The Museum of Hyphenated Media

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If there is a bound codex that writers of hypertext and new media artists have been waiting for, *The New Media Reader* is it.

In its 823 pages the editors sample the work of a stunning array of writers, designers, programmers, scientists, and artists. Italo Calvino and Robert Coover stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Jan L. Bordeuwijk and Ben van Kaam, authors of "Towards a New Classification of Tele-Information Services" and, for less surprising but no less interesting company, video artists Bill Viola and Scott McCloud, whose comic essays on comics have made him the Aristotelian dramatist of the form.

As Janet Murray points out in her introduction, "Seeing all of these players gathered within the boundaries of this one volume we can almost imagine them in a single room, participating in a kind of quilting bee. In one corner Borges, Burroughs, and the Oulipo are busy shredding the outgrown garments of print, while across the room Bush, Engelbart, and the Xerox PARC collaborators are eagerly sewing the fragments together into an intricately patterned, vast, and welcoming quilt."

That's the strange thing about it. Any collection of texts tracking and linking the genealogy of new media, you would just assume ought to be rendered in new media. And that assumption makes perfect sense. The more difficult option though is the one employed here: Take a nod from a number of the textual innovators you're writing about, bring aboard designer Michael Crumpton and devise a pagination system that allows readers to smoothly surf the many connections among and between the selections just about as easily as clicking those underlined blue words we are all by now so familiar with.

Bringing it all together in this physical structure, which, if my photocopied galleys are any indication, is no easier to curl up with in bed than the average Compaq desktop, does arrange the project in a binding approaching the comfort level of a (albeit heavy) quilt. You get the sense that what one needs to know to get a handle on things, to see where art and technology have come from and where they have ended up, is here to be had. Everyone you need to talk to is in this room.

Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, who both come to this project with their particular new media prejudices, have done a resounding job in fairly representing the genealogy of new media. That judgement comes from the perspective of a writer of course. The cynical side of me knows there will be programmer-types who wonder why all this William S. Burroughs nonsense is taking up space in the behemoth. Similarly, I felt quite comfortable skipping around in, for instance, certain sections of "A Research Center for
Augmenting Human Intellect” by Douglas Engelbart and William English, which documents the “mother of all demos” from the 1968 Fall Joint Computer Conference in San Francisco, during which Augmentation Research Center (ARC) held a risky live demonstration of interactive computing over a microwave, pre-Internet connection. (Fortunately the video documentary of the demo is included on the CD-ROM so I could passively watch it later.) In such pieces, the links out produced a far more interesting trail through the book than the typical linear practice. And I suppose if there’s any book in which you go with that urge to link, this is the one. (Parker has written on the link previously in ebr - ed.)

The New Media Reader is a museum really; Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort its curators. The editors tag-team writing brief introductory essays to each of the 54 chapters that in most cases contextualize the forthcoming passages historically and across disciplines.

The CD-ROM mimics the book’s structure, offering texts, hypertexts, and documentaries all succinctly contextualized and linked to further references on the Web — if you’re comfortable leaving the room. Old working video games by Atari are there, as are working versions of Adventure, Eliza, and Spacewar! (the first modern video game). Be prepared to spend several hours playing the old Atari 2600 games, alone.

Lev Manovich, in a companion introduction, proposes that the developers of human-computer interaction are the “major modern artists.” Manovich writes: “...In my view this book is not just an anthology of new media but also the first example of a radically new history of modern culture — a view from the future when more people will recognize that the true cultural innovators of the last decades of the twentieth century were interface designers, computer game designers, music video directors and DJs — rather than painters, filmmakers, or fiction writers, whose fields remained relatively stable during this historical period.”

Setting aside the assertion that this volume’s triumph will be its vindication of a nameless horde of gifted interface designers and DJs who deserve more recognition than they’ve received: Certainly there are “true cultural innovators” of the sort he describes, even at the moment, who fly under the radar of a society that privileges more comfortable art forms, DJs who experiment with repetition and juxtaposition such as Evolution Control Committe, filmmakers such as Mike Figgis of Timecode, and the designers of Myst for instance whose names I confess I should know. But certainly Manovich lives in a different world than I if he thinks so-and-so literary fiction author/indie filmmaker/painter has any more notoriety on a popular level than the director of the most recent Snoop Dogg video or the uninteresting MTV Beach Party DJs. (Manovich is reviewed in ebr - ed.)

In my no less biased view, The New Media Reader is useful for precisely the opposite reason. It assimilates and articulates a very specific history. It follows threads of thought through the various fields: literary theory, interface design, video game programming, performance, interaction, etc. It is therefore highly magnetic to a wide number of important past, present, and future new media playas and will attract reluctant but interested writers, filmmakers, and painters, at least.

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The other thing we have been waiting on is the maturation of the hypertext novel. I have been holding on to Richard Holeton’s Figurski at Findhorn on
Acid for upwards of a year, reading and rereading it, wanting for it to be the one to break out, as they say in industry-speak.

I am finally prepared to say it is not. It does however do a number of things well.

The story works like this: There are characters, places and objects. Each of these has a history and a history node that tends to recur, especially in the default reading, to make sure you remember who everyone and what everything is. The characters are Frank Figurski, a former Harvard graduate student who murdered his professor and is now out on parole; Nguyen the famous handless cup flipper; and Fatima Michelle Vieuchanger, a scheming French Moroccan Journalist who once led a Saddam Hussein assassination plot. The places include Findhorn, a new age international community in Scotland; Shower-Lourdes, a trailer park in Florida where a glue imprint of Jesus crucified was once described a miracle; and the Holodeck, indeed, the very Star Trek Holodeck upon which one can participate in the very realistic projections of one’s own programming. The objects include acid (as in “far out, man” not hydrochloric), cans of Spam (and also the British imitation Sham), and two mechanical pigs with functioning orifices and digestive systems which allow the animatrons to consume and defecate as well as dance (one of the pigs is the original pig designed and built in 1737 by a Rosselini; the second a recreation, a nearly identical forgery crafted by van Gelderschott in 1884).

Figurski arranges the characters, places, and objects in different combinations. Within each arrangement there are concerns dictated mostly by who, what, and where. In nodes in which acid is present, the characters trip/hallucinate. In nodes in which Spam is present, the characters do things with Spam. In nodes in which one or both of the pigs are present, the character(s) pursue and fight over the beasts. The main concern on everyone’s part is the procurement of the mechanical pig(s). Each character is in pursuit and occasional possession of either the real 1737 Rosselini pig or the 1884 van Gelderschott recreation, or both. If Nguyen and Figurski are on the Holodeck with the pig and on acid, for instance, they will program in the day of Princess Di’s death, assume their roles—Nguyen as Prince Charles; Figurski as the former Princess’s ill-fated lover - and then try to deceive each other while fleeing the paparazzi amid the chaos of the subsequent car crash in order to come away with the pig.

This structure is compelling for a while until ultimately the point seems made — everyone is in pursuit of the pig(s). Okay. And therein lies the narrative drive of the novel.

There are some beautiful moments. The node in which Figurski first discovers the pig, emerging from the waters off Scotland, Findhorn Bay, just a whale-like shadow under the surface until it breaks through, bobbing toward him.

The nodes affected by the object acid, conversely, by and large, come off flat, vacant, the drug’s presence seemingly an excuse to distort the reality of the work, and the hypertext itself, an excuse to live up to the novel’s “screwball” billing. The wacky sequences get tiresome when they’re not concentrating more on the desires and intentions behind the characters’ mechanical pig quests. An exception would be the aforementioned Nguyen and Figurski on the Holodeck with Rosselini’s 1737 mechanical pig, the Princess Di holographic reality sequence/hallucination. When the princess first lays eyes upon the pig, she quips, “It’s a guard pig, is it?” Later in that
sequence, acid is added to the scene, the Holodeck and the trip and the reality and the hologram all get confused in the grisly real landscape of mangled bodies inside a mangled car with paparazzi peeking their cameras in and Figurski having replaced his holographic self with a true hologram and being actually outside the Holodeck, trapping Nguyen and presumably making off with the pig. These are the moments that punch holes in the screen. Other parts of the text are made up of found or purported to be found metafictional text passages. From a title called Twelve Narrative Features of Dreams published by a Fictitious Press, we get: "1. Sudden shifts of context, location, character, associative “logic” vs. linearity. 2. Acceptance of the bizarre as natural… 3. Character-shifting and character-blending...” and so on. One of two laws of a hashish operation reads: "after the completion of any one fantasia has arrived, there almost invariably succeeds a shifting of the action to some other stage entirely different in its surrounds.” This last bit almost perfectly describes the frequent down shifts in the novel, and the twelve features of dreams are point-by-point descriptions of tactics employed throughout.

Inevitable allusions to Janet Murray’s seminal book on hypertext, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, are also hard to ignore. Figurski is no Hamlet, though. He is a thin caricature, ironic, and (for a hypertext creation) ironically thin as paper. There is some good writing in here. All told however it is too clever, too thin. One ultimately wonders, in hypertext will we ever get away from self-reflexivity and metafiction or will we just eventually drown ourselves in the flood of our own references to what we are trying to do?