

# BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE

The Challenges of Building Interactive Narratives (Part 2)



From Adrienne Wortzel's "Electronic Chronicles": reconstitution of the "Twin Lions Building," located at the epicenter of the bedrock island known as Man-Hat-10.

Sites reviewed in this article:

[Hyperizons](#)

[NowTV Murder Mysteries](#)

[Mercury](#)

[huhebi:the self-organizing island of information](#)

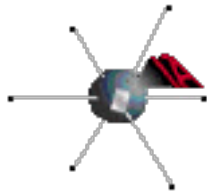
[Electronic Chronicles](#)

[Trip](#)

The comparison of interactive narratives to a wooden house burning in reverse rather

than a house built of bricks hints at certain challenges involved in the construction of interactive fiction: there is a lack of the master plan that a brick-by-brick construction of a house requires; and the metaphor of a house burning in reverse [see end of Part 1 in our July/August issue] points to a certain de(con)struction of narrative causality, logic, and time.

Interactive narratives are composed of segments, which are linked electronically by multiple paths and allow manifold combinations. The author creates a "map" of the story with alternate paths and various options; the reader chooses routes and thus creates an individual version of the narrative. Since the reading process is nonsequential, authors cannot accurately predict which path readers will follow (or if they can follow at all). Readers change the story not only through their individual interpretive biases, but choose links, and thus actively influence the sequence of text segments or even words. They may return to a segment of the story they have read before and follow a link leading to an entirely different narrative strand than the one they have encountered during their previous reading. Reading a printed text for a second time, readers may arrive at a different interpretation without the text changing at all, but readers of interactive narratives probably won't even read the same story twice. Due to the changing order of narrative elements, interactive narratives challenge readers to reconsider their expectations and interpretations in a more radical way than the linearity of the print medium does. Readers are aware that they may encounter the same segment in entirely different contexts and that they are reading only one of many possible versions of the story.



### **Hyperizons**

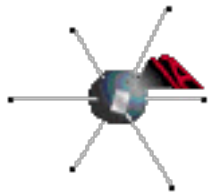
During the past decade, interactive fiction has established itself as a genre. An excellent gateway to interactive narratives or hyperfictions on the Web is **Hyperizons** (<http://www.duke.edu/~mshumate/hyperfic.html>), maintained by **Michael Shumate**. "Hyperizons" is an inclusive, annotated bibliography that lists interactive fictions both on the Web and published on diskette, as well as theory and criticism on hyperfiction.

As a genre, interactive fiction is by no means unified: the narratives may have been created by multiple authors or an individual one; they may be text-based or combine text and graphics and their structure differs radically. Among the projects that have been created by multiple authors and are open to contribution by visitors are **David Blair's Waxweb** (<http://bug.village.virginia.edu/>) and **The Hypertext Hotel** (<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/hypertext/landow/HTatBrown/hotelmoo.html>), a project begun by **Robert Coover** at **Brown University** several years ago. At

the latter site, all elected members of the "Board of Directors" may read, write, and sleep at the hotel, moving in wherever they feel most comfortable.

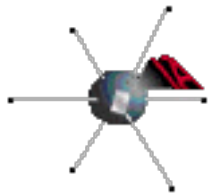
There are some "basic" structures of interactive fiction, and most of the narratives are hybrids combining a variety of these structural elements. A hierarchical hyperfiction usually starts with a specific scene and then branches out--or rather down--according to the reader's selections; the structure is uni-directional, which means that the reader has to go back to a previous page in order to follow a different link, so that the movement is backward or forward, up and down the hierarchy. The term 'hierarchical hyperfictions' certainly is paradoxical, and the narratives based on this structure seldom succeed in exploring the possibilities the medium offers. Hyperfictions with a network structure consist of various narrative nodes that are all interconnected, so that the story branches out with many paths to follow. In an interactive fiction with a parallel structure, two or more stories unfold concurrently, and characters or objects are used as the 'linking element' between these stories.

Whether the structure of an interactive narrative is hierarchical, parallel or consists of a network, depends on the methods of linking that are used and thus on the options of navigation that are offered to the reader.



### **NowTV Murder Mysteries**

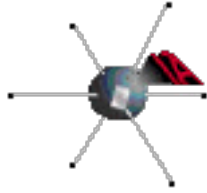
The website **NowTV Murder Mysteries** (<http://NowTV.com/>) for example, consists of murder mystery games such as "The Dead Client" (with VDOLive video and MIDI music) and "Natasha's Mystery," which present readers with a set of questions they may choose and "ask." "Natasha's Mystery" is based on the premise "An attractive young woman walks into your office..." The woman introduces herself as Natasha Polmakova and, of course, you ask her if you can be of any help. Lowering her head slightly, she says softly, "I hope so, I am in some difficulty." Now you select a response: "What sort of difficulty, Miss Polmakova?"/ "What sort of difficulty, Natasha?"/ "How can I get in touch with you?" In the tradition of the choose-your-own-adventure genre, the narrative options offered by these questions tend to be rather limited and the questions themselves are repetitive.



### **Mercury**

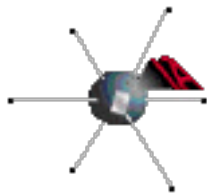
An example of an interactive narrative with a network structure is **Michael Benedetti's Mercury**

(<http://www.ugcs.caltech.edu/~benedett/lit/>), a short story with record-breaking link density. Virtually every word on the approximately 35 pages to read is linked. Amazingly enough, the story still manages to keep you interested--depending on your willingness to make creative efforts, of course.



### **huhebi**

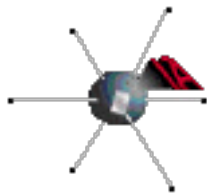
Another hyperfiction with a lot of link density is **Chung-chieh Shan's huhebi: the self-organizing island of information**--a reflection on the construction of a story rather than a narrative.



### **Electronic Chronicles**

In the same spirit, but on a far more ambitious and elaborate level, **Adrianne Wortzel's Electronic Chronicles**

(<http://artnetweb.com/artnetweb/projects/ahneed/first.html>) explore the nature of decoding and deconstructing text in our electronic civilization. The "Electronic Chronicles" in question are a series of electronic records documenting the (lost) civilization of the "Blue Planet Wizards." The wizards encrypted and compressed these documents long ago and placed them in a cornerstone of "The Twin Lions Building." The "Electronic Chronicles" website is dedicated to a fictional future scenario--the research work of the "Casaba Melon Institute," whose team of scientists, engineers, artists, anthropologists and archaeologists unearthed the chronicles and is now engaged in a "real-time unraveling of the mystery of an otherwise obscure and enigmatic civilization." Wortzel's "Electronic Chronicles" satirize our electronic era in a brilliant, idiosyncratic way that is always entertaining and never fails to surprise.

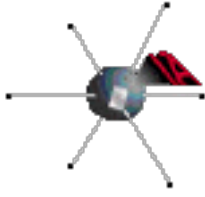


If one compares the hyperfictions created in HTML and those created in hypertext writing software, there seem to be major differences in terms of the options of linking; most of the offline hyperfictions listed at "Hyperizons" have been created in **Storyspace** and are available from **Eastgate Systems**(<http://www.eastgate.com>) The interface of Storyspace consists of "writing spaces"--which may contain text or other writing spaces--and links are visualized as a

kind of spider's strand. A hyperfiction created in Storyspace may offer its readers various options of navigation simultaneously: readers may double-click on a navigation tool and thus open a connected space by default; they may choose paths from each space's list of all the links connected to it; they may explore the 'geography' of the web of writing spaces by clicking on a compass; or they may answer yes-or-no questions. The interactive narratives on the Web created in HTML have a comparatively simpler structure and are more reminiscent of the print medium since browsers mostly display one window or page at a time.

Regardless of the writing environment that is used, readers and authors of interactive narratives have to face the same challenges: there is a lack of the kind of structure, logic and closure that the print medium can provide. Books store information in unchanging spatial representations and enable authors to supply their fictional world with a more grounded notion of structure, meaning and closure. Authors of interactive fiction must work from a multi-dimensional perspective, trying to anticipate all the routes a story-line may follow and the way a reader's past decisions may influence future ones. Yet, authors have to accept the probability that readers will create versions of a text which they have never seen or anticipated. The fact that hyperfiction tends to obscure cause/effect-relationships and chronological developments makes the process of structuring a story even more difficult. Writing from a multi-dimensional perspective may also prove to be a liberating experience for the author: the fragmentation of interactive narratives offers possibilities to experiment with narrative perspective, logic and a multiplicity of story-lines. For the reader of interactive fiction, the major psychological threat is the possibility of getting lost in hyperspace. This loss may be caused by disorientation and the inability to find the desired information. Readers assemble the structure of the narrative and have to make more of an effort to supply it with logic and a sense of closure. It depends on the readers' willingness to make creative efforts as well as on the guidance of the invisible author whether this loss turns out to be a positive experience.

In order to assist readers in conceptualizing the (sometimes mutually exclusive) information they encounter, authors have to develop underlying structures and organizational models. Readers may use these structures in creating their own contexts while they engage in a performative reading of a text. The alternation of open episodes and episodic closure is one possibility of maintaining readers' interests without frustrating them. Another possible structure is the creation of underlying metaphors which function as a tool of orientation for the reader.



## Trip

**Matthew Miller's Trip** (<http://raven.ubalt.edu/guests/trip/>), for example, uses the American highway system as a navigational tool for the documentation of a cross-country trip. The main interface is a map of the US, and the highway metaphor proves to be extremely effective: it provides you with spatial orientation, even if you seem to have lost the route of the story-line.

Unless readers supply an interactive narrative with a sense of closure, they may 'quit' the story without a sense of an ending. Hyperfictions don't provide a formal conclusion to the narrative, an ending which might assist in retrospectively explaining the story's development. Nevertheless, our experience of a text is strongly influenced by our anticipation of an ending, which is integral to the act of reading, even if we know that there is no final page or word ("The End") waiting for us. In a sense, all fictions may be open, since they all have to be interpreted by their readers. Yet, the openness of a fiction may vary considerably. There is a difference between works that are formally closed and those that formally require the interpreter to close them, as many interactive fictions do. Readers of hyperfiction may find themselves in a state of mind fluctuating between connectivity and lack of determination: they are presented with series of connected elements and with discontinuous elements whose interrelationships need to be established.

Yet, interactive narratives offer their reader a sense of the nature of textuality; the understanding of this nature presumably arises from the sum of various readings, from composing structures out of what has been assembled to read. This process may compensate for the lack of a physical ending. Even if "The End" is missing, interactive narratives provide you with--as **Jay Bolter** has called it--"a structure of possible structures."

Photo Credit: Adrienne Wortzel, "Electronic Chronicles."

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