

Tangled Up In *Blue*

Readers accustomed to the conventions of print may assume texts are traversed in a linear fashion, but careful exploration of hypertext fiction has roundly disproved that orthodox notion. While I've explored a wide variety of avant-garde digital literature in my studies thus far, few selections have utilized the Web's inventive structural possibilities as elegantly as Michael Joyce's *Twelve Blue*. Joyce's narrative is split amongst a map of pages interconnected by redirect links. With multiple links embedded in each page, *Twelve Blue* provides a unique reading experience every time an individual wades through its waters. This text, however, distinctly omits features for tracing "the trail," a concept that Vannevar Bush defined as a record of a reader's movement through a text. As a hypertext scholar, Michael Joyce is no stranger to trails; the idea's exclusion in *Twelve Blue* is a pointed deviation from Bush's literary compass. Joyce deliberately confounds a reader's attempts to register trails over the course of *Twelve Blue* in order illustrate the complicated, multifaceted manner in which language and information unfolds. Before diving for those clusters of pearls, however, the case demands a more thorough understanding of Bush's "trail" notion.

A brief analysis of Bush's trail should clarify relevant vocabulary and produce a healthier discussion of *Twelve Blue*'s decision to subvert it. When Bush published speculations in "As We May Think" on a possible futuristic reading device called the [Memex](#), he identified the trail as the contraption's "essential feature." The content of a text itself, Bush argues, is less significant than the possibility of "tying two items together" in a coherent, discernible trail. Bush's trail also endures in a fixed format, serving as a "material, textual memory" that may be transmitted to other readers. The trail, in essence, is an evolving record of an individual's progress through text. One important consequence of the trail's visibility is the reader's newfound ability to collectively view his/her reading practices – a holistic body of text that comprises, Professor Terry Harpold claims, an individual's "signature reading." An observable trail allows a reader to divine information about his/her own literary inclinations – his/her signature reading – and convey this pattern to another individual, thus allowing for a second, identical movement through textual selections. Bush's trail facilitates the experience of textual recreation. Joyce, however, markedly inhibits the recording of the trail for greater stylistic purposes.

Joyce's presentation of his text employs some nontraditional features in order to confound readers and erase the trail throughout *Twelve Blue*. The most immediately striking of these authorial choices is Joyce's liberal use of blue pigment around the webpage itself. While the author's election to blanket the text in these hues falls under the umbrella of Joyce's "writing within constraints" exercise, the visual depth of the blue creates another effect. The many shades of blue, while distinct, inevitably melt into one another as readers progress through the text. This optical outcome indirectly communicates one of the central themes of Joyce's text: the murky

interconnectedness of both life sequences – things do not, in fact, always progress along a fixed timeline. While the color scheme is the most visibly apparent formatting alteration, the coding Joyce employs as the audience clicks from one node to the next is pivotal in melding the discrete narrative bits into an irreducibly complex entity. Joyce has programmed the links to change color when they are clicked, effectively blending the link into the background and causing the originally wide array of “choices” to “[disappear](#).” In cleverly masking the reader’s perception of the node links, Joyce is literally wiping the reader’s trail off the monitor. If Bush’s trail acts as a textual memory, Joyce’s fiction systematically works to dismantle and scatter those remembrances. This tactic transforms *Twelve Blue* from a traditional serial story into William Gass’ “random set of meanings...softly gathered around the world,” [a quotation that Joyce prefaces his piece with](#). The navigation bar in *Twelve Blue* performs similar work, albeit through subtler methods. Instead of providing the reader with a cleanly categorized list of nodes to select from, Joyce instead serves the audience a menu composed entirely of near-indistinguishable colored sand:



The sand itself resists layering and segregation; the different lines taper off, mixing together to create an inexorably entwined, blue-tinted tool for parsing Joyce’s text. By supplying the audience with a guide mechanic that neither offers identifiable destinations nor maintains a fixed order, Joyce further ensnares readers in his intricately spun linguistic web. Joyce’s multi-pronged formatting assault on the trail’s preservation in *Twelve Blue* draws his readers deeper into his textual mire and masterfully reinforces his text’s symbolic entanglements.

Joyce deepens literary interconnectivity’s thematic roots throughout the text by planting obstacles designed to impede trail formation into the text itself. The seemingly basic task of name designation plays an interesting role in furthering this aim. While Joyce could have selected distinctive names for his cast, he purposely chose names that both sound and look alike: “Lisle,” “Lisa,” and “Aurelie” (who is frequently nicknamed “Lee”) are visibly and aurally similar. Consequently, a handful of readers will likely confuse these individuals and experience difficulty relegating each to their discrete (if sometimes intersecting) narrative spheres. My personal experiences with *Twelve Blue* class discussions have even prompted the generation of an [identification chart](#) to help differentiate between key figures. As Joyce himself coyly writes through the mouth of a character within *Twelve Blue*, “[It is hard to keep the names straight, like a Dickens novel](#).” Joyce’s intentional naming confusion twists the reader’s memories and fuses scenes together, a practice that in turn illuminates the fluidity of text itself (inside and outside the

work). Joyce also erects a powerful symbol in the "[estuary](#)" throughout his narrative by constructing images of silt-ridden waters merging into one another throughout his work and supplementing this imagery with actual illustrations of the areas:



By definition, an estuary is the portion of a wetland where freshwater and saltwater intersects. Joyce's repeated emphasis on this peculiar natural hybrid meshes textual components together into a brackish concoction and diverts a conventionally chronological narrative progression into what Harpold deems a "liquid meander," where every word, page and plot point dissolves into an artfully indeterminate pool of letters. Joyce's thematic compositions within the story solidify this experiential knotting and reinforce Joyce's central belief in writing's mercurial nature.

Twelve Blue's innovative operational techniques and richly detailed literary motifs synergistically produce an environment where scenes, physical pages and the language emblazoned on them bleed together. By dismantling the reader's trail in these methods, Joyce's work gracefully illuminates text's ability (and, he might argue, tendency) to polymerize, cross boundaries and disrupt linearity through comingling. While Bush's trail produces undeniably useful information about reading practices and patterns, Joyce's erasure of the concept in *Twelve Blue* uncovers profound insight on the inherently knotted nature of writing and deftly wraps the findings in a stunning blue ribbon.

Works Cited

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