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Greysmoke

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GREYSMOKE

A Hypertext Fiction

By

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B.A. University of Maine, 1995

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

University of Maine

May, 1999

Advisory Committee:

Welch Everman, Professor of English, Advisor

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GREYSMOKE
A Hypertext Fiction

By Diane Cheryl Genthner

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Welch Everman

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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This project allowed me to explore two of my greatest areas of interest and creative expression: writing and web design. While a World Wide Web presence is not a necessity for the use of hypertext, I believe that the web will be a major conduit for the written word in the years to come. It's not my intention or desire to replace print and paper, but rather to explore the new tools and avenues available for the creative writer.

In creating this piece, I tried to use the most fundamental tools available. The story itself I had already outlined and partly handwritten in notebooks. When developing the hypertext for the web, I used the text editor, Composer, that was part of the web browser I use, Netscape 4.5. This was all free, since I am both student and staff at the University. In addition, I rewrote some of the code using my own knowledge of HTML, in this case 4.0.

For designing some of the graphics, I used Microsoft Paint, which is a part of our Windows 95 system on our home Dell 486 PC. For others, I used the one piece of software that I purchased, PaintShop Pro 5. At \$70, it was bargain, since it contains many of the features in Photoshop 5, which costs @ \$300.

For now, the novella is available at the library on cd-rom and on the special collections website; and at the English department on cd-rom, with a copy of Netscape 4.5 on the disk as well. (That may make it accessible for the next few years.) I also plan to keep it on any future website that I have - or whatever comes next. Any of my work will always be accessible by doing a search on my name.

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*Since the thesis does not exist in paper form, it is only available here on cd-rom. It can also be found on the UM Library's website, and in Special Collections, under my name.

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling can be traced back to prehistoric times, when, likely before an oral language had developed, our ancient ancestors drew or carved their stories on cave walls.

With the Egyptian invention of paper, it became possible to record written language on a medium that could be passed from person to person.

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1455 took it another step, making mass distribution of texts possible, likely to the undying gratitude of monks everywhere,

Oral traditions flourished in many cultures worldwide, ensuring that the story would survive long after the passing of its teller.

Thomas Edison's many inventions at the end of the nineteenth century opened the door of technology even wider. Photography led to moving pictures, and another medium for storytelling was born.

Meanwhile, the book flourished, and the reading of stories, whether to oneself or aloud to others, rivaled the oral tradition. In addition, the stories became increasingly more complex, and demanded more dedicated attention on the part of the reader.

Radio revived the oral tradition in the 30's and 40's. Families could gather around a familiar voice emanating from a medium to large box, much as they once gathered around a communal fire.

The 50's brought television, and a variety of dramatized stories brought theater to one's home, every night, requiring little on the part of the audience beyond getting up to change the channel.

Through the 60's and 70's television and movies expanded their scope and quality. Books were still strong, and some - (Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas; The Feminine Mystique; Valley of the Dolls; Gravity's Rainbow) - were objects of social import as well as works of literature.

In the 1980's the personal computer was introduced, initially as a purely functional device that would lead us into the paperless office. By the end of the decade it was no longer a complicated typewriter, but had transformed into an entertainment option as well as a useful tool. The computer game industry mushroomed, and once again, there was competition with books for the attention of the individual.

By the 1990's, artists and writers began to seriously explore the possibilities computers offered them, which grew even greater with the explosion of the Internet, and the World Wide Web.

My attraction to working in this medium came from many directions: my preference for reading and writing science fiction; my interests in science and technology; the chance to work creatively within a medium I was already using as a functional tool; the opportunity to tell a story the way it appears inside my head - bouncing all over the place, with occasional pauses to ask why? Or, what's this? Or, how can I find out more?; and the very exciting prospect of working in a genre still in its relative infancy.

Now, I'm not saying I'm doing cutting edge work, or am a pioneer in the field. Experiments with non-linear fiction have long been a part of literary history. Footnotes and sidebars are the most obvious examples of reasons for the reader to suspend the reading of the text and jump off to another spot. Works such as Frank Capra's film "It's a

Wonderful Life” and Jorge Luis Borge’s story “The Garden of Forty Paths” are multiform tales, offering alternative conclusions. Alan Lightman’s book Einstein’s Dreams is a series of vignettes in which Einstein, himself obsessed with the concept of linear time, examines the possibilities:

“Some make light of decisions, arguing that all possible decisions will occur. In such a world how could one be responsible for his actions? Others hold that each decision must be considered and committed to, that without commitment there is chaos. Such people are content to live in contradictory worlds, so long as they know the reason for each.”

Italo Calvino’s novel If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler starts, starts over, starts over again:

“Everything has already begun before, the first page of every novel refers to something that has already happened outside the book . . . I feel the thrill of a beginning that can be followed by multiple developments, inexhaustibly.”

Raymond Queneau and the other members of his experimental literary group, Oulipo, played often with non-linearity. One set of poems were identical in their number of lines, and the reader was encouraged to swap corresponding lines from one poem to another. Another creation was a language substitution system, where the reader can create an endless number of different stories. In both of these cases, much like hypertext, the reader has a role in creating the final work.

Role playing video games are the ultimate visual (non-text) example of the hypertext concept. Generally, the character is moving through a set of mazes, or problems, or obstacles on the way to a reward, or escape, or whatever. The choices the player makes along the way - which door to open, which weapons to use - determine the outcome of the game. (Although there is generally only one successful conclusion.)

Hypertext as a function of computers was first developed for mainframe systems in the 60's, but became widely available on personal computers in the late 80's. Michael Joyce's Afternoon: A Story, written in 1987, is considered the pioneering work of hypertext fiction. Compared to the 79 lexias in my thesis - lexia being the hypertext version of page - his work contains 539. His work continues to be among the most highly regarded of the genre, and is available for sale online at Eastgate, the leading publisher of hyperfiction.

Many critics and academicians have dedicated time and work to exploration of the genre.

In 1993, Robert Coover wrote an article for the New York Times Book Review entitled "The End of the Book". He was not issuing a doomsday warning for literature, but, rather, predicting a new direction for it. Janet Murray of MIT is one of hyperfiction's most energetic proponents: like Coover at Brown, she teaches courses on the use of the medium. George Landow, also of Brown, has helped develop tools for hypertext writers, and has contributed to many books and discussions on the subject, in addition to teaching

writing at Brown, and writing his own hyperfiction.

On the other side of the discussion are theorists Jacques Derrida and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Derrida wrote:

“An entire epoch of so-called literature . . . cannot survive a certain technological regime of telecommunications.”

Lyotard echoed these fears:

“When we’re dealing with bits, there’s no longer any question of free forms given here and now to sensibility and the imagination.”

Laura Miller, ironically, an editor at *Salon*, an Internet magazine, wrote an article in the New York Times Book Review in March of this year entitled “www.claptrap.com”. She refers to Coover’s article and the ensuing furor. Despite her own presence in cyberspace, she comments:

“What’s most remarkable about hyperfiction is that no one really *wants* to read it.” She agrees with Landow that hypertext is “an almost embarrassingly literal embodiment” of key post-structuralist notions. However, she believes that rather than representing a viable popular medium, it demonstrates “how alienated academic literary criticism is from actual readers and their desires.”

This tickles me, as I consider myself far outside the academic mainstream, despite my long tenure as a student. I do agree, however, that the genre is still a distance away from being a popular art form. But I think, in time, it will happen, and storytelling will continue in yet another form, into the millennium.

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<http://www.eastgate.com>

Hyperizons:Hypertext Fiction

<http://www.duke.edu/~mshumate/hyperfic.html>

Hypertext at Brown University

<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/hypertext/landow/HTatBrown/BrownHT.html>

Written on the Web

<http://www.feedmag.com/95.09guyer/95.09guyer.html>

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Diane C. Genthner was born in Waldoboro, Maine on February 28, 1953. She was raised in Waldoboro, and graduated from Medomak Valley High School in 1970. She attended the University of Maine and graduated in 1974 with a degree in Journalism. She returned to the University in 1990 and entered the English program. She finished the undergraduate degree in 1995, and then entered the graduate program in English, with a focus on Creative Writing.

After receiving her degree, Diane hopes to find employment as a writer. Diane is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Maine in May, 1999.