

# Ordering Disorder

## *ninemsn*, Hypertext and Databases

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<sup>1</sup> Central within the discourses that have surrounded the commercial internet during its emergence has been an underlying promise of disorder. The claims for consumer empowerment with which e-commerce was promoted and discussed within industry and academic literature (Flamberg; Gates; Horton; Levine et al. for instance), coupled with recurring claims that the emergence of e-commerce was as profound a shift as that occasioned by the Industrial Revolution (Dancer; Sullivan; Lynch for instance), established an underlying sense of chaotic upheaval – a clear and present danger to the established order.

<sup>2</sup> And on the surface it would appear as if the commercial internet does serve as a challenge to established authority. User interfaces function by offering a degree of autonomy and informal control to the user. However, the infrastructure supporting e-commerce is multi-layered. It is here that the friendly interface cedes to a vast data structure: an ordered and ordering database. Using an August 2002 sample of the corporate portal *ninemsn* extensively analysed as part of a broader PhD project, this paper explores the tension between front end disorder and back end order. Its goal is to indicate how the surface forms of this site are superimposed on a machinery which orders, or perhaps disciplines, consumer activity.

### The *ninemsn* Interface

<sup>3</sup> The *ninemsn* website is typified by a dominance of written text over graphic images. It is constituted primarily by complex noun phrases (the most commonly occurring utterance type) followed by imperative formations. Less often used are statements and interrogatives. The preponderance of noun phrases is readily explained by the metafunction of these utterances as hypertext anchors. Content analyses conducted by Haas and Grams indicate a typical use of noun phrases as anchor text on websites. But it is the fact that all of the phrase types are used on the *ninemsn* website as hypertext which renders the distinction between utterance types redundant.

<sup>4</sup> Despite their different surface forms, the status of the utterances as hypertext anchors makes them similar in terms of function. All of the utterances become actionable, open to activation and engagement by the consumer, thereby challenging their function as direct commands or statements. By inviting the act of linking, hypertext presupposes that there is 'something else' which lies behind those pieces of text. They are, therefore, never merely utterances which can be interpreted solely at their surface but are marked by the immanent existence of what Chomsky calls **deep structure**, layers of significance beyond that revealed in the surface form. None of the linguistic features previously identified is therefore a simple utterance. Each has an alternative form and function by virtue of the fact that it is constituted within a logic of hypertext.

<sup>5</sup> On *ninemsn* all the utterances have the performative (illocutionary) force (Austin) of **offers**. The surface forms can be read as the result of a **transformation** (Chomsky) of this underlying linguistic structure. The base form best associated with a commercial institution operating within a hypertextual medium is the interrogative "would you like ...?" Consequently, the noun phrase "Bust-shaping bodysuit" (*ninemsn* Home Page 12 Aug 2002) is a transformation of the underlying interrogative "Would you like a bust-shaping bodysuit?", or the humble statement "I [*ninemsn*] offer you [*the user*] a bust-shaping bodysuit". But what is significant is that for the site to make sense and serve as something other than a random collection of statements and imperatives, this underlying form **must** be recovered by the user. And it would be a naïve user indeed who did not recognise the polite offers of hypertext which underpin the commands appearing at the surface of the *ninemsn* website.

<sup>6</sup> These transformative effects mitigate the power, or control, being obviously exerted by the company over the user's experience of *ninemsn*. Firstly they do this by transforming commands and bold declaratives into polite inquiries. But the very nature of hypertext alone

works to this end. As Miles has argued, the illocutionary force of hypertext, in this case the act of offering, is contained within the relationship between anchor text and the destination site. "It is not in the nodes that hypertext 'happens', but in the causal connections and pathways made between nodes" (Miles "Cinematic Paradigms" n.pag.). Thus, for Miles, what becomes important in a hypertextual document is the 'event of connection' ("Hypertext Structure" n.pag.) – an act performed by the user. Thus, hypertext and the performative power it extends to the statements on the *ninemsn* website, make the user the key active agent in the determination of meaning on the site rather than the company.

7 By denying control of the site, both in the form of user activated hypertext and through the underlying invitational nature of its utterances, *ninemsn* opens itself to random and chaotic interaction. It becomes a site not for the direct and strict ordering of users – neither in the form of direct imperatives nor in the form of control of practice. Rather it is a site for the de-control of user activity. The interactivity enabled by hypertext here becomes a tool for disorder.

## The *ninemsn* Database

8 However thus far we have only examined the surface structures of the site, the user-friendly interface of the corporate entity that is *ninemsn*. Below this lies the infrastructure of the site: the database.

9 *ninemsn* is a database in two senses. Firstly it is a collection of sites, pages, and links which cohere under the *ninemsn* brand umbrella. Pages which are marked with the *ninemsn* brand, and to which links are directly offered from the site, do not constitute the entire World Wide Web. This occurs despite the site's description as a portal implying that it functions as a window onto the system. At this level, *ninemsn* can be conceived as a particular ordering through selection and collation of the information system that is the Web. But it is also an active ordering of the activities of the user. By only offering a limited set of links to strategic partners, and offering paid listings foremost in its Web-wide search function, the site delimits the autonomy which it appears to offer at the hypertextual interface. At the level of the database, it becomes an attenuated autonomy, ordered by strategic hyperlinking (Jackson).

10 But *ninemsn* is also a database of consumers and consumer traffic patterns which are then onsold to advertisers and strategic partners. The site invites users to [personalise the interface](#) by entering preferences which effectively expose their consumer behaviour. They are offered memberships which result in extra rewards but involve filling in a proforma listing personal details remarkably similar to the demographic information the site offers advertisers about its [consumers](#). By entering data into the system in these ways – a voluntary act of choice lured by the personalisation options it enables – the consumer becomes ordered. Online consumer activity here becomes organised into a set of pre-ordained fields which constitute that user for the purposes of that transaction (Poster). They become known, not through the self-directed, disorderly conduct of surfing, but through the pre-defined and orderly fields of the marketing database.

11 This effect can be traced further in the commercial Web. By similarly mapping the behaviours of users, cookies and other forms of more passively activated 'spyware' also reduce the behaviour of users to pre-constituted fields of value. As the consumer interacts with the system following the polite invitations of hypertext, the system orders this trail into valuable marketing data. Thus, it is the same hypertext which offers the illusion of autonomy at the site interface which enables the increasing surveillance and ordering of consumers at the lower levels of the database.

## Interactivity as an Ordering Practice

12 Interactivity and its e-commerce companion, the promise of personalisation, here become disciplining practices, seductively drawing the consumer further into the ordering machinery of the site. They encourage the user to submit more and more of their Self – their interests, the trajectory of their logic – to the ordering gaze of the market. Using Virilio's terms, we can therefore understand interactivity in e-commerce as both an accelerator and a brake on human movement, in this instance the movement of hypertext as the manifestation of individual choice. It is both a technology which 'empowers' the user to move in their personally determined disordered fashion, mimicking the radical potential of dynamic bodies, and a delimiting of that potential into the regimented service of commerce.

13 But this is not to argue that consumers necessarily accept this role, nor to imply any (over)-



determining role for hypertextual environments. Foucault himself recognises the immanent potential for resistance within any disciplining practice. It is however, to point to the ordered disordering that constitutes the new media environment, particularly in its commercial forms. Like Featherstone on consumer culture we can read interactive media as a site for the 'controlled de-control' of emotion. We can see it as a site where disorder is not necessarily the weapon of the revolutionary or the radical, but is also, and simultaneously, in the service of the order it ostensibly challenges.

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