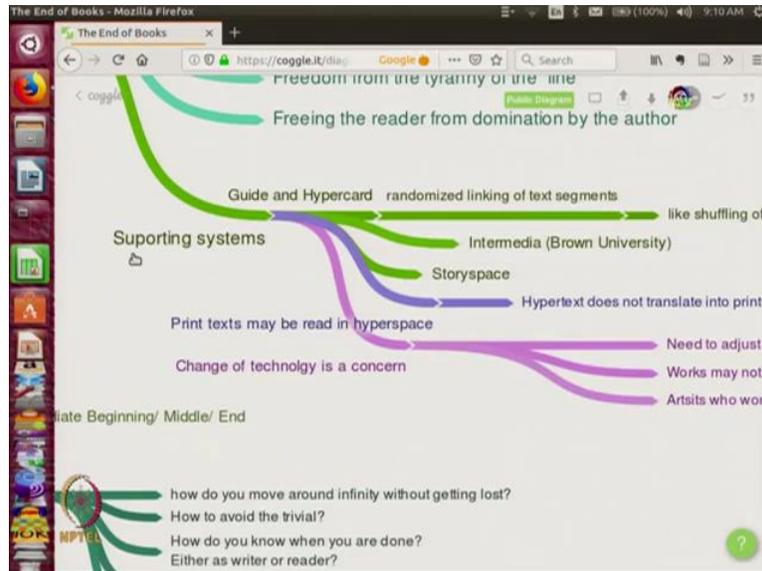


Text, Textuality and Digital Media
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Lecture 23
Robert Coover: The End of Books
Part - 2

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Now to ensure that, this apparent freedom of the reader from domination by the author comes into being, what we need for hypertext I mean digital writing systems are certain supporting codes or programming which occurs as a backbone of electronic literature. Now in the early days of the Internet, we see a lot of efforts by various institutions to develop adequate support systems. The point about this is very similar to what we saw in the early days of the manuscript era where there would be specialized scribes.

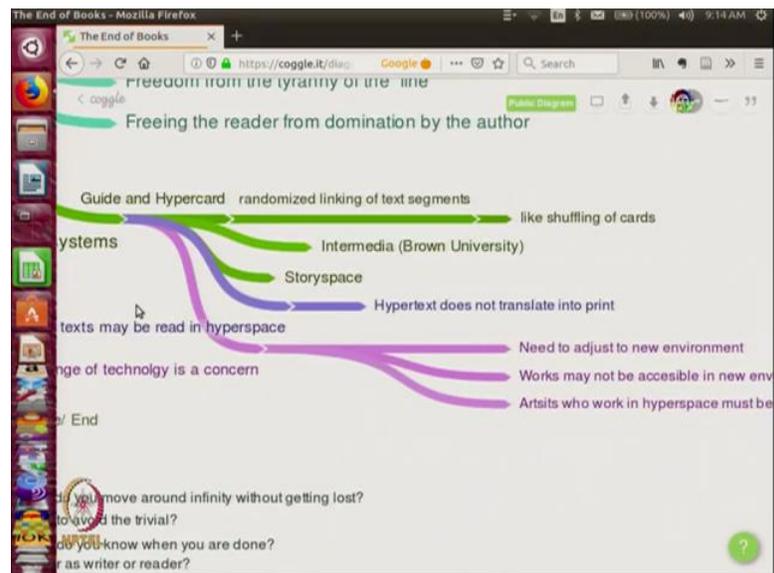
So poets would take help of poets or scholars would take help of scribes in order to get their creations, literary creations written. And this got more systematized in the print process though it became almost invisible-zed. It looked like it is some kind of a baking (())(1:49) the printing press where the author submitted a manuscript and that would be printed out and the task this highly technical task of actually printing the manuscript would be taken up by a specialized system, a specialized institution which is that of the press or the publisher.

However, in the case of electronic media, what we see is that the author writes on directly, creates directly on the system because the way the network, the digital platform is structured will

also structure the literary work. And therefore, this back end actually in the case of the digital literary universe needs to come in before the text is actually created. The supporting systems need to come in to operation need to be present before the creativity actually begins. In fact, it is very often that the way the back end, the codes, the programs, the platforms are structured determines the way the literary creativity also get structured.

And therefore, what various organizations did undertake are efforts to actually make multiple platforms available according to the demands of the kind of creative use writers, artists would like to put the newfound hyper textual medium. So some of these supporting systems we are going to look at with some proximity, they are being discussed her.

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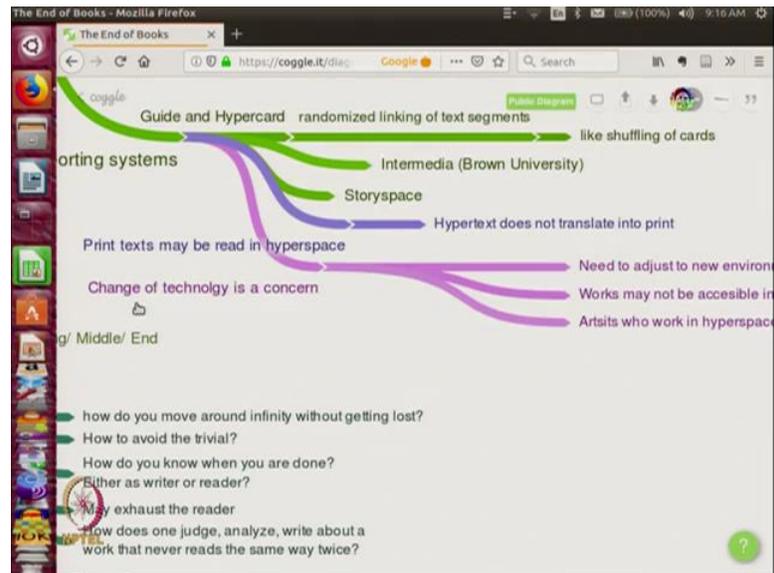


So the Guide and HyperCard system what it tries to do is randomize the linking of text segments that is, these linkages are not fixed. They are randomly associated as the text is encountered by a reader, very much like the shuffling of cards. In a normal web page, what you would find is that the association between a particular hyperlink text and another text is, the linkage is between the two texts, the nodes are fixed.

So when you click on a particular link a particular text will open up, but in this particular case in this system that linking becomes randomized. So one of the systems was Intermedia by Brown University, and the other is Storyspace, what Storyspace does is, as we have seen one of the features of digital media is that because everything at the back end is code. So it becomes much

easier to actually place various kinds of media together with text so you can put maps, you can put images or even videos alongside the text and Storyspace is that kind of platform an online platform which allows one to do that.

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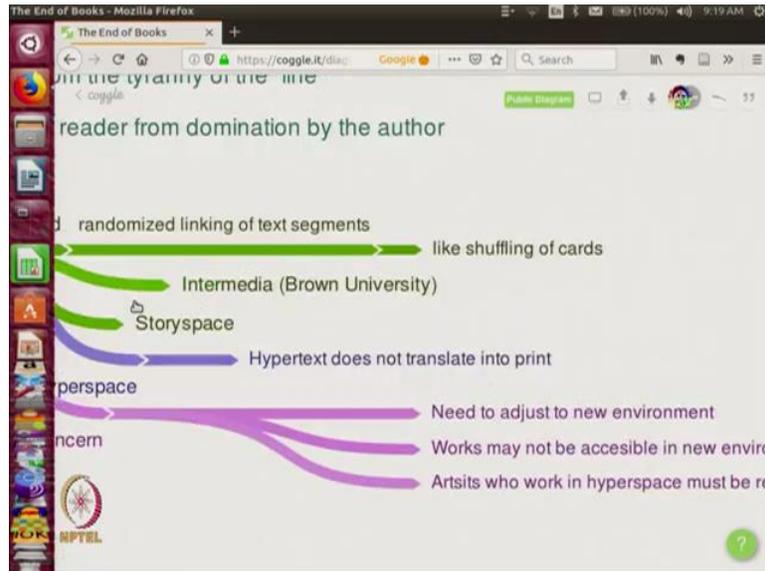
Another important characteristic is that printed texts can be read in hyperspace. So if there is a book, that book either in e-book format or even in HTML format or even in PDF format multiple formats. In fact many a times choices are given when you try to look at a text for example you go to Project Gutenberg and you want to look at a text which is outside the preview of copyright and prosecutable gives you choice, how do you want to read this text? Do you want to read it as a PDF? Do you want to read it as HTML? Download it as an e-book?

In fact, if you go to a website like Librivox there you can also get audiobooks, audio formats for many of these print texts. So the printed text once they are available they can be transformed into various other formats to be read and encountered within the hyperspace universe. But the same cannot be said of the hypertext universe. Hypertext does not translate into print. In fact, complex hypertext cannot be translated into print, why is that?

That is because the multi-linearity, the multivocality of the hypertext can have the probability of actually enclosing within its own larger scheme, a linear text and printed texts are linear. So it is possible to enclose a printed text in whatever format it is within a larger hypertext network. However, the network is very difficult to actually put forward within a printed format. Because

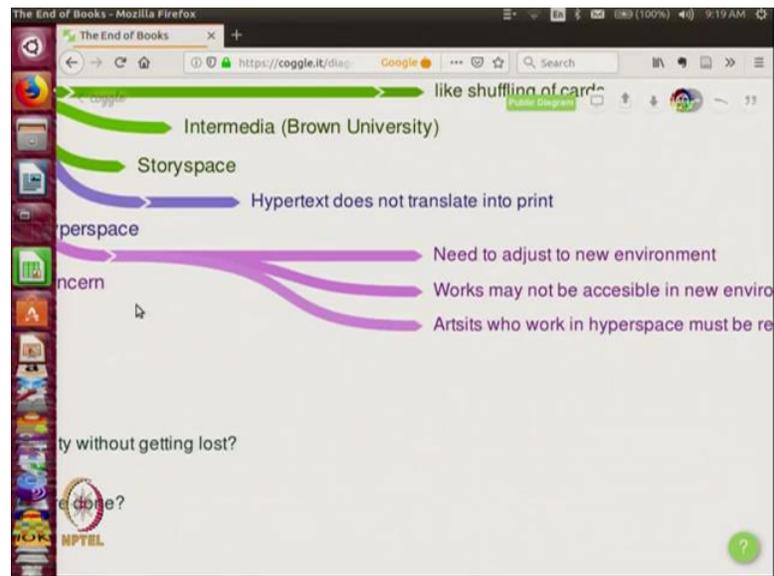
print by its very nature has a linear structure that is when we are talking about the Codex principally or we are talking about the line, the sentence and texts organized hierarchically into paragraphs and chapters within that Codex in such a situation.

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But look at this we just talked about this randomized linking of various text segments like the shuffling of cards, now it is possible. So obviously cards do not have a linearity. When you put cards around they can be organized in any particular fashion, when someone is doling out cards. they do not do it any particular order. Though they have to be put in that order and that is the entire game of the cards, to put something that inherently do not have a link, to link them, to create new linkages between them that is the idea.

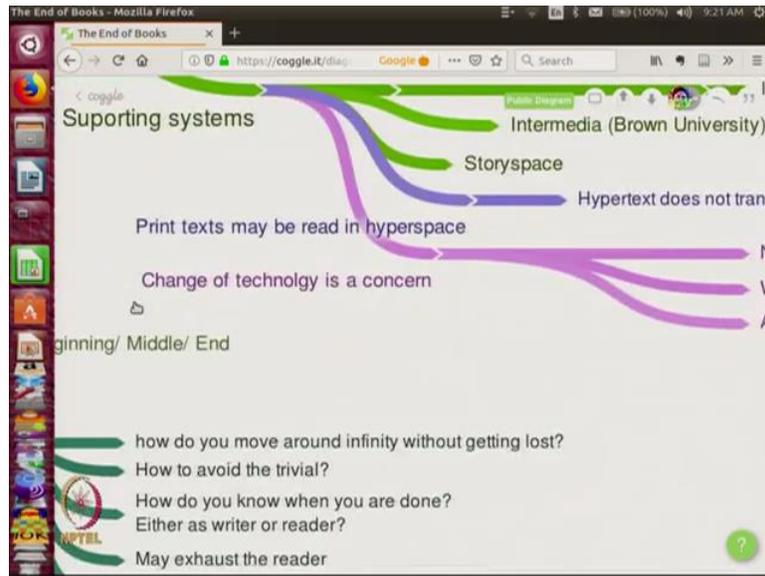
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So even cards are printed. So in this kind of a situation one can say that if a hypertext document is there, one can probably print it in a diagrammatic fashion showing the interlinkages between. So that is what we call a site map. Many sites will offer you a site map to give you a diagram of the various linkages between different pages and how that entire network within that particular webpage is linked.

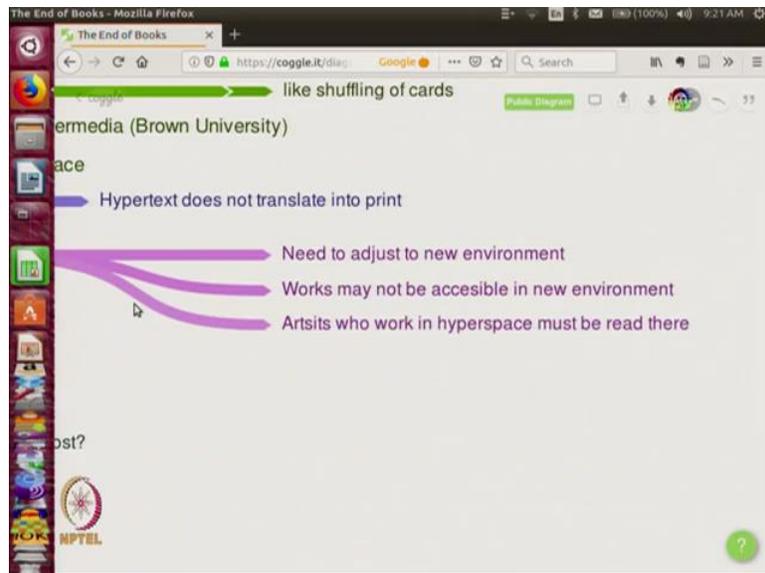
A site map becomes an easier sort of way to navigate a kind of fixed framework within which you navigate a particular website which otherwise belies a fixed print kind of universe. But of course the diagram is not linear. So it is very different kind and you can just have one shot of diagram. It has to be a single object which cannot be linked object as a codex which is linked in a particular way. So conceptually the hyperspace is different from the print as we know.

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Now one of the concerns of the supporting systems of electronic literature within the digital ecosphere is that the change in technology.

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Now, what happens typically as you know as we go along electronic age we find we constantly need to upgrade both our hardware and our software and hardwares become obsolete as we go along the exponential pace at which these get to be replaced and get to be upgraded is just mind boggling. What is the turnaround of our phone? How long does a phone take to get obsolete? Is it 6 months, is it 3 months? Depends on how absolutely up-to-date you want to remain.

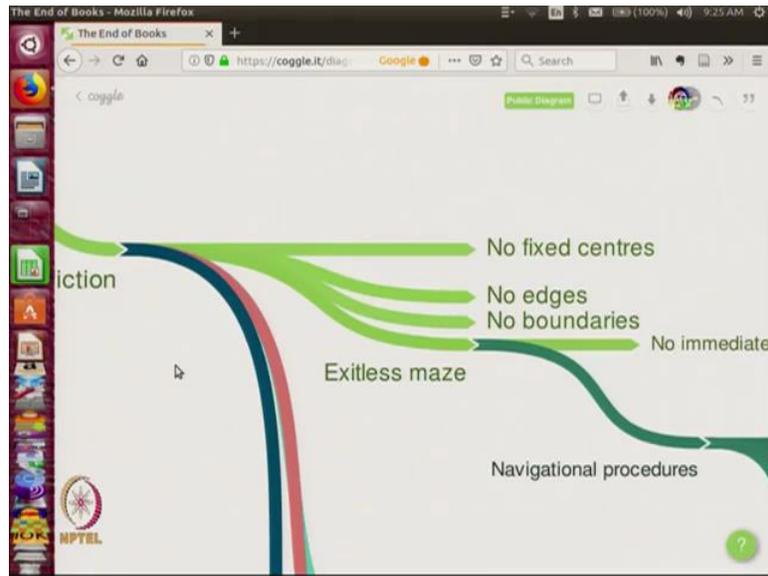
So this is the problem for hypertext creativity in fact very early literatures would not be readable anymore because people would not have those machines installed. Those softwares will not be operating any more. So the work may not remain accessible in this new environment. And the work has to be read. The work of the artist who actually works in the hyperspace universe actually must be read in that, so what you just saw is the fun of the hypertext universe where even after publication one can make the corrections to the text that one has.

But to return to our point is that this is a major challenge, videogames which I have pointed out that videogames do work on narratives and therefore, have a literary angle to it very much like the film script now, the play script. The play script is the backend. The literary backend of the performance. The film script is a literary backend of the movie then the overall plan, overall narrative structure of a videogame is the literary backend of a particular videogame environment

Now videogames do go obsolete they have to be upgraded and those narratives are left behind, they cannot be accessed which is very different from the manuscript or the print universe. Yes, the only ways in which a manuscript could get obsoleted really not manuscript. Manuscripts are altogether very-very recent but some of these clay tablets or even the Rosetta Stone or the seals from the Mohenjo-Daro they get obsoleted simply because nobody knows that language anymore, so you cannot access it. Human beings cannot access it.

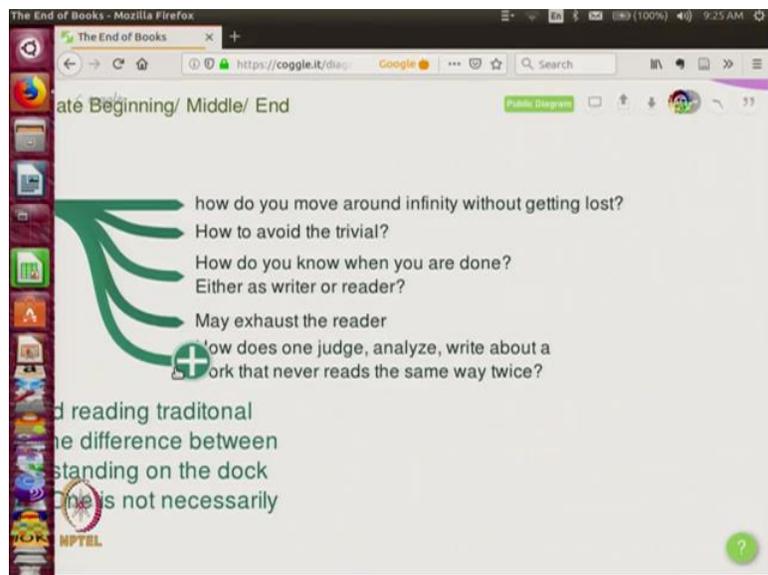
Or if I do not know a particular language I cannot read a particular printed book so that is the only barrier that could be there in accessing print, otherwise unless the physical copy has been destroyed through various reasons, of time and longevity, these works continue to remain accessible. But in the electronic universe the texts which are produced get obsoleted because that software (15:05) has been created does not exist anymore, does not work anymore.

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So hyper fiction the way it occurs is there are no fixed centers, we do not know it is up to the reader where they begin and where they end. There are no edges, no boundaries and becomes a kind of an exit less maze, you can keep moving round and round within a particular text and so therefore, there is no immediate beginning and middle and end. The beginning, middle and end is something that is defined according to the particular user's experience.

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And there are these different challenges because of the navigational procedures. So the questions that are there could be that how do you move around without getting lost? How do you go

actually about engaging and understanding the text? And because there is no clear sense of beginning, middle and end remember we are still brought up our schools still operate on printed texts.

So we are used to this idea of a beginning of a book and an end of a book and with text which where there are no exits may actually exhaust the reader that is one view point. The other viewpoint maybe that it draws the reader in and intoxicates the reader. How many kids have you seen play the same videogames again and again without fail and they do not want to leave it? So it could be intoxicating as well. It could be addictive.

And the crucial question very important question how does one judge, analyze or write about a work that never reads the same way twice? Different people have different viewpoints, so various people will have various takes on a certain work. Interesting viewpoint by Coover if we relate it to traditional printed texts, linear texts, well, two people may watch the same movie and have different viewpoints, but the point is that there they may refer to a same text and point out. I understand what your experience is but what your reaction to this particular film is, but if I refer to this specific episode, with this specific scene or specific sequence then maybe you would change your mind and you would agree to my point of view that is how a conversation on a film, a movie goes and we can agree to disagree between ourselves as to what a particular work, how a particular work can be analyzed or what would be a fit reaction or reception to a particular piece of work.

At least the text remains fixed, but this viewpoint of the digital media is very similar to the manuscript universe where we did talk about the fact that there would be different manuscripts though they may have the same title and reportedly by the same writer talking about the same narrative but the exact sequence, the exact representation, and the exact portrayal might be very different within each of the things, each of the manuscripts. And different scholars would be referring to different manuscripts and therefore it was very difficult to come, it would have been very difficult to even conceptualize coming into any kind of agreement on what the text is. The fixity of the text would not be there.

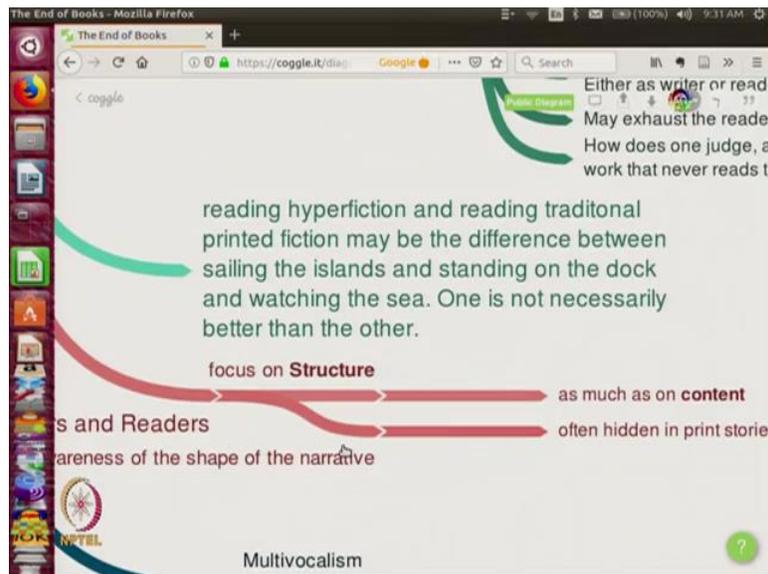
So what we see here is that electronic texts present a challenge before analysis and criticism in the same way in which analysis and criticism was difficult within the early manuscript universe

when manuscripts would be very few and far between. Except within as we said, except within specific circles of scholars who are referring to specific manuscripts. And that leads to a certain kind of a bubble in which a particular community believes in a truth and there are multiple truths which fail to interact with each other and therefore, fail to produce the universal.

Whereas in the manuscript universe, this concept of a universal analysis or a worldview would not have existed because that historically had not preexisted at that point of time. In the case of the digital universe of course, it becomes a bit of a challenge because we are used to these universal overarching claims, larger metanarratives. And those getting challenged because of the new ways in which texts have started behaving within the electronic universe becomes a major challenge because there is of course always that first-generation Alana who have never actually encountered the printed text before and they would not understand what the fuss is always about.

We will be discussing this aspect of the digital media particularly the kind of fake news atmosphere that exist within the social media in greater detail in another lecture. However, the point to be noted is that this becomes a very important question in the sphere of the literary world of the digital media.

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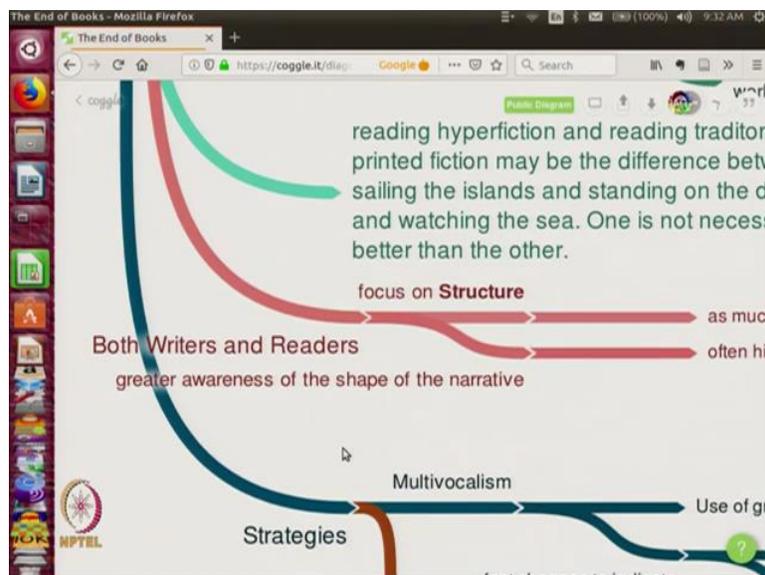


So question is whether one can privilege one kind of reading over another. Now that is again a matter of open debate and this is what Coover has to say about this entire issue. He says reading hyper fiction and reading traditional printed fiction may be the difference between sailing the

islands and standing on the dock and watching the sea. One is not necessarily better than the other one.

So whether you are (()) (21:58), so this is what he is referring here is this idea of the distant reading versus the close reading. Now, either you are moving from place to place or you have the large overview. One cannot privilege one over the other because we have been used to one kind of reading the other forms of reading, other forms of operating, are negative. There is no reason to privilege one over the other.

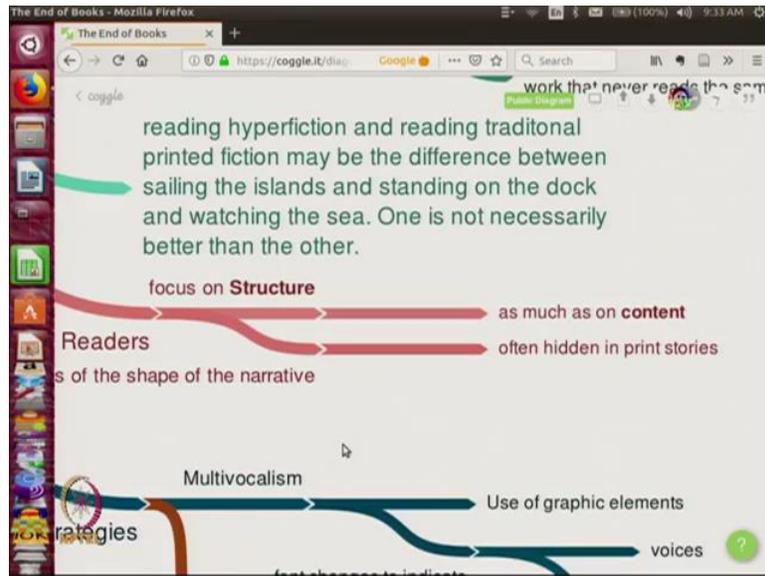
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Now the point is that because within the digital text the task of the navigation is taken up by the reader. Also it is taken up by writer who lays out the text within its various linkages. But it is also the task of the navigating is upon the reader as well and therefore, there is greater awareness among the readers of the shape of the narrative. Whereas in the printed text the shape is given by the form.

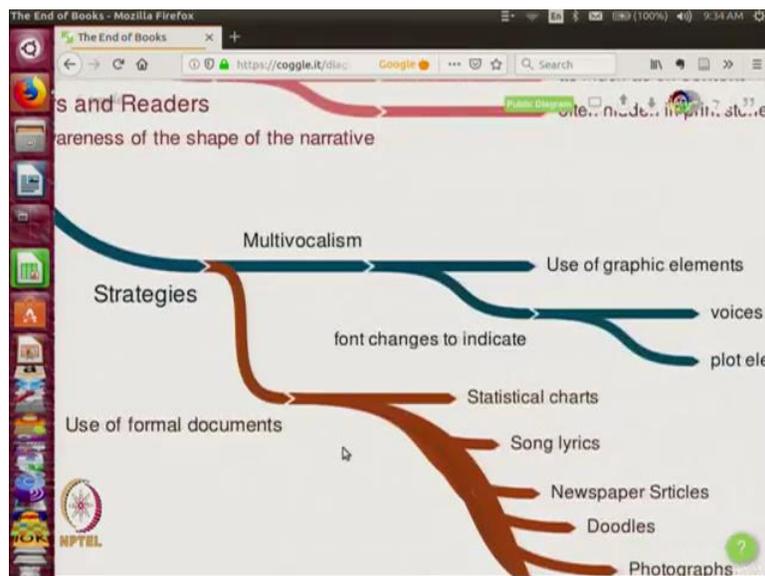
I mean it is given by the form of the book which is a linear form and it is only the writer who chooses to play around with that form. The reader, once the book has been printed, once it has been put into a particular shape the reader does not any longer retain a choice of it.

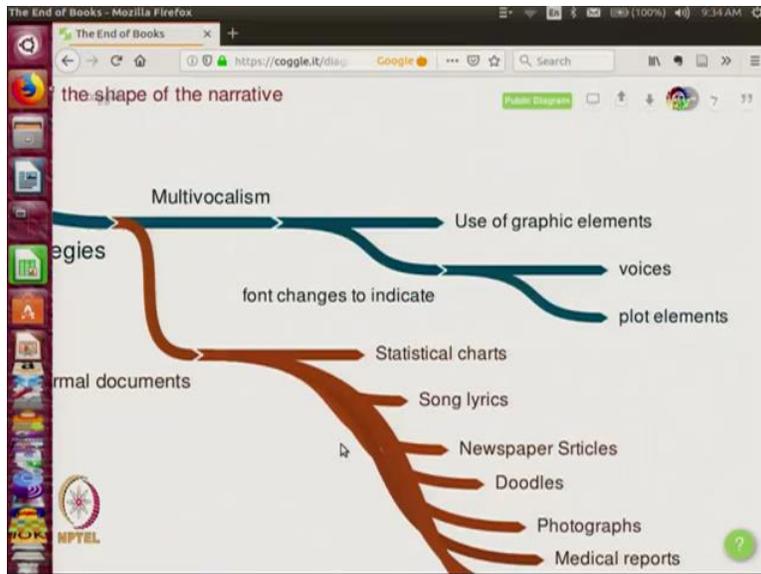
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So this focus on the structure, there is much focus on the content and on the structure. The focus on the structure is far greater within the electronic literature and this structure is mostly hidden in printed stories. It is only in critical practices that we see that the structures of printed texts are discussed are unpacked.

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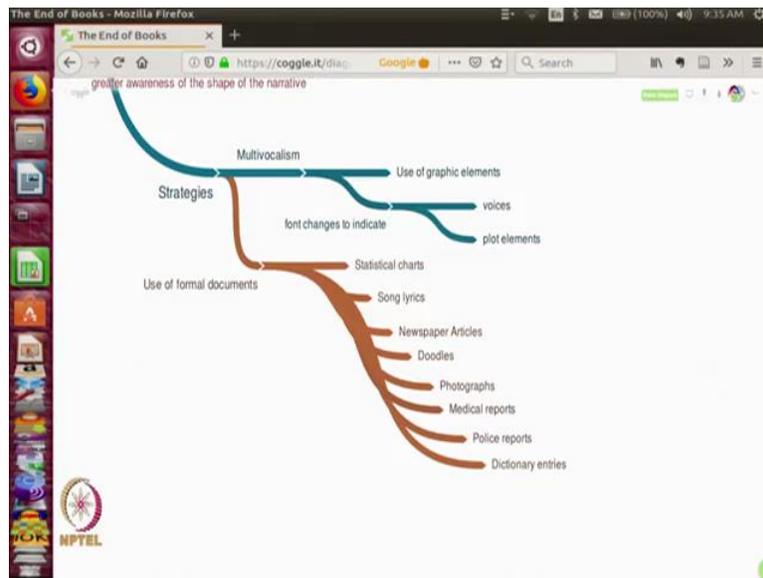




So what are the various strategies? The strategies of multi vocalism. Of the usage of graphic elements, various kinds of elements to bring in, now those of you who have studied Bertolt Brecht again will refer to it. The point is one of the ways in which Brecht brings in multi vocalism and a kind of a critical viewpoint is by bringing in different media, projections and placards and songs. So that is of course the kind of mechanism that exists within the electronic media. The fact that there are various kinds of elements which are used.

And within the kind of marked up atmosphere we have seen how within print, the use of paragraph spacing and drop caps and various headings and subtitles and margins are kind of ways of indicating various nodes of the text. So, here within the webpage, font changes could be one of the ways in which to indicate various voices, various plot elements, sometimes different colors of fonts, backgrounds and other kinds of material could be used.

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And one could of course use the number of various elements that could be included within the hypertext, within an electronic reproduced text could be much larger various kinds of formats could actually be incorporated and it could be left to the reader as to what kind of documents that the reader would like to refer to.