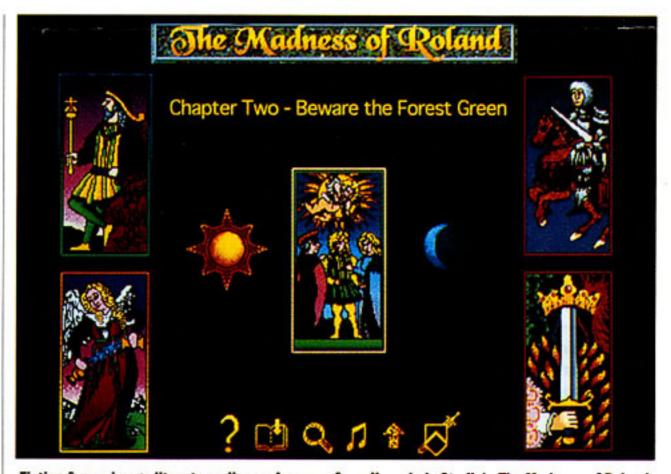# The changing shape of fiction

Some early entries from a rich new world of fiction

Despite its dramatic name, hyperfiction—the latest craze in high-tech literature—is basically software: You load it onto your computer and use certain tools to navigate through it. And what a ride it is.

In hyperfiction, you don't just read, you make choices. It's the classic existentialist dilemma manifested in the reading process. You're at least partially responsible for creating (by choice or actual writing) what you read, so you can never just snuggle up with your laptop and get lost in the story. Rather, you *can* get lost in the story, but it's your responsibility to find the way out, if indeed you want to get out, which is all up to you. There's no comfort in watching the pages between you and the end of the book evaporate in the sure knowledge that the end is in sight. And there's no such thing as reading ahead to the last page to find out who killed whom. There is no closure to a work of hyperfiction. When you stop reading, that's the end—of that particular reading of the fiction.

Some works, such as *Quibbling* or *Hypertext Quarterly,* give you a reading map of the hypertext—a sort of topographical representation of the blocks of text, or lexias. By clicking on links—highlighted words or phrases—you can zoom into another set of lexias (and characters and storylines). Other hyperfictions allow you to type in a word, which may lead you anywhere. And almost all hyperfictions allow you to point the mouse, click on any word that might strike your fancy, and see where *that* takes you. Several hyperfictions indicate, by means of underlining, boxes, or boldface, certain words or phrases that have a link to another part of the hypertext.

Fiction for an image-literate audience: A screen from Hyperbole Studio's *The Madness of Roland*.

Most readers, conditioned by novels and short stories, have traditional expectations when they first encounter hyperfiction: They want to know who did what, and why. Hyperfiction plays with these expectations, especially with the need to perceive an established order. You still read for plot, for characters and their motivations, and for the key to the mystery, but hyperfiction demands a spatial rather than a linear reading. Each lexia consists of several surfaces that interact differently with other text blocks and links, resulting in an almost boundless web of interconnections. Not only is there room for a vast range of interpretations, but hyperfiction actively encourages multiplex reactions and interactions.

Hyperfiction constitutes a radically new genre, quite distinct from the so-called expanded novels (published by Voyager, 478 Broadway, New York, NY 10012)—novels adapted for computers and souped up with hypertext components, but which you read more or less as you would a book between covers. Hyperfiction empowers readers and overturns traditional notions of author and reader. Stuart Moulthrop, hypertext critic and author of *Victory Garden,* distinguishes between two kinds of hyperfiction—exploratory and constructive—in his essay "Polymers, Paranoia, and the Rhetoric of Hypertext" in the spring 1991 issue of *Writing on the Edge (* Campus Writing Center, University of California, Davis, CA 95616). According to Moulthrop, an exploratory hyperfiction—which includes most commercially available hypertexts—allows the reader to " 'transform' the textual body by

following alternative paths or linkways" while the hyperfiction "retains its fundamental identity under all transformations. . . . The maze may have many permutations, the circuit many switchings, but in all of them the user still circulates through the same mechanized volume." Constructive hyperfiction, which arrived in the commercial sphere with the November 1993 publication of Deena Larsen's *Marble Springs*, allows you to add your own words to the hypertext and send your additions back to the publisher to be included in subsequent editions. *Marble Springs* points to the future of constructive hyperfiction, which lies in the proliferation of computer networks where many reader/writers will collaborate on projects made open-ended by virtue of their virtual existence as malleable data in cyberspace.

Hyperfiction addresses a fundamental issue that faces all writers: In a society where people are more willing to consume images than read, hypertext seems like a wordsmith's dream. Finally, here's a vehicle for writing that is as fast as the microprocessor that paints the words on the screens, the words taking on a visual quality that can compete with pictures. Ultimately, however, hyperfictions must still succeed first as writing: Are the characters worth following through the labyrinth of a hyperfiction? Is the narrative structure engaging, its complexity challenging or its simplicity aesthetically pleasing? Is the language fresh? Most importantly, does the writer have something new to say in addition to having a new way to say it?

The hyperfictions reviewed here run on an Apple Macintosh Plus and more powerful models and are available for IBM compatibles in Windows format except where noted. Although they will run on 1 MB of RAM, they run slowly, so 2 MB is suggested, and required where indicated.

Afternoon, a story by Michael Joyce (Eastgate Systems, 134 Main St., Watertown, MA 02172, $19.95). One of the very first hypertext fictions and still one of the most fascinating, *Afternoon, a story* doesn't have any mapping graphics that allow you to see where you are in the whole scheme of things, but is so engrossing that you can get lost in it and not care. The lyrical intensity of the language lures you through a structure that is simultaneously compelling and perplexing.

Afternoon affords a remarkable

amount of freedom. If you find yourself pursuing a link that doesn't interest you and remember seeing one a few screens back that looked more promising, you can backtrack to find it. A cascade of returns can be very entertaining, the words dancing on the screen, revealing the hyperfiction not as printed matter but as something more ephemeral. And when you turn off the computer, you might find that the voices of *Afternoon* linger in your ear, speaking of the intrigue that you sensed rippling just beneath the surface, waiting to be uncovered the next time you venture into the fiction.

Ambulance: An Electronic Novel by Monica Moran (Electronic Hollywood, Box 448, Prince Street Station, New York, NY 10012, $17 ppd.). Produced by the prolific Jaime Levy, *Ambulance* is the latest in a series of cyberzines published by Levy's New York-based Electronic Hollywood. Monica Moran's very linear narrative tells the story of a group of twentysomethings who crash their

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In hyperfiction, you help create what you read.

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car somewhere in the Hollywood hills. A serial killer spies the accident from his house and decides to collect our band of hapless travelers and take them back to his house, where grim mayhem ensues. *Ambulance* combines Levy's cinematic sensibility with hypertextual flashbacks and some engaging multimedia effects, including bass samples by alternative rocker Mike Watt and illustrations by Jaime Hernandez (of the *Love and Rockets* comic book series). By turns amusing and grisly, *Ambulance* requires less work on the part of the reader than hyperfictions more consciously concerned with putting into practice the theories of Derrida and Barthes and the fictional visions of Borges and Pynchon.

The Madness of Roland by Greg Roach, with animation by David Crossley (Hyperbole Studios, 1756 114th Av. SE, Bellevue, WA 98004, $59.95). The most striking things about *Roland* are its animation, videos, sound, look—in short, everything but the text of this multimedia extravaganza whose list of credits resembles that of a movie production. As hyperfiction becomes more geared toward a primarily image-literate audience, collaborative hypermedia efforts of this sort will undoubtedly in-

crease. Unfortunately, *Roland* points to one of the pitfalls: Mediocre writing will never be able to compete with wow-'em special effects. Requires CD-ROM player for Macintosh or MPC machine and Video for Windows for IBM compatibles.

Marble Springs by Deena Larsen (Eastgate Systems, $19.95). The first to invite the reader to collaborate on subsequent editions by writing characters and creating links, this hyperfiction is very much an *Our Town* brought to hypertext. You enter the work via the Marble Springs cemetery to discover a ghost town where women have woven the fabric of the town's history. In addition to the usual assortment of text-based links, the map of Marble Springs provides one way of getting into the fiction; you choose certain geographical locations and discover—or write—the lives of the inhabitants. This is easily the most demanding hypertext on the market in the range of choices the reader is given, from perusing actual bibliographies detailing the research that went into reconstructing an Old West town to collaborating with Deena Larsen and other readers. Requires HyperCard 2.0 and 2 MB of RAM; available for Macintosh only.

Victory Garden by Stuart Moulthrop (Eastgate Systems, $19.95). *Victory Garden* is hyperfiction about the Gulf War by noted Thomas Pynchon critic Stuart Moulthrop. One of the most complex hypertexts now available, with an astonishing number of lexias and links, *Victory Garden* explores reactions to the war in letters and scenes from Saudi Arabia featuring college student and reservist Emily Runbird, media coverage of the war, military technobabble, and protests at the college Emily attended before she was shipped off. Moulthrop has taken a historical event and given it back to us through almost 1,000 blocks of text and 2,800 links; careful characterizations; numerous storylines, plots, and subplots; and an incisive critique of the news media, the war, and the war's media audience. The Gulf War was presented to the public in fragments. Moulthrop has used hyperfiction to link real and imagined fragments, allowing the reader to do what the media and the government made impossible: to explore the story of the war, and of ourselves, for ourselves.

—Harry Goldstein

Harry Goldstein lives in New York City, where he writes, and writes about, fiction.