

Project documentation

Course

INF3210 Information Design

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Group member

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Project

Polyscopic Hypertext Fiction

Project URL

<http://dietrovetro.com/story/story.php>

For the Polyscopic Hypertext Fiction as plain text, see Attachment 1 (p.10)

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Project description

What might a polyscopic hypertext look like? What will the user experience be reading this kind of narrative as opposed to reading hypertext fictions with other characteristics – or reading a traditional linear text? In what way might the concept of polyscopy help the writer give its narrative life? The polyscopic hypertext fiction will be the main product of the project, while the other questions will be answered in the project reflection document.

Motivation for the choice of project

As a child I was quite a bookworm, and at an early age I was introduced to a book in the choose-your-own-adventure spirit. I was extremely fascinated and tried to read it as systematically as a five year old is capable of – trying to read each possible story path. The choose-your-own-adventure computer games were as appealing when I discovered them as a teenager. Still, it was not until I started university that I was introduced to the hypertext fictions - *Same Day Test* by Gavin Inglis being the very first.

Early in the information design course I learned about the concept of polyscopy and polyscopic modelling. Even though the actual term was new to me, I feel that I deal with the concept every day in my job creating information portals on the web. High-level versus low-level views, different entry points for different target groups to give them different aspects on the information, relating articles that give different aspects to the same subject, are all familiar strategies. Since I already have a lot of hands on experience with this sort of information structuring, I wanted to do something a bit different in my project.

I soon got the idea of combining the concept of polyscopy with my fascination for hypertext narratives. This way I could explore the concept of polyscopy further and challenge myself by trying to apply the concept on a somewhat different field than the field of information in which I normally work.

Polyscopy and hypertext

Before describing the project idea any further, I would like to explain the term polyscopy using the words of my professor Dino Karabeg – the developer of this approach to information structuring:

“Polyscopy is conscious creation and use of multiple ways of looking or scopes in informing. Different scopes lead to different views. To understand the meaning and purpose of scopes, it is useful to imagine them as viewpoints on a mountain. Low-level scopes and corresponding views are like the viewpoints and the views from the bottom of the mountain – one sees the details but not the big picture. The high-level scopes and views are opposite – one sees the forest but not the trees.”

Dino Karabeg in “Introducing Polyscopy” (2007)



With the ideogram above, one can further explain the approach. The triangle is meant to illustrate the information mountain framework consisting of both high-level and

low-level information. Where the high-level view is supposed to give us the big picture, the low-level view on information is supposed to give us further details. The circle illustrates the high-level view on information as a vertical abstraction of underlying low-level details. The low-level view is represented by the square. The four edges is meant to illustrate different aspects of low-level information you might need to be able to explain the higher leveled big picture.

For me this description clearly sounds like a tree-structure of some sort – and with that impression the concept of hypertext is not far away. Sergio Cicconi describes the hypertext this way:

“We can think of a hypertext as a potentially unlimited net of nodes and links; each of these nodes is a complex portion of a text”

Sergio Cicconi in “The Shaping of Hypertextual Narrative” (2000)

Further he describes how these portions of text can contain information on a certain domain. In addition to this, you might find different commands in the node that instruct the reader on how to read the node, jump to another node via links, or maybe even how the user can add a node and links to the hypertext.

Project idea further described

Many writers have used the hypertext concept to write in the choose-your-own-adventure-style. I wanted to try to use the hypertext in combination with polyscopic modeling to write *one* “adventure” that can be explored in many directions. The point of this hypertext is not for the user to choose one path to read. Every path is an aspect of the same overall story (the *fabula*) – not alternative story paths with different and non-corresponding events as in a choose-your-own-adventure.

Often you will see hypertexts where one node can be a whole page of text, with only a few links to the next paths. In such a text there are probably a dozen words the user would want to click on to explore further – if only the words actually were links... I wanted to go to an extreme by making each node only a sentence long, and have many links in each of the sentences. That way all words that could trigger some interest with the user would actually be a link. I also decided that there would be no “false forkings” in the story – meaning that no node would be repeated in different story paths to bring the story paths together. Cicconi illustrates an hypertext with false forkings like the model below (2000).

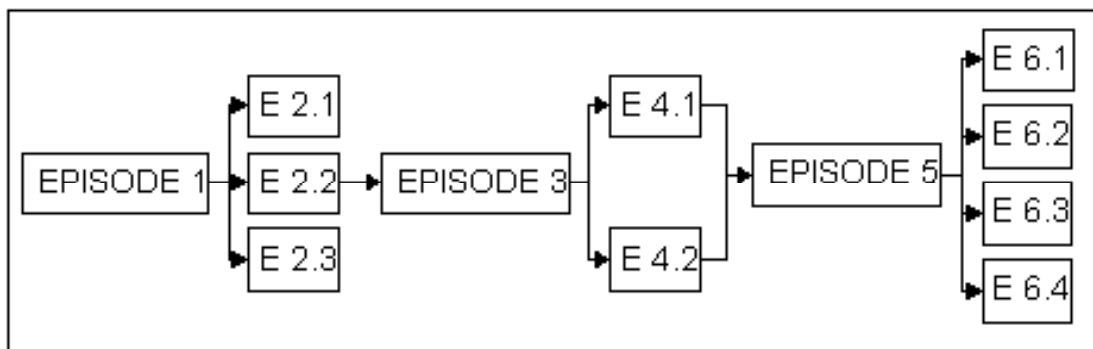


Fig.1: Hypertext with false forkings

For me such a text is less interesting because when exploring it you will reach the same node several times. In some cases, of course, this revisiting of nodes will give the node new meaning each time, since the user knows more of the overall story for every visit of the node. I rather wanted the information in the nodes in the different paths to compliment each other instead of letting a node recur in several paths. I like the idea of the user reading a sentence in one path and then seeing an implicit link to content read in another path – without the nodes being explicitly linked to each other.

The writing process and polyscopy applied

In the beginning I had the idea of starting with one sentence with links, and then let the user dig deeper and add more sentences to the story by choosing links to follow. This would equal the vertical abstraction in polyscopy, and can be modeled like this:

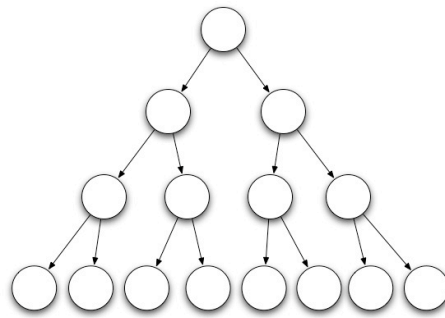


Fig.2: Hypertext tree structure with vertical abstraction

Each circle represents a node containing a sentence with words that link to other nodes. The arrow is a link from a word within a node to another node on a lower level.

In my project the root node is represented by the sentence: ‘When Emily died, no one really cared.’ For me this is a good high-level sentence that communicates that this is a story about Emily, her death and some sort of underlying problems. When creating this sentence I had some plans for “the plot” of the story, but mainly I wanted the polyscopic methodology to help me create the branches of the story tree.

I did not really know anything about Emily’s past when creating that first sentence – I only knew that I wanted her to be an interesting character that had lived an interesting life. I had a lot of suggestions for sentences to be placed in the child node that followed the link ‘Emily’. That was when I realised that these different sentences about Emily were actually different aspects of her – and that I should not have to choose between them. I could use several sentences as nodes following the link ‘Emily’. This made the polyscopic model for my hypertext complete, since the concept of aspects was applied:

(see figure next page)

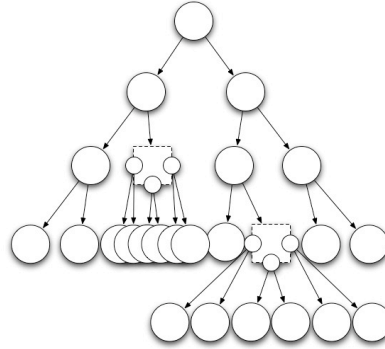


Fig.3: Hypertext tree structure including aspects

The square with different nodes attached represents the concept of aspects – where one link in a parent node will actually send you to several child nodes. In the case of Emily, two child nodes were added in the story, so it would look like this:

*When **Emily** died, no one really cared.*

- *Emily had been an excellent photographer, catching the beauty of people in their most important moments.*
- *So who was Emily? A woman in love with apple pies, long mornings and Elvis, and that had some severe doubts about God's existence.*

The user can then choose which aspects of Emily to explore further.

To put the whole hypertext story into a visual model like the one in figure 3 would be absolutely impossible considering the large increase of nodes for each level. Instead I had to keep a mental model of figure 3 while writing the story in plain text, and make a code system to show which path a node belonged to. The hypertext in plain text with mentioned codes (my working document) can be viewed in attachment 1 (p.10). These codes were also used in the php-code to keep track of the different nodes to call.

Often hypertexts can seem a bit fragmented given that the links send the user to new pages with text – and those new pieces of text are not always clearly connected to the node the user came from. I have tried to overcome this problem by letting every new node the user click on show up on the same page as the root node (the first sentence in the hypertext). In addition to this I have made each path a linear text trying to give it a literary style, with a good rhythm that connects the sentences to each other. I feel this writing principle makes it clearer that the higher and lower levels belong together and that they make a whole.

The hypertext does not have any ending, and in principle it can be forever expanding in any direction. The polyscopic modeling methodology has been a good help in expanding and bringing the story to life. As mentioned, I more or less started off with one sentence and some ideas for story elements. Still, most of the story came about by choosing an interesting word in a node, and then letting that word inspire a new sentence. As an example; I had no idea that Emily probably was a lesbian until the name Ada came along in a node. Then my fantasy started spinning around what Ada could have meant to Emily, trying to create a lower-level node about Ada. This way the methodology pushes the writer to expand and detail the fabula, the story universe, in a whole other way than I feel the linear story writing does.

Story content

This project has for me mainly been about exploring polyscopy and hypertext fiction combined on a practical level; how polyscopy can be applied to a hypertext fiction, how the writing process will work for the writer, how the user experience will be. Still, to be able to write anything, I needed something to say, a purpose with the story.

I found my purpose in my experience from working a summer in a nursing home. I remember the workers always being too few in each shift to really be able to take care of the residents. I remember some of the residents being bored, and that I wasn't able to do anything about it, having too much to do to take my time and really talk to them. I treated them as residents and nothing more, because I never had time to reflect over the fact that they also were individuals with an interesting life behind them. I also remember some residents suffering from Alzheimer that really were frustrated and sad because they sort of knew that something was wrong. The fact that the resources to stimulate the residents socially and intellectually were quite limited probably made them weaker much earlier than necessary.

I have tried to get this point across without really saying it explicitly in the text. When the user reads about the sad ending of Emily's life, and then reads about the interesting life she lived before, that might be enough to understand that we should not forget that the elderly also are individuals with stories to tell, and knowledge to share.

The story is written mainly from Emily's point of view. That's why for instance the word Alzheimer never is mentioned in the actual text, but hopefully, by reading different story paths, one will combine the information and figure out what the story universe looks like.

User experience and design

I am a fan of simplicity and originally wanted my hypertext to look as they did in the early 90's. At the same time, I wanted some more experience with CSS and Photoshop, so I chose to make the site look a bit maximalistic instead. Wallpaper, an old book, and a pile of photos to alter and place, gave me a lot of experience in the areas mentioned. And I am happy with my choice of design; I find the end result more consistent and harmonic and it brings more life to the story than a plain text would have done.

The book also makes you think about the possibility of there being more to the story than just what is shown in that exact page. With that book as a design element I think I manage to show that Emily's story is a story in a bigger whole.

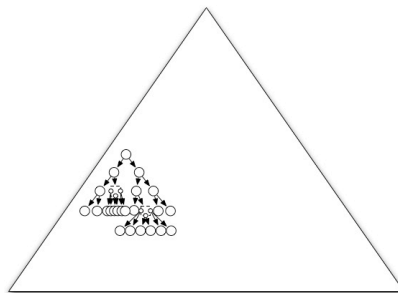


Fig.5. The Emily Hypertext being part of a larger whole.

The book also gave me the opportunity to follow up on another metaphor. When the user chooses a link to explore a part of the story further, I highlight that link in yellow – trying to give the user the feeling of the mouse arrow being a yellow marker. I also explain that metaphor explicitly if one clicks the question mark to get instructions on how to navigate in the hypertext.

Whether you need the instructions or not, I am not sure. But the fact that I have removed any visual sign of the links except when the user hovers over it, might make the help page necessary. I have done this to make the hypertext more exploratory, and because there are so many links that they would interrupt the eye when reading if they were visible all the time.

I am no PHP-expert, so I had a colleague help me set up the framework for the project. I see now that it would have been a great improvement for the user experience if links were shown when hovering over a node instead of just being shown when hovering over the exact linked word. The solution chosen in the project probably makes the user quite frustrated hovering over pieces of text to check if there is a link there. To improve the usability somewhat, I have added a symbol to illustrate the end of a path. This way the user will not have to look for links in nodes that do not have any links.

Reflection

“The exponential trap” is described by Cicconi as the trap the hypertext writer will go in if writing a hypertext with a tree structure, but without false forkings (2000). The story will very soon expand beyond a manageable amount. I went in that trap with my eyes wide open, and created a lot of work for myself. Still, I feel I have learnt a lot from this project, and even surprised myself in my ability to create a story universe (see attachment 2: “My course itinerary” p.14).

The polyscopic hypertext concept I have created is not revolutionary. Even so, I have not seen this exact way of storytelling in my research for this project. The way the concept really forces the writer to come up with new story elements is very interesting. I can also see how the concept can be used for forever expanding narratives, and narratives created by the users themselves. This however would require some sort of alert when nodes are added so that it would be easy to follow the story when it is evolving. I will save that thought for another project!

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ATTACHMENT 1

The Polyscopic Hypertext Fiction - the way it was written

When Emily died, no one really cared.

1 **When** (illustrations: watch at 7.24)

1 **When** Yesterday morning at 7.24 AM she died of pure exhaustion.

1.1 **7.24 AM** After 71 years of rich life, and 5 years of boredom, that is. *

1.2 **pure exhaustion**

1.2-1 The nurse at the night shift was only happy that she finally kept quiet for a while.

1.2-1.1 **she finally kept quiet** Keeping everyone else at the home awake several nights in a row, Emily had made that nurse's night shifts busier than ever.

1.2-1.1.1 **busier than ever** Busier, and quite embarrassing.

1.2-1.1.1.1 **embarrassing** The children and grandchildren of Bertram sat on his deathbed in an unbearable stench while listening to hysterical screaming and nurses in despair.

1.2-1.1.1.1.1 **the children and grandchildren** In Emily's room, however, there were no one. Her roommate had been transferred to another room while Emily partly ate, partly threw her breakfast around the room. *

1.2-2 Her last strength was spent screaming hysterically on and off for 3 whole days, kicking anyone getting close enough, spitting soup and throwing her excrements on the wall.

1.2-2.1 **on and off** Her screams were more on than off, though, driving the social workers nuts during their shifts. *

1.2-2.2 **throwing her excrements on the wall** That last activity mentioned was probably what most of the workers in the home would remember her for – given the unforgettable stench that filled the atmosphere of the whole department. *

2 **Emily** (illustrations: wedding photos, Ada)

2-1 Emily had been an excellent photographer, catching the beauty of people in their most important moments.

2-1.1 **excellent photographer**

2-1.1-1 Her photos were spread all over the country – hanging on walls, standing on mantelpieces, placed on office desks. *

2-1.1-2 No-one really noticed her when she was photographing either. But that was what made her photos so good. *

2-1.2 **beauty of people**

2-1.2-1 Emily could always make people feel at ease and be real in front of the camera. *

2-1.2-2 Real beauty, however, was to Emily all about one person.

2-1.2-2.1 **One person:** Ada and Emily was inseparable, but only a few people knew.

2-1.2-2.1.1 **Ada and Emily:** They were living together for 45 years, until Ada had an awful accident climbing the apple tree in the back yard.

2-1.2-2.1.1.1 **living together:** Each morning in these 45 years Ada would get up a bit before Emily, then run into the kitchen to put on the tea kettle.

2-1.2-2.1.1.1.1 **before Emily:** Ada never knew that Emily was awake when she ran out to the kitchen - and Emily wouldn't tell, 'cause she loved their morning routine. *

2-1.2-2.1.1.1.2 **tea kettle:** Ada was addicted to her breakfast tea.

2-1.2-2.1.1.1.2.1 **addicted**

2-1.2-2.1.1.1.2.1-1 Addicted to the making of it - seeing how the tea bag made brown sky formations in the hot water. *

2-1.2-2.1.1.1.2.1-2 Addicted to seeing Emily wake up when walking into the bedroom with the sweet smell of the tea and some biscuits on a breakfast tray. *

2-1.2-2.1.1.2 **awful accident**: What was most awful about it, was that Emily saw the whole thing from the kitchen window without being able to do anything to prevent it all from happening. *

2-1.2-2.1.1.3 **apple tree**: Every autumn Ada would climb the apple tree to pick apples for the cider they usually made. When they had made enough cider for both themselves and their neighbours down the road, Ada would make a phenomenal apple pie of the leftovers. *

2-1.2-2.1.2 **inseparable**: Even though they never planned and went through with any important moment together like the ones Emily photographed – they had their own special moments every day. *

2-1.2-2.1.3 **a few people**: The neighbours in the old yellow house down the road, the mailman, and Adas parents. *

2-1.3 **important moments**

2-1.3-1 What was meant to be their most important moments, that is. Real important moments are never planned. *

2-1.3-2 Her own important moments, however, were never caught on film. They involved eye-contact. (removed from project)*

2-1.3-3 These important moments often involves a party. At the big parties Emily made sure she could bring one guest.

2-1.3-3.1 **big parties** There were many of these big parties in Emily's life, but none of them were ever for her. *

2-1.3-3.2 **one guest**: Ada, of course! And in any film roll from these parties one would find Ada amongst the guest, wearing a weird looking red hat giving the photographer her widest smile.

2-1.3-3.2.1 **one would find Ada**: As a customer of Emily one would find Ada in the film roll – and probably think that it was a distant relative from the other part of the family. *

2-1.3-3.2.2 **red hat** “The wedding hat” they used to call it. Once quite modern and fluffy looking, but in the later years it just seemed like the air had gone out of it. *

2-2 So who was Emily? A woman in love with apple pies, long mornings and Elvis, and that had some severe doubts about God's existence.

2-2.1 **apple pies** Apple pie made of apples from the tree in her own back yard was top notch, but she was no good in the kitchen herself.

2-2.1.1 **good in the kitchen** Ada, was an excellent cook, though, and took care of all apple business. Unfortunately, that business killed her one day... *

2-2.2 **long mornings**

2-2.2-1 The long mornings was often a direct result of the long nights spent in the dark room or with Ada chatting over a glass of red wine. *

2-2.2-2 The long mornings was a bit meditative for Emily – waking up at a descent hour, but still postponing the actual start of the day a bit, felt really good.

2-2.2-2.1 **the actual start of the day**: Luckily weddings and other ceremonies usually don't take place at an early hour, so her work rarely interfered with her need for morning meditation. *

2-2.3 **Elvis**: When it comes to Elvis – putting on one of his records was all it took to make Emily dance around in the living room. Her impressions of him weren't half bad either, but not many people got to see those. *

2-2.4 **severe doubts about God's existence**: Not that she used a lot of time on this doubting – the fact just deserves a place in this story anyway. *

3 **died** (illustrations: alzheimer quotes)

3 **died** Emily was bored, then angry and frustrated, then dead.

3.1 **bored**

3.1-1 Sitting in a chair at the home reading celebrity magazines, eating pieces of apple and drinking lemonade wasn't Emily's favorite activity. Still it was her main activity the last 5 years of her life...

3.1-1.1 **favorite activity** Where was the music? The laughter? The dancing? The wine?

3.1-1.1.1 **music** For Emily the hymns sung at the Sunday service didn't really count as music. *

3.1-1.1.2 **laughter** Looking up from the celebrity magazine and around her in the common room Emily would only find wrinkled, apathetic faces.

3.1-1.1.2.1 **wrinkled, apathetic faces** Her own face soon reached that same state. *

3.1-1.1.3 **wine**: Emily would like a glass of wine in the evening, chatting with a friend or so. *

3.1-2 Yes, she was tired, she forgot stuff and needed care, but going to bed at 6 PM wasn't really necessary, was it?

3.1-2.1 **to bed at 6 PM** As long as she had to get up way before the birds did, it probably was. So there went her beloved long mornings. *

3.2 **angry and frustrated** Some would call it frustrated, others would call it plain crazy.

3.2.1 **frustrated** For Emily it was all about being seen as an individual, about interaction with others and intellectual stimulation.

3.2.1.1 **an individual** Emily forgot stuff once in a while... She still remembered loads from her time with Ada, though. *

3.2.1.2 **interaction with others**

3.2.1.2-1 In the home, however, the social workers were way too few to be able to care in any other way than the strictly task-oriented one.

3.2.1.2-1.1 **too few** Actually, there were a bunch of social workers working in the home, but only a few at the time.

3.2.1.2-1.1.1 **a bunch of social workers** That bunch didn't make it any easier for Emily – having to relate to a new person almost every day. *

3.2.1.2-2 In the home, however, the other residents were too tired and weak to keep a conversation going. *

3.2.2 **plain crazy** Her madness came to the surface sooner rather than later – and she ended her days in an extensive psychotic attack.

3.2.2.1 **sooner rather than later** Hours upon hours filled with nothing made her brain go dull in a much faster pace. *

3.2.2.2 **psychotic attack** She was frightened, angry, and both her body and her mind were all out of her control. *

3.3 **dead** And death is what it is. The only sure thing in life is that we're all going to die one day. *

4 **no one**

4.1 **No one.**

4.1-1 If being relieved doesn't count as caring, that is.

4.1-1.1 **relieved** Everyone witnessing Emily's crazy "show" her last days in the home, must have identified a feeling of relief within when she finally passed away. *

4.1-2 If Ada had been alive she would have cared, of course.

4.1-2.1 **would have cared** But Ada's horrible accident made Emily the mourning widow instead. *

5 really cared

5-1 Caring is about having time.

5-1.1 **time** The workers in the home just didn't have enough of that.

5-1.1.1 **the workers** The workers were many, but still few in each shift.

5-1.1.1.1 **many** Most of them just worked part time. Or actually, while waiting for a full time position to open up, they worked part time in different homes to make ends meet.

5-1.1.1.2 **few in each shift** Getting six residents up each morning, making them ready for breakfast AND preparing that breakfast within an hour and a half, doesn't give much room for chit-chat.

5-1.1.1.2.1 **six residents** Three of them didn't really know where they were and definitely didn't know how to put on their own clothes. Two never made it to the bathroom on time, which meant a change of bed sheets every day. One had a complicated prosthetic leg to put on each morning and needed at least two workers to be moved from his bed to the wheel chair. *

5-2 Caring is about recognizing the human being inside the wrinkly skin.

5-2.1 **human being** There's a difference between caring about the human, and just caring about completing the task at hand.

5-2.1.1 **caring about the human** The nurses and the social workers in the home wanted to be able to really care, but the limited resources made it difficult. *

*: Where a story path ends

ATTACHMENT 2

My course itinerary

