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## Writing in the web

**!Kung meets 5 writers of the digital era**

[beginning] [net] [future] [writing] [roots]

## [beginning]

Many literary studies (from Barthes to Landow) say hypertext form allows a kind of reading which is more free and unobstructed than traditional linear-text reading. But as an hyperfiction reader I feel a great limit to non standard reading operation: I'm talking about the beginning of an hypertext and the developing of an adequate interface in order to let the reader take control of the text immediately. I mean, when I hold a book in my hands, I can open it in the middle and start reading from page 128, as well as I can start watching a movie from a certain frame, and this is very useful if I'm trying to analyze a text (reading it two, three and more times...). When I read an hyperfiction, especially a web based hyperfiction, I am constricted to start from the first page, also if no second page really exists.

### William Gillespie

You can't start watching a movie from a certain frame.

Can you?

Certainly not as well as you could start a book from a certain page.

I mean if you really want to thread the film into the projector until you find the frame you're looking for, you could, but that would take hours and you might melt the film.

### Mark Amerika

First, we must get rid of the page metaphor. The paginal must give way to the screenal and, since the screenal, at least from my research, is now heavily dependent on the "network," we must investigate how this creates interesting opportunities to reconfigure both the author and the reader into virtual artists.

### Shelley Jackson

You are free to open the book in the middle? Yes, and a marathon runner is free to hop on a subway and get to the end first, like an enterprising woman once did in NY. (Or was it Boston?) She is free, but she is no longer exactly running a marathon. A reader is free to hop around in a book, but this is not a freedom allowed for in the text itself, it is a freedom the reader seizes for herself. All texts imply readers, they are the fixed half of a joint performance, and they attempt with various hints and coercions to guide their partner to go along with them. The actual reader is free to read however she likes, but the implied reader is not. In the traditional novel, this guerrilla reading (and we're all guerrilla readers) exists in relation to a text that is defined as an unbroken one way trip.

I love the guerrilla reader, and I agree that so far, e-texts tend to hinder her freedom of movement. In Patchwork Girl, I hope the maps and overviews make it possible for the reader to see where she is and chart her own course. My ideal reader will get to know her way around PG as well as I do. (Of course, I have to accept that my actual readers might be doing something completely different.) This may be the biggest difference between Patchwork Girl and a linear novel: my implied reader IS the guerrilla reader. She takes in bits of linear narrative, sure, but also jumps around at will, getting to know what's there and how it's joined together, finding her own favored pathways. In My Body, on the other hand, I was thinking of reading as a sort of blind burrowing, in which the reader could get lost. A kind of sexual encounter, in which you are too close to get a view of the whole. Reading as licking. In this work, in other words, I wanted to take some freedom AWAY from the reader--for her own pleasure, of course. I think too much has been said about the freedom of the reader in hypertext. Freedom is neither the automatic nor the ideal result of hypertext. Every text creates some kinds of freedom for the reader and denies others.

**How do you face the "first page dilemma"? How do you choose the first page in your works?**

**Shelley Jackson**

Personally, I like first pages. I like the slightly stuffy formality, the sense of a portal. The invitation: come in and have a look around. I like to hand the reader a map, because I like the spacial metaphor, hypertext as a kind of language installation, through which you wander, and I like my readers to get familiar with the terrain. But you could also make an aesthetic experience out of keeping the reader in the dark. I can imagine writing a text that has no map, no privileged entry point, no title page. For example, the World Wide Web. (You didn't know I was the chief author of the Web? I write under numerous assumed names, of course, and when others encroach on my work I hack into their sites and replace their existing pages with nearly identical but conceptually vastly superior versions, a la Pierre Menard. That the public will never appreciate this work goes without saying--arousing the public's indifference is my ambition and my particular talent. This is my first public statement claiming authorship. Of course, this is contrary to my pursuit of incomprehension as an aesthetic aim, but I am counting on the public to decide that I am lying.

#### **Adrienne Eisen**

When I write hypertext, I write for an audience that is like me, and I need conflict to pull me through a story. I need to know immediately what's at stake -- what's the problem. If there is no problem, then I don't care what happens. Some Russian writer (Tolstoy?) once said something like, "All happy lives are the same, and all unhappy lives are unhappy in their own way." I need to know right away that I'm reading about an unhappy life.

To that end, hypertext to me needs to open with a problem. I am not willing to click five times before I get to the problem, in the same way that I'm not willing to turn ten pages before I find out the problem. I have not figured out a way to let the reader know the problem without controlling the first pieces of text that a reader encounters.

In the vein of "what's the problem?" is "what's the solution?". Not all problems have solutions -- probably most do not. But all problems can be made more clear by asking good questions. So to me, the end of a hypertext must either show the reader a clear ending (unlikely) or a more clear understanding of the problem (like the end of Tim O'Brien's "In the Bottom of the Lake" -- he says, in effect, there is no ending to this story, but at least you understand the unhappiness that I'm writing about, whereas at the beginning of the book you probably did not.)

#### **Dirk Stratton**

The Unknown struggled with this issue for a long time. I, for one, resisted a "homepage" or default page for much the same reasons you outline above. That is, I wanted The Unknown to be as "pure" a hypertext as possible. By that I meant that, for me, the most interesting thing about hypertext is how it allows readers so much freedom to choose their reading paths, how it makes readers into active collaborators with the text. Any restriction on the readers' freedom, then, was repugnant to me, a violation of the fundamental tenets of hypertext (as I understood them). So, for a long time, The Unknown did not have a true default page. Initially, the first page we wrote became the default page . . . by default, as it were. And at our first interactive readings of The Unknown (where we allow the audience to choose which hyperlinks will be clicked on next), we began with that first page and then let the audience direct us from there. Eventually, for our readings, we began choosing the first page based on our audience: for example, when we read at Brown University, we started with a page about visiting Brown University (which, by the way, had been written at least 6 months before we got the invitation to Brown). While this method worked for our live readings, it did not solve the problem of what page a reader would find when accessing The Unknown on-line. Our technical advisor (the keeper of our first server) kept bugging us about this issue, and so finally we relented.

One weekend, while I was in Chicago visiting Scott, we decided to collaborate on the default page. Given my antipathy to the project, the only way I felt comfortable writing such a page was to make it one in which my reservations about the whole thing were made clear.

In effect, then, we wrote a default page that discusses the pros and cons of default pages. (If you wish to read that page, you can find it at [www.unknownhypertext.com/default.html](http://www.unknownhypertext.com/default.html))

Recently, The Unknown instituted a new solution to the single default page problem when we moved the hypertext to a new server and acquired the unknownhypertext.com domain name. William created a CGI script that will randomly choose the first page a reader will see when they log on (from a list of about a dozen pages we all agreed seemed to be good places to start). While this does not give the reader the choice of where to begin, it also removes that choice from the authors, which I think is a good thing. Now a reader can experience The Unknown with virtually no interference from the authors.

At this juncture, let me argue a bit with some of your assumptions about the frustrations of hypertexts having "mandatory" first pages and how that differs from other media (whether books, film, etc.).

While you are correct that a reader is under no compulsion to begin reading a book on the first page, the fact remains that books have first pages, and that it is highly unlikely that a reader will not, at some point, begin where the author wants them to begin, and then read accordingly. Any subsequent reading will then be informed by that experience of the book's inescapable linear nature. That is, if you pick up the book again and start your reading on some page other than page one, it will be with the knowledge of where that other page is in relation to page one (and all the other pages that precede it). In other words, the author's ordering of events will still remain the context in which you read, even if you decide to "violate" that order. In such a case, the author's design remains paramount regardless of how a reader decides to interact with that design; a reader might "break" the rules a little, but can never fully escape them.

Hypertext, on the other hand, can (it doesn't always, as I'll discuss below) radically alter this "linear imperative" when its authors relinquish any pretense of determining in what order pages should be read. The Unknown, for instance, is constructed in such a way that once a reader has logged on, they literally have the entire hypertext at their disposal: they can go anywhere, anytime, without any restrictions. Every page includes the means to do this. There is no author-created order to discover or violate. In fact, one of the complaints we have received from a few readers is that The Unknown offers too much freedom, that our authorial absence is anxiety-inducing because these readers want more direction than we have provided. In this regard, The Unknown is somewhat a rarity in the hypertext world. What disturbs me about many of the hypertexts I've read is that the authors have retained far too much authorial control; the choices a reader has are so limited you might as well be reading a book.

Frankly, I don't understand this impulse to erect these One Way signs in an arena where it isn't necessary, and is, in fact, (at least

theoretically) discouraged. Well, actually, I do: authors are by nature controlling creatures. Even in the supposedly author-liberated world of hypertext, old authorial habits are hard to break.

**Do you think hyperfiction writing concerns the developing of a reading interface too?**

**Mark Amerika**

So much depends on The Interface. Too much of what we see on the web today is boring and predictable, driven by a still-life, click-thru mentality that equates clicking with consuming. So hypermedia art, whether textual or visual or conceptual or some hybrid thereof, must de-familiarize this ecommerce language that the commercial captians of corporate culture have made all-too-common.

**William Gillespie**

Hypertext writing is the simultaneous development of a text and an interface.

**Dirk Stratton**

Yes, definitely. I think it is an issue every hypertext author should take very seriously. As is obvious from what I've written above, I'm quite fond of The Unknown's reader-friendly, reader-empowering interface.

**And what about the end of an hyperfiction? Do you write different ending points or do you prefer to let the reader stop her/his reading experience by her/himself?**

**Dirk Stratton**

My initial response would be that "pure" hyperfiction would have no end, and that the readers should be the ones to decide when to stop. But, I also recognize that hypertext has been used (to marvelous effect) to tell what is essentially a linear story or stories; in such cases, author-produced endings would make sense. [I want to clarify my usage of the term "pure" because I don't want anyone to imagine that I've established orders of rectitude or something; I'm using the word descriptively, not judgmentally. The best way to explain it, I think, is to imagine a continuum that registers how much an author controls or dictates the reading experience of their hypertext. The "purer" the hypertext, the less an author intrudes; that's all. And while I personally prefer such hypertexts, don't imagine that I believe they are somehow provably superior in some way to those hypertexts in which the author has retained more direct control over what the reader may read and in what order.]

**Shelley Jackson**

In my work, the implied end (which is unlikely to be the actual end of any real reader's experience) is when you have read all the pages and have explored enough to have a sense of the whole. I'm not primarily interested in the kind of plot that realizes itself only in reaching an end. I'd rather try to give my readers pleasure along the way, while they come to their own understanding of the whole.

**Mark Amerika**

It's important to look at it as stopping, and not as ending. There is no narrative closure, true, but I was able to achieve multi-linear narrative possibility in my novels too. Or anti-novels, as they called The Kafka Chronicles which, the reader soon became aware, was open to multiple readings (you no longer had to read from page one to "the end"). With stopping, you create temporary rest. Rest is good. You can surf the web for six days straight and then, on the seventh day, you can bookmark your experience, and rest. So: let the reader decide (sometimes they have to write).

**More generally, is hypertext a multi-linear text with residual linear fragments or is it a totally non linear reality?**

**Mark Amerika**

There are many kinds of hypertext and most of them ,if you read them closely, are conventionally constructed, like old Modernist fables that are fragmented [broken-up] for aesthetic-effect, with a clear desire for wholeness -<or>- sweet cohesion. I have a problem with this, actually. If you want a real hypertext experience, type the word "religious" into your favorite search engine and let the clicking (consuming) begin.

**Dirk Stratton**

I don't think you can escape linearity. Writing is linear and there's nothing anyone can do to change that. Now, you can obviously discard some of the other linear features that have traditionally organized writing, but "a totally non-linear reality"? Well, if someone can show me such a thing (that involves writing), fine, but until then...

**Shelley Jackson**

There is no such thing as a completely nonlinear text. Language does have a nonlinear aspect--words resonate in a kind of simultaneity--but we can only read one sentence at a time. (Or maybe two or three. But not an infinite number. )

## [net]

**Almost every mass media of the past two centuries produced at least a typical narrative form, I mean: radio -> radio drama, cinema -> hollywood like movies, photography -> photonovel, tv -> tv movie (and plenty of others)...**

### Dirk Stratton

But are these "typical narrative forms" really all that different from each other? I mean, they're all fundamentally narratives. I guess I'm less impressed by the differences and more interested in their similarities. Human beings thrive on story-telling, whether it takes place around a fire in a cave during the Stone Age or in the darkness of a movie theater.

**It seems to me that the internet hasn't yet developed his own popular (and recognizable) narrative form: has it something to do with the peculiarity of this new medium?**

### Adrienne Eisen

I think interactive storytelling is not near what it will become.

Bandwidth will dictate the parameters of experimentation; right now we have relatively small bandwidth, so experimentation is a little constipated.

Tools like HTML and Eastgate's Storyspace will encounter a lot of competition once bandwidth increases: Interactive entertainment will become profitable on a large scale, and Hollywood will pay big bucks for interactive storytelling tools. Writers, also, will encounter a lot of competition. Also, the writers in Hollywood, who are great at figuring out what the public will pay for on a mass scale, have not touched interactive storytelling because there is no way to make money right now. As bandwidth increases, the Hollywood writers will move in, and interactive storytelling will be more of a convergence of media than it is right now.

### William Gillespie

Well, the Internet is a funny guy. He's tried out a number of narrative forms.

We have personal narratives ([www.links.net](http://www.links.net)) and we have soap operas ([http://www.zdnet.co.uk/athome/yahoo/may\\_26\\_97.html](http://www.zdnet.co.uk/athome/yahoo/may_26_97.html)) and news (<http://news.yahoo.com>) and even cartoons ([www.flashfilmfestival.com](http://www.flashfilmfestival.com)).

### Dirk Stratton

More likely it has something to do with how new the internet is. Movies began as essentially filmed plays; it took awhile before film makers learned to take advantage of what film could do, or rather, what they could do with film (e.g. mise en scene). Let the net mature a bit more and then it might be the time to ask this question again.

**or could hyperfiction be this new form we are still waiting for?**

### Shelley Jackson

Who knows? That sort of question can only be answered after the fact. There's always a gluey period when a new medium is trying to detach itself from older ones. Though some people, going sweetly gaga at the novelty, are sure everything will be different now (better), and some, revolted, are sure everything will be different now (worse), the truth is that it's hard to come unstuck from the past. We're trying to imagine a new form with imaginations shaped by old ones. The one thing I know for sure is that what we are doing now will look naive later on.

### Dirk Stratton

Perhaps. But again, I think this may be a premature question.

### Mark Amerika

Narrative form on the web is becoming something Other, like Digital Rhetoric. What you experience when "reading" and moving [navigating] through the web is more like degenerative narrative, where your attention is constantly being challenged or disrupted. What you decide to do with your attention is then turned into immediate narrative experience. It could be anything from interacting with an mp3 concept album to participating in a live, realtime publication that you activate by "writing" your "character" into a MOO space or an IRC channel. The possibilities are many.

### William Gillespie

As to whether hyperfiction is the new form we've been waiting for, Mr. Internet's unique contribution to narrative, I don't know.

Wait, I mean yes.

Well, maybe it's more helpful or interesting to think of the Internet as a distribution system, rather than a medium, in that it is a confluence of old media (text, photography, cinema) and new technology.

As for the HyperText Markup Language, while she did not invent hyperfiction, she has made it popularly accessible (people know what "links" are), and has provided a free and simple and nonproprietary means to write it.

**Writing for the net also means redefining the old concept of copyright. Are you frightened by it? How are you (or your publisher) managing copyright problems on the internet right now?**

### Shelley Jackson

I am interested in piracy and plagiarism. I'm not interested in copyright, except when it guarantees some inheritance to the meek, and

punishes the powerful who are, sadly, its usual beneficiaries.

#### **Dirk Stratton**

The Unknown doesn't have a publisher. But we want one.

#### **William Gillespie**

We just found out that a review, originally published in Technology Review, of our free hypertext novel The Unknown, is being sold (illegally without the author's permission) on the Internet.

I shit you not: <http://www.contentville.com/product/product.asp?ProdID={F1413AA4-3D6C-46C4-9223-F010602787DA}>

Who would rather buy a review of a free novel than read the novel? And what kind of parasite tries to steal and sell a book review?

I'm sorry, what was the question?

#### **Mark Amerika**

Try copyleft, i.e. leaving a free copy for others to take and redistribute freely throughout their networks. This way, you can cause a rift (split) between being intellectual and being property.

### **Do you prefer writing for the internet or for the cd market (i.e. Eastgate)? What are the differences (if some) among these two fields?**

#### **William Gillespie**

Well, one difference is that the Internet is a free, instantaneous, world-wide distribution system unrivaled by any means of information dissemination in history.

Another difference is that the Internet doesn't have editors to reject your work.

#### **Mark Amerika**

The answer is easy: the Internet is most radical publishing/distribution model for art and writing ever. Period.

#### **Shelley Jackson**

I like writing for the internet, because the audience is huge and not pre-selected for an interest in experimental hypertext. I like that it costs nothing to read my work on-line, assuming you have already paid for an [internet connection](#) (and stolen a computer). Putting my work on the internet is a gesture of confidence in readers and in the intrinsic value of creating something pointless, strange, and difficult out of words.

Nobody stands to gain anything from it (except whatever blend of pleasure and misery my writing supplies), yet there it is. This rare and beautiful virtue is also the problem: I don't make any money at it!

## **[future]**

**The newest developing tools in the field of hypermedia (i.e. Macromedia Flash, Director, Toolbook) seem to favour a form of computer based art which is far from written word and near to other form of expression (cartoons, music, visual art, design, theater, photography, comics, cinema). On the other hand, apart from university based experimentation, there's a strong loss of interest in written words in general.**

#### **Dirk Stratton**

I'm skeptical of this idea that there's been "a strong loss of interest in written words in general"--on what do you base this claim? Remember the grand prophecies a few years ago about how [computers](#) would allow us to enjoy "paperless offices"? In fact, the use of paper has increased exponentially. And what's on that paper? It ain't all bar graphs, that's for sure. What about the e-mail explosion? Lots of words involved there. When I see the number of books published every year and the number of journals and magazines and so forth and so on, I have a hard time believing that reflects a "strong loss of interest" in the written word.

#### **Adrienne Eisen**

Once bandwidth increases significantly, I think the mass-market interactive storytelling will be more like movies than books. It'll be just like movies and books now - most people watch movies, a few people read books.

As the interactive media market changes to mimic the current entertainment market, the interactive production processes will change also. In fact, interactive media is already moving toward a studio model, where interactive writers are only one piece of a larger production. For example, at POP and Icebox (both Los Angeles-based companies) the writers work with designers, programmers and producers. In general, writers are not amazing designers, and vice versa, so as interactive storytelling matures, the bar will rise, and there will be little tolerance for designers who write and writers who noodle with Photoshop and Flash.

I think, in this scenario, there's also room for an Eastgate -- a company that focuses on the written word and does not seek the same audience as POP and Icebox. Perhaps, as the industry matures, POP and Icebox will buy rights to writing from Eastgate in the same way that movie studios buy rights to writing from Random House.

### **Are you interested in mixing up traditional fiction writing with other media?**

#### **Dirk Stratton**

Yes.

**William Gillespie**

I am interested in what new meanings can emerge in the intersections between media formerly regarded as separate, but I am generally not interested in text that is merely dressed up with multiple fonts and bright colors and distracting animation and throbbing music, or text that is illegible or unintelligible because it's being mixed with too many layers of sound or images.

**Do you look after the visual aspects of your works?****Dirk Stratton**

Yes.

**Adrienne Eisen**

I think of myself as a writer and a site architect (in so far as I choose the order that a reader encounters each piece of writing.) I am not a designer.

**Is the "coming-soon-hyperwriter" a photographer or a musician too?****Dirk Stratton**

It certainly couldn't hurt, but I don't think it's absolutely necessary.

**William Gillespie**

The coming-soon-hyperwriter is neither a person with a single skill nor a single person. The collaborative model will become more common than the single author model.

Photography and music are only two of many media that can converge in the new media. Someday, using virtual reality technology, there will be sculpture and even architecture on the Web.

Perhaps I can say that the coming-soon-hyperwriter, regardless of how well she can work with artistic media, had better be good at working with other people.

And one of those people needs to know something about computers.

**Mark Amerika**

This is an excellent question, one I am dealing with in my current research and development here at the University of Colorado where I am developing an Internet Art curriculum. The answers are not easy because everything depends on the individual artists or groups of artists. Most of the net art I see today has some writing or textual element to it. Of course, in a work like GRAMMATRON, text is obvious. But then in my second major project, Holo-X, which I created with Jay Dillemath, the emphasis is on virtual reality or a [3-D](#) web experience [even though there is text too]. My third major project, PHON:E:ME, was very much an experiment in sound and design, that is, in DJ remixing and animated texts that become animated visual art works. PHON:E:ME is also a work of online conceptual art.

Many other writers I know are doing this too. So maybe the "soon-to-be" hypermedia writer cum virtual artist is no longer "soon-to-be", but already here!

**Shelley Jackson**

I have not broken faith with the written word, which I love with an indecent passion. But "HI! MY NAME IS Legion," as I wrote on a name tag recently: I'm not only a writer. I've always divided my time between writing and art, and that's only to name the two things I do professionally. I seem to be making it my life's project to try my hand at everything. One of the projects I have in mind will be (if I ever master all the different skills I need to learn, or find some devoted collaborators) a sort of combination of hypertext + film + computer game.

There have always been people like me who revolt at specialization, but the traditional divisions between art forms make no allowances for us. The options have been to juggle separate careers, or find the few hybrid forms that subsisted in ye olde worlde, like the picture book. But the internet is the natural habitat of the polymorph. Just designing your own web page you make decisions that an author in the old style would see taken out of her hands and delivered to a designer, a typographer, a compositor, etc. Even on this elementary level there is a merging of functions between "content-provider" (disgusting term) and designer.

Obviously, the results are not always glorious, and as you say, the written word often loses the most in the struggle, becomes perfunctory and bland. But I don't think that's inevitable. I can imagine hybrid forms that preserve the particular denseness and complexity of the written word. Writing existed before it was arranged in blocks on a numbered series of white rectangles. It will metamorphose and be revitalized in the process.

**What tools are you using right now to write your hypertexts (storyspace, html editor, a simple wordprocessor, ink and paper...)?****Mark Amerika**

The tools used in my various web projects include html, javascript, vrmf, animation, video, real audio, mp3, shockwave, flash, 3-D audio, etc. But the tools are used to achieve narrative rhetorical conceptual-visual ends.

**Dirk Stratton**

bbEdit for the html. (I'm currently trying to learn how to use Dreamweaver, which both of my collaborators use.) I'm working on some hypertexts that were begun using ink and paper, but the final realization will eventually reside in cyberspace and will require something like Dreamweaver to make the transition.

**William Gillespie**

Dreamweaver, Photoshop, Illustrator, Inspiration, ImageReady, Word, Pico, ink, pencil, and paper.

**Shelley Jackson**

Most of the above, plus pliers, lenses, lipstick, paint, razor blades, rumor, recording devices, dolls, survival manuals, the confessions of strangers, and scissors.

## [writing]

**The elementary hypertext unit is said to be a lexia - using a Barthesian vocabulary, a gramme - using a Derridean vocabulary, or a page - using the common internet speech. How do you choose to divide your text into single units? I mean, do you respect something like a classical action (or time, or space) unity in your choice?**

### **Adrienne Eisen**

In my writing, I make sure each hypertext unit has a small string to pull the reader along --a clear conflict and path to discovery with payoff at the end -- and all hypertext units should add up to a larger path of conflict - discovery - payoff. I think that the nature of life is that this path is rambling, and hypertext works well to convey this rambling.

### **Dirk Stratton**

With The Unknown, the term adopted was "the scene," as in, "Dirk, it's time for you to write a scene for The Unknown, you lazy poet you." Given that The Unknown contains lists, poems, dialogues, plays, critical prose, and good old prose fiction, among other things, "scene" was obviously being used somewhat broadly. But, for instance, the prose fiction portions are, for the most part, indistinguishable from any other conventional piece of fiction; they have beginnings, middles, and ends, and so forth. Occasionally, larger "scenes" were divided into multiple pages, which could be read in sequence, if so desired, but for the most part "scenes" were self-contained.

### **Shelley Jackson**

My writing seems to fall into chunks all by itself. (My writing for print is also made of short pieces, and I shuffle them obsessively until I decide on a final order.) I am definitely not consciously thinking about "classical action"! The real answer is that there is no one answer: some chunks could be read as prose poems, like the squares of the Quilt section in Patchwork Girl, some are short scenes within in a sequential narrative, some pursue one thought or line of reasoning. In My Body most pages are named after body parts (toe, elbow, ear) and that's exactly what they're about.

### **William Gillespie**

Writing the Unknown, I eventually learned that every page had to function on its own at the same time as it had to function (in multiple, difficult-to-predict ways) in the larger hypertext. I tried to make each page a short short story with an ending, to compensate for narrative momentum surrendered to the multisequentiality.

**Do you follow the same method of text division (into single units) in all your works? During the writing process do you figure out the hotwords/links (and their target) while you are writing or is it a separate phase?**

### **Dirk Stratton**

Depends: I've done both. Usually, though, I figure out at least some of the links while writing. Scott, on the other hand, usually does his linking as a separate phase.

### **Shelley Jackson**

For me, writing and linking are separate phases. Maybe I'm a natural writer of hypertext, because I seem to be completely incapable of writing a story from beginning to end. Everything I write comes out in short little noodles of story--macaroni, not spaghetti (which makes me think of the good but little-used word "macaronic," meaning patched together from lots of different sources, a word I would have used in Patchwork Girl if I had known it). To write a novel I have to pick the macaroni out of the pot and thread them end to end one piece at a time, whether I'm following a plot or some other model of sequence. This is a kind of hypertext linking--linearity is the limit case of hypertext--it just requires deciding on one path (you hope it's the best path) and ignoring all the others. In multilinear hypertext, you still have to make decisions, but other aesthetic possibilities open to you: you can use one path to comment on another, nearly parallel path (I did this in the narrative part of Patchwork Girl, where there are two routes that separate at certain points only to merge again), you can force the reader to make choices, etc. etc.

I am most interested in using hypertext to create new formal structures. As I said, I like spatial metaphors, like the body, the quilt, the graveyard. In this case, the pattern has its own logic that dictates the links. Even in linear texts, I am always looking for formal patterns, which resist the propulsive linear plot and create a kind of implied spatiality.

**As an amateur hypertext writer I feel like I am a movie editor more than a traditional writer, especially when I organize links between pages - do you feel the same?**

### **Shelley Jackson**

To me hypertext is nothing like making a movie. Movies are linear, at least so far. It's writing a novel that is really like making a movie: jump cuts made it into fiction long time ago.

### **Dirk Stratton**

Good analogy. Though I didn't "feel the same" before I read this question, I suspect I will in the future.

**Mark Amerika**

Yes, let's call it an "orchestration of writerly effects." These can be textual, sexual, hypermexual, whatever. The important thing is take that "gram" as you call it, and create dream narrative applications that de-familiarize the web surfing/reading experience. Work against links, even while linking. Discrete text chunks are nice, and sometimes they work, but how do the words or, better yet, the language riffs of the writer-cum-network-conductor, \*resonate\* with the modes of cultural production now available in the new media environment? By investigating the answer to this question, we hope to do away with method, genre, and the need to build a vocabulary modeled after 20th century art and writing.

**More generally, what are the main differences between a linear and an hypertextual fiction writing process?**

**Mark Amerika**

For me, none. But that's because my novels are already hyperfiction.

## [roots]

**This one is pretty simple. Could you name one or more forerunners of hypertextual form among fiction writers of the past? (writers that influenced not your style but your decision to write hyperfictions instead of/in addition to traditional fictions)**

**Mark Amerika**

Too many to list here, but read my Amerika Online columns for a clue [[www.altx.com/amerika.online](http://www.altx.com/amerika.online)]

**Dirk Stratton**

For me, my fascination with footnotes of all kinds (whether in academic papers or in a novel like "Infinite Jest") was the biggest reason I became attracted to hypertext. Hypertext is the ultimate footnote generator.

**Shelley Jackson**

Sterne, Borges, Calvino, Cortazar, Nabokov, Queneau...

**William Gillespie**

This is not an answer to your question, but the following writers are a few of many who influenced my style, infused me with the thrill of literary experimentation, and indirectly lead to my writing multisequential poetry and fiction for the page and later for computers: Julio Cortazar, May Swenson, Raymond Queneau, Lyn Hejinian, Harry Mathews, Bernadette Mayer, Italo Calvino, Virginia Woolf.

**Have your hyper-works renounced to tell a story?**

**Dirk Stratton**

No. Besides, I think it is impossible to renounce narrative, no matter how hard one tries. To be human is to be conscious, to use consciousness. And consciousness is basically a story-telling mechanism: that's how it works, that's what it is: the ongoing story of "I." So whatever consciousness touches becomes "tainted" with narrative. This includes all hyper-works, not just mine.

**William Gillespie**

I'm still trying to tell a story, even in my poetry, theater, and videogames.

**Adrienne Eisen**

I began writing seriously around 1992. In 1993 someone told me I could never write a novel because everything I wrote was one page, self-contained. The same year I met people who worked at Philips Media who were trying to figure out what to put on the first CD-i's (the precursor to CD-ROM). I realized that my writing would fit perfectly in this medium, so I started telling people I was writing interactive fiction. In order to become a better writer of what I could write, I read all the short-shorts I could get my hands on so that I could figure out what makes a very short piece of writing work. Then I read collections of short stories to figure out what makes a bunch of short pieces add up to something more.

**Shelley Jackson**

No. And yes. It depends on the work. If the question is, must they renounce storytelling, then the answer is no. But I am interested in many things besides story-telling.

**Do you consider your works more similar to poetry (or to theater, or to videogames, or to something else) than fiction?**



**Shelley Jackson**

I hope my work calls into question the desire to classify it.

**Dirk Stratton**

No. The Unknown is more like fiction than anything else. But, so what? I'm not sure what purpose such distinctions serve.

**Mark Amerika**

CNN called it Internet Art, as did the Whitney Museum. USA Today called it I-art. Do they know something that we don't?

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August - September 2000. Thank you so much Kristine.

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