



# Hypertext as Humanistic Practice: A Digital Humanities Reading of Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a Story*

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## Abstract

*Michael Joyce's afternoon, a story—deliberately written with a lowercase “a”—first presented in 1987 and published by Eastgate Systems in 1990. It is widely regarded as a foundational work of electronic literature and one of the earliest examples of hypertext fiction. It is not merely a technological curiosity. The piece rearranges narrative form, authorship, and reading practices—often in ways that anticipate key concerns of the Digital Humanities (DH). Joyce's project asks readers to do something different: click, wander, and hesitate. The text refuses a single tidy line and instead rewards a specific restless attention. This essay returns to afternoon as a humanistic digital artifact, highlighting how its hypertextual architecture lays bare reader agency, interpretive uncertainty, and the material presence of digital interfaces. Clicking through Lexias, the short modular nodes Joyce strings together, can break a train of thought the way a crumpled map sends your route off course. Drawing on poststructuralist theory and reader response criticism as well as DH approaches—especially Franco Moretti's distant-reading methods and Johanna Drucker's concept of graphesis—the study argues that afternoon models meaning-making as participatory and multiple. By combining close reading with theoretical framing, the paper shows that Joyce's experiment embodies the ethical and interpretive commitments at the heart of digital humanities: attention to process, contingency, and the active work readers perform when they engage a text that resists closure.*

**Keywords:** digital humanities, hypertext fiction, michael joyce, reader - response theory, poststructuralist theory, distant reading, graphesis, electronic literature

The rise of digital humanities has forced scholars to ask some fundamental, unsettling questions: what counts as a “text” anymore, how do we read it, and how is meaning made in spaces that are themselves transactional and interactive? Too often DH gets reduced to datasets, software, and large-scale text mining, but its roots run deeper—back into early experiments in electronic literature. Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*, belongs to that earlier lineage. Long before digital humanities coalesced into a recognizable field, *afternoon* was already testing how

digital form could reorder narrative logic and change the way readers engage with texts.

First introduced at the ACM Hypertext Conference in 1987 and later published by Eastgate Systems in 1990, *afternoon* decisively breaks with print conventions. The narrative centers on Peter, a man tormented by the possibility that his son died in a car accident—yet the work refuses to let that possibility calcify into fact. Joyce denies closure; instead, he scatters fragments for the reader to assemble (or to leave scattered). As Peter confesses, “I want to say my son is dead, but I cannot be sure”



(Joyce). That hesitation isn't just a theme—it's built into the hypertext architecture itself.

Read this way, afternoon functions like an early manifesto for digital humanities as a humanistic project. Attend to its non-linear design, the interpretive labor it demands, and the ways its interface shapes meaning, and you can see it anticipating contemporary DH conversations about interpretation, visualization, and participation.

We often define digital humanities as the pairing of computational methods with humanistic inquiry. That tidy definition, however, can obscure something quieter: digital form can act as a kind of theory. Early hypertext fiction shows how digital environments rearrange our assumptions about texts and audiences in ways that are not merely illustrative but argumentative.

Hypertext disrupts the linear sequencing that print presumes. Instead of one fixed order, readers encounter a web of lexias linked together; each click produces a different encounter. The experience resembles poststructuralist critiques of fixed meaning and singular authorship. What Roland Barthes described abstractly—dispersed authority, unstable meaning—hypertext enacts on the page (or screen).

In the afternoon, the digital environment is not a neutral container; it performs interpretive work. Joyce composed the piece in Storyspace, and the software encourages readers to think spatially rather than in a straightforward sequence. Reading becomes exploratory: you navigate, you backtrack; it's less like consuming a finished object and more like poking around a house with doors you can open or leave shut. Some rooms offer clarity, others contradiction. That exploratory mode dovetails with the interpretive ethos at the heart of digital humanities.

The story consists of discrete units that contradict and revise one another. Peter's memories of the accident are fractured, unreliable, and emotionally raw. At one moment, he says, "I saw him die, but I also saw him alive" (Joyce). Lines like that collapse tidy binaries—truth/falsehood, presence/absence—into a messy human knot.

Those formal instabilities echo poststructuralist thought. Jacques Derrida's notion of meaning as endlessly deferred finds a formal analogue in the reader's perpetual movement through hyperlinks: no lexia is final; each is provisional. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizome works as a helpful metaphor here, too. The text has neither a single origin nor a final destination. You can enter at different points and follow divergent paths; none can claim the one accurate reading.

This fragmentation is not a mere ornament. It maps onto the logic of memory—especially traumatic memory, which resists tidy coherence. Hypertext, it turns out, is particularly well suited to depicting psychological complexity.

Reader-response criticism helps explain how an afternoon produces meaning. Wolfgang Iser argued that texts are completed by readers, who fill interpretive "gaps." In hypertext fiction, those gaps are not oversights; they are structural features.

Every link in the afternoon demands a choice. Which uncertainty will you follow? Which narrative thread will you abandon? Meaning emerges through interaction, not passive reception. Joyce presumes an "implied reader" (to borrow Iser's phrase)—someone willing to live with ambiguity, repetition, and the ethical weight of decisions that have no definitive outcome. Reading becomes an active, sometimes fraught, act.

That participatory model resonates with broader humanistic aims in digital humanities: collaboration, interpretive openness, and reflexivity—not a hunt for a single authoritative conclusion.

Espen Aarseth's notion of ergodic literature makes this demand explicit. Ergodic texts require "nontrivial effort" to traverse. In the afternoon, that effort looks like sustained attention, repeated navigation, a willingness to revisit the same lexia in new contexts, and the revision of earlier judgments.

Readers often run into the same fragment multiple times; each repetition invites a fresh reading. The structure resists the speed and skim-and-skim mentality we associate with digital life. Afternoon insists on slowness and reflection; it privileges interpretive depth over instant retrieval.



Although *afternoon* resists large-scale quantitative methods, it nevertheless anticipates Franco Moretti's pivot toward analyzing structures rather than isolated passages. Moretti's distant reading redirects attention to patterns and systems. In hypertext fiction, the system—the network of possible reading paths—becomes the primary object of analysis.

The multiplicity of routes through the *afternoon* foregrounds repetition, return, and divergence. Meaning springs not from a single *lexia* but from the network as a whole. Joyce's work thus anticipates digital humanities' emphasis on relational and systemic knowledge.

Johanna Drucker's theory of *graphesis*—the idea that visual forms do interpretive work—makes a related point. Visualizations don't merely display data; they shape how we understand it. The *Storyspace* interface in the *afternoon* does precisely that.

By rendering narrative as a map of interconnected nodes, the interface invites spatial thinking. Coherence is recast as navigational possibility. That visualization is rhetorical: it treats uncertainty as generative rather than merely an obstacle. In the *afternoon*, the interface quietly argues about how stories and knowledge operate inside digital environments.

At its core, *afternoon*, a story that confronts the limits of knowledge and the persistence of doubt. Peter can never definitively confirm his son's fate, no matter how many paths the reader follows. He warns us, "You may think you know what happened, but you do not" (Joyce). This refusal of closure makes uncertainty itself an ethical and interpretive stance.

Hypertext, then, is especially well suited to humanistic inquiry: it allows contradiction, hesitation, and multiplicity without forcing tidy resolution. In doing so, *afternoon* resists reductive readings and insists on the messiness of human life.

Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*, remains a landmark in electronic literature and in the intellectual history of digital humanities. Through its

hypertextual form, it reimagines narrative as a collaborative, indeterminate process shaped by reader choice and interface design. By engaging poststructuralist theory, reader-response criticism, ergodic concepts, distant reading, and *graphesis*, we can see *afternoon* as exemplary of DH's humanistic commitments.

Joyce does not fetishize technology for its own sake. Joyce uses digital form to probe memory, responsibility, and uncertainty. *afternoon* reminds us that digital humanities is not just about tools or methods; it is about how people make meaning in and through digital spaces.

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