

Mixed Company: Literacy in Print and Hypertext Together

By David Kolb

Our time has been called "the late age of print" (Jay David Bolter), but the age of print seems in no hurry to end. Computer text and hypertext will coexist with printed books, and so our reading and writing skills need to become more complex as texts mutate and crossbreed. While more critical attention has been paid to hypertext experiments with narrative and poetry, hypertext can also change argumentative and expository prose, as these coexist differently with their print brethren.

Hypertext can be used to make argument structures evident. For instance, maps and outlines can clarify argumentative lines, stretches of argument can be separated yet linked, spaces can be provided for backing and sub-arguments, typed links can indicate rhetorical "moves," annotation tools can offer directed questioning, and so on. There are problems to be worked out in software design, but, presuming good tools were developed for presenting argument structures, the question would remain: what would we want to do with those tools?

Argument is supposed to persuade the reader. For that purpose, is there any reason to use hypertext rather than printed books? There might be some presentational advantages to hypertext for storing knowledge and presenting it selectively, because linking can lay out structures, and because hypertext can offer "live" outlines and summaries, as well as the possibility of including comments and responses. But is this enough? Suppose we want the text to be "more fully hypertextual"? By this I intend no essentialism. Hypertext is a technology, not a literary genre; it can be used in many different ways. Still, any medium makes some things easier and some things harder. The feature of hypertext I want to highlight can be indicated by saying that hypertexts have no edge to their pages. We are accustomed to the idea that books have no fixed length; a book can grow indefinitely long and extend into multiple volumes. In hypertext the margins as well are endlessly wide. There is always more space for sideways remarks, space for new kinds of moves and relations. But this means that an intended sequence of argument can get lost when the proliferating marginalia become the text.

For instance, I have been working on *Sprawling Places*, a long text containing numerous kinds of writing (description, narration, polemic, constructive arguments both concrete and abstract). The work concerns "places" today -- a place is more than an area of space; a place is correlated with human actions and norms. I want to deny certain accusations against modern and postmodern places, by arguing the accusations rest on false presuppositions. I want to urge new concepts while suggesting guidelines for remediation of obvious problems with many contemporary places. From the reader I hope for critical evaluation and agreement. I don't want to set out a structure to be strolled through and admired for its baroque complexity. Nor am I just creating a world that readers try on, thinking "so this is what it feels like to have this point of view." That is useful but not enough. Contemplation of structure can leave the reader unaffected. There are specific assertions and propositions to be judged and assented to. The reader should exit from the text changed, but in a self-critically evaluative way. I want the audience to accept some conclusions, to assent to certain propositions, to adopt some concepts -- more concretely: to give up certain complaints, to propose certain policies.

So I want to make sure that the reader encounters conclusions and arguments as items to be judged. A lot of structuring is needed to make sure that the propositions and arguments do get encountered and evaluated. We know how to do that in books.

The writing in this project has many parts that don't integrate easily into one final view or linear sequence. It is intended, also, for different audiences: philosophers, architectural theorists, planners, writers about place, debaters about postmodern life. Because of this variety the project seems natural for hypertext presentation. But most of the specific audiences I am aiming for have not encountered hypertext and may have little desire to do so. They are not literate in techniques of hypertext reading.

The real danger, though, is that hypertext may undermine my desired effects. Writing in hypertext, and needing to assure the textual prominence of my line of argument I will need to provide textually privileged concepts, and a clear unified voice. At the very least I will need summaries, tables, diagrams, conclusions, overviews, maps. But this is beginning to sound like a printed book. All these features present problems in hypertext: because such textual elements can be multiplied, or commented to death, buried in a forest of links, or undermined in the edgeless text where there is always more space and

more kinds of space available for moves and meta-discussions. The node that asserts its own authority becomes at most one element within the net or web.

This multiplication is not unique to hypertext; it is true of the Library, taken as a whole, where there can always be more books commenting on your book. But in hypertext the single work may have no edges. There are those tempting other dimensions opening as you write, and you are free of the discipline of one fixed order of presentation. Other discourses, and maybe the other of discourse, surround the argument and can become more visible.

Now, these problems can be "handled" in a hypertext, by ingenious structure. There are ways to set up a single-author hypertext to force textual prominence and authority and a clear view of the argument, and to curb excessive non-linearity. But the more you use such devices to structure the reader's experience the less reason you may have to use hypertext at all.

Consider again my work-in-progress example. I try to rebut attacks on today's mode of living in space (real or virtual). These attacks argue that true dwelling in a thick environment has been destroyed, that the sense of locality has been replaced by simulacra, that formless sprawl forces one-dimensional uniformity of place dotted with theme parks that pretend to difference. There is truth in these attacks, but we should beware the pre-supposition that true dwelling requires rooted organic centered places, and beware as well the opposite pre-supposition that our true existence belongs nowhere, that our dispersed inhabitation can only be ironic. My argument involves studying the general conditions for places to exist, and some abstract considerations about change in cultural objects. I argue for new kinds of place-unity, and for using some qualities of contemporary places (discontinuity and linkage) against others (simplification and flattening of identity). We need to complexify, de-serialize, non-linearize, find or make links.

Given its varied audiences, and varied types of writing, a mixed strategy seemed called for, utilising both print and hypertext. My original idea was for a large archive hypertext and a book which offered a slice of the archive (or perhaps several smaller books offering different slices). The archive would be on a CD tucked into the book, or it could be on a web site, or both -- a CD would bring closure but perhaps encourage more careful reading and attention; a Web site would bring more access and updatability, and a kind of serendipity for readers using search engines.

Readers would have both the archive and a book with explicit references into the archive. The printed book would provide accessibility, "solidity," convenience, ubiquity and durability. The hypertext would provide linkage, clarity and complexity, and freedom of invention and structure.

That was the original idea about the format. In the end the publisher of the book was not willing to follow that idea; when the book appears it will be accompanied by a hypertext on the web, and perhaps the larger archive can be produced separately later on. But the real issue under discussion here is not the publishing format but *the mixed content*. If a book and a hypertext are working together, what should be in the hypertext? It could include the book text redone into separate nodes, multiply linked with structures strongly mapped by outlines, summaries, and navigational aids.

But if that was all, why bother? The hypertext should be more than an alternative presentation of the book. There could be other materials: more pictures, essays that were extensions of the ideas or more detailed concrete examples. There could be critical dialogues, and further explorations of the bases and background of the ideas. This is all fine, and it might be a way of offering valuable context. But all that could be done in print as well. Could we make the document "more fully hypertextual"? What could justify using the hypertext medium?

There might be explorations of alternative ways of posing questions, divagations, distractions, tangles and multiple voices that feel their way around the topics but don't lead to conclusions. That feels more hypertextual, but then the propositions and recommendations could get lost. Must we split the text into Argument and Play?

To see that there is a role for hypertext presentation, we need to look more closely at a presupposition that has remained unexamined so far. How does *structure* fit into being "more fully hypertextual"? Indeed, *what is structure*?

Speaking of architecture, Douglas Cooper says that:

"Structure is how architects impose their will on chaos. They make things that stand and are ordered in a specific way, with a sequence of rooms that mean something or dictate the way human beings move through them. . . . The architect designs a floor plan; he doesn't dictate the order in which the rooms are to be experienced. He gives over the options of navigating that building to its occupant. That doesn't make the architect any less

of an architect, any less the author of a building. The walls are set in place". (Douglas Cooper, "The Plot Thickens", *Architecture*, July 1998, 43-51)

So far I've been equating hypertext structure with mappable link relations just as Cooper ties architectural structure to the floor plan. But besides the plan there are the norms. Besides the nodes and links (rooms, doors, passages) there are the norms that define what the rooms are. This normative structure is the grammar of the place, a set of norms for appropriate use. Dining room, bedroom -- these involve norms as to what one *should* do, not what one *will* do -- you can dine in the bedroom, but it's still normatively a bedroom.

So too in hypertext (as in any text) there's a normative structure that is more than a set of links. This bit is this sort of text, to be used in this way, this link or pattern of links means we should judge that node as a conclusion. There are speech acts, rhetorical moves, textual conventions, norms defining various kinds of appropriateness. Often the link structure of a text, whether it is a book or a hypertext, is designed to express the normative structure, but an author can set the two against each other, and use link structure to set normative structure ajar.

This is an old game in literature and visual art, which have been busy for more than a century twisting formal structures and playing them off against the norms and conventions of "the novel," or "painting" or "gallery" or "museum." Literary hypertexts often create this kind of collision of form and norm within narrative structures. So, being "more fully hypertextual" could involve playing the link structure off against the normative expectations. But then our question becomes: Can this kind of play be of any use in argumentative texts? Or is it only useful for narrative and literary experimentation?

There are norms of appropriateness in exposition and argument, norms for what follows and for what counts as backing. The logic and math side of argument structure is more a priori, but that logical structure must be combined with speech act norms and contextual appropriateness in order to be useful. Could one play with those norms, turning link structures against them? This would be different than simply multiplying arguments or rhetorical moves. It would be more akin to such standard deconstructive gestures as giving multiple readings and creating or finding textual undecidables. This parallel reminds us that such play can be and is done in print too. Maybe it works even better there because there is no explicit map, so even the formal structure can be left undecided. On the other

hand, in hypertext an explicit link structure provides a new space for such manoeuvres. This may mean fighting against the atomism of hypertext -- its boxes and arrows -- even as that atomism gives us new tools. We can turn them against themselves, refuse to take them as uncontested background, make them explicit, play them off against themselves and against the normative structure.

Supposing that such play is possible, why might one want to do it? We might do it to make plain the norms and roles, or to show the difference between the different kinds of structure and how they depend on and stimulate each other. We might do it to criticise the norms, to highlight them so that they can be judged or adjusted. We might make the reader's inhabitation of the text more self-aware and more self-critical. To judge and assent to conclusions, really hold them, but also to be self-consciously critical about the act of judging and assenting. It takes a lot of structure to question the role of structure. The "more fully hypertextual" presentation would be about getting the reader to inhabit the text and its argument differently.

Of course, this puts great demands on the skills of the reader and the writer. They have to deal with larger interwoven nets and shorter nodes, overviews, typed links, lots of structure and navigation, as well as all this textual play. The reader and writer need to be aware of structure of multiple levels and kinds, and of the process of norm creation; they have to understand and change and judge and relate and hold it open -- to be there in place and to be aware of the processes of being in place. They are not just contemplating the structure but participating self-critically in the structuring act.

Hypertext could help us, because the habit of hypertextual active attention to linking and structure can enhance our inhabitation (of place as well as of text). Both audience and authors must learn together to develop both the new textual objects and new literacy skills. We need to experiment with writing and reading in the more open space provided by the mixed company of print and hypertext together, seeing what happens, and who we become.