

A Threat To The Known: The Unknown Descendants Of The Bounded Text

Hypertext fiction, a popular form of electronic literature, embraces the margins which experimental authors like Italo Calvino, Lawrence Sterne, and Milorad Pavic explored in fresh and avant garde forms. There is no fixed center or boundaries in hypertext fiction. Hypertext fiction raises many questions about literature that can be examined more carefully through a reader's discourse with the genre. An important distinction between print and electronic literature is that electronic literature, is 'digital born' and “usually meant to be read on a computer” unlike print literature that has been adapted to the computer such as the Project Gutenberg website (Hayles 3). For this discussion, the most suitable definition comes from Matthew Kirschenbaum, who defines electronic literature as “Poetry, fiction, or other literary work that depends on the distinctive behavioral, visual, or material properties of computers, computer networks, and code for its composition, execution, and reception” (What is Electronic Literature?).

In the preface to the second edition of Terry Eagleton's very influential *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, he announces that his book wants to make “modern literary theory intelligible and attractive to as wide a readership as possible.” (vii) Theorists like George Landow and authors like The Unknown Collective, according to Nikolaj Fournaise Jensen, have tried to make hypertext fiction accessible to both the expert and layman. Jensen argues in his own work that a goal for electronic literature should be to design their work so that it can be accessible and alluring for a more mainstream audience. Eagleton notes the very complex changes that have occurred in how literature is defined in the last half century. New criticism, structuralism, post structuralism, deconstruction, and other theories have come along to keep literature's definition

in a state of constant fluidity. The examination of electronic literature further continues this discourse through its association by Landow and others, whether deserved or not, with deconstruction and theorists like Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. I find myself in agreement with most of what Eagleton defines as literature and believe hypertext fiction also fulfills these qualities. Hypertext fiction uses language in very “peculiar ways” and moves away from common language through hyperlinked lexias and other electronic mediums that take language into a new space for examination and exploration (2). The two primary works of hypertext fiction I will be focusing on certainly fulfill Eagleton's concept. The Unknown Collective's *The Unknown* uses the trope of a fictional book tour to explore both fictional and theoretical issues. Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves Of Girls* explores feminist and queer concerns by using a memoir of the protagonist's sexual coming of age for readers to read and click through.

The epistolary novel *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker, defies the conventional approach which many of his contemporaries took by emphasizing the points of view of several protagonists, creating a more fluid, nonlinear, world. *Dracula* switches between letters, journals, and other forms of communication in ways which often mimic hypertext fiction. Point of view also switches between the protagonists in a variety of settings. The protagonists of *Dracula* are almost defeated by their adversary in part due to their lack of access to their companion's correspondence at all times.

Depending on how the reader engaging with a work of hypertext fiction, each visit births a new version of the text. *Dracula* itself is already an unruly, nonlinear, novel whose attributes can only be emphasized by hypertext. When I began reading hypertext fiction about five years

ago, I found myself drawn to details I would not have followed or noticed previously in a bounded text. Not only did this greatly accelerate my learning curve when engaging with electronic literature, but the way I read novels in print also evolved. Hypertext fiction is simply another, newer, technology for reading and writing. Neither print nor electronic literature is better or worse or weirder. Each is unique, wonderful, and engaging. Hypertext breathes new life into print literature, becoming an interactive environment where reader agency, not just passive holding of a book, is emphasized. Linearity need not be staked by some sort of Codex Slayer, but just made into another potential option for literature. The discourse about past print literature can only be enriched by looking at it through electronic literature's lenses.

Stoker's recently canonical Victorian novel *Dracula* is presented to the reader via character diaries, telegrams and letters between various protagonists, and newspaper clippings and other forms of contemporary media like journal entries. Instead of approaching the epistolary novel as his contemporaries often did Stoker changes the narrative form, creating a more fluid, nonlinear, world. *Dracula* offers an interesting narrative premise: there are several first person perspectives and no central narrator. As soon as the reader is comfortable with one perspective, the narrative shifts to another narrator and, often, time or form. This switch can be rather jarring as the novel moves between journals, letters, and telegraphs and moves backwards and forwards through a given set of months. The switching between perspectives also allows for different versions of the same events to rise to the surface of the narrative world. Readers are not stuck with one version of an event because they are seeing in real time what the characters do not. Their lack of access of everyone else's journals and letters does not allow them to come to conclusions about the horrors which they face until much after the reader most likely has

done.

The character's analysis is always a step behind the narrative, struggling to keep up with the real time progression which the story's arc takes. It isn't until Van Helsing appears to offer answers, which readers have likely concluded long beforehand, that the characters catch up with the narrative's progression. Careful readers will have figured out a lot of what is going on in the novel, especially one hundred years hence, but even the best close reader cannot create a fully realized, coherent, narrative world to emerge from their reading. The restrictions of the bounded text restrict readers to a self contained reading which cannot encompass the entire world. Unless a reader is willing to plot out the narrative in both chronological order and empirical information, a print copy of *Dracula* cannot suffice. As the characters in the novel are held back by their lack of coordinated real time information, the bounded text version of it also restricts readers. A more fully realized hypertext adaptation allows a more subtle, layered, narrative world to emerge. By adapting Stoker's novel to hypertext, the contents of his Gothic world can fully thrive and come alive.

If I was to adapt *Dracula* for a hypertext edition, Canadian author Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves Of Girls* would be a good template for how I would proceed. *These Waves Of Girls* is a work of lesbian fiction which chronicles the sexual evolution of, presumably, the narrator. It is written as a memoir, taking place in multiple time periods. After a graphical splash screen, *These Waves Of Girls* opens on the screen in a table of contents filled with boxed phrases wove together. The clickable phrases "kissing girls," "school tales," "I want her," "city," "country," "she was warned," "dare," and "her collections," open brief excerpts from the opening of that portion of *These Waves Of Girls* when toggled over with the cursor. *Dracula* could be organized

in a similar manner. The table of contents would include the various forms included in the novel: journals, letters, diaries, and other miscellaneous forms that don't fall under those headings. Further, the contents of the novel could be broken down by character. Under, hypothetically, a "journal" heading Jonathan Harker's journal would be linked alongside Mina Murray.

Hyper linking between different lexias could be done in a number of interesting ways, but using the organization of these links to engage with the fluidity of Stoker's already nonlinear novel. The way in which a novel can be a partial representation of a larger world, with separate links to different versions or time frames of a specific event, can bring the discontinuity of the novel to the surface for further examination by a reader or classroom. A lexia from Mina Murray's journal entry for August 6<sup>th</sup> is ripe for linking. If I was adapting *Dracula*, "heard a word" would link to the letter only three days, but some twenty pages, later from Sister Agatha to Mina updating her on his condition (97). The words "last letter" could link back to Jonathan's previous letter from Transylvania. Steering the reader in a different direction, "Lucy is more excitable" could direct readers a little further in Mina's journal to her entry from August 11<sup>th</sup>, where she documents Lucy's night walking and fits (89).

In a bounded text like *Dracula*, ultimately, despite the interesting choice of structure and form which Stoker uses, as a reader I find the novel very disappointing because the ordering and form does not assist me in envisioning the narrative. However, when I consider the agency given to readers of hypertext fiction, a coherent world forms as I click and choose which lexia to proceed to next in my mind's eye. In *These Waves Of Girls*, after clicking on a link in the table of contents, the reader is brought to a multiframe page with text, links, and a sidebar of links to

other parts of the work. Readers clicking on “I want her” readers are given the previously cited paragraph plus one more, with hyperlinks sending them in other directions entirely. On the sidebar, a number of links are included: “Butterfly,” “tell,” “watching,” “camp,” “Barbie,” and “Vanessa,” which direct the reader to lexias with similar topical writing about the narrator's attraction to a number of different females during her sexual development (want.htm). Clicking on the hyperlinked “Barbie was a bad girl, but she wasn't punished unless she wanted to be” further down the screen leads back to “school,” which includes some of the links from the table of contents, and a number of links built into the sidebar within that frame, including some of those from the previous sidebar (school.htm).

*Dracula* could be adapted in a similar manner. The previously mentioned “Lucy is more excitable,” linking to Mina's journal entry from August 11<sup>th</sup>, could have a sidebar frame of links to further examples of Lucy's ever growing stranger behavior. A few examples of this could be Lucy's letter to Mina from May 24<sup>th</sup>, where she discusses the three proposals, and Lucy's journal from September 29<sup>th</sup>, where she mentions the flowers in her room and references a similar scene involving Ophelia from *Hamlet*. That lexia could then link to a new sidebar within the frame that would bring the reader back to the larger text, and perhaps a link to criticism connecting the novel to the play, and onto other matters in the novel.

This is the kind of close reading which can be done with electronic literature. Readers are given more agency to interact with a narrative world which is never the same for any two readers. The idea that the words in a bounded novel form some sort of coherent world is a hindering facade that disallows the evolution of reader responses to literature. The deterrence I feel, as a reader, from the structure of *Dracula* goes away when I envision it as a work of

hypertext fiction. The bounded text version becomes hostile to my close reading of the text, something not to be trusted as it is, but something which can be torn apart and reconstructed in a manner that makes Stoker's novel truly thrive.

The Unknown Collective's award winning 2001 hypertext novel *The Unknown*, is primarily link based, presenting the story of a fictional book tour to the reader. The plot is based around a fictional book tour the members of the Unknown Collective go on, mostly in America but with stops in Canada and Europe as well, to promote their book *The Anthology of The Unknown*. Quickly the tour deteriorates into plot deviations involving drug use, meeting various famous postmodern authors, physic cult leaders, and resurrection via alien technology. *The Unknown* offers readers numerous paths from which to engage with the text. From the opening screen a number of links are available to advance the narrative (/unknown.htm). The introductory quote from Thomas Pynchon has two links which readers can click on to continue. There are multiple alternatives present for readers to click on. If a reader clicks on the “Thomas Pynchon” link they are led to a longer piece about The Unknown Collective attending a barbecue in Connecticut with Pynchon and Don DeLillo (/east.htm). From there a number of lexias on the screen offer different paths to proliferate and fork through the rest of the novel. With numerous alternatives in front of her, the reader might perhaps come back around to, “mental map,” the other link in the Pynchon quote or never encounter it at all until another session where they, instead of choosing the Pynchon link, decide to engage with “mental map” instead.

In *Dracula*, modern readers surely will be able to piece together what is happening much quicker than the protagonists, who do not have the same privileged access to what is happening

to the others. In a work like *The Unknown*, new readers of electronic literature may have problems engaging with the decidedly nonlinear structure of modern hypertexts. Problems with navigation can become accelerated by the pseudo crippling of previous rules and borders. Some, such as Jensen, argue that readers already participate in texts nonlinearly, what Barthes refers to as “tmesis,” by skipping around. The bounded text is a truly random access device, no one will argue.

While finding a precise passage in a piece of hypertext fiction maybe more difficult on the surface, *The Unknown* offers lexias with mapped links for all the links in their work. To defy the lack of random access, each lexia has a hyperlink to a large map of the United States where readers can access different portions of the novel (</maps.htm>). For example, readers who were curious about The Unknown Collective's adventures in the northeast, after reading about the barbecue with Pynchon, could click on hyperlinks for New York, Maine, or Boston to further engage with the region. Clicking on the hyperlink that hovers over New York leads the reader to a lexia where The Unknown Collective documents their first trip to New York City.

The best close reader of a novel like *Dracula* will still be unable to create a complete narrative world from their reading. Hypertext novels like *The Unknown* expand the horizons of close reading to encompass the entire world. The vast layers of the subtle, fully rendered narrative world emerge when engaging with hypertext fiction in ways that the bounded text restricts. The world in which *The Unknown* takes place is immersive and very personalized as the reader clicks their way through, changing directions via the map or by clicking on links which take them to another portion of the work.

New readers of hypertext fiction often ask how someone will know if they are “finished”



reading. In hypertext fiction, readers are allowed a significant amount of agency to peel those layers away further in order to dig deeper into the narrative world. The nonlinear shifts in *The Unknown* are a good reminder of the agency hypertext fiction gives readers in order to further investigate the text. *Dracula* is an extremely incoherent novel, rather ripe for a hypertext adaptation. *The Unknown's* world defies the idea that novels offer closure to readers.

In the classroom, the coexistence of any number of combinations of clicks from just a single lexia easily coexists because there is a potential for all of the others. This fluidity allows each student to close read in the manner of their choosing. The crossover between their choices creates a larger narrative world in the collective mind's eye of the classroom. *Dracula's* constrained form disallows the individualized engagement that lets hypertext fiction thrive for readers. This facade hinders reader agency and the further evolution of how they respond to literature. Print is not something I can trust on its own. Hypertext fiction tears apart print facades and reconstructs writing in a manner where it can truly thrive.

Clicking around a series of hyperlinked lexias allows a plot to unfold in numerous ways according to how the reader progresses. This personalized “writing” of the text defies and transgresses the author's intentions, perhaps, or their rules for the work. It can also cause difficulty for the reader. Jill Walker-Rettberg notes her early experiences with hypertext, in *Piecing Together and Tearing Apart: Finding The Story In Afternoon*, left her “click(ing) (her) mouse haphazardly on any old word” before giving up on the text for a number of months (1). She quickly discovered that there was a “default” path which could be followed if the reader pressed enter after reading each lexia instead of clicking on a specifically linked word.

Forty years after deconstruction's emergence, the transition to acceptance of hypertext

and electronic literature has not and still will not happen overnight. Linear texts have beginnings, middles, and ends. This established culture normality is a tough monster to slay. The transition from manuscript to print culture suggests a lesson for the transition to electronic texts and acceptance of hypertext: it is going to take a long time. Print technology didn't change Europe from oral to print countries until around 1700. Still, even at that point, most people who could read could not sign their own names.

The resistance some academics and many readers have towards hypertext fiction and electronic literature in general should not be surprising given the slow reception of previously uncanonized literature like many of the novels written by women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which were not included in academic study until the 1970's. As Landow writes in the 1992 version of *Hypertext*, whenever new technology comes along they “only oppose the newest machines, not machines in general” since theirs have already been accepted and canonized (168). Jackson comments to Rettberg in an interview, in regards to her own multidisciplinary, cross cultural, work that print culture “is no less ignorant of that tradition, and dismisses canon-breaking work as either pretentious esoterica or as falling outside the category of literature all together.” (2)

For people like me who feel that this process is moving too slowly, it is important to take a step back and think about the pragmatic concerns involved with the humanities. A collapsing economy, decreased budgets for literature programs, and the insecurity of the tenure process are likely factors for electronic literature not finding its way into mainstream thought any time soon. The government will not be coming along to bail out literature departments to help them add classes to their schedules.

I do not feel that electronic literature's role as a descendant of the bounded text requires it

to replace print culture completely. I will be clear: in no way or shape do I believe print culture is a relic that needs to be destroyed. Whether adherents to print culture take seriously or believe in the tenants of electronic literature, they must make space for it. As Joseph Raben writes in *Tenure, Promotion, and Digital Publication*, Google's plan to scan the archives of major universities will leave "very few reasons" for print journals to be considered superior to an online database like JSTOR or the one Google is creating. The growth of scholarly journals like *Digital Humanities Quarterly* are also making it harder for electronically housed information to be further ignored or discredited. The problem is, as Raben argues, mainstream academia might not be eager to change a system that has worked decently so far. That is understandable, especially since the acceptance of not only electronic literature but digitally based scholarship has been slow so far. Raben points to a recent MLA newsletter, which reported that approximately forty percent of schools that offered doctoral programs had zero experience evaluated articles electronically (2).

Electronic literature is still an extremely young field in comparison to print culture. Determining what direction electronic literature should go proves especially difficult given the new directions, new potentials, of the genre that grow and evolve everyday. The intellectual promiscuity of electronic literature makes it very hard to nail down and categorize. The questions and theories I have posed hopefully have compelled the reader to question how they come to understand what is and is not literature. The fear of losing the stability of print based literature can cause an ontological crisis that brings into question everything around the reader. I know it did for me. As electronic literature expands and grows, this debate is nowhere near its extinction. This is not the end, it is only the beginning.