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## The American Hypertext Novel, and Whatever Became of It?

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The 1990 Eastgate publication of Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, A Story* earned hypertext fiction a place within institutionalised literary culture. Robert Coover's 1992 essay 'The End of Books' announced hypertext fiction as a challenge to traditional conceptions such as narrative linearity, the sense of closure, and the "desire for coherence." While some theorists, such as George Landow, praised hypertext for instantiating poststructuralist theory, others such as Sven Birkerts, in *The Gutenberg Elegies*, regarded it with strong concern. The publication of more hypertext fictions such as Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (1991) and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995) resulted in a small, dedicated interest community. However, no paradigm-shifting rise in interest took place. The independent publication of hypertext novels on the World Wide Web such as Robert Arellano's *Sunshine 69* (1996), Mark Amerika's *Grammatron* (1997), and William Gillespie, Frank Marquardt, Scott Rettberg, and Dirk Stratton's *The Unknown* (1998) briefly revitalised the networked fictional form before it was eclipsed in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by a range of other digital narrative forms.

## 1. Hypertext Fiction Before the Web

During the 1990s, as the personal computer became a fixture of everyday life in offices and homes, writers and academics became interested in exploring the potential of hypertext as a genre for narrative fiction. During the early 1990s in particular, the form seemed to offer great promise as a logical literary follow-on both to late 20<sup>th</sup> century post-structuralist theory and to general shifts in late 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction writing, especially in the United States, towards postmodern narrative structures that contested prior conventions of linearity, closure and immersive reading.

For what was in retrospect a quite brief period during the late 1980s and early 1990s, what Robert Coover (1999) referred to as the ‘Golden Age’ of literary hypertext, writers working in dedicated hypertext systems such as Hypercard, the Intermedia system at Brown University and, most importantly, Storyspace, explored the potential of hypertext for narrative fiction. Enough writers were working in the form during this period, and their works garnered enough critical attention, that we can speak of these hypertext fictions as a group—what some of have called ‘The Eastgate School’—named after the publisher responsible for publishing and distributing most of the early works of hypertext fiction.

Hypertext was first conceptualised by Theodore Holm Nelson (1965) in his paper ‘A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing, and the Indeterminate’ when he introduced the term “to mean a body of written or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be presented or represented on paper.” In his ‘No More Teachers’ Dirty Looks’ (1970), Nelson followed up with a more expansive definition of “hyper-media” as “branching or performing presentations which respond to user actions, systems of prearranged

words and pictures (for example) which may be explored freely or queried in stylized ways.”

Among the types of hypertexts he discusses in that essay, which focused on the potential uses of hypermedia in new systems that could potentially revolutionise education are “discrete hypertexts” which “consist of separate pieces of text connected by links.” The majority of hypertext fictions published during the 1980s and 1990s would fit within this rubric though, as Noah Wardrip-Fruin (2004) argued, this conception of hypertext as “chunk-style” linked nodes is somewhat narrower than hypermedia as Nelson originally envisioned it. The post-millennial turn in electronic literature towards a broader use of media-rich texts, more complex uses of generativity and other computational processes, and deeper engagement with network-specific communication technologies and styles of writing better represents the broader range of hypertext and hypermedia as conceptualised by Nelson than either the first-generation hypertext fictions published by Eastgate or the second-generation works published on the Web.

During the 1980s, digital writing experiments, including long-form hypertext fictions such as Judy Malloy’s pioneering “hyperfictional narrative database” *Uncle Roger* (1986),<sup>1</sup> were distributed on bulletin boards such as the WELL.<sup>2</sup> Interactive fiction developed separately from hypertext fiction, emerging from a different cultural context. The text-parser-based form of interactive digital writing that began with *Colossal Cave Adventure* by Will Crowther and Don Woods (1976) saw commercial success during the 1980s with Infocom titles such as the *Zork* series before graphic computer games swallowed the market in the late 1980s. As Nick Montfort documents in his *Twisty Little Passages* (2003), an amateur community developed around the

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<sup>1</sup> *Uncle Roger* was first published in serial form on Art Com Electronic Network and then programmed in BASIC and distributed on the *ACEN Datanet*. She then published a web version of the work in 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Jill Walker Rettberg’s *Electronic Literature Seen from a Distance: The Beginnings of a Field* provides an excellent introduction both to the scene from which the Eastgate writers emerged and other less-chronicled early electronic literature communities, such as the one that formed on the WELL.

form shortly thereafter, enabled by group effort and the release of free programming languages, authoring and reading environments such as TADS (in 1987) and Inform (in 1993). Though there were substantial literary and aesthetic achievements in interactive fiction, outside of a few outliers,<sup>3</sup> it was not until the publisher and software developer Eastgate Systems began publishing hypertext fiction in 1987 that literary critics began to significantly engage with electronic literature.

The novelist Robert Coover played an important role in bringing these experimental fictions to the notice of a broader public, most notably in his 1992 *New York Times Book Review* essay ‘The End of Books,’ which introduced hypertext fiction to a broader literary audience. The essay describes the ways that the hypertext form poses challenges for writers, and readers accustomed to conventional narrative forms, including assumptions about linearity, closure and the division of agency between the writer and reader. Coover focused on the disruptions that hypertext caused to narrative linearity, its interruption of “the tyranny of the line” (Coover, 1992). Coover noted that in hypertext, the narrative structures of fictions are foregrounded and become a predominant concern: “The most radical new element that comes to the fore in hypertext is the system of multidirectional and often labyrinthine linkages we are invited or obliged to create.”

Coover identified a core tension for fiction writers working in hypertextual forms in the “conflict between the reader’s desire for coherence and closure and the text’s desire for continuance, its fear of death.” Coover asked: “If the author is free to take a story anywhere at any time and in as many directions as she or he wishes, does that not become the obligation to do so?” Coover’s essay on hypertext remains a key summation of the affordances and opportunity costs of

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Ann Buckles 1987 UC San Diego Ph.D. dissertation *Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame ‘Adventure’* was the first book-length academic work on the form.

hypertext for fiction writers. Forms such as the short story and particularly the novel have a deep, if not intrinsic, relationship to the limits and constraints of print. Whatever belief one has of the function of fiction, most stories or novels strive to reduce, distil and make comprehensible an experience or perception of the world. The role of the fiction writer is both to provide a particular perspective on human experience and to select and enliven some narrative possibilities while eliminating others. The form of the book—such that each page requires more paper and each word more ink—pulls the writer towards economy, restraint, and limitation while the form of hypertext, offering multiple pathways, limitless text and multiple medial modalities, pulls authors towards exploration and expansiveness.

The potential uses of hypertext links in a narrative fiction are multifarious, ranging from offering the reader conscious plot choices in a choose-your-own-adventure style, to establishing multiple narrative lines of narrative or multiple character perspectives on the same set of events, to serving as any kind of footnote-style reference, to poetic or linguistic play between words or scenes in a narrative.

In Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, A Story* (1989) we saw the hypertext link used in all of these various ways in the story of a man in a state of breakdown after a car accident in which his son may or may not have been killed. The fragmented and disrupted nature of the narrator's psychological and emotional state finds an objective correlative in the hypertextual form of the narrative. The narrative of *Afternoon* centres on the various overlapping relations and conflicts between the main narrator Peter, his ex-wife Lisa, her lover Wert (Werther), Lolly and Nausicaa.

There is no need to provide a close reading of *Afternoon* here—as it is the most cited work of electronic literature,<sup>4</sup> and ample discussions of the work are available elsewhere. However, we can highlight a few formal aspects of the work. The first is that the work is playing a great deal with indeterminacy and a sense of loss and confusion. The reader can follow a default path, but there are also typically several links on a given node of the story. Joyce, however, chose not to make those links visible to the reader. Instead, he encouraged readers to seek out “words that yield”—that is, to click on given words that seem to be particularly evocative, and to see if the system will respond. This indeterminacy extended to the narrative voice. Though the main perspective is that of Peter, selecting some nodes will pull the narrative into the perspective of one of the other characters. These switches are not always clearly marked in a way that would make the perspective immediately clear to the reader. Another notable aspect of the work is its very clear use of modernist techniques and tropes. The work is thick with intertextual references: to the *Odyssey*, to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, to Goethe’s *Werther*, to the Grimm brothers, to Tolstoy and to Pynchon. Formally, the text is also diverse. Following links takes the reader from interior monologues and musings to dialogues to poems and lists. The fact that the text as a whole echoes the breakdown state of the main character is yet another modernist gesture. We encounter Peter’s interior state through the form of the work in a similar way to encountering the stream-of-consciousness narration in, for example, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*.

Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon* is, in short, a ‘writerly’ work of modernist fiction developed in Storyspace software. While the material form of the work is digital, its DNA is clearly a strand of the experimental writing traditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We can see very clear relationships

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<sup>4</sup> See Rettberg 2013 “An Emerging Canon? A Preliminary Analysis of All References to Creative Works in Critical Writing Documented in the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Base” for and data and analysis of critical citations of works of electronic literature.

between the work and antecedent print works. While it is not accidental that the work is presented in hypertext form, Joyce's gravitation towards experimenting with hypertext was driven by the fact that the fragmented, nodal style of Storyspace software, the tentative, indeterminate, searching way that the reader encountered the interface, and the various models of interconnectivity available in Storyspace were particularly well-suited to the form of the story he wanted to tell.<sup>5</sup>

Joyce's *Afternoon* is an exclusively text-based hypertext—it included no images or other multimedia assets. Compared to many contemporary works, it also had very limited use of computation, including links, some limited “yes/no” text parsing, and guard fields that limited access to some nodes until other nodes had been visited. Writing on the first hypertext experimentalists in his *Literary Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age*, Coover (1999) notes that:

[E]arly experimental writers of the time worked almost exclusively in text, as did the students in our pioneer hypertext workshops at Brown University, partly by choice (they were print writers moving tentatively into this radically new domain and carrying into it what they knew best), but largely because the very limited capacities of computers and diskettes in those days dictated it.

Coover noted that these constraints were also empowering. The writers working with hypertext in the 1980s and 1990s were not primarily focused on manipulating images or animations or in complex programming tasks, but were instead mostly working with words, lines, texts and

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, Michael Joyce didn't simply run across some software that he liked. He took part in its development. Storyspace was initially developed by Michael Joyce with Jay David Bolter and John Smith.

scenes, just as any other writer of the time would have been, but were working within a computational environment that offered new ways of remedying narrative techniques that were largely derived from the canon of modernist and postmodernist fiction that preceded them.

Though the majority of the hypertext systems available at the time did allow for some use of visual media and other media assets, text was clearly the dominant mode of expression.

The majority of the hypertext fictions published by Eastgate during the late 1980s and early 1990s similarly emerged from a clearly literary heritage. The two other most-frequently-cited works of this period, *Patchwork Girl* by Shelley Jackson (1995) and *Victory Garden* by Stuart Moulthrop (1991), were each novel-length works of deeply intertextual postmodern fiction.

*Patchwork Girl*, Jackson's inventive retelling of the *Frankenstein* story from the perspective of the female monster, wore its postmodernism on its sleeve. In the tradition of American literary postmodernism, *Patchwork Girl* is a self-conscious text, by turns intertextual, polyvocal and expressly concerned with post-structuralist questions of identity. Five sections of the hypertext novel: the journal, story, graveyard, crazy quilt and the body of the text each used different material structures and stylistic conventions. A more visual thinker than Joyce, Jackson both used some limited imagery—woodcut images of a female body and a man's skull—and took advantage of the visual layout features of Storyspace software to produce visual user interfaces. The reader of *Patchwork Girl* participated in navigating the work in acts of pastiche. Assembly of different types of texts occurs throughout the work. In the “crazy quilt” section of the text, for example, Jackson stitches together quotations from Jacques Derrida's *Disseminations*, Donna Haraway's “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, L. Frank Baum's *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*, Barbara Maria Stafford's *Body Criticism* and the *Storyspace User's Manual*. The first draft of *Patchwork Girl* was originally produced for one of theorist George



Landow's courses at Brown University, and throughout the novel, we can see how Jackson was testing the waters, using both fiction and a new writing technology she was encountering for the first time to represent and deconstruct theories of identity.

Both *Afternoon* and *Patchwork Girl* were extensive hypertexts, including a good deal of writing—according to Raine Koskimaa, 539 lexia (text spaces) in *Afternoon* and 323 in *Patchwork Girl*. Though *Afternoon* includes *A Story* in its somewhat humble title, both are clearly of such length and narrative development that they are properly considered novels. Stuart Moulthrop's 1991 *Victory Garden* included 933 lexia. The most Borgesian of the hypertexts published by Eastgate Systems, *Victory Garden* extensively experimented with the multilinear possibility space of hypertext fiction. Taking its cue from Borges' story 'Garden of Forking Paths,' *Victory Garden* uses hypertext to explore narrative structures: multiple potential outcomes of given storylines, changes in perspective on given events, chronological jumps and flashbacks, and different forms of reading cycles (for instance narrative loops that vary on recursion). Set during the first Gulf War and centred on a group of characters living in a university town, the novel in a broad sense is about the reception of war filtered through contemporary academic, popular and media culture. In one lexia of the work, 'All of the Above,' Moulthrop summarised Borges' story: "In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pen, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them." *Victory Garden* is perhaps the single experiment in the hypertext canon that attempted to do just that. As Koskimaa notes, "*Victory Garden* is clearly pointing towards the kind of hypertext fiction which, because of its size, is theoretically and practically, inexhaustible." Just as an event such as a blitzkrieg war unfolding both in the lived experiences of soldiers and civilians abroad and on multitudes of cable television screens and

other networked media outlets is in some sense fundamentally unknowable as a totality, Moulthrop was providing us with a textual analogue in his fiction. As in the other two examples, Moulthrop's novel included a great variety of different types of textual materials and was intertextual in relation to several works of print literature—Borges's fiction and Thomas Pynchon's novels serve as touchstones and make cameo appearances. Moulthrop also integrated images and maps as navigational apparatuses to aid movement through the text.

In discussing the early hypertext fictions, I have cited the three most referenced works, all of which were produced in the Storyspace platform. It is important to emphasise that during this time Eastgate also published works in other platforms, such as John McDaid's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse* (1992), authored in Hypercard, and later M.D. Coverley's *Califia* (2002), produced in Toolbook. The degree to which platform is important in determining categories or genres of electronic literature is open for debate. It is clear that particular constraints and affordances of operating systems have aesthetic effects. While the stories and styles of *Afternoon*, *Patchwork Girl* and *Victory Garden* were radically different in content and in many qualities of style, the writing and reading platform of Storyspace set common material limits and possibility spaces for the authors using it and the readers encountering the works in the platform.

The other important aspect to consider is that as a publisher, Eastgate was participating in an evolving literary culture that was trying to establish itself. Eastgate advertised itself as the publisher of 'serious' hypertext fiction—perhaps in an attempt to differentiate itself from 'text adventure' publishing enterprises or the emerging market of games. The social and critical apparatus is important. Publishing both software and literary works, Eastgate was partially modelled after the type of serious small press publishers that popularised modernist literature during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and partly modelled on contemporary software companies. Theorists

such as George Landow, Terry Harpold, Jane Yellowlees Douglas and others were foregrounding the connections between hypertext narratives and postmodern theory, just as later theorists such as N. Katherine Hayles emphasised the materiality of these text-machines in their media-specific context and their relation to the idea of the posthuman.

For a brief period, there was a concerted if in retrospect somewhat desperate attempt to carve a niche for hypertext fiction within the boundaries established by the print literary context and traditions—and for a while this made sense. At the time, most software was sold and distributed as distinct packaged objects, which could be sold by mail order or in stores. Thus, it was sensible for a publisher of literary works for the computer to think along the lines of a traditional publishing model, in which programs could be treated like individual books, and the author/publisher relationship situated in a similar fashion to that of print literature. There were some real benefits to this sort of apparatus. The early hypertext movement had a sort of spiritual home at Brown University and its digital writing workshops, a house publisher in Eastgate, and a school of critics gathering around its creations. Though their works were diverse in terms of content, the participating authors had similar literary heritage and stylistic concerns and were similarly steeped in modernist and postmodernist 20<sup>th</sup> century American print literature. The digital writing workshops at Brown emerged from a long tradition of embracing literary experimentation, and Robert Coover himself is of course one of the pivotal figures in postmodern fiction and an avid experimenter with narrative form who had long played with expansions and perversions of the storytelling apparatus.

By the mid to late-1990s, new models of publishing, communicating and interacting in network culture were already beginning to evolve, and this small press model of selling and distributing hypertext fiction would become obsolete before it was ever widely adopted. The World Wide

Web came along and brought with it significant changes. The market benefits of selling computer programs on floppy discs or CD-ROMs were soon trumped by the practical benefits of distributing work instantaneously to the global network.

Sadly, though most of the Eastgate hypertext fictions are still ‘in print,’ in the sense that they can be bought on physical CD-ROM, few of them can be read on contemporary operating systems.

The technical challenges of updating individual works to make them operable with new versions of the Mac OS, for example, have proven to be too much for Eastgate to handle. In other cases, such as that of *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse*, the whole platform (Apple's Hypercard) is no longer supported. After teaching the Eastgate hypertexts for more than a decade, I can no longer use them in the curriculum of my electronic literature classes, except as a past reference. They no longer work on any of the computers I own or those available in our university labs. Short of setting up a dedicated lab with old computer equipment (as Dene Grigar at Washington State University and Lori Emerson at University of Colorado Boulder have done), the classic hypertexts are now difficult to access and operate. While critics and archivists have provided valuable references that to an extent document and describe these works, it is not sufficient to read *about* works of e-lit. Students need to be able to access the primary texts themselves.

The short history of electronic literature has proven that works produced and distributed in non-proprietary, open-access and/or open source platforms, and using open standards, have tended to have a longer shelf life than works produced using proprietary software. If a software developer is purchased by another company or goes out of business, the platform itself can cease to be operable. If a publisher holds on to copyright but ceases to release updated versions of the work to operate with contemporary operating systems, then even the authors themselves cannot release their work in an operable format. One hopes that the list of hypertexts published by Eastgate

Systems will soon be made available again in a more accessible and durable way, so that their important list of early hypertext fictions will not be lost to contemporary and future readers.

## **2. Hypertext Novels of the Late 1990s**

After Tim Berners-Lee's development of the World Wide Web in 1989–91, the release of the Mosaic Web browser in 1992 and its commercial cousin Netscape in 1994, the World Wide Web was by the mid-1990s emerging as a new playground, distribution platform, and online community for hypertext authors. Though the proprietary Storyspace platform actually offered more hypertext authoring features than did simple HTML, the extensibility of the Web (allowing for other standards and platforms to plug in to its architecture) and its capacity as an open global distribution network had an irresistible pull for hypertext authors eager to reach an audience beyond the community that had developed around Storyspace and other proprietary platforms. During the late 1990s a number of substantial novel-length works of hypertext fiction were published on the Web, where they could encounter new audiences and for a time, some notoriety, if never mainstream commercial success.

Judy Malloy moved her *Uncle Roger* and other 'narrabase' writing projects to the Web in 1995. A wave of hypertext fictions written for the Web followed for the next five years: hypertexts written and distributed on the Web in a network-specific context. One could consider this period, however brief it was, as a second wave or renaissance of hypertext fiction.

At the time of its initial release in 1996, Robert Arrellano's *Sunshine '69* was one of the first hypertext novels written specifically for the Web, and it remains one of the best attempts to tell a

coherent but multilinear and polyvocal story in the distractive environment of the network.

*Sunshine '69* is a historical hypertext novel that attempts to encapsulate the zeitgeist of the 1960s by tracking events in the lives of nine characters from June through December 1969, concluding with the Altamont festival held on 6 December 1969. Arellano based his fiction loosely on historical fact. At different points in the novel, the reader can encounter a 'bird's-eye view' of the historical events in 1969, and the work includes a bibliography of the nonfiction sources that Arellano sampled from. While the novel references historical fact, Arellano uses that context as a background for a largely metaphoric tale of corrupted visions. In the novel, Mick Jagger makes a deal with Lucifer that results in the tragedy at Altamont, and LSD is transformed from a substance for utopian mind-expansion into a sinister market commodity.

The characters of *Sunshine '69* are sketched very quickly as cartoonish types—in one section of the hypertext, a page including a cartoon drawing of a suit and a character sketch represents each individual character. The 'flatness' of the characters helps Arellano to avoid the problem of slowly developing characters in a novel that could be read in thousands of possible orders. The drawings don't include any faces—as if to underscore that these characters should be understood not as individual human beings, but as stereotypes, fictional personalities representative of the cultural forces at play in the novel.

The cast of characters of *Sunshine '69* includes Alan Passoro, a Hell's Angel, hired for security at Altamont; Lucifer; the Glimmer Twins, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones; Ali a.k.a. Ronald Stark, a shady agent provocateur with connections to the CIA; Meredith Hunter, a young African-American hipster from South Berkeley; Orange Sunshine, alternatively a hippie girl-next-door and a brand of LSD; Norm Cavettesa, a discharged Vietnam

veteran; and Timothy Leary, one of the leading advocates of experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs.

Arellano freely mixed 'real' people with fictional characters. Leary, Jagger and Richards, real people in the world outside the novel, are also icons who represent cultural movements. Hunter and Passoro are real people who did not become icons: Hunter was the 18-year-old murdered at Altamont, and Passoro, the Hell's Angel who stabbed him. The other characters were presumably fictional.

Real events, adapted from nonfiction texts, are juxtaposed with imagined events to create an alternative history, and to underscore the idea that all histories are narrative constructs. In the context of the novel, the characters who really lived through the events, or who died as a result of them, are no more or less real than those imagined by the author to represent flower children, government spies or allegorical evil.

A particular innovation of *Sunshine '69* was the diverse range of navigational options it presented to the reader, in addition to the in-text hypertext link. In the absence of the reading conventions of the book, authors of nonlinear fiction can provide readers with other navigational tools to guide them. These tools can be as simple as the 'alternate reading order' that Julio Cortazar provides the reader of his *Hopscotch* (1966) or can make more elaborate use of the multimedia capabilities of the computer. Once the readers get past the animated Flash introduction to the work, each screen of the novel has four buttons linking to 'Calendar,' 'People,' '8-Track' and 'Map.' Each button links to a different navigational apparatus, so that readers can navigate by character, chronologically, according to musical selections, or by a map.

Mark Amerika's *Grammatron* (1997) was another expansive work of hypertext and hypermedia narrative. Emerging from the context of the Alt-X online publishing network and Mark Amerika's then-popular "Amerika Online" column,<sup>6</sup> *Grammatron* retells the 'Golam' myth in digital form. The work centres on Abe Golam, a pioneering Net artist who creates the Grammatron, a writing machine. The creature becomes a kind of combinatory monster, wherein all texts recombine. Throughout the work, Golam searches for his 'second half'—a programmer, Cynthia Kitchen, who could provide the missing link to another dimension of digital being.

*Grammatron* included more than 1,000 text elements (some of them scripted and some randomised), thousands of cross-links between nodes of the text, many still and animated images, a background soundtrack and spoken word audio. *Grammatron* was pushing toward a *Gesamtkunstwerk* mode of hypertext writing and was as much a philosophical exploration of 'network consciousness' as it was a novel. It was also situated specifically as 'Net Art.' Amerika made a conscious move to position himself in an art world context in this and in later work. *Grammatron* was received as one of the first significant works of Net Art and embraced within the art world context, and was exhibited at the 2000 Whitney Biennial.

With *Grammatron*, we can see several strands that would become more marked in later years, including the move away from a specifically literary audience and an openness towards other cultural contexts, such as conceptual art and performance. *Grammatron* also marked a shift from hypertext *per se* towards hypermedia, in which text is one of many media elements. This multimodal shift became even more pronounced in subsequent years, particularly with the rise of Flash as an authoring platform in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.altx.com/amerika.online/>



William Gillespie, Frank Marquardt, Scott Rettberg and Dirk Stratton's *The Unknown* was the co-winner<sup>7</sup> of the 1999 trAce/ AltX competition (Gillespie et al 1999). A comic novel, it begins with the premise that the hypertext novel is itself a promotional stunt for a printed book, an anthology of experimental poetry and fiction. The hypertext is the story of the eponymous authors' book tour, which takes on the character and excesses of a rock tour. As *The Unknown* authors tour venues across the USA and abroad ranging from small used book stores to the Hollywood Bowl, they have encounters with literary and cultural celebrities ranging from Newt Gingrich to William Gaddis, from Marjorie Perloff to John Barth, from Terry Gilliam to Lou Reed. Complications develop, as one of the protagonists becomes a cult leader before becoming a human sacrifice; another becomes a mean and withdrawn social outcast; and another a heroin addict enamoured of celebrity and its excesses. As their fame reaches its apex and a Hollywood blockbuster is made of their hypertext fiction, things generally fall apart. A picaresque novel with classic elements of a road trip novel, *The Unknown* freely mixes writing styles and forms ranging from prose to poetry, credit card statements to freshman composition writing assignments, pastorals to corporate typing tests. Many scenes of *The Unknown* are parodies or tributes to other writers: Scenes are written in the style of Jack Kerouac, Edgar Allan Poe, Cormac McCarthy, Nelson Algren, Kathy Acker and many other notable American authors.

Like many of the other hypertexts discussed, *The Unknown* tended toward expansiveness and embraced excess. As the project was written and distributed, the authors kept writing and adding new material, for several years after the novel was first published on the Web and announced. While the main component of *The Unknown* is a fictional narrative, a "sickeningly decadent hypertext novel," the work also included several other "lines" of content including documentary

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<sup>7</sup> With the series of multimedia poems *Rice* by geniwate.

material, “metafictional bullshit,” correspondence, art projects, documentation of live readings and a press kit (Gillespie et al 1999).

As the project progressed and after it had won an award, the authors toured in person to a variety of venues and performed interactive readings of the work in jacket and tie, ringing a call bell every time a link appeared on the page, encouraging readers to interrupt and shout out a link to follow whenever they encountered one they found particularly toothsome. The majority of these readings were recorded in audio and/or video, and those recordings integrated into the given page of the hypertext, so that readers could listen to the authors reading the text. These travels also provided further material and settings for writing. *The Unknown* was thus both a novel and a work of performance writing and in some respects also a constraint-driven writing game. Like *Sunshine '69*, *The Unknown* made extensive use of hypertext links to cross-link scenes of the novel and provided other indices and apparatuses for navigation. The links were used in a variety of different ways: sometimes to guide the reader to the next section of a narrative sequence, sometimes to provide further referential information and other times according to a more whimsical logic: for example every time the word “beer” appears it is a link, taking the reader to another scene in which beer is mentioned. Readers can follow the links into the spiralling web of stories, or navigate via a “People” index of celebrities and literary figures in the novel, a list of “Bookstores” in which reading scenes took place, and a “Map” of the USA, providing links to episodes based on location. The different lines also each have their own index. In including a series of web documentaries about the making of *The Unknown*, documentation of readings and performances, a press kit of links to popular media reviews of and scholarly articles about *The Unknown* as well as correspondence between the authors, *The Unknown* gestures toward a totalising encyclopaedic hypertext form. It is a novel that attempts to fully integrate its own

publishing and critical apparatuses. As the authors' statement published in the *Electronic Literature Collection, Volume Two* (only half-jokingly) attests, *The Unknown* "attempts to destroy the contemporary literary culture by making institutions such as publishing houses, publicists, book reviews and literary critics completely obsolete" (Rettberg et al 2011).

As was the case for the majority of the other hypertexts mentioned, *The Unknown* had a number of metafictional characteristics, including a number of asides on writing in the form itself, which are included in the "metafictional bullshit" nodes of the text. In the node "Hypertext is/are Electronic Space" William Gillespie, for example, mused in Deleuzian fashion:

Hypertext, to put it clearly, is a mapping of a text onto a four-dimensional 'space.'

Normal grammars, then, do not apply, and become branching structures anew.

Fragments, branches, links.

The word is glowing and on a screen. It is electronic and cannot be touched. It has been copied over thousands of times and reverberates through virtual space.<sup>8</sup> (Gillespie et al 1999)

Reflection on the form of hypertext seems an almost inevitable outcome of writing a hypertext novel. As writers first encountered digital environments, the works they produced were narratives or poems and expressions of ideas, but they are also always explorations and experiments. Hypertext fictions are often field notes as much as they are fiction.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://unknownhypertext.com/hypertext.htm>

### 3. Conclusion

One of the virtues of the World Wide Web is that it is an extensible platform. Authors developing work for the Web are not restricted to HTML, nor are they restricted to simple link-and-node hypertext. As the 1990s ended, many of the authors who first produced hypertext narratives in Storyspace or in HTML began to develop works in other platforms, such as Flash, which allowed for more extensive use of animation and other multimedia. As more and more devices, such as smart phones, locative devices, iPads and other tables began to proliferate, there was also a shift away from works designed specifically for the desktop computer and towards types of narratives suited to these new environments. While it would not be accurate to say that the hypertext novel was completely abandoned by the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is the case that link-and-node hypertext would no longer be the dominant mode of literary experimentation in digital media. In my other chapter in this volume, 'Post-Hyperfiction: Practices in Digital Textuality,' I will provide examples of how hypertext has provided a basis for other emergent narrative forms in an increasingly diverse range of experimentation in narrative for digital media.

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