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## A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative

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# Unnatural Narrative in Hypertext Fiction



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## 1. Introduction

This essay argues that hypertext provides a distinctive context for unnaturalness in narrative fiction. It explores the structural attributes of hypertext fiction in general before analyzing two examples of unnatural narrative in Stuart Moulthrop's Storyspace hypertext fiction *Victory Garden*. The first analysis shows how the multilinear structure of hypertext facilitates narrative contradiction. The second analysis demonstrates that the fragmented structure of the text allows the unnatural status of a scene to change depending on the reading route through which it is accessed. The study thus analyzes two different types of unnaturalness in hypertext by first focusing on a logical impossibility before moving on to an example of physical impossibility. The article concludes that hypertext adds a digitally specific component to unnatural narrative that must be analyzed according to the affordances of the medium (cf. Hayles).

## 2. Unnatural Narratology

In the relatively new field of unnatural narratology, unnatural narratives have been defined as “strategies or aspects of discourse that do not have a natural

grounding in familiar cognitive parameters or in familiar real-life situations” (Fludernik, *Towards* 11); “texts that employ unnatural narrational stances that are impossible in nonfictional discourse” (Richardson 37); and narratives that contain “physically impossible scenarios and events, that is, impossible by the known laws governing the physical world, as well as logically impossible ones” (Alber 80). While each study provides a slightly different definition of the unnatural—with Fludernik preferring the term “non-natural”—each theorist emphasizes that some types of narrative cannot occur in real-world situations. Unnatural narratives are therefore narratives that are inherently fictional because they contain events and scenarios that are impossible according to real-world physical and logical laws.

Most studies within unnatural narratology use examples from print fiction in their analyses, and few have considered how unnatural narratives operate in a digital context. Yet as studies within the field of hypertext theory have shown (e.g., Bolter; Ciccoricco; Bell, *Possible* and “Ontological”), the structural attributes that characterize Storyspace hypertext fiction in particular have significant ramifications for narrative fiction because the physical configuration of the text facilitates a unique narrative structure. Storyspace hypertext fictions are read from a computer and composed of fragments of text, known as lexias, that are connected by hyperlinks. The reader can press the “Enter” key on his or her keyboard to follow a default path through the text. Alternatively, the reader can follow hyperlinks which lead him or her to other parts of the text. While a finite number of hyperlinks exist within a text, thus setting limits as to its structural organization, readers are ultimately responsible for their journey through the text. They can choose to pursue a scene for as long as the default reading path will allow, or they can use the hyperlinks to explore other diversions that interest them. A reader may read a default path until he or she can continue no further, or he or she may abandon a particular reading path and return to the beginning of the text to choose another. Some readers might flick backward and forward through the text, retracing their earlier steps. Others might use a “search” facility, which allows them to locate lexias that contain particular words, or use a list of lexias from a dropdown menu. Readers can therefore navigate the text according to a particular agenda or read in a less considered fashion by randomly following links. Each reader’s experience of the text will vary and, to the extent that he or she can select lexia titles randomly, is somewhat unpredictable. In addition, because each reading usually results in a different configuration of lexias, the same fragments of text can be read in a number of different orders.

A number of print works, retrospectively collected under the term “proto-hypertext,” are often seen as the print precursors of hypertext fiction. B. S.

Johnson's *The Unfortunates* comprises a box containing twenty-seven pamphlets—each acting as an individual chapter. The reader must begin with the prescribed first and last pamphlet but can then choose to read the other chapters in any order. Also packaged in a box, Marc Saporta's novel *Composition No. 1* is composed of unbound pages that the reader can read in any order she or he chooses. In both cases, different reading orders deliver or imply different narrative outcomes so that the reader is assigned some responsibility, as in a hypertext fiction, for selecting which path to follow (also see Richardson's essay in this volume for other examples of printed texts that contain fragmented and/or multilinear narratives).

While proto-hypertexts share some of the structural attributes of hypertext fiction insofar as the reader is allotted a degree of responsibility for his or her journey through the text, digital hypertext is not, like the texts cited above, a collection of textual fragments that can be joined in any order, allowing for an indefinite number of configurations. Rather, a hypertext fiction contains fragments that are linked in predetermined paths of which the reader is not always aware, so while the reader of both types of text is allotted a degree of responsibility, the reader's level of knowledge is quite different in each case. The reader of a proto-hypertext, such as *Composition No. 1*, can access each fragment of text at will. The hypertext fiction reader, on the other hand, can unveil only one lexia at a time and is often ignorant of the forthcoming sections and reading paths. In each case, the reader is granted some responsibility, but the reader of a hypertext fiction is always constricted by the integral capacities of the digital medium to hide the forthcoming text. Moreover, while both types of text facilitate structural fragmentation, the hypertext medium allows authors to implement media-specific narrative structures. The fragments of text in a hypertext are connected by hyperlinks so that there is a prelimited but ultimately unpredictable pathway through the text. Authors are also able to implement "guard fields," which prevent readers from accessing specific lexias until they have visited others, and readers are often ignorant of the structural limitations that are placed on their experience of the text.

### 3. Unnatural Narrative and Hypertext Fiction

As the preceding overview shows, the reader of a hypertext fiction will inevitably experience different events, different versions of events, or a different ordering of events, depending on the path he or she chooses to take. Thus hypertext inherently facilitates fragmentation and multilinearity. Richardson suggests that the narrative multiplicity found in hypertext fiction causes an

unavoidable form of unnaturalness. In particular he suggests that narrators of hypertext fiction “problematize the idea of omniscience and even third-person narration by presenting a series of narrative possibilities that a reader must then convert into a single story” (9). As Richardson notes, the structure of a hypertext usually means that readers experience a number of different versions of the narrative, some of which may contradict others. This might be because the fictional world is presented from a number of different viewpoints, or it may be because the ontological status of an event is obscured by the fragmented and/or nonchronological order in which it is read by a reader.

Hypertext theorists also identify a link between the hypertext structure and narrative multiplicity. Bolter, for example, defines hypertext as “a structure that can embrace contradictory . . . outcomes” (125–26). Douglas is more committed to the distinctiveness of hypertext, claiming that while “the physical confines of printed space . . . have prevented narratives from representing multiple, mutually exclusive representations of a single set of events” (“What” 15), hypertext is able to “embod[y] all its possibilities without giving priority to any one of them” (16). Douglas maintains that hypertext offers a narrative structure that cannot be replicated in print and is therefore concerned with the affordances that are granted by different media. Like Bolter, however, she recognizes that hypertext offers a peculiar kind of multilinear structure for narrative fiction.

The hypertext structure means that narrative contradiction and/or inconsistencies are somewhat inevitable in hypertext fiction, but, while hypertext does provide a multilinear structure, the emergent narratives are not necessarily unnatural. In some hypertexts, narrative inconsistencies can be resolved through further exploration of the text. In others, the multilinear structure is used to house different voices or to present different scenes but the narratives do not contradict one another. Thus while the hypertext structure can result in unnatural narratives, unnatural narrative is not an inevitable component of hypertext fiction.

Yet while some hypertext fiction narratives can be reconciled according to real-world parameters, Stuart Moulthrop’s *Victory Garden* exploits the hypertext medium as a means of presenting a number of unnatural contradictions and ambiguities. In the story, set during the first Gulf War, protagonist Emily Runbird has been drafted to work on a Saudi Arabian military base, leaving her friends back home in the fictional town of Tara in the United States. The narrative revolves around the two settings, with the text documenting Emily’s experience of the war in the Gulf as well as the effect of the conflict on her friends, family, and colleagues at home and on the campus of the University of Tara. The motives behind and consequences of the Gulf War resonate through-

out the text and are debated either explicitly between characters or implicitly through the various viewpoints that are presented. Offering a mediated view of the conflict, scenes from news broadcasts depict the off- and on-air discussions between two television war correspondents. Theoretical debates between academics at the University of Tara take place over the ideological and ethical motives of the war. Quotations from real-world figures such as George Bush, Saddam Hussein, and the CBS anchorman Dan Rather are also scattered throughout the text, which, while usually a product of Moulthrop's artistic license, remind the reader that the Gulf War was an actual world event rather than a purely fictional construction.

The various scenes and voices in *Victory Garden* are linked thematically, but the hypertext structure means that they are often encountered separately and/or sporadically. Readers are therefore required to draw associations between parts of the text that might not be physically connected. Similarly, the different reading paths that result from the lexia-link configurations mean that the text can be navigated according to a number of different routes. In some cases this results in mutually exclusive versions of events being documented in each reading path. They are unnatural because the narrative contradictions they generate cannot be resolved according to real-world logic irrespective of how much more of the text is explored. Other forms of unnaturalness are caused by different types of narration. In these parts of the text, the nature of the unnaturalness depends on the route through which the lexia has been reached. The ambiguity that the hypertext structure permits is thus used to problematize and ultimately undermine the ontological status of particular parts of the text.

#### 4. Narrative Contradiction in *Victory Garden*

The most significant unnatural elements in *Victory Garden* are those that are caused by narrative contradictions. Perhaps most strikingly, in some reading paths the protagonist Emily Runbird dies during a bomb blast in the Gulf, but other parts of the text imply that she has survived the conflict to return home to her family and friends. In a less ruthless but equally prominent narrative incongruity, the heterodiegetic narrator describes a scene three different times with minor details changed in each iteration. In each version of the encounter, university professor Boris Urquhart runs away from a pursuer and seeks solace in the office of his colleague Provost Tate. In the "In Need of Help" lexia the book on Tate's desk is entitled *Jane's All the World's Ordnance, 1989–90*, and in the "Helpful" lexia it is changed to *Jane's All the World's Kill-*

*ing Machines*, 1989–90. In the “In Need of Help” lexia, the book is described as “voluminous,” and in the “Helpful” lexia as “massive” (see Bell *Possible*; Ciccoricco; Koskimaa for detailed analyses of these scenes).

Both Emily Runbird’s simultaneous death and survival and Boris Urquhart’s reiterated visits to Tate are unnatural because they present logically irreconcilable scenarios which, according to real-world logic, cannot exist concurrently. More specifically, they break the law of noncontradiction, which states that A and not A cannot be true at the same time. When this law is applied to the text, a character cannot both live and die, and the same scene cannot contain inconsistent details. In both cases it is possible to theoretically eliminate the narrative contradictions and thereby reconcile them with real-world logic by seeing the whole hypertext as a mass of possibilities with new and discrete fictional worlds emerging during each reading. Accordingly, in Ryan’s application of Possible Worlds Theory to hypertext, “every lexia is regarded as a representation of a different possible world, and every jump to a new lexia as a recentering to another world” (222), so that each version of the story is considered to be a different story altogether. Ryan’s strategy achieves its logical aim of “rationaliz[ing] . . . [hyper]texts that present a high degree of internal contradiction” (223). Yet while it is possible to see the text as a series of disconnected narratives, this approach ignores the fundamental structure and form of the hypertext by attempting to eradicate its multilinearity. More importantly, it wrongly assumes that we dismiss our previous experience of a text as we encounter new material. A strategy that seeks to reconcile unnatural elements with real-world experience—defined by Culler as “naturalization” and by Fludernik as “narrativisation” (*Towards*)—will inevitably fail to accommodate contradictions in *Victory Garden* because they are meant to be noticed. As Koskimaa notes in his analysis of *Victory Garden*, “for the most part the reader clearly recognizes she is reading several narratives simultaneously.” As if to confirm the futility of naturalization, the narrator sometimes self-consciously alludes to the unnatural elements. In the reiterated scene between Boris and Tate, the narrator notes in one version that “the weather panels were *still* rolled back” (“temple”; my italics, A.B.) and that “U[rquhart] is *once again still* always running through that dark field” (“Ring Around”; my italics, A.B.). In this hypertext, then, the reader cannot ignore the unnaturalness of the recurring scene but is instead alerted to its presence.

In both examples of narrative contradiction in *Victory Garden*, a heterodiegetic narrator provides an apparently authentic account of an event before subsequently undermining its validity by superseding it with an alternative. Each thus fulfills the requirements of what Richardson defines as a “contradictory narrator . . . [in which] multiple contradictory versions of . . . the same

events are set forth, with no mechanism offered (such as different narrators with different memories and agendas) to explain away the often outrageous contradictions” (104). Richardson’s contradictory narrators are taken from print fictions, but the successful application of his categories to *Victory Garden* shows how they can be used to analyze other media. Yet while some types of unnaturalness can occur in different types of text, hypertext does change the way in which narrative contradictions operate. The narrative of Emily’s death and the narrative of Emily’s survival occur in different parts of the same text. Yet because the text exists as a collection of fragments and links, each possibility exists in parallel so that Emily’s death and survival coexist. The reader may encounter them in a particular order, but any sequence is determined by the reader’s choice of reading route rather than by its fixed position in the hypertext.

Similarly, while the hypertext’s facility for housing multilinearity allows Emily’s death and survival to exist in parallel, the hypertext’s capacity to snare the reader in a reading route provides a unique environment in which the three contradictory versions of Urquhart’s visit to Tate can be placed. Each description is presented in a continuous loop from which the reader cannot escape without terminating his or her reading. They occur one after the other in a tightly controlled configuration that the reader is forced to read again and again and again until he or she decides to return to the beginning of the hypertext to begin a new reading path. This type of infinite recursion is clearly not achievable in print without a never-ending and infinitely repeating text. Both examples of narrative contradiction are therefore housed in a structure that is peculiar, if not unique, to hypertext, and the unnaturalness is facilitated by the structures afforded by the medium.

## 5. Rereading and the Unnatural

While the fragmented structure of hypertext does not necessarily lead to unnaturalness, *Victory Garden* houses many lexias in which indeterminate or ambiguous forms of reference are contained and that a reader will interpret differently depending on the path through which they have been reached. This means that the same lexia can be used in a number of different reading paths, and this sometimes leads to contradictory narrative outcomes. Similarly, because readers can encounter the same lexia during several points in their reading, their interpretation of some parts of the text will be influenced by the respective reading route through which it is reached. Thus not only are narratives experienced in a fragmented and often disjointed manner, but the



same scene can be experienced multiple times so that scenes are often (re) interpreted at a later stage in light of new information. Compounding the structural diversity, some reading paths in *Victory Garden* are restricted by “guard fields.” As noted earlier, these structural mechanisms, implemented by the author, restrict access to particular lexias until others have been visited. Thus, while on one reading a particular configuration of lexias may be displayed, on another additional text that changes the nature of the narrative may have been released. Guard fields can be circumvented by using the dropdown menu to select individual lexia titles, but in a text that contains almost a thousand lexias, the chances of locating a particularly relevant piece of information are slim. More importantly, overriding the guard fields ignores the narrative ambiguities that are integral to the reader’s experience of the text.

That hypertext fiction reading is characterized by rereading has been well documented in hypertext theory. Joyce argues that “hypertext fiction in some fundamental sense depends upon rereading” (“Nonce” 585) because a reader will often happen upon the same lexia more than once, only each time with a different experience of and knowledge about the rest of the text. In her analysis of Michael Joyce’s hypertext fiction, *afternoon, a story*, Douglas notes that while the contents of each lexia must remain the same, “you can trek across a single place four times . . . and discover that it possesses four radically different meanings each time” (“Understanding” 118). Ciccoricco devotes a book-length study to the process of rereading in hypertext, arguing that “the rereading of textual elements, via the recycling of nodes, is fundamental to (hyper)textual comprehension” (12). The fact that readers regularly revisit lexias during the course of their reading might imply that hypertext readers should adopt a more flexible reading strategy. In particular, readers should expect that the meaning or relevance of some lexias will change in light of new information, but also that the same lexia can operate in a number of different reading contexts.

*Victory Garden* houses several stylistically ambiguous forms of narration from which multiple interpretations about the status of the narrator and the scenes that she or he documents can be drawn. While most of the text is narrated by a heterodiegetic narrator using the third person, the text also contains first-person singular, first-person plural, and second-person narration. The tense of the narration also fluctuates between past, present, and future so that readers encounter a multitude of narrative agents, styles, and temporal perspectives, many of which can be allotted to a number of different contexts. One of the thirty-nine entrance links, for example, leads to the “Slacktown” lexia, which contains the following abridged text:



protagonist must know much better” (*Towards* 262). The opening sentence of the “Slacktown” lexia creates an unnatural narrative in which the narrator claims to have access to the reader’s mind and, as the narrative in “Slacktown” progresses, the unnaturalness continues but the referent of “you” changes. The narrator presents an increasingly precise description of a fictional scene, and this connects “you” to a more specific and fictional referent. Fludernik observes that “as second-person texts proceed to fill in more specific information about *you* . . . the status of this *you* as fictional persona becomes increasingly clear” (*Towards* 227). In the “Slacktown” lexia, the narrator describes a hotel lobby with intricate details including “concrete pillars” and “glassine cephalopod elevators” and in so doing provides an account of a space to which the reader does not belong. The visual description is also accompanied by proximal markers, “this” and “here,” which locate the spatial point of view firmly within the fictional world. The reporting of direct speech, “which way to . . . er . . . the lobby?” which is followed by a critical response by the narrator, also confirms that the narrator is addressing a fictional character rather than the reader. The rest of the reading path further confirms such a deictic shift as the narrative follows “you” through a number of equally specific scenes and dialogues so that as the second-person narrative provides more detailed descriptions, the status of the opening line in “Slacktown” and the initial referent of “you” as reader is undermined.

More specifically, the second-person narrative in “Slacktown” shifts from what Richardson defines as the “autotelic” form, in which the “direct address to a ‘you’ . . . is at times the actual reader” (30), to the “standard” form, where “a story is told, usually in the present tense, about a single protagonist who is referred to in the second person” (20). Moreover, as the details of the scene become more precise, the status of the “you” in the opening line is also undermined. While the reader is the initial recipient of the second-person address, the “you” retrospectively becomes what Herman defines as the “doubly-deictic” you, in which the “narrative *you* produces an ontological hesitation between . . . reference to entities . . . internal to the storyworld and reference to entities . . . external to the storyworld” (338). In this case “you” refers to both a fictional and a real addressee simultaneously, causing a large degree of ambiguity and reader identification without the ontological frame of the narrative being exceeded completely.

Irrespective of whether “you” refers to the reader or the protagonist or both, the second-person narrative in “Slacktown” is unnatural throughout because the narrator appears to have access to the thoughts of another being. Moreover, the present tense of the narrative implies also that the narrator knows what is happening at the same that the story is unfolding. As

Fludernik observes, “by employing the imperative and the narrative present tense . . . second-person fiction foregrounds the act of invention and illustrates how telling *generates* the story in the first place, rather than representing and reproducing in narrative shape a sequence of events that is prior to this act of linguistic creation” (*Towards* 262). The unnaturalness of the second-person voice in “Slacktown” is compounded therefore by the tense in which it is presented; the fictional scene cannot be simultaneously described and created.

As the references to Fludernik’s, Richardson’s, and Herman’s studies of print fiction suggest, the unnatural second-person narrative in “Slacktown” is certainly not exclusive to hypertext, and their narrative theories, which are based on print examples, can be successfully applied to the digital context of *Victory Garden*. However, the hypertext structure is used in *Victory Garden* to complicate and ultimately undermine the ontological status of the narrative in “Slacktown” as well as the many other lexias that follow and as such can be seen as offering a form of unnatural narration that is peculiar to the digital medium. As was noted in the discussion of hypertext fragmentation above, since readers often encounter the same part of a hypertext text via a number of different reading trajectories and/or revisit lexias in light of new information, their interpretation of lexias can change. The preceding analysis of the “Slacktown” lexia showed how a reader entering the text from one of several entrance links would encounter heterodiegetic second-person narration. However, if the lexia were to be accessed by a reader with more experience of the text or reached via a different reading route, other conclusions about the narrative in “Slacktown” could be drawn. More specifically, *Victory Garden* contains several scenes in which academics from the University of Tara are involved in researching dreams. During these parts of the text, experiments are performed in which volunteers are placed in a form of hypnotic sleep. Boris Urquhart then attempts to subliminally manipulate their dreaming experiences by speaking to them in the second-person voice. Providing a visual clue for readers, the dreamers’ experiences appear in lexias that are framed by a curved line at the top of the screen, as shown in the “Slacktown” extract on page 193. Readers with previous experience of the dreaming sequences will therefore likely categorize the narrative in “Slacktown” as well as the other lexias that follow as part of a narrative in which the voice of a homodiegetic narrator—Boris Urquhart—is heard by a character who is asleep. In this case, the narrative represents the thoughts of a character, listening to the direct speech of Boris Urquhart as he attempts to guide them through a particular dream world.

This alternative scenario is unnatural because it depicts a scene that cannot be replicated in the real world. We have access to our own thoughts only and

therefore cannot depict those of others. Similarly, we can never have access to a reporting experience at the same time that it is happening. However, while this scene is unnatural, it is unnatural in a way that is different from the unnaturalness of a heterodiegetic narrator's address. An address from the heterodiegetic narrator to either the reader or the protagonist or both, as shown in the initial analysis of "Slacktown," is unnatural because it implies that the future is known and also that minds can be read. An address to an unconscious character is unnatural because it suggests that it is possible for the thoughts of an unconscious character to be known as well as presented as they are simultaneously experienced.

In the "Slacktown" example, hypertext provides a distinctive context for unnatural narrative because the ontological status of the scene is dramatically altered by the knowledge that the reader has when he or she encounters the lexia. While readers of print fiction may also modify their interpretation of scenes based on new information, the hypertext structure allows both alternatives to exist in the same text. Crucially, these mutually exclusive events do not represent the same type of narrative contradiction as Emily's death and survival or the three versions of the same Urquhart-Tate scene. Once readers learn that the "Slacktown" lexia forms part of a dream sequence, any previous conclusions are superseded. Thus whereas narrative contradictions exist in parallel, narrative qualifications create a trail of disqualified possibilities. Yet while the result is different, in each case the analysis of "Slacktown" shows how the hypertext structure allows the unnaturalness of the scene to be influenced by the reading route through which it is reached, and this is something that is facilitated by the hypertext's fragmented structure.

## 6. Conclusion

The application of narrative theory has shown that the narrative contradictions and the second-person narrative housed in *Victory Garden* are unnatural. In the former case two logically irreconcilable scenarios are presented. In the latter the narrator claims to have access to the thoughts of others as well as an omniscient ability to document events as they unfold. From a methodological perspective, this analysis has also shown that narrative theory, which has been developed using examples from print fiction, can be used successfully to analyze unnaturalness in hypertext fiction. In addition, however, while this essay has argued that hypertext fiction is not inherently unnatural, it has shown that hypertext provides a multilinear and/or fragmentary context in which unnatural narratives can be placed. In a hypertext structure, narrative

contradictions can exist in parallel and lexias and links can be combined to form inescapable loops. Consequently, different readers will inevitably experience different narratives, and, indeed, the same reader may well experience a different narrative each time he or she reads the text. More importantly in the context of this analysis, when encountered in a range of different reading paths, the same section of text can have a range of different meanings, some natural and some unnatural. When coupled with ambiguous forms of reference, such as that found in second-person narration, the multilinearity of the narrative is compounded. Ultimately a hypertextual structure offers an environment for narrative fiction that cannot be replicated in print. Thus when we apply narrative theory, which has traditionally been based on the analysis of print, we must be conscious of the affordances that a digital context permits.

In addition, it is because the hypertext configuration of lexias and links allows for structural experimentation that unnatural elements proliferate in digital fiction. This analysis has focused on narrative multiplicity and narrative fragmentation in *Victory Garden*, but unnatural elements can also be found in a range of other hypertext fictions. Like *Victory Garden*, Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story* and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* both use the hypertext structure to house narrative contradictions. In other cases, the fragmentary hypertext structure facilitates the merging of narrative levels. For example, in *Patchwork Girl* the protagonist has a sexual relationship with a character from the novel she is writing, and in Richard Holeton's *Figurski at Findhorn on Acid* the characters email the author to complain about the way in which he is presenting them. In all three texts, as in many others, the hypertext structure is used to house playful but ultimately unnatural narratives (cf. Bell and Alber). All of these unnatural devices can be found in print, but the hypertext structure allows them to be placed in a digital environment, and it is therefore important that media-specific tools are developed to account for this. Moreover, that hypertext fictions consistently contain unnatural elements suggests that narrative theory can exploit them as plentiful sources of data. As this essay has shown, however, any narratological analysis must be sensitive to the media-specific affordances these kinds of texts inevitably bring with them.

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