

# The Networked Self in Hypertext Fiction

Kanae Uchiyama

Marshall McLuhan points out that the rapid development of electric media has transformed our psychic and social consciousness, and he calls this psychic shifting “the final phase of the extensions of man” (3). His famous aphorism, “The medium is the message,” seems to mean that the form itself is the content and that our consciousness cannot be separated from technologies in order to express itself. Walter J. Ong also makes it clear that the act of writing, which seems to be so natural for us at present, has been the primary technology influencing our mentality: “More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness” (78). He demonstrates how historically some media thought to “technologize the word” — namely writing, printing, and the computer — have been criticized by some for dehumanizing our culture (80). For instance, Plato regarded writing as an unnatural technology that destroys memory and weakens the mind. However, Ong’s observation on writing is based on the unity of form and content, and shows that our consciousness does not exist prior to the forms or technologies used to express it:

To say writing is artificial is not to condemn it but to praise it. Like other artificial creations and indeed more than any other, it is utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials. Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word. Such transformations can be uplifting. Writing heightens consciousness. (82)

Here, he contends that to be artificial is natural for human beings and that the usage of technology makes it possible to extend our inner lives.

However, just as writing went against Plato’s politics at one time, now the same kind of debate exists as to whether the development of digital

technology is useful for democracy or instead creates totalitarian uniformity within society. George P. Landow, a leading hypertext critic, who has argued in favor of the anarchic or democratizing dimensions of the medium, points out that quite a few intellectuals, especially in the humanities, show a groundless distrust toward technology:

Resentment of the device one needs, resentment at one's own need and guilt, and a Romantic dislike of the artificiality of the device that answers one's needs mark most humanists' attitudes toward technology, and these same factors appear in the traditional view of the single most important technology we possess — writing. (275)

At the same time, Landow asserts that, “The history of information technology from writing to hypertext reveals an increasing democratization or dissemination of power” (277). This statement suggests that the power relationship between author and reader will change in a digital world. Traditionally, an author has been considered the father or the owner of his printed texts and maintains his creative authority; therefore, the functions of author and reader have been completely separate. Criticizing the power of the author, Roland Barthes reveals that the text is neither a fixed work nor “a computable object” (57); instead it is a fluid, open space where readers create their own meanings. Landow realizes that this postmodern approach to the text can be easily put into practice in the digital world and that hypertext has the potential to widely transform the relationship between author and reader. In this paper, I will show how hypertext can be a democratizing technology by considering how it reconstructs our sense of subjectivity.

Landow draws our attention to some similarities between the ideas of pioneers of information technology, like Theodor H. Nelson or Andries van Dam, and the writings of postmodern theorists, such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes: “All four, like many others who write on hypertext and literary theory, argue that we must abandon conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and replace them with ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks” (2). Anyone who reads and writes hypertext in a digital environment can easily experience the concept of an “open” text — what Derrida and Barthes have worked hard

to show in *Glas* and *S/Z*— because electronic writing enables us to escape from the fixed linearity of printed books and changes traditional notions of the coherence of language, or even text. Jay David Bolter thinks that the practice of deconstruction has become entirely natural in digital space because electronic writing has lost the assumption of the “fixed” character of a text:

The question is whether the deconstruction of an electronic text seems worth the effort. The electronic text never takes itself seriously, as a printed text inevitably does. Deconstruction itself is playful, but its playful attitude requires a fundamental seriousness in its object. An electronic text already comes to us in pieces, as a tentative, fluid collection of words: why seek to deconstruct it further? (*Writing Space* 165)

Bolter therefore insists on the necessity of “a new literary theory to achieve a positive understanding of electronic writing” (166). He is not satisfied with the postmodern concept of “infinity,” which shows that we are not able to reach what Derrida calls “the transcendental signified,” and emphasizes instead the arbitrary and limited character of electronic writing: “We suggested earlier that a simple interactive fiction might take the reader in a circle. In such cases, the hypertextual network is not infinite; it is instead, like the lines of latitude and longitude on the globe, finite but unbounded. The computer provides us with an electronic writing space that is always a finite world” (203). In fact, one of the greatest concerns among hypertext theorists is the issue of freedom in a limited electronic environment.

To what degree, then, are hypertext users free in the digital environment? Or how are readers of digital literature freer than readers of traditional printed books? The main characteristic of hypertext, which is composed of blocks of text connected by electronic links, is to offer readers a non-linear reading experience. Ilana Snyder examines how hypertext allows readers to choose their own ways by following links they like, and often gives them opportunities to add their own writings, thereby breaking the border between writers and readers: “Hypertext differs from printed text by offering readers multiple paths through a body of information: it allows them to make their own connections, incorporate their own links, and

produce their own meanings. Hypertext consequently blurs the boundaries between readers and writers” (127). A good example of this can be found in the digital narrative *Califa* (2000), published as a CD-ROM, that comprises digitized music, many visual images, maps, and multiple narratives produced by three main characters who attempt to find gold buried in California. Readers are required to find some clues hidden in the large quantity of information presented by these characters, and the clues help the readers discover the treasure. The three characters, Augusta, Calvin, and Kaye represent different approaches to the text, or the chronological order of real events, historical materials, and mythological stories, respectively. Readers can begin with any character’s information and follow given rules to explore varied narratives; they have to find their own threads to follow by using various navigation methods and by rearranging independent fragments into a coherent story.

Thus, in the hypertextual mode, readers need to play active roles. They must decide which paths they choose or which materials they use and rearrange them into useful information. On the other hand, readers who read printed books for simple entertainment, are passive because they don’t necessarily need to seek associations between different parts of the narrative. Critics, however, generally select some parts out of the whole text, combine them with concepts and citations from other critical essays, and construct their own original ideas. Because almost all readers of hypertextual narratives follow different reading procedures, hypertext critics would focus more on rhetorical devices or intertextual connections that hypertext designers use to lead readers, rather than paying attention to the content, or what writers mean through the narrative. In many cases, hypertext critics might discuss what a given story suggests, but each reader of the text has not necessarily followed the same procedures, thereby resulting in different beginnings and endings of the narrative. Readers of hypertext play the role of critic, to some degree, in the sense that they find connections among individual blocks of text and make linkages, which is the basic work in traditional criticism.

This function of hypertext, which demands active reader participation, seems to be at the root of the discussion associating democracy and

hypertextuality. If the reader serves as the “temporal center” that creates meaningful associations among electronic links, it is difficult to regard his position as that of the contemporary, “decentered” subject presented by postmodern deconstructionists. Postmodernists such as Lyotard and Baudrillard have denied the notion of the autonomous or rational ego. However, as Silvio Gaggi says, it is hard to address moral and political issues through the perspective of these postmodern thinkers: “Postmodern and poststructural thinkers have been used — justifiably or unjustifiably — to rationalize ignoring contemporary social and political realities as they affect real people in real situations” (145). Terry Eagleton, in *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, also claims that postmodern theory results in a new “universalism” as a consequence of leaning toward decentralism, plurality, multiplicity, and contingency, while it has little to say about the liberal motifs of the law, justice, freedom, equality, and unity. He refuses the postmodern image of a free-floating subject existing without closure: “As far as any ‘positive’ doctrine of freedom goes, a world which really was random would not stay still long enough for me to realize my freedom, in the sense of taking the reasonably determinate steps involved in furthering my chosen projects. Freedom demands closure, a paradox which postmodernism seems reluctant to entertain” (42). These critical remarks suggest that the decentered subjectivity proposed by postmodernism is too passive to have a democratizing influence in society. Janet H. Murray, one of the most positive hypertext theorists, also expresses her resistance to postmodernist theory: “Academic theorists reduce literature to a system of arbitrary symbols that do not point to anything but other texts. But in our ordinary lives, we do not experience it as a succession of car chases” (274). Murray, who is dissatisfied with the lack of subjectivity in postmodernism, expects that digital literature will serve to recover our interactive participation in creating narratives and will enhance our self-consciousness as individuals.

Yet if hypertext enables readers to choose their paths, it is also true that their freedom is limited. Snyder suggests two ways that hypertext restricts readers rather than giving them freedom: “At one extreme, a hypertext document may be so restrictive that readers find they have no more (and perhaps even fewer) navigational choices than they would with a linear

version of the text. At the other extreme, a hypertext document may be so open, interconnected and reader-controlled that users could be overwhelmed by the multiplicity of choices” (128). First, as Bolter also suggests, it is possible for hypertext programmers to restrict readers’ freedom as they like: “The author may put any number of restrictions on the reading order. The extent of the reader’s choices and therefore the reader’s freedom in examining the literary space depends upon the links that the author creates between episodes. The reader may have to choose from among a few alternatives or may range widely through the work” (123). Second, when readers cannot ground themselves enough to choose a path in the huge flood of information, they become passive despite their freedom, even if they have options for action. Quite a few hypertext narratives present the navigational maps to show readers’ current positions within the entire structure of links. Nevertheless, readers often lose their positions in hypertext narratives; that is, they cannot presume as to when they will reach final sections. Just as Fredric Jameson suggests the loss of cognitive mapping in a postmodern space like the Bonaventure Hotel in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Silvio Gaggi points out that hypertext readers lose their positions as subjects in the case that they choose their next path without rational reasons: “This disorientation [by the complexity of hypertext] is analogous to the disorientation of the subject in the postmodern space described by Jameson and the inability of the subject to construct a conceptual map of the whole that would make effective action possible” (105).

It cannot be said that hypertext users are “free” in the Cartesian notion of a localized self, but they do not represent the postmodern notion of a passive subject. In *Remediation*, Bolter states that both the networked self as collective identity and the unified self as individual identity are “complementary rather than contradictory” in a hypertextual environment, since “The networked self is made up both of that self that is doing the networking and the various selves that are presented on the network” (233). On the presumption that our notion of self will be modified with the development of new digital multimedia, Bolter insists that digital users can possess their own viewpoints immersed in virtual reality and simultaneously contribute

to creating associations and affiliations in networked communities: “The remediated self is also evident in ‘virtual communities’ on the Internet, in which individuals stake out and occupy verbal and visual points of view through textual and graphic manifestations, but at the same time constitute their collective identities as a network of affiliations among these mediated selves” (232).

Bolter, in *Degrees of Freedom*, refers to the computer as a hypertext “symbol manipulator,” and also calls the computer a virtual reality “perceptual manipulator.” His initial interest in the two functions of a computer seems to have developed at present into the idea that the centered self is compatible with the decentered subject in digital multimedia. We can see this in his discussion of the distance from a viewer to a representation as graphic object: “The scientific eye is different in important ways from the virtual eye that electronic technology now offers us. The scientific eye observed at a distance; it emphasized the separation of viewer and object and defined an objective, inquiring, and therefore scientific relationship between the two. The virtual eye does not favor abstraction or distance; it offers instead presence or empathetic involvement on the part of the viewer.” This discussion of the scientific or observing eye reminds us in turn of Walter Benjamin’s concept of “aura.” In both “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and “A Small History of Photography,” Benjamin defines aura as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (222) or as “the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be” (250). He realizes that new media such as film and photography have become transparent by losing what he calls aura — the “distance” between a viewer and objects — and have allowed viewers to enjoy the sense of immersion inside media:

The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thor-

oughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art. (233–34)

Thus, Benjamin has realized the transition from the “scientific” eye to the “virtual” eye in the new era of technical reproducibility.

Today, however, hypertext requires its viewer to have both types of the eyes. A film viewer as well as a hypertext user can be immersed in the world of the representation of objects, but the latter needs to maintain a distance from objects in the digital environment. Bolter, in *Writing Space*, argues that hypertext, which can be transparent or opaque, asks readers to “look through” the text as a story and “look at” the text itself as a formal structure of allusions:

Rapid oscillation between the transparent and the opaque (between looking through and looking at) is a defining characteristic of hypertext. It applies not only to interactive fiction, but also to hypertextual pedagogy, technical writing, and databases. In any hypertext readers move back and forth between reading the verbal text and reading the structure. When they are reading the verbal text, they may temporarily forget about the hypertextual structure and concentrate on the voice in the text. When they are moving about in the structure, readers are brought back to the hypertext as a network of elements. A good hypertext is constructed so that the movement between these two kinds of reading is almost effortless. (167–68)

Readers of good hypertext may enjoy immersing themselves in the text, but they also need the observing eye to construct the collage of fragmented materials dispersed in the text. As Walter J. Ong once said, the act of writing has enhanced our consciousness because writing enables the writer to take distance from objects. Writing on paper materials has given the writer the observing or scientific eye, but also has been the cause of the romantic concept of authority. In addition, writing and print generally have ignored the reader’s response. For readers of printed books, it is not so easy to make contact with the authors. However, digital literature seems to recover the readers’ active role by giving them some ways of responding to authors. If we really want to fully experience this new type of subject, who

is endowed both with the observing eye and with the immersing eye, hypertext documents on the World Wide Web will give us a more ideal environment than even digital literature published as a CD-ROM. On the Internet, we can exchange our ideas with actual others and experience the networked self.

*99 People on the Train*, a Japanese on-line hypertext fiction started by Yumehito Inoue in 1996, is composed of the streams of consciousness of 99 people who move from one station to another on the Ginza subway line (there are 18 stations). You can start anywhere by clicking on a station on a subway map or by choosing a character shown to be in a specific car on a map of the train. Some characters are interconnected with other characters in the closed and open carriage, from which several persons get on or get off at each station. You can expand your story if you shift from one consciousness to another; your story might include a love story or a kidnapping. Readers can contact the writer via e-mail and suggest additional narrative ideas. Since its inception, Inoue actually has added a few characters that were designed by readers; therefore, there are currently 103 characters. And in the attached chat room, readers and Inoue have the space to communicate with one another. Quite a few hypertext narratives are open to anyone with access to the World Wide Web, and are coauthored or have chat rooms for discussion. These hypertext narratives show that the once one-sided relationship between author and reader is transformed into an interactive one.

This Japanese hypertext fiction presents one more interesting suggestion in terms of the reader-author relationship. One reader started a series of short stories that were continued by other, multiple readers. The first short story he wrote is about his fantasy of meeting other readers with whom he has had contact in the chat room. He asked others to choose one of several suggested options for the end of his story or to write the next short story. What this first reader-author calls “a relay of stories” seems to prove the possibility that readers can turn into authors in the electronic writing space. Yet if people choose to create collaborative narratives on the Internet, they will need rules or minimal formal constraints to continue the project. I know this from personal experience. When I was a child, a friend and I

tried to write a succession of stories between us without communicating about them during the process, but it was not so easy to continue without discussion. I believe that in the future, narrative projects on the Internet will require collaboration in order to disperse power among many users of hypertext.

Landow posits four main characteristics of hypertext: “The use of hypertext systems involves four kinds of access to text and control over it: reading, linking, writing, and networking” (285). As we have observed, reading and linking are easily performed in hypertext documents. Sophisticated digital fiction and poetry, in CD-ROM formats, give readers the writing space to take note of or respond to questions. However, the CD-ROM is not so different from the printed book because both media have the quality of independence from other texts. On the other hand, for readers of “open” hypertext on the web, writing in a discussion room is directly associated with creating the networked self, because his writing might be useful for other people. Landow himself has given readers who visit his homepages opportunities to write and add their documents to them. He does not refuse the concept of authorship, however, suggests the necessity of another type of copyright law to correspond to the new relationship among users of hypertext: “Hypertext . . . requires a new balancing of rights belonging to those entities whom we can describe variously as primary versus secondary authors, authors versus reader-authors, or authors versus linkers. Although no one should have the right to modify or appropriate another’s text any more than one does now, hypertext reader-authors should be able to link their own texts or those by a third author to a text created by someone else, and they should also be able to copyright their own link sets should they wish to do so” (303). The complexity of the reader-author relationship in hypertext requires new rules to satisfy both the rights of an individual and the interests of communities. In the electronic community, the importance of an individual is not contradictory to her contribution to the networked society because the system empowers the individual to satisfy herself through her involvement with communities. Gaggi associates the exchange of ideas and information in hypertext with “live conversations” because it may be difficult to “determine how much each participant

contributed to the result” when an understanding or solution emerges from a casual conversation (106). Bolter also finds a similarity between hypertext and dialogue: “A dialogue speaks with more than one voice and therefore shares or postpones responsibility. . . . A hypertextual essay in the computer is always a dialogue between the writer and his or her readers, and the reader has to share the responsibility for the outcome” (*Writing Space* 117).

McLuhan, whose ideas opened this essay, is an early theorist who regarded speech, jazz, and sport as media that could be used to disperse power among participants. He divides media into two groups: the hot medium (film, radio, photography, etc) to construct the one-handed relationship from artists to receivers, and the cool medium to be filled by participants. He calls the waltz “a hot, fast mechanical dance suited to the industrial time,” while he calls jazz cool, “a casual dialogue form of dance quite lacking in the repetitive and mechanical forms of the waltz” (27). Jazz is regarded as the only form of music original to the U.S. But it also has its root in the “call and response” pattern, itself a tool for developing collective identities in small communities of West Africa, where anyone can participate in dancing and music if she claps her hands and responds to other players. Now in a jam session, each musician is allowed to display her individual ability through improvisation, but she should not break the harmony among other musicians. In this sense, jazz has some political connotations in the United States. Murray also associates the hypertext with: “The interactor, whether as navigator, protagonist, explorer, or builder, makes use of this repertoire of possible steps and rhythms to improvise a particular dance among the many, many possible dances the author has enabled” (153).

These media theorists, who find early forms of hypertext in discussion, dialogue, sport, and jazz, suggest that hypertext has a new “aura,” in the sense that it is basically only one presence to participants. Of course, discussion, jazz, and sport can be copied and repeated by media. Yet, audiences often prefer to go to concerts or stadiums to enjoy live performances, even if they could repeatedly watch the same performances on TV. And these performances also depend on improvisation or chance and

are developed in relation to the direct responses of observers, even while they follow some rules or regulations on a basic level. While reading and writing in the digital world does not represent real physical closeness to others, it follows something of the same principle because it is based on the call and response relationship among individuals. As the consequence of receiving responses, hypertext users can feel their presence through these media.

Through Sherry Turkle's comparison of our self-image in the Internet era with a homepage, we can see how our remediated selves can be simultaneously multiple and coherent: "If we take the home page as a real estate metaphor for the self, its decor is postmodern. Its different rooms with different styles are located on computers all over the world. But through one's effort, they are brought together to be of a piece" (259). We are networked through others on the Internet, but at the same time we need unitary selves to respond to others. When we act as individual and offer information to others through the Internet, we simultaneously expand our networked identities. As a democratized media, hypertext seems to suggest a notion of subjectivity beyond postmodern thinking; it will reform the postmodern decentered self and resituate the position of an individual between the localized self and the networked self.

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