

What Clicks

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RIDING THE MERIDIAN

<http://www.heelstone.com/meridian>

CAULDRON & NET

<http://www.studiocleo.com/cauldron>

Imagine it's 1895 and you're sitting in a dark Parisian basement. A bright glow from the back of the room magically conjures a speeding train on the wall before you. People around you shriek and take cover. Why? The event is so compelling they forget they are experiencing something through an artistic medium.

This is what I look for in good hypertext.

I like my bed, and I like the sheets creeping right up to the edge of my book. I like that my book gets warm as I get sleepy. The only thing I like about reading on a computer is that I can do it at work when I need to procrastinate in a way that will not elicit suspicions of negligence. In that case, my standards for reading material go way down. I am willing to read journals uploaded by eighth-graders; I am willing to read unintelligible poems by obscure Victorian poets as long as the text is dark and the screen is light. Or vice versa.

But when I'm not at work, there needs to be a reason for a click. There needs to be a reason I am straining my eyes to read text on a screen. Most writing is not better interactive, and most writers know this intuitively, and most writers do not let the reader mess around. To write literature is to interact with yourself, and to allow other people to interact with themselves—via you. To let the reader futz with your writing probably does neither of those things for either of you. However there is a special category of writing that is good but would not be if readers couldn't futz with it. On the Web.

Lately, it seems everyone is writing on-line and talking about hypertext, and just like the rest of the Web, everyone's looking for a way to sort

through the muck. A couple of sites come to mind that are weeding out work that is worth clicking into even after you've come home from work:

Riding the Meridian and *Cauldron & Net*.

These two sites archive the recent developments in hypertext. Not all hypertext is as well written or as bound to the Web as I would like. Many people who write with engaging, crafted language do not need their writing to be on-line to be understood (only to be distributed). On *Cauldron & Net*, for example, Kevin Fitzgerald's "Five Poems" and David Fujino's "Six poems" are nice to read, but I would like to read them in my bed, since I can.

Deena Larsen's "Power Moves" is fun for a cursor. Her unique interface makes the text change from rollovers in another part of the page. I couldn't do this in bed, if you follow me. But I wish that her story tugged my heartstrings.

Jim Andrews's slew of small, interactive pieces coin new phrases for text interaction that I hope will stick: "Do the text. Stop the text. Discipline the text." The invitation to take any of these actions sounds so exciting that I want to click. Another interface invites the reader to "Prod, stir or tame." Stirring the letters to a bubble, disciplining the letters into a word: this is fun and new.

The Lumière brothers, who showed that film in that Parisian basement, never thought the movies would take off. Why watch a representation of something you see every day? They didn't realize that people would forget about the medium.

Which is hard to get people to do. You need a text that requires interactivity to tell its story and engages the reader in a visceral way. I don't want to have to remember that I'm reading on-line. When I read the scene in *Portnoy's Complaint* when the kid masturbates a slab of liver, I do not think, "I am reading a book." When I read-click-read-click, the clicking must be automatic to make me forget about the medium.

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In *Riding the Meridian* Carolyn Guertin and Marjorie Coverley Luesebrink curate a progressive dinner party, based on Judy Chicago's dinner party (<http://www.heelstone.com/meridian/templates/Dinner/dinner2.htm>). Like Judy Chicago's piece, this on-line dinner party showcases many styles and talents. And like Judy Chicago's piece, this dinner party rests at the forefront of expression, presenting hypertexts that make me think about words as I never have before.

For example, Natalie Bookchin's "The Intruder" makes games from words, and the more you play the game, the more meaning the words hold. Carolyn Guertin's "skeleton sky: a millennium poem" makes reading poetry feel like channel changing—all the excitement of holding the remote without the disappointment of insipid writing.

Stephanie Strickland's "The Ballad of Sand and Harry Soot" is full of the beautiful writing of a controlled poet: "Sand was a gourd fanatic/ and she played/ a glass/ marimba." However, I found myself switching focus from narrator to navigation each time I clicked and nothing happened. The navigation is a little difficult: Does a red word mean click, or don't click? Does a yellow word mean click or don't click? I could not figure out the rules: I had an experience similar to when I'm reading a good book while I get a manicure, and I have to focus more on figuring out how to turn the page than on what I'm reading.

M.D. Coverly's "Endless Suburbs" adheres to more conventional writing styles than other Dinner Party guests; however, the interactivity of the text brings new meaning to the story. Coverly's chunks of writing each tells a story in its own right, and the storytelling has gems for sentences such as these: "Bob Kimbell is having a second cup of coffee at the house down the street. The house is just like his own, except that the layout is reversed. The woman he is having an affair with is a lot like his wife, too, but she dresses in sexy, tight pants.

Sometimes when he climbs out of bed, he can't remember which house he is in."

Together, Coverly's chunks of information create a pastiche of suburban life. Read in print format, the reader would feel like "Endless Suburbs" is reportage. Read in hypertext format, this reader feels like a gossiping neighbor—each click is a knock on a neighbor's door to collect more information. Gossip is not linear. To make the reader feel like a suburban dweller, no better than Bob or his wife Peggy, the text must be interactive.

That *Cauldron & Net* can field such strong writers is a testament to the arrival of hypertext even among writers who do not need the medium per se. That *Riding the Meridian* can field a dinner party of women using the Web to reposition language is a harbinger of the approaching on-line revolution, akin to the first dinner party portended off-line affair. It is brave for artists to let readers interact with their works. It is brave for readers to give up reading time in bed to sit in front of a computer.

Adrienne Eisen writes hypertexts which have won many awards, including New Media Magazine's Invision Award and Eastgate's HyStruct Award. Her hypertexts are located at <http://www.apc.net/adrienne>.