One Click at a Time – Playing Porpentine’s *howling dogs*

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**ABSTRACT**

Hypertext fiction has been a mainstay of electronic literature since its inception. As early as 1987, with Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon, a story*, literary work has been constructed that relies on node based trails through the text for its delivery and aesthetic project. But the popularity of hypertext work soon waned. The medium never reached the appeal that was anticipated, and remained within the confines of experiment and academia (Ryan 2005). The introduction of Twine, developed by Chris Klimas in 2009, opened new avenues for hypertext fiction. The accessibility of the platform allowed a greater variety of writers and designers to create hypertext works which in turn led to a shift in the conceptual framework of the medium. Increasingly Twine authors situated their work in the realm of indi-games, embracing a counter cultural, underdog aesthetic (Harvey 2014). While the legitimacy of Twine works as ‘games’ has been questioned, examining these works within both a literary and a ludic framework allows for rich analysis to emerge.

One of the most outspoken proponents of Twine as an indi-game platform ripe for subversion and resistance has been the author Porpentine (Porpentine 2013). In 2012 Porpentine’s game *howling dogs* received the XYZZY award for “Best Story” and “Best Writing”. *howling dogs* presents the story of a person in captivity, caught in a seemingly endless routine of sleeping, eating, and immersing themselves in virtual reality (Porpentine 2012). The narrative circles through the daily routine, punctuated by excursions into virtual reality vignettes. In these moments of virtual reality, the player-character can make decisions that affect the outcome of each insert, and ultimately effects the outcome of the narrative as a whole. The game is presented text, with some words and phrases highlighted as hyperlinks, thus imbuing them with narrative significance. These clickable markers cause the reader/player to pause, to consider, and to second guess. In some cases this highlights potential for significant decision making, in others it emphasizes the lack of choice, futility and inevitability. Each click creates meaning.

Much has been written on *howling dogs* in indi-game press and criticism (Short 2012; Reed 2012; Psepho 2013) This paper however offers a different approach and analyses the game not only form the point of view of a branching narrative, but also from the point of view of the system of signification established through the links themselves. The ways in which links create meaning, through structural patterns, juxtaposition, and nodal relations are investigated (Bernstein 2000; Bernstein 2009). This is expanded upon through a reading that considers the links as more than just joins in information, analogues to the cinematic cut (Miles 1999), but as self-revealing constructs, visible marks on a screen defining and delineating the text. Within a ludic framework the ability of the game to offer the player an illusion of agency through these links is interrogated, raising questions of game play, playfulness and player engagement (Salen & Zimmerman 2003; Aarseth 1997) In conclusion the work is considered as a text that operates within and yet resists gameplay. The structure of resistance and repetition that the game explores mechanically is deeply entwined with its thematic underpinnings. This creates a work that allows for the exploration of hypertext’s literary and ludic qualities in medium and message.
References


Keywords
Hypertext; Hyperlink; Porpentine; Twine; Narrative; indi-games; Interactive Fiction