

For This We Play: an Introduction to this Issue's New Media Poems

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One of the most exciting things about being involved with How2 is keeping track of the innovative digital works that it presents and experiencing the huge differences in form and language, not only from issue to issue, but from work to work within each issue. There is no shortage of high-quality experimental digital practice in women's writing in the 21st-century, that is clear. I have been lucky to be able to curate this issue's new media section, which has given me the opportunity to showcase some of the work by contemporary poets which is current, varied and exciting.

To define all of the works presented here as 'interactive' is perhaps not particularly useful as this might seem to assert a special feature for digital media that is not already present in page-based works. Many contemporary digital works stress the physicalities of working with the poetics of electronic media and, in comparable ways to innovative print-based works. Many works emphasize the construction of a space for an active reader. All poetry, digital or not, might be considered 'interactive' if it involves the reader in the creations of meanings in a text.

Digital interaction (e.g. using a mouse, typing on a keyboard) defaults to physical interactivity. What makes a digital poem successful is the development of one or many reading strategies that are integral to meaning-making processes. In such strategies, interactivity is a composite of physical and interpretive actions that require, to borrow from Espen Aarseth's discussions of ergodic literature, the "non-trivial" use of media specific forms to generate output. This is similar in some respects to a poetics of performance – in which the performance space, its participants, objects, actions, language and duration are integral to any consideration of form.

Similarly, interaction with digital media can be considered as a type of performance, whose enactment, be it in a public or private context constructs its own texts and textualities. As with performance art, the environmental conditions of digital textual production can be alien and uncomfortable. This has the potential to be amplified in a digital context, since the textual environments created through various applications can themselves be produced as independent applications, each with their own unique rules and interactive requirements which may seem to bear little relation to existing interfaces. That is, textual applications have the potential to be systemically internalized, running on their own terms which need not necessarily relate to external rules of engagement even if they might make use of external materials for their content. The digital artist can create potentially unique contexts for producing meanings – contexts which may overlap through several such systems to produce complex meaning-making wholes. As these systems dictate their own aesthetic or navigational methods, such systems might, at first, seem further removed from a recognizable social context than performance in the public realm, as Talan Memmott explains:

Because of the diversity of technologies available for the development of digital poetry, the variety of their use as signifying strategies, and radical differences between individual practitioners, digital poetry is not a single recognizable entity. [...] Strategies of signification that arise out of these *writing* technologies operate in difference modalities with different intent than strategies of page-based

authorship. These differences are not superficial or interfacial but integral.¹

These strategies of the digital text are multiple – they are at once engines with objective goals (the rules of interaction – how to operate the application) and then they are interpretive loops, recursive readings in which there are multiple ways of using the text, of navigating it perhaps, or of creating layers of materials through which meanings, semantic or otherwise (or a combination of the two) can occur. These physical and interpretive strategies are tied together.

My interest in choosing these works was in considering the above points and how these works share and yet offer varied versions of performative navigation or participation in the unique ways dictated by their forms. This includes how their social interactions as performance gestures exist through and exert their economies onto the technologies they use.

Katie Clapham's *Brain Versioning* piece enacts the physicalities of the reciprocal relationships between body and machine which create meaning-making processes and are intimately bound to linguistic systems:

When the machine in question is digital, the flickering nature of the machine becomes harder to visualise. In fact the solution seems to be not to visualise it, but to 'linguitise' it. The way language must be coded to exist digitally, the body might have to be 'linguitised' before it can be digitised.

[...] The experiment was divided into two stages: the remediation of the brain into language and the remediation of the language to the digital setting. The keywords which relate to functions in the human brain were remediated into links that would activate the same parts of my digital version of the brain as would the corresponding parts of the human brain. For example, when the 'sigbral nuclirtual' of the digibrain is activated, it activates the functions co-ordination, movement and posture, the three functions the grey matter of the cerebral nuclei is responsible for in the human brain.²

The linked neologisms in *Brain Versioning* enacts a process by which physical mergings rise from fragments and link through to larger structures of accumulated meaning. Short-circuits of meaning can only be created through the linking processes which fuse incomplete fragments of memory together. As Loss Glazier states:

In the case of traumatic memories that need to be reconciled, there is a process of healing that occurs through therapy, procedure, and the natural process of time. Through language, such memories physically – and literally – move to the other side of the brain. We are always writing language to the brain. [...] This power of the process of language is related to computer language. [...] A poem-program offers the possibility of exploring how through language that makes art, art makes language. [...] This] is not the logic of grammatical assembly but

¹ Talan Memmott "Beyond Taxonomy: Digital Poetics and the Problem of Reading," from *New Media Poetics*, pp. 293-4

² Katie Clapham, Introduction to *Brain Versioning*.
http://www.how2journal.com/vol_3_no_3/new_media/clapham/brain-versioning-intro.html

the ecstasy of its error. [...] This active process is similar to the ecosystem of natural language: in it, sound crosses over, words migrate, form new conjunctions; phrases linger, last forever.³

The way that Brain Versioning is produced, there is significance not only in the linguistic compounds which are created on screen, but also in the fact that the linking sequences and text / image combinations, though possible in print, demand a unique reading perspective and navigation technique when on the screen, taking the reader through a navigational process which encourages leakages across texts and creating mergers of language, and foregrounding a linguistic base to cognition which is analogous to the multi-layered linguistic makeup of digital code-based writing.

Becky Cremin's *Alphalogical* explores procedural processes to work through the alphabet in a digital context, by way of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of the rhizome. Such a working through is important in considering the physical makeup of the piece, which, as per Memmott's considerations, demands its own reading strategies, rules, systems of function, to create its meanings. Furthermore, this piece creates – through the explorative practices it demands – composite layers in which discrete elements of the text work together to produce what Memmott calls a “signifying harmonics.” Memmott explains the relation of discrete elements of signification working in relation to each other simultaneously:

As elements on their own, they may be lacking in poetic capacity, but in relationship with other elements—signs, words, images, computational and performative qualities—a poetics, or signifying harmonics, may emerge.⁴

In the context of *Alphalogical*, the dialogue with Deleuze and Guattari in practice works through the cumulative signifying harmonics. Deleuze and Guattari explain that a “plateau is always in the middle, not at the beginning or at the end. A rhizome is made of plateaus.”⁵ In *Alphalogical*, the user progresses and learns the workings of textual production, and in doing so releases an increasing amount of simultaneous information, as new windows open and add to content rather than replace existing content. Meaning making processes therefore do not necessarily situate themselves at either end of this progression, but in the middle of the collective effect of these materials – the physical layering of windows and the polyphonic expansion of the sounds.

Simone Gilson's *Atone* uses the “scrutiny” of the developed system as an analogue for the scrutiny of the body. As Gilson states in the methodology:

The image of a marionette doll - which is asexual in form - worked well with this concept, and references Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* in which she positions the cyborg as one that is, ‘resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity.’ In *Atone* ‘partiality’ is a key, in contrast to *Patchwork Girl* which moves autonomously and with fluidity, here hidden hyperlinks are

³ Glazier, Loss Pequeño, “Io Sono At Swoons,” from *New Media Poetics*, p. 213

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 302

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “A Thousand Plateaus,” from *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, p. 520

used to force the reader/user to scrutinise the body of doll.⁶

Haraway's discussions of the hybridity of the cyborg transposes to that of other socially-constructed systems of separation, to include

Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations, i.e., as frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings. The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other.⁷

Atone scrutinizes the systemic workings of the text as complicit in the control and identity issues surrounding the body which the piece explores, subverting these through a text which is permeable and open. The text invites physical exploration to break apart texts by departing from them, and yet in doing so furthers their constitutive meanings through the progression this affords. As the system of discovering hidden links is achieved both through the text and the images, the "social interactions constituting" gender are explored figuratively and literally through this physical process of reading.

The three works presented here by Aya Karpinska, though vastly different pieces of work on different media, all share in the investigation of these social interactions through the distinct social performances inherent in the media they use (iPhone / iPod Touch; Cell phone (general); Computer via joypad). The reflexive nature of these texts is twofold. Firstly there is the input-output-input cyclical nature of the hardware and software (the gestures on the screen, the subscription to and receiving of SMS, the animated text controlled by the joypad) and then there is the socially embedded nature of these works, the recognition of the social contexts in which these pieces of hardware (and the software which traditionally runs on them) operate which plays an important role in how the signifying strategies they employ play out.

As such, Karpinska's pieces presented here offer on the one hand a sense of familiarity of interface (the receiving of SMS, the use of gesture on the iPhone screen, the joypad / PC) but from within subverted social contexts. These contexts invite the reader to explore and be part of the signifying harmonics created through tensions between the unique applications of media in each piece and the traditional roles these media perform. In for this we pray, Catholic prayer provides the basis for a complex system through which text and medium are explored. Karpinska's working note explains the method for reading the prayer cards, and also invites readers to subscribe to the SMS service "that delivers prayers of 125 characters or less to your mobile phone on a (more or less) monthly basis."⁸ These installments of texts delivered to subscribers, in addition to their basis in rituals of Catholicism, also take into account the social transactions

⁶ Simone Gilson, Introduction to *Atone*.

http://www.how2journal.com/vol_3_no_3/new_media/gilson/atone-intro.html

⁷ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," from *The New Media Reader*, p. 524

⁸ Aya Karpinska, *for this we pray*. http://www.how2journal.com/vol_3_no_3/new_media/karpinska/for-this-we-pray.html

(rituals) of service subscriptions through multimedia devices, and the contexts of timing and location which accompany the receiving of the messages.

Shadows Never Sleep similarly employs the now-familiar gestural techniques of the iPhone as a platform for storytelling. Rather than turning the page, tapping 'next' or even following a link, the story is progressed through the pinching and swiping techniques which allow for movement and magnification through the iPhone's screen. The reader therefore works *through* the story, working with a literally malleable text to produce meaning. The reader becomes an instrument to this creation, similar to the description by N Katherine Hayles:

Interacting with electronic images rather than with a materially resistant text, I absorb through my fingers as well as my mind a model of signification in which no simple one-to-one correspondence exists between signifier and signified. [...] As I work with the text-as-flickering-image, I instantiate within my body the habitual patterns of movement that make pattern and randomness more real, more relevant, and more powerful than presence and absence.⁹

Nobody knows but you could be considered the most 'instrumental' text presented in this section. Aesthetically and systemically, this piece places itself in the context of gaming as developmental tool, instantiating unique texts through joystick interaction. Similarly to Cremin's piece, *nobody knows but you* allows for layered approaches to interpretation, as the instructions recommend music be played as an additional layer to the visual feedback and/or spoken word performance of the visuals being produced.

A video of the performance is presented in this section (as well as the downloadable engine itself) and from this and especially the video presented here from the e-poetry 2007 festival, one can see how visuals, narration in relation to the projection and background music all contribute to a holistic reading which has both an audience- and performer- oriented perspective.

nobody knows but you is literally an instrument, in a similar way to how a computer game might be considered an instrument. It is an engine produced as a platform to create meaning, or as Memmott notes:

To consider a digital poem as an instrument, one must first recognize it as a specific application or piece of software: a tool for the development of something other than itself. A clarinet is just a clarinet, a tool that demands a player for the production of music. A digital poetry object is by default—or almost always—a piece of software that needs a user to become an instrument of/for signification. To learn to play the instrument—in this case, the digital poetry object—is to become aware of the strategies of operational signification within the given application. [...] It is an operational interface for a system of signifying harmonics.¹⁰

⁹ Hayles, N Katherine, "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers," from *How We Became Posthuman*, p. 26

¹⁰ Talan Memmott "Beyond Taxonomy: Digital Poetics and the Problem of Reading," from *New Media Poetics*, pp. 294

As digital instrument, even *nobody knows but you's* meta-literature is striking and relevant. The instructions for controlling the piece via the joypad, aesthetically similar to the actual performable text and integral to the learning of meaning-making strategies in the piece, become part of the piece's identity and foreground the work's socio-technological context.

Three of the practitioners featured here (Katie Clapham, Becky Cremin and Simone Gilson) are recent graduates of the MA Poetic Practice programme at Royal Holloway, University of London which was set up by Robert Hampson and Redell Olsen. The three artists featured here offer a varied representation of the course's output in a new media context. This MA programme has steadily produced graduates who continue to push boundaries inside and outside of the academy in digital, page-based and hybrid performance contexts. This course considers writing in an expanded field that encompasses many of these contexts in relation to modernist and postmodernist traditions in poetry and poetics and it is this plurality of approaches and visions for new media writing that I have attempted to capture in this issue.

<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/English/studying/Postgraduate-Study/MA/PoeticPractice.html>