

## Helen Jamieson

# From Paper and Ink to Pixels and Links



Something is happening to text: letters, words and whole sentences are lifting off the page and flying through cyberspace. The security and permanence of the printed word has given way to text as an interactive and changeable medium. We copy and paste, publish and update our writing on the internet, travel by hyperlink and meet in chat rooms.

The digital age is changing the way we create, manipulate and interpret text. It is opening up new environments for interaction between creators, performers and audience - on the web, CD-ROM and via email. These creative tools are not without oppressive male canon or traditions; however, here women are pioneers, coining new terms and making up the rules as we go.

I was asked to write an article about how the internet and new "virtual" worlds were influencing text in relation to theatre and women - a very broad starting point. As soon as I began to research and write, I found myself, in true hypertext style, racing along distractingly fascinating side-roads and realising that (despite my role as the Magdalena Project's Web Queen) I had only been aware of a tiny piece of the action.

So, rather than attempt to make any definitive statement about where all this text is flying off to and what it all means, I have chosen to swing a follow-spot across the digital stage and illuminate the work of a number of women. And you, also in true hypertext style, can follow the links that interest you, off the page and onto the screen, to wherever you may wander (see address list at the end).

### HYPertext AND THE WEB

The World Wide Web is made of **hypertext** - active text - text that does more than be read passively. Hypertext can take you to another page, another place, another world. It is word association, spinning off in tangents of global proportions, where you as reader/audience/user choose the path.

Artists have been playing with hypertext since the 1980s (and

**hyper** prefix. over; beyond; above; excessively; above normal.

**hypertext** n. computing; a system allowing extensive cross-referencing between related sections of text.

with its non-digital precursors for much longer), telling non-linear narratives and experimenting with reader interaction. Text has escaped from the left-to-write march of words across the page and the turn of each page from the beginning to the end of a book.

With hypertext, readers can jump in and out of a text at almost any point, digging deeper into what interests and skipping the boring bits. It is poetry, collage, **assemblage** - pulling together related yet different parts to form a whole that has multiple readings.

The web abounds with experiments in hypertext writing and lively discussions between writer-pioneers. There are e-zines, personal web sites, and digital libraries. Online writers' communities such as [TrAce](#) and [Alt-X Online](#) publish interviews, articles and work, and hold conferences and competitions to stretch our preconceived notions of what writing is.

[Riding the Meridian](#) and [Assemblage: the Women's Hypertext Gallery](#), established and maintained by Carolyn Guertin, are two of the first jumping-off points for your exploration. Also visit Susan Hawthorne and her [CyberFeminism](#) e-zine and [Shelley Jackson](#), author of the acclaimed hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl*.

## CYBER COLLABORATIONS

New media is also expanding our notions of collaboration. The concept of the solitary artist in the garret has never been very applicable to theatre, where collaboration happens through workshopping, rehearsals, improvisation and devised group work, but email and the internet are now allowing intimate collaboration between writers and performers from different sides of the globe. For example, the performers chosen to work in pairs for the *Br/leading Ground* project communicated for several months via email, discussing ideas and getting to know each other, before being thrown together for an intense week of creation and performance.

Playwright **Caridad Svich** used email to collaborate with thirteen playwrights from around the USA on the creation of the script *Stations of Desire*. The result was a full-length performance text, appropriately given a simultaneous reading at numerous theatres in the USA and broadcast live on the internet.

"I think writers do collaborate differently via email," says Svich. "Physical separation keeps the writer's private space constant and makes the interaction happen on a mental level. ... In the virtual environment, how someone behaves in a room, what they wear, anything that might influence an individual one way or another, for the most part disappears and you're left with just the work. I think this allows for writers, in a strange way, to be freer with each other."

Email does facilitate instant, easy textual communication, but it is in the chat rooms and **MOO** environments that there seems to be the greatest potential to push the boundaries of collaborative theatre and hypertext. Improvisation, devising, rehearsing and performance - all this and more is happening in cyber theatres.

## ONLINE STREET THEATRE

The Palace houses hundreds of graphical chat-rooms, some public, some custom-built by the inhabitants of this cartoonesque world, who are represented on-screen by **avatars**, nicknames, and speech bubbles.

What's the difference between a **MOO** and a graphical chat room? MOO stands for MUD Object-Oriented (MUD being a Multi User Dungeon) and is an interactive environment for games, conferences, collaboration and other real-time interaction via the internet. Graphical chat rooms take the concept further, allowing visual representation of participants, props, scenes, etc.

This is where **Adriene Jenik**, **Lisa Brenneis** and friends meet, improvise and perform. Their initial impulse for what has become Desktop Theater was to "make something happen" in the chat rooms.

*Graphical chat rooms represent anticipatory spaces ripe for dramatic play. Everyone is simultaneously static*

**avatar** n. 1. manifestation of a deity or released soul in bodily form on earth. 2. a movable icon representing a person in cyberspace or virtual reality graphics.

**Adriene Jenik** is a telecommunications media artist who has been working for over 15 years as an artist, teacher, curator, administrator, and engineer.

**Lisa Brenneis** has served as a teacher, author, panellist, and film production manager. Her production credits range from interactive digital media to educational films, animation to live action, documentary to poetic fantasy.

*(seated in front of their terminals) and in motion (on screen), silent, yet speaking, alone, yet crowded into a small space. Those of us challenged with breaking down the barriers between audience and actor find immediate interest in the arrangement of participants sharing the same arena, already masked and performing a version of themselves.*

Adriene Jenik, Digital Arts & Culture Conference, 1999

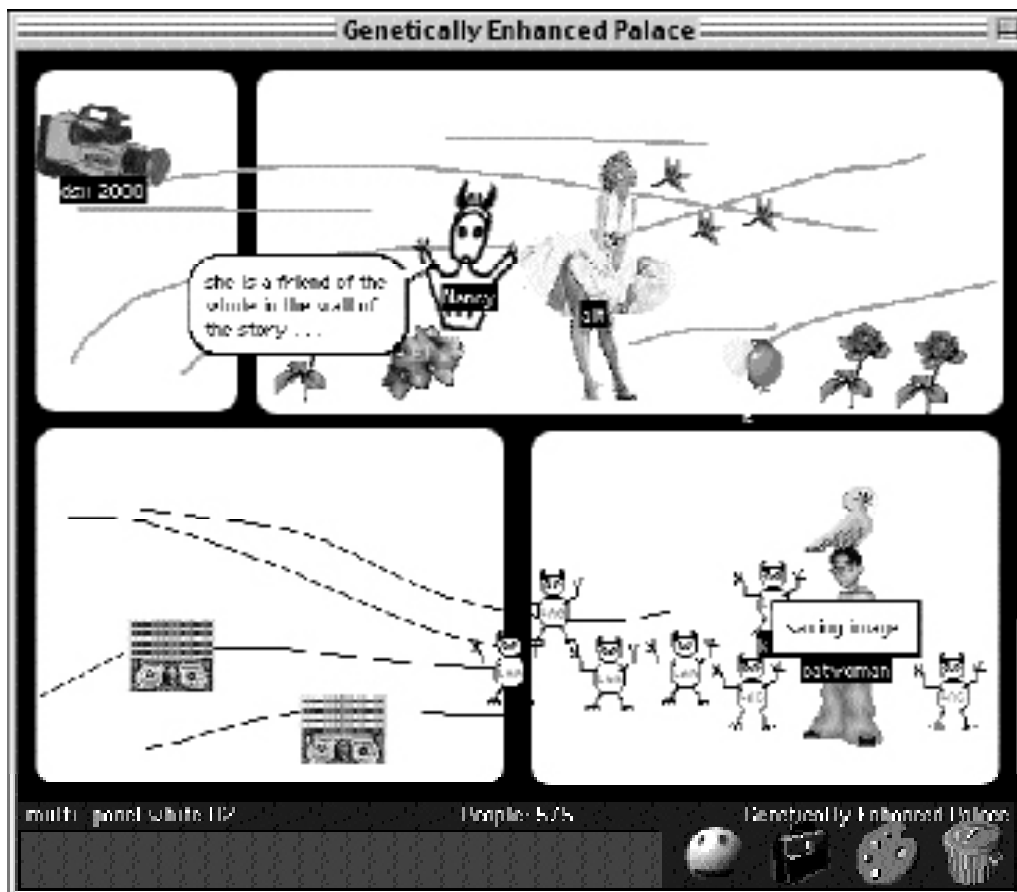
In 1997, at the Third Annual Digital Storytelling Festival, Jenik and Brenneis premiered *Waiting for Godot.com* in a public chat room; in this performance, Godot actually turned up, in the form of chat room participant Muscleman. In another public performance, they played AlGore and geeBush, visiting several different rooms and asking the inhabitants to vote for them. Prior to the performance, they gathered bits of the candidates' speeches, and "regurgitated" them, using preprogrammed text. Interspersed with the banal chat room conversations, the resulting script is bizarrely funny.

secreet\_1999: so what's up?  
 AlGore: let me tell you a little story  
 Silly Kid: not too much  
 AlGore: about a fellow named Samuel Morse  
 PeZKlowN: summone is standing on me  
 AlGore: you've heard of him right?  
 Silly Kid: you have a friend  
 AlGore: Morse code  
 (PB)2HOT i don't think so  
 (playmate):  
 AlGore: he invented it  
 AlGore: began our telecommunications  
 revolution

Another project, *Santaman's Harvest*, draws on the allegory, pantomime and politics of Morality Plays and the improvisation techniques of Augusto Boal. After rehearsing online in both private and public spaces, they compiled a script from the logs of these rehearsals.

The logs record what everyone says, thinks and does; performers either type their dialogue, cut and paste from a script, or use commands to trigger pre-programmed lines of dialogue (which enables them to effectively walk and talk at the same time). Dialogue appears in speech bubbles beside the speaker's avatar. As well as speaking, performers can paint and employ a variety of pre-made props and changes of costume.

Another activity is "dreaming": one participant tells a dream while the others perform roles, create props and paint the scene. Disguised as Catwoman, I'm telling my wind dream, while Lisa appears as Marilyn Monroe, Adriene (obscured) plays the kid and Nancy Reilly-McVittie makes a cyber-allusion.



The "audience" has an integral role in Desktop Theatre's performances. Chat room inhabitants find themselves unwitting participants (if they work out they're in the middle of a play), and their responses vary from full involvement, like Muscleman, to leaving.

Cyber theatre requires a new approach to audiences, including an awareness of the greater power to influence a performance - and the confidence to play with this rather than attempt to control it.

## PLACING THE AUDIENCE

"You have to set the mood, invite them in, make a space for them, make it fun," says **Juli Burk**, creator of **ATHEMOO**.

**Juli Burk** is Associate Professor of Theatre in the University of Hawaii Department of Theatre and Dance. She is the administrator of **ATHEMOO**, developed for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). She is a scholar and stage director whose specialities are contemporary and feminist theory.

ATHEMOO was created in 1995 by Juli Burk to extend access to the ATHE (Association for Theatre in Higher Education) Conference. She quickly realised the educational and creative potential of the MOO, and it has become a place for her colleagues to learn about the technology as well as an exciting new performance and teaching space.

*We give great attention to including the audience in what is happening. Audiences online are used to participating, typing to announce their presence. There isn't the false division of the seated-in-the-dark audience facing the actors-on-stage.*

Around a dozen plays have been conceived, rehearsed and performed at ATHEMOO, with all but one written specifically for the MOO environment. Cyber theatre differs from **proximal** theatre in many ways besides the role of the audience, such as how characters are established and express emotion, and how the scene is set. Proximal theatre is performed in close physical proximity to the audience.

**proximal** adj. situated near to the centre of the body or an area or the point of attachment.

Burk has found that audiences stay more connected with the performance if their space is well-established. She says it is part of the MOO culture: "I don't fancy just sitting at my computer watching typing flow across my screen. I might as well read a book."

**Karen Wheatley** had attended one performance at ATHEMOO before writing *Scheherezade's Daughters* for performance at ATHEMOO and as part of the

**Karen Wheatley** is currently one of five writers working on an interactive version of Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* with DA2 Bristol. She is interested in developing a theatre MOO where schools can interact and improvise around curriculum plays, and new writers can try the medium.

final year of her Creative Arts degree. "From the outset I was blown over by the difficulty of writing for the MOO medium. How do you incorporate interaction? I was completely locked into the proscenium arch affair and then I suddenly realised that it was angels on the pin-head time. Your audience can be anywhere or anything."

Wheatley wove two forms of interaction into her script - a role-play and a discussion - with differing levels of success. The role-play required the cast to encourage audience members to play parts from their stories, but the audience, once put into a role, found it impossible to put down. With the discussion, the cast asked the audience questions about their lives, and some moving moments developed. Audience participation meant that the twenty-eight minute script was never performed in under an hour.

Says Burk, "The interrupting and improvising is very exciting... how to control that or shape it, or what it means if you don't. There are so many things to explore." It is a scary challenge for the writer, to hand over your carefully crafted words to an active and vocal cyber audience. But text now has a life of its own, and is in cahoots with Muscleman and friends.

## TEXT AS LIVING DATA

Text travels as electric pulses down cables; packets of data; zeroes and ones; reassembled on your computer screen as an assemblage of pixels, recreated by your brain as letters, words, sentences, concepts. No longer passive, hypertext can influence and control the world around it.

In 1996, the Wooster Group approached film-maker **Zoe Beloff** and asked her to develop a CD-ROM inspired by, but not a documentation of, their production *House/Lights* (based on Gertrude Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*). Beloff describes her creation as "... a satellite work. It exists purely in the virtual realm."

"My desire was to use the play as a starting point to provoke questions concerning how we think about our mental space within the real world in relation to the virtual machines which we more and more substitute in its place." As Beloff attended rehearsals and explored Stein's text, she began to work with the text not so much as a story, but "as a set of logical operations or 'Application', within which I can 'input' my own 'data'."

The resulting CD-ROM *Where Where ThereThere Where* contains a series of panoramas representing the transition from 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial mechanics to 20<sup>th</sup> century computer architecture. Excerpts from Stein's script appear above the visuals, and each time a word of the text is rewritten, the panorama moves, "... thus giving the impression that the world is structured by the recombination of language... suggesting that the visible world is now nothing but an interface and behind it lies the logical structure of programming, a text that controls."

## HYPERLINK ON...

Text has come alive and is running wild in our networks - interrupting, improvising, and even controlling. An exciting journey lies ahead for writers of all genres as we grapple with this evolu-

tion of text, and who knows down which tangent it will lead each of us.

As we play and create with hypertext and new media, we are developing words and phrases to describe our adventures; and along the way, we are documenting, discussing and analysing. My spotlight has quickly skimmed the surface (and the Western surface, at that), leaving lots of shadowy, half-lit places for you to delve into. So boot up and point your browser at some of the sites I have discussed.

The Digital Performance Archive is documenting developments in the creative use of computer technologies in performance, with an extensive online searchable database of cyber theatre performances and related events.

The Plaintext Players are an online performance group forging a unique hybrid of theatre, fiction, poetry, and vaudeville in the virtual role-playing worlds known as MOOs.

Joint winners of the first trAce/AltX International Hypertext Competition were *Rice* by Jenny Weight and *The Unknown* by William Gillespie, Scott Rettberg and Dirk Stratton.

Marlena Corcoran has been writing on and about the internet, and directing and performing plays in MOOs since 1996.

N. Katherine Hayles is an English Professor at UCLA who teaches various courses with interesting names about text in the digital age.

The Magdalena Project

TADA (Theater As Digital Activity) - young people using the web to create theatre.

Playwrights on the Web - a database of plays and playwrights, with online noticeboard and forum.

### Site addresses:

TrAce <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk>

Alt-X Online <http://www.altx.com>

Riding the Meridian <http://www.heelstone.com/meridian>

Assemblage: the Women's Hypertext Gallery <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/traced/guertin/assemblage.htm>

Cyberfeminism e-zine <http://www.spinifexpress.com.au/cf/cf.htm>

Shelley Jackson <http://www.ineradicablestain.com>

Br/leeding Ground <http://www.magdalenaproject.org/archive/brl.html>

Caridad Svich <http://hometown.aol.com/csvich21/myhomepage/profile.html>

Desktop Theater <http://www.desktoptheater.org>

Adriene Jenik <http://visarts.ucsd.edu/adriene>

Digital Arts & Culture Conference, 1999 <http://www.lcc.gatech.edu/events/dac99>

ATHEMOO <http://moo.hawaii.edu:7000>

Zoe Beloff <http://www.zoebeloff.com>

The Digital Performance Archive [http://dpa.ntu.ac.uk/dpa\\_site/](http://dpa.ntu.ac.uk/dpa_site/)

Please note - these URLs are correct at the time of publication, but may change.

HELEN JAMIESON (New Zealand) accidentally completed a BA in English and Drama and then spent six years in Wellington where two of her plays were professionally produced and she helped to establish an arts lobby group, the Artists' Round Table. She is living in Edinburgh now but spending most of her time in orbit in cyberspace.