

The Problem with Hypertext

by David Shenk

RAY SUAREZ, HOST: Chips are said to be the brains behind the computer. Commentator David Shenk says that as we make computers faster and easier to use, we shouldn't ignore the architecture of the human brain.

DAVID SHENK, COMMENTATOR: Someday, perhaps tens of thousands of years from now, the human form may be very different. Our eyes might point in different directions, our ears may process different channels of sound in distinct parts of the brain, and we might even talk and think in fragmented hyper-speak.

Until then, we are all stuck in a linear world. We can dabble in hyper-fiction and so-called dense TV as forms of entertainment and as thought experiments, but let us not forget that our brains are wired to read the adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Time Magazine.

Our sentences work best when they have a subject, object, and verb. Our stories work best when they have an ending. As we surf the Internet, we're in danger of forgetting this basic truth.

With hyper-text, endings are irrelevant, because no one ever gets to one. Reading gives way to surfing, a meandering peripatetic journey through a maze of threads. The surfer creates his or her own narrative, opting for the most seductive link immediately available.

As a research technique, this is superb. As a mode of thought however, it has serious deficiencies. Faster is not always better and segmentation is not always smarter.

If Jane Austen could see what her book *Pride and Prejudice* has become on the World Wide Web, she would faint dead away. In the first five sentences, there are four invitations to go elsewhere.

In our restless technological optimism, we tend to look down on old technologies as inferior, but we need to resist this. Some of the boring old linear technologies, including the one we're using right now, still ride on the cutting edge of human intelligence.

The works of George Orwell, E.B. White, and Joan Didion read from beginning to end, not just because of the primitive tools these writers used. Traditional narrative offers the reader a journey with a built-in purpose.

The progression of thought is specifically designed so that the reader may learn something, not just from the parts of the story, but also from the story as a whole.

For all of its advantages, hyper-text has no whole. As the Web becomes integrated into the fabric of our lives, mostly to our great benefit, we should employ hyper-linking as a useful tool, but be careful not to let it govern the way we think.

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