

“Hyper Kafka: Rooms of Memory”: An Immersive Hypertext Fiction Installation for Teaching and Disseminating Literature

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Hypertext Fiction is re-emerging as a nexus of textual nodes and navigational links yet enhanced by modern immersive media and aesthetics. As such it can stimulate the learning process towards focused research and creative interpretation on various subject matters. Drawing upon the reflections of Vannevar Bush, Ted Nelson, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Gerard Genette, and Julia Kristeva, the authors have explored hypertext fiction as the means to holistically approach the literary work of Franz Kafka. In their course “Augmented Technologies in the Curriculum”, part of the Pedagogical and Didactical Sufficiency Program at the Department of Audiovisual Arts at the Ionian University, they guided their students to investigate, study and interpret Kafka-related excerpts, patterns, thematics, in order to create an interactive learning environment in the form of hypertext fiction. It is the authors' premise that through a dynamic, dialectic system fostering the initiative to make choices, follow different paths, and reflect on different perspectives, hypertext fiction can be used as an effective educational tool for in-depth and engaging analysis of curricula and student-centered, discovery learning practices.

In terms of methodology, the students were, in the course of one semester, first prompted to research upon Kafka's work and discuss their findings with the rest of the class. Then, through workshops on i) HTML programming, ii) graphic design, and iii) sound design, they were guided to create hypermedia rooms hosting texts, images, and sounds. Selected works were joined into an application and enhanced through a common interactive interface and scenographic props. The result was the interactive installation “Hyper Kafka: Rooms of Memory”, which has been so far presented at the Library of the Philosophical School of the Athens University and the Audiovisual Festival of the Ionian University. Interface design embraced a literary feel with a dark aesthetic, incorporating a 3D environment to offer the audience a glimpse into the chaotic and minimal Kafkaesque world. The scenographic preparation included an old lamp pointing at a mouse on a desk that was decorated with pictures of Kafka's own sketches and old newspapers, reflecting a retro ambience. The hypertext fiction environment itself was projected on the wall and played back through speakers.

Preliminary evaluation of “Hyper Kafka: Rooms of Memory” has showed increased interest and acceptance of a hypertext fiction work as the core component of a learning environment. The participants of a focus group discussion (post-graduate students of German Literature) reported that the artworks succeeded in capturing Kafka's absurdity, the technical execution was well-made, and the scenographic configuration of the physical space helpful in creating an immersive atmosphere. Hypermedia elements, such as virtual doors, passages, paths, and surprises were found to highlight the transformation, isolation, and complexity pertaining to Kafka's narrative, yet a technical introduction in navigating through the hypertext space was suggested for future applications. The authors will further evaluate and enrich hypertext fiction environments in search of the optimal educational practices.

Keywords

hypertext, hypertext fiction, literature, education, interaction, installation, immersion