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Temporal and Spatial Coordinates in Hypertext Fiction

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Temporal and Spatial Coordinates in Hypertext Fiction

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Abstract- Electronic literature, or hypertext fiction, as a new trend in the development of literary works, demonstrates ever-lasting, inexhaustible search for new ways of self-expression by human mind which goes along with investigations and exploitations of new possibilities modern technologies provide for composition of works of fiction that belong to the age-old literary genres. The structure of a hypertext provides a way to link and get access to multiple parts of a text that are joined by various types of relations as a web of nodes. By choosing a certain link from an available number of options, a reader makes a leap in time and, consequently, in space, that is changes what M. Bakhtin defined as a chronotope -- a constitutive unit of form and content in literature that combines spatial and temporal parameters into one whole, into a system of coordinates for a certain narrative action. A linked structure of a hypertext, organized into a network of fragments and connections between them forms "a mosaic" of chronotopes. A change of time dimension entails a change of space dimension and results in constant change of chronotopes creating the effect of a kaleidoscope each turn of which forms a new picture from available parts.

The paper examines how a change of time and space coordinates creates new possibilities for organizing a narrative space in the early works of electronic fiction by Michael Joyce and Stuart Moulthrop.

Keywords: hypertext fiction, chronotope, composition of plot lines, narrative space.

I. Introduction

Digital computers engendered new ways of reading and writing that undergo transformation together with the rapid evolution in the field of digital technology. Possibilities of the net have encouraged imagination and creative abilities of its users leading to a whole array of innovative writings that reflect experiments with the net. Immediate access to textual material affects the principles of work with computers and influences the way literature evolves. The function of the reader has also been transformed from passive, to active reading. A net structure of computer-mediated texts allows every point of a text to be connected with any other point, changing the role of the reader from interpretation to intervention with the aim to gain control of a narrative. Theodor Nelson coined the term "hypertext" for this new way of organizing a text that could be read in a sequence chosen by the reader, instead of following the sequence premeditated by the writer. The process of searching and finding likens reading a hypertext to a game by adding a gambling element of excitement to the process of reading, as accessing the message is as important as the message itself. A feedback loop between the reader and the text is regarded as one of the main distinguishing features of electronic fiction (Eskelinen, 2012: 22).

Another important feature of electronic literature is a code (Hayles, 2008: 5) which needs to be activated in order to read the text and appreciate its peculiarities. One more peculiarity of hypertext fiction is non-linear approach to time, the idea of which comes from Jorge Luis Borges`s short story *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1999: 127) where time is viewed as a non-uniform and non-absolute notion, as "an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times."

Authors of hypertext fiction exploit the idea of non-uniform time to create a panoramic depiction of connected and parallel events with the aim of showing an integrated picture of a fictional world as the structure of a hypertext provides a way to link and access multiple parts of a text that are joined by various types of association, or cause-effect relations to one another as a web of nodes. By choosing a certain link from an available number of options, the reader makes a leap in time and, consequently, in space, that is changes a chronotope, which according to Bakhtin (1981: 425) is a constitutive unit of form and content that combines spatial and temporal parameters into one whole, into a system of coordinates for a certain narrative action, the background on which actions unfold and images are depicted.

II. Methodology

The notion of *chronotope* acquires an intrinsic significance for hypertext fiction that resorts to the method of changing chronotopes to show an overall picture of narrative events. A linked structure of a hypertext, organized into networks of fragments and connections between them at a static level may be compared to a mosaic of chronotopes. This represents the main distinction in composition of paper based fictional works and the works of electronic fiction. Narration in hypertext fiction is anachronous. The time dimension changes from present to flashbacks and flash forwards that entail the change of space dimension, and results in constant change of chronotopes. Simultaneously, changes of spatial dimension let authors show actions happening

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elsewhere at the same time. Reading a hypertext is like looking into a kaleidoscope, each turn of which creates a new picture from the already available parts. Instead of finishing reading a hypertext, "the reader either exhausts the text, or the text exhausts the reader" (Aarseth, 1997).

A combination of hidden and visual links gives the narrative a latent ambiguity that is a hallmark of digital hypertext (Mangen 2008: 410-412). The online sketch *Lasting Image* by Carolyn Guyer and Michael Joyce (2000) is an example of a hypertext fiction the gamble effect of which depends on browsing the screen in search of hidden links. Set in a Japanese village after World War II, it is told, as far as it can be understood, by one of the former American soldiers who were still staying in Japan and used to go to a small fishing village below Yokohama to get some beer. There they met a blind monk who had lost his sight looking up into the searing light at Nagasaki. The man, whose name was Meisetsu, wore a camera curved out of wood and took miraculous photographs with it. The short episodes represent reminiscences of the narrator that are printed on the background of the old man`s photographs of Japanese scenery, abodes and temples.

Arrows in the bottom right hand corner move the narration from one picture and an episode to another. Some links also appear on the pages as visual signposts, others can be found by moving the cursor across the entire picture. Reading the sketch resembles looking through a collection of photographs of different locations taken at different time and reading inscriptions that reflect these recollections.

However, in spite of various differences, there are more similarities in constructing hypertexts and printed literature than differences. Bolter and Joyce (1987: 41) regard hypertext as a "new kind of flexible, interactive fiction", "a continuation of the modern 'tradition' of experimental literature in print." One similarity of hypertexts and paper based texts is the structure of plot lines (Ciccoricco, 2007: 5) that fall into three basic categories: axial, arborescent, and networked. In multi-plot genres, in terms of formalists, plot lines have a chain, parallel, or circular organization.

III. Discussion

Axial -- a structure situated along an axis, is the structure of the first literary hypertext "*afternoon, a story"* by Michael Joyce (1987), the initiator of this trend in literature, who first used a computer screen as a page to write a text composed of blocks, or "lexias" (R. Barthes, 1974), and electronic links as connections between them.

The main plot line corresponds to the story of a protagonist, a divorced technical writer Peter, who, one afternoon suddenly remembers a car crash he had witnessed in the morning. Recalling the accident and two bodies on the ground, he begins to suspect that the wrecked car belonged to his former wife Lisa, and that the victims of the accident might have been she and their son Andy. Psychological by nature, the story features the narrator, who fears he has lost his son in a car accident. The haunting recollections of the scene by the protagonist are objectified as a change of the main plot line if a reader chooses a different path, and express a stream of consciousness of a disquieted mind. The anxiety of the narrator is expressed through a recurrent sentence "*I want to say I may have seen my son die this morning*." This is the loop that brings readers back to this lexia again and again. Corresponding to memories flashbacks are reflected through changing chronotopes. However, readers do not get an answer to the question of what had actually happened.

Twelve Blue (1996), another hypertext by Michael Joyce is a flow of associational thinking expressed via surfing the Web. The hypertext includes 269 links in 96 spaces. A column on the left displays coloured threads representing links in the network of the StorySpace passing through eight points on a grid. These threads indicate narrative lines of the main characters. The reader moves on by clicking on the threads, or on hyperlinks within the text which appears as light blue segments on a dark blue background on the right, larger part of the screen. Each page is named splitting the story into separate poetic fragments, each of them repeating the word "blue". The narration is nonlinear in which parallel plot lines are interconnected by links, which bring to various associations of characters connected with people, events and places. Browsing the text in a random way, the reader assembles interlaced segments into a story told from twelve different perspectives, and twelve characters with complex inner lives come to life reflecting its multifaceted character.

Michael Joyce continued experiments with hypertext structure. *Twilight, A Symphony* (1996) indicates to a shift toward virtual reality worlds of narrative storytelling and has a more complex, branching, arborescent structure. The protagonist of the novel is a journalist Hugh Colin Enright, who kidnaps his infant son and hides from his estranged wife. On the shores of Pleasant Lake he encounters a Polish emigrant and his wife, Magda (Magdalena), who shelter them. Some years later Magda, suffering from an incurable form of cancer, finds Hugh and asks him to help her search for the Twilight Doctor, who, as she hopes, will assist her in her death. When their search fails, Hugh agrees to help Magda in her unsuccessful attempt to commit a suicide.

The narration moves in two directions: to the east, or in the past is life; to the west, or in the future lies death. The past and the future are interconnected. The text of *Twilight* consists of 389 nodes connected by

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over 1,300 links (Ciccoricco, 2012). The nodes are linked not only sequentially, but are also included into one another. The novel is a vivid example of a hypertext structured as kaleidoscope of chronotopes. Approximation to the end turns out to be a return to the beginning. As death in this novel would have indicated the end of the narrative, the motif of the failed suicide incorporated the feeling of endlessness of Magda`s sufferings into the thematic structure of the story.

The most complex, networked structure, is represented by an interconnected system of nodes in which there is no dominant axis of orientation. It is the structure of the novel *Victory Garden* (1992) by Stuart Moulthrop that is often referred to as a traditional, typical academic novel, which vividly shows the mosaic structure of chronotopes in hypertext fiction. Thematically, it is a mixture of American campus novel and anti-war novel set during the Gulf War in 1991, primarily in an imaginary University town Tara, and centers on Emily Runbird and the lives and relations of the people connected with her. Most characters are teachers or students of the University who give their own perspective to the story and are interrelated in various ways. As most of the hypertext novels, *Victory Garden* has no set "end". The novel contains 105 spaces, 993 lexias and 500 hyperlinks. Readers may follow one of the lexias that is indicated on the map, or follow one of the thirteen "Paths to Explore" that are centered around one of the characters of the novel. By pressing on default link one can go to seven more "Paths to Deplore". That is, *Victory Garden* offers twenty paths of a varying length to traverse the text by using the return key after each lexia.

Narration in the novel is anachronous. Time dimension constantly changes from the present to flashbacks, or even dreams that entail a change of space dimension, i.e. result in constant change of chronotopes. Each path the readers take brings them to different fragmented pieces of the story, or nodes, and by rereading different paths the reader obtains different perspectives of different characters. Luis Borges' story *The Garden of the Forking Paths* serves the function of intertext for the novel and the source of the eponymous garden metaphor. It also gives the explanation for the structure of alternative, forking paths in the novel.

IV. Conclusion

Victory Garden, as well as hypertext fictional works by Michael Joyce, represent an inventive way of using new media for creating remarkable works of fiction that are attributed to the age-old literary genres, but use new means for their composition and reflect the search of possibilities the net provides by the authors, who themselves are theoreticians, writers, and innovators of electronic literature and hypertext fiction. Inventions of new technologies are always accompanied by investigations and exploitations of new possibilities these technologies provide. As N.K. Hayles wrote (2008: 112), "the evolution of Homo sapiens has co-developed with technologies."

Though principles of composition of works of single plot and multi plot genres are similar for both print and computer-generated fiction, the main difference turns out to be in the difference of composition between what was defined by formalists as a plot and a story (syuzhet). If a plot is a chain of events in their logical causal and temporal sequence, a story is the way the plot unfolds, it is the sequence and motivation for the presentation of the depicted events. A plot shows how the story unfolds and moves in time through its five main elements: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution, or denoument (Shklovsky, 1993; Tomashevsky, 1996). Any fictional narrative, electronic or paper based, may be brought down to its plot lines, no matter how the action unfolds. It is the innovative ways of composing a story (or syuzhet) that distinguish electronic literature from print texts.

One of them is the use of constantly changing chronotopes that allows authors to show parallel worlds in which characters live and links that bring them together showing how human lives intersect and integrate into a single picture of our multifaceted life. Another possibility the net provides is to integrate life events of an individual character into a unified whole thus bringing a human life to a common denominator by combining and showing connections between its constituent elements.

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