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Assignment #1: Distinctive Characteristics of Old and New Media
Handling New Media
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Hailed as one of the first hypertext novels, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) is an interactive work of fiction that requires its reader to make choices concerning what order the novel will be read in. As there is no "right way" to approach the work, each reading will be unique and the narrative slightly different. For some, it may be viewed as a novel that includes extensively annotated poem, one that tells the story of its author's life. For others, it can be read as the annotator's opinion of the poem's author, his friend and colleague. And still another story that emerges is a series of tales from the fictional land of Zembla, the narrator and annotator's home. *Pale Fire* is the title of the poem written by the character John Shade, who is recently deceased within the narrative. While this novel exhibits characteristics commonly attributed to "new media" works, it is ultimately bound to its printed form. By contrast, Robert Kendall's *In the Garden of Recounting* (2004), is a hypertext poem that has been "printed" on the Internet. This animated, interactive text as well requires the reader to make choices that will affect her interpretation of the work. Yet a comparison of these works reveals numerable inherent distinctions between them that draw a clear line between "old" and "new" media.

In the Garden of Recounting is an animated poem in the shape of a small garden. As the reader/user scrolls over outlines of plants, they begin to fill with green as words and phrases appear around and between the leaves. Once all the plants have been filled, their color and the words around them will fade, with the exception of a few that form the beginning of the next group of plants. Meanwhile, in the clouds overhead, letters are swirling, waiting for the reader to scroll over four words beside the garden that allows them to rain down into sentences on the plants. The poem's narrative is the recollection of a childhood memory, and reflects this process by the arbitrary order in which the fragments emerge depending on the choices made by the reader. About his poem, Robert Kendall states that, "It also demonstrates the way that memories change organically over time and how they can mutate in order to meet the needs of the story one wants to tell about oneself."¹

The most striking similarity between these two texts is perhaps their interactive nature. Both works require the reader to become actively involved in the unfolding of the narrative. The two texts are likewise non-linear, causing the interpretation of the work to vary depending on those choices the reader makes. Another similarity is that they are both poems, or at least, involve an element of poetry, while at the same time neither are traditional poems. It may also be concluded that both narratives relate to recollection; that memory plays an important role. Finally, in a sense they are both annotated, though again, the idea of annotation will have to be altered in the consideration of these texts.

¹ From Robert Kendall's website. Accessed 9/14/2005 at
<<http://www.wordcircuits.com/kendall/poetry/index.html>>

The similarities between *Pale Fire* and *In the Garden of Recounting* are also starting points for an examination of their differences, beginning with the idea of interactivity as it relates to each.

In his book *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich describes his method of defining new media: “Rather than focusing on familiar categories such as interactivity or hypermedia, I suggest a different list. This reduces all principles of new media to five – numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and cultural transcoding.”² Of course, only Kendall’s text has those five characteristics, while they both share the familiar category of interactivity Manovich wants to avoid. From Manovich’s point of view, interactivity alone isn’t enough to define a new media work. However, Janet H. Murray, in her essay “Inventing the Medium,” allows for the concept to remain as a characteristic, as long as one considers that unique space of digital interactivity is something entirely different. She explains that digital interactivity involves the procedural and participatory foundation of the computer: “We do something with the computer... and it processes our input and responds in a way that makes sense to us. Because of the interactive nature of the medium, the computer environment is not just immersive, it is animated.”³

Indeed, the level of interactivity in Kendall’s poem is far more immersive than in Nabokov’s work. With the latter, the reader is handling an object that has been in existence for over hundreds of years: the printed book. This object exists in real space, and thus is interacted with the same way any physical object is. While the novel does call for the reader to participate in the unfolding of the narrative, the physical action of turning the pages remains the same as it would for any book. On the other hand, the reader/user accesses *In the Garden of Recounting* in a space that is simulated, one which, as Murray notes, has an enveloping quality that, “derives from the spatial property of the medium, its capability for embodying dimensionality.”⁴ Within the GUI, the reader/user navigates through links and trails that lead up to the poem itself. We move through the work, “rather than just look at it,”⁵ as the reader does in the case of *Pale Fire*. This series of interfaces that the user follows to reach the work, as well as those that come after, leads back to the idea of annotation as mentioned above. The poem cannot be read/interacted with until the reader goes through a series of pages in Kendall’s website, and possibly even more if the work was accessed through, for example, Eastgate Systems, Inc. The links can be thought of as a new form of annotation, unique to the web-based poem. While Nabokov has created a unique form of annotation as well (fictional annotations to a poem by a character in a novel who uses them to tell his own stories), the media remains distinctly “old.”

² Lev Manovich. “What is New Media?” *The Language of New Media*. (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001) 20.

³ Janet H. Murray. “Inventing the Medium.” *The New Media Reader*. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, ed., (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003) 6.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

These two works can be distinguished by their visual quality as well. *Pale Fire*'s only illustration is on its cover. Kendall's poem, on the other hand, is an animated work; the graphics are part of the content. In the case of old media, adding illustrations to a work is certainly a possibility, but usually will not affect the reader's interpretation of the work to a great degree. And of course, the printed book does not allow for moving graphics to enter the text. *In the Garden of Recounting* has a very specific aesthetic quality that pushes it to the border of visual art. It is not simply a poem. Changing the graphics and playfully animated letters that hover in the cloud would fundamentally change the work itself. The animated aspect of the work also allows the author/creator to have a degree of control over the unfolding of the narrative. While the reader chooses in what order she will read the text, the author has chosen where the text will appear on the screen. He has also programmed the text to fade in and out at varying intervals, so that lines of the poem will appear one at a time in a seemingly arbitrary order, impressing upon the reader the act of recollection through motion graphics.

The Compact Oxford English Dictionary Online defines hypertext as in computing, "a system allowing extensive cross-referencing between related sections of text."⁶ Without the word computing in the definition, *Pale Fire* might fit and perhaps it does in some older dictionary. While the definition of hypertext may expand include a work such as this, it is still an "old media" work. The novel is bound to its printed form. Kendall's work on the other hand, fits the definitions of new media as proposed by Murray and Manovich. More than simply a poem created on a computer and published on the Internet, *In the Garden of Recounting* and similar works contribute to the increasing development of new media capability, pushing through the traditional borders imposed by the old.

⁶ *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Accessed 9/13/2005 at <http://www.askoxford.com/dictionaries/compact_oed/?view=uk>