Showing the scars

A short case study of de-enhancement of hypertext works for circulation via fan binding or Kindle Direct Publishing

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ABSTRACT

This short presentation examines instances of literary hypertexts intentionally stripped of that which makes them interconnected and updatable. To investigate aspects of how and why text creators, users, and intermediaries de-enhance hypertexts for reasons entirely distinct from the much-studied antipathy to hypertextuality found in some 20th century literary cultures, it contrasts one commercial and one non-commercial (indeed, actively anti-commercial) example: the mass phenomenon of Kindle Direct Publishing and the niche practice of fan binding. Fan bindings, where fanfiction and other fan works are printed and bound as material objects, sometimes using Print on Demand (POD) services but more often by hand, circulate in a gift economy with distinctive ethical norms and, as transformative works in their own right, illustrate how meaning is made as well as lost in uncoupling works from their fan community contexts. Juxtaposing these examples problematises conceptions of either commercial self-publishing or non-commercial fan communities as offering uncomplicated refuge for interactive literature, and challenges narratives of literary communities as enduringly hostile to or no longer interested in experimentation with hypertextuality. The presentation addresses the conference topics of authorship and reading practices from a book history perspective, highlighting the wider significance of stances against hypertextuality and implications for hypertext creators and audiences across genres.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → **Media arts**; **Publishing**; • **Human-centered computing** → **Hypertext / hypermedia**.

KEYWORDS

hypertextuality, authorship, book history, Kindle Direct Publishing, fan fiction

1 INTRODUCTION

If hypertext is, as Vint Cerf put it in his remarks introducing this conference, 'text about which software knows something, and is capable of interacting with it' [6], it seems on the face of it perverse (or at least against the interests of creators and readers) to diminish that knowledge or capability. However, in the two instances contrasted here, for software to know less and be capable of less makes it possible for creators and readers to enable different circulation, and make new meaning, via conscious diminishment.

1.1 Traditions of de-enhancement

As historians of electronic literature have long noted, for hypertexts that endure long enough to be experienced by different communities of readers, using different technologies, at different times, stasis is impossible. Through curating 'An Afternoon with *afternoon*: An Exhibition Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*', Grigar explored how the human experience of a work encompasses 'sensory modalities, along with interaction, immersion, emotional connection, and other potential relationships evoked by or established with a particular work' and 'experience is impacted by time' as well as technology, meaning that even with access to vintage computers (like those in the Electronic Literature Lab of which Grigar is Director), 'encountering the work [in 2020]...is different than when it was first introduced and electronic media was so new' [14]. But intentional de-hypertextualisation is rare enough to be noteworthy. As Ensslin observes, J. Yellowlees Douglas's 'I Have Said Nothing' 'is one of the few hypertexts to have ever been reproduced in a print anthology (Norton 1997)' [12] (Joyce's *afternoon* is another) [14], and artworks like James Bridle's "The Iraq War: A History of Wikipedia Changelogs" (which presents a complete listing of all changes to the Wikipedia article on the Iraq War, in 12 handsomely bound volumes exhibited in galleries) [4] make part of their meaning from the loss of meaning when a digital text is confined, in a very literal sense, by print.

1.2 Objections to enhancement

With its emphasis on diminishing hypertextualization, not granting it, this case study is not focused on longstanding arguments against creating a hypertext as a born-digital artefact, or against augmenting an existing conventional text. However, the tenacity, and bitterness, of such arguments forms the backdrop of this discussion. The surge of interest in literary hypertext in the 1980s and

early 1990s [12] (when Coover's famous essay predicted that print novels would become a small- audience heritage form as readers flocked to the new interactive fiction [8]) was followed by retrenchment of the late 1990s and early 2000s [19] (when promises of 'the expanded book, the super-book, the hyper-book' gave way to more modest ambitions [11]). But anxieties over perceived threats to literary culture [3, 19], bookishness [20], or 'book-ness' [10], are not the reasons for de-hypertextualising in these examples. Rather, creators and readers relegate benefits including connection, currency, and interactivity to a second tier of desirability. Parties are more motivated by risk-reduction and, particularly in the case of fan binding, affect and different participation in literary communities – in short, fear and love.

2 COMMERCIAL DE-HYPERTEXTUALISATION

2.1 Amazon as arbiter of reader experience

In creating Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), and making KDP the only approved means of distributing self-published e-books via the largest e-book retailer, Amazon has established itself as the dominant player in digital self-publishing. Authors can create a KDP book by formatting a file according to Amazon's guidelines and then following KDP workflow steps to enter metadata, upload the file, preview, and publish. Accepted file types currently include HTML, PDF, RTF, and TXT as well as the more commonly used DOC/DOCX, EPUB, MOBI and Amazon's Kindle Package Format (KFP) [2]. (While Print on Demand [POD] makes it possible to offer hardcover and softcover editions, the popularity of all-you-can-read Kindle Unlimited subscriptions makes per-page payments for e-book loans the most significant source of KDP author income). Amazon places an array of strictures on KDP e-books, with rules on hyperlinks sitting alongside equally non-negotiable limits on aspects from content to font to file size [9]. While internal hyperlinks are actively encouraged, particularly as a means of navigation from a table of contents or to notes and references, KDP guidelines state that 'external links within Kindle books should be present *only* if they directly enhance the reader experience and the content of the title *as determined by Amazon*', with examples of permitted content including links to other books in a series (for a KDP book, likely also sold by Amazon), author-related social media (promoting the book, as sold by Amazon) and 'links to additional ancillary material (e.g., checklists, assessment forms, craft patterns, and similar printable materials)' (added value for the product, as sold by Amazon); further, 'Amazon *reserves the right to remove links in its sole discretion*' [italics mine] [1]. Amazon can exclude any external links, on any grounds, at any time.

2.2 Managing risk

The list of 'examples of prohibited links' (a non-exhaustive list, giving KDP authors no guarantees as to zones of safety) reveals much about the kinds of risks Amazon is determined to mitigate. It includes 'links to pornography' (despite the importance to Amazon of erotica as a genre [18], and with definition again at Amazon's discretion), and predictable categories such as 'links to illegal, harmful, infringing, or offensive content' and 'links that are malicious in

intent (e.g., virus, phishing, or similar)', but also 'links to commercial eBook store sites other than Amazon' [1], underscoring that one risk Amazon wishes to mitigate is loss of sales to competitors. Amazon's hypertext policy incentivizes defensive and conservative practices: a suspected infraction does not invite reminders, or open a dialogue, it triggers removal of the external hyperlink(s). KDP authors must play it safe or risk having their books altered without warning. Though the very presence of penalties, as with other KDP content policies that constantly expand to counter authors' inventive testing of boundaries [9], indicates authors' continuing experimentation with hypertextuality and willingness to negotiate its value to 'reader experience', compliance is the price of access to the world's largest market for self-published fiction.

3 ANTI-COMMERCIAL DE-HYPERTEXTUALISATION

3.1 What is fan binding?

In fan binding, fan works such as (but not limited to) fan fiction are printed and bound, sometimes using POD services such as Lulu or Barnes & Noble, but more often by hand, with typically self-taught fans mastering both desktop publishing software and traditional bookbinding techniques to create bespoke book objects. While legal definitions of fan fiction, primarily concerned with intellectual property ownership, may categorize such writing as 'any work by a fan, or indeed by anyone other than the content owner(s), set in a fictional world or using such pre-existing fictional characters' [22], other conceptions of 'imaginative interpolations and extrapolations by fans of existing literary worlds' make the figure of the fan, writing or reading for fannish reasons, central to the definition [15]. Novel-length stories from large, active fandoms like those of *Lord of the Rings* or Harry Potter, and freely shared via online archives like Fanfiction.net or Archive of Our Own (AO3), are far from the only or even the most typical examples. Fan fiction is far older than the web (and indeed older than Star Trek conventions; as Wilson points out, 'it has become almost a cliché of fan studies to place fan fiction in a much older tradition of transformative literatures'), and stories also spring from proudly 'rare and obscure' fandoms [25], such as those of a specific Roman orator, Eurovision song, or television commercial, and may be shared privately or not at all. Open to many forms of exchange, fan fiction has a longstanding non-commercial ethos [23] while remaining 'receptive to compensatory practices that can arguably fall within the parameters of fandom gift culture' [17].

3.2 Motives for fan binding: affect, safety, and status at the cost of links

Preservation of fan-made works, under constant threat of deletion or censorship whether in print zine or born-digital form [7], is one benefit of fan binding. But preservation is not the only or even the primary motivation to commit a work to print. Fan binders interviewed for Buchsbaum and Kennedy's qualitative studies on the small but growing Renegade Bindery community highlighted love, for a given fic and for fan fiction as a genre, as the single most important reason for engaging in a demanding and expensive fannish activity [5, 16]. Other benefits, such as 'reducing screen time

[and replacing it with worthwhile offline pursuits], the challenge and craft of book making, a desire to give book objects as gifts, and a desire to affirm the work of fic writers' [5], and "thingness", physical legitimacy, and the power of traditional notions of authorship' [21], are also rooted in dedication to the texts and belief in their importance and worth.

3.3 Augmenting, not replacing, digital forms

Binding, however, comes at a cost, as the loss of hypertextuality changes the meaning of fannish texts. Because 'at its core, fandom is a conversation' where 'without the source material and the fandom interactions that led to the fic's creation, readers cannot understand the full breadth of meaning held within the story' [16], losses when binding include aspects of 'accessibility, interactivity, and malleability... losing hyperlinks and comments [which] strips the fic of its community context' [5]. As 'preservation efforts, both physical and digital, will inevitably leave out some part of the fandom experience' [16], fan binding does not represent a rejection of the digital, but an augmentation of it. Binders aspire to create new versions that extend and further transform works, offering additional modes of circulation and preservation, and different kinds of connections between fans and creators [5], without supplanting the born-digital original.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In either example, de-hypertextualisation is concealable: if links and history are removed with care, readers, like those of corrupted e-book files examined by Galey, 'would have no way of knowing that they have not, in a basic sense, read the same novel as other readers' [13]. But it can also be visible and, with sufficient sign-posting, to a degree reversible. KDP authors can choose to show their scars: to make it obvious where links were removed, inviting readers to seek out what was lost while drawing attention to the gulf between Amazon policies and their personal writing practice. While some fan binders remove traces of prior digital existence to foster a particular aesthetic and reading experience, others 'include some contextual information' such as author notes, or binder-created forwards 'on "when and in what climate it was written"' [16], which can serve to guide interested readers back to hypertextual descriptors [24]. Showcasing de- hypertextualisation becomes a statement as to the enduring value of hypertextuality. Juxtaposing these examples problematises conceptions of either commercial self-publishing or non-commercial fan communities as offering uncomplicated refuge for interactive literature, and challenges narratives of literary communities as enduringly hostile to or no longer interested in experimentation with hypertextuality. It is my hope to, in the modest way possible for a short conference paper, further these conversations by appending to old lore of hypertext-hate a newer story of de-hypertextualisation motivated by fear or love.

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