REVIEW:
TOWARD THE HYPERCASE


With the turn of a car key, the expected sequence of Donald “Dax” Cowart’s life story was forever changed. In 1973, after unknowingly parking a car over a gas leak, Cowart was in an explosion that killed his father and left Cowart blind and maimed. The story of his medical treatment would probably have not been known outside Texas if Cowart had not relentlessly demanded that the health care team stop caring for his burns and allow him to die. The recent release of a videodisc presentation of this narrative testifies to the power of this 22 year-old case as a continued source for examining such issues as paternalism, patient’s rights, and informed consent.

Anyone interested in Cowart’s story soon discovers that the case is unique not only for the richness of material available but also for the variety of ways it has been presented. The case was initially made available for teaching through a videotape titled Please Let Me Die, which consists of an interview with Cowart by Robert White, the consulting psychiatrist, along with scenes of Cowart’s medical treatment. The interest in this video has been due most probably to the sense of cinema verité that it gives rise to; there are few taped versions of a moral dilemma that were made during the time of the dilemma itself. Soon after, the case was written for the Hastings Center Report under the title “A Demand To Die”; this would become the first of many write-ups of Cowart’s narrative. Dax’s Case, an hour-long documentary of Cowart’s story made eleven years after the first video, includes interviews with the central participants. Now, with the release of a videodisc by the Center for Design of Educational Computing at Carnegie Mellon University, Cowart’s case has been converted into a new medium, which combines many of the elements of the oral, visual, and written forms in which it has previously been shown. Since this videodisc portrayal of Cowart’s story does not present any information that is not already available, what needs analysis and evaluation is the style of presentation itself. This new form of narration forces us to reflect
on whether the medium of an ethics case contributes in any measure to its message.

The authors of the videodisc, A Right To Die?, give the reader two separate “pathways” in which to explore the Cowart case. The first pathway is through a section called “Guided Inquiries” and the second is through the “Archives.” These pathways should be distinguished from each other primarily through the different ways in which they present the Cowart story through the technology of the computer. The Guided Inquiries pathway, I contend, should be understood as a multimedia presentation and the Archives pathway as a hypermedia one. The term “multimedia” indicates the presentation of material that integrates and draws upon oral, visual, and literary sources. A multimedia presentation of Shakespeare’s Hamlet could entail having the text with scholarly commentary on one side of a computer screen while on the other side being able to watch a filmed performance. As I shall explain below, the Guided Inquiries pathway in A Right to Die? provides a multimedia movement between text and video.

The term “hypertext,” however, coined by Theodor Nelson, refers not merely to a computer’s capacity to provide an interchange of different media but an entirely different way of reading a narrative. Hypertexts are instances of “nonsequential” literature, and what is referred to as a hypermedia system involves the extension of this lack of sequentiality to non-print media, such as video and sound. Unlike reading a printed book in which the text must be physically arranged in some manner, a computer permits a writer to construct a story in which the reader is the one who decides the ordering of the events. When one reads or views a hypertext or a hypermedia system, there are no predetermined ways of moving through the narrative; instead there are a multiplicity of possible entrance points and routes through the story. For this reason some critics assert that the traditional notions of plot have begun to be challenged by hypertexts and hypermedia systems. A hypertext or hypermedia system essentially furnishes the reader a story without any predetermined plot, for each encounter with the text can result in a different arrangement of the events by the reader. It is in the Archives pathway in A Right To Die? that the reader encounters a hypermedia presentation of an ethics case, or what could be referred to as a “hypercase” – that is, a nonsequential case presentation. In sections two and three of this paper, I explore some of the implications a hypermedia presentation has for the Cowart case in particular and for bioethics in general. First, however, I look at the multimedia features of the Guided Inquiries pathway.