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## **“No more than a heap of letters”<sup>1</sup>: The Cognitive Mapping of Hypertext Literature**

Molly M. McLay

A hypertext is like a set of note cards one has written for a research paper. The researcher pulls certain pieces of information from sources, notates them, and sets them aside for ordering later. Each card contains a mini-point of some kind. Once some or all of the cards are written, they are ordered in a logical, seemingly linear way and used as a guide for fleshing out the paper. This fleshing out includes adding transitions, making intra- and inter-textual connections, and coming to conclusions based on a set of knowledge presented in a certain way.

What would happen, though, if the researcher decided not to order the cards once the notating was done? What if the researcher instead threw the cards into the air and let them spread out over the room in a completely random way? The researcher could then look at a card and any other cards surrounding it—or even those not near it at all—and make connections in a multiplicity of ways. A map could be made of all the possible connections between sources.

Welcome to the world of hypertext. If you have ever wanted to cut up a narrative and patch it back together in a new order; if you have ever thought about the implications of singular linearity on literature and the thought process; or if you have ever wondered if the mind might favor a more associative, linkage-based form of reading literature, then you may know of hypertext. Through a discussion of criticism ranging from post-structuralism to constructivism, I will argue that hypertext literature, specifically Michael Joyce’s *afternoon, a story* and Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*, maps narratives like those the mind creates when forming and reading the text of one’s reality and memory.<sup>2</sup>

### **Defining the Map: Theories of Medium, Multilinearity, and Hypertextual “Thick Cognition”**

For the mind, reading hypertext literature is like reading a map. One interacts with a tangible medium that provides a multiplicity of paths and associations from which the reader may choose for identification and processing. According to *The Oxford*

*English Dictionary*, “hypertext” is defined as “text which does not form a single sequence and which may be read in various orders: spec. text and graphics (usu. in machine-readable form) which are interconnected in such a way that a reader of the material (as displayed at a computer terminal, etc.) can discontinue reading one document at certain points in order to consult other related matter.” The OED explains that most hypertext is created and read on the computer and has multiple pathways through which the reader can structure his or her reading experience. This paper will specifically explore literature incarnated, reproduced, and read as electronic hypertext.

Michael Joyce, a renowned hypertext theorist and author, wrote his definitive hypertext novel, *afternoon, a story*, in 1987. It circles around a single fictional wintry day and a car accident that may or may not have involved the son of one of the narrators. The text opens with a small white dialog window with an introductory note from Michael Joyce, and the reader can click from there to enter the hypertext. The reader has multiple links from which to choose, and each link leads the reader in a new direction, along another trajectory of possible pathways. At certain points, the reader will run into text boxes that only link up with one other page, so if the reader has already read that chain of pieces before, he or she will have to read it again because there are no other available pathways. There is also a good chance that the reader will never access parts of the hypertext because of the looping mechanism,<sup>3</sup> and the narrative ends when the reader chooses to stop reading. The hypertext reader may experience feelings similar to those of its characters: just as the narrator is uncertain of what he sees or if his son has died, the reader is also uncertain, as some areas of the text may never unfold if he or she does not coincidentally click to enter them.

A similar type of reading takes place in Shelley Jackson’s more recent hypertext, *Patchwork Girl*. Jackson, another hypertext theorist, creates exactly what her title states—a patchwork about the fictional text/monster/girl that Mary Shelley creates while envisioning and writing *Frankenstein*. The reader enters the text through an image of a dissected cadaver, and then has the option to enter a “graveyard,” a “journal,” a “quilt,” a “story,” or “broken accents” (“title page”). The pathway taken in one individual section eventually links up to other sections, and

the reader is never quite sure if he or she is reading a journal entry, a gravestone, a historical document, or a patchwork of fictions Jackson has constructed from other texts. Like *afternoon*, *Patchwork Girl* is read on an interactive machine, and thus the narrative can be structured through multiple pathways. These two elements—media dynamics and multilinearity of narrative—affect how readers process hypertext in a unique way, and they are also what render it like the way a human cognitively constructs his or her reality.

As do other hypertext novels, both *afternoon* and *Patchwork Girl* facilitate readings that are influenced heavily by the medium of the text. Discussing the textual medium is important when determining not only the meaning and structure of the text, but also how it is processed and mapped by the mind. In "Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis," hypertext theorist N. Katherine Hayles argues that, since much literary analysis has "been imbued with assumptions specific to print," electronic hypertext gives the critic an opportunity to recognize how a text's medium influences one's reading of it (87). Hayles proposes nine points about electronic hypertexts: they are dynamic images, they include both analogue resemblance and digital coding, they are generated through fragmentation and recombination, they have depth and operate in three dimensions, they are bilingual (through code and natural language), they are mutable and transformable, they are spaces to navigate, they are written and read in distributed cognitive environments, and they initiate and demand cyborg reading practices (74). The method of producing electronic hypertext is complex and integral to its existence as a text. Therefore, an analysis which recognizes the importance of its medium is vital to complete our understanding of it. Because the creation of hypertext literature is so entwined with its physical medium, a hypertext's production—by both the author and by the reader—is integral to how the text is read and thus processed and mapped by the mind.

Hypertext literature also depends upon (as well as differs from printed texts in) its facilitation of narrative interactivity and multilinearity. In the article "Wittgenstein, Genette, and the Reader's Narrative in Hypertext," Gunnar Liestøl discusses several aspects of hypertext and his broader term of hypermedia: interactivity between subject and text, integration of a multiplicity

of media, and inclusion of context. His premise is rooted in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who writes about his wish to break from linear writing and “the one-dimensionality these conventions demands [that] was incompatible with the way he actually thought” (88). Using Wittgenstein’s failed attempt to break from linearity as a guide, Liestøl posits that hypertexts are not actually nonlinear as some critics may claim, but rather multilinear, “designat[ing] complex structures of various kinds and occurrences of linearities or, rather, multiplication of linearities” (Liestøl 110). In a similar fashion, critic Rasmus Blok argues that there actually is not the “incompatibility between the concept of narrative and the non-sequential nature of digital literature” that so many critics believe (306). The reader has a multiplicity of pathways from which to choose, but once he or she begins on a trajectory, he or she is only reading one narrative; and in some hypertext novels, the hypertext reader’s construction of story is inhibited by the path the reader chooses to take and thus prone to not uncovering certain vital pieces of information, only to be surprised when they are revealed later. This type of linearity precipitates a reading that ends when the reader’s lack of “insight into the dominating hierarchical structure of the text” (319) produces a “frustration [that leads to] closure” (317). Liestøl (specifically through his leaning on Wittgenstein) and Blok (specifically through his discussion of surprise and frustration) identify hypertext as a form more akin to how people actually think, treating story and discourse as multifaceted elements dependent upon order, duration, frequency, the specifics of linearity, and reader interaction. These elements are vital to how a hypertext is received and read.

The medium and multilinearity of hypertext literature are integral to the way it is read, and because of this, readers process them differently than they process printed texts. In a literature review on the cognitive study of hypertext, Ingrid Fontanini writes, “Processing hypertexts requires the integration of characteristics which are inherent to the reader’s nature (e.g. cognitive abilities, strategies and expertise in the domain), as well as to aspects provided by the machine, such as navigation tools, information structures, accessibility for location of text windows among others” (167). According to educational researcher Astrid Ensslin, hypertext meshes well with the theory of constructivism.

This educational and psychological philosophy encourages learners (and by extension, readers) to “create knowledge actively, according to their own plan, without requiring instruction” (Ensslin 309) and to “be empowered to pick and choose from a rich assortment of information types...by becoming authors themselves, by re-writing their minds and thereby co-processing old and new information structures” (313). Hypertexts and the mental processes associated with them are responsible for a rich, complicated, (inter)active form of understanding, and according to this constructivist view of cognitive psychology, that is the best kind of learning.

Ensslin is idealistic in terms of what she believes hypertexts are capable of doing, though, and Catherine F. Smith finds the earliest hypertexts, most often defined by “meaningful units of information (nodes) and...meaningful connections (links) among them” (267), give readers some freedom of choice, but at a cognitive price, “ma[king] heavy demands on users’ memories... [and] not support[ing] many ordinary thinking tasks” (267). Because readers bring certain things to the table when they read—“explicit as well as tacit knowledge, interests, and constraints,” “particular as well as general needs to know,” and “symbolized as well as unsymbolized constructions of reality” (Smith 268)—hypertext writers need to make sure the knowledge they present is accessible, engaging to the reader, and well-represented (269). Furthermore, since hypertext writers have the most power to link nodes, Fontanini notes that “the constraints...imposed by the text itself, for example, the discontinuity in their rhetorical organization and presentation of information...may affect processing, thus, being more demanding in terms of readers’ skills and strategies” (180). While readers may garner much freedom from hypertext, they must adapt to the new types of cognitive processing it requires.

Hypertext, in its best form, will consider the challenges that medium, multilinearity, and linking entail. It will ask readers to understand it through what Smith characterizes as “thick cognition”: the engagement of the mind “along with orderly, logical capabilities, other, more anarchistic elements—doubt, contradiction, intuition, recollection, forgetfulness, denial, tacit knowledge, partial awareness—the full, mixed baggage of consciousness...embedded in the human condition of

plurality...[and] entail[ing] the thinker's multiple physical, social, cultural, and historical life world" (Smith 265). Hypertext requires a different sort of processing and mind-mapping than does printed text, and current research is undecided on whether or not this difference is more likely to be problematic or beneficial. I propose that the experience of hypertext literature conjures up a sort of map that the reader is actually quite accustomed to reading—a map of interpersonal connections, memory, and reality.

### Exploring the Map: A Hypertextual Exercise in Choosing and Reading Reality

The hypertext map's medium, multilinearity, and both's effects of cognitive processing implicate and open up a debate on the issue of choice in the form. What sorts of choices does hypertext open or block for the reader? In terms of hypertext literature—that is, literature written for and with the computer in a hypertext form, specifically the hypertext novels *afternoon, a story* by Michael Joyce and *Patchwork Girl* by Shelley Jackson—readers have several choices. They can choose what information to view next (at least to some extent), they can choose where to start and especially where to stop reading, and they can choose which pieces of information to deem important enough to encode cognitively and which to discard. However, there are some choices that hypertext literature does not give readers: they cannot choose to see what is ahead or behind without losing the information in front of them, and they cannot choose to access certain pieces of information from certain nodes because of guardfields the author has created.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of what the reader can do about each of these choices, the fact that there are potential choices at all is significant. Each hypertextual choice relates to a similar choice one has in his or her "reading" of reality. I propose that these choices and their relation to choices one makes in reality—and the problems some critics have with this issue of choice—are precisely what make hypertext literature so unique and so cognitively stimulating.

Hypertext literature allows the reader some choice in what information she or he reads and learns. Upon opening Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, I find a black-and-white sketch of a naked woman lying across two patched-together triangles of fabric. I can click anywhere on the woman—I choose the right breast—to be taken to

the title page, which reads:

PATCHWORK GIRL;  
OR,  
A MODERN MONSTER  
BY MARY/SHELLEY, & HERSELF  
a graveyard,  
a journal,  
a quilt,  
a story,  
& broken accents ("title page")

From here, there are a number of pathways from which to choose—graveyard, journal, quilt, story, and broken accents—and any of these, when selected, activates a different node and set of links. I choose the pathway "& broken accents," and I reach a cross-section of a woman's brain entitled "phrenology." There are about twenty words—twenty links, if you will—patched into the brain image, so I click the word "tabitha," wondering if perhaps the narrator knows a person by that name. "[T]abitha" takes me to a page called "this writing," and there, I am immediately bombarded by a narrator's thoughts on patching together a hypertext. After clicking on a few more chosen links, what I now know of this narrator is a very strange set of informative fragments. I can assume she is a girl, a woman even, from the image I have seen (one which must be related to the voice I am reading). She seems disconnected from reality in some way, and she thinks about herself or her life or her words as a metaphor for the broken present; she is just a "dotted line" ("hop"). Something must have happened to her to make her feel this way.

The fact is, though, that I have chosen what information to learn about this woman. While I did not know what I would learn when I pressed forward on a certain issue or word, I was able to choose which pieces of information to follow and what clues to follow up on. I am reminded of what it is like to meet a new person in real life. As with meeting the patchwork girl, when I meet a new person in real life, I can choose which nodes to activate about the life of that person. I do not have the questions or links set ahead of me as I do in a hypertext, but I have a certain code of appropriate questions I may ask, and I can choose the pieces of information about which to find out more. Though I cannot verbally ask the narrator anything, I can attend closely to



certain aspects of her personality, her movements, or her language.<sup>5</sup> In this respect—in the choices I can make about the information I read—hypertext reading is like reading a person or reading reality. I may be unsure about the information I will discover, but I make the conscious choice to discover it on my own terms.

A hypertext reader can also choose where to start or to stop learning information. In *Patchwork Girl*, I did not have to start learning about the narrator right away. After clicking to “phrenology,” I could have decided that this information did not look enticing to me and moved backward to the title page and chosen another path. I could have chosen another node—like “journal” or “quilt”—or even perhaps another person about whom to learn.<sup>6</sup> Even more significant is that I can choose where to stop reading. For this point, Joyce’s *afternoon, a story* provides a good example. I decide to open the novel with a certain goal in mind: to find out who really died in the car accident. I read through about thirty nodes—some of which take me through a character’s therapy, others glimmers of memory into past love affairs, others wisps of information about the society they live in, and still more philosophical gestures on the meaning of closure and text—until I realize that I am never going to find the information I am seeking. I end on the page “Peter, Peter,” where a narrator, presumably Peter, a self-proclaimed “terrible romantic,” muses, “I had a wife and couldn’t keep her. Which, of course, was the mistake in the first place. I mean, have you ever chased fireflies?” (“Peter, Peter”). I decide that this is the most I can—or want—to learn about Peter and his (ex?-)wife, so I stop reading.

Many critics find the idea of closure in hypertext narrative very intriguing, and Blok discusses it extensively in his research on *afternoon*. Because of the restrictedness of Joyce’s nodes, one often has one’s reading of *afternoon* ended by the very nature of the medium, which Blok calls “frustration as closure” (317), but closure all the same. I had gone through one node of text for a second time, which spun me off on a new path even though I had clicked the same linking word—“alive”—both times. Knowing that I can never get back on that original path again, I decide to stop reading. Now, while Blok may argue that the nature of the narrative is what caused me to stop reading—and that may be true—the point is that I made the choice. In reality, people often

choose to stop learning about a person when they have heard enough. Sometimes it is called "tuning out"; in other, more serious instances, the people just drift apart. The interest in the person, for one reason or another, fades away. Maybe it is because the learner really stops genuinely caring about the other. In other cases, it may be that the learner still cares, but that a technicality, perhaps a fight or a move or a new relationship, has caused the narrative of friendship to be cut off sooner than anticipated. In either case, it is how reality works. This choice for the hypertext reader—when to start or stop learning about something—is a real-life one a so-called "reader of reality" must also make.

The hypertext reader can make other, more cognitively-significant choices as well, more generally the choice of what information to deem important and encode into the cognitive schema. Let us return to my first reading of *Patchwork Girl*. After clicking through "& broken accents" and the link "tabitha," I find a narrator's thoughts on—surprise!—the patching together of hypertext. The narrator says, "Assembling these patched words in an electronic space, I feel half-blind, as if the entire text is within reach, but because of some myopic condition I am only familiar with from dreams, I can only see that part most immediately before me, and have no sense of how that part relates to the rest. When I open a book I know where I am, which is restful" ("this writing"). It is quite coincidental that I choose this passage to read first. Without even anticipating it, I encounter a passage which describes my very feeling about hypertext. Even though I am in a new environment and hardly know a thing about the narrator or the circumstances of this quotation, I can make exactly of this text what I want to make of it. Even though finding out this information was mostly luck—I did not know where "tabitha" would take me—I found out exactly what I wanted to.

What I learned in this node I will take with me as a part of the vital meaning of the text, partly because of pure coincidence and placement, but also partly because of what I brought to the text, what Smith calls my "mixed baggage of consciousness" (265). This is what happens in real life, too. When a person discovers a piece of information about someone else, a particular viewpoint, a particular event from his or her past, the learner is able to encode that knowledge deep into his or her cognitive schema, sometimes

fixating on that piece of information. Even if it is only a small sentence of a rather lengthy description of one's philosophy, a careful reader will pick out what matters most to one's schema—perhaps a value that comes in direct connection or conflict with one of one's own—and hold onto it, agree with it, defend it, prosecute it if necessary. It is the process by which humans form arguments and even start to develop relationships. That hypertexts allow readers to use a process so common and vital to their cognition is important; it allows them to read text as they read reality.

Hypertext literature does put some constraints on the reader in terms of choice. Although the reader can choose which pathways to pursue, he or she can only choose to look at one node at a time. Venturing back to the example from *Patchwork Girl* yet again, I find that this constraint applies. In this hypertext, a newly-begun reading by me, I am, as the narrator says, “in a here and a present moment that has no history and no expectations for the future” (“this writing”). However, the narrator also states, “History is only a haphazard hopscotch through other present moments” (“this writing”). All I have of a history of this narrator is what I have seen thus far (which is not much). I know there is a body stitched in or on fabric, I know there is a graveyard and a quilt and a journal and broken accents. What I learn after that one starting point, common for all readers, is pure luck, only fate. Where I click my cursor, where I circumstantially land in the text of this narrator's life, is both completely in my control and completely out of my control. I can control where I look next, but I cannot control exactly what information I learn. In a printed book, where “my reading is spatial and even volumetric” as the narrator says (“this writing”), I can search for the passage that contains the information on which I wish to be informed. In a hypertext novel, though, I have to take what the computer deals me. I can only process the information directly before my eyes, “as many stories as I care to put together” (“this writing”), and assimilate or accommodate it into my already-encoded schema. This places a lot of pressure on me, the reader, to link information from the present node to that of other nodes, since I cannot see them physically at the moment. Critics like Fontanini and Davida Charney have noted and at times worried about this pressure, as it may be too demanding (Fontanini 180) and cause the reader to

confuse information (Charney 250).

However, this pressure is not foreign to a reader who has done a lot of reading of reality. When learning about people in general, a learner can only absorb a certain amount of data at once and must constantly rely on the mind's ability to retrieve previous information about the other person. Some of that information can only be found in the depths of long-term memory. While certain critics cite this as a flaw in hypertext, it can also be seen as a benefit, especially for literary hypertexts, if the point of the hypertext—or of literature—is to imitate life. Developing stronger deep retrieval reading processes is certainly merited by a constructivist view, and it is something hypertext indeed does (and, in the instances of Joyce and Jackson, does well).

Hypertext readers are also sometimes blocked access to certain pieces of information from certain nodes because of guard-fields the author has created. Blok and others cite this lack of choice when discussing issues of closure and linearity. Because Joyce places more guard-fields on links (at least in many versions of the novel) than most hypertext authors do, it is appropriate to investigate *afternoon* about this issue. Let us move back to the earlier reading of *afternoon*, ending on the page "Peter, Peter." Let us pretend that I, in fact, did not choose to stop reading here, but instead kept reading. I have decided that, since the page ends with some discussion of the character Wert, I want to pursue learning about him. I click on every "Wert" link I can find. I read through about ten nodes and find out more about Wert and Peter's relationship—they seem to be sleeping with each other's ex-wives. I finally arrive at the page "three" through pages with only two words on them—"she thought"; "he thought"; "she said"; "he said"; "they both"; "all three"—and then I am at a page I have seen before: "I am boring him. He would rather consider the probabilities of one of us sleeping with the other's wife" ("three"). I remember reading this before—sometime after Lolly and Peter are in a therapy session, and Lolly is reading Peter's thoughts... or perhaps it is Peter or Wert thinking about one or the other. I am lost; who is speaking now? I click the link "I" and get: "<Are you sleeping with her?> he asks. / There are candies in a crystal dish before me. I pick one and unwrap it carefully" ("yes6"). I have seen this before as well; we are back to Wert and Peter's conversation. I imagine that the subject of Dataquest is going to

come up again in their conversation; sure enough, it does. I am in a loop. I reach the same poem ("he recited my poem") I reached about thirty nodes ago. They are talking about Bimmies again ("neufel"). I am not sure I can get out of this loop. I do after a few tries, but I avoid clicking on Wert's name for the rest of my reading, knowing I do not want to repeat that loop again; it is just too annoying to get out of.

But is this not what we avoid in human interaction as well? Do we not avoid certain topics of conversation with certain people, knowing that we will get drawn into certain repeated stories, certain typical conversations, certain metaphorical loops of thought that always come up with a certain mention to a certain person? If hypertext literature trusts us to get out of literary loops, then it must have a lot of faith in us—probably we are used to pulling ourselves out of loops all the time. The hypertext reader sometimes gets caught in loops, but while there is often no choice of getting into the loop once it has been opened, there is sometimes a choice about getting out of it or avoiding it altogether.

The hypertext map works as the mind does. Readers can make choices between multiple nodes and links. One can choose information to activate, places to start and stop reading, and information to deem important, while one cannot always choose to look at more than one node at once or to attain access to every part of the text from every other node. However, the fact that these choices—afforded to the reader or not—are even a question in a text is vital. Hypertext literature gives readers a way to utilize the skills of cognitive mapping that their minds already know from everyday interactions.

### Understanding the Map: The Specifications and Purpose of Hypertext Literature

It is easy to see that the maps created by hypertext literature offer readers many interactive cognitive choices. However, some critics question the benefit of these choices. Do hypertext readers really benefit from getting to choose reading pathways, order of information, stopping points, and the like? One disbeliever is Davida Charney. Her essay, "The Effect of Hypertext on the Processes of Reading and Writing," surveys cognitive psychological research on reading processes, and she finds that it

is not always beneficial for readers to make these choices. She writes,

Many hypertext designers assume that readers know what sequence of information is best for them, that they can tell when they have read enough or judge whether what they are reading is important. However, the evidence suggests that readers are not very good at assessing the adequacy of the information they have encountered and are even worse at anticipating whether important or useful material remains in the portions of text they have not reached. (Charney 250)

Under most conditions, Charney believes that "readers are unlikely to devote the time and energy necessary to fit all the pieces of a network together," especially if the hypertexts are designed by people who neglect to think about the cognitive implications that choice bears on a reader's understanding of the text. Charney does note that the "available evidence is mixed" (251), but she remains firm in her belief that hypertext theory is too idealistic and does not consider the real cognitive troubles readers may have in piecing together information in these new ways. The "time-tested cognitive and rhetorical theories" for studying print texts are no longer relevant (260). Thus, readers may have a hard time breaking out of those cognitive molds.

Charney makes some good claims; it is true that readers and writers of hypertext must be aware of the links readers may or may not make in this new method of connecting. However, much of Charney's research on the subject rests heavily on hypertexts used as teaching tools, not as literature. While she does not explicitly state this distinction, it is an important one to make. The benefit that processing hypertext requires of the reader greatly depends not only on the type of hypertext being read, but also on what the reader is supposed to get out of it. The status, the language, and the purpose of hypertext as fiction or art is distinctive from the ways we expect language to work in everyday discourse (e.g., in teaching). It is true that a hypertext may not be the best way to get students to regurgitate certain "important" pieces of information for a test, for they may not have gained access to certain information or encoded it deeply into their memory banks. But should the point of all hypertexts be, as Charney says, to promote "reader's efforts to make sense of the text... [and] find

information relevant to some specific question” (260)? Do the readers of hypertext *literature* need to regurgitate information for an exam? And will such readers really not devote time to integrate pieces of the text into a coherent whole that makes sense to them? After all, readers of hypertext literature are reading the hypertext for one reason or another: they probably like reading (or are majoring in literature), they probably have an interest in hypertext or at least in postmodernist literature, and they may even have a background in the form. It is unfair fair to the hypertext reader to assume that he or she will have too much difficulty “figuring out” the text, that he or she will experience cognitive overload and give up. There are vast, dense, complex, and intricate associative properties of language—allusions and references, metaphors and tropes, e.g.—that an understanding of everyday discourse may not account for. Hypertext literature highlights the associative capacities of language for aesthetic purposes by asking readers to physically and mentally construct associations of their own as bridges to fuller understanding.

The problem with much hypertext research lies in the fact that all types of hypertext are thrown together in a sort of “this is hypertext” category. We need to remember that different hypertexts are written for different purposes, and they are read for different purposes as well. There is a tendency in some criticism against hypertext to rely heavily on those hypertexts that can and should be used as teaching tools. There may be some fair criticism coming from these camps—though that is debatable, depending on the type of teaching one wishes to promote in a classroom—but critics need to differentiate between hypertexts that teach and hypertexts that are to be read and analyzed for literary merit. Literary texts like *afternoon, a story* and *Patchwork Girl* should not be studied in the same way that a biographical or historical hypertext on, say, Charles Dickens’ life should be, because their purposes are not the same.

When it comes to understanding a text, it is good to ask two questions: what is the text’s purpose, and does the text accomplish that purpose and accomplish it well? The answers to these questions will obviously differ depending on the type of text. Hypertext literature has a different purpose than hypertext teaching tools, so the accomplishing of each one’s purpose will certainly be different and must be analyzed differently. So, what

is the purpose of hypertext literature?

Perhaps Shelley Jackson, the author of *Patchwork Girl*, offers the best answer to this question. In 1997—two years after the release of *Patchwork Girl*—Jackson penned an essay entitled “Stitch Bitch.” It is a free-flowing nonfiction piece with radical implications about narrative and its relation to the body. Jackson, or “Shelley Shelley” as the narrator of the piece calls herself, argues that, while hypertext is certainly a new and different form of writing, its multilinearity does not make it a wrong or bad one. She calls the conventional novel, with its tendency toward linear narrative, into question, dubbing it a “safe ride” designed to plant in the reader a “compulsion to find out what happens next” (n. pag.). Hypertext, however, “need[s] other reasons to keep readers reading” (n. pag.). She questions why we privilege linear narrative in literature, and she exclaims most poignantly that she often knows more about a printed book in its beginning than she knows about her own life. Hypertext is more like the narrative the body shares, with its stories tucked into unlikely places, emerging only when activated by its reader. Hypertext is like reality, and Jackson calls for a reclaiming of that reality in literature, a reclaiming of what she calls the “banished body,” the “feminine,” and what we know as “bad writing,” as it may not be bad, just different (n. pag.). In Jackson’s view, hypertext and the ways it is written and processed—mapped, if you will—are strongly tied to human thought and perception of reality (even those thoughts and perceptions we neglect to articulate or even recognize), and, in fact, that does not make it “bad” writing, it makes it quite “good” and cognitively-significant writing.

Jackson’s (or Shelley Shelley’s) ideas about hypertext and its relation to reality further the argument that the choices hypertext literature gives the reader are much like choices one faces when reading reality. What is so unique and compelling about my experiences encountering the patchwork girl and Peter and Wert is that I encounter them the way any human would encounter another human whom he or she has never met before. All I know about them is what is initially laid out before me. I do not have a book of printed pages to which I can refer, a metaphorical index that explains the history of the character. I could search around the hypertext for more information, but I again would be learning only more bits. I would not get a whole picture of any of them except



through association and construction. I only have a traversable map and a mind with which to read it.

Yet this is like life. In reality, I do not earn the privilege of looking at a person's backstory. I can only experience the here-and-now and connect it to what I have stored in the depths of my memory banks. Information disappears from view with the click of a mouse or the breath of a word. I can retrace my steps later, but I may lose my place in the present if I do so. When reading hypertext, I do not know more about the characters than I know about my own life, and that is comforting to me. I want my experience of literature to be like my experience of reality. If I can figure out more about these characters' reality, perhaps I can figure out more about my own.

Reading life, like reading a hypertext, is like reading through a set of note cards. The cards are assembled by pulling certain pieces of information from sources, notating those pieces of information, and setting them aside for ordering later. Each card contains a mini-point of some kind. But unlike the cards written for a research paper, the note cards of life cannot be ordered in an easy, logical, seemingly linear way. Information from the cards appears and reappears to the reader multiple times throughout life, and connections must be drawn from these repeated readings.

Readers of reality, though, cannot come to conclusions simply because knowledge from these metaphorical cards is presented in a certain orderly way; real life is not that simple or linear. One can choose to read life through a multitude of medium-constructed pathways, and what is revealed to the reader through those pathways is often difficult to comprehend. Reading life requires Smith's "thick cognition" and an ability to combine multiple contexts and histories into a cognitive schema that may be different from and more difficult than the sort of mental processing one does with typical "book learning." Hypertext literature gives readers a chance to test out their life schemas, their map-reading skills, in an environment that is both literarily pleasing and analytically stimulating. If literature is to emulate reality, there is scarcely a better way for it to be written and read than through a medium and a mode allowing readers to utilize their common cognitive and reality-reading skills.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The title is a quotation from a node in Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*. See works cited for publication details.

<sup>2</sup> Because the claims I make about one's reading of reality are so general and could be viewed as almost universal, additional sociological and psychological research to back up those very general claims did not seem pertinent. The reader should keep in mind, though, that my observation of human interaction may differ slightly from others'.

<sup>3</sup> Some versions of *afternoon, a story* come embedded in a specific software package (StorySpace) that allows the reader to access any one page from any other page—to link pages through the navigation menu. However, the original version of the hypertext was not packaged with such a feature, and the default reading of the text—one Joyce no doubt intended—contains guard-fields that block access to certain pages from others for various reasons. For this paper, I limit myself to Joyce's original guard-fields and do not utilize the additional navigation features.

<sup>4</sup> Not all versions of the novel require the reader to follow the guard-fields, but the default feature of even these versions is to use them. Please refer to the first footnote on looping mechanisms for further explanation.

<sup>5</sup> This particular hypertext does involve a sort of odd intimacy, even voyeurism or violation, as I have entered the text by touching a naked woman's body, and such an intimacy seems strange for so cold a medium. However, even the experience of reading the female body in this text renders itself like a similar phenomenon in the external world: often our first impression of a woman—our first entry into relation with her—is through an interaction with, or at least a recognition of, her body.

<sup>6</sup> Subject-object relations between reader and text are often an interesting issue in hypertext. In reality, a person can be the subject of an action or a link, or the object of one. At this point, the reader has only been active, a subject who can consciously make the text an object of his or her interaction. Hypertext does, however, at times objectify the reader, putting him or her at the will of certain technical or textual mechanisms (such as guard-fields or looping).

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