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entertainment



Hypertext

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between the links

By Julia Keller

TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

So why should Jane and Herman and Chuck have all the fun?

The question raised by hypertext is just that: Why must readers intrigued by the fictional worlds created by writers such as Jane Austen, Herman Melville and Charles Dickens be forced to stay on the marked trail? Why can't readers explore the made-up terrains on their own, without the author playing tour guide?

Why do the writers always get the last word?

"A hypertext," said Chicago author Scott Rettberg, "is a much less author-guided, and much more reader-decided journey, than a conventional narrative would be."

As it happened, Rettberg, 28, offered that definition in a portion of "The Unknown," a hypertext novel (www.soa.uc.edu/user/unknown) upon which he is collaborating with three friends.

Hypertext — or electronic literature, a term its practitioners prefer — is, depending on one's perspective, either the salvation of the written word or an abomination signaling the end of literacy.

Whether you know it or not, you've probably seen a hypertext. If you've called up a site on the Web, count yourself as a hypertext user. The Web itself, in fact, is a hypertext — that is, a medium that includes links to other sites.

Typically, the links are indicated by a **different ink color** or **different font** for certain words, or sometimes by a squiggly line beneath the word. Clicking on the designated word zips the reader away from the main text and into an auxiliary text.

According to Rettberg and his cyber-sidekicks, Chicago is a hotbed of hypertext. Even in a computer-based medium that renders physical location irrelevant, Chicago is garnering international attention for its electronic literary creations.

Not everyone, though, is ready to boot up. Despite its increasing acceptance by the academic world, some scholars still are irritated and confused by what they see as merely a high-tech fad, said Terry Harpold, who teaches hypertext literature at Georgia Tech.

"For many, it's still 'hyper-what?' It's not like reading a book. It requires a whole new set of tools," he said.

At its debut about 15 years ago, hypertext made headlines because it invited readers to participate in the writing or to select variable endings. As hypertext has evolved, however, that novelty has largely given way to a multiplicity of hyperlinks from which readers can choose.

"There are exciting changes going on — a new set of rules for writing," said Rob Wittig, a Chicago author who believes that hypertext is the next great leap forward for communication.

"The more you know about the history of literature, the less scary this becomes."

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The circuitous soul of hypertext

By **Julia Keller**
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

The subject of Keller's doctoral dissertation was Virginia Woolf, whose novels might be considered a kind of precursor to hypertext, filled as they are with elegant rhetorical curlicues that branch off the plot.



Photo for the Tribune by Eric Unger
Rettberg, 28, is a doctoral candidate at the University of Cincinnati. The Elk Grove native returned to Chicago to finish his dissertation.



Television's response:
'Oh, yeah? Well, we'll just see about that.'

William Gillespie, Dirk Stratton and Frank Marquardt. Gillespie lives in Champaign, Ill.; Stratton in Cincinnati; Marquardt in San Francisco.

Brown University, at which Robert Coover teaches, is a center of hypertext activity. Coover has been thinking, writing and teaching hypertext since the early 1960s. His 1992 article in the New York Times Book Review ("The End of Books"), a sort of hypertext manifesto, galvanized electronic literature fans around the world.



Tribune photo by Charles Ongood
He's a 43-year-old California native who lived in Paris for several years, soaking up all that French intellectual stuff, and returned to Chicago to work in graphic design — and to spread the word about hypertext. He created an online literary studio at www.tank20.com



The future of literature is happening in a scruffy second-floor apartment in Chicago's East Village, just west of downtown.

There, in a room so tiny that it calls to mind a certain risqué anecdote involving **Dorothy Parker and Robert Benchley**, **Scott Rettberg** has spent the last year diligently typing his contribution to "**The Unknown**," a hypertext novel that recently was co-winner of an international prize for electronic literature.

Just what is **hypertext**? A better question might be: What *isn't* hypertext?

People have always followed their own paths when reading. Take this text, for instance: Nothing prevents you from skipping to the last paragraph, then returning to this one. Or stopping altogether and turning on your **TV set**. Hypertext simply makes explicit what once was implicit about reading.

Hypertext is one of what Rettberg and others call "emerging literatures." The expanded capacity of personal computers, along with the possibilities of the **Internet**, now make hypertext feasible as never before.

Michael Joyce, a respected hypertext author, has said, "**Hypertext is the revenge of the word on television.**"

Rettberg and **three friends** began writing "The Unknown" as "a kind of lark," he said. "But it became so much fun, we stayed with it." The novel is a sort of virtual road trip, as the guys try to peddle their literary wares to an unsuspecting public. Along the way, they ponder deep concepts such as literary fame and beer.

"You can jump in anywhere," Rettberg said. And jump out, too, because each "**page**" is sprinkled with hyperlinks, which, when visited, come across as muttered asides.

Hypertext, however, is not all fun and video games. It is now a serious **academic subject**, complete with fancy conferences, tenured professorships and respected journals.

"**If anything, I think it has too much academic standing now,**" said Ed

Barrett, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor who teaches and writes hypertext. "Academics have encrusted it with so much critical theory."

For **Rob Wittig**, hypertext isn't a replacement for traditional novels but an enhancement. "They both have their pleasures," he said.

"Progressive thinkers believe the characteristic of our age is that everything is possible."

When hypertext began about 15 years ago, it was available only on floppy disks and then **CD-ROMs**; users would purchase a novel and then follow — or not — the forking paths of divergent plotlines by clicking on various hyperlinks.

In the last five years, a great deal of hypertext has moved onto the Web. That has sparked important questions, according to Rettberg: "What kind of publishing models will we have? How do you make hypertext free for everybody but still have authors get paid for it?"

Terry Harpold, a Georgia Tech professor who specializes in hypertext, defined it as "another forum for the investigation of language."

Not everyone is ready to jump on the hypertext bandwagon. Literary critic **Sven Birkerts** complains that words on a screen can never be the equal of words on a page. "This glimpse of the future — if it is the future — has me clinging all the more tightly to my books," Birkerts said.

Rettberg, however, sees hypertext as much more than mere wired wordplay. It's a life preserver flung at literature.

"If you go into a classroom of college freshmen and ask them their five favorite books, you'll get blank looks," he said. "Ask them their five favorite Web sites, though, and they'll rattle them off."

"What we're really concerned about is the survival of **literature** in the digital age. We're trying to create a whole new arena for literature."



Humorists Parker and Benchley, members of the famed Algonquin Round Table, once shared a small office in New York. How small? "If there were one square inch less space," Parker cracked, "it would legally constitute adultery."

Hypertext, according to a link in "The Unknown," 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 text coils in on itself." If this makes your head hurt, relax: You are normal. But it gets easier with repeated use.



Although, frankly, we would prefer that you didn't. It's up to you, of course. It's a matter of trust. We'll never know.



For a brief, lively history of the Internet's development, check out w3.aces.uiuc.edu/AIM/scala/nethistory.html

An archaic, totally irrelevant concept when applied to hypertext, but it's like macaroni and cheese: You know it. You love it. It's the rhetorical equivalent of comfort food.



This reminds us of the remark made by the late Flannery O'Connor, short-story writer. Asked if academic writing programs stifle writers, she retorted, "They don't stifle enough of 'em!" O'Connor also liked peacocks, which is not really relevant to the point, but you never know what you'll find in a hyperlink.

www.eastgate.com offers hypertext floppies and CD-ROMs for sale.



His books include "The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age" (1994) and "Readings" (1999). Birkerts often is cast as a weirdo Luddite, but his writing is graceful and his passion for words charming.