

# Authors, Readers, and Progression in Hypertext Narrative

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## **The Similarity of Print and Hypertext Narrative: A Hypothesis**

George Landow, Espen J. Aarseth, Stuart Moulthrop and many others have heralded the development of hypertext because they believe it represents a revolution in textuality that will radically alter how we read and write, including of course how we read and write narrative. Print texts, we are reminded by the champions of this new medium, are linear while hypertexts are nonlinear. Consequently, the argument goes, print narratives encourage reading in a fixed, straight-line sequence—one word after another, one page after another—under the control of the author. Even post-modern attempts to subvert the fixity of the print sequence cannot overcome the stability of the printed page and the restrictions on format imposed by the traditional book. Hypertext narratives, on the other hand, are fluid by design; their sequence changes based on readerly decisions. To put it another way, as those who advance this argument sometimes do, readers approach hypertext narratives from variable positions within the narrative, and so their progression through the text—indeed, the progression of the text—is not fixed but variable from reader to reader and from one reading occasion to the next. If the medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan so famously pronounced, then it would follow that reading hypertext narratives should be a significantly different experience from reading print narratives. It is our hypothesis, however, that the differences between hypertext and print narratives are neither as absolute nor as stark as they first appear and that understanding their similarities will enhance our understanding of each individually. We will support this hypothesis by calling attention to some frequently neglected features of narrative progression in both print and hypertext narratives and by analyzing the progression of one well-known hypertext, Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*.

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The term 'hypertext' was originally coined in 1960 by Ted Nelson to describe a new form of writing that emphasized not only the blocks of writing found in a text—often called *lexias*, following Roland Barthes—but also, and maybe more importantly, the links between these lexias.<sup>1</sup> In its initial form, hypertext referred more often than not to ways of organizing information: rather than laying everything out in a two-dimensional plane, hypertext was (at least) three-dimensional because readers could see what was underneath the first plane by clicking on certain words or phrases. Accordingly, with the continued development of the Internet, the World Wide Web has become the best-known and most elaborate hypertext. Hypertext narrative, according to George Landow, has many new and notable features, including "(1) reader choice, intervention, and empowerment; (2) inclusion of extralinguistic texts (images, motion, sound); (3) complexity of network structure; and (4) degrees of multiplicity and variation in literary elements, such as plot, characterization, setting and so forth" (180). But of course, well before hypertext became a novel form of writing associated with technological change, novelists and poets such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and Julio Cortazar had played with the conventions of narrative, writing texts that foregrounded not only issues of non-linearity and reader choice, but also the interrelations among parts of texts, as well as intertextual relations among discrete texts. And of course in our postmodern age, print writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, John Barth, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Angela Carter have engaged in more radical experimentation with non-linear forms. More significantly, however, even before these experimental modernists and postmodernists came along, novelists had been creating progressions that moved their narratives beyond anything that can adequately be described as "linear." To develop this point, we need to begin with a closer look at the concept central to the claims for the revolutionary nature of hypertext: progression.

### **The Concept of Progression and the Progression of Print Narratives**

Most claims about the linearity of traditional print narrative depend upon the conflation of the concepts of plot and of progression. In previous work, James Phelan has differentiated the two concepts in the following way: plot focuses on the contents of the text and the sequence of events to be found within it (a sequence that may or may not appear in chronological order), while pro-

gression focuses on the relation between the text and the reader's temporal experience of it. Progression, Phelan suggests, "refers to narrative as a dynamic event, one that must move, in both its telling and its reception, through time. In examining progression, then, we are concerned with how authors generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers' interests in narrative" (15). Phelan has also identified two main mechanisms by which authors generate readers' interests, one that is part of 'story' and the other part of 'discourse.' He labels the first mechanism *instabilities*, a term that refers to conflictual or otherwise unsettled relations among characters or between a single character and his or her situation. Phelan labels the second mechanism *tensions*, a term that refers to unstable relations between the author or narrator and the authorial audience. In Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, for example, Frederic Henry's relation to Catherine Barkley in the early sections of the novel is an instability, while his naïve beliefs about the war are tensions. The narrative arouses our interest in both of these matters and invites us to read on to see if—and how—each is resolved.

While progression is thus rooted in formal features of the text—in character, events, and narrative discourse—it also includes the dynamics of readerly understanding as well. It is our contention that those dynamics, even in print texts, are rarely well-described with linear models. To take a dramatic example, consider Robert Coover's "The Babysitter." Its progression involves the reader in the continual revision of the nature of the action as well as of the nature and purpose of the narrative. The story is organized as a set of short descriptions of events, told from the perspective of different characters with no one perspective positioned as authoritative. The descriptions contradict each other. It is possible to decide that some must be fantasies of the characters, but the lack of an authoritative perspective makes it impossible to determine which descriptions are the fantasies. Consequently, it is simply not possible to make each description fit into a coherent narrative of what happened the night the babysitter sat for the Tuckers. Did all go smoothly, as one subset of descriptions suggest? Or did all hell break loose, as another subset suggests? And if the latter, which circle of hell was the babysitter actually in? Furthermore, as the events contradict each other, the temporal sequence of the story breaks with a standard chronological progression, even though the overall trajectory of the story is clearly from early evening to late night. As a result, the reader's progression through the narrative can be described as a series of loop-de-loops as each new description complicates the number of instabilities and tensions and the inter-

relations among them. Indeed, the effort to make sense of the story is likely to lead readers to break the sequence on the printed page and do such things as read all the descriptions from one character's perspective in order and then all those from another character's perspective. But even such moves, which are analogous to following specific links in a hypertext, do not resolve the contradictions of the narrative. The progression, nevertheless, is not at all random. Instead, the multiple versions of events in which fantasy and reality become impossible to separate are part of a progression that reveals the potential for violence and mayhem lurking just underneath the placid surface of suburbia.

Although "The Babysitter" is, in one sense, an extreme example of how narrative progression depends on recursiveness, in another sense it simply highlights a feature of progression in narratives of any sophistication. Take something as far from postmodernism as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel opens with Mr. and Mrs. Bennet discussing the recent arrival to their neighborhood of Mr. Bingley, a single man of large fortune, whom Mrs. Bennet immediately regards as a potential husband for one of their five daughters. The comedy of Chapter 1 arises not just from the wonderful irony of the famous opening, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife," but also from the dialogue in which Mr. Bennet resists Mrs. Bennet's suggestion that he call on Mr. Bingley:

"My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of [our daughters]."

"Is that his design in settling here?"

"Design! nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes."

"I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better; for, as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party."

(1)

When the narrator then informs us at the beginning of Chapter 2 that Mr. Bennet was among the first to call on Mr. Bingley, something fairly complicated happens to the progression: we must revise our understanding of (a) the initial dialogue and (b) Mr. Bennet's character, even as we draw further inferences about the

nature of this narrative world. We recognize that Mr Bennet has only been pretending to resist Mrs Bennet's wishes and that he derives much pleasure from such teasing of his wife, who does not always recognize that she is being teased. We recognize, further, a troubling underside to Mr Bennet's indulging his wit this way, even as our dominant conclusion is that we are in a comic world, that is, one where obstacles to a positive outcome are likely to be only temporary. Something similar happens on a much greater scale later in the narrative with the incident of Lydia's elopement with Wickham. Elizabeth, with good reason, regards the event as one that would prevent Darcy from ever marrying into the Bennet family, and though our awareness that we are in a comic world prevents us from agreeing with her entirely, we do not see how this obstacle can be overcome. Austen's genius is to lead us to infer much later in the narrative that the obstacle is actually a significant means for bringing the lovers satisfactorily together. We come to learn that the elopement provides the occasion for Darcy to set aside his pride and do something generous for the Bennets, and we see that Elizabeth's learning of his intervention prompts the expression of her gratitude that leads to his second proposal. Now if we knew right away that Lydia's elopement would have these results—if, that is, the progression of the narrative were linear—it would be far weaker: the drama of the continual evolution of each character and of their gradual discovery of mutual love would be lost. In short, although from the perspective of postmodernism, Austen's marriage plot in *Pride and Prejudice* may seem to exemplify traditional storytelling, the novel's narrative progression is marked by recursiveness among the past, present, and future of our reading. At any point in our reading (the present), what we've read so far (the past) and what we infer about the overall trajectory of the narrative (the future) will influence our responses. Furthermore, what we read in the present has the potential to revise our understanding of what we have read so far and of the overall trajectory of the narrative. It is an experience much better described by a complicated feedback loop than by a straight line. Our larger claim is that what is true of *Pride and Prejudice* is true not only of "The Babysitter" and other postmodern narratives, but also of most print narratives of any sophistication.

### **The Progression of *Victory Garden***

*Victory Garden*, what Moulthrop has called an 'exploratory hypertext' utilizes the *Storyspace* development program and incor-

porates many of the standard features of hypertext: multiple starting points, variable and alternating plot paths, linked passages, infinite textual loops, narrative dead-ends, and graphics. But *Victory Garden* also uses the elements of standard print narratives: multiple characters who develop relationships and cross paths, multiple plots that occasionally intertwine, and multiple narrative perspectives. The story centers around a group of characters at the University of Tara, a fictitious college based in part on the University of Texas at Austin. At some point prior to the present-time action of the narrative, one of the characters, Emily Runbird, leaves for active duty in the Gulf War. Part of the narrative involves her day-to-day experiences in the war, while the remaining characters watch, literally on TV, as the Gulf War unfolds, with more or less investment in what happens to Emily. As Emily's story develops, a number of parallel plots occur. Thea Agnew, a liberal professor and critic of traditional Western Civilization curriculum, works through relationships with her son and her friends Emily and Veronica Runbird, the war, and a curriculum battle at Tara. In addition, Boris Urquhart, Emily's boyfriend and a scholar of Virtual Studies, undergoes a mid-life crisis; Veronica Runbird and Harley Morgan experience some changes in their relationship; and a curriculum battle takes place. Intermingled with the plot developments is a healthy dose of political disagreement between liberal and conservative factions.

Because this narrative is in a hypertext format, different readers will encounter this narrative information in different ways, just as the same reader can take different paths through it on different reading occasions. Nevertheless, a short overview of the reading can be given. *Victory Garden* begins, unless one asks for help or chooses to go directly to the map, with the words:

IN  
THE  
labyrinth : beginning

From here, the reader is presented with a section of a large map, the hypertext equivalent of a table of contents (see fig. 1). Like a traditional print text, there is a default path one can follow: just as the default path in a print narrative is taken by starting on page one and reading each subsequent page in the order in which it is printed, the default path in a hypertext fiction of this sort is taken by hitting the 'enter' key every time one wants to get to another lexia. If one chooses, though, one can take a path different from the default





Figure 2

with the narrative or to end there. If we were to end our reading, we would do so with the knowledge that we had not 'finished' the narrative. To continue reading from this point, we can either backtrack to a lexia with a link that takes us to a different path or return to the map and choose a different starting point. These paths, in turn, will eventually lead either to a dead end or to a loop into a previous path.

This description indicates that completing the reading of a hypertext fiction involves more than reading from a clearly marked beginning to a clearly defined endpoint—from the first to the last lexia. Instead, completing a hypertext fiction involves reading all of the lexias in whatever order we encounter them. Not surprisingly, many features of *Victory Garden* guide us to this recognition of what it means to complete it: the table of contents that offers us other links; links that we do not choose initially, that point to text we are not seeing as we follow our first path; instabilities and tensions that evoke the desire for more information. And of course the format of the text provides a procedure for our continued reading: a link to the map, a back button, a list of other possible links.

Our reading of *Victory Garden* has identified many differences between its features and those of print narratives. But from the perspective of the reader's activity, the most salient point is that the structure of *Victory Garden* means that there will be a great variability in the temporal order in which different readers experience



the lexias—or from one reading to the next by the same reader. In considering the extent to which *Victory Garden's* progression is an instance of a new mode of narrative, the key issue, then, is the consequence of this variability in the temporal order for our experience of the progression. That is, does one set of paths through the whole of the narrative create a substantially different reading experience from another set of paths? Our answer is no. In our view, Moulthrop writes the narrative in such a way that the temporal order of our experience of the lexias is not finally crucial to the experience of the whole. There are, however, a few strands of the overall narrative, such as the one surrounding the revelation of Emily's fate, which we discuss in more detail below, where order matters. Strikingly, in those strands, Moulthrop builds in restrictions that limit the variability of different readers' experience of the order. In fact, *Victory Garden*, like many other hypertext narratives, indicates that claims about the reader's freedom with hypertext narratives are exaggerated. We would go so far as to say that there are more restrictions on the progression of reading Moulthrop's narrative than there are freedoms. We cannot, for example, begin reading at any lexia we choose—something that, though non-normative, we can easily do in any print narrative. And of course we cannot take any path we choose: only some words function as links and those links lead us to specific lexias. In other words, although there are lots of ways to get through the narrative all those ways have been plotted for us. More generally, Moulthrop's effort in constructing the narrative has been to create a variety of paths through the lexias in such a way that different readers' different paths lead to common, sharable experiences and understandings of the whole.

We can illustrate these points by considering Moulthrop's handling of instabilities and tensions. In the default path through the narrative, Moulthrop builds the story by constructing multiple mini-narratives that progress mostly by instabilities between characters but also by some tensions. (Indeed, following the default order is not all that different from following the sequence of numbered pages in a print narrative.) However, even along the default path, we end up making jumps from one story line to the next before the first story line is resolved. The mini-narratives, for the most part, are not greatly affected by this kind of interruption, though following the default order ultimately gives the reader only a small portion of the entire set of lexias. What happens within the default order also happens when readers choose to deviate from it by clicking on specific links. That is, we leave one story line before

it is resolved but that departure does not ultimately interfere with our sense of that storyline's development or eventual resolution. Furthermore, the repeated experience of jumping from one story line to the other reinforces our knowledge that the individual story lines are only parts of some larger whole. This repeated experience also teaches us that in this narrative the order in which we read the events is less important than our ability to put them all together once we have accumulated sufficient knowledge of each. Let us take a closer look at one set of instabilities and one significant tension.

The instabilities with Thea Agnew exist on a number of levels. When her son returns from boarding school, or rather from the trip across America he decided to take instead of staying in boarding school, we see Thea struggle with her own politics and the paths she sees her son taking. Her liberal perspective is at odds with her desire to protect her son, and Moulthrop is able to draw us into their unstable relationship:

Thea stared at him. "Well kiddo, you certainly are confused. A while ago you were asking about protests. Now it sounds like you want to join the Marines."

Leroy shook his head. "I just don't know. I feel restless and unsure about things."

We might choose to stay with the default sequence in order to see how Thea works through her conflicting impulses. However, if we make that choice, we jump, via an emotive lexia, from Thea's story to a short narrative about one of the local Texas fraternity-types, Billy Van Saxgutter.

AAAAAAA!

YEEEEEEEEEEEE

*ha*

After following the narrative about Billy Van, we can return, by following different paths, to Thea's story and stay with it until it reaches its resolution. The shift to Billy Van's storyline does increase our suspense about Thea's story, but it does not materially affect our understanding of what happens with Thea. Nor does our stopping at just this point in Thea's narrative have significant consequences for our experience of Billy Van's story. Instead, each of these mini-narratives, like all the others in *Victory Garden*, is an important piece of the larger mosaic Moulthrop is constructing.

Something different, however, happens with the tension created by the unequal knowledge between the narrator and the reader about the fate of Emily Runbird: the narrator knows, but we don't. Furthermore, Moulthrop does not want us to learn of Emily's fate until we have experienced the rest of her story. Consequently, he is very careful to control the resolution of this tension. His control is all the more noticeable because the tension leads us to look for clues about the outcome of Emily's experience in the war. Moulthrop, however, rarely gives anything away in the various non-Emily threads. In fact, the few times we get close to a resolution—when Thea receives a phone call that anticipates some news about Emily or the various narrative moments when we see Emily and her troop putting on their protective gear in expectation of a chemical attack—Moulthrop carefully avoids any revelation of Emily's fate. Furthermore, when we do reach the revelation, clicking on return does not throw us back into the hypertext mix and so we know that we have reached one important endpoint. But unless we have already hit endpoints or eternal loops with all the other possible paths, we also know that our experience of the narrative is not complete.

Looking at Moulthrop's narrative more globally, we see that its building blocks are a series of traditional mini-narratives and that the effect of the whole narrative depends less on the order in which we encounter them than on their cumulative interactive effect. The hypertext format shows readers' capacity for negative capability—or, as Henry James might say, for hanging fire—but it does not create a radically new form that produces radically new experiences. To restate our case succinctly: starting with the Boris narrative but then skipping to the Thea narrative and then to the Emily in the Gulf narrative before returning to Boris does not yield a substantially different experience than reading each of these narratives in straight sequence.<sup>2</sup> This effect is a function of the kind of narratives Moulthrop is working with, which in turn is a function of the kind of larger narrative he wants to write: one that allows for the pleasures and rewards of mimetic investment in characters, even as the individual characters are all part of a larger portrait of American academic society at the time of the gulf war.

If this analysis of *Victory Garden* is on target, then our hypothesis about the important similarities between progression in print narratives and in hypertext remains viable. We stop short of claiming that the hypothesis has been conclusively demonstrated because we are wary of generalizing too much from a single case. Not all hypertexts will have the same kind of progression as *Victory*

*Garden*. Furthermore, it is easy to conceive of a hypertext narrative in which the variability of the reader's path does produce greater differences of experience than we find in Moulthrop's. But as "The Babysitter" indicates, resourceful writers of print narrative can find ways to induce readers to try different paths through their narratives, and it is a short step to recognizing that those different paths can lead to different experiences. In other words, although there are significant differences in the media of print and hypertext, theorists have been too quick to proclaim that the advent of hypertext marks a revolution in the writing and reading of narrative. Instead, the advent of hypertext helps us appreciate some of the complexities of progression in sophisticated print narrative, even as it makes possible a new arena for experimenting with narrative forms—and as it promises to attract new writers and readers of narrative.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 1945, long before Nelson coined the term, however, the concept of hypertext was articulated by Vannevar Bush. Bush theorized a machine he called a Memex. See Landow and Johnson for a more detailed discussion of the Memex.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the effects that experiencing the various mini-narratives in different orders might have, there is also the additional impact of rereading in hypertext. A typical progression in a reading of *Victory Garden* involves returning to the same place over and over again. The effect of this reification can vary from frustration to a sense of heightened tension as part of the reading experience, but the overall narrative structure varies little and one still continues to read past the parts one has already read in order to find some bit of narrative that fills in blanks of the various mini-narratives. Ultimately this is not much different than the repetition of certain character descriptions one might find in a very traditional novel.

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