

## Exploring conventional and alternative ways of navigating around an informational website

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*Where Charles Dickens's narrative links stitched together the torn fabric of industrial society, today's hypertext links attempt the same with information. The imaginative crisis that faces us today comes from the crisis of having too much information at our fingertips, the near-impossible task of contemplating a colossal web of interconnected computers.*

(Johnson, 1997 p.116)

This project is an attempt to represent different ways in which we might negotiate our way through the information-space of a website.

'Many people have a tree growing in their heads,' Deleuze and Guattari observe, 'but the brain itself is much more of a grass than a tree.' (quoted in Moulthrop p. 301). What they proposed was a new social order (which I shall simply gloss over here for lack of space and so as not to deviate too far from the subject of this report) based on the metaphor of the nomad moving through the desert, rather than the 'urban grid of the policeman..( )..a chaotically distributed network (the rhizome) rather than a regular hierarchy of trunk and branches.' (Moulthrop p. 301) Central to this is the notion of smooth versus striated space – striated space being represented by an ordered view of knowledge, purposeful, controlled....whereas smooth space is conceived dynamically, by 'bricolage' rather than linearity. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, 'the points are subordinated to the trajectory.' (quoted in Moulthrop p 303). This would perhaps correspond with the view of hypertext where the *links* are in a way more significant than the *nodes* of the network, as Vannevar Bush claimed, 'the process of tying two items together is the important thing' ('As We May Think', para.7).

## Hyperlinks and 'building trails'

What Steven Johnson had in mind in the opening quote (above) was a common device that Dickens employed in his novels, that of the 'link of association': the hints of a connection, 'passing resemblances, half-glimpsed then forgotten'. Johnson's view is that hypertext links perform a similar function, that of bringing together apparently unrelated elements in such a way that semantic or cognitive associations are made in the mind of the reader/user/viewer. However, his point is that we need 'more than one type of link'.

Recalling Bush's 'As We May Think', Johnson goes on to suggest that the proposed 'Memex' - a device that would enable connections to be made between pieces of information, and so doing build 'trails' through information-space, individual to the 'builder' - is closer to how hypertext could and should be employed. In other words, *building* a trail is different from *following* one, which is what a lot of the Web is like at the moment.

However, 'links of association', even idiosyncratic ones, or the building of a trail through interaction and customisation, is one way of conceptualising hypertext. Another is to view links as interruptions in a narrative, for, as Harpold explains, clicking on a link is not just a pause in the narrative, but 'a point of singularity where everything that came "before" is changed in ways that cannot have been predicted prior to the rupture.' (1994, p. 197) Although he is particularly talking about hypertext fiction, this seems to be generally a valid point, and one I have tried to illustrate in my project. Moulthrop takes this a step further in observing that 'making sense' of a link necessarily involves reader/viewer input. 'Hypertexts are composed of ... linearities broken across the gap or synapse of transition, a space which the receiver must somehow fill with meaning.' (p 304)

## Resistance

The equation of smooth space to hypertext and striated space to print or traditional text, although intuitively appealing, is not a simple one. The smooth space of hypertext is in fact 'mediated by discontinuities', as Moulthrop puts it - 'it propagates in a matrix of breaks, jumps and implied or contingent connections which are enacted by the viewer or receiver.' (p 303). It could also be said that hypertext needs to exhibit a degree of striation in order to actually work. In addition, underlying the construction of hypertext are layers of computer coding that are necessarily logical, controlled and rule-driven. Moulthrop cites Martin Rosenberg's damning critique of

hypertext theory when he points out that 'no technologically mediated link can ever constitute a genuine line of flight.' (p 310)

Moreover, it could be that we may find ourselves resisting the 'what-you-will' of relatively smooth space, creating order once more - Moulthrop cites Coover as saying that in the age of hypertext, 'one will feel the need, even while using these vast networks and principles of randomness and expansive storyline, to struggle against them..' (p 308) I suggest that an example of this is the increasing standardisation of web design, many standardisations becoming conventions. I touch upon this issue in the project.

## **The Project**

The subject of the information-space I have created is the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, a Regency palace noted for its eclectic, if not unique range of architectural and interior design styles and the colourful figure of its original owner, George IV. The Pavilion is open to the public, who follow a prescribed route through the state rooms. The official guidebook describes the rooms in the sequence that they are passed through, and the end section deals with topics such as 'Life in the Royal Pavilion', and details of the restoration work. The children's guide is less structured – it consists of a number of quizzes, cartoon-like illustrations, colouring-in and other diversions, all related to people, rooms or incidents that took place in the Pavilion.

What I wanted to model was three different approaches – the first two drawing heavily upon the structure and content of the two print guides. The principles I have tried to follow here are those summarised by Donald Norman in 'The Design of Everyday Things' as *affordances*, *constraints*, *mapping* and *feedback*.

**Affordances** are 'the perceived and actual properties (of a thing)' (p 9) – Norman gives the example of a chair 'affording' support, therefore it is for sitting on. On a web page, good design would make it obvious what the elements of it are 'good for'; sometimes this happens through convention (eg underlined text = a link = you can click on it and something will happen). Other times design is more of a factor. Is there something else to see? Do I have to click on something to make something happen? Are there links on this page? Where can I go next? These are questions that should, according to the principle of affordance, be visibly answered on the page.

Less immediately obvious than affordances are **constraints**. Norman asserts that 'with the proper use of ... constraints there should only be a limited number of possible actions.' (p 84). One of his examples of a physical constraint is a Yale door key – it can only be inserted into the

lock if held vertically. On a website, there are many physical constraints, not just limiting the viewer's actions but also the designer's. The browser which reads the web page may not be a version that 'understands' Java, or may have that capacity disabled. This would be a physical constraint upon the designer should she wish all viewers to see a Java applet on her page (although it would not constrain her from incorporating it.) Viewers are constrained by a number of factors including their web browser, operating system, processor speed...as well as the structure of the web page. If you are following the Tour, you may want to jump to a room out of sequence. However, there is no 'menu' of rooms on each page that would allow this: the viewer is constrained to click back or forward through each room. Similarly, I have created links from the Tour to certain of the Tricks pages, but opened in a new browser window, which means the viewer is never taken away from the Tour. However, I have not allowed the viewer to access Episode or Tour pages from the Tricks track. This is a constraint built into the design.

As well as physical constraints, Norman describes cultural, semantic and logical constraints. Cultural constraints would be, for example, knowing how to behave in certain conventional situations, semantic constraints derive from our 'knowledge of the world and the situation', and logical constraints relate to what Norman calls 'mapping', which I shall return to below. I have tried to make the 'Tour' pages as explicit as possible in terms of what can and can't be done on each page. The use of icons on web pages are good examples. To show the viewer where to click to move to the adjacent pages I use the arrows >> and <<. The meaning of >> can only really be forwards, an example of a semantic constraint. I use it in conjunction with the words 'next room' in order to establish the convention of moving sequentially through the rooms of the Pavilion. That 'going forward' takes you to the next room and not any other room is an example of a cultural constraint of the *real world*. In the world of hypertext, of course, this is not a constraint. Thus, for the more experienced user, it needs to be established.

The connection between the 'virtual' Tour and the idea of an 'actual' walking tour through the Pavilion is an example of what Norman calls **mapping**. He is principally concerned with the relation between 'controls and their movements and results in the world', as seen in everyday objects such as car radios and fridge thermostats. He claims that the closer the designer can get to 'natural mappings' such as spatial (up, down, left, right) or conventional (moving a volume control slider upwards usually means a louder sound) the greater the chance of 'immediate understanding.' (p 23) Mappings may be learnt, of course. There are many examples of this when learning a musical instrument, for example, the notes on a page of music are read left-to-right, even when on the piano the hands may be travelling right-to-left on the keyboard. Web page conventions such as consistent positioning of navigational and stylistic elements (menu always in the same place, consistency of colour schemes, fonts and layout) are all supposed to

eliminate errors of faulty mapping. Many such conventions, through common usage and the dictates of 'web style' gurus, have become almost as established as 'red means stop and green means go'.

Norman's final principle is that of **feedback** – 'sending back to the user information about what action has actually been done, what result has been accomplished is a well-known concept in the science of control and information theory.' (p 27) On the Tour, clicking on >> takes you to the next room in the sequence, a fact that can be checked at each stage by clicking the 'where am I?' button and seeing your position on the map. This facility also allows you to see what rooms are yet to come, their relative sizes, layout of the building, etcetera – all feedback confirming your 'position' and progress on the Tour.

The third track of the Royal Pavilion site is entitled 'Tricks', and, as the title implies, it is intended as an 'alternative' to the other two. My intention was for it to be something more uniquely suited to the medium of hypertext. I deliberately went *against* the principles of mapping and feedback in an effort to free the viewer from certain webpage (and cultural) conventions; in so doing I have tried to experiment with links as 'ruptures' as Harpold describes them, and as a way of 'leaving things out and letting the trails do the work' as suggested by Johnson (p 133). Given the fantasy, exotic past, exuberance and density of the Royal Pavilion, and the opportunity to engage with the metaphors of moving around a physical space, this produced something perhaps more akin to a game than to an informational piece. But, as Johnson points out in his critique of the term 'surfing' as applied to the Web, 'TV channel surfing is all about the thrill of surfaces. Web surfing is about *depth*, about wanting to know more.' (p 123) The aim is to leave the viewer wanting to know more, and feeling there is more to discover.

*In general, I should make the following points:*

- The site is only sketched out, the finished piece would be far larger, especially the Tricks section, in order to achieve the intended 'dislocatory' effect. At the moment there are fewer than fifty pages. I kept the Tour down to just a few rooms, to illustrate the idea, rather than the entire Pavilion.
- Since this is not a piece intended for public viewing, I have not obtained permission for use of any of the photos. I have included copyright credits at the end of this report, however.

- The site was created for the most part using Adobe GoLive and Photoshop.

## Site Outline

### *Tour*

The Tour is conventional, linear, following the official guidebook. Designed to take you on a 'walking tour' of the building. Follows a linear order, and the web design conventions of layout, ease of navigation, consistency, clarity, fast-loading graphics, etcetera. There is a beginning and an end, you can take hypertext diversions but you never lose sight of the tour (because links open in new browser windows) and there is always an end to the tour once you have got bored with following 'diversions'. You can also track your progress through the building on a map ('where am I?').

### *Episodes*

as it sounds - less linear, more episodic. But still a logical narrative within each 'episode', and conventional ways of navigating back to the beginning and between episodes. You can tell when you have explored all the information in the 'episodic' space, through elimination/working your way through the menus.

### *Tricks*

the third track is the most hypertextual: you are launched into it with no sense of where you are, or whether there is a beginning. Diversions lead in various directions, the themes of fantasy and deception add to the sense of this space being more risky than the other two tracks. You never know whether a link will take you back to where you've been, but even if it does you may not experience the page in the same way as you did before you took the diversion. Some links are 'dead' and others appear to be unrelated or unexpected, or they may contain a riddle or a reference that is not immediately obvious. It's not clear what is *designed* and what is a design *error*. There is a risk involved in chasing a link. There are no conventional menus or ways of conceptualising the space you are in, nor are there obvious 'goals' to reach; the reader's curiosity is all that propels her forward. This makes it different from a game, or a maze. You are supposed leave with the feeling not that you have come to the end, but that there is more to find out.

## References

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## Site Credits

*All photos of the Pavilion, cartoons and much of the text taken from*

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Photos of China & site graphics: author's own