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Spatial/Temporal Literary Hypertext

Background

I am Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Associate Professor in Film and Media Arts in the School of Communications and Theater at Temple University in Philadelphia. My background is in screenwriting and film directing, along with narrative theory and literary fiction. I've come to hypertext out of this hybrid of stuff.

In the last one hundred and fifty years, literary text has become highly hybridized, that is, it is understood to represent a number of voices and perspectives (see M. M. Bakhtin for an elaboration of this). Some of these voices are diegetic voices – those that exist in the story world and compete with one another. Others embody different narrative levels. Thus, one voice may represent the writer of a letter describing a situation; a second voice may be that of the characters she describes. Or voice may represent various levels of narrators who do not necessarily appear as characters in the story themselves. Ambiguous words or phrases, along with metaphorical and/or symbolic constructions, also serve as devices designed to open the text.

The relative weight and authority that we as readers give to these voices account for the ambiguity of much modern and later fiction. If we want to use information metaphors, we can think of this ambiguity as “noise” in the system – and in fact some have used information theory to account for the openness of literary meaning (for instance, see William R. Paulson, *The Noise*

of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information). We would then say our reading depends on what we reject as noise and what we chose to interpret as part of the textual meaning itself.

For instance, take the opening sentence of *White Noise* (1985) by Don DeLillo. “The station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus.” How do we read “station wagons”? At one level they are what they are—cars with extended bodies that carry luggage. Yet, we can read them ironically – the portentous phrase, “x arrived at noon” suggests unearned salvation or liberation. Or we can read them metaphorically – the “lifeblood” of the university is returning. We can read them culturally – in the eighties, station wagons tended to be the car of choice of upper, middle class suburban families. Or historically, what are station wagons in this era of SUV’s? Further, we can read their arrival as occurring immediately before the narrator’s wrote this sentence, or as occurring months before the time of writing which might take place well after the last event in the novel concludes. The sentence, therefore, can reflect different narrative positions.

Our entrance into the novel is dependent on what readings we emphasize. I gravitate to the ironic, believing the novel is using “station wagon” as an object of contemporary culture, but do not dismiss the metaphorical entirely because I expect from DeLillo a tenderness in his critique of our material world. No matter. I’ve taken the same words and chosen, interactively if you will, my meaning from a multitude of meanings. To me, this is the literacy promise of hypertext.

Unfortunately, the first generation of hypertext, the Storyspace texts, do not really get at this. Because Storyspace replaces one screen with an entirely new one, the connection between link and result tends to vanish in the transition. This is compounded by the fact that many of the best of these works (for instance, “afternoon”, “Victory Garden” and “Patchwork Girl”) conceal

their links. What is disappointing in these works is that they do not facilitate (there are exceptions in “Patchwork Girl”) a simultaneity of experience that would allow the reader to appreciate both the link text and the text linked. Rather they work much like filmic montage where one shot obliterates the one it replaces.

Even before knowing of the work being done in spatial hypertext, I have been exploring a form of literary hypertext built around a combination of spatial/temporal mapping. Before I get to this let me comment on one example of spatial hypertext, the Visual Knowledge Builder (VKB) developed by Kevin T. Gupton and Frank M. Shipman III, as it relates to literary hypertext.

VKB is an exciting model of spatial hypertext which features, in my context here, one conceptual piece of great interest. This is based on the observation that temporal linked hypertext, navigational hypertext, suggests a binary, either on or off, connection between the link and the text it links to. Such a binary connection may not best reflect the ephemeral nuances of thought. Therefore, VKB proposes instead a sense of connection based on geographical proximity, an analog mode. The closer two items are the greater the connection between them, implied but never completely insisted upon.

Project

I am working on a Flash-based piece, entitled “Three Men Going Home”, that explores notions of masculinity in three middle-aged men who all think of themselves as “different from their fathers”. The three interactive stories all take place in that undefined space between leaving work and arriving home

The piece starts with a block of text, called a blurt, centered on the bottom of an empty screen. The text is unmarked, but the cursor changes on linkable words. Some of these words

are considered uninflected while others are specifically hybrids, chosen because they represent ambiguity of meaning or voice. They are the words whose interpretation is more likely to influence a reader's understanding of a story.

If the reader chooses an uninflected word, a line animates out from the word until it reaches a point further up and to one side of the screen. When the animation completes another blurt appears. At the same time, the original blurt dims except for highlights at the other linkable words. The user may now work with the second blurt and continue this path, or she may go back to the original blurt and start another path by linking on another word. All paths remain visible. When the text reaches the top of the screen, the screen scrolls preserving all the paths that led up to it.

When the user chooses a hybrid word, two lines animate from the original word, bifurcating and leading to two secondary blurts. These blurts represents two distinct perspectives; one may be a continuation of the story while the second may be a commentary on it. Each blurt may be engaged as one would the original blurt or left alone.

Finally, some links lead to the story of the second man going home, which is told left-to-right across the screen, rather than down-to-up. When this happens, the down-to-up blurts dim, when the left-to-right blurts are written over them.

As I mention above, one of the things I admire in the VKB is the idea of spatial proximity suggesting, but not insisting on relationships. This is a very powerful approach.

The line based connection of blurts is highly determined. This led me to think about a depth relationship that charts a tentative relationship between the left-to-right blurts which lay over the down-to-up blurts. A user may explore the dimmed blurts by rolling over them. Once she finds an inferential connection between a dimmed blurt and the top level of highlighted

blurts, she clicks on the dimmed blurt and drags to the foregrounded one. A box is formed between them suggesting a proximal relationship between the two stories, yet one less strong than that indicated by lines. In effect, the lines chart forward story movement and commentary; the boxes mark thematic or vertical associations.

Let me finish with one example. The first blurt of “Three Men Going Home” reads, “He had trouble judging of late. Even the most obvious distances.” There are a number of links off this, but the hybrid link is on the word, “obvious”. One bifurcation reads, “So it might be that he drifts over. Or the blue Chevy blindly pulls out. Either way.” The other bifurcation reads, “Sometimes sitting next to each other, you feel more apart than across the city. You are contained, almost pushed back by your proximity. Which doesn’t help. You might not know this, but if you could talk freely, you wouldn’t know what to say.”

The first of these links starts a plot line in which this character, numbly driving home from work, accidentally scrapes a car (or doesn’t, this is always kept unclear), and instead of stopping, takes off. Under the threat of being caught, he discovers a strange euphoria that comes from driving without a direction, and entering deeper into a world new to him.

The second link is more authorial. It works as a comment that relates distance, and more specifically the obviousness of distance, to the quality of a relationship, summarized from outside. It explicitly creates a voice which can look in and pull out meaning that the character can not see.

By working with both time and space, spatial-temporal hypertext seeks to preserve the force of a story line unwinding in time, while providing vertical commentary spatially mapped onto the story line. All of this can be drawn from by the multiple meanings implied by a single word in the context of hybrid literary language.