Chapter 4

Network Fiction and Technotext
Talan Memmott’s *Branded, Next:*nex(i)t
and *Lexia to Perplexia*
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*Our usual practice is to follow the narrative and try to figure out the meaning and main idea that are suggested by the things we encounter. Even if a novel, just like a landscape painting, depicts many individual tree-leaves one by one without narrating a single event, we begin to consider what the narrator is trying to imply in this way, and what kind of story these leaves will eventually form.*

*Our mind constantly searches for motive idea, purpose, a secret center.* - Orhan Pamuk, *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*

What is happening today on the World Wide Web is still not only true to the volume but tries to accomplish, to achieve the model of THE BOOK more than the books themselves. That is ... the transparence, the accessibility—so everyone can share and participate in this global repetition, this global writing, global reading ... today, finally we reach THE BOOK, we have THE BOOK. The books were not books, but the World Wide Web is THE BOOK. - Talan Memmott, *CD for Derrida: A Book/Ends Report*

During the 1990s, the coming of networked and programmable media opened new possibilities for experimentation in the expanding field of electronic literature. New information processing and electronic communication technologies facilitated the connecting of millions of computers over a vast network, creating a virtual space for subjective experience and artistic expression. The possibilities of
literary hypertext were not yet exhausted when the advent of the internet opened new trajectories for novel adventures and innovations in the field of literary hypermedia. Robert Coover, the father of literary hypertext, who celebrated the hypertext technology for literally facilitating new forms of writing and reading practices in his two seminal essays “The End of Books” and “Hyperfiction: Novels for the Computer”, now started lamenting the increasing intrusion of hypermedia in the field of new media writing. Commenting on the demise of the hypertext in his keynote address “Literary Hypertext: The Passing of The Golden Age” delivered at Digital arts and Culture Conference in Georgia, USA in the year 1999 and published in the *Feed* magazine, he says:

> For those who’ve only recently lost their footing and fallen into the flood of hypertext, literary or otherwise, it may be dismaying to learn that they are arriving after the golden age is already over, but that’s in the nature of golden ages: not even there until so seen by succeeding generations.

Coover attributed this “passing of the golden age” to the rise of World Wide Web. The problem with the Web is that it “tends to be a noisy, restless, opportunistic, superficial, e-commerce-driven, chaotic realm, dominated by hacks, pitchmen, and pretenders, in which the quiet voice of literature cannot easily be heard or, if heard by chance, attended to for more than a moment or two”. As a result, the meditative nature of literary experience gives way to the momentary and transitory nature of World Wide Web which is “riven by ceaseless hype and chatter” (“Literary Hypertext”). Because the word started “galloping in its new element, jumping with
the speed of electricity from screen to screen”, Coover was scared that it would sooner or later lose its footing and only the screen would remain in its stead (Birkets 152).

On the other hand, William J Mitchell in his path-breaking study *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (1995) argues that the society is undergoing a radical transformation, as a result of which the visual and the image are becoming the dominant forms of expression, dissemination and communication. He defines the change as the “pictorial turn”, when the ghosts of the ‘image’ which got buried under the heap of words are returning to avenge the injustices done to the ‘image’. Mitchell’s verdict seems entirely true the moment one makes a cursory survey of human surroundings. Our everyday landscape of daily life is so replete with images and visuals all kinds that it becomes impossible to escape this reign of the visual. In fact, we may also conclude with Manovich, for whom it is the entity called information that underpins everything from the simplest to the most complex of representations, that every form of information has been primarily channelized and designed as a field of visual signs. Everything can be represented visually.

The coming of digital electronic technologies has imparted an increased intensity to the *visuality* of the visual image as the rise of so-called HD (high definition and high resolution) TV screens highlights. This is not to say that visual representation is a recent phenomenon with no precedent. The attempt, on the contrary, is to trace the specificity of the resurgence of the visual in a world where it is becoming highly aggressive, extremely overpowering, dangerously volatile and dynamic, and dauntingly intimidating to the human sensibility, as Jonathan Crary
writes on the very first page of his classic study, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*: “[the] formalization and diffusion of computer generated imagery heralds the ubiquitous implantation of fabricated visual ‘spaces’ radically different from the mimetic capacities of the film, photography, and television” (1). A basic reconfiguration of the human sensorium is underway; it is getting, one could say, reassembled. The advent of the internet has only enhanced the complex circuitary of the visual that encircles us today, aided by complex computer graphics techniques. The world has finally become visual in a manner the human beings never dreamt of.

Writing in the new media has not remained untouched by this rise of the visual. The second generation writers and artists working in the field of new media have been quite eager and excited about this new dimension which they could now appropriate for the creation and construction of new media artifacts, together with the fresh functionalities opened up by the internet. Mark Amerika, who specializes in Net-art and hypermedia writing practices, welcomed the coming of the World Wide Web as a new possibility for devising new modes of cultural production and distribution, and of engaging oneself with issues of form deemed exhausted in the book-form. Amerika, in his Net-art trilogy, has attempted to approach “the computer-mediated environment of the World Wide Web as an experimental writing zone” (181). Amerika proposes that rather than becoming nostalgic over losing the age-old stereotypes of individual author-as-genius, we should open ourselves to new forms of writing practices like collaborative and participatory authorship facilitated by the network-distributed environment. “Writing”, according to Amerika, is becoming “more performative” in the new computer-mediated environment (181).
The *trAce* online writing community, established at the Nottingham Trent University in the year 1995, was one of the first ventures of its kind in the field of net-based writing. Gradually, it became an international space for writers, artists and computer engineers and designers who were keen to experiment with the possibilities of artistic expression through the internet. Subsequently, there has emerged an independent genre of new media writing which makes use of the possibilities of coding and the internet for create experimentation.

“The regime of computation,” to use Hayles’s words, that was set into motion by the pervasiveness of computers and their inter-connectivity, enabled writers and artists to experiment with new forms of writing practices which basically led to the growth of “second-generation” writing practices (7). Adalaide Morris says that the transition from “first generation” writing (which generally includes hypertext fiction) to “second generation” writing (which involves coding and programming) is a move from “navigating linked texts to participating in the activities of dynamic information structures” that characterize “second generation” works (Morris and Swiss 17). As a result, the work is “transformed from an impersonal cognitive schema…into an immediately graspable, profoundly personal experience, one played out through its interface with the proprioceptive and affective body of the user” (17). Moreover, these second generation works used “…a wide variety of navigation schemes and interface metaphors that tend to deemphasize the link as such” (Hayles 7). Moreover, network fiction makes the

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1  **Proprioceptive** means the reception of stimuli produced within the organism.
visual an essential dimension of creative experimentation; the visual becomes constitutive of the aesthetics of work as it gets embedded in the very structure of the work. In network fiction, “[t]he parts, or nodes, of network narratives are self-contained semantic entities – as each screenful of narrative material must be combined and recombined in order for a higher level of coherence to emerge” (Ciccoricco 7). This is to say that the screen itself becomes part of the semiotics of narrative. Consequently, network fiction may be defined as a fiction which “makes use of hypertext technology in order to create emergent and recombinatory narratives” (4).

Talan Memmott is a hypermedia writer and artist living in San Francisco, California. His work is available free over the internet and it is generally read or played only on the internet. At present, he teaches at the Blekinge Institute of Technology in Karlskrona, Sweden and has co-edited the second anthology of creative works published recently by Electronic Literature Organization. Memmott has been active in the field of new media writing since 1995, though started making significant intervention in the field of new media art and writing only in 1997. Memmott’s work is characterized by the implicit coding and programming that go into the making and performance of his works. All of his works are infused with neologisms like “cell.f”, “bi.narrative”, “remotional”, “exe.termination” and “I-terminal” through which he brilliantly evokes the “complex hybridization now underway between human cognition and the very different and yet interlinked cognitions of intelligent machines” (Hayles 21).
4.1 **BRANDED**

Memmott’s work *Branded* is a short and crisp piece of writing composed in collaboration with Kate Pullinger. It was one of the earliest works of Talan Memmott and it makes use of the possibilities of the internet to explore the literary-aesthetic dimensions of new media technology. The work was produced as part of *Mapping the Transition from Page to Screen* project supported by Arts and Humanities Research Board and *trAce* Online Writing Centre to encourage new media writing practices by creating an award scheme for innovative experimentation in the budding field of new media writing at Nottingham Trent University, England. It is one of the simplest works of Memmott’s new media writing oeuvre. The work is available online in the archives of the *trAce* Online Writing Centre.

*Branded* is a short work. The story revolves around the character of twenty-one year old James who has been sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of his girlfriend Lana. Although James says that he did not kill her, no one believes him because has been convicted of the murder. Even his sister Florence, whom James fondly calls Flossie, does not trust her brother. The work through the use of images of prison bars, background sounds and echoes tries to capture the psychological state of James in prison. The first frame of the work provides the reader with the broad outline of the story.

The layout of the screen is black. The prison cell is designed in grey and black shades in a rectangular shape to separate it out from the screen. The frame of the work is divided into two parts: left and right. The left part includes prison bars and a rectangular block at the bottom which symbolize the interior of the prison cell. The right part includes a very small rectangular frame with prisons bars within a big
rectangular block. The small one shows a window onto the outside world. The two rectangular blocks on the right and the left overlap to highlight the interpenetration of the two worlds that exists within the prison cell and outside it. The following figure shows the complete layout of the frame.

![Frame Layout](image)

Figure: 1, *Branded*

The frame opens with the text: “A prisoner is alone in his cell,” located right at the top of the frame in the centre. As the reader clicks on the text which is active, new text appears on the frame: “He lies on his bed. In his cell, His eyes are open. He stares at the ceiling,” and “Outside the cell, there is a tremendous amount of noise-“. The text appears as the reader scrolls over the surface of the rectangular bars in the frame. Here the text stops and the reader is supposed to again make an intervention to take the work forward. As soon as the reader takes the cursor to the line “there is a tremendous amount of noise,” the text below this line starts appearing with a low-bass heavy background sound that tries to symbolize what is written in the text.

Simultaneously, a diagonal line starts moving towards the rectangular frame on the
left hand side and stops with the appearance of the following text: “In his cell,”. The reader traces it and comes to the text, and the noise immediately stops as the cursor moves over the text, and there emerges the word “Silence” to signify the ambience of the cell in which James is lying. To take the narrative forward, a forward arrow has been placed at the right at the bottom of the frame.

The second frame comes on to the screen as the reader clicks on the arrow. The text seems to start flowing from the above left corner with the opening up of the frame. The text goes like this:

It is late now.

The prison is quiet.

In the distance, on another wing,

he can hear music, but even that is faint.

As the reader moves the cursor over the text: “In the distance…”, new text appears with sounds that seems to be some kind of music, and the following text appears:

Further away still,

he hears a freight train

rolling low over the tracks.

This text appears in the block on the right hand side of the second frame. The reader scrolls over this text, and the sound of a moving train starts, with the following text appearing in the block at the bottom on the left hand side which refers to James’s state of mind as he is thinking about the train:

Where’s it going, he thinks.

He turns onto his sides, and closes his eyes.

In the weeks since his conviction, he has not slept.
Some of the lines in the text are active. As the reader reads the text with the cursor on “Where’s it going, he thinks,” a voice says: “Where am I?,” and with the movement of the to the last line, the same voice says: “Is it weeks or Is it years?” It seems as if James is contemplating his own condition, the voice symbolizing the interior monologue of James. The reader now needs to click on the bottom arrow to move through the work.

The layout of the third frame is particularly important. There are no rectangular blocks in the frame. There are only bars on the left hand side with their shadows falling diagonally on the right side which signify that the scene of the narrative has moved into the prison cell.

Figure: 2, *Branded* (For coloured image see Appendix I)

After reading, the reader moves the cursor over the text and new text appears which says that there is a noise which James hears in his prison cell, but the voice remains faint and unrecognizable. As James adjusts himself over the pillow sent by his
mother, the voice keeps resounding. James struggles with himself because of his inability to understand what the noise is and where it is coming from. Finally, he recognizes it as Lana’s voice. He assures himself that it is Lana’s voice; she is talking to him but as the text itself reads: “from - and through -”, that is to say, from where and through what.

He becomes curious. Moving closer to the walls of the prison, he leans over them and is gradually able to feel Lana’s voice and hear it clearly. It seems, the narrative goes, as if Lana is breathless and she is asking James, “What happened there?” The voice starts reverberating in the emptiness of the prison and gets louder. And suddenly, the voice is gone: “Vanished”. The next frame appears with a receiver at the center of the frame and the phone bell is ringing. It keeps ringing until the reader clicks on it. As a soon as s/he does, James starts speaking: “Flossie, it’s me James”. Flossie’s response appears in the form of text with James speaking in the background.

Figure: 3, Branded
The topographical layout of the text is interesting in that the text is displayed around the receiver. Rather, the text overlaps the receiver in the frame which literally makes the receiver the site of the narrative. The next frame continues the conversation between James and Flossie with the same frame layout. James wants to talk to Flossie to share what he is going through. He urges her to come and see him, pleading to her. She senses his state of mind, but resists. He confesses that Lana is talking to her. Flossie receives a shock. The font size and italicization of text in the following frame are very interesting in that those depict the psychological state of Flossie. The larger font of the text, like “Listen James -”, “I don’t want to talk to you about Lana” and “James, This is not funny,” and the italicization highlight this text as words spoken by Flossie. The word spoken “What?” is both italicized and has higher font size than the entire text which attempts to embody the sense of shock and the frightened surprise of Flossie.

Figure: 4, Branded (For coloured image see Appendix II)
The works end with Flossie finally accepting James’s request to come and see him. The last frame has a layout similar to that of the last two frames. It ends with the both hearing each other breathing through the phone. The reader can hear the heavy sound of breathing.

*Branded* is one of the earliest experimental works by Talan Memmott. The work, as we have seen, explores the multifarious possibilities of new media technology and online networking to construct a literary aesthetic experience through the incorporation of sounds, images, and creative topographical relationships made possible by the screen. The overall layout of the work is evocative of the dense gloom of the scenario traced in the narrative fragments. The designing and layout of the frame attempt to suggest where we are in the imaginary landscape of the narrative space of the work, as the shift from the second to the third frame shows. The gradual and slow-motion appearance of the text to the screen seems to signify the characters’ flow of thoughts, mainly James’s. And the random topographical organization foregrounds the doubt, fear and fumbling which accompany fear. The work moves forward with the reader’s intervention through the cursor’s movement over the frame. The background sound enables the reader to feel James’s psychological state from greater proximity.

4.2 *NEXT:*[N]EX(I)T

The next work by Talan Memmott under consideration is *Next:*[n]ex(i)t. The work begins with an on-going conversation between Swann and Ariadne. In Greek mythology, *Ariadne* was the daughter of the King of Crete and is generally related to mazes and labyrinths. Ariadne asks Swann a question: “What will tomorrow bring?” as shown in the following figure:
The very opening of the work places the reader in the work and the question
provokes him/her to wander through the maze of the text to search the answer. It
makes the reader also eager to know the answer. S/he clicks on it to find out what
happens next as the complete sentence is active, that is, it hyperlinked to a new
segment. Swans responds to Ariadne’s query by saying, “Tomorrow, something
altogether new will begin,” and slowly moves towards the bookshelf and searches
through the knick-knacks lying there. He seems indifferent to the question. Picking
up some of the things like Venus of Willendorf, a miniature Kouros of plaster and a
labrys made of brass, he puts them on a table. These artifacts belong to ancient
human civilizations, with Venus of Willendorf being one of the earliest miniature
statues of the human being, and that too of a voluptuous female nude; labrys being a
double-headed axe designed by the Greeks, considered to be one of the oldest
symbols of the Greek civilization; and Kouros being the figures of young males
which made their first appearance in the Greek period. All three words are active; the moment the reader clicks on one of them, a figure appears on the screen. Swann appears to assure Ariadne that there is nothing to worry about; the future is within their grasp and reach. It seems he wants to construct their own future from the ruins of the past by going right back to the beginning of human civilization. The three artifacts (a female figure, a double-headed axe and a male figure) together signify the beginning of time, when the future was unleashed through the two humans being as an “US”.

As soon as the reader starts clicking on the active links, the figures of Willendorf, labrys and kouros appears on the screen. From the three figures, only the labrys is active which may symbolically refer to the piercing of the time if the future needs to take birth from the womb of time. A click on the figure of the axe takes the reader to the following frame:

![Image](http://home.icio.us/img/timelessness.jpg)

Figure: 6, Next:[n]ext
In this frame, a clock is shown with the title “Timelessness”. The numerals in the clock melt into a kind of whirlpool. Clicking on “timelessness” brings forth the following text:

The bigger the APE-X gets, the smaller the significance of its individual members… Diluted and extreme, ex- stream - the real Oceanus [Italics original].

In Greek mythology, Oceanus was a titan who ruled over a river which circled round the whole of the earth. Only the word “APE-X” is active in the above paragraph. The reader clicks on it, and comes to understand what the word APE-X may signify. The hyphen in the word “APE-X” may refer to the inescapable link that exists between the past of Homo sapiens, to apes as our biological ancestors and also to the present state of Homo sapiens as human beings, the apex of the biological pyramid.

Swann has been looking at the map of the world for hours now, ruminating the infinite richness and diversity of people, empires, nations, cultures and traditions with different identities, conflicting interests and varied forms of life that have “soiled” the vast landscape of the earth and ultimately met its end. Suddenly, he realizes - “He was alone”. Through his contemplation of the map of the earth, Swann realizes the dark truth that man is always alone. The use of the capital ‘H’ in He makes it a common pronoun, whereas the use of the past tense highlights Swann’s identification with the inescapable and endless existential solitude of the human being from the very beginning of time.
Underneath the square box, the time-division is written as “(hours / minutes)”. It is also active, and it is this link which moves the work forward. Clicking on the time-division (*hours / minutes*), a new frame appears with the same layout. The only difference it has from the previous one is that the time-division here is “(days / nights)”. Again the square box is titled “Timelessness”. Clicking on it, the reader sees the following text:

Swann looked down at his silly body and his funny hands, raised his fingers in front of face (APE-X is driven by what is put before its face), counting his fingers -- Sunday, Monday, so on...

There is nothing cosmologically necessary in the concept of a bracketed set of years... It is done for the sake of narrative. The millenium is a milestone, closing out and marking the beginning of the volume, **NEXT**.

In the above section, one reads how Swann responds to his understanding which is gradually emerging as he continues contemplating what Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, etc. mean. He comes to the conclusion that such divisions in the continuity of time and life are not built into the very structure of life; it is not a cosmological necessity. Rather, it is done for the sake of giving logic to the flow of events and time in the form of a narrative order. It is done arbitrarily for the “sake of narrative”. As a result, Swann concludes that a “millennium” is just a milestone, a point where a certain historical past comes to an end so that a beginning can take place. Even here it is not a complete break.
In the above frame, there are only two active links: *so on*... and *NEXT*. It is completely the prerogative of the reader to follow either of the two links. If the reader follows the *so on*... link, he is forwarded, within the same frame, to the following:

He is tickled by the trivia of days and nights, seconds and millennia...

“There has thus far only been a beginning.” He thinks, “So it is not about the END, because it won’t -- it is about the NEXT.

(rotation, revolution)…

From the above, it becomes clear that Swann is excited about such time-divisions like days, nights, seconds, hours, centuries and millennia and this leads him to a kind of revelation, according to which the question is not about the “End” as such. The question hovers around the *NEXT*. And it is very difficult to understand whether the *NEXT* is a rotation which brings things back to the same point from where it all started to begin yet again, or it is a revolution which, in a different way, takes things to a point where everything has to start from the scratch and the vestiges of the past are erased. The words are enclosed in circular brackets which may signify their cyclic nature at some level, and three dots “…” indicate a continuation towards another beginning. It also uncovers the raw truth that there have only been beginnings, which amounts to saying the same thing: “There has thus far only been a beginning”.

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We cannot forget that the time-division, \((days / nights)\), as in the last frame is also active. Clicking on the time-division, the reader enters the next frame:

![Figure: 7, Next:[n]ext(i)t](image)

There is a significant change in this frame in the form of the image of the earth enclosed in a square where there had been a clock with numerals disappearing into a circular swirl. This change corresponds to the time-division underneath the square that is \“(months / years)\”. With the reader clicking on “Timelessness”, the following text appears:

Swann started from the fossil and moved his way out to the \textit{APE-X}.

He wanted make sure he understood everything essential, everything fundamental to the project. From the ruins, Swann has been able to make his way through to the APE-X. This was necessary for him to be able to make sense of everything that seemed
fundamental to the project. As the reader clicks on the active link APE-X, he comes across the following:

He spread out all time before him and divided it into big seasons, millennial blocks of time. Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter - - Swann wondered where he was. And then, to even think of where he was became pure abstraction, a plan (et) that broke down the machine into its parts. Ariadne’s question is Earth-Plus.*Timeless.*

Swann gathers sense from the mud of time which he has spread before him. He takes the chance by constructing something through his own divisions of time, but all of sudden he wants to know where he was *in time*, the question which in turn unveils another of the cruel truths of his predicament; that is, to ask this question is like abstracting oneself out of flow/continuity which disintegrates the whole or “the machine”, as he calls it, into its constituent parts, all lying scattered once more. As a result, Swann comes to understand that Ariadne’s question is *timeless*. The reader then clicks on the time division (*months/years*) and enters the next frame.

We should here note an important thing in reading Memmott’s *Next:*[n]*exit(i)t*. In the above paragraphs we have talking about various time-divisions in respective frames, but one thing which remained constant was the notion of *timelessness*. In each frame and in the time-division within that frame, the title given to the square is “Timelessness” which corresponds to the very inescapability of timelessness howsoever rigorously and hard one may attempt to chalk out a concrete sequence or structure of time. Within each frame, there are links following which the
reader enters directly to the next level. For instance, the word *NEXT* in the text takes the reader to the following frame:

![Image](http://example.com/image.png)

**Figure: 8, Next:[n]ext**

In the above frame, there are two images; one on the left corner above and the other on the right side of the frame. As the reader takes the cursor over the image of the Greek temple on the left corner above, the word “LIBERTY” appears before the temple. The image on the right side is the famous image of Liberty leading the people during the French Revolution. Each image is active; clicking on each one of them brings to the screen respective texts. The click on “LIBERTY” brings forth the following text:

Looking forward to a golden age is always looking back to a forgotten point in time in which nostalgia is chaos and emotion is instinct. The Golden Age, any golden age is always a thing remembered -- forgetting the hardships and frustration, the labors of
the past. Looking past reason to get to the bottom of it all -- the real root and reason of every action -- future, past and current...

Within the logic of work, the reader is here confronted with the idea of looking forward to a golden age, the NEXT, which, according to the text, is always visualized as a new era of liberty and freedom, but which strangely rests on a renewed engagement and confrontation with a “forgotten point” in the past. It is a point where the rule of law was chaos and the criterion of action was instinct; a point where the flow of events and time existed in their rawness. As Memmott further says, a golden age is always something “remembered” in a way that gives to the real hardships, struggles, failures, vexation and courageous labours of man, a more benign form. The challenge, however, for Memmott, is to go to the very core of the past and make a deft effort to make sense of every subsequent action, the paths chosen which would enable the human being to construct the future through the past and by diving into the ruins of the current, as highlighted by “future, past and current…”. The challenge of “What will happen tomorrow”, or NEXT is a perpetual coming back to the current via a long detour through the chaos and ruins of the past.

The reader continues and clicks on the image of Liberty to explore further. S/he encounters the following text:

In suburbia there is a suspect mythos presided over by the Pantheon of Liberty, of luxury and expression. Promoting anarchy in the cul de sac, Swann presents a beacon of hope -- promising a pixelated future, an age of Sam with all its perks and pleasure, worldwide... New muses, free and private nations, homebound re-births of long dead
minor demons, little household gods directing individuated narratives and fates, micro-states and nano-cultures...

In the paragraph, we can see how Swann is shown as presenting “a beacon of hope” of a “pixilated future” as he is confronted with a “cul de sac”. Now, the word pixel refers to the constituent building blocks of an image in computers. The idea of “pixilated future” may refer to a future which is broken or which seems to have been composed of so many minute fragmented parts in the form of “individuated narratives and fates, micro-states and nano-cultures…,” all coming together to compose an image of future. In other words, it also alludes to Lyotard’s idea of the absence of overarching grand narrative, in this case Liberty, which once gave a form to the future but is no longer available. This in turn highlights the spectacular and illusory nature of grand narratives.

In another screen (whose layout is almost the same except for the difference in figure on the right side), the figure is of a human. As the reader clicks on the figure, the following text appears which alludes to the myth of Valchanos:

Every two-thousand years a Grand Valchanos is born, formed spontaneously from the sediment, human fiction and waste, the glories and progression of the preceding two-thousand years. Each year a smaller Valchanos, a double is born, formed spontaneously from a piece of the Grand Valchanos. This smaller Valchanos serves as the keeper of time for one year, and dies, is returned to the body of the Grand Valchanos. The returned pieces construct the Institutions for the next Millenia. Again and again, the Grand Valchanos is sacrificed to time. A renewable human resource.
The myth of *Valchanos* in the above paragraph is significant in that it invokes the ancient Minoan myth. *Valchanos* is the Minoan name of the Greek god Zeus who “took the roles of son and consort” and is supposed to die each year (Castleden 125). The myth represents “the important principle of discontinuity of nature” (125).

The work has more than one beginning, and in each beginning Ariadne asks a different question. For instance, in the first one, she asks, “What will tomorrow bring?” In another, she asks, “What’s that down there?” The work contemplates the coming of tomorrow in terms of how and what kind of future will gradually take shape out of the present. The central question revolves around “NEXT”. The *Next:*[n]ex(i)t is designed in such way that the word *NEXT* may also mean that there is really no exit from the human predicament. The human being is caught up in the endlessly repetitive cycle of the past, the present and the future; it is like Nietzsche’s Eternal Return. The [N] after the colon, in the title, stands for ‘no’ and EX(I)T means exit, which can be read as an allusion to Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous play *No Exit* in which three characters, a man and two women, get locked up in a room for all eternity. Memmott takes this situation to a new level in his work *Next:*[n]ex(i)t since in this work, the two characters, a man and a woman, in a certain relationship, are struggling to come to terms with the question of the future, that is, the *NEXT*. All attempts to create a future crash in the face of their mortal life and the inevitability of death. *Next:*[n]ex(i)t does not involve any standard form of narrative movement through cause and effect or a more complex intersection of events; it is rather a meditation on the movement of time and on the human being’s place and situation in the universe. The navigational pathways through the work vary with every reading.
because the reader followd a different set of links in each reading. Each frame comes minimally with a single link or more than one link; the reader is free to follow any of the links. It means the reader may, in a particular reading, follow the shortest path to the end which means that s/he may not experience the work in its entirety. It should be noted that we have made a relatively linear reading of Next:next in order to grasp and take into account the varied dynamics of the text. Otherwise, there are certain screens in Next:next in which there are links which lead directly to the next and even straight to the last screen. In another sense, this in itself suggests the unforeseeable suddenness of the end, of death.

4.3 \textit{LEXIA TO PERPLEXIA}

\textit{Lexia to Perplexia} is one of the most critically acclaimed works not only in the field of network fiction ever since the emergence of electronic literature on the literary and critical landscape. The work was awarded \textit{trA\textcopyright ce} Online Writing Prize for the year 2000; it was also selected for publication in the first anthology of works of electronic literature by Electronic Literature Organization. The work makes use of programming languages like DHTML\textsuperscript{2} and Javascript\textsuperscript{3}. The work can only be played over the internet, and the interface of the work is designed “as a diagrammatic

\textsuperscript{2} DHTML is dynamic HTML. It is an “extension of HTML allowing a web page to change in response to the user” (Daintith and Wright 163). Thus the dynamic characteristic of DHTML is the way it functions while a page is viewed, not in its ability to generate a unique page with each page load.

\textsuperscript{3} Javascript is “a scripting language designed to add features to web pages. Javascript code is embedded in the HTML code and is run by the web browser” (Daintith and Wright 271). It is dynamic and supports higher-order functions.
metaphor, emphasizing the local (user) and remote (server) poles of network attachment while exploring the “intimate” hidden spaces of the process” (“Author description,” *Lexia to Perplexia*). The process of getting hooked on to a network, in which the humans become an intermediate part of a network of computer machines, has been explored in great detail. All of this critical exploration does not exclude our age-old historical and mythological baggage which is part of our collective human history. Memmott has made use of the Egyptian Book of Dead, Narcissus and Echo, the history of Minoan culture, all of which form the background of our new predicament of being located in a world of images, screens, computers, and networks. In addition to these, Memmott uses postmodern literary and cultural theory to decipher the implications and dynamics of the new socio-historical and technological configurations.

The work is divided into four chapters, each having an independent title, namely “The Process of Attachment”, “Double-Funnels”, “Metastrophe” and “Exe.Termination”. The reader is supposed to click on any one of these to begin reading/playing the work. There is no narrative in the work. The work is basically, in the words of Memmott, about “…ontological complications that occur by way of attachment to the internet” (“active/onBlur”). The reader can enter the work through any of the chapters. The work makes use of many neologisms composed of programming language and English to highlight the underlying coding that went into its making and which helps the work play out its performance. The work, as Memmott himself says, is “based upon the premise that the prefixations of all terms
in hypermedia are negotiable and subject to change without notice” (“Abstract”). Consequently, the work also questions the status of the “Author and User/Reader positions in relation to web-based literary content” (“About Lexia to Perplexia”). It is meant to offer a critique of the author/reader binary in new media culture.

Memmott says that the “hypermedia writer stands apart from the traditional concept of a writer and can perhaps be located only in transition between artist-writer-engineer” (“Abstract”).

Memmott writes that his work Lexia to Perplexia is primarily a “theory/fiction”. By this he means that the work attempts to explore the relationship between human subjectivity and network phenomenology by questioning its own location, constructedness and situatedness within the network. In fact, in Lexia to Perplexia, Memmott writes, in the introduction to the work, that “…certain theoretical attributes are not displayed as text but are incorporated into the functionality of the work” which makes it an altogether different attempt to experience certain concepts. The work can be said to fall into the category of “Code work”. Code work may be understood as an independent sub-genre of new media writing in which a kind of creole is created by mixing up English and programming

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4 Such creative works make use of the perceptive insights of theory and try to create a creative work by embedding the critical insights of the theory into the very narrative fabric of the art object. In the words of Memmott himself, theory/fiction attempts to “introduce theory into the humanity through an apparently creative (yet critical, and research based) process” (153). Another recent example of theory/fiction is Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials by the Iranian philosopher Rega Negarestani.
languages. Alan Sondheim, Mary Ann Breeze and Talan Memmott are among the best known practitioners of “Code work” in the field of new media writing.

In *Lexia to Perplexia*, each page has been designed with such embedded interactive features that even the movements of the cursor affect the layout of the work. The title of the first chapter is “The Process of Attachment” which certainly alludes to the process of hooking into the network that has been created by the interlinking of computer machines. It is “a tangential description of the action of user”. This is one of the important chapters since it highlights how we as human beings have become inescapably attached to the World Wide Web. The attachment takes place between “I-terminals” and “X-terminal”. This process unfolds within a broader phenomenon which Memmott defines as “Cyborganization and its Dys|Content(s): Sign.mud.Fraud”. Here we can see that Memmott is playing with the title of Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Memmott juxtaposes the contemporary ‘cyborganziation’ with civilization as the process of ‘cyborganziation’ is almost like civilization in the sense that new subjectivities and subjective experiences are made possible by the new virtual spaces opened up by the embedding of technology in almost every facet of human life. The creole “Sign.mud.Fraud” alludes to Sigmund Freud and also to the coding that goes into the making of this play. This may also be understood to refer to the mud of signs over the internet which consequently remains ambiguous and fluid and thus seems to be a kind of “Fraud”. Moreover, it also points what Donna Haraway has shown in her studies: that there are no rigid boundaries separating the human and the machine
(Haraway 149-181). Katherine Hayles says, “The dots also divide the name so it functions both as an allusion to Freud (Fraud), announcing its ironic appropriation of this seminal thinker, and also punctuating (or as one of Memmott’s neologisms would have it, “puncturating”) the signature so it performs what ‘cyborgization’ implies by transforming a proper name into creolized sign” (294). As soon as the reader clicks on this option, the work starts unfolding and the screen appears. On the screen, the following text appears:

The inconstancy of location is transparent to the I-terminal as its focus is at the screen rather than the origin of the image. It is the illusory object at the screen that is of interest to the human enactor of the process….

The words “the illusory object at the screen that is of interest to the human enactor of the process” straightaway brings to the foreground the constructedness of the work. Secondly, it highlights the role of the reader/player in the unfolding of the work. However, the reader is not supposed to be interested in what Orhan Pamuk has described in an epigraph to the paper as “a secret center” but in how the illusion of “a secret center” is sustained by the very process that has been initiated by the enactor of the work. The work enacts itself before the reader through his/her own participation; it was not a completed work available before the process of attachment began. The screen foregrounds the production of the self in a perpetually specular and dynamic interaction with the other.
Memmott makes use of the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus to dwell on the binary of self and other. To notice this, one only needs to read the following passage:

From out of NO.where, Echo appears in the private space of Narcissus.tmp to form a solipstatic community (of 1, ON) with N.tmp, at the surface. The two machines -- the originating and the simulative -- collapse and collate to form the terminal-I, a Cell.f, or, cell...(f) that processes the self as outside of itself -- in realtime.

This passage talks about the emergence of Echo out of nowhere. Here the word echo is also used to allude to the echo of one’s voice when one is standing in front a vast open space. That vast space here is the World Wide Web created by the interconnectivity of machines. The paragraph continues:

The bi.narrative exe.change between remote and local bodies is con.gress and compressed into the space between the physical screen and the Oculus of terminal-I. As such, the identity of Echo is exclusive, determined by the private acts of individual agents, any/every Narcissus.tmp.

Reading the above paragraph, we could say that the echo has no indentity.

The word “oculus” is important here as it refer to the circular nature of the “terminal-I”. The echo is nothing in itself; it is “exclusively” and contingently determined by the respective individuals who plugg into the network. This is true for “any/every” individual and it generally is a
narcissistic relationship since each individual is enamoured of her/his echo but
forgets that it is his/her own echo/reflection in the universe of network.

Figure: 9, *Lexia to Perplexia* (For coloured image see Appendix II)

Shown in the above figure, on the right side of the screen, there is a text which is
significant for the kind of sense of self that forms in the network. The text goes on
like this:

she took my hand into her own and looked at the palm then up at my
face, down at my palm then again into my face. She stared into my
eyes for a moment then pulled my hand closer to her face and began
tracing the network of lines with the tip of her finger, following each
thread…

In the above paragraph, we read that she pulled the narrator’s hand closer to her face
and started “tracing the network of lines with the tip of her finger, following each
thread…” which hints at the composition of human flesh as nothing but a network of
complex line patterns and also alludes to the complex and fluid network of relationships which underlie the illusion of self. The moment the reader clicks on the icon of an eye, located just left of the centre of the rectangular frame, in the square, it gets replaced with the word “Echo” within the topography of the same square and the “eye” moves to the bottom of the screen, and appears in a larger size. Simultaneously, the text on the right side above changes to one of the most evocative sentences in the work:

She says, “Narcissus came before me and with his gaze I fell, I fell into his arms, and when he looked away, I disappeared”.

The line seems to refer to the process of plugging into the network, and the sense of self/other binary it generates as long as one is moving in the network. The moment one decides to plug out of the network, everything just melts away. The ext of the above sentence is hyperlinked, with the word “disappeared” hyperlinked independently. Clicking on “disappeared”, the “Echo” in the square disappears. But as the reader clicks on the other part, the following text appears:

Echo is nowhere without the other of Echo -- the Narc(is sus)pect -- the one that gives her away, sets her up and holds her captive. It is this self-rendered agent that provides for the reversals of the displayed Cell.f. Not only is Echo the lover of the Narc(is sus)pect, she is a reverberation of the originating suspect -- the one whom the one who wants to see, wants to see... the attraction is singular, while the attachment, the *.mergency is bi.narrative in nature. Echo at the screen is cyb-ling to Cell.f.
The machines are both originating and simulative in the sense that the simulation is produced by the physical machines but both the original (the original merely meaning “a screen or shell, a construct of how I imagine the body from the way I feel it”) and the simulative collapse into each other to form the “cell.f” (self), again alluding the inescapable inter-penetration of the human body and the machine. And that simulative self is outside itself in the “realtime” process of terminal attachment. The phrase ‘real time’ is used in computer languages by the programmers to refer to the running time of animated or simulated computer processes along the general human time scale. The Echo and the “cell.f” are related in a dynamic loop where each corresponds to desire for the other. Memmott writes that “the identity of Echo is exclusively determined by the private act of individual agents, any/every Narcissus.tmp⁵. The individual agent (self) is transposed into a “cell.f” as much by the Echo as by its own narcissistic desire for Echo.

The title of the second chapter is “Double Funnels: (s)T(ex)T(s) and Intertimacy”. The word “intertimacy” is again a play on the words ‘inter-’ and ‘intimacy’ to highlight the “process of attachment” that enables the enactor of the process to form a kind of intimacy with the machine. There are two eyes facing each other on both ends of a rectangular frame, and no bodies.

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5 In computer languages ‘tmp’ is a kind of variable which can be both global and local and which is temporary in the sense that as long as it is called by the enactor of the program it remains active. Here it is joined with Narcissus.tmp which means that every enactor of the process is temporary and yet the attachment is like that of Narcissus.
As the user rolls the cursor over either of the eyes, a range of vision for each eye appears, and since they are facing each other, the vision inevitably overlaps. Two dotted lines which seem to be flowing continuously from respective eyes end up at two arrow marks “>>” which are funnels. The moment one clicks on the funnel there appears the following text:

\[(s) \ T \ (ex) \ T \ (s)\]

The words in the above text signify particular subject position vis-à-vis the user attachment with the network. For example, the first ‘s’ denotes the “BODY:SELF,” the last ‘s’ denotes “BODY:REMOTE,” the ‘T’ denotes “TERMINAL”; the first means local, the second means remote terminal, and “ex” signifies ‘exit’. As the user/reader scrolls the cursor over the respective letters of alphabet, the text corresponding to respective subject positions appears on the upper half of the screen.
The third chapter is titled “Metastrophe - Temporary manifesto” which again is a play on the words ‘manifesto’ and ‘strophe’. The frame consists of five circles at the top. At the bottom of the page, the following text is written:

When everything is crystal clear and susynchronized the passage of meaning through the bi.narrative conduit is smooth, without catches or serration and the doubled trans|missive agent(s) never meet, combat or challenge. The combined inTents perform as components of a single ideocratic device, de.signing, de.veloping and exe.cuting the mechanism that permits their passage.

As the user moves the cursor over the circles, the manifestos appear. Each manifesto is a little meditation on the relationship between the I-terminal and the R-terminal, and how these relationships facilitate the construction of self which goes on being reconstructed through new relationships as the terminals change within the network. Memmott here uses allusions to the works of various critical theorists to make his
point. The very desire to have “crystal clear” meaning is highlighted and frustrated since this is impossible as the subject who desires the meaning has got “indistinguishable from electronic messages” (Hayles 59). Moreover, Memmott himself states that “[c]yborganic protocol is intimacy -- is becoming...”, as a result, meaning is always deferred, and the user participates in this becoming. In the second manifesto, the author writes that “[w]e *.fect (infect) the atmosphere as we move through it, construct the infosphere as we move through it, striving toward communification”. The word ‘infosphere’ alludes to the pervasiveness of the information regime which has come into existence with the development of digital communication technologies. The word ‘communification’ refers to the ubiquitous processes of commodification that accompany the digital information revolution.

In the last chapter titled “Exe.Termination” the user is asked to execute the process of termination of attachment with the machine. The window of this chapter is composed of small rectangular frames. In the background there is a text which remains in motion, highlighting all the neologisms used in the work. The noise of images, words and texts increases to a level where it becomes impossible to make sense of what is happening on the terminal. One can only have cursory glimpses of the text, and the work showcases utter incomprehensibility. It may be noted, as Hayles remarks, that “illegibility is not simply a lack of meaning, …but a signifier of distributed cognitive processes that construct reading as an active production of a cybernetic circuit and not merely an internal activity of the human mind” (51).

Memmott’s *Lexia to Perplexia* can be seen as a performative meditation on the relationship between human beings and computing and communication
technologies. It situates the human being in the network of machines and refuses to take for granted the priority generally ascribed to the human being as the maker of those machines. By so designing the interface, he puts the cherished humanist position of the subject into question. Hayles observes that “the noise that permeates the text may serve as a stimulus to emergent complexity. But it also ensures that meanings are always unstable and that totalizing interpretations impossible” (60).

Memmott’s work intimidates the reader by frustrating her attempts at meaning-construction. The predominantly visual nature of the work also foregrounds the increasing use of the spectacle and of visual imagery in new media writing forms. Following Coleridge and Wordsworth, David S Miall and Teresa Dobson rightly characterize this tendency as “the despotism of the eye” which may lead to an entirely different experience (qtd. in Miall and Dobson). The intrusion of external visual imagery into the domain of words and the corresponding feelings evoked by the images can be problematic, if not entirely liberatory and advantageous for the reader and the writer. Memmott’s Lexia to Perplexia should be seen as one of those works of new media writing which have exploited the potential of the medium of the internet to the maximum. The self-reflexive nature of the work brings to light what Robert Coover had already forewarned: that is, the space of the World Wide Web is noisy, fractured, chaotic, restless and almost uncontrollable.

A close look at the development of subject-matter and the respective technological make-up of the artifacts highlight the range of Memmott’s creative engagement with the question of gradual disintegration of the self-professed unity and purity of the liberal humanist subject. In Branded, the reader identifies with the
character of James, and it is as such a traditional realistic text. Coming to

\textit{Next:}\textit{ex(i)t}, the reader is called upon to witness the existential crisis through the
colorado of Swann and Ariadne who struggle to create any sense of the future and
confront meaninglessness at every turn. And finally in \textit{Lexia to Perplexia} the unity
of the human subject is completely dismembered, and a radical crisis of the
Unitarian and transparent identity of the self is enacted with the participation of the
reader whose own identity emerges only within the logistics of the text and remains
as fluid and contingent as the text itself. The three works taken together depict the
history of the last one hundred and twenty years during which the self-proclaimed
unity of the human subject has been gradually deconstructed. In a way, Memmott’s
three pieces traces the transition from liberal humanist to modernist avant-garde, and
finally to postmodernist aesthetics.