

- Our presentation is titled "What Is A Text? A Political History Of Texts From Gutenberg To Electronic Literature & Beyond"
- Although I agree with Simon Denith that "dictionaries are the graveyard of language," it is important to define our terms here. The key terms for this presentation are "text," "hypertext," and "electronic literature."
- These definitions were carefully chosen by Toni & I, but it is important to note that they are "always in a ceaseless flow of becoming," as Bakhtin wrote in *Marxism & The Philosophy of Language*
- In *The Death Of The Author*, Roland Barthes defines a text as

a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash

- According to the University of Maryland's Matthew Kirschenbaum, electronic literature can be defined 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.

- The term Hypertext is coined in 1965 by Ted Nelson. By hypertext, "he means non-sequential writing--text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways" Hypertext denotes text composed of blocks of text, what Barthes refers to as a *lexia*, and the electronic links that join them
- Nelson's original conceptualization of hypertext involved a "system of interconnected writing persistent but open to constant expansion." Nelson's system was limited due to the centralized nature of the technology he imagined. Hypertext and the World Wide Web are more successful because of their ability to constantly evolve and adapt. Hypertext, specifically electronic literature, is constantly morphing and growing as technology changes alongside of it.
- ...two years later, in 1967, Julia Kristeva coins the term Intertextuality...the relationship between critical theory and hypertext theory has been discussed in numerous papers, books, and conferences over the past few decades. I would point to George Landow's *Hypertext 2.0* for more detailed background on the convergence of CT and HT. It should be pointed out here that while

there is a lot of crossing between CT and HT, as Landow, Jill-Walker-Rettberg, and others note they are not one and the same. More on that in a few minutes.

- Something that sets the bounded text apart from hypertext is the fact that it has had a LOT more time to evolve as a technology
- And that is what the bounded text is: a piece of technology that has evolved and been refined over hundreds of years. Like pens, pencils, and printing presses it is not a so called "natural" or "normal" form for reading.
- Electronic literature, hypertext, etc is another form of technology for reading. Neither type of text, whether bound or linked is better or worse or weirder. Each has their own unique and wonderful constraints and capacities for use.
- Landow argues that electronic literature is a direct response to the strengths and weaknesses of the bounded text. Systems based on center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity must be replaced with multi-linearity, nodes, links, and networks.
- Since writing and printing was invented, information technology has concentrated on creating unchanged records of language. The rise of Gutenberg allowed multiple copies, multiple readings to be done by readers.
- But leaving information in a fixed, linear, format does make information retrieval more difficult. Print has evolved though through pagination, bibliographies, and my personal favorite, the index.
- Hypertext is an evolution of, and just as radical as, Gutenberg's moveable type, what Baudrillard calls "the shift from the tactile to the digital" and produces electronic text which "combines fixity and flexibility, order and accesibility"
- In 1974, Nelson insists that ordinary people need to have access to personal computers. Thirty years before, in an essay for [The Atlantic](#), Vannevar Bush also argues for this.
- Electronic literature, specifically hypertext, decentralizes the text and moves it towards Barthes' writerly text and a more personalized, democratic process. But this evolution is still in progress and has

taken thirty or forty years to get where we are....seventy if you trace back to Bush...

- A brief history of Preweb hypertext authoring systems: The first PC's are available in the late seventies and early eighties...systems to create hypertext at home did not come until the late eighties...GUIDE was followed by Hypercard and then Storyspace. As Walker points out, Tinderbox is the most recent system to follow in both Bush and Nelson's footsteps and has recently, as in...earlier this month...been highly praised by Nelson as an example of a system doing just that. I can point people in the direction of more articles on the FASCINATING world of preweb hypertext authoring systems if they want.
- Distribution of literary hypertext before the World Wide Web still shared many of the characteristics of the bounded text. Like a copy of Sorrentino's *Aberration of Starlight* in paperback, a CD-Rom of Shelley Jackson's *Patch Work Girl* still restricted readers to a "sustained reading of a self-contained work"
- Hypertext author and theorist Michael Joyce's created terms to denote the difference between preweb and web hypertext: "exploratory" and "constructive" hypertexts.
- Exploratory hypertext, like Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and Joyce's own *Afternoon*, is more in line with the "output" we are so used to from contemporary book culture.
- The rise of cheaper personal computers and the World Wide Web began to allow anyone with an Internet account to publish on the web, link, and be linked to. This led to what Walker refers to as "feral hypertext," hypertext that is "no longer tame and domesticated." Hypertext is very unruly and rather disobedient!
- As Walker points out, literary hypertext that has gone, in her words, "feral" demands of the reader "to accept structures that are neither predefined nor clearly bounded." Collaboratively written works like [The Unknown](#), digital poetry like Megan Sapnar and Ingrid Ankersen's [Cruising](#) defy the boundaries of the bounded text. An interactive memoir like Caitlin Fisher's [These Waves Of Girls](#) is an unruly and rather untamed account of growing up told with audio and visual links. After making sure to note that Landow and others have pointed out the differences between critical theory and hypertext theory while pointing out their similarities, Walker expresses the idea, which I strongly agree with, that theorists involved with critical theory and intertextuality are already arguing that texts are unruly and extremely

disobedient. Literary hypertext on the World Wide Web is an evolution of the writerly text and emphasizes intertextuality in ways that the bounded text cannot. Hypertext that is feral is, as I see it, an interactive expression of the writing of the work on authorship and intertextuality of theorists like Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes.

- Hypertext does not allow a "tyrannical, univocal, voice" to arise. Thais Morgan suggests a shift of attention from author/work/tradition to text/discourse/culture. The voice always comes from that moment, that lexia's continually shifting meaning during a reader's path. The rest of the text is only a few clicks of a mouse away for reference...like Borges' Aleph...points in space which contain all other points...
- The limitations of humanity will never truly allow the text to be completely free however. As Foucault smartly argues in his penultimate concluding paragraph to *What Is An Author?*, this would be "pure romanticism." But that is humanity's design flaw, not the texts.
- The move away from a centralized, author based, text is a threat to capitalistic concerns, which desires disposable, throwaway, literature and thought. A book reread, reexamined is one less sold.
- Authorship is the culmination of capitalistic ideology which treats authors as Special and Very Important People. This kind of capitalistic tyranny wants to unite the author with their work and make them insuperable.
- As Toni will discuss further, the transition to acceptance of hypertext and electronic literature does not and will not happen overnight:
- Final thought: According to Alvin Kernan, the transition from manuscript to print culture suggests a lesson for the transition to electronic texts and to an acceptance of hypertext: It is going to take a long time. As Kernan notes, it wasn't until approx 1700 that print technology changed European society from oral to print countries. And still, even most people who could read could not sign their own name.

Then Toni talks! Hooray!

- William and I are collaborating in the community building spirit of the conference and other department events, but also because I bring a different perspective to this discussion of electronic literature. As an "outsider" to electronic literature, I want to share how other materials we have all been studying and discussing relate to electronic literature.
- While the list is endless, the things that I want to make connections to today are literary studies of technology, reader-response and reception theory and cultural studies.
- In studying the democritization of print, Michael Warner, in *The Cultural Mediation of the Print Medium*, writes that "the change in print can not be explained as the expression of the individual and the people. Instead it would signal a broad change in social and cultural systems" and that there is a "reciprocal determination...between a medium and its politics." In examining the matrix of the medium and the metapolitics of the speech within it, Warner offers distinct clues as to one valuable approach to electronic literature. Faced, again, with a new medium, with a new matrix, it is time to endeavor on new analyses. Of course, Warner is hardly an isolated renegade in studies of print; from David Hall's *Readers and Reading in America* to Patrick Bratlinger's *The Reading Lesson* and Cathy Davidson's *Revolution and The World*, mediums, platforms, attitudes towards reading and the function of texts continues to evolve historically as well as in academic study. Applying these methods of inquiry to electronic literature is only a further extension of the important work already being done in the field.
- In terms of narrative theory, Ian Watt's seminal book, *The Rise of the Novel*, he, like Warner, includes an entire chapter detailing how changes in the reading public, printing, marketing and distribution simultaneously form and inform both novelist's aims and reader expectations. Thus, if we consider Bahktin's theory of the ever-evolving, cannibalizing genre of novel and incorporate reception

theory, we can see that formal changes and expanded media, from online hypertext novels to further distributed narratives which employ a variety of platforms, can and do change interpretative communities and alter the horizon of expectations of audiences.

- Like all forms and genres, electronic literature takes specific training and experience to read. As Kirshenbaum's definition explains, this literature "depends on the distinctive behavioral, visual, or material properties of computers, computer networks, and code for its composition, execution and reception." While this might seem scary at first glance, this is just another, further step, in the evolution of literature and literary study. An example that I am dealing with in my own work at present is the critical reception of fiction written by women in America in the 19th century. As many of you will know and probably either disdain or applaud, most popular fiction at this time was written by women and until the 1970's was not included in academic study. In Susan K. Harris' important study, *Nineteenth Century American Womens' Novels: Interpretive Strategies*, she utilized the journals and letters of contemporary readers to illustrate the various "levels" upon which reading was executed. She further uses these levels to analyze women's fiction and advocates this method for further study. Along with Harris' work, Jane Tompkins' seminal *Sensational Designs* effectively illustrates the multifaceted process of critical acceptance. In relation to electronic literature, then, it seems obvious to me that the resistance to electronic literature is not at all surprising but will eventually be overcome through new levels of reading and the formation of new interpretative communities.
- For those, ahem, for whom this process is moving too slowly (wink, wink, nudge, nudge) it is certainly unfortunate, but beyond mere idealism there are always pragmatic concerns. With decreasing budgets and masses of educated scholars without secure positions, it is unlikely that electronic literature will find its way into the

mainstream any time soon. Ideally, I would love to have encountered electronic literature and Jill Walker's writing about distributed narrative in survey theory and novel courses, but considering that scholars must be highly specialized to be successful and are of course over-worked and underpaid as it is, it is not surprising that these new and vital mediums and ideas are trapped below the radar. Keeping up with one's own field of specialization is hard enough, to keep up with the discipline as a whole is impossible.

- Still, when I read Franco Moretti claiming that the intellectuals are always a few steps ahead of the masses, it's a little frustrating. It may have that moment of comfort given by a Leavisite perspective, but it is not ultimately productive. It is still a way of maintaining a false sense of superiority and security and the same mechanism that for over one hundred years claimed that popular women's fiction was not worth critical attention. Beyond the pragmatic concerns and the obvious fact that we simply can not include "everything" there is still an elitist notion and irrational fear that confronts scholars of electronic literature. I hope that through continued discussion and intervention critical communities will understand that electronic literature is not a break from traditional standards and methods, but simply a new branch.