

**Johan Elmfeldt**  
**School of Teacher Education**  
**Malmö university**  
**S-205 06 Malmö**  
**Sweden**  
[johan.elmfeldt@mah.se](mailto:johan.elmfeldt@mah.se)

**AoIR Internet Research 3.0: NET/WORK/THEORY, Maastricht NL**  
**Oct 13-16 2002**

## **Mediacy - Exploring Hypertextuality**

In everyday language we think of texts as black signs on a paper. Texts are manifested as artifacts, e g books and papers like the one I am reading right now. But what happens if we think instead of textuality?

Hypertexts can be certain avantgardistic experiments. In a wider sense the whole bunch of Internet is a hypertext. But what happens if we think instead of hypertextuality?

Several theorists have written about the changes or the challenges which are put forward concerning “text” in digital culture. I think that for several of us here in this conference some names pop up when I say this: Vannevar Bush, Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, N Katherine Hayles, Michael Heim, George Landow, Lev Manovich, Janet Murray, Ted Nelson, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Espen Aarseth. I hope that mentioning them is not regarded as only flirtatious name dropping. All of them have in a number of articles, conference papers and books elaborated on the similarities and differences between thinking, writing and reading in print and digital culture. But the interest has not only been focused on ways of thinking and reading. Problems concerning the experience of body and the question in what ways we should think of embodiment and gender or sexual identity formation in digital culture are debated. A critical point here is of course all those power relations permeating all human action. See e g Don Idhe, *Bodies in Technology* (2002) as an illuminating example of the necessity to look phenomenologically on the role technology plays for our being-in-the-world.

Telepresence, immersion, interactivity and remediation are key aesthetic concepts in this work. Lev Manovich has even proposed that it is necessary to reread, reinterpret and rewrite the history of art using concepts from information theory and new media experiments. The digitalization interpellates us to rethink what has become natural or self-evident. That which has become “nature” depends on the certain ways of producing, storing and reading that belongs to aesthetic practices, genres and reading practices in print culture.

The purpose of this paper is to invite you to a discussion on the possibilities to rethink everyday behaviours when we use new media. I want to discuss whether it is fruitful to use “hypertextuality” as a key category for analysis and interpretation. If so, *mediacy* as a concept used to signify *literacy* in digital culture, would be *capabilities exploring hypertextuality*. Exploring hypertextuality is then an aesthetic practice in private life and would be a combined aesthetic and teaching practice in all educational institutions.

First it is necessary to make some definitions or rather to declare some positions concerning the way I think of “textuality”, “intertextuality” and “hypertextuality”.

A very general definition of *textuality* is that it is a quality, a state of being, but also a potential: something that yet is not but might come to be. The notion of textuality is closely bound to print culture. Therefore, text theorists when trying to cope with changes caused by digitalization, have problems trying to define what “text” is.

In literary theory *intertextuality* is a concept with origin in psychoanalysis reminding us of the continuously and contingently ongoing crossroads/bifurcations/rhizomes of texts as narratives, memories, fantasies that constitute our being-in-the-world. The concept is also used in linguistics, especially among those who work on discourse analyses of mass media. Intertextuality is manifest in every text. You could debate whether a certain text can be the intertext of itself. What could be said for sure, though, is that intertextuality has to do with the more or less explicit representations of texts in other texts. It is not surprising that the notion of intertextuality has attracted hypertext theorists.

*Hypertextuality* is also a quality, a state of being and also a potential. Hypertext was coined in order to develop a term that could be used for describing and creating potentialities in electronic writing and reading processes. But multilinear and recursive readings are not necessarily possible only using a computer, but can also be manifested in readings of print. Readings are often hypertextual, e.g. readers go back and forth through the text. When reading a detective story it happens that readers go backwards in order to once again read about a certain character or event in the purpose of finding out if there are any clues or red herrings in the text, put there by the author. It is not very appropriate to read the end of a criminal story, as we all know. However, it is not uncommon to go to the end of the text. When reading scientific texts this is more or less a convention, part of the genre.

So, textuality, intertextuality, and hypertextuality are manifested both as ways of organizing or producing ideas and fantasies and as ways of reading, or rather rereading practices.

Can the concept of “hypertextuality” be used in a broader sense without losing its certain characteristics? Doing this is to draw on “hypertext” using it as a metaphor. The literal meaning of hypertext is transported to or imported into other areas than the original one. I put the problem because other concepts in literary theory and cultural studies and theory tend to be so widely used that they seem to lose their meaning. “Text” can be used to signify everything in culture from the certain qualities of print text, over piercing as fashion in late modernity to the behaviour when embarking an aeroplane in order to fly to an AoIR-conference. Also “discourse” can be used for analysing and interpreting everything from the most rudimentary speech act in a conversation to certain themes in history as insanity and sexuality. Even “intertextuality” can be used for more or less everything from pointing out certain explicit allusions in a literary text to the whole web of texts, print and/or digital in which we all live and dwell. The concepts mentioned can also be parts of other neologisms. In the analysis of e.g. advertisements “discourse analysis” is used in connection with neologisms as “interdiscursive” practices.

But what I am thinking about now is whether it is appropriate to regard aesthetic practices as exploring hypertextuality. Let me make a *plaidoyer* for this, just for the sake of playing around a little with the arguments. I shall give four examples, which all can be understood as ways of exploring hypertextuality.

My first example is also a reminder. Vannevar Bush thought that the Memex could become the technology of associative indexing. It might be that I now widen the discussion too far, but it is necessary to linger a while on human-computer interaction. There are, I think, two lines of thought when working by the computer when it comes to writing. The first is dividing the text or the documents into hierarchies. The archive so constructed is divided into categories ordered hierarchically, boxes within boxes within boxes. But the way categories are constructed is totally dependent on the horizon from which I look upon the world. I think that everyone who has tried to get some order into a wide amount of data in quantitative and also qualitative research knows what I am talking about. The construction of categories and of hierarchies can always be put into question. Intimately connected to this attempt to order things are our capabilities of associative thinking in analogies and metaphors, even in metonymies. How do we then work interacting with the computer? My experience is that this work is highly associative, if not dominantly associative. All the folders in my computer are graphically ordered in hierarchies, but the hierarchies are at the same time ordered in the way of associative indexing. So, the ordering of documents is an example of hypertextuality in the sense of associative indexing.

My second example is short. In the academia the supervisor can say that certain parts of the student's paper or dissertation chapters could be "linked" to each other in other ways. After the advent of electronic hypertexts in everyday activities the metaphor "link" or "linkage" gets a concrete meaning, that is, it also becomes the literal memory of a graphic interface. So, a concept which was elaborated for the purpose of describing what might be made possible with the computer also says something about working and thinking in print culture. The new concept makes us rethink and rewrite history.

Third, another line of argument for a widened use of hypertextuality as a quality not necessarily bound to a narrow definition of text would be to talk about hypertextuality linked to "remediation". Bolter & Grusin claim that the history of media, including visual art, architecture and design of furniture etc is the history of transparency, i.e. a strife for more and more "realistic" representation. At the same time we use more and more media: "our culture [...] wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them", as Bolter & Grusin writes (5). The perspective of renaissance art is an example of how a technological innovation, or maybe rather a geometric innovation concerning how to create depth into the two dimensions of a painting, is used to create a feeling of transparency. In the era of reproduction digital media become more and more intertwined in a constant process of convergence and divergence. A new technology of this kind would be film on DVD-disc and the DVD-player. The film can be watched as an immersive experience, but watching the film can also be complemented by e.g. the director's comments in voice over. In this way the production process as such and the technics used in producing the film become explicit. The result is a media-reflexive reader-response. It should also be noticed that the DVD-player often or regularly is connected to a wide screen, a powerful amplifier and loudspeakers all around the room. The total amount of different apparatuses used is close to a ubiquitous computing

environment. This can be further developed as a whole bunch of machines for sound and sight constructed by one and the same producer as Bang & Olufsen.

So, can the mentioned technics, the usage of them and the reader response be called an example of hypertextuality? Yes, they can as long as we think of hypertextuality in a wide sense as potential combinations of different media used, visual and audile, and as aesthetic experiences which are both immersive and reflexive. If so, processes of remediation can metaphorically be seen as hypertextual in the sense that the hardware, i.e. the technological equipment, the software, i.e. the film, and the aesthetic experience are so close linked to each other that using hypertextuality as a key concept signifying a quality, a state of mind, might be suitable.

My last example concerns the relationships between the chatrooms and mobile phones/cellulars. In these days, as we all know, the stock market is not very happy when dealing telecommunication shares. But the everyday usage of mobile phones does not seem to lessen, at least not when it comes to youth. Talking on the phone and maybe more frequent sending SMS's is very popular and has even become a disciplinary problem in Swedish classrooms. At the same time as we see this, it is worth noticing that a Swedish chatsite called [lunarstorm.se](http://lunarstorm.se) has attracted two million members, most of them teenagers. Logging in to [lunarstorm.se](http://lunarstorm.se) has also become, just as for mobile phones, a disciplinary problem in schools. Instead of completing the tasks the teachers give them, the pupils chat, publish their personal diaries, build their own "shelters" etc on [lunarstorm](http://lunarstorm.se). The communicative possibilities and the intersection of them can mean that a teenager sends an SMS to a friend, asks him or her to log in on [lunarstorm](http://lunarstorm.se) in order to continue the correspondence there, either privately or in a widened circle. Is this a social behaviour that could be defined as an aspect of hypertextuality? I think so. All the different ways of linking and connecting to each other is a hypertextual practice. The concept of hypertextuality can be a way to understand what it is all about. Different "texts" are linked to each other via digital media.

So, to conclude: the usage of new media can be understood as fundamentally hypertextual. I have tried to give four examples of behaviours in which hypertextuality could be used as a key category for description and analysis (but not further developed into interpretation): the way we order documents when interacting with the computer, conversation in supervision, the usage of DVD-players, and sending SMS's and communicating in chatrooms. The problem is of course that the concept now has become so wide and used on so many levels that it might have lost any sense of meaning. You could say, shouldn't we reserve hypertextuality for just the basic hypertext, i.e. chunks of texts electronically linked to each other as on websites? Yes, this definition and practices connected to it still hold. But then we are rather talking about electronic hypertexts in a narrow sense, not about an attempt to catch the expansion of new media in every corner of our lives.

For me, the most basic point is the question whether we can rethink everyday behaviour and everyday aesthetic practices using a terminology which has its origin in the development of new media. I have just tried to do this by formulating some tentative thoughts.