Story/Story

David Kolb
Charles A. Dana Professor Emeritus
of Philosophy
Bates College
Home: 841 W 36th Ave., Eugene, OR
+1 541 345 3110

davkolb@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper starts with an introductory essay stating the issues and discussing the notion of metafiction. Then it continues in an online hypertext narrative demonstration of the interweaving of story and meta-story. The hypertext attempts to show in action how seemingly unified narratives and narrative voices are surrounded and influenced by other voices and meta-stories. No narrative is un-mediated and no narrative voice is alone. The hypertext concludes with some musings on the complexities of narrative reading and writing, also with counterpoint voices. Throughout, the text comments on issues about the reading and writing of hypertext narratives.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J/5 [**Arts and Humanities: literature**]

General Terms

Design, Experimentation, Human Factors

Keywords

Story, Metastory, Narrative, Hypertext, Links, Levels, Complex pages, Metafiction, Metanarrative
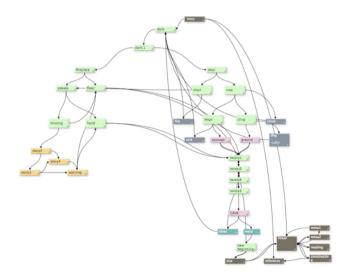
1. INTRODUCTION

This essay comes in two parts, this prose and an online hypertext. This introductory essay explains the issues raised and describes the solution that the hypertext tries to enact. The hypertext itself contains a story and ongoing reflections on the story, plus reflections on those reflections. It is not so much a logical argument for its conclusions as a demonstration of them in action, thus confirming their possibility.

The hypertext contains thirty-eight linked nodes. Thirty-two nodes (7000 words) tell a branching story in the Choose Your Own Adventure style. Each node is a complex page with the story in the left column and in the right a meta-story discussion by two voices, concerning issues about the construction of the story, and the general relations of stories to stories about stories, and the uses of hypertext for narrative. The remaining six nodes (3000 words) offer philosophical reflections about narrative incompleteness, authorial voices, and the possibilities of "constructive hypertext." These reflections are also accompanied by other voices.

The full hypertext can be accessed online (http://www.dkolb.org/dark.site/intro.html), or downloaded locally, in the Hypertext 2012 proceedings on the ACM Digital Library.

2. MAP OF THE HYPERTEXT

The map shows that the hypertext has a mostly tree-like structure but with some returns to the beginning and with all branches eventually leading to a single conclusion. The story occupies the tree-structure and the final set of nodes contains the philosophical musings.

3. THE ISSUES

In other writings I have argued that we too often rely on the presupposition that a concept, an argument, a place, or a community has a single core identity. I have tried to show how there are multiple layers, relations, and connections that do not nest together in a hierarchy organized around a single core. There are gaps and slidings and self-reflections even in what seems solid identity, especially as those identities endure through time by reproducing and reinterpreting themselves.[1]

This essay/hypertext takes up the relation of a story to the meta-stories and discourses that surround narrative. The border between story and meta-story may seem firm: here is the teller and there is the critic. I try to show how in action the hierarchy breaks down and borders are crossed.

In philosophy and logic there can be a sharp distinction between language and meta-language, as long as each language is taken as a finished product formally defined and derived from axioms in a way that "ordinary" language cheerfully ignores. And even with all the technicalities observed, paradoxes of self-reference can still arise and borders be transgressed.

When language is seen in the act of being produced, or a story in the act of being told, then its internal spacings and self-reflections become more available, as do the surrounding meta-stories that grow and guide its production. This hypertext tries to make that evident by telling a story and reflecting on the telling, all at once.

4. METAFICTION

The hypertext is an example of metafiction, fiction that emphasizes and comments on its own fictive character. More precisely, it offers a metanarrative, a narrative that foregrounds and comments on its own act of narration.

The use of the term "metanarrative" in this sense differs from the more familiar post-modern use of "meta-narrative" (deriving from Lyotard [17]) to designate totalizing over-narratives such as the Enlightenment story of Progress, the Marxist story of History, or the Christian story of Salvation History that orient and locate local and smaller stories within their expansive context. Such Lyotardian "meta-narratives" do not necessarily show up in metanarrative gestures, though they may. They are, though, part of the multiplicity of "meta-stories" that this hypertext is concerned with.

In this specialized sense of the terms,

> Metanarration and metafiction are umbrella terms designating self-reflexive utterances, i.e. comments referring to the discourse rather than to the story.

Although they are related and often used interchangeably, the terms should be distinguished: metanarration refers to the narrator's reflections on the act or process of narration; metafiction concerns comments on the fictionality and/or constructedness of the narrative.

> Thus, whereas metafictionality designates the quality of disclosing the fictionality of a narrative, metanarration captures those forms of self-reflexive narration in which aspects of narration are addressed in the narratorial discourse, i.e. narrative utterances about narrative rather than fiction about fiction.

> In contrast to metafiction, which can only appear in the context of fiction, types of metanarration can also be found in many non-fictional narrative genres and media. [21]

Given hypertext's ability to exfoliate nodes and links of many kinds in all directions, it is easy for hypertexts to become self-referential. See, for instance, the self-comments in afternoon, the self-analogies in *Patchwork Girl* [7], or the story of its own composition and performance in *The Unknown* [22].

5. HYPERTEXT TECHNIQUES

The hypertext story uses a mildly complex pattern of links, whereby each page is replaced by another that occupies the same place on the screen. But the text also makes each single page complex, with two columns and multiple voices. Both the link pattern and the complex pages do metanarrative, but in different ways.

Link-and-node hypertext that replaces one page with another can enact different kinds of relationships. Links can be arranged to make a text multiple and self-referential, with no clear central text standing over against subordinates such as footnotes.

Complex pages, however, introduce spatial contrasts, and these combine with our spatial habits of perception to relations and centralities and subordinations. One benefit of spatial hypertext is the way these spatial habits and perceptions can be used or played against. But for metanarrative spatially complex pages almost inevitably introduce subordinations that may quite literally marginalize some voices.

Lately on the web, complexly linked hypertext structures that might enact metanarrative gestures have largely given way to simpler Wikipedia-style collections of linked mini-essays [15]. So complex pages then must take up more of the burden in doing metafiction, and new creativity is called for.

6. ILLUSIONS

Metafiction is hardly new. One of its finest examples is the "first" Western novel, *Don Quixote* [18]. But in keeping with a general trend in twentieth-century critical theory, metafiction is now interpreted as trying to break down the illusions of a unified narrator and seamless story world. These illusions are seen as restricting readers' freedom and as supporting potentially or actually oppressive institutions. They need to be "denaturalized" and seen for the constructs they are.

---

[1] See [16] for a discussion of the complex unity of places, [11] for the slidings of concepts, [13] for the problem of criticism without a firm meta-platform, and [14] for the different modes of unity in hypertext vs. linear writings.

But metanarrative, with its self-referential narrative voice(s), can also be seen as maintaining illusions:

> substantiating the illusion of authenticity that a narrative seeks to create.…by accentuating the act of narration, thus triggering a different strategy of naturalization, viz. what Fludernik ([3], p. 341) has called the "frame of storytelling." [21]

Perhaps, though, we should talk less about naturalizing and denaturalizing, which suggest that normal narratives are doing something illegitimate or socially repressive. We should talk of metafiction as making clear how a narrative voice or a story world that appears seamless and immediate is really internally complex and mediated by connections among conflicting internal and external multiplicities. The immediacy and unity of voice and story can be seen for what they are, effects produced in a field of forces and mediations that they do not dominate or control.

We should also question the presupposition that a "normal" narrative produces a single unified cognitive frame in its audience, which metanarrative then disturbs by adding a second frame. For instance:

> Wolf [26] seeks to increase the transmedial applicability of metafiction by reconceptualizing it in a first step as a non media-specific concept, namely as "metareference." Metareference denotes a signifying practice that generates a self-referential meaning and *actualizes a secondary cognitive frame* in the recipient. On this basis, individual media can be examined with respect to their metareferential capacities. [21, my emphasis].

Notice in the quoted paragraph how talk of a "*secondary* cognitive frame" presupposes a single unified *principal* cognitive frame. In opposition to this, my hypertext story tries to show how both author and reader inhabit multiple levels and frames at the same time, all the time, within the acts of writing or reading.

What I wanted to show in this hypertext was that no voice and no frame exists alone but is always surrounded and supported by other voices [12].

It is wrong in any case to presuppose that most narratives have always produced the illusion of a unified author and seamless story world. The hypertext mentions the case of an endlessly ramifying Indian skein of stories that never reach a conclusion. A seventeenth century reader of *Don Quixote* who was familiar with medieval romances and Italian mock-epics [2], especially Ariosto, would have been used to long narratives that were over-rich and internally inconsistent, or were attributed to multiple and pseudonymous authors, or that ironically commented on themselves. Critics who see oppressive illusions holding sway until being denaturalized by metafiction may be constructing an overly unified picture of the life of narrative. Multiplicity and implicit self-reference may be the rule, not the exception.[2]

---

[2] Even though it ignores European Medieval and Renaissance works, and the whole non-western world, the Wikipedia entry for "Metafiction" still lists dozens of works from the ancient world, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as modern metafictions.

7. REFERENCES

(This list includes items referred to in this introductory essay, and also items referred to in the hypertext.)

[1] Bernstein, Mark, "More than Legible", http://www.markbernstein.org/talks/HT00.html

[2] Brand, Peter. *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 1999

[3] Fludernik, Monika. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. London: Routledge, 1996.

[4] Ingarden, Roman. *Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, translated by Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

[5] Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.

[6] "Hypertext Hotel", http://hyperdis.de/hyphotel/ [No longer available on line.]

[7] Jackson, Shelley. *Patchwork Girl*, Watertown, MA: Eastgate Systems, 1995.

[8] Jauss, Hans Robert. *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, translated by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

[9] Joyce, Michael. *afternoon, a story*. Watertown: Eastgate Systems, 1986-2011. http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/Afternoon.html

[10] Joyce, Michael. "Siren Shapes: Exploratory and Constructive Hypertexts". Academic Computing (November, 1988): 10+. Reprinted in *The New Media Reader*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

[11] Kolb, David. *The Critique of Pure Modernity: Hegel, Heidegger, and After*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

[12] Kolb, David. *Socrates in the Labyrinth: Hypertext, Argument, Philosophy*. Watertown, MA: Eastgate Systems, 1994.

[13] Kolb, David. "Hegelian Buddhist Hypertextual Media Inhabitation, or, Criticism in the Age of Electronic Immersion", *Adrift in the Technological Matrix, Bucknell Review* 46.2, Autumn 2002, 90-108. Online at http://www.dkolb.org/hegelian.buddhist.media.pdf

[14] Kolb, David. "Twin Media: Hypertext Structure Under Pressure," *Proceedings of the 2004 ACM Hypertext Conference*. Online at http://www.dkolb.org/twin.media.ht04/covershe.html.

[15] Kolb, David. "The Revenge of the Page" http://www.dkolb.org/fp002.kolb.pdf

[16] Kolb, David. *Sprawling Places*. University of Georgia Press, 2008. Also a book-length hypertext at http://www.dkolb.org/sprawlingplaces.

[17] Lyotard, Jean François. *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

[18] Mancing, Howard. 1981. "Cide Hamete Benengeli vs. Miguel de Cervantes: The Metafictional Dialectic of Don Quijote," in *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 1.1-2 (1981): 63-81. Online at http://www.h-net.org/~cervant/csa/articf81/mancing.htm

[19] Moulthrop, Stuart. *Victory Garden*. Watertown: Eastgate Systems, 1986-2011. http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/VictoryGarden.html

[20] Moulthrop, Stuart. "Polymers, Paranoia, and the Rhetorics of Hypertext", Writing on the Edge, 1991. Reprinted in *The New Media Reader CD*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

[21] Neumann, Birgit and Nünning, Ansgar.. "Metanarration and Metafiction", Paragraph 4. In: Hühn, Peter et al. (eds.): *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2012. Online at http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Metanarration_and_Metafiction

[22] Rettberg, Scott, Gillespie, William, Stratton, Dirk, Marquardt, Frank. *The Unknown*. http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/rettberg_theunknown.html

[23] Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*, volume 3, translated by Kathleen Blarney and David Pellauer, University of Chicago press 1988. Abbreviated as TN3.

[24] Somadeva. *Kathāsaritsāgara*. (For a discussion of this Indian "ocean of stories", see [9] and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathāsaritsāgara. An English translation of the Kathāsaritsāgara in two volumes can be downloaded from http://www.archive.org/details/oceanofstorybein06somauoft.)

[25] van Buitenen, J. A. B. *Tales of Ancient India*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.

[26] Wolf, Werner. "Metareference across Media: The Concept, its Transmedial Potentials and Problems, Main Forms and Functions." Werner Wolf (ed.) in collaboration with Katharina Bantleon and Jeff Thoss. *Metareference across Media. Theory and Case Studies*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009, 1–85.