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Posthyperfiction: Practices in Digital Textuality

Scott Rettberg

Web hypertext fiction never really had an operable business model nor a significant cultural apparatus. They were pure artistic experiments in that sense. Perhaps because no models really existed to qualify a hypertext novel as “successful,” more hypertext narratives were created in short forms than as long novels. The early 2000s saw other important examples of web hypertext novels, such as Caitlin Fischer’s 2001 Electronic Literature Award-winning *These Waves of Girls*. But as electronic literature began to develop as its own field in the 2000s, short forms, in particular digital poetry, would for a time dominate the field.

Web hypertexts were part of a larger global experiment in digital textuality. As much as the Web now seems second nature, an at-hand information landscape crowded with social networks, streaming video, and online commerce, during the late 1990s and early 2000s it was more of a Wild West. No one knew precisely what “Web Content” should be or would become. It made just as much sense to think of the Web as a new platform for writing and reading literature as anything else. It can be fairly said that the ubiquitous adoption of personal computers and mobile devices and the Internet has been the most profound technological shift in the way that human societies produce and interact with writing since the Gutenberg press. Works of electronic literature have and will continue to explore both the novelty of new forms and even more fundamentally the changes in everyday textuality that are taking place so rapidly in this environment that we might otherwise miss them.

Since the turn of the millennium, writers working with digital narrative have been decreasingly interested in the poetics of the hypertext link and network story structures, and more interested in evolving network styles of writing. Each new communication platform adopted: email, blogs, Wikipedia, social networks, Twitter and so forth, in some sense generates a new genre of

writing practiced on the Web. These communication platforms each offer their own affordances for narrative, and each shape the language produced within them in distinctive ways, whether it be the particular epistolary forms of e-mail, the reverse-chronology unfolding of weblogs, or the rapid-fire 140 character limited lines of Twitter.

Many of the early Web hypertext fictions explored some of the material aspects of the early hand-coded HTML Web. Shelley and Pamela Jackson's *The Doll Games* (2001) is a hypertext that documents a complex narrative game that Shelley and Pamela Jackson used to play when they were prepubescent girls, and frames that documentation in faux-academic discourse. In their DAC 2001 presentation of the project, the authors described *The Doll Games* as sitting "uneasily between fiction nonfiction, serious inquiry parody."¹ In "sitting uneasily between" different styles of discourse, the work enlists the reader to differentiate between authoritative knowledge and play. Throughout, the project plays with constructions of gender and of identity. *The Doll Games* is a network novel in the sense that it uses the network to construct narratives in a particularly novel way. *The Doll Games* is also consciously structured as a network document, and plays in an ironic fashion with its network context. A portmanteau work, the work takes formal cues both from the playful tone of childish obsession of the games themselves as they were enacted by the girls as children and from academic discourse. Taking a page from Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, the work includes a complex scholarly academic apparatus, and features J.F. Bellwether, Ph.D., a scholar who has allegedly made the study of a "ground-breaking series of theatrical performances by Shelley and Pamela Jackson that took place in a private home in Berkeley, California, in the first half of the 1970's" a focus of his scholarly work. Structurally, *The Doll Games* content is assembled as a kind of cross between a play-set of materials and an academic case study. The material includes photographs and profiles of the dolls, narratives written by and about them, interviews between Shelley and Pamela, and an academic case study. The work also features Bellwether's arch academic voice and study. Thus a great deal of narrative material is presented and made available for play, without the provision of any sort of comprehensive narrative lines.

Just as they were using and exploring other forms to disperse the materials for a storyworld, Shelley and Pamela Jackson were also exploring some aspects of the materiality of the network itself. The first page past the title page

¹ <http://cds.library.brown.edu/conferences/DAC/abstracts/jackson.html>

includes a small grey footer with the keywords "...doll sex, doll mutilation, transgender dolls, prosthetic doll penises, doll death, doll dreams...." These keywords may be intended to cue readers as to the content of what will follow, but they also serve a function in how this particular HTML page will be read *by the network*. The Jackson sisters likely knew how search engines operate, and placed these keywords conspicuously on the front page in order to draw a particular readership for the work. Indeed for a time, *The Doll Games* was the first site returned by a Google search for "doll mutilation." The savvy placement of phrases such as these by the Jackson sisters was used to draw readers to the network fiction, in this case readers who are pre-qualified as interested in *The Doll Games* by virtue of their interest in doll mutilation. The project also solicited and integrated doll game stories provided by readers who responded to a call for email submissions. The use of keywords and meta-tags and the authors' consciousness of how the work fit into the search engine ecology, as well as the integration of "user-generated content" are in keep with an emerging awareness during this period that the network was not simply another means of distribution for hypertext, but a materially distinct writing platform that itself affects and shapes work developed there

Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* (2000) and other hypertext works produced during this period continued to develop the philosophical and theoretical concerns of "network consciousness" first emerging as fodder for fiction in Amerika's *Grammatron*. Memmott's works explored what he called "network phenomenology" and the effects of hybridized human/machine/network intelligence, essentially providing the literary work as an objective correlative for a posthuman state of being². *Lexia to Perplexia* was also notable for its relation to what would become known as "codework" —a strand of electronic literature interested in exploring the relation of human and machine language and the various poetic possibilities emergent from those relations. The other lasting contribution of *Lexia to Perplexia* was its sophisticated use of graphic design and web programming. The graphics, user interface, and programmed behaviors of *Lexia to Perplexia* are as essential to the story it is trying to tell as its text.

Rob Wittig's *The Fall of the Site of Marsha* (1999), *Friday's Big Meeting* (2000), and *Blue Company* (2002) were each narrative experiments that explored the potential of a different communications platform for fiction. *The*

² A connection explored in detail by N. Katherine Hayles in her 2002 *Writing Machines*.

Fall of the Site of Marsha was at play with the conventions of the phenomena of “home page”—that early web genre of web site in which individuals would roughly hack some HTML, and fill a page with a few biographical details, hobbies they were obsessed with, links they were interested in, animated gifs, crazily mixed typography, pictures of their cats etc. for little apparent purpose other than to claim a space on the Web as their own. Wittig’s fiction included three iterations of a home page dedicated to angels (Martha’s particular obsession). One of the sites was provided as Marsha first published it, and two further hacked versions revealed a story behind the scenes. Marsha’s husband, who wanted to get out of the marriage, had hacked the page to make it seem that the angels were after Marsha. His infidelities are revealed comically in the clues left in the vandalism of the site itself. *Friday’s Big Meeting* similarly explored a new medium—a corporate bulletin board—to unfold a story of workplace intrigue, deception, and romances. Wittig’s *Blue Company* was an email novel about an advertising writer who had been recruited to travel through space and time to 14th century Italy as part of a campaign to change the course of history to make it more profitable for a contemporary corporate client. Told through a series of emails to a potential lover in the present day (on a smuggled laptop), the novel was using a classic epistolary structure and themes adapted to the particular modalities of contemporary email. The novel was also distributed to its initial subscribers in serial form in email messages over the course of a month. So the story transpired on a real-time basis in relation to the time scale in which it was read. Here we can again identify a trend in post-hypertext digital narrative. The text is not to be understood only as a singular work or artefact bounded by printed space, but as a performance that unfolds over time.

Rob Wittig’s recent projects, particularly his Netprov projects, developed in collaboration with Mark Marino, continue to develop his interest in network styles of writing and the affordances of particular communication technologies, and his interest in network writing as performance. Wittig and Marino’s netprov projects, such as *Grace, Wit & Charm* (2012), *Occupy MLA* (2012) and *@Tempspence* project (2013), have taken place on Twitter and other social media platforms, though they have sometimes also extended onto web sites and into the physical world. The netprov projects have integrated elements of contributory collaboration, social media discourse, and online hoax in developing online performance fictions. While *Blue Company* was an email novel written by one author for a subscribing audience, the netprov projects have typically not been announced to readers until they are underway or finished. Instead, the characters present themselves on Twitter accounts as

real people. In the case of *Occupy MLA*, the characters were a group of adjunct humanities faculty, who over the course of a year struggled to cope with the demands of excessive teaching loads, job interviews, and the typical trials and tribulations of faculty in tenuous underpaid positions. The three main characters then proposed to start a labor protest movement which would culminate in an action at that year's MLA conference. They even named specific sessions at which the protest was to take place. Only the authors themselves knew that their identities were false and that the Twitter accounts were representing parodic characters rather than real people. When the hoax was finally revealed, a good deal of controversy surrounded it, even drawing chastisement from Michael Bérubé, the outgoing president of the MLA, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*³.

While it is a long way from *afternoon, a story* to *Occupy MLA*, I mention the project not because it is a hypertext but because it illustrates one of the directions the narrative side of digital media writing has moved in the past decade or so. It is not the case that the majority of authors who were working in hypertext in the 1990s and 2000s have abandoned digital writing altogether, but that they have continued to experiment with and invent new forms that have become possible in contemporary network contexts.

Nonlinear interactive narrative also moved from the web browser to other spatial environments, including the physical world. *34 North 118 West*, produced by Jeremy Hight, Jeff Knowlton, and Naomi Spellman in 2003 is one notable example of locative narrative. Using consumer technologies—a tablet computer with a Global Positioning System card—that were at the time in their infancy, the project layered historical stories of Los Angeles during earlier eras, such as the turn of the 19th to 20th century, onto physical spaces in a four-block area of L.A. As the user walked the area with the tablet computer, wearing headphones, he or she encountered narratives set in those environments. Some elements of the narrative apparatus at work are very similar to screen-based hypertext—the user is triggering narratives just as readers of the earlier hypertext fictions activated links, and the narrative is nonlinear in the sense that one can encounter narrative nodes in different order

³ In a reply to the authors' post about the project in the Prof. Hacker column of the *Chronicle*, Bérubé wrote "I can say that Occupy MLA had no influence on my agenda whatsoever. It was merely annoying. . . . Occupy MLA came to 'the crisis of the moment' a good while after the MLA did. I followed the Twitter feed in late 2011, though, and now I think it's really regrettable that anyone would try to advance the cause of NTT faculty by making adjuncts appear so—what is the word?—'cartoonish.'"

depending on how they move through the streets. The important difference is settings in a locative narrative are not merely described, but experienced as embodied space. *34 North 118 West* treated the city as a sort of palimpsest, on which stories could be written, erased, and recovered. The voices of imaginary ghosts served to specify memories of a place. There is an important ontological distinction here in the situation of the reader, not at a remove from the diegetic world of the story, but instead embedded and immersed in the same environment. The physical world that the user and the story share becomes part of the material of the story. As Jeremy Hight wrote in an artist's statement accompanying the RadioELO audio archive of the project, "A story could be told using walls, buildings, streets, trees, a dry river bed, a lake edge etc. It was now possible to write with [the] physical world. This was the initial realization of the possibilities of locative narrative." And as awkward as it may have been to lug an early 2000s tablet computer around the streets of Los Angeles, *34 North 118 West* represented an important decoupling of hypertextual narrative from the situation of sitting in front of a computer screen. The narrative was not a distant object for the reader to interpret, but something that the user could walk inside.

A focus on the relation of the reader's body to the body of text is indeed one of the notable recurring interests of digital narrative after hypertext. If Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* was in large part a meditation on the sort of posthuman consciousness enframed by the relations between person and screen, individual identity and network, more recent digital narratives are more likely to reconfigure the reading situation more generally. Readers are not necessarily sitting in a chair in front of a screen. They are just as likely to be moving through a narrative situated in physical space, or moving through the virtual space of an Augmented Reality environment, or experiencing the narrative in a 3D CAVE environment, or encountering a digital narrative in a communal experience of a performance.

Around the same time that *34 North 118 West* was narrativizing the streets of Los Angeles, the development of another sort of embodied narrative immersion was taking place in Robert Coover's CAVE Writing workshops at Brown University. The CAVE (Computer Assisted Virtual Environment) is a room-sized virtual reality display. Wearing 3D glasses with attached sensors, CAVEs allow for readers to enter a text in virtual space. In 2002, the work *Screen* was developed by Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Josh Carroll, Robert Coover, Shawn Greenlee, Andrew McClain, and Ben "Sascha" Shine. The work begins as a simple listening and reading experience. Narrative "memory texts" appear

on the walls, and are read in voice-over. This initial experience is much like listening to a story being read, and the walls of the CAVE seem very much like the two dimensional space of the page. After the initial narration of the piece is complete, however the words on the walls become unsettled and begin to move, eventually peeling off the walls and floating in three dimensional space. The user discovers that it is possible to interact with the words as material objects can be knocked around the room or split in two with the wave of a hand. The words are hypertextual in that they can be activated and interacted with in ways that extend the text, but rather than functioning as links to other nodes of narrative they are made literalized objects that the reader confronts in space and then returns to the walls in new configurations. The result of this interaction in the third stage of the piece is poem formed from the words the reader has interacted with, and serves as a meditation on the nature of memory and forgetting.

The 2014 CAVE2™ narrative developed by Roderick Coover, Arthur Nishimoto, Scott Rettberg, and Daria Tsoupikova *Hearts and Minds: The Interrogations Project* at the Electronic Visualization Lab at the University of Illinois Chicago also uses hypertextual narrative strategies to present a difficult set of materials in an immersive and affective virtual reality environment. The CAVE2™ is the next generation of CAVE technology, described by its creators as “a hybrid system that combines the benefits of both scalable-resolution display walls and virtual-reality systems to create a seamless 2D / 3D environment.” *Hearts and Minds* is a project based on interviews of American soldiers who participated in acts of battlefield torture and abusive violence during their service in Iraq. The interviews were conducted for Dr. John Tsukayma’s 2013 dissertation *By Any Means Necessary: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis Study of Post 9/11 American Abusive Violence in Iraq*. The project presents the audience with a narrative environment that begins in a reflective temple space with four doors opening to ordinary American domestic spaces: a boy’s bedroom, a family room, a suburban back yard, a kitchen. Moving through and exploring each these rooms. One user is tracked through this space via motion tracking sensors, and the 3D view of the scenes is focalized on this perspective. Using a wand with a trigger, the user triggers individual objects, such as a toy truck, a Boy Scout poster, a pair of wire cutters. When each object is activated, the walls of the domestic space fall away and a surreal desert landscape is revealed in 2D surrounding panorama, and one of the four voiceover actors is heard recounting particular acts and memory related metaphorically to the object selected. Just as in earlier hypertext narratives, there is a movement

through narrative space, if in this case a stereoscopic virtual space as well. The objects also function very much like hyperlinks in moving us from one narrative element to another. The projects attempts to extend and make accessible difficult narratives based on the actual testimonies involved. The immersion the system provides allows for a different type of affective experience of the narrative, activated through the visceral immersion afforded by the visual and auditory environment, but in structure and form it is essentially a contemporary hypertext.

The two *Electronic Literature Collections* published by the Electronic Literature Organization—volume one in 2006 and volume two in 2011—evidence the great diversity of literary forms that fall under the broader umbrella of electronic literature, and the general movement of the field after the turn of the millennium. In the collections, hypertext fictions appear alongside kinetic poetry, generative poetry and fiction, cinematic digital narratives, interactive narrative animations, interactive fiction, interactive drama, new media performance, locative narratives, hypermedia documentaries, and a variety of other forms. If in the 1990s digital writing communities tended to fall into a few identifiable camps that rarely interacted with one other—hypertext authors over here, IF authors over there, e-poets there—the electronic literature communities represented by the *Collections* and the ELO conferences and e-Poetry Festivals are much more inclusive and diverse in terms of forms and genres. The crowd of writers who participate in the Electronic Literature Organization have more of a cultural affiliation than a generic one. What they have in common is more an interest in exploring and exploiting the capabilities of the programmable networked computer and the network context for creative writing (and more generally, creative media) than an affiliation to any particular form therein.

All of this is not to say that the potentialities of the hypertext novel have been fully exhausted, nor that it has not had a lasting impact on the other digital media narrative forms that have followed. Some essential components of hypertext—breaking the narrative line; structuring stories into small segments, episodes, or nodes; enabling readers to interact with or arrange the presentation of narratives in various ways; weighing the user interface, graphic presentation, and navigational apparatus as poetic elements of the work—have carried through into a variety of other digital narrative forms. Hypertext and hypermedia remain elements of many contemporary digital media narrative projects—complex and ambitious digital writing and performance projects such as Judd Morrissey and Mark Jeffrey's *The Last*

Performance (2007) and *The Operature* (2013) for instance include hypertext elements within a more baroque poetic architecture —though it could no longer be said that the hypertext novel itself is an area of much contemporary activity.

In 2011, Paul La Farge published *Luminous Airplanes* with Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux. The main character and narrator of the novel is a web developer, a graduate of Bleak College and a former history Ph.D. student at Stanford. After the internet bubble has burst, he has moved back to his hometown of Thebes to sort through the belongings of his deceased grandfather and to prepare the family home for sale. In the process he is sorting through his own past in an attempt to sort out his own identity. The novel functions as a sort of bildungsroman as the narrator moves us through different periods of his life. The novel as it was printed is a kind of cut of a larger hypertext project published online. Though the “immersive text” version of the novel (La Farge’s editors at FSG did not want him to call it “hypertext” because they felt the word had negative connotations) is presented as an expansion of the novel, it is clear from reading La Farge’s commentary within the hypertext that the writing and development of the hypertext actually preceded the printed book. What essentially occurred then is that an editor came to the hypertext with a sharp knife and whittled away about 2/3 of the material included in the hypertext.

The “immersive text” version of *Luminous Airplanes* includes a great deal more material than there is in the printed book. The segments or episodes of the novel that appear there include both the material found in the book and other stories, episodes and texts that expand on the context of the novel. On the one hand, much of the material in the online hypertext version of the story fleshes out the reader’s understanding of the characters and their relationships, but on the other, some of the material, such as the long section “Summerland, about half a novel”—a manuscript written by the main character—does not add much to the experience of reading the work. There is a quality of everything-and-the-kitchen-sink-ism to the immersive text, and some gems appear alongside pages that might have been better left in the author's drawer.

Reviewing the project in *The New York Times*, Kathryn Shultz (2011) wrote that “the whole thing feels like a kind of literary 52-card pickup—i.e., a lot more fun for the thrower than the throwee. The most generous take on this Web project is that it reads like a rough draft of a very good novel—which this is.” My own experience of reading both the book and the hypertext

version of *Luminous Airplanes* was similar. La Farge clearly included material written over the span of many years. The sections written earlier in his career, such as the “Summerland” and “Bleak College” sections, are simply not as engaging on a sentence-by-sentence level as the material he wrote later, such as the “Thebes” section about his homecoming, reconnection and interaction with old friends and uncovering of family secrets. I suppose it is not surprising that in a writing project written over the course of more than a decade, the nature and quality of the writing would change. The good news is that La Farge’s writing style and his sense of character and plot improved immensely over the course of those years. The bad news is the hypertext includes all of the evidence of that improvement.

Luminous Airplanes has problems from a user interface standpoint. An apparatus that offers the reader logical, or interesting, or satisfying ways of traversing the text is essential to the reading experience of a hypertext fiction. While many hypertexts (including *The Unknown*) suffer to a degree from over-linking, the use of hypertext in this work is actually quite conservative, and somewhat limiting. In-text hyperlinks are used infrequently, and generally only in a referential style. Large episodes are held together with previous/next buttons, but when you reach the end of a section, links are not always used to offer the reader narrative progression or an associative logic. While an interactive visual map is provided, dividing the narrative into different sub-themes and periods of time, most of the offshoots from the main narrative are connected only to the “previous section” read or the narrative hub from which they originate. This leaves the reader to do a great deal of clicking back to texts he or she has already read. These loops often seem more repetitive, incidental, and time-consuming than generative. It would have been useful to be able to click from any text being read back to its position on the map and to navigate more directly from there.

There has always been a metafictional impulse to hypertext fiction, and La Farge indulges in this as much as any of the early hypertext novelists, commenting and situating his technical effects while he uses them and throwing shout-outs to his chosen antecedents, for example in a two-page comment about his use of photographs being preceded by the work of W.G. Sebald. Within the hypertext, La Farge offers an extensive commentary. These sections, identifiable by a light-blue background tint, are among the most interesting in the project, as we see La Farge struggling with the form of hypertext and his relationship to it as author (a relationship curiously tinged with what he describes as “guilt”). At one point in a discourse on constraint,

La Farge muses: “What I want to know is, what happens if you take these restrictions away? Beginning, I guess, with the idea of a definite beginning, or a fixed end. And then also: what happens if you let everything in?”⁴

I couldn't help but identify with La Farge there, as these were the same sorts of questions my coauthors and I were asking while we were writing *The Unknown*. The answer to his question, unfortunately, is “something bad happens if you let everything in.” The potential—for the hypertext author—to cast all constraints aside and to make connections across time, space, theme, and different types of texts—the temptation to simply *keep going*—to let the narrative expand and move and change and grow, endlessly—is both wonderful and terrible. And in some sense, this limitlessness is more fundamentally at odds with the form of the novel than any of the other subversions of story structure, or character development, or point of view, or causality enabled by the use of the hypertext form. Once you let everything in, perhaps you no longer have a novel but some other type of textual creature whose growth will eventually become malignant.

No story is boundless. The story must eventually cease, and the author—pathetic mortal—must eventually die. In some ways it does seem as if the American hypertext novel is a kind of ghost town—a narrative genre that was quickly discovered, developed, evolved, and then abandoned in pursuit of new territories before it ever reached its full potential. Of course, while stories end and writers expire, once invented, literary forms don't ever really perish. They merely go into hibernation and, in dormancy, await their rediscovery and reinvention. And so it may be with the hypertext novel. We have seen how many of the theoretical underpinnings, structural elements, and narrative techniques of hypertext have migrated into other forms of digital narrative. This is not however to say that the hypertext novel has simply been raided for spare parts. La Farge's experiment, if not entirely successful, is evidence that the form is not completely moribund. It is entirely likely that authors will return to the hypertext, embrace its comparative computational simplicity, which while driven towards excess is also in its own way austere, and will develop its future even as they learn from its past. Hypertext is dead. Long live hypertext.

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⁴ <http://www.luminousairplanes.com/section/constraint/>

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