

Links Of Darkness: Hypertext And Horror

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ABSTRACT

Category fiction adopts a formal narrative framework to explore topics of mutual interest to readers and writers. Originating as a means of assisting retail booksellers and movie theaters in their work of matching readers and writers, categories like “Mystery”, “Western”, and “Horror” have shaped modern storytelling. The frameworks that underlie category fiction are often confounded with their conventional surface characteristics. For example, mysteries are not puzzles, but rather interrogate how a damaged world can be understood and, with understanding, repaired. We observe that that framework of Horror is congruent to the affordances of literary hypertext. The technologies and trappings of hypertext itself share the slippery uncanniness and *unheimlichkeit* of other horror staples: mirrors, twins, rivers, and crossroads. Finally, it is intriguing that the history of hypertext and the World Wide Web itself falls neatly into the framework of horror.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → Arts and humanities; Media arts; Computers in other domains; Publishing; Computers in other domains; Personal computers and PC applications; Computer games.

KEYWORDS

Hypertext, Links, Horror, World Wide Web, Literary Hypertext

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1 CATEGORY FICTION

Retail bookstores stock 40,000 or more distinct titles, most of which are of scant interest to any individual customer [77]. There is always too much to read [68; 89]. In the store, a few titles of current interest might be displayed in windows or on tables. A few others might be recommended by clerks, especially when they assist frequent customers whose interests and taste they know [18; 36]. It often makes good sense for the bookseller to shelve related titles together: a customer interested in one historical treatise might be tempted to purchase several. The challenge of adapting this simple

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observation to the domain of fiction has been a central problem in modern literary culture.

Between the wars, a number of editors discovered (or created) magazine audiences eager for stories of various specific kinds. Fifty-six stories and four novels about the career of Sherlock Holmes led the way, and inspired waves of emulation and response [22; 31]. American magazine publishers courted niche markets for science fiction [44], for horror, for tales of the American frontier, for superhero comics, and for stories of romance. Booksellers (and pharmacies that sold magazines) soon learned to collect titles in each category in their own rack. Cinema faced a related problem: even if one went to the movies every week, there was still too much to see [50]. To decide, one might ask a friend, consult a critic, or you could simply get tickets for the sort of movie you liked best — a screwball romance, perhaps, or an action-packed Western. Categories help audiences use analogy to identify work they might want to pursue. (In this paper, we use the term “category fiction” rather than “genre fiction,” because “genre” has a different meaning in literary criticism.)

These categories accreted an array of shared surface features. Science fiction often had space ships, “aliens,” and blasters. Mystery featured detectives, stolid cops, and picaresque witnesses. These are seldom essential, and writers can dispense with them when convenient. What sets each category apart is not this superficial apparatus, but a shared story framework that addresses a core problem. The Western may have gunfights and cactus, or it may not; it always concerns the tension between the individual, the community immediately surrounding him, and the march of progress. Westerns have been notably popular in postwar Germany [38] and the Balkans [71]. Postwar intellectual anxieties led some to dismiss category fiction as hackwork or child’s play [44] [64]. Indeed, many thoughtful people misunderstand the nature of these categories and the stories they tell.

A generation of literary hypertext has shown us that hypertext narrative is sometimes hard to write [12]. It was observed from the beginning that hypertext resists closure [47]. This fact complicates slingshot endings like those of O. Henry or Guy de Maupassant: if the sting of the tale lies at its end, the reader must reach that end, and in hypertext this can be difficult to assure. Similarly, stories like *Parsifal* that depend on the observation of significant vistas in a specific sequence are possible [8] but difficult to contrive hypertextually [67]. Some story frameworks seem constantly to fight either agency or responsiveness [61]: let a sane and sensible person like yourself into *Romeo and Juliet* or *Some Like It Hot*, and the action is bound to collapse [6].

2 THE USE OF STORIES

Why do people tell and retell these category fictions, if they share the same framework? Why, having read one Sherlock Holmes story, do we wish to read another? Each story is, in some sense, much like

the next. We begin in Baker Street, where we learn that something is amiss. By the story's end, all will be explained and the world will, once more, make sense. Yet, many people do want to read more of these stories [31] — so much so that even the abundance of the Conan Doyle canon does not satisfy us [21; 51]. We seek out Holmes-like stories by other hands — Dorothy Sayers, Georges Simenon, Agatha Christie, Laurie King. We find as well myriad retellings of these stories which argue against Holmes within the same narrative framework. Sam Spade (Hammett) and Philip Marlowe (Chandler) are Americans who understand crime — who inhabit crime — as Sherlock never did. Upfield's detective "Bony" is Holmes but an aboriginal Australian, Paretsky's V. I. Warshawsky is Holmes but a woman, Barbara Hambly's Benjamin January is a freedman. Why do these variations on a theme not bore us? Indeed, few of us feel an urgent need to solve mysterious murders or to locate stolen jewels; what makes these stories interest us? And, if we have little practical use for the arts of murder, what can horror, with its ghosts and specters, its vampires and synthetic monsters, conceivably offer us?

Fictions offer people a worked argument, a way to reason about our confrontation with existence [87]. Our own problems are specific, wrapped in perplexing detail. Category fiction can abstract away confounding, confusing circumstances and personalities.

Alienation — the sense that when we are at work we are not at home and that when we do find ourselves at home we are not getting work done — is perhaps the defining quality of modernity [23]. Everyone has problems: category fiction provides metaphoric explorations in which problems are identified and, at least in part, set right. Fiction avoids arguing about your immediate situation. It does not tell you what to do: you would not listen. Instead, it shows another situation, like yours but also unlike. These differences and distinctions are the essence of category fiction. We know (in part) where we are going, but we also want to see how we get there and how things go en route.

In addition, the familiarity of the story framework reassures the anxious reader that the world is not wholly disordered, that its hostility may in time be ameliorated. Events have logic, even in the presence of gods and magic [60]. There is a certain pleasure in seeing once more that things turn out as we remembered them, and the interplay of our memory of the story (perhaps in a different telling, or perhaps our memory of other stories) with the story as it unfolds yet again provides its own pleasures. People enjoy new tellings of even the most familiar stories — the Haggadah, the Mass, the False Knight On The Road. Liturgy, too, has its comforts.

The underlying issue that horror addresses is the understanding, inchoate since the 18th Century, that we inhabit a planet which might be imperiled, wounded, or murdered [25]. Perhaps we ourselves are the destined assassin.

3 HYPERTEXT AND HORROR

Horror need not concern gore and monsters. *It's A Wonderful Life!* is horror. So are *The Cat In The Hat* [65] and *Little Red Riding Hood* [30] [12]. "Heart Of Darkness" ((Conrad 1898)) is horror. So, I think, is *Paradise Lost*.

The horror story posits that the world is not, in fact, what we think it is. It begins with a hero who sees the world as we do.

But there is some small anomaly, a sighting of something odd, something that demands investigation. The story proceeds through four stages: [26]

- **Sighting.** A flaw in reality is seen.
- **Thickening.** In trying to understand or explain the flaw, more evidence accumulates that things are seldom what they seem.
- **Revel.** We look on the world as it is, unmasked, the naked face of God or his absence. This truth is maddening, or incomprehensible, or sickens us.
- **Aftermath.** We return to the world, and try to live as best we may.

Janet Murray, in *Hamlet On The Holodeck*, postulated that interactive literature has four common characteristics: that it is procedural, participatory, encyclopedic, and spatial. [69] As appealing as this list appears, these properties are not, in fact, particularly prevalent in literary hypertext. However, they are notably useful to horror. The horror story depends on identification, without which there is no terror and no story. The revelation of the world as it is, and the discovery of this new dispensation, is necessarily encyclopedic. World-building always is. Indeed, a good deal of formal experimentation in horror involves the search for ways to incorporate encyclopedic information without relying on a prophet or Librarian to carry buckets of exposition. *Carrie* revived the epistolary novel for this purpose [52]. (So did *Frankenstein*. [78]) The spatial propensities of horror are equally clear: if the world we know is a sham, a fog of amnesia, or a deception, we may need to travel to the heart of darkness, or descend to the world below, to see the world as it truly is.

Each schematic stage of the horror tale is typically encountered in sequence, which might seem a problem for interactive hypertextuality. Yet this difficulty is easily addressed, even within a sculptural hypertext [14; 43], through gating or gauntlets. Moreover, while leakage between sections could create continuity problems in the mystery story, in horror such leakage explains itself. Sighting, after all, is merely our first experience of Thickening: if some Sighting turns up in Thickening, it's just a bit more thickening. If some thickening turns up in Revel, well, in Revel everything is topsy-turvy. And should Revel leak into Aftermath, that is only to be expected.

Let us consider in turn each component of the horror story with regard to the affordances and difficulties that hypertextuality offers.

3.1 Sighting.

At the outset of the tale, we must introduce the protagonist, describe her initial situation, and narrate her first intimation that the world is not as she (and we) have always assumed. This raises no special difficulties for hypertext. At the outset, readers accept that the state of the world is what it is: they have not yet had the opportunity to assert agency or to anticipate responsiveness. Since little or nothing has happened yet, we have no worries about continuity and few concerns about coherence.

3.2 Thickening.

Thickening reveals a growing sense of strangeness, of wrongness. In linear writing, thickening often involves an episodic series of

encounters or observations that reveal how things are not as they ought to be [58]. Often, these can be encountered in any sequence. Continuity constraints (e.g. when the protagonist in one scene might recall another scene which may or may not have already been encountered) may be enforced by link constraints [7] but may also be ignored entirely: readers will reconstruct the causal order if the dissonance disturbs them, and the effort that this reconstruction imposes — the difficulty [26] or *ergodicity* [1] of the hypertext — may deepen the sense of the protagonist's inextricable involvement in catastrophe.

3.3 Revel

The fragmented word mazes [47] and mirror worlds [29] [63] found at the heart of so many classic hypertexts symbolize and operationalize the carnivalesque chaos of revel. Darkness is everywhere, alienation is profound and seemingly irrevocable, escape impossible. We need not worry if some thickening intrudes into revel. Indeed, such intrusions deepen the revel by momentarily casting the chaos into relief. In *The Cat In The Hat*, the sober advice of the fish reminds us that this is not, in fact, good fun or good trouble. Nevertheless, it remains a talking fish. Besides, we still have a cake on a rake.

3.4 Aftermath

Here alone, hypertext horror requires a proper gate, an episodic boundary that (for the most part) keeps fragments of Revel out of the fields in which we now must dwell. Aftermath is typically brief, in which case its internal structure need not concern us. In aftermath, “there is nothing to be done, . . . there is no cure to hand, no more story to tell.” [26]

4 BACK TO SCHOOL

In considering the suitability of hypertext to a class of tasks, it often proves instructive to compose a specific hypertext intended for a specific task [66]. If we wish to explore approaches to pedagogical hypertexts, it makes sense to write a specific hypertext that addresses a specific instructional mission [19; 33; 53]. This exercise need not yield an ideal document, or one demonstrably superior to all other approaches; the point is to identify in what ways the lines of the problem are supported by the inclinations of the medium, and in what manner the medium finds itself at cross-purposes with what we believe we want to do. To appreciate the nature of watercolor, it helps to pick up a brush and to apply paint to paper. You may learn a good deal about painting without yourself producing a work of any great merit [75]. In this example, a creator of horror films and an editor of hypertexts collaborate to craft a modest horror hypertext, a yarn along the lines of “The Last Feast Of Harlequin” [58] or “Stone Animals” [59].

It goes without saying that this story is entirely fictitious.

4.1 Sighting

May Liu is a research assistant, working on the dynamics of abnormal galaxies in a department of Astronomy in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She recently received her undergraduate degree from a small Liberal Arts college in rural Vermont, and expects remain in Cambridge for a year or two before beginning her doctoral studies in California. May

is deeply devoted to her work, and also has a particular fondness for observational astronomy. It is not lost on May that, a century before, this very observatory had — in part by its willingness to employ women — discovered foundational facts about the size and composition of the universe. Her real work is all done on computers, but she is fond of the Old Library with its antique observational ledgers, and of the 19th-Century refractors, still on the roof, that are now used to introduce undergraduates to the basics.

One night, May receives a text message from the parents of her one-time college roommate, Hannah Evert. A few days ago, Hannah fell suddenly and profoundly ill. She had been hospitalized in Vermont, and that hospital has sent her to Beth Israel in Boston. Could May find a moment to visit? Naturally, May hurries across the river at once.

Hannah remains unconscious, and neither her mother nor her father dares leave her. Unfortunately, Ashvale College, from which May graduated last year and from which Hannah had expected to graduate later this year, announced its closure at the New Year. Hannah's parents ask May if she could take the weekend off, drive to Ashvale, and sort through Hannah's things lest the College discard them.

Sighting lends itself to conventional calligraphic hypertext [43]. A core problem in sighting, as at the outset of most narratives, is that everything remains to be established. It is necessary to describe the protagonist, to establish her situation, and to give us some indication of how she believes the world to be ordered. We know where we must begin, and we know that Sighting ends in that hospital conference room, when May accepts the duty imposed on her by poor Hannah's parents. Calligraphic hypertext allows us to examine some topics that interest May (the history of women in Astronomy, the pleasures of numerical integration, her relation with other Chinese Americans) for readers who enjoy a more discursive story, while allowing hurried readers to get on with things.

The hypertext is told in third person. The reader identifies with May, but the reader is not May: in particular, May feels obligations to Hannah's parents (who have been kind to May, and whom Hannah adores) that we ourselves might not feel, and her actions may be constrained by obligations we ourselves do not perceive.

4.2 Thickening

The drive from Cambridge to Ashvale can be managed in three or four hours. The road leads through Concord, where once the embattled farmers stood, and then alongside Walden Pond. We pass the towns drowned beneath the Quabbin Reservoir and cross the Connecticut River. Perhaps we visit a museum on the way; museums are useful repositories of old history and disturbing images. We stop, not far from Ashvale, at a diner where the waitress is strangely hostile. We think about poor Hannah. We think about Ashvale and its sudden collapse. We ponder, too, the history of this strange little college, with its roots in a forgotten 19th-century religious dispute, its historical prominence in fostering women in science and engineering, its ever-precarious finances and the periodically-scandalous doings of its most famous and daring alumni.

Arriving at the former campus is dispiriting. The place is already redolent of neglect and absence, while memories lurk around each corner. We meet an assistant Dean who is escorting a group of real-estate investors. We glimpse a former classmate, whom we have no urgent desire to see again.

May begins to sort through Hannah's stuff. The task is formidable. Her parents asked May to donate the clothes to a suitable charity, to bring back papers and art and anything personal. If Hannah recovers and needs new clothes, well, they'll cross that bridge when they come to it.

When May cleans out a big old wardrobe to take a bag of clothes to the local Warming Center, the staff assume that May herself is seeking shelter.

Here we enter classic sculptural hypertext territory. The writer wants to accumulate wrongness, and can accomplish that through a succession of images and episodes which need not be described in strict chronological sequence. It doesn't matter whether we see Florida, Massachusetts before Zoar, or after. We can describe the Museum with its wonderful Degas bronzes (bequeathers by Ashvale's greatest donor) after our distressing visit to the diner, even if we visited the museum first. Thickening is cumulative and anachronic [85].

Though it makes sense to construct episodic gates to delimit the start and end of Thickening, these gates may be porous. An episode of Thickening that winds up in Sighting is simply more Sighting. If the episode ends up in Revel, it is a respite, a reminder of a time when things — however bad — had once made sense.

Even now, the trappings of the story are not especially Gothic and do not proclaim imminent horror; there are no zombies, chainsaws or ghosts. Still, familiar motifs appear almost of their own accord. That wardrobe is simply the correct architectural detail of a dorm built out of an 1860s Vermont house, but of course Narnia lurks in its shadow. We keep crossing rivers, and we mourn a friend who is not dead.

4.3 Revel

May returns to campus late. The contrasts of the day — the opulence of the real-estate speculators and of the museum contrasted with the poverty of the Warming Center — disturb her. Perhaps there was something off with the beef stew they'd fed the homeless guests. May has texted Hannah's parents but they have not replied. There's the matter of the boy whom May has no wish to meet again.

Unable to sleep, May walks over to the Observatory, once her favorite campus haunt. It is now disused and derelict, and May has no trouble breaking in. She doesn't dare open the dome — it made a racket even when it was in regular use — and besides the scattered clouds and full moon would make for terrible seeing.

To her surprise, May finds that a door she has always assumed to be a supply closet leads to a spiral staircase. It descends to surprising depths. At the bottom, she sees the Artifact that supplied that abundance on which the College had once been built, and witnesses once more the Fall Of Man.

Mirrorworlds and mazes [5] are natural ways to approach revel. Alternatively, this episode could be told as an artifactual hypertext, or even a spatial hypertext in which the reader could interact in turn with the disparate objects and corridors of the Observatory as in an adventure game [13]. Revel can relieve us from strict observance of coherence and causality [28], and so we can link more freely and impressionistically here than elsewhere.

Again, it is interesting how easily horror motifs fall out of an essentially realist approach. At the beginning, we went *up* to the

roof to see the stars: in revel, we go to the observatory but the sky is hidden from our sight. Instead, we descend into the depths.

4.4 Aftermath

Afterward, we must try to go on. Life continues, though we no longer possess the protective illusion that once shielded us from the truth.

Aftermath is often very short, particularly in modern horror where the planet's disease is acute and the end is clear (though unspeakable) [27]. In this case, we have little need to explore structure: all we require is the concluding cadence, or the silence that replaces it. Elsewhere, the aftermath may be narrated and elaborated in considerable detail [3]. Here, the techniques of quality-based interactive fiction may prove useful in accommodating the choices the reader has made into a coherent frame [80], in the context of either a calligraphic or sculptural hypertext context [62].

5 SOME OBSERVATIONS

Throughout the early stages of composition, it seemed striking how naturally some familiar tropes of horror appeared in what is, after all, a far from fantastic setting. We wanted to send our heroine to sort through someone's belongings: what could be more natural than to do this as a favor? And if it were a favor, who might ask it, and why would they ask? Though at each step we chose what seemed the least horrific and less supernatural choice — we might, after all, have sent May to clean out the house where her dead mother had gone to live with May's wicked stepfather. Nevertheless, we found ourselves in the service of a Sleeping Beauty. We did not plan all the river crossings for effect: if you live in Cambridge, that's where the hospitals are, and in New England, the Connecticut River marks a real cultural and political boundary that's hard to miss. Similarly, the observatories, rooftops and basements, the distant (abnormal) galaxies and the occluded, empty sky that broods over the failed college were not taken from the shelf of horror paraphernalia — at least not deliberately. The astronomical frame allowed us to establish our heroine's feminism quickly and without (much) rancor, and we simply asked ourselves what campus places a recently-graduated astrophysicist might want to revisit before the real-estate developers demolish it all.

5.1 Hypertext And Horror: Eye Of Newt And Toe Of Frog

As mentioned above, category fiction frequently identifies itself by adopting familiar settings and props. This saves time: readers already know what a "space ship" is, what a "phaser" does, and why "zombies" are good to avoid. Reused concepts lets the writer avoid redundant explication [44]. Superficial elements, reflected in flap copy and cover art, can help fans of specific categories identify work they might enjoy amidst a retailer's crowded shelves. Conversely, writers may, to good effect, use the framework of category fiction without these familiar trappings: *Gaudy Night* is a mystery without much of a crime [76], *The Maltese Falcon* is a mystery where justice demands that the private investigator (who is nothing like the genteel and educated Sherlock Holmes) join with the criminals and then betray his client [42]. *The Cat In The Hat* is a story of the horror of a day when it was too wet to play.

Yet, some elements recur in horror not because they are conventional but also because they resonate with the sort of story that horror tells, which is to say, the story of a planet that is not the clean, well-lighted place in which we once believed. Twins and doppelgängers are uncanny; they suggest that things are not what they seem. Sleep and (especially) sleepwalking confound our waking reason. Ghosts and spirits worry us more, the less we believe in them [45]. Crossroads let you turn away from your anticipated path, though you can never be entirely sure that, in turning away, you are not fulfilling an appointment in Samarra. The road that leads from your door is filled with dread [30].

Here, we briefly note some horrifically-inclined properties of hypertext.

5.2 Multivalence Is Not A Vice

Though we seldom speak of this, hypertext research lies at the intersection of two distinct lines of inquiry, both of which originate in the disasters of the World Wars.

One response to the War's devastation was a remarkable burst of inquiry into communication and the nature of information, a search for ways to prevent charlatans and fools from destroying what remained of the world [10]. This led to work on synthetic languages, formal languages, and structural linguistics that, it was hoped, would prevent misunderstanding and foil propaganda. The same efforts inspired investigation into generative grammars, self-correcting codes, information theory, and of course the fundamental work by von Neumann, Turing, and Gödel on the capacities of general computation and on its limitations. Most of these foundations were laid long before there was any prospect of efficient electronic devices that would operationalize these concerns, but hypertext research — like all of Computer Science — rests on these foundations.

In the humanities, this impulse led to a prolonged investigation into how writing works, and where meaning resides. If language could be mastered, one might convince voters to respect their own interest or enable workers to tame the terrors that had come to control their state and fate. James Joyce, William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, e.e. cummings, and Don Marquis were just a few workers in this laboratory of language. For a time, it seemed likely that structural concepts underlying language could be elucidated and understood [39], much as structural properties had been a key to Chemistry and had seemed, for a time, to offer insights into History [83], narrative [72], and anthropology.[57].

This effort failed; language is not merely a lossy communications protocol and communication is not merely a process of transferring mental states between minds [34; 79]. The failure was, however, extraordinarily productive, revealing the complexity of texts of all sorts and of their interpretation. Almost all early literary hypertext explicitly concerns itself with the construction of meaning [55], and with understanding how the reader's choice of links to follow (and perhaps the reader's additions to the text [49]), were to be understood [35]. The growth of the Web, and the great importance the early Web placed on graphic design and rhetoric, lent even greater weight to these questions.

Specifically, both early hypertext and early Web design were deeply interested in how readers would (or should) interpret a passage that could be approached along different paths [32]. In

linear text, any specific passage appears at one point in the story; in a hypertext, it might occur in different places. The same lines of dialogue might be spoken at different points in the story, or attributed to different people. The same words might mean one thing at the outset, and a very different thing when we encounter them later. Though some effort was proposed to avoid this through systematic engineering [40], the problem is intractable. A sentence cannot mean precisely one thing, and multivalence is not a vice [16].

Multivalence, however, is (literally) uncanny. A passage that shifts in the story cannot be pinned down, and its interpretation cannot be comfortably frozen, not even as a superposition on eigenstates [37].

5.3 Links Of Darkness

The link itself is discomfiting. It literally alienates the reader, taking her away from where she is, and sending her elsewhere. "Print stays itself, electronic text replaces itself [48]."

This slipperiness has long inspired mistrust [20] and revulsion [17] among those inclined to see the world of books as fragile. Indeed, it seems to be widely acknowledged that kids today have short attention spans because they have grown up in a world where something of interest was only ever a click away. These inattentive children have almost universally read some of the longest novels ever published, including the million-word *Harry Potter* and the half-million-word *Lord Of The Rings*. Many watch films that span dozens or even hundreds of hours: *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer* is a 100-hour *bildungsroman* intended to be viewed over the course of seven years.

Yet, from the very beginning, readers have mistrusted links — and have been right to do so. Links clamor for the reader's attention, but are not always honest. The rhetoric of links is one of departures and arrivals, of promises and bargains: the link tries to communicate what it offers without impeding what is being said [54]. Feints mislead the reader for the reader's benefit [5] while clickbait misdirects the reader for the benefit of advertisers or villains [15].

5.4 It Speaks!

In hypertext, the machine speaks to us — either literally [9] or metaphorically. Through most of history, whatever spoke was either human, divine, or diabolical [73]. When a machine tells us, "I want to say that I may have seen my son die this morning," [47] or assures us that "there will be cake", the assertion itself is unsettling; we cannot know, at least at first, what disbelief we are being asked to suspend [84]. Talking dolls are uncanny, and machines who think are worrisome. When they are alone, what do they say about us? [74]

Indeed, the problem of the artificial person and its place in the world is arguably the beginning of horror [78]. Can an artificial person, necessarily imperfect as are all the works of man, deserve love? If not, how can an artificial person bear to exist? Moreover, because the artifact speaks, it may remonstrate against our injustice to itself — and by extension, the imperialist's exploitation of colonies and of the planet [24]:

6 WEB OF HORROR

The development of the World Wide Web may itself be considered a horror story. Of course, that story may be told in different ways. Here, I sketch one such telling.

The origins of the Web are conventionally ascribed to Vannevar Bush, Douglas Engelbart, Ted Nelson, and then Tim Berners-Lee [4]. This is not wrong, but we may readily see that all this work rests on subtle ideas and noble concepts that emerged from the disasters of the short 20th Century [10]. Among these, we might include [64]:

- **Linguistics** — natural and computational — and identification of the capacities and limitations of abstract computation, the foundations of Computer Science, and of markup;
- **Existentialism** — itself a response to Occupation — and its insistence on the central importance of individual action;
- **Structuralism** and its conviction that both the natural and the social world can be understood through structural forces;
- **Rejection of simulacra** and simulated experience and the quest for authenticity;
- **Critical Theory** and its investigation into the nature and place of meaning.

These concerns pervade the design and the early rhetoric of the Web: its reliance on loosely linked but independent servers exempt from any central control or authority, its emphasis on equal access and individual expression, its embrace of emphatic performative authenticity [82], its neat balance of POST and GET.

Yet from its beginning, something was not quite right. The Web is not concerned (as Xanadu was [70]) with referential integrity, and from its earliest days, critics worried about dead links — and about duplicitous servers that might deliver some valuable information today, but switch to a pernicious advertisement tomorrow. This initial **sighting** of malaise seemed innocuous for a time; servers *could* be duplicitous, but why would any server wish to lie? (“Misery made me a fiend.”) PageRank, domain squatters, and ad networks supplied a way to monetize links, and soon whole swaths of the World Wide Web became link farms and webs of deceit [15].

For a brief time, it seemed possible that some sort of crowd-sourced structural map might provide a reliable guide, helping people find the good parts while avoiding spam and deception. Yahoo! tried to outline the Web, Cool Site Of The Day identified great leaps forward in design, and the WikiWikiWeb tried to make a social web everyone could write [56]. **Thickening** progressed, however, as people discovered that control of the guidebook was itself profitable and powerful. Jilted lovers, corporations, and even governmental agencies waged PR wars on the pages of Wikipedia [46] [2; 81]. The early promise of a read/write Web collapsed as “the social network that everyone hated” [88] discovered the immense profitability of misinforming fanatics and fools, in the guise of serving them photos of their grandchildren. By focusing on efficient warehousing and delivery systems, Amazon has placed itself in a position to collect a tax on books, films, musical recordings, games, groceries, and petaflops worldwide. Hypertext research turned away from its early concerns with systems, structures, and rhetorics, focusing ever more tightly on providing automatic surveillance tools that might reduce labor costs for Facebook and Twitter, or might make social

networks more useful tools for autocratic regimes and criminal conspiracies.

Today, we find ourselves deeply in **Revel**. The planetary fire burns unabated, the death toll from our current epidemic approaches six million, European cities are bombed daily. The few surviving wikis are inundated by vandals. Email has been rendered marginal through spam and deceit. Cryptocurrency Ponzi schemes bid against online bookies for Super Bowl ads. Once, pundits confidently predicted that the net would route around outages: today, police forces monitor social media in order to compile lists of dissidents, and totalitarian states routinely suppress Internet access when doing so serves the regime.

We don’t know what the **Aftermath** will be.

7 TELLING THE STORY

Publishing — which is to say, the problem of matching readers with work they want to read — remains a central problem of our literary world [11]. 20th-Century publishers found in category fiction a convenient means through which readers could identify literary work that addressed problems that interested them. In particular, three separate categories — science fiction, fantasy, and horror — address the growing perception that the planet we inhabit is itself the protagonist of a long tale, one whose outcome is doubtful [26].

Rhyming schemes and chord patterns constrain what may happen next while not determining what happens now; we know where this sonata or this blues song will wind up, but may be delighted to see how we get there. Similarly, stories often use familiar frameworks to achieve their effects. No story, moreover, is isolated; we always compare a new story to stories we know, and the echoes of those old stories inevitably resonate with the new. This resonance is especially intense among devotees of category fiction, who are among the most extensive of literary consumers [44].

Other frameworks may share related advantages. The Western story — currently somewhat eclipsed in the U.S., pace Star Wars — is one example. This category assembles several distinct frameworks to explore a core conflict: personal responsibility versus responsibilities to family and to community [38]. Representing community remains a challenge for hypertext as it does for computer games, but that obstacle need not be insuperable.

As we would expect, hypertext fits some frameworks easily, while others prove more difficult. In particular, hypertext is bound to be challenged by story frameworks that depend on precise coincidence in space, time and temperament. Much attention has focused on frameworks, such as tragedy, that possess cultural cachet or patronage [41], or on intellectual properties that promise a mass audience. It might prove more useful to examine story frameworks that are naturally anachronic, that welcome ambiguity and transgression, and in which closure has always been a suspect quality. In horror, only the grave of the planet is fully closed. And even then, you never know.[86]

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