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Leaving the Path: Writing and Reading the Webbed-Text

The web-writer is bound to new conventions of composition, where spatial considerations are essential to the effective use of a network of ideas. That is, how the words relate to each other, and how the reader progresses through the text, are central concerns in the design and construction of a webbed text.

The connective ability of hypertext extends to both a navigational as well as thematic construction of the networked text. The web-writer has tools to create and subvert meaning, to argue in new and potentially powerful ways, to produce new forms of textuality itself.

Nevertheless, the web-writer faces hurdles, from technological to associative, which must be overcome, or at least recognized, before the networked text can be designed and distributed. Chief among these concerns is the labyrinthine appearance of the text, a winding and endless series of loops and backtracks which can deter the reader from ever endeavoring to begin the journey. Indeed, if the path through the text is not explicit, the process of reading and creating meaning may be useless. While a properly webbed-text will never be linear by definition, the text must be designed so that users have no choice but to continue down the path.

First, however, we may pause to consider some of the foundational terms for our exploration. By establishing a proper grammar for webbed-writing, we can then proceed to consider the varied ways the text may be produced and performed. Only then may we stop to reflect on the potential problems web-writers and web-readers may encounter along the path.

Hypertext — Links in space and spirit

Understanding the fundamental function of a webbed text is crucial to utilizing the power of the network of words and ideas. A webbed text is simply that — a series of threads that meet at nodes of significance. Thoughts, ideas, words, images can all be linked together through hyperlinks. In writing, the links take the form of hypertext.

However, hypertext is about not just connecting words together spatially, but spiritually. The connections between words are based primarily on meaning, either of the word itself or the between the words. 'Shoe' and 'foot' have intrinsic definitions, but it is in their relation that we find meaning [7]. Hypertext is a method to explicitly identify a relationship with another idea.

It is that overt nature that gives hyperlinks considerable power — a link between ideas is clearly demarcated and handed to the reader. While similar ideas can logically be networked together, the web-writer can also create connections between seemingly unrelated topics through hyperlinks. For example, a word can be linked to an image to create a new connotation not inherent in the words alone. By linking these objects, the web-writer establishes a new frame to construct meaning.

This conflation of meaning is an effective tool for the web-writer. A link can validate an argument or create new connotations between ideas. The later is of particular importance to the web-writer as a tool to build a narrative or subvert an idea through juxtaposition or direct contradiction.

Handholding and cattle-prodding — Guiding/forcing the reader along the path

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the web-writer is controlling how the reader navigates a webbed text. By design, the text is a matrix of connectivity, with words serving as nodal meeting points. The web-writer sacrifices a measure of linearity for the enmeshing of ideas through hypertext.

Good textual design gives the web-writer some amount of control of the path through the text — the way can be subtly suggested or rigidly enforced, though ultimately undermined by the predilection of the reader. They can always go to a different site and abandon the path completely.

The web-writer creates a set of thematic guideposts throughout the text by emphasizing certain words or phrases and linking judiciously between them. As the reader progresses, they establish thematic context through the series of linked ideas.

Similarly, the web-writer can also throw up roadblocks to more rigidly control the reader's path. A text can have few links, and navigation can be limited to a simple 'previous/next' structure to force the reader through the text. However, this method of control reduces the functionality of a networked text by removing the links between the words.

The poet and the professor — Purposeful writing of a webbed text

Webbed writing serves multiple genres if the benefits and limitations are understood. The poet and the academic can each write a networked text effectively, though in different ways.

The academic web-writer has the connectivity of hypertext to provide evidence of an argument by linking to a source text. Similarly, a networked text creates new possibilities for annotation, quotation and citation.

The academic faces several problems, however. Evidential documentation stored on an external site can be removed or altered beyond the control of the web-writer. Linear argumentation is nearly impossible in a truly networked text, as readers can choose their own path through a text and confound the intentions of the original argument. And, as the text changes, annotation becomes difficult to maintain consistently. For example, as new text is inserted, citations lose their sequential nature. While not a critical failure, the result is a confusing and potentially non-sensical set of notes.

The poet (or other creative web-writer) also has the power of the connectivity of hypertext. Here, however, a distinction can be made between the poet and the academic — where the academic is bound to use hyperlinks to make logical connections and, therefore, maximize reader accessibility to the linked information, the poet may link words in random, chaotic or even subversive ways.

The Color and the Shape — Formatting the webbed text

Writing has always been about the space as well as the message. Stone and parchment, paper and screen — the medium gives context to the words, gives the words space to play in, to perform. There would be no cliff-hangers without the turn of the page.

Digital writing exists in a unique position, lacking the cold permanence of the monument, but nevertheless having a kind of youthful immortality¹. The words remain, or can change as the facts or fictions behind them change. They can alter their appearance, or the space around them can shift as fast as the browser refreshes.

Writing a networked text is an excursion into aesthetic design as well as structural, for most networked texts are displayed graphically through browsers². The graphical space of a browser is filled with colors, with fonts, with images, with hyperlinks. The web-writer can use these formatting tools to emphasize or hide, to foster new associations between words and thoughts, and to help drive the reader along the path.

Font-face the music — Styling text functionally

Just as the careful script of an ancient scholar or the carefully designed type of the printing press provides information about a text, the web-writer can manipulate the look of a digital text to signify the function of those words; large text catches your eye, flashing text makes you look.

The size of a font is a visual shortcut to emphasize importance. Headlines and major themes are shouted in a large, heavy font; annotations and disclaimers are superscripted to act more as tests for the sharp-eyed. While not exclusively the domain of digital texts, the digital medium presents unique applications of the font size and shape, especially in the use of motion.

Technological solutions often create technological problems, however. When designing a networked text, the web-writer must consider the varied (and often incompatible) applications the reader may use to access that text. Online texts, for example, are typically read by a browser — Firefox, Opera and Internet Explorer are the most prevalent — which often display texts somewhat differently. While HTML is an almost universally understood programming language, each browser has a unique rendering of that code. These renderings may or may not be identical, so the web-writer must consider how multiple, varied interpretations of the source code affects the flow, the structure and the meaning of a webbed text.

Coloring for fun(ction) — Color considerations in textual context

Color is another effective tool for emphasizing the importance of text relative to either itself or to other texts. The web-writer can change the color of a text freely to stress or limit visual emphasis.

Similarly, the color of the page itself affects the reading of the text. A harsh, high-contrast page reads differently than a cool, low-contrast page. This can be an important distinction, depending on the function of the text. A lengthy piece of prose may benefit from a color that puts less strain on a reader's eye, while a short, punchy article can effectively employ the strong separation of the words and the background to attract attention to the message. Here, then, the function of the page informs the aesthetic design of the page.

Hyperlinks — No clever title necessary

Deceptively simple, hyperlinks are a means of connecting words or phrases together³. The links serve as navigational nodes between information, binding the pages of the text together.

Hyperlinks allows for an exchange of meaning between words through a shared connection. Primarily, the emphasis is placed on the word that carries the link, though the exchange is reciprocal by connotation.

Navigating hyperlinks can also alter the meaning of a word. Navigating through the links of a hypertext fiction like *afternoon, a fiction* by Michael Joyce a second time assigns a slightly different meaning to the original text based on where you've been since you first encountered it. This progressive navigation is problematic, of course, since the web-writer has very little control over how the networked text is traversed.

Hyperlinks also serve as visual markers of significance — the eye is drawn to the distinction in color, the possible path promised by the word. Here, color, style and functionality meet to perform the critical function of hypertext, that of the gateway between ideas.

Form fits function — Laying out a networked text

Structurally sound webbed texts reflect not just good programming but good planning, where the purpose of the page drives its design. Ads are flashy and catch your eye, an encyclopedia page clearly cross-references facts, a commercial site drives customers through checkout seamlessly, and a stock portfolio page concisely displays pertinent information⁴. Navigating the space should reinforce the message, or at least stay out of its way.

The web-writer has several considerations when designing and presenting a networked text — who the reader is, how the text will be read (both by application and reader-navigation), and where it will be stored, among them⁵. These considerations often present themselves as unknowns, and the web-writer must make assumptions when creating a networked text. The emergence of a viral distribution network (YouTube, for example) presents even more complications for the web-writer – context becomes even more crucial, and often absent.

Effective design can satisfy many of the unknowns. If a linear narrative is necessary, removing hyperlinks from the text can reduce the tendency of the reader to stray; similarly, opening links in a new browser window keeps the original page open so the reader can return to the path.

How the text appears on the page can affect reader response. The lower resolution of computer screens compared to print (72 dpi against 300 dpi, typically) makes the eye work harder to define characters, and less apt to capture and retain that information⁶. The web-writer must use short paragraphs, line breaks and white space to separate the words into manageable components.

Hyperlinks add another element to controlling the layout of a webbed text. They are guideposts along the path, demonstrating significant points of interest or showing the way. The web-writer can use hyperlinks to create both connections between words as well as navigational tools to suggest the direction the reader should take (or force it upon them).

Imag(in)e — The digital visual text

A digital text is a visual text⁷. Images can be placed next to a text to reinforce meaning or provide supplemental information (much like printed text), but motion can also be added to a digital text (movies, images or text that move across the page-space). The page-space becomes a canvas for not just text and images, but for anima, an endowment of the living.

Images can be linked to words to visualize an idea, another in a series of techniques to create, subvert or destroy meaningful connections between thoughts. That the media are different (an image, a text) creates opportunities to both highlight and destroy the distinction between them. Typing 'flower' gives the reader the chance to make an associative connection internally – some may visualize a daisy, others an orchid, still others a lily. Displaying a picture of a tulip, however, destroys the internalized creation of meaning. When linked together, 'flower' and the image of a tulip create an association and negate the grey space of interpretation.

New windows — Technological considerations on formatting

A link is only as good as where it takes you. Implicit in the action is the abandonment of the origination, the leaving of the path. Navigating back can be a difficult task, particularly when the link exists between separate sites (that is, between a blog and Wikipedia, for example)⁸.

When maintaining the origination is important, the web-writer can employ a technological solution by opening the link in a new window. The reader is directed to the new destination with a clear, ever-present (if minimized) path back to the origin.

Conversely, linking within the same window forces a reader down a more rigidly designed path. The web-writer can control the flow of the narrative, guiding the reader to the cognitive connection while reducing the ability of the reader to leave the message.

My god, it's full of holes — Problems and pitfalls along the path

Broad and meandering, blind and unkempt, the networked text is at once a backwoods trail and Madison Avenue, a path of carefully laid plans and dangerous distractions. One wrong click and the reader is lost, the message gone. Exploring the space creates possibilities for new connections but comes at the cost of the linear — boon and bane simultaneously to the web-writer.

Technology compounds the problem further. After all, digital texts require digital means of dissemination. Vast variation in applications to interpret digital data wreaks havoc on standards and challenges the web-writer to design with aggressive restraint. The design must incorporate not just code but time and space, as well — data exists momentarily (in the most literal of senses, at a particular time and place).

Writing a networked text, then, requires a focus on subject and context in a unique way, for the web writer must consider both how and when a reader may access the text.

Now, now, now — Problems of immediacy

Perhaps the most problematic feature of digital texts is that of immediacy. Momentary text is just that — a snapshot of particular circumstances. As the circumstances change — principally, time changes all things — so too may the text. This shift may be the result of static text in a dynamic context or changes to the text itself.

Digital text can be updated and redistributed easily. Revising a volume of a printed encyclopedia is expensive, resource-intensive, and untimely. A digital encyclopedia, however, can be updated quickly and with minimal impact to its users. So, not only does the text 'remain,' it can be 'refreshed' and kept constantly updated.

Consider the news story served digitally on the Internet. Updates to a text are made almost instantaneously as new facts emerge in a story. A printed medium issues multiple editions of a story by default, while digital distribution allows for altered versions of the same text⁹.

This fluidity is the creation of timeliness at the destruction of permanence. Tangibility implies a certain power in its physical presence — the object is here with undeniable certainty¹⁰. A simple refresh of the browser, though, may bring a different text, one which nevertheless remains ever current¹.

Again, consider the news story. In a mass-syndicated medium like print, millions of copies of a story are produced. The digital version of the story is served millions of times, but readily disappears — click a link and the data is essentially gone. To 'delete' the physical artifact of the newspaper requires concerted

effort — taking the paper to the recycling bin, taking the bin to the curb — while deleting the remnants of the digital data is often an automated (and invisible) script of the browser to conserve memory. As the digital text changes, then, the record of those changes is lost.

Context is a shifting entity as well. Situational changes — police catch a suspect, stock is reduced — often drive textual changes. Keeping up situationally, however, is compromised by the limits of technology, and chiefly by the complexities of producing and distributing the digital text. Certainly digital distribution allows for rapid distribution, but the process of preparing the text for release is mired in code, FTP transfers, network congestion and other particular technological concerns.

Demand for immediate access to data creates a tension with the ability of the web-writer to produce it. Any market related function, for example, operates most efficiently with accurate data about the conditions of the market — a retailer gauges demand for an item and adjusts the price accordingly, just as the consumer validates the availability of an item and determines the appropriate value of an item¹¹.

Clicking in circles — Frustrating endeavors in non-linearity

The web-writer faces a dilemma when creating a networked text — cohesion or flexibility? Any narrative requires a certain amount of linearity. But the power of a networked text lays in the ability to jump spatially as well as thematically. As the reader jumps, the path through the text becomes branched, or lost. Navigating back becomes more difficult the further away the reader drifts.

Maintaining the original argument, then, becomes a complicated endeavor, particularly in informational texts (an encyclopedia entry, an academic article), where cohesive thought is critical. Reducing the navigable paths can tighten the narrative flow, but only by eliminating connective possibilities. Thus the web-writer must balance the need for structured narrative with the functional implications of the network, as well as the reader's predilection.

Browser beware — Technological complications to making your shit look pretty

Non-standardized technology creates logistical problems for the web-writer — there is little hope that all of the text will display identically between varied users. Even a terse perusal of available word processors, for example, suggests the massive scope of variables to consider when producing the digital text.

Indeed, planning for the potential applications used to access digital texts is both principle to good design as well as nearly impossible. If visual structure or navigation functionality is essential to the text, standardized modes of access are critical¹². Forcing the reader to accept a standard is difficult however, as many may shun from the idea of loading new software to access a text. The web-writer must create a sense of value to a text to override the inconvenience of installing a unique application to access it.

The writer and the coder — Must the web-writer be a technologist?

The artist has long maintained a precarious distinction from the technician, despite significant overlap in their function [19]. However, digital texts are created through technology, which requires an interface between the author and the interpreter (the application).

While this interaction may exist within a graphically defined, user-tested environment, there is nevertheless a demand for technical competence by the author. To write simply in Word requires at least basic understanding of formatting and digital functionality (opening and saving a document, for example). Writing in HTML is even more demanding, as sometimes lengthy tags are required to do even simple

tasks of formatting and function. WYSIWYG¹³ programs offer some relief from the demands of coding every line of a digital text but at the expense of clean, efficient code.

The web-writer runs the risk of losing the message for the code, either in design or in production. While layout is a functional tool to present a digital text effectively, creating the code requires skills beyond those associated traditionally with the writer. Managing breaks and links, navigation and look is a crucial component of good digital design, but not necessarily inherent in a good writer. Digital technology further complicates these considerations by the means of inputting these formatting commands, often in incomprehensible tags like:

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"a href="/home.html" ONMOUSEOVER="home.src='/stash/button_home_inv.jpg"  
ONMOUSEOUT="home.src='/stash/button_home.jpg"."
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So, must the web-writer be a technologist? Ultimately, the answer is a frustrating 'kind of' — digital texts require at least a basic literacy in technology by their very nature. While a web-writer can create digital texts through 'user-friendly' programs, understanding at least the special circumstances of digital writing is necessary, if not the skeleton holding it together.

The webbed-text — Rethinking digital writing

We can say, then, that the networked text is and is not like other texts. It shares certain didactic similarities with what we think of as a text proper — it is structured around an argument or central claim (or many), it uses associative connections between ideas to describe that claim, and it requires a participant (reader) to navigate the text. Already, though, the very grammar we describe here shows the distinctions inherent in a webbed-text. Structurally, the networked text is both more loosely defined and more precisely preformed than the classical model of a text — it is defined explicitly by its structure (the links that make up the nodal points of the text), though those links may take readers far from the apparent claim of the text; similarly, these meandering links must, by necessity, provide a structure to the text which may or may not be intentional, and cannot be clearly defined in advance. While the web-writer strives to provide coherence within the text, the reader performs the text at their discretion (or not at all). This is the defining characteristic of the networked text: it is a performed text. It is in this very performance that the power of possibility becomes most apparent, where the webbed-text is at once a liberating experiential artifact and a fiercely rebellious endeavor in articulation and argumentation.

[1] A digital text remains only as long as a system is serving it. Online texts, for example, reside in code stored on a hard drive distributed electronically via the Internet. Other texts (such as application data stored on a CD/DVD/flash memory) are 'served' through their respective medium and displayed by an appropriate application. Either form suggests both the limitations of the physical medium (the hard drive on the server or the DVD may fail) and the power of digitally stored data (digital data is far easier to duplicate and redistribute than hieroglyphics, or even a printed book). While a physical medium may be destroyed, digital propagation allows for easy mass-distribution. Therefore, digital texts can, theoretical, live forever.

Even more importantly, the digital text can be updated and redistributed easily. Revising a volume of a printed encyclopedia is expensive, resource-intensive, and untimely. A digital encyclopedia, however, can be updated quickly and with minimal impact to its users. So, not only does the text 'remain' almost indefinitely, it can be 'refreshed' and kept constantly updated.

[2] There are non-digital ways of producing a 'networked text' — such as the memex — that I will ignore for the sake of simplicity in this paper. I refer to a networked or webbed text as a digital text.

[3] This is truly a topic that requires an extensive dialogue to address even inadequately, so I'll clear the air here and state, unequivocally, that my definition of hypertext is limited. In this dialogue, I confine 'hypertext' to text itself and not other media (images, music, et al.), unless otherwise noted.

[4] I speak here of ideal texts. The Internet abounds in counter-examples, of course.

[5] While these are not exactly unique considerations to a web-writer, they are far more difficult to control. A printed book should be reproduced identically unless otherwise designed (large-print books, for example). But a webpage loaded by Firefox will look slightly (or radically) different than one loaded by Opera. So these uncertainties are compounded by non-standardized digital technology.

[6] Multiple studies (Nielsen among them) have demonstrated this matter. Indeed, simple mathematics and deductive reasoning would back this assertion.

[7] I concede that all texts are inherently visual texts. However, a unique distinction can be made for the way in which visualization can affect the digital text (primarily through motion) compared to a traditional 'print' text.

[8] There is, of course, the 'back' button on most browsers, but good design eliminates this need when maintaining the origination is important.

[9] This, of course, begs for an examination of whether this is exactly the same text, which I won't be making here. I'll settle for a firm fence-sitting and say it's a version of a single text.

[10] To paraphrase one much smarter than I, reality is that which does not disappear when ignored. A train still kills if you stand on the tracks with your eyes closed.

[11] As with many of the arguments herein, I am considering optimal conditions. Sellers also want to maximize their profit so can create the appearance of limited availability, clouding the waters and creating an artificial market, for example.

[12] There are several means of attempting to meet standardized distribution of a digital text. The text may be written in such a way that a ubiquitous application is used to display it (Java or Flash, for example), or a single, sometimes proprietary, application may be required to access the text (Amazon's proprietary media player).

[13] What You See Is What You Get (WYSIWYG) is literally that — a way of visually designing a space without having to code every line. WYSIWYG programs are notorious for making ugly, poorly-designed code. While this is acceptable for small applications for HTML (a personal website, a simple structure or layout), it is far from ideal.