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**Dual effects in digital texts:
connectivity in hypertext fiction and the splitting in two of stories**

Storytelling involves the recounting and shaping of events by portraying in words, images, and sounds, for the most part, what happens in our world or in imagined worlds. Approaching storytelling across media as a cognitive construct, activated by various types of signs and displayed through different supports, implies taking into account three fundamental levels of narrative. First, semantics or content, which concerns the meaning of signs; second, syntax, which relates to the structure and the way these signs interact; and third, pragmatics or narrative seen as performance. Now, the question is what happens to these domains when storytelling migrates to digital media? Does the shift from one medium to another really modify the way a story functions as a series of events and actions undertaken by characters in a given narrative world? Does it transform the way the story is perceived by the audience?

Stories conveyed in what Marie-Laure Ryan calls 'genuinely digital texts' (Ryan, 2003) cannot be taken away from the computer. In hypertext fiction or computer generated texts, for instance, storytelling relies upon digital platforms to be constructed, displayed, and performed. Stories within these formats encompass several supports – text, image, or sound – and imply non conventional and complex interpretative strategies on the part of the reader, just like stories conveyed in books or films. However, since hypertext fiction stories 'live' in linked and dynamic spaces within computers and digital supports, they basically dwell upon connectivity and performance, which hardly apply to media other than digital.

Here I intend to focus on connectivity and the performing dimension of stories within hypertext fiction which, as I intend to show, produce a subtle splitting in two of both the syntactic and semantic levels of a given story.

Several critics have approached digital stories as non-linear texts, as series of disconnected events, which favour non sequential reading and confusion. But most stories, either told, written, or projected on a screen, are complex and, like life, are non-linear in the sense that at any moment, they live in the past, in the present, and in the future. Stories conveyed in modernist and postmodernist print narratives and films, suggest in fact this complexity and thus symbolize non-linearity not only through flashbacks and premonitions but also enabling different plot lines that develop at once. Events, for instance, do not appear in a strict chronological order and the whole narrative is usually fragmented by means of digressions, illustrations, and any other device aiming at giving further information about a character or a setting. This technique distracts the reader from the conventional sequential reading related to causality and temporality but removing a single probable or necessary sequence of events does not do away with all linearity and the logic connection of facts. The reader who follows a reading path even if that path curves back upon itself or heads in strange directions, somehow notices linearity and logic by associating meaningful signs. But, what if these signs are not only associated in the reader's mind but also connected in the text by her action? Does this impact on the pragmatic dimension of narrative affect semantics and syntax?

It is my contention that the shift from print or film to digital media causes a subtle impact on all these levels in the sense that the involvement of the reader in the shaping and very contribution to the progress of the story splits the narrative. The very connective nature of hypertext fiction, that is the possibility for the reader to mentally associate and physically connect the parts of the story, enables two narrative dimensions which produce an impact on the semantic and syntactic levels and so, on the very perception of the content and structure of a given story. One narrative level relates to what I call associative and static textual elements which dwell on more or less extended

fragments of text projected on a screen. The other relates to the connective and dynamic elements which, like links and multimedia objects, allow the reader entering, wandering, and quitting the story, more or less at random.

Many critics have observed that stories in hypertext fiction generally convey a sense of incoherent confusion, exacerbated by the plurality of links and pathways and the lack of a definite ending. Now, when dealing with linearity and interactivity in digital literature, several scholars have discussed whether these texts can have a story at all, or if, on the contrary, they have too many stories. In *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth states that hypertext fictions like Michael Joyce's *afternoon*, are something other than stories or narratives because they are *ergodic* and a non-trivial effort is required to let the reader traverse the text (Aarseth, 1997). This non trivial effort, which is a choice of the pathways to follow, would prevent the story from naturally flowing and prevent the reader from immersing herself into the story and feeling thematic linearity and continuity. But since even printed stories in a book are somehow interactive, it seems necessary to see whether the mere presence of linkage and devices like control-animated pictures (e.g., Flash) prevents digital fiction from telling stories as a series of logically related events that maintain a semantic coherence within a narrative world. And here I use the concept of cohesion comprising linguistic devices which are used to express the semantic continuity of different parts of text. In this sense, anchors supporting links are not only splitting linguistic devices, as we shall see, but also a variety of ligatures the function of which is to create a cohesive ensemble, so that the reader can envision the text as semantic whole. In other words, since anchors and links enact opening and closure, they allow fragmentation and cohesion at the same time.

Hypertext fiction like Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves of Girls* requires a series of clicks to let the reader traverse the story, through a myriad of links. The text seems to be controlled by the receiver who by her action evokes a particular *momentum* for the story. This does in fact involve a certain degree of engagement in spite of total immersion and feel for thematic stream. The story is perceived through fragments which convey a fractal overview of the whole. Recent hypertext

fiction like Beta's *The Book of Waste* stories tends, on the other hand, to diminish the number of links and automatically display animated texts and images, which do not require or require the minimum input on the reader's part to let the story progress. Immersion and engagement swap over within a series of stories which, like those in films and certain modern literature, favour several linearities and fragmentation mostly at the levels of temporality, "what will happen next?" and causality, "whodunit?". There is in fact a tension between the text as a story and the text as a structure, as an ensemble of implications.

Let me now focus on connectivity and links, that is text connecting other texts, and the way they shape storytelling in digital media. Linkage, in hypertext fiction, forces the reader to happen upon connections between and among the various elements in the text within a space which is basically layered. The link is an electronic representation of a perceived relationship between two pieces of material, a relationship instantiated electronically that I see as a ligature, that is not a mere sequence nor a simple bridge but a meaningful event of connection.

Yet, as Adrian Miles forcefully argues, the link is regularly discussed in terms of what it enables, such as multilinear narrative, but rarely is it explored ontologically (Miles, 2002). The traditional approach to hypermedia fiction and the way the stories are told in that specific digital format, loosely perceives anchors and links as agents that serve the reader with just a choice. As meaningful signs, anchors and links and dynamic or automatic elements in hypertext fiction give raise in our minds to representations of imagined worlds. At the same time, they serve as multipliers of meaning and as shifting and subverting devices which, at the very instant of the click, makes the story progress in several directions favoring fragmentation.

However, like Peirce's *interpretant*, the link represents the sign as a possibility, fact, and reason, three elementary non discrete sequences, which relate to what in the context of narrative theory, Bremond identifies as the three functions of any basic narrative sequence. The first function opens the possibility of the process by promising an event; the second function implements this *virtuality* in the form of the event in act; the third function closes this process in the form of a result of the

same event (Bremond, 1970). In a narrow perspective, the link would be in this sequence a mere bridge between a sign and what the sign represents in a self-contained system. Yet in hypertext fiction the bridge, the space in between does not only associate signs but echoes similar signs and encompass these three sequences. Thus, links open and fragment the story but, in a double movement, they somehow close it and favor cohesion. I call this movement a subtle “splitting in two” of the story, a doubling of the narrative levels. Moreover, links dislodge the text, expanding the story not in the sense of multiplying points of view or enabling different plot lines embedded in the text, but in the sense of duplicating content and structures, that is the semantic and syntactic levels of narrative. Here, traditional stories are shadowed and doubled by a new kind of story, in which the paths to follow are part of the process of signification.

Pantomime, a story contained in Beta’s *The Book of Waste*, introduces Lisa to the reader. She is obsessed with a friend who committed suicide. Fragments suggest that she will commit suicide too by telling that she fears her parents and love while her life has no meaning at all. In fact, the last words are: Lisa no breathing, Lisa no life, Lisa no meaning. Words linking these fragments (anchors) are ‘mind’, ‘position’, ‘forget it’, ‘breath’, ‘secure’, and ‘failed’. This story is doubled in the sense that fragments and links, on the one hand, and the very linking dimension on the other, convey at least two narrations of the same events. The reader may read the whole text but if she just clicks on the words highlighted, she may follow a second restrained plot and shall figure out what is going on through a narrow storytelling space. In fact, Lisa seems to meditate about her ‘position’, she does not feel ‘secure’, her life is a ‘failure’ and so, she ‘fails’ to ‘breathe’. In another story, *Trap/Findings*, the space which unfolds is built on memory and metaphor. The narrator uncannily caress a sleeping woman with a gun. He attempts to kill her while he remembers some stages of their relationship. Text appears automatically as we read so when a first sentence is complete a second sentence appears, and so on. The gradual display of narrative developments contributes to intensifying violence and suspense. In this sense, it seems to me that these dynamic devices convey meaning too.

It is thus important to stress the relationship between linking and dynamic storytelling and interpretation in digital media by approaching links and multimedia connective elements separately from the textual fragments they interconnect as well as reviewing some postulates related to traditional narrative theory.

All these new elements have indeed a descriptive power to the point where, by themselves, they become a reading. As José Ricardo puts it (Ricardo, 1998), if semantic power of links can be established, it is possible to show that they can sustain separate meanings and communicative intentions of their own, hence the idea of a separate, alternative, and parallel text and the dual effects in digital stories. In a given fragment, a particular event, a character description, even a setting can be displayed not only through a series of sentences or paragraphs but it can also be told through a clickable word or syntagma, or a visual component being dynamic.

Print works have highlighted words and visual elements that may convey meaning by their own too. Yet, links and animated devices in hypertext fiction are what I call ligatures, that is devices that tie all the elements of the story to the point that the story could not develop without them. The frame narrative could not be comprehended without this second connective dimension, which seems to prevail in the text at the very act of reading, in the pragmatic level. Narrative space is splitted in two since connectivity enables a second dimension within the story, which may be pragmatically seized as an autonomous one, as a single narrative string.

As Michael Joyce suggests, links are like comets on the surface of a pond, that is doubly illusory. They expand the meaning of a given text and restrain it once the reader click on and pass through, not only providing important clues about the story together with the actual and the incoming node but also adding a second perspective on the same story. They double the narrative by opening a parallel semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic space which works at the level of linkage. The gap or synapse of transition within this space, that is between two nodes may indeed contribute toward disruption in a story which shall be inevitably seized at two levels.

Another digital story, *The Jew's Daughter*, is constructed in the form of disordered thoughts concerning some events related to the narrator's life, a wandering man who meditates about his past and his relationship with a woman who's gone. The story is conveyed through long fragments where flash-backs and flash-forwards abound. The few clickable words (there is one per fragment) push the reader to follow a story that is continually modified. Rolling over a highlighted word subtly changes the entire narrative on the page so if the reader clicks on 'criminal' or 'June' the text changes. The story is reshaped again and again so one envisions the modified fragment in a new perspective on the basis of this second narrative space which is dynamic and connective.

Indeed, storytelling here relies upon two spaces. Whereas one dimension is dynamic, connective, eventful, and actual, the other is static, associative, stable and generally provides background information, relating to past and future events. While one space is made of words, sentences, and images, the other dwells upon paragraphs and long fragments of text. The latter would correspond to the episodes of a story while the first would be not only breaks, sequences or decision points, as John Slatin (Slatin, 1991) and Jay David Bolter (Bolter, 1991) argue, but also storytelling agents which mirror the framing story.

In *Snow Falls*, a fragment of Dena Larsen's *Disappearing Rain*, anchors like 'forgetting', 'Alzheimers', 'language problems', 'hallucinations', and 'wander out' reflect the first dimension story in the sense that they convey a series of images which give a second compressed version of this episode about one character's disease and her inevitable loss of language skills, memory or sight.

Early hypermedia fiction provided a series of menus and lists of clickable words in order to give a general overview of the story. More recent digital stories avoid on the contrary a general index and merge these words into nodes in a more complex way. These connective words are embedded in the content and structure and thus make the story progress. On the other hand, they not only provide enough clues to follow a story as a series of transformations and events but also enable a second storytelling dimension which, sometimes, may not exactly correspond to the framing first

dimension. See, for instance, *These Waves of Girls*, a confessional autobiography about a girl coming to terms with her lesbian identity. In a fragment entitled Vanessa, anchors give additional information about that girl so the reader knows that she used to pursue Vanessa in a mall because, she says, 'I could run faster, confidently, could wrestle and hold'. She could also beat her uncle's friends 'because I was a child and because they were weak'. These sentences give indeed additional information and will certainly open out the story. However, they can be seized independently of the frame narrative giving, if read alone one after the other, a subtly different version of the same facts. The reader will know then that she was faster because she was a child and that she could wrestle her rivals because they were weak. The performance leads then to a doubling of the story, a story which is seized at two levels which may be subtly different, as if performance – pragmatics – acquire precedence over the plot and the structure – semantics and syntax. The development of the story is doubled then because the interpretation of the significance of a segment is tied to the reader's perception of a word which is not only a central junction in the structure of the text (Douglas, 2000) but also a sign conveying meaning and telling something by itself.

In Richard Lanham's terms (Lanham, 1989), the story may be told and read 'through' when it relates to the first, textual and static, narrative space, where nodes are particularly transparent and immersive. It may be told and read 'at' when it matches to the second space, related to anchors and links, which is erroneously supposed to be opaque and solely *ergodic*.

A story in this dual space may be displayed not only through nodes or fragments together with links but also through links and dynamic words and images. These are decision points, specific devices which can be approached together with the texts they interconnect but also separately. When the reader chooses to follow a path, the path gives rise in her mind to a condensed story which mirrors the framing story and often overrides it, provoking a splitting in two effect on narrative.

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