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## Semantisation, exploration, self-reflection and absorption. Four modes of reading hypertext fiction

Though we have known the phenomenon called hypertext for more than 50 years, and though it was realised through the World Wide Web for more than two decades ago, we still lack knowledge on the hypertext structure's impact on reading.<sup>i</sup> Regarding hypertext fiction questions such as how do we read literary hypertexts, what are the preconditions for reading this kind of literature, and how can we describe different types of aesthetic experience and literary pleasure, are still of current interest. The complexity of reading does not increase as literature is turned into digital codes and utilises newer technological affordances, but the technological features, as semiotic and aesthetic means, emphasise and prefigure modes of reading in ways which would not be present in print literature.

Our knowledge of hypertext reading has expanded through research such as Moulthrop (1991), Kaplan and Moulthrop (1991), Snyder (1997), Miall and Dobson (2001), Ryan (2001), Gardner (2003), Gunder (2004), Page (2006) and White (2007). Many of these studies, and others, partly describe how their readers react and respond to hypertext fiction, but, as I see it, they partly fail in that they put too much weight on the reader's response and hardly any weight on the fact that hypertext fiction, just like print fiction, encourages or prefigures different responses and different modes of reading. The consequence is that these studies suffer from limitations which lessen their valuable contribution to our knowledge about reading hypertext fiction. One reason for this might be that hypertext theory lacks established concepts for describing response structures that encourage different modes of reading. By evolving concepts for unfolding the preconditions for reading hypertext fiction, we might gain a more nuanced picture of the process of reading hypertexts.

### A simple taxonomy

In a previous article<sup>ii</sup> on Megan Heyward's multimedia narrative work, *Of day of night* (2002), I sketched out four different reading attitudes or modes of reading and argued that three of these modes are prefigured in Heyward's work. In the following I would like to

identify and describe in more detail these four modes of reading, and discuss these in relation to relevant concepts regarding the reading process in print literature (Iser 1978), and from theory of MUD players (Bartle 1996). These modes may arise from the interrelationship of two dimensions of reading activity: intentionality versus non-intentionality, and reality-orientation versus subversion-orientation. These dimensions of reading activity are explored in relation to three significant aspects in the reading process: interactivity, experience of coherence, and genre recognition. Before I go further it is important to remember that the following notes concern implied readers and are not to be assumed to be true of any individual reader. In other words I am here talking about structures which Wolfgang Iser with his phenomenological approach to the act of reading in print literature would call “die Appellstruktur der Texte” (Iser 1978) or “text game structures” (Iser 1993).

### 1. Semantisation

One predominant way of reading a (hyper)text is the search for meaning. In view of such anticipation, the play of signifiers in the text is subject to semantics as an overarching frame of reference. Semantisation is hence a semiotic view on reading (Eco 1992). It is led by the necessity of understanding and controlling the text. The mode (of reading) can also involve the reader’s desire to appropriate the experience of the hypertext in such a way that whatever happens must be semanticised. And lastly, the mode can also indicate a defensive impulse where the quest for meaning is a rampart against the intrusion of the unfamiliar.

Semantisation is a mode grounded on an interaction between the reader and the text where “die Appellstruktur” invites the reader to apply his literary codes. And thereby, we might add, the text protects its reader from losing control, from experiencing a lack of coherence, and from a lack of genre recognition. Regarding the degree of interactivity, this means that the hypertext reader is able to choose which links to click on. His choices are then based on semiotic considerations and information provided by categorised links or the organisation of links on the screen so the outcome of the reader’s choice is to a large extent predictable. The reader might also experience that he is in control of making the text coherent through explicit cohesion markers, and that his preferences for meaning-making are preserved and confirmed.

Naturally we also find this confirmative mode of reading described in literary theory in relation to print literature. In his theory of text games Iser describes this reading process as *the semantic orientation of reading*. The semantic orientation of reading can according to Iser be

described as a reading process primarily oriented towards meaning-making, in order to understand the message of the text. Iser himself describes this mode of reading as “a game that ends when meaning has been found.” (Iser 1993:276). The mode “semantisation” which I have described here in relation to hypertext fiction also seems to some extent to be familiar with an approach to playing MUDs described by Richard Bartle in his article “Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs” (1996). Those players who are primarily oriented towards a goal and find pleasure in achieving this goal are named “Achievers” by Bartle. This goal-oriented strategy might involve such goals as finishing a game, points-gathering, rising in levels, and thereby leaving the lower levels done and used up. Similarly there are hypertexts where meaning-making through conscious and predictable action is a goal.

## 2. Exploration

The situation is different when the hypertext puts his reader in a role of exploration and a mode of gaining experience. This is the case when the hypertext (re-)reading (always) generates a new text, new combinations of clusters and semiotic resources, and new potentials for meaning-making from the same underlying text. Here the digital text turns the reader’s attention away from the process of semantisation and towards exploration and the fascination for transformation. The exploration is also prefigured in the hypertext when it undermines predictability and lacks patterns which guide the reader’s choice. This is for instance the case with uncategorising links, links that are organised in such a way that they do not reveal a specific order or sequence of reading, and invisible mouseovers. In these cases the reader must traverse the hypertext more or less by accident. And the outcome resulting pleasure might then be related to an insecurity as to whether or not he has found all the words and read all the information available in a node, just as well as the pleasure is related to the achievement of new experiences and the discovering of new underlying texts.

In the question of the mental configuration and interpretation of the text, the explorative mode of reading is also put forward by an indeterminate number of dissimilar causes, which prevent the recognition of what Eco (1992) calls a possible constant semantic isotopy<sup>iii</sup>. The hypertext puts the reader in a never-ending interpretative machine. Every time he thinks he has discovered a similarity, the sign will point to another similarity, in an endless progression.

Exploration reflects an attitude where the reader is less concerned about where his is taken as long as he is taken some where. This mode of reading is then motivated by travelling and discovering, more than a search for a specific meaning. Here we have entered a realm of hypertext fiction which takes chance as one of its main principles. Chance, according to Roberto Simanowski, is used as “an aesthetic means of going beyond traditional, familiar and predictable ways of seeing and describing things” (Simanowski 2003), as he describes the rule of alea in literature. And we might add that chance is also an aesthetic means to make the reader give up his desire for control and his aspirations for predictability. Iser also identifies chance as an aesthetic means in print literature and associates it with a mode of reading where the pleasure is related to discovering something new. In order to gain new experience, Iser writes, we have to put our own code at stake and be guided by an aleatory rule in literature (Iser 1993).

Just like print and electronic literature, computer games also have their moments of randomness. According to Bartle unpredictability favours those players who are oriented towards exploration, and who find pleasure in having the game surprise them. These players “try to find out as much as they can about the virtual world.” (Bartle 1996:3) Bartle calls these players “the explorers”, and just like the reading mode I have identified here as “exploration”, “the explorers” in MUD dig around for information.

### 3. Self-reflection

A hypertext, just like any text, can also be approached from the standpoint of playing a role. Computer technology easily offers ways to fool the reader by simulating a real person, or making the reader believe he is communicating with a real person, or making the reader believe that what he sees and hears is real. This is for instance the case in electronic literature such as the 24-part online drama *Online Caroline* (Bevan and Wright 2000).

Jill Walker’s enjoyable description of her e-friendship with Caroline, the fictional protagonist in the 24-part online drama *Online Caroline*, illustrates the role-playing:

I connect my computer to the network, sipping my morning coffee. My hair is still wet from the shower when I check my email and find it there in between other messages: an email from Caroline. I read it quickly and then visit her web site. She’s waiting for me. She holds a shirt she’s just bought up to the webcam so I can see it, asking me afterwards by email whether I’d like her to send it to me. “Yes”, I answer, clicking and

typing my responses into the web form and giving her my physical address. Caroline knows I like coffee and she knows I read her email in the morning. Caroline and I are friends.” (Walker 2003:65)

Walker is role-playing, and through her friendship with Caroline her own preferences and experiences, her non-playing codes, are activated and come into play: “Being a heterosexual woman, I fill in those blanks in Caroline’s character and in my own self-presentation so they will suit my expectations of a relationship between girls talking about boyfriends and work and emotions.” (ibid.:76) Online Caroline encourages readers to play a role as well as play themselves.

The point is that the fictional world appears coherent and reality-like. It is as if we are in touch with reality through the computer. Rather than bringing different messages, sound and visuals have the same content. The sense of reality is heightened when they align. The imitation of reality gives the reader the opportunity to play a role, being someone else or being somewhere else. As the reader is drawn into this reality-like fiction, he is invited to activate his own codes. Such “an activation makes the reader into a player allowed to watch himself or herself playing a role”, writes Iser (1993:96) in his theory on the reading of print literature. The self-present in the fictional world is an experience of how the reader’s own codes constitute the text-game mimicry. The pleasure is here related to a self-enjoyment in the enjoyment of being someone else or being somewhere else. This is what Iser calls “aesthetic enjoyment”, which is, according to Iser, the quintessence of aesthetic experience, the “self-enjoyment in the enjoyment of something other” (Iser 1993:278). In this self-enjoyment the reader becomes aware of his own codes, his own experiences and expectations, and this awareness turns the reading into a self-reflective mode of reading.

Reading as self-reflection does not seem to have a companion in Bartle’s theory, but that does not make it less relevant for MUD players (and vice versa). Bartle identifies what he calls “the socialiser”, whose primary goal is to socialise with others through the game’s communicative facilities. To converse or otherwise interact with fellow players, the socialiser must both play a role and activate his own code, Bartle writes. This kind of socialisation might be observed in electronic literature as well. Both Bartle’s socialiser and the self-reflexive reader are thereby involved in role-playing.

#### 4. Absorption.

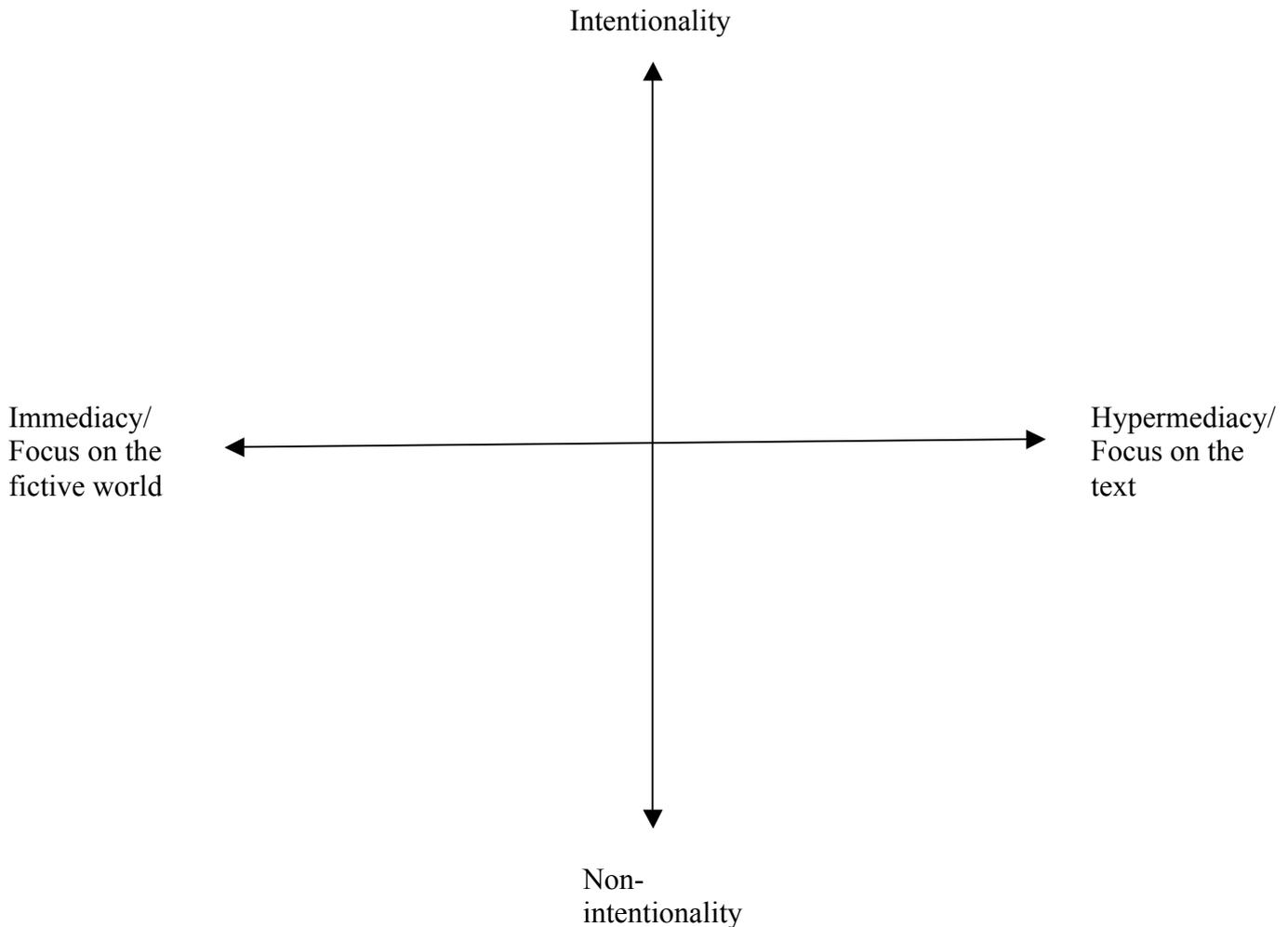
There is one more approach to be distinguished from those outlined so far. This embodies the most intensive absorption of the reader in the hypertext. Absorption is a mode of reading which can be described as pursuing vertigo, prefigured by hypertexts which keep their readers so busy that their efforts to discover meaning, intentional or accidental, or play a role as being someone else or being somewhere else, falls apart, so the readers' more or less only option is to slide into the text and let themselves be absorbed into the play of textual elements.

Absorption might be considered as what Roland Barthes calls the pleasure of the text. Barthes describes the pleasure of the text as an experience of the site of loss, where language is never anything but the site of its effect: "what pleasure wants is the site of loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation" (Barthes 1975:7). In multimodal hypertexts the pleasure might be linked to a comfortable practice of reading where the reader is being seduced by the combination and organisation of modalities, as well as by the semiotic mobility and blankness of its effect. This is for instance the case in *I, you, me* (2001), by Dan Waber and Jason Pimble, where the readers flow into the river of verbs.<sup>iv</sup> Here readers become aware of the fickle nature of semiotic resources which makes them slip into an in-between position. This aesthetic experience might be pleasurable and enjoyable, but it might just as well be a frightful and frustrating one. Not least because it seems like much of the hypertext fiction that prefigures absorption invert literary conventions. The lack of coherence, the lack of genre recognition, and the impossibility of creating a stable meaning or in other ways controlling the text, keep the reader in a condition of confusion. Some hypertexts hover "on the borders of illegibility", which is how Katherine Hayles describes *Lexia to perplexia* in her book *Writing machines* (Hayles 2002:51).

A somewhat similar mode of reading to the one I have called absorption is found in the theory of Barthes (Barthes 1975) and Iser (Iser 1993). Barthes' concept "the pleasure of the text" and what Iser calls "the most intensive absorption of the reader in the text game" (ibid.278) describes a mode of reading where the text is rocking the readers cultural and psychological foundations, bringing the reader to a crisis in the understanding of language. And if we turn towards computer games Bartle describes a type of player whose main interest lies in sabotaging the game, going against established conventions and expectations for how to play the game. Bartle calls these kinds of players "the killers", as they make it more or less impossible for other players, like "the achievers" or "the socialiser", to play the game the way they prefer. "The killers" then inflict distress and frustration on other players.

## A graph

Having outlined these four modes of reading which I find relevant for describing the preconditions for reading hypertext fiction, let us consider the following abstract graph:



The axes of the graph represent the interrelationship of two dimensions of reading activity: intentionality versus non-intentionality, and reality-orientation versus subversion-orientation. The x-axis goes from the emphasis on the fictive world as make-believe to an emphasis on the text and its facilities as an artefact, while the y-axis goes from the reader's preconditions for doing conscious actions regarding interactivity, concerning the constitution of a coherent text, and regarding meaning-making on the one hand, to the lack of such preconditions on the other hand.

Intentionality is here understood from the point of view of the reader and to what extent he can maintain purpose-driven, goal-directed intentionality in hypertext fiction. This is a different approach of intentionality than for instance Searls's, which defines intentionality as a communicative intention of the speaker in performing a successful act of communication and the receiver's recognition of this intention (Searle 1983). My approach also differs from critical concepts of intention, like Hirsch (1967), whose concept points at the writer's or text's assumed purpose. A further and more thorough discussion on intentionality in hypertext and new media is to be found in Ensslin (1997).

I here use the concept intentionality in a rather common meaning as a purpose-driven human action. This action takes place on different levels in the reading process of hypertext fiction, such as choosing which path to follow, connecting semiotic resources into coherent wholes, and creating meaningful texts. The physical action takes place as the reader virtually has to configure the text he is about to read (Eskelinen 2001). This configuration is an action defined by Eskelinen to distinguish between hypertext and print literature. According to Eskelinen, in hypertext the reader is required to configure the text to be able to interpret it, while in print literature the interpretation have to take place before the reader can configure the text into a coherent world. The physical action involves clicking on links or activating mouseovers which causes textual changes and brings about semiotic resources for interpretation. These changes caused by the reader's interaction with the text might be deliberate<sup>v</sup> or accidental. By this I mean that on the one hand the hypertext might give the reader the opportunity to choose a reading path through reflections and predictability and thereby make the reader experience that he is in control, that he is playing the text and not the other way around. On the other hand the hypertext might lack patterns that guide the reader's choice and thereby undermine predictability and the reader's intentionality. The former prefigures most likely a mode of reading I have called semantisation, the latter involves exploration.

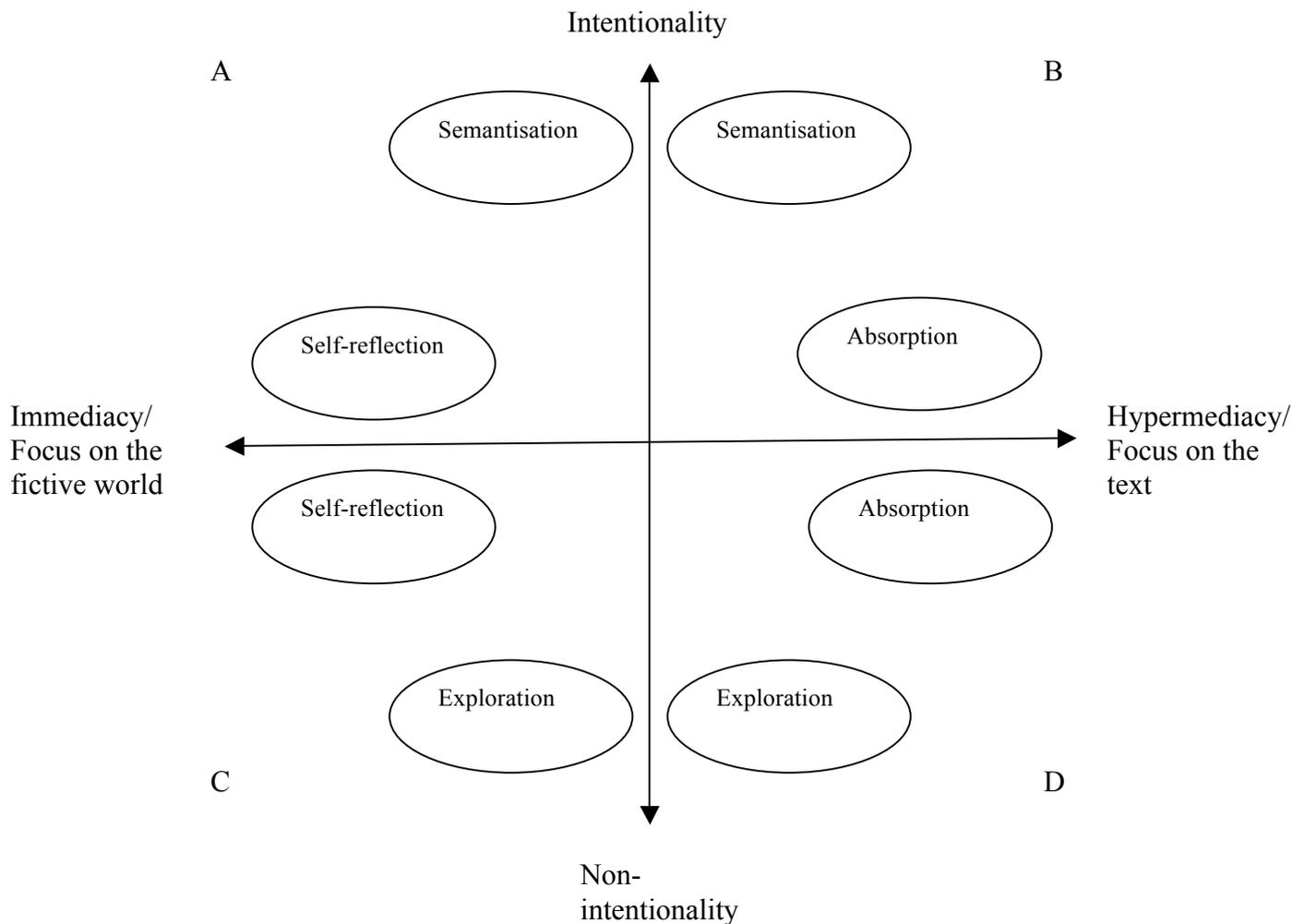
While intentionality and non-intentionality are positioned in a continuum on the vertical axis in the model, regarding to what extent the reader can uphold a purpose-driven goal, the horizontal axis represents the precondition for immersion. Here I make a distinction between absorption into the fictive world and absorption into the text. I see these two types of immersion as similar to Bolter and Grusin's concepts on immediacy and hypermediacy, representing a double logic in new media (Bolter and Grusin 1999). According to Bolter and Grusin immediacy is the erasure of the gap between signifier and signified. The media is then

operating as neutral or transparent between different dimensions of realities so the reader forgets the presence of the medium. As the interface between the reader and the medium is erased the reader “is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium.”(ibid.24) The semiotic resources are then perceived to be a window to the real world. Hypermediacy on the other hand invites the reader not so much to focus on the fictive world, but instead to focus on the presence of the medium. Bolter and Grusin write that hypermediacy is a “style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium.” (Bolter and Grusin 1999:272). It makes the reader conscious (or hyper-conscious) of the presence of semiotic resources in different modalities and media. This is for instance the case when semiotic resources are creating counterpoints or paradoxical relations.

### An extended graph and mixed modes

Naturally, these modes cross over, and readers will often drift between all four, depending on variations in the hypertext fiction they are reading. These variations might be preconditions for interactivity, preconditions for experience of coherence, and preconditions for genre recognition. A hypertext fiction might for instance provide the reader with more or less information about a link destination through categorising and uncategorising links (Gunder 2001), semiotic resources might be integrated in the text which provide coherence and meaningful structure to events and spatial arrangements, and the text utilises genre norms which conditions the recognising of one or several genre(s), which again is a necessarily assumption for the process of meaning-making. These different variations make the reading more or less predictable, and the textual world more or less coherent and recognisable.

The four modes of reading that I have identified and described so far can form a four-sided model for reading hypertext fiction, based on the interrelationship of intentionality / non-intentionality, and reality-orientation / subversion-orientation. Since the modes of reading do not necessarily work alone, different combinations of two modes might be associated within each quadrant (A, B, C and D) in the graph.



As I see it some of the reading modes exclude each other, but during the reading process an actual reader might sweep into three or perhaps all four modes. It would be impossible to combine semantisation and exploration or self-reflection and absorption at the same time, but other combinations are likely to occur in different degrees of balance and domination. In semantisation the established relation between signifier and signified is final and fixed. The reader is not oriented towards other possible relations, but finds pleasure in having discovered or found a relation. In combination with self-reflection and immediacy (quadrant A), where semantisation dominates, this “final” relation also represents a real world. This means that the sign, as the result of the established connection between signifier and signified, confirms norms, values, feelings, social systems etc. If semantisation is combined with and dominates over absorption (quadrant B) the outcome of the reading might be that the established connection turns norms, values, feelings, social systems etc. up-side-down. A self-reflective mode-domination weakens the process of meaning-making because the text puts the reader in a position of role-playing and self-enjoyment. When absorption dominates over

semantisation, the interpretative reader which is in search for a meaning is in trouble as he will be left dissatisfied and frustrated because what he seeks can never be found.

The graph also indicates different combinations of exploration and self-reflection (quadrant C). Here the explorative mode would break up the illusion of immediacy, the pretended equation between the hypertext and the world. This is so because the explorative mode is put forward by continual connotations, a never ending semiosis. The reader will then for instance experience that different semiotic resources, and different nodes, represent discontinuity of events. If self-reflection has the upper hand the role-play will continue, but the reader will experience continual change in the different dimensions of realities. And lastly, the combination of exploration and absorption (quadrant D) leads to a boundless connotation process where the outcome is not just new experiences, but where these new experiences are colliding and paradoxical.

### A semiotic-aesthetic view on reading

I have in this paper discussed some of the preconditions for reading hypertext fiction and related these to four types or modes of reading. In my approach to and description of these modes I have made links to similar approaches and views from theory both on print literature and game theory. Both the theory of Wolfgang Iser and the theory of Richard Bartle are to some extent valuable in the process of mapping out how we might read hypertexts because hypertext fiction bear traces of both literature and game. But the model I have sketched out is not just in the juxtaposition of aesthetic theory belonging to different genres; it is also, as I see it, a mix of a semiotic approach and an aesthetic approach. The x-axis might represent a semiotic view on reading, while the y-axis represents an aesthetic view on reading.

I see an advantage in that the four-sided model I have described here embraces different aesthetic experiences which traditionally are kept separate in the twentieth-century reader-oriented theories. We might distinguish between those reader-oriented theories which are predominately concerned with how readers make sense of a text, such as the Anglo-American tradition called reader response and the German tradition called reception theory, and those theories which are concerned with how texts frustrate readers' attempts at making sense, such as deconstructionist like deMan, Miller and Derrida. The reading model elaborated out of the four modes of reading might be seen as an amalgam of these different concerns. It consists of

both the aspect of how the text prepares its readers in applying their own codes and semanticise the text, as well as aspects on how the text prevents the reader from making meaning.

Since one mode of reading rarely occurs in isolation and is generally mixed, the model might offer a way to combine the variable conditions and effects for reading in new media.

Hypertext fiction is then seen as an occasion for interpretation, as an occasion for emotions and sensations, regarding frustration, tears of sorrow, bellies filled with laughter or hair-raising terror, as well as a genre for absorbing effects which make the reader forget himself and for a moment become other than himself.

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<sup>i</sup> This is also an issue discussed in Mark Bernstein's "Where are the hypertexts" (Bernstein 1999).

<sup>ii</sup> Rustad, Hans K 2009: "A four-sided model for reading hypertext fiction. Modes of reading Megan Heyward's *Of day of night*." Forthcoming

<sup>iii</sup> *Semantic isotopy* is a concept which Eco borrows from Greimas. Greimas defines isotopy as "a complex of manifold semantic categories making possible the uniform reading of a story." (Greimas 1970:88)

<sup>iv</sup> This is how *I, you, me* is described in *Electronic literature collection, Volume one* (2006).

<sup>v</sup> In Searle's (1983) phenomenological view on intentionality, the deliberate physical action is always intentional though not always conscious.