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# Iser's Aesthetic Response Theory Viewed in the Context of Collaborative Hyperfictions

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# Iser's Aesthetic Response Theory Viewed in the Context of Collaborative Hyperfictions

## **Abstract**

In 1978, Wolfgang Iser wrote his most influential book, *The Act of Reading*, which details his theories about aesthetic reader response. Since the publishing of *The Act of Reading*, the pervasive use of personal computers and the internet has introduced new forms of fiction, including collaborative hyperfictions. This paper presents an analysis of Iser's theories in relation to collaborative hyperfictions. It explains how upon juxtaposing the conventions of collaborative hyperfictions and Iser's aesthetic response theories, one finds that hyperfictions are not as revolutionary as some authors and critics would believe. However, this juxtaposition also reveals the ways in which Iser's theories need to be updated for the digital age, and also the ways in which storytelling may evolve in the coming years.

## **Keywords**

Iser, hyperfiction, reader response theory, internet, digital fiction, James English, English, James, English

## **Disciplines**

English Language and Literature

In 1978, Wolfgang Iser, a leader in the field of reader-response theory, published his most important and influential book, The Act of Reading, in which he explained his theories of aesthetic reader response. Because the book was written before use of the internet and computers became mainstream, his theories are based solely on the traditional printed texts that were available at the time. Examining his theories in light of the digital age that has since occurred can yield insights into how literature has evolved and is still evolving. The use of computer technology, particularly the internet, has complicated the relationship between author, reader, and text, and has given rise to new categories of literary works. Because these genres of digital literature are in their infancy compared to printed literary texts, or perhaps because the scholarly community is hesitant to view these new literatures as legitimate art forms, little attention has been given to the reading and writing of digital literature. The analysis that has been done in this field has focused mainly on pre-packaged works of interactive digital fictions, or hypertexts. However, there are other genres of digital fiction, including collaborative hyperfictions on the internet in which the readers can become writers of the stories by adding on to them, that have received relatively little attention from literary critics. Few studies have been done on the results of applying traditional literary theory to the reading of collaborative hyperfictions. Upon juxtaposing the conventions of collaborative hyperfictions and Iser's aesthetic response theories, one finds that hyperfictions are not as revolutionary as some authors and critics would believe. However, this juxtaposition reveals the ways in which Iser's theories need to be updated for the digital age, and also the ways in which storytelling may evolve in the coming years.

## History of Hypertext

Before describing collaborative hyperfictions in terms of Iser's aesthetic response theory, it is helpful to briefly examine the history of digital texts. This will allow critics to place collaborative hyperfictions into a historical context, emphasizing the features that the genre possesses that its predecessors did not. The prefix "hyper" was first applied to texts in 1965 by Ted Nelson to refer to 'non-sequential writing—text that branches and allows choices to the reader [and is] best read at an interactive screen" (qtd. in Snyder 24). When asked why he chose to give this name to interactive texts, Nelson explained that "*hyper-* connotes extension and generality, as in the mathematical hyperspace, and this was the connotation [he] wanted to give the idea" (25). He went on to explain that non-linear hypertexts were supposed to reflect the way in which the human brain processed information, which is through associations. As the human brain moves from one idea to the next, trails, or webs, of information are produced in the mind, similar to the narrative structure of hypertexts. People's ideas of reality are based on the webs of information that they create, and thus Nelson concluded that hypertext "allows users to 'keep ideas hitched together in ways that better represent reality'" (25). The idea of linking ideas together in the form of trails was not a new one, as Vannevar Bush's 1945 memex machine was meant to facilitate the process of finding connections between scientific ideas and information. Users of the machine would be able to retrieve and annotate scientific reports, and save the trails that their searches created for use at later dates. They would also be able to add notes to the works that they found, which would be available for future users to view. Thus, the notion of linking texts together, which was the inspiration for the internet, was for the purpose of collaboration.

### Three Types of Hypertext

All of these methods of presenting information in interactive, useful ways that reflected reality and associations between ideas gave rise to the modern hypertext. Today's hypertext fictions can be separated into three categories, according to Professors Barbara Szubinska and Linda Doerge, which reflect the varying degrees of control the reader has over the narrative. The first type is very similar to the format found in traditional linear literature, in which the reader has very limited control over the narrative, with all readers reaching the same conclusion of the story. As Szubinska and Doerge describe it, "the authors will intermittently offer the readers two or more paths from which to choose. This option gives the readers many ways to interact with the story. However, the authors retain control over the script, and only the author can alter it" (24). In many such stories, like Hangover by Mark Weal, a reader will encounter all of the scenes the author has created at some point, although two different readers are likely to experience them in two different sequences. The same cannot be said for the second type of hypertext fiction, in which the reader is able to contribute to the text and save their contributions for later viewing. Szubinska and Doerge liken this to "adding pages to a book one owns or writing in the margins" (25). The author is still in control of the overall script of the narrative, but readers are able to save the paths that they've taken in the story. The features of this type of hypertext allow the opportunity for more storylines to be explored. Michael Joyce's afternoon, a story is one example of the second type of hypertext. Joyce's novel is not completely collaborative in nature, in contrast to the third category of hypertext. The third category consists of ongoing stories with many authors contributing to the narrative. "With this format, the readers are even more empowered to contribute to the story at any time. The contribution may be temporary, or it may become a permanent part of the story" (26). Therefore, such stories are

perpetually evolving and defy all typical literary conventions. The first page of the fantasy Dark Lethe, by L.J. Winson and Individual Authors, states that “Dark Lethe is a collaborative story environment in which writers can create stories that interconnect, conflict, and conjoin in a new hyperlinked structure” (“Dark Lethe”). All hypertexts, with their varying degrees of fluidity, lack the stability of character and plot that is found in traditional, paper-based literature. Since it is the author, according to traditional literary notions, that is responsible for the stability of character and plot in fiction, one could argue that the role of the author is just as precarious as the nature of the hypertext narrative.

Indeed, the role of the author(s) in collaborative hyperfiction is defined by the authors themselves. The nature of the plot and direction of the story are governed entirely by the initial writer of the story and any readers who choose to add on to it. This is in direct contrast to the first and second types of digital fiction detailed by Szubinska and Doerge, in which the reader is essentially navigating through a maze that has been pre-constructed by an author, which may or may not have multiple paths or venues of escape or conclusion. Authors of a collaborative hyperfiction, however, create their own world, with the only walls being the general guidelines established by the initial writer.

### **The Psychology of Reading**

The question still remains as to what attracts certain people to the worlds created in collaborative hyperfiction. It is important to remember that such individuals are necessarily readers of the stories before they are the authors, so it is useful to recall the psychological aspects of what Mildred Robeck and Randall R. Wallace, authors of The Psychology of Reading: An Interdisciplinary Approach, call “creative reading”. They posit that different kinds of personalities are driven to read different genres of writing. The term “creative reading” is used

to refer to the reading of literary works that goes beyond the basic elements of the story. The authors preface this definition with the claim that “all reading embodies an element of creativity. Readers bring part of themselves and their background to the interpretation of what the author has written. At least part of the extrapolation that readers make when they tackle a reading task is unique” (377). In other words, the reader is able to relate the content of what they have read to their understanding of the world or even themselves. Creative reading involves a deeper relationship between the reader and the text, requiring a certain mindset from the reader. Robeck and Wallace describe creative readers as “self-directed; they engage themselves in cognitive and affective responses that go beyond comprehension of the author’s message to satisfy purposes of their own” (377). The authors imply that readers of creative works who are engaged with the text on a level deeper than the storyline are seeking something other than what the author is explicitly offering them. This could very well be something emotional, especially if the reader does not receive emotional support and validation from the realities of everyday life.

### **The Psychology of Writing**

Similarly, the motivations for writing a literary work can also be emotional in nature. Alice Glarden Brand, in her book The Psychology of Writing: The Affective Experience, claims that there are many possible motivations for writing, including fame, money, or academic success. She goes on to say that other writers have “more idiosyncratic motives. But for many who write—particularly those who write under no obvious pressure—there seems to be a certain quality of emotional engagement that brings them to the writing of words and keeps them at nothing else” (18). There is, it seems, an emotional fulfillment that comes from writing, particularly when it is done without monetary compensation. The particular emotions involved in writing vary from genre to genre and author to author.

## **Impact of Technology on the Text**

Glarden's book predates the internet as we currently know it, and therefore does not contain any analysis on how technology has affected the relationship between the writer, reader, and text. Much has been said about this topic by other theorists. Several have contended that new technologies result in new notions of identity for their users. In his study on the evolution of printed texts to digital texts, Silvio Gaggi cites Michael Heim as saying that "each historical shift in the symbolization of reality brings with it a restructuring of the psyche" and that the "entire human personality is configured anew with every shift in the dominant medium for preserving thought" (qtd. in Gaggi 113). This "restructuring of the psyche," in turn, reconfigures what it means to be an author when the term "author" is applied to digital texts. Digital author Michael Joyce describes the new possibilities of the meaning of "author" as follows: "It may be that we cannot see the truly new forms of rhetoric and theory that are emerging. What we see as senseless beauty may be the emergence of as yet unrecognizable new ways of making sense" (63). These "new ways of making sense" are certainly different from traditional literary conventions. Specifically, Nancy Kaplan contrasts the open-ended nature of digital fictions, collaboratively authored or not, with the fixed nature of printed texts, saying that "print constructs reading as a continuous act of submission to the rules of the text, as deferral of [the reader's immediate desires] until the reader ceases to read the text" (213). The nature of writing and reading any digital text encourages freedom of thought and does not demand that any particular conventions be followed at any point of either the reading or writing process. Later it will be shown that Iser finds fault with this assessment, believing instead that the conventions of the reading process are independent of the actual medium the text is presented in.



One new definition of author in digital texts is presented in the form of collaborative hyperfictions, in which there is no singular author but rather an unlimited number of contributing authors. In this way, the notions of individuality surrounding the authorship of printed texts are discarded in favor of a more communal approach to authorship and creative property. Joyce discusses the notion of collaboration in digital texts at some length, initially describing it in terms of a concept from the classical Greek language: “The middle voice in Greek is neither active nor passive, yet it offers us a way to see ourselves in where we are. In the middle voice the subject performs the action, but the action somehow returns to the subject, that is, the subject somehow has some special interest in the action” (61). He uses this concept of the middle voice to explain the coherence that can be found throughout any digital collaborative work: “The middle voice is a solitary but not a lonely pursuit, what Hélène Cixous calls ‘walking through the self toward the dark’...In collaboration the middle voice maintains the continuity of the self as something with a voice and a name: the writer, a self-sufficient sensibility given over to others...Coherence no longer, if it ever did, distinguishes itself against but rather within” (61-62). Collaborative hyperfictions, along with digital texts in general, offer a “superabundance of possibilities” which, when united with the coherence that Joyce discusses, can result in rich stories that defy traditional literary conventions. Iser, however, sees a “superabundance of possibilities” in any work of fiction that allows for sufficient reader involvement.

As implied earlier, the internet was born out of a necessity for collaboration between scholars. Today, collaboration on the internet is not limited to scholarly pursuits, for the current structure of the internet is conducive for collaboration of all kinds. This is largely due to the ease with which communities are formed on the internet, uniting people with common interests and ideas. The values typical of any community are reflected in the nature of all digital texts.

According to Gaggi, digital text “encourages a value system that emphasizes the solving of problems and the growth of learning by and for the good of the community as a whole, rather than one that insists that individuals always be recognized and rewarded for the exact part they have played in that communal endeavor” (106-107). He claims that the internet itself, composed entirely of digital texts, is, by nature, collaborative, in direct contrast to printed texts. “If individual authorship is an ineluctable consequence of the printed text, collaboration in print can be achieved only through a conscious decision, an act of will” (111). Similarly, the tendency of collaboration on the internet makes it so that “individual authorship can be maintained...only through a conscious effort to resist that tendency” (111). Gaggi goes on to claim that the relationship between reader and writer on the internet is an altered version of the reader-writer relationship that is found in traditional printed texts. In printed texts, the reader is made to feel as if the author is speaking only to him or her. On the internet, however, there is no illusion of a single writer or a single reader. Rather, there are many writers and many readers, thus encouraging the interrogation of the text by the readers more than printed texts. It is this interrogation that prompts readers of collaborative hypertexts to contribute to the stories they read. While the internet does invite interrogation and a more explicit and concrete contribution from the reader, Iser maintains that the aesthetic response necessitates a collaboration between reader and writer, even if the results of this collaboration are never expressed in textual form.

Another aspect of the internet that encourages collaboration is the absence of authority figures on the internet. George Landow goes as far as to say, “I contend that the history of information technology from writing to hypertext reveals an increasing democratization or dissemination of power” (qtd. in Gaggi 115). The internet can be said to make all of its users equal, for as long as they are not violating any federal laws in their use of the internet, they have

no one to answer to. Not only is there no authority on the internet that all users are subjected to, but there are also no social conventions that must be strictly adhered to in order to “fit in”. It is little wonder, then, that people often feel freer to “be themselves” when interacting with others on the internet. Someone who would not feel comfortable submitting their work to an in-person writing group may feel less intimidated by the prospect of sending their work to be read by a sea of anonymous readers. The internet also brings freedoms that are seldom found in the real world, which places obligations and rules on everyone. Therefore, a writer on the internet also has the choice to not write and can write any time he or she pleases. Such an arrangement cannot be found when writing for a certain publication or publishing company. On the internet, anything goes. While Iser mentions nothing of the Internet, or anything like it, in his writings, he maintains that ultimately there is no authority mandating the “correct” meaning of the text. The “anything goes” mentality, therefore, applies when considering different interpreted meanings of the text.

### **Fundamentals of Iser’s Aesthetic Response Theory**

Similar to what Joyce refers to as the “middle ground” is Wolfgang Iser’s theory of reader response, which he outlines in his book The Act of Reading. He concentrates on the notion of “aesthetic response”, which involves not only the interaction between reader and text, but also the unique, imaginative capacity that the reader brings to the text. Iser describes aesthetic response as follows: “Aesthetic response is...to be analyzed in terms of a dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction. It is called aesthetic response because, although it is brought about by the text, it brings into play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader, in order to make him adjust and even differentiate his own focus” (x). Because the reader’s contribution is unique, and because the meaning of the text cannot be found

solely within the text or the reader's understanding of it, "the literary work is to be considered not as a documentary record of something that exists or has existed, but as a reformulation of an already formulated reality, which brings into the world something that did not exist before" (x). Indeed, the work itself is not defined by the text itself or by the reader's interpretations, but "must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism" (21).

From this definition of aesthetic response, the analysis of the psychology of the reader or writer in isolation has little bearing on the actual relationship between the two parties, or the relationship between the reader and the text produced by the author. As Iser states explicitly in a chapter entitled "The Rudiments of a Theory of Aesthetic Response," "exclusive concentration on either the author's techniques or the reader's psychology will tell us little about the reading process itself. This is not to deny the vital importance of each of the two poles—it is simply that if one loses sight of the relationship, one loses sight of the virtual work" (21). While taking Iser's theories into consideration, it is useful to remember that his ideas are based on traditional, printed texts, and preceded the use of digital technology in the production of literature.

While the reader is actually interacting, or reading, the text, Iser claims that there are four main perspectives that are at work in the production of the meaning of the text: the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the "fictitious reader" (or the "implied reader", as mentioned in the title of another one of Iser's books) (35). The reader is labeled as such because the author must have some audience in mind when writing the text, and because each reader is different there is little, if any, chance that the actual reader and the imagined reader are the same person. It is through the perspectives that each of these elements of the reading experience offer that the meaning of

the text is produced: “what they do is provide guidelines originating from different starting points...continuously shading into each other and devised in such a way that they all converge on a general meeting place. We call this meeting place the meaning of the text” (35). While the reader is contributing to the story and in some ways “authors” the reading experience for himself, Iser stresses the importance of viewing the roles of author and reader as separate and distinct.

Because the reader is bringing his or her own creative viewpoint to the text during the reading process, different readers will inevitably have different interpretations of the text’s meaning. Even if the reader tries to find more than one meaning of the text, “the total potential can never be fulfilled in the reading process” (22). Despite this, all interpretations are united in the fact that they can all be verified, or justified, by certain aspects of the text. As Iser puts it, “However individual may be the meaning realized in each case, the act of composing it will always have intersubjectively verifiable characteristics” (22). Thus, if two readers of the same text were to debate the validity of their interpretations, they would both be able to justify their positions because their experiences were guided by the same text. In other words, there is no “wrong” interpretation, even if the reader derives a meaning from the text that the author had no intention of conveying.

If two readers, or indeed any two people, come together to ascertain the validity of their experience, they would have the opportunity to interact with each other in ways that are impossible in the relationship between reader and text. In Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology, Iser directly contrasts the two types of interactions:

An obvious and major difference between reading and all forms of social interaction is the fact that with reading there is no face-to-face situation. A text cannot adapt itself to each reader it comes into contact with. The partners in

dyadic interaction can ask each other questions in order to ascertain how far their images have bridged the gap of the inexperienceability of one another's experiences. The reader, however, can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate his views of it are. (32)

It is this inability of the reader to inquire about the validity of his interpretation that makes each reader's interpretation justifiable, since no reader can rightfully label his or her reading of the text as the "correct" one. Obviously, Iser is not taking into consideration the possibility of the reader having the chance to ask the author about the correctness of the meaning he or she produced during the reading of the text.

The reason for a multitude of different readings being considered equally valid lies not only in the uniqueness of each reader, but also in the nature of the text itself. The texts that Iser has in mind when describing his theories of aesthetic response are works of fiction that do not "spell everything out" for the reader, requiring the reader of the text to determine their own meaning of it. In this way, the reader is involved in both the comprehension and production of the work's intention, or meaning. Iser states:

Although it is clear that acts of comprehension are guided by the structures of the text, the latter can never exercise complete control, and this is where one might sense a touch of arbitrariness. However, it must be borne in mind that fictional texts constitute their own objects and do not copy something already in existence. For this reason they cannot have the total determinacy of real objects, and, indeed, it is the elements of indeterminacy that enable the text to 'communicate' with the reader, in the sense that they induce him to participate in both the production and the comprehension of the work's intention. (Act of Reading 24)

Therefore, it is the indeterminacy of the text that, along with the reader's own unique imaginative process, enables the justification of multiple interpretations.

Just as there is the ability for multiple interpretations of a text to be considered legitimate, a work can certainly be called "good" by one person and "bad" by another just as easily. These are called "value judgments" by Iser, and he emphasizes that these judgments are not the same as interpretations. Rather, "a literary text contains intersubjectively verifiable instructions for meaning-production, but the meaning produced may then lead to a whole variety of different experiences and hence subjective judgments" (Act of Reading 25).

The difference between value judgments and meanings is essentially the same as the difference between the significance and meaning that a reader derives from a text. The significance has more to do with the reader's psychology and past experiences and is emotional in nature. In contrast, the meaning is based entirely on the structure of the text and the reader's intellectual interpretation of that text. It is the significance that the reader attaches to the text that allows for the reader to become more self-aware and use the text to resolve emotional issues. As Iser describes it, "The significance of the work, then, does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that the meaning brings out what had previously been sealed within us. When the subject is separated from himself, the resultant spontaneity is guided and shaped by the text in such a way that it is transformed into a new and real consciousness" (Act of Reading 157). Because the reader is, and must be, actively involved in the construction of the meaning of the text, there is the potential for great emotional satisfaction to be obtained from the reader's interaction with the text, which in certain instances can be properly called catharsis. Indeed, "only if the reader is involved in working out [the] solution [of the conflicts within the story], can there be a truly cathartic effect, for only participation—as opposed to mere contemplation—

can bring the reader the hoped-for satisfaction” (Act of Reading 48). The catharsis, or any other emotional reaction from the reader, can only take place if the reader is willing to attribute any significance to the text, and if the text allows for active participation on the part of the reader in the construction of meaning and the resolution of conflicting aspects of the story. Indeed, “if the solution [of the conflicts within the story] is in fact formulated in the text, the activity of the reader will naturally be of a different sort: instead of actualizing a solution, he will now adopt an attitude toward the one offered him. The more explicit the text, the less involved [the reader] will be” (Act of Reading 46).

In order to maximize the emotional, and also aesthetic, impact of the text, the text should be able to provide the reader with an experience that is different from his or her everyday experiences. The aesthetic aspect of the text exists because the text is communicated and not directly experienced by the reader, thus making different from everyday experiences. Iser explains, “If aesthetic and everyday experiences are bracketed together, the literary text must lose its aesthetic quality and be regarded merely as material to demonstrate the functioning or nonfunctioning of our psychological dispositions” (Act of Reading 40). The structure of the text, therefore, has a direct impact on its aesthetic quality. Because the author has direct control over how the text is structured and expressed on the page, the author plays the dominant role in determining the aesthetic, and potentially emotional, experience of the reader during his or her interaction with the text.

Iser elaborates on the importance of the contrast between aesthetic and everyday experiences later in The Act of Reading. The reading experience, according to Iser, should allow the reader to temporarily separate himself or herself from everyday life, and it is this disconnect between the aesthetic experience and actual, everyday experiences that allows the reader to



obtain insight into their own life from their reading of the text. Iser describes the reading experience as seeing a series of mental images based on one of the four main perspectives described earlier. “But if we are absorbed into an image, we are no longer present in a reality—instead we are experiencing what can only be described as an irrealization, in the sense that we are preoccupied with something that takes us out of our own given reality. This is why people often talk of escapism with regard to literature” (140). The very escapism that literature offers to its readers can provide useful lessons that can be applied to the readers’ everyday lives. Escapism implies detachment, and detachment can allow the reader to see certain aspects of their reality in a new light, providing the opportunity for new insights to be formed. As Iser describes it:

The significance of this process lies in the fact that image-building eliminates the subject-object division essential for all perception, so that when we ‘awaken’ to the real world, this division seems more accentuated. Suddenly we find ourselves detached from our world, to which we are inextricably tied, and able to perceive it as an object. And even if this detachment is only momentary, it may enable us to apply the knowledge that we have gained...so that we can view our own world as a thing “freshly understood”. (140).

If there is an ideal reading experience, specifically one in which the reader can profit from his or her time away from the real world in an a way that is both emotionally and intellectually constructive, one may as if there is such a thing as an ideal reader. Iser defines the “ideal reader” as “a structural impossibility as far as literary communication is concerned. An ideal reader would have to have an identical code to that of the author; authors, however, generally recodify prevailing codes in their texts, and so the ideal reader would also have to

share the intentions underlying this process” (Act of Reading 28). This then poses the possibility of the author being his or her own ideal reader. However, this possibility is negated, according to Iser, if one reads comments that authors write about their own work. They usually speak of their intentions and the strategies they used when writing the text, not of any impact, emotional or otherwise, that their work has had on them (29). Iser ends the discussion of the author as the ideal reader by saying, “In other words, the author, although theoretically the only possible ideal reader, as he has experienced what he has written, does not in fact *need* to duplicate himself into author and ideal reader, so that the postulate of an ideal reader is, in his case, superfluous” (29).

Indeed, if the author were to duplicate himself or herself into being both the author and ideal reader, nothing would need to be communicated between the author and ideal reader, rendering the whole work unnecessary. This relates to Iser’s notion of the text as a performance of meaning, with the reader as both an audience and a director. As Iser claims, “we can say that literary texts initiate ‘performances’ of meaning rather than actually formulating the meanings themselves. Their aesthetic quality lies in this ‘performing’ structure, which clearly cannot be identical to the final product, because without the participation of the individual reader there can be no performance” (Act of Reading 27). If reader and author are the same, it would seem that there would be no performance since, as stated previously, there is nothing to be communicated.

Since there is such a stress on the communication between author and writer in Iser’s theories, one may be curious as to the aspect of the text that allows the reader to interpret the text in their own way apart from what is communicated to him or her by the author. The answer to this question is what Iser refers to as “blanks” or gaps in the text. These instances in the text occur when something crucial to understanding the text is “missing” and must be “filled in” by the reader. Iser claims, “whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps

function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves. Hence the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text” (Act of Reading 169). The blanks within the text serve as an opportunity for readers to join the different segments of the texts in a way that produces a meaning that is in accordance with their own interpretation of the text thus far. Such blanks also emphasize the difference between the language of the text and the language of everyday life:

“Blanks...signaliz[e] both the absence of a connection and the expectations we have of everyday language, where connectability is governed pragmatically...They point up the difference between literary and everyday use of language, for what is always given in everyday language must first be brought into existence in fiction” (Act of Reading 183). Iser goes so far as to say that blanks are the foundation upon which the reader’s interpreted meaning of the text is based, stating that “the [meaning] itself is a product of interconnection, the structuring of which is to a great extent regulated and controlled by blanks” (Prospecting 35).

The blanks are crucial in what Iser calls “the game of imagination” that is played by the author and the reader. The text itself merely serves as a set of rules that guide the playing of the game but do not determine its final outcome. The reader’s decision to play the game, and his or her enjoyment of the game, is dependent on the balance between the blanks and what is explicitly stated in the text. Iser describes the game as follows:

The reader’s enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play. There are, of course, limits to the reader’s willingness to participate, and these will be exceeded if the text makes things too clear or, on the other hand, too obscure: boredom and

overstrain represent the two poles of tolerance, and in either case the reader is likely to opt out of the game. (Act of Reading 108)

The success of the game, therefore, is dependent on both the author and the reader. The author must provide a balance between blanks and the text itself, and the reader must have the emotional and intellectual abilities and willingness to play the game proposed by the author. Only when all of these conditions are right will the text truly become a work of art, for, as Sartre famously said, “Art exists only for and through other people” (qtd. in Act of Reading 108).

### **Iser’s Aesthetic Response Theory in the Context of Collaborative Hyperfictions**

The genre of collaborative hyperfictions, in which participants are both authors and readers, requires Iser’s aesthetic response theory to be viewed in a new light. Because the boundary between reader and writer can be blurred to the point of them being indistinguishable, certain aspects of Iser’s theory must be drastically changed if they are to be applied to collaborative hyperfictions, while other facets of aesthetic response theory are highlighted when applied to the new genre. In the analysis that follows, it is assumed that the reader is also an author of the text. While it is true that readers may simply be readers and not authors of these texts, the relationship between reader and text in this case is little, if any, different from the relationship between the reader and traditional, printed texts. It is therefore more fruitful and productive to concentrate solely on readers that are also authors in the analysis of Iser’s theory in relation to collaborative hyperfictions.

The first problem posed to Iser’s theory by collaborative hyperfictions is, of course, the notion of author and reader being the same individual. This complicates Iser’s notion of the four main perspectives of the text, in which the reader is considered to be entirely separate from the elements of the text generated by the author. Because the contributors of hyperfictions have the

chance to communicate through online forums, in which the text is discussed, the notion of a “fictitious reader” virtually disappears, since the contributors have a fairly accurate idea of who is reading their work and what these readers are expecting from their reading of the text. While there is always a chance of new readers joining the collective reading and writing experience, even these new readers will likely have expectations similar to established readers, since the readers would not be examining the text if some aspect of it did not attract them or resonate with them on some level. If this is not the case, and the new readers choose to stop reading the text, they were never intended to be part of the community in the first place. Because of the community structure upon which collaborative hyperfictions are based, the “fictitious readers” of the texts are readers that are similar to the authors themselves. Since the readers are, in general, known to the authors during the writing process, there are no “fictitious readers”, but known readers.

The potential that fiction, collaborative or otherwise, has to affect change within the reader and to elicit profound emotional responses is supported by Iser as well as Robeck and Wallace. The unique ability of certain readers of fiction to become deeply emotionally involved with a text is alluded to by Robeck and Wallace in their discussion of how certain people are attracted to different genres of writing. They define “empathic-mystical literature” as “mystical, religious, or allegorical literature [that] deals with knowledge of intuition and demands extraordinary responsiveness from readers. The empathic reader fashions the emotions of authors who write of experiences that are conveyed indirectly” (387). Robeck and Wallace go on to claim that “those who have learned to read empathic-mystical literature see emotional and intrapersonal meanings in the text that may be missed by readers who are attuned only to semantic-logical interpretations” (394). It is not unreasonable to assume that certain readers of

fiction would deliberately seek out “emotional and intrapersonal meanings” in the stories that they read. Opportunities for this development are rarely found in the rational, fact-based reality in which we all live.

Robeck and Wallace, in their analysis of reader response to types of writing, provide yet another insight into how people relate to the stories that they read. “Sensitive readers see themselves in the characters portrayed in literature, which makes them vulnerable to self-criticism. The more open they are to the experiences of protagonists, the greater the possibility they can be hurt by the author’s subtle damnation of weakness” (387). By becoming an author of the story, the creative participants in collaborative hyperfictions eliminate this emotional risk of becoming deeply engaged with it; there is an understanding that the other authors feel as they do and would do nothing to “damn” their own weaknesses.

The use of literature as a form of self-healing is also an aspect of the reader’s reading that is analyzed by Robeck and Wallace. They contend that, as an example, the Greek tragedies were designed to allow the viewer or reader to experience an emotional catharsis, provided that they identified with the characters in the story. “A negative experience is likely to result from a surface reading of Greek tragedy, whereas the creative reader experiences a catharsis, which the playwright intended—a washing away of guilt feelings or an emotional purging followed by rejuvenation. The nature of this experience explains why some readers go back and reread tragedies while other readers shun this form of literature” (388). By directly participating in the formation of the narrative, the cathartic effects of collaborative hyperfiction can only be increased for the creative contributor. This notion is supported by Iser’s discussion of catharsis and the importance of the difference between the aesthetic and the everyday.

Another compelling contrast between traditional texts, on which Iser's theory is based, and collaborative hyperfictions, is the number of meanings that could possibly be derived from a text. In the case of hyperfictions, since more than one person is contributing to the actual text, the "correct" meaning of the text must be agreed upon between the authors on some level, whether this agreement is explicitly stated or not. The contributor is welcome to experience the emotional rewards of participating in a collaborative hyperfiction and interact with like-minded people provided that they follow the general guidelines for the given story. If the rules are not obeyed in a given contribution, that contribution to the story is subject to deletion.

"StorySprawl," a collection of collaborative hyperfictions on the internet, provides an FAQ page detailing the workings and conventions of collaborative hyperfictions. In response to the question, "What's your quality control? How do you really expect to keep the quality level of the stories up?", the site administrator replies, "The structure of the site already seems to be helping with this a bit....Creating and reading story guides for each of the stories is required. Notes about stylistic conventions, rules of that narrative universe, character notes, all these things are important to keep track of... If someone goes against the information, the moderator can request a chapter to be deleted" (StorySprawl FAQ). The hierarchical structure within a particular work of collaborative hyperfiction is further evidenced by a subsequent statement made in answer to the same question: "When the moderator feels that a story is getting out of control, he or she can make it private and invite certain key authors to help clean it up" (StorySprawl FAQ). Thus, a contributor must prove himself or herself worthy of having privileged access to certain stories, even though the collection itself is available for all interested parties. Initial writers of stories have no qualms about deleting chapters that do not meet their standards. If someone contributes a piece of text whose meaning is not in accordance with the

meaning of the text intended by the initial author, as laid out in the guidelines of the story, that piece of text will ultimately not be included in the work. In this way, the initial guidelines laid out by the initial author serve as the “rules” of the “game of imagination” that Iser refers to in his writings. Because the text is continually growing, and because of the guidelines regarding the content, and therefore meaning, of the text, the notion of any meaning derived from the text being valid is not applicable to collaborative hyperfictions, for the initial author, by allowing or refusing the contributions of others, is in essence communicating with the readers and other authors, confirming or refuting their ideas of the correct meaning of the text. This is in violation of Iser’s notion that the interactions between reader and text are drastically different from the social interactions between people; if the author is allowed to communicate with the reader, then the reader can have his or her interpretation of the text validated by the author, making the reading process more akin to a typical social interaction.

The ability of the author and reader to communicate via a medium other than the established text itself poses another problem for the application of Iser’s aesthetic response theory to collaborative hyperfictions. The construction and reading of the hyperfiction are done simultaneously, and thus the reader is interacting with a dynamic, rather than static, text. In the case of hyperfictions, then, the reader is still having the dynamic interaction with the text that Iser bases his theory on, but the text itself is also dynamic and ultimately governed by the authority of the initial author. This authority figure, absent in traditional texts, causes the reader’s interpreted meaning of the text to be brought into question, rather than allowing the meaning proposed by the reader to be accepted unquestioningly as justifiable.

The description of the politics within collaborative hyperfictions also raises the question of the role of “value judgments”, as Iser calls them, in the digital genre. Since the initial author



can decide that a contribution isn't "good enough" to be included in the work, value judgments are no longer merely an emotional reaction to the text that is separate from the construction of its meaning. Rather, the value judgments of the initial author play a direct role in the way the text itself is shaped. Although the quotation from the StorySprawl FAQ would suggest that it is relatively rare for someone's contribution to be refused for not being "good enough", the possibility that a contribution would not be included due to lack of literary merit is sufficient to make value judgments instrumental to the ultimate meaning of the text.

Reading accounts of participants' experiences with collaborative hyperfiction validate the effect of the hierarchal structure of the stories on the contributors. On the blog created for participants of Dark Lethe, a writer identifying himself as "Scott" described his experience with the Dark Lethe website and collection of stories: "I still remember how I felt when I first chanced upon Dark Lethe. The Internet was still in a gestation phase. Bandwidth was small and ideas were larger than life. The site was truly dark then, with a stark black screen. The only light in my room came from the words written there. It was an environment of danger and suspense" (DL: Writing). "Scott", like other creative collaborative hyperfiction contributors, got a great amount of emotional fulfillment from his hyperfiction experience. He says, "I began harmlessly enough, by writing a story with no obvious ties to other threads. It was unobtrusive, and at first, it was good. Just getting my contribution accepted was a thrill for me. Then I started writing more and more, and it became like a drug, a high I pined for. I started bugging the webmaster to post my stories sooner" (DL: Writing). His next comment reveals just how powerful the "ego-trip" that comes from climbing the social ladder within collaborative hyperfiction can be: "As time went on, I began to consider myself 'established', part of the 'in' crowd of first tier authors, like Leonie and Taralyn and Jim Brady. I was giving feedback to them and other writers left and

right, speculating, extrapolating, and above all, criticizing” (DL: Writing) “Scott” is obviously engaged with the stories on a deep emotional level, describing it as a “drug” that he grew to crave. This is an illustration of how the authors of collaborative hyperfictions are “performing”, as Iser puts it, not just for the readers, but for each other.

Iser’s notion of the importance of the separation between aesthetic and everyday experience is also verified when examining collaborative hyperfictions in terms of Iser’s theory of aesthetic response. The themes and motifs found in the stories are almost always surreal, other-worldly, or are otherwise reminiscent of science fiction. The site administrator of Dark Lethe describes the content of the stories on the site’s FAQ page:

By using a Virtual Reality backdrop we can really do anything we want with the story-line. The actual ethics of virtual reality, their long term effects on users and more sinister uses of the technology are all ideas we are already exploring. We are also constructing the story outside the VR environment, looking at the characters real lives and how they are effected [sic], along with exploring what type of society we would have when this sort of technology is available. (DL FAQ)

Here, the site administrator expressly points out the appeal of the freedom that the virtual reality backdrop offers. Contributors are therefore encouraged to do whatever they would like with the story, provided that the initial guidelines are followed. Also evident here is the desire of the contributors to learn certain truths about their everyday lives via fiction that is set in a world very different from their own.

Other examples of innovative, creative storylines that have little to no basis in reality are easily found in collections of collaborative hyperfictions. On the “StorySprawl” homepage, the

stories are listed in order of popularity, with a summary of the intended content of each story.

The most popular hyperfiction on the site, “Inferno”, has a description that reads as follows: “It's six years after the destruction of ‘Inferno,’ the first off-world prison satellite orbiting Mars... The explosion took the lives of all the prisoners and staff on board... Ericka's primary responsibility on the mission is to lead a team of scientist into the carcass...and clean the place up. ... This should end up pretty dark - I'm thinking a ghost/horror story in space” (StorySprawl). The second most popular story on the site, “Thievery in Blue”, also has a surreal, dark plotline. In this story, “Tycho Blue is a man who is driven by a maddening curse - a curse that forces him to steal, to thief, and perhaps to kill. It's the gypsies that did it to him, he's sure of it. And they have Kaylera. Someday Tycho will meet with them again, but for now - he has to survive... A mystery set in a fantasy setting...keep it semi-dark” (StorySprawl). It appears that the most popular and longest-running collaborative hyperfictions have themes and plots that shun reality. Perhaps there is such an emphasis on surreal topics because the interactions between the authors and readers is part of everyday reality, and the need to write about otherworldly events and entities is the authors’ way of compensating for the “real world interruption” that has disrupted their escape from reality, as detailed in Iser’s writings.

The idea of the author being the ideal reader of the text, refuted by Iser, is worthy of examination in the context of collaborative hyperfictions. Because the creation of these hyperfictions involves the ideas, or codes, of several different authors, and since the progression of the text, and ultimately the meaning of the text, relies on these ideas, the ideal reader that each other has in mind is not himself or herself, as would be the case in the traditional printed texts that Iser used as the basis for his theory of aesthetic response. Rather, the ideal reader for each author is an individual who will, or already has, contribute something to the text that will be

equally conducive to moving the plot forward. While each author does have his or her own code when writing contributions for the story, the codes are influenced by the initial guidelines established at the story's beginning, and the ideal reader would recognize the importance of this code to the structure of the text and contribute in kind.

Perhaps the most obvious parallel between Iser's theory and the structure of collaborative hyperfictions is the concept, and importance, of blanks. It is the blanks in the hyperfictions that allow other writers to contribute to the story. Without blanks, the story ends, whether or not the plot has reached a logical conclusion. If there are too many blanks in the text, the moderator, usually the initial author of the story, is faced with the challenge of deciding which among the multitude of equally valid contributions should be included as the next chapter of the story. This creates an unnecessary burden for both the moderator and the contributors. The plot moves along because each chapter leaves out a certain amount of information, and thus each chapter must contain at least one blank in order for the story to progress. Thus, blanks are not only essential for the reader's understanding of the story, but also for the creation of the story itself.

## **Conclusion**

Just because collaborative hyperfiction lacks the traits typically associated with "legitimate" (i.e., conventional) works of literature, the genre should not be dismissed as being merely subversive or experimental. This is especially true when one takes into consideration Iser's question of the role of literature, in its various forms, in what it means to be human. He states, "If it is true that something happens to us by way of the literary text and that we cannot do without our fictions—regardless of what we consider them to be—the question arises as to the actual function of literature in the overall make-up of man" (Act of Reading xi). Creators of digital texts may have an equally profound role on the evolution of what is included in the

general public's concept of "literature". Indeed, the printed book, according to Landow, has taken a backseat to various forms of digital and visual entertainment. Landow writes, "The sales of books and other printed matter, for centuries the center of our technology of cultural memory, have now fallen to fourth position behind the sales of television, cinema, and video games" (23). The public, it seems, is growing more receptive to forms of fictional entertainment that do not come from a printing press. Joyce also chooses to view digital fictions in general in terms of their place in history. Specifically, he dismisses the notion that digital fictions, collaborative efforts or not, are "experimental". He makes the following claim:

There is an inherent representational problem in an experimental approach since it suggests that someone approaches writing (or any task) with a sense of being experimental... While it may be that some people *do* intend to write in a particular fashion, this intention is political and not artistic or intellectual, and only history can decide whether the effort was experimental, radical, traditional, et cetera. (29)

It is not constructive, therefore, to label collaborative hyperfictions, or any other form of literature that does not and cannot take the form of a book, as "trendy" or "experimental" or any other derisive and dismissive description. Kaplan makes a similar assertion in her essay, in which she questions ideas of what can be considered "literature." She states:

The claims made for critical literacy require us to ask why certain genres and periods of imaginative literature so often figure in these stories... And what works does this definition of higher literacy do? If the concept of literacy these critics provide offers only an idealized condition, one constantly sought but rarely attained, we might want to know whose interests are served by this concept (and whose are suppressed). (219)

While hyperfictions, when viewed in light of Iser's theory of aesthetic response, are not completely revolutionary, they do point to a potential evolution of what society considers feasible and entertaining ways to present stories to an audience. The collaborative nature of the evolution of the story found in collaborative hypertexts can be seen in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) in which participants live together in a virtual world and advance the progress of the game by making alliances or starting conflicts with other groups of players. The textual nature of the hyperfictions is what roots them in traditional ideas of literature, reading, and writing, such as those presented by Iser. However, the technology and sociology behind the formation of hyperfictions suggests that literature is evolving along with the technology used by everyday readers and writers, and that literary theory will one day be forced to catch up.

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