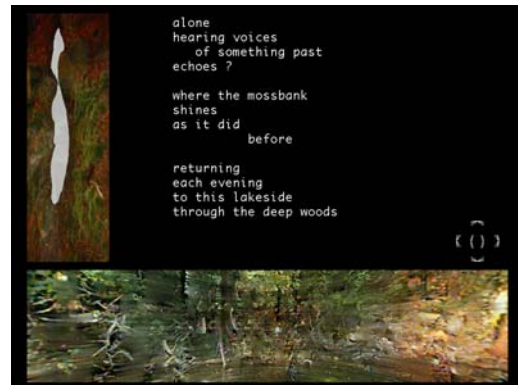


Morphing Into New Modes of Writing: John Cayley's riverIsland

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*Figure 1: John Cayley's riverIsland.
Screenshot of first screen/poem.
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Keywords

New media poetry, John Cayley, postmodern poetry, experimental methods of writing, morphing, transliteral and interliteral graphic morphing

Abstract

Today we do not only see the convergence of many modern and postmodern strategies in literature, forming that “difficult whole” McHale enumerates in his work on postmodern long poems, *The Obligation Toward a Difficult Whole*, but we are also living in an eruption of digital technologies which today are considered by most to be media, and thus called new media. *riverIsland*, I argue, is a meta-text and a paradigmatic example of new media poetry as instantiation of many different concurrent strategies and traditions (with highly diverse genealogies) which co-exist now. In my reading I focus on the morphing in *riverIsland* as one of those strategies.

Introduction

New media poetry is here to stay; it is not a fad or the preoccupation of a few. However, until recently, critical commentary was mostly done by the practitioners themselves. Loss Pequeño Glazier, John Cayley Brian Kim Stefans, and Stephanie Strickland are among the more prominent poets/critics. Today, on the other hand, many academics who are not poets themselves are investigating new media poetry. This is indicated by for instance some of the contributions in the recent publications of *First Person* [1], and the ongoing series of the *CyberText Yearbook* [2], several critical articles (some of the more excellent ones by Rita Raley, Carrie Noland, and N.

Katherine Hayles), and a number of books on new media, or digital, poetry by, for instance, Loss Pequeño Glazier, Brian Kim Stefans, Hayles, as well as the forthcoming collection *New Media Poetry: Aesthetics, Institutions, Audiences* edited by Thomas Swiss and Dee Morris [3]. The publication of this special issue of Leonardo Electronic Almanac is another indication that new media poetry has come of age and begins to be under the same type of scholarly scrutiny as for instance postmodern literature was in the late 1960s/early 1970s.

In what follows I examine a poem which I see as paradigmatic of new media poetry having come of age. John Cayley's *riverIsland* is a complex, mature, and intriguing poetic work which has already received quite a bit of attention and praise. In this article I will read *riverIsland* as a meta-text, a reflection on its own creation and as an instantiation of some of the new modes of poetry that are emerging. As a meta-poem, *riverIsland* is making visible how experimental modes of poetic writing is morphing into new forms in new media.

John Cayley is a poet, a sinologist, the founding editor of Wellsweep Press, and a scholar. He is already widely known for his work with digital technologies, or as he calls them, networked and programmable media. He has worked with computers as poetic medium since the late 1970s, engaging in different aesthetic and poetic practices. His central concern, however, has always been the letter. Cayley calls his poetry "literal art" [4], emphasizing the letter as well as the literal qualities of the letter: its malleability and specific materiality. In his engagement with language, its material as well as its signification processes, Cayley aligns himself with e.g. John Cage, some of the Language writers, and such contemporary poets as Jim Rosenberg and Brian Kim Stefans, both of which use new media technologies in their work. Cayley is, in fact, part of a diverse and ever-moving tradition of experimental writing, which now is in its "postmodern" phase. I will come back to this claim shortly.

Cayley's *riverIsland* is constructed in and for the Macintosh computer environment with the Hypercard application as a base. It is a multimedial work comprising poetic texts, sounds, images, human voices, movement, reader interaction, and algorithmically controlled sequences of changes of letters called literal morphing. Given the particularities of programmable media, it is useful to distinguish between the surface level, or what the reader sees and experiences, from the construction and process of the poem which is at a 'deeper,' to the reader-invisible level. *riverIsland* takes the full space of the screen and visually it comprises four main sections. To the upper left there is a vertical image, comprising several images on top of each other. The images show water, shores, and forests in green, blue, and brown shades. That it is a "multileveled" image becomes apparent to the reader as he/she moves the mouse cursor over it. At the bottom of the screen there is another image, horizontally placed. It contains several images put together to form a river landscape with green-brownish water and riverbanks. It is also an image which revolves in 360° as the reader moves the cursor. The image is, in effect, a circle which the reader can only see a part of at a time. These two images function, thus, as navigation "tools" to guide the reading. Above the horizontal image to the right there is another navigation tool, a set of arrows (north, south, east, and west) which generate a similar step-by-step movement across the spaces of the two images.

The reader's navigation, moving and stopping at different places, conjures different poems. These poems are then shown in the central part of the screen, usually with white letters on a black background. The poems are in different ways adaptations and translations of 8th century *Wang River Sequence* by the Chinese poet Wang Wei. Arranged on the horizontal and the vertical images, the 32 poems are presented in two groups. The first group, accessed by navigating the horizontal image at the base of the screen, consists of 16 poems which are Cayley's own adaptations of 16 of the 20 quatrains which make up the sequence. These poems are all in English. The second group, accessed by navigating the vertical image to the left, also contains 16 poems, but these are all based on the fifth poem from the River sequence. The poems are translations and adaptations from other authors

in different languages. Among the poems there are material from Octavio Paz, Gary Snyder, and François Cheng, and the languages used are English, French, Spanish, and Chinese (represented in pinyin as well as calligraphic signs) [5].

The beginning poem of the *riverIsland* connects the two “loops” that are created by the vertical and horizontal images and the poems. It reads (see also figure 1):

alone
hearing voices
 of something past
echoes ?

where the mossbank
shines
as it did
 before

returning
each evening
to this lakeside
through the deep woods

riverIsland contains sounds and voices, making the reading a multi-sensory experience. The sounds and voices relate to the particular place in the poetic work that the reader stops at. When the poems are shown, the reader hears the sound of human voices reciting the texts. There is a male voice which belongs to Cayley himself, and a female voice, belonging to Harriet Evans. Cayley reads all the English texts, while Harriet Evans reads the Spanish, French, and Chinese texts [6]. The poems are recited in a slow, emphatic manner throughout, and the tone and timbre of the voices underscore the over-all pensive and calm tone of the work. Needless to say, reading, listening, and navigating through the work takes time.

The poetic content and form intertwine to create a reflective work. As I have already mentioned the originary texts of the 32 poems is Wang Wei’s 8th century work. This work focuses on nature and how humans relate to their natural surroundings and themselves (in Wei’s case with a clear Zen Buddhist sensibility). In Cayley’s work, the river is the nexus around which these issues revolve and the river is repeated in visual, sonic and linguistic representations.

As must be clear even from this brief description, *riverIsland* is a complex poetic event. The question is, then, what interpretative frameworks are activated by this multimedial work? A wide range of approaches are possible. For instance, one could address the intriguing and important issues of the Eurocentrism which seem to be the foundation of computer technology since it is based on Western alphanumerical characters. Dealing with a different system of inscription, such as in the Chinese language, and computer technology which is based on an alphanumerical system a translation reaching across systems of inscription is needed. Cayley has discussed the issues involved in such a translation, from i.e. logographs to ideographs, as neither straightforward, nor “innocent” [7].

Another possible interpretative focus is the question of intertextuality. *riverIsland* seemingly stems from one source, the *Wang River Sequence* poems by Wang Wei, but these poems comes to us through translations done at different times, in different languages, and by different people. As Cayley notes in the explanatory texts

about *riverIsland* on his website, he has borrowed translations of Wei's poems and included his own adaptations of 16 poems into the work which implies a process of selection, interpretation, and translation. These textual histories, of the source texts as well as the adaptations and translations, along with the implications of transferring them into a different context, and a different medium, are also pertinent in a study of *riverIsland*'s multiple intertexts. *riverIsland* forms an intricate web of paraphrasing, borrowing, and adapting of texts in a radical way which I argue is best termed postmodern in the sense of Brian McHale's discourse in his recent *The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* [8]. In this work, McHale suggests a number of strategies, or a "repertoire of features" which can be found in some postmodern poetry. Among these features, we find construction and deconstruction, the aleatory and mechanical, sampling and the "found", and a spatial turn [9]. Several of these features are found in *riverIsland*, although, and this is crucial, with a particular slant given the specificities of the medium in which the work is created (McHale's examples are mostly printed works).

The spatial turn McHale speaks of (referencing Frederic Jameson) concerns the emphasis of postmodern poetry on the materiality of the poetry itself. As such, it is a self-referential strategy which clearly is a concern of many new media poems; it has even found its way into the name "new media poetry" which brings the medium to the forefront. Speaking of the spatial turn of postmodern poetry, McHale actually mentions Cayley's hypertext poetry, but not *riverIsland*. Instead, he chooses to focus only on the hypertextual aspect of some of Cayley's poems. I would claim that *riverIsland* goes further in using a postmodern repertoire than Cayley's earlier poems. It exhibits an engagement with aleatory and algorithmic procedures in the making of the poem, as well as an engagement with the multimedial possibilities of programmable media. This leads us to the issue of the "new media" in new media poetry.

The medium presents itself, *flaunts* itself one could say, in different ways and at different moments in *riverIsland*. While the images, words, and sounds create a suggestive and intricate poetic work, what is truly significant and noticeable about *riverIsland* are the processes of morphing of letters which Cayley has employed. There are two kinds of morphing in *riverIsland*: interliteral graphic morphing and transliteral morphing. Slightly different, they are both governed by algorithms which generate a certain animation and change in the poetic texts. Normally, 'morphing' refers to a process of change between two images. In the case of *riverIsland*, the morphing is textual. The *interliteral graphic morphing* reflects a process of visual translation, or migration from Chinese signs to Western letters and back. *Transliterate morphing* concerns translation between letters, spaces, and typographic signs such as periods and question marks. In this context I concentrate on the latter.

Transliterate morphing is created by an algorithm which organizes the English alphabet according to a set grid system and assigns specific loops to replace letters (spaces, or signs) according to similarities in sound. The morphing takes place between two places, which in a particular reading becomes the initial and final moments of the changes. The initial point is the source poem; the final is the target poem. According to the restrictions of the algorithm which Cayley has written, letters and spaces are replaced step by step by other letters and spaces. What happens in the in-between is the fluctuations of a different kind of texts than the adaptations of the Wang poems mentioned in Cayley's own explanatory texts on *riverIsland*. These "anonymous" in-between texts move as the reader watches, ranging from nonsensical to almost readable, almost understandable, until the target text is reached and the movement stops.



Figure 2: John Cayley's *riverIsland*.
Screenshot of work in process of literal morphing.
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The morphing is set off by the reader, by his/her choices while interacting with the work. The poetic texts which serve as starting and ending points seem to be the purpose of the journey, and the moving texts in-between seem too nonsensical or too resisting to interpretations or even reading to be of any interest. I would argue, however, along with for instance Hayles and Cayley himself, that these texts hold poetic weight as well. Moreover, in my reading of *riverIsland* as a meta-text, I would suggest that the transliteral morphing instantiates the postmodern strategies of construction and deconstruction which McHale describes in his *The Obligation Toward a Difficult Whole*. In print poetry, two basic possibilities open up for the process of construction and deconstruction: through language itself (signifier and signified) and the graphic layout.

New media poetry is different most conspicuously through the possibilities of animation processes, i.e. movement, that networked, programmable media allow. Although I can catch a moment of the process (as for instance in figure 2) the process occurs when a transliteral morphing is running, which creates an exclusive event (which Hayles has expounded upon in *The Time of Digital Poetry*. At this point I bracket the issue of time in *riverIsland* which is a highly interesting concern).

Morphing in *riverIsland* has a visible level, the movements, and a hidden technical level, the algorithm and computational processes. These two are intimately connected. Because morphing is a self-referential strategy pointing to its own creation — its own process — *riverIsland* has been compared to language writing and postmodern writing in general. On the other hand, within digital literature it has been categorized as belonging to the subcategory “codework” [10]. Cayley has in several articles maintained the importance of distinguishing between computer code which is operational and computer code which is not. There are works which use code only as part of the interface text (still made and published in programmable media) where it may raise a number of interesting and important issues (often called a “broken code” practice). Since code very much “works” in *riverIsland* such a label does not fit. Moreover, for Cayley “code which runs (in time), generating or modulating the writing of which it is an intrinsic or necessary part” creates a substantially different type of codework, one which employs different strategies than ‘broken code’ work [11]. For the reader, perhaps not always aware of the difference between broken and operational code, the moment in *riverIsland* when generated or modulated writing is most visible is during the morphing sequences. While the computer code itself is invisible to the viewer, the result of its algorithms is seen in the transformation of the text “from object to process” as Hayles has put it [12].

Taking a cue from the title of the work, I suggest that *riverIsland* as a poetic new media work is itself a metaphorical island in a river-like flow of literary strategies and poetic practices which are always flowing and changing; the composition of each work slightly different from the next. *riverIsland* also instantiates the changes and multiplication of inscription technologies which we see today. Serving as an illustration of media translation, or, to use Jay Bolter’s term, remediation, *riverIsland* reminds us of the importance of attending to the specificity of the material of literature. As scholars such as Jerome McGann and N. Katherine Hayles have

argued, materiality is not only the work as physical object, but an emergent materiality, specific to each artifact, which is, or should be, vital to our understanding of literary works. I argue that an attention to materiality and media-specificity is crucial in the analysis of experimental writing which often evoke other strategies of writing (and reading) than most “traditional” writing [13]. *riverIsland* can be seen, then, as a work in experimental or innovative writing akin to for instance some language writing and is as such foregrounding language — animated as well as static language, engaging the reader to read differently (following Espen Aarseth, such readings could be called “ergodic” [14]).

Of course, chance methods, aleatory or random-number generators have been used in poets’ methods of writing before new media came along, but the difference of how such procedures take shape in new media is important. In *riverIsland* the computer’s intrinsic constraints and the algorithms which control the morphing (as well as the rest of the work in the Hypercard environment with QuickTime movies etc.) allow for certain effects on the surface, which the reader encounters. In expositions of postmodern poetry, such as McHale’s, a *scale* of agency on part of the poet vs. machinic or algorithmic agency is proposed. Aarseth, for instance, has termed this a “cyborg” authorship. In the case of *riverIsland*, then, the machine “takes over” certain sections of the work and the medium is flaunted. In other sections, for instance when the static texts are shown, the computer’s processes are in the background. Then, the power of remediating other media (print, sound, photos) which is one of the strengths of programmable media is more prominent. This oscillation between the different “levels” (the inner workings, as Cayley has put it, of the machine, and the surface work) creates a changing, temporal work which requires a scholarly sensibility which can attend to both levels.

In this article I have outlined an argument for viewing a particular new media poem with a bi-focal view: the new medial and the postmodern. Neither of the lenses offers by itself a complete view, but in the combination of the two (each highly diverse) a more interesting and rewarding approach emerges for analyses of this type of poetic experimental writing. It has often been said that poetry is a machine of words, and indeed it is. In its new media instantiations it is also a machine generating images, sound, and movement, and these elements are juxtaposed to create a whole which engages a number of poetic and artistic issues. In my own dissertation work on the aesthetics and poetics of digital poetry I focus on issues such as those I have outlined in this article. In conclusion, coming back to where I started from, *riverIsland* serves as prime example for how new media technology and contemporary poetry come together to form a new mode of writing.

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6. As above
7. See for instance Cayley's essays "Digital Wen: on the Digitization of Letter- and Character-Based Systems of Inscription" in Michel Hockx and Ivo Smits (eds.) *Reading East Asian Writing: The Limits of Literary Theory* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003) pp. 277-94 and "Between Here and Nowhere" self-published <http://www.shadoof.net/in/translit/transl.html>.
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9. These features are described as not only postmodern, some can be found in modernist poems or in poetry in general, but they do point toward a moment in time when these can be found in postmodern poetry. McHale states, "items from the repertoire overlap, interfere, pull in different directions, jar against each other, even contradict each other; but they also echo, amplify, and mutually reinforce each other. They do not slot smoothly together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but they do form (what else?) a difficult whole" (*The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole* p.261). To further look at aleatory or chance methods in the creation of postmodern poetry I suggest McHale's article "Poetry as Prosthesis" (*Poetics Today* Vol. 21 No. 1 (Spring 2000)).
10. See for instance Alan Sondheim's "Introduction" in *American Book Review* Vol. 22 No. 6 (2001) and Rita Raley's exposition on codework "Interferences: [Net.Writing] and the Practice of Codework" *Electronic Book Review* (9 August 2002). Also accessible at: http://www.electronicbookreview.com/v3/servlet/ebr?command=view_essay&essay_id=rayleyele
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Author Biography

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