

# Formal Complaints

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**Abstract.** In any medium it is clear that form shapes content, offering parameters within which subsequent creators (be they authors, musicians, filmmakers) will operate. Authoring tools represent an additional level of abstraction (reduction?), an act of remediation that asks what the designer considers to be essential features of a medium.

What potential power do these initial creators have in helping to define a particular tool, however? This paper explores the play between form and content by returning once more to *StorySpace*, and outlining the way in which content instead came to define form.

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In their ground-breaking history of reading in the west, Professors Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier [1] argue that form “transmits how the person who created that text [...] perceived the reader’s abilities”, an argument echoed in both Professor Nathan Ensmenger’s parallel notion that an inventor also invents the people they expect to use their inventions [2] and in passing mention by media theorist Neil Postman, in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Discussing the medium of the smoke signal, Postman suggests it is a form incapable of conveying ideas of deep philosophical complexity; “its form excludes the content” [3]. Technologies, he writes elsewhere, are not simply “machines which convey information” [4]. They help classify and frame the world around us.

We receive a similar argument from George Landow in his book *Hypertext*. One section describes language as “a reducer and a distorter of experience” [5], much as Information Studies scholar Michael Zimmer observes that new media technologies act like “lenses, shaping, perhaps even distorting, the information they present and framing the very knowledge that their users are meant to obtain” [6]. This tension between the formal and the aesthetic can, of course, be found elsewhere: in the concerns of New Criticism with regard to intentionality and affect; the academic study and theory of taste; the concerns of reader-response critics like Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser. In discussing the origins of photography, Roland Barthes argues in favour of chemists, rather than the painters who subsequently leant the medium its grammar of framing and perspective [7].

*Origins* perhaps, but clearly photography developed its own language within even the physical constraints of chemistry, just as the limitations of 45rpm did not prevent recording artists from expressing themselves creatively in units of four minutes or less. Attempting to understand why some authors are more culturally significant than others, Michel Foucault argues for a category of superior author, constituting those who are “not just the authors of their own works [but]... the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts” [8]. Such creators establish the parameters within which others will operate. As author, theologian, and critic G. K. Chesterton puts it, “art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame” [9].

Form defines the parameters within which subsequent creators express themselves. This observation is doubly true of authoring tools, which are themselves often attempts to reduce the complex potential of a particular medium for the benefit of an audience better furnished with ideas than technical skill. Such authoring tools are by nature reductive, often underpinning a certain vision of their chosen medium or emphasizing a specific affordance. Ted Nelson’s original definition of hypertext emphasised dynamic display, for example, the presentation of both source and destination for a hyperlink in multiple windows [10], a feature later present in Apple Computing’s *HyperCard* system. Despite this, the multi-window interface and collaborative workflow of hypertext (both features identified as essential in Nelson’s original ACM presentation) continue to be poorly represented in both hypertext fiction [11] and authoring tools designed for its creation. Despite being a conventional link-node calligraphic paradigm that *Twine* (for example) perpetuates, concealing the hypertext (overarching view) is by no means a requirement. Frank Halasz *et al.*’s 1987 *NoteCards* made the “corkboard” view the default for all users, which became a significant influence on the spatial view found in Catherine C Marshall *et al.*’s 1991 platform *Aquanet*, which rejected the traditional “focus on nodes and the local connections between them” in favour of visually representing all nodes.

Does the presence of an interpolating, arguably didactic layer present a means of perpetuating established views of a medium? To illustrate this we might turn back the clock some thirty years to 1987, and Michael Joyce’s *afternoon, a story*.

*afternoon* was described at the time as definitive of hypertext fiction: “more than one entry point, many internal branches, and no clear ending” [12]. Espen Aarseth went so far as to invoke Foucault’s earlier founders of discursivity, claiming that Joyce created “not merely a new work but a new medium” [13], while a review displayed prominently on the website for *StorySpace* (still the foremost publisher of literary hypertext fiction) suggests that *afternoon* is “to the hypertext...interactive novel what the Gutenberg Bible is to publishing”, positioning Joyce as founder not fundamentally of thematic paradigms but of formal ones.

*afternoon* did indeed establish many of the formal paradigms which would define hypertext fiction during its initial heyday, supported in part by the operational structure of *Storyspace* itself. This is unsurprising since, as already mentioned, *Storyspace* was co-developed by Joyce himself, alongside literary theorist Jay David Bolter, and Professor of Computer Science John Smith. The latter doesn’t appear as an author on the original paper describing the tool, however, or in the acknowledgements on the *StorySpace* website, though Landow at one point mentions him as a co-creator [14]. Smith

himself seems untroubled by the omission, partially on the basis that that he was “not interested in prose, in fiction” [15].

*Storyspace* has been described as a tool suited to a particular form and style of writing, not a general-purpose platform for authoring hypertext. In a rather neat turn of phrase, Aarseth [13] noted that the version of *afternoon* he encountered in reading “was (in more than one sense) not the same as the one discussed by Stuart Moulthrop, J. David Bolter, and Landow”. Aarseth intended this not in the sense of a unique path through the material, but that the material affordances of the system as presented to him were different to those claimed by other scholars. His version of *afternoon* did not allow users to create their own links or to view the hypotext of the work, a claim he repeated in his notable work *Cybertext*.

Describing this as “one of the most disturbing aspects of Aarseth’s critique,” Landow dedicates much of *Hypertext* third edition’s revised final chapter to a furious rebuttal, rightly arguing that these were in fact affordances of the *StorySpace* system. Charitably, we might suggest that this confusion arose because of a preferred form of modernist literary experimentation that dominated the field during this time, arguably one defined by the characteristics that opened this section: more than one entry point, many internal branches, and no clear ending. Landow himself argued for an extensive, “embarrassingly literal” correspondence between hypertext as a medium and Continental literary theory as an approach [16], in particular its embodiment of Barthes’ *Death of the Author* and the potential realization of his ideal text [17].

Landow’s observation is correct, however: *StorySpace* could facilitate the features Aarseth identifies, and more. The correspondence between *StorySpace* and a small subset of works created within it was concretised primarily by the discourse that surrounded it. Ensslin gathers these diverse works under the title of “*StorySpace* canon” [18], which has the unfortunate side effect of tying the medium directly to this particular kind of content. It is still commonplace to open essays and articles on hypertext fiction – even apologetically – with a reference to *afternoon*. This inductive process results in an understanding of a particular platform informed by a subset of works created within it, much as earlier critics had identified certain qualities of hypertext as essential. Form defines content, but in time content may come to define form.

Authoring tools are like islands of a nation, each with their own customs and peculiarities but sharing a common, wider culture in the medium from which they emerge; the archipelago of hypertext is a fine example. While frequently described as a platform for unconventional and marginalized voices, *Twine*’s default story format (Harlowe) is itself formally rather conservative. The default structure is quintessential link-node hypertext, with individual words and phrases connected to complete nodes elsewhere; the hypotext is concealed, thereby necessitating readers explore the work exhaustively to establish its extent; the viewport permits only one node to be visible at a time. It is also non-collaborative, in every sense: *Twine* works cannot be edited simultaneously, and readers cannot annotate or edit the work themselves. While *Twine* is extendable, the platform’s lack of technical complexity has been cited as partially to credit for its success. *Snowman* and *Sugarcube*, the two alternate story formats, are both designed to be used by people who are familiar with writing JavaScript and CSS, and the default experience remains link-node, retaining most of the default features. Anastasia Salter

suggests that there is “little discourse between Twine’s authors and the tradition of hypertext” [19] despite there being something traditional about the kind of hypertext it favours. Its vigorous creative culture seems to derive not so much from form, but from a less reductive view of its potential.

An authoring tool must be didactic by nature – it is, after all, an intermediary between the complexities of the code itself and the relative ease experienced by the user, a bridge between code and cultural layer (to quote Lev Manovich [28]). The challenge lies in teaching the tool without in the process training the user, appreciating that these are manifestations of an idea, not exemplars. The tension between the aesthetic and the formal, between application and Application, persists.

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