Lost in hyperspace

From Ted Nelson

I coined, you say, the word hypertext in 1963 "while working on ways to make computers more accessible at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island" (17 June, p 60). But in 1963 I was a dolphin photographer in Miami, nowhere near Brown.

I had become inflamed with ideas and designs for nonsequential literature and media in 1960, but no one would back them, then or now. Not until the late sixties did I spend months at Brown, with no official position and at considerable personal expense, to help them build a hypertext system.

That project dumbed down hypertext to one-way, embedded, non-overlapping links. Its broken and deficient model of hypertext became by turns the structure of the NoteCards and HyperCard programs, the World Wide Web, and XML.

At the time I thought of that structure as an interim model, forgetting the old slogan "nothing endures like the temporary". XML is only the latest, most publicised, and in my view most wrongful system that fits this description. It is opaque to the laypersons who deserve deep command of electronic literature and media. It gratuitously imposes hierarchy and sequence wherever it can, and is very poor at representing overlap, parallel cross-connection, and other vital non-hierarchical media structures that some people do not wish to recognise.

I believe humanity went down the wrong path because of that project at Brown. I greatly regret my part in it, and that I did not fight for deeper constructs. These would facilitate an entire form of literature where links do not break as versions change; where documents may be closely compared side by side and closely annotated; showing the origins of every quotation; and with a copyright system for frictionless, non-negotiated quotation of any amount at any time.

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