

## *New Media Poetry and Poetics From Concrete to Codework: Praxis in Networked and Programmable Media*

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### **Keywords**

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### **Abstract**

Poetry has entered the digital realm, and has been changed by the experience. No longer static texts on a page, contemporary poetry has undergone some intense re-wiring at the hidden levels of pixel and sub-text machinery. In the new media environment, we deal with an expanded notion of "poem" as praxis of surface level and sub-textual computer code levels, and an expanded awareness of the digital poem as process. The reading and reception of this writing occurs in a networked context, in which the reader becomes an "ergodic" participant (to use Espen Aarseth's term) and helps shape the form of the new media poem.

There have been many terms for such work used in past scholarship, including "new media poetry," "digital poetry," "E-poetry," "ergodic poetry," and others. While this field is potentially quite wide, including hypertexts, online communities such as weblogs and listservs, and the cinematic Flash work of writers such as Brian Kim Stefans, I am choosing to focus on work that engages the digital medium by exploring what Loss Pequeño Glazier calls "textuality superimposed upon textuality" — work that explores its own self-reflexive relation to the means of production and that aesthetic toolkit of code language specific to the medium. So by "new media poetry" in this issue of *Leonardo Electronic Almanac (LEA)*, I mean specifically writing which engages with digital, programmable media and which operates in a networked context.

This hybrid category can include, as I enumerated in the CFP for this special issue, "multimedia digital works (image/text/sound) as examined through the lens of 'writing,' specifically any of those concerns central to poetry rather than narrative: reader as active participant in the 'ergodic' sense, the use of stochastic methods and chance procedures, and the complex relations between the author, reader, and computer-as-writer/reader which evolve from that interaction." Modes of work that foregrounded the digital medium (such as "codework") were also encouraged.

Here in this special issue of *LEA* devoted to *New Media Poetry and Poetics*, I have compiled a series of articles that give an overview of issues in the field by many of the essential practitioners and critics. These articles address the following questions. How do we define new media poetry? Why does the introduction of digital media necessitate this re-assessment of writing? How does this understanding change the nature of reading?

What implications does it have for developing appropriate and illuminating critical responses? What might such critical responses look like? One of the unique aspects of this *LEA* special issue is the way in which many of the articles model critical readings of such work, addressing how digital media have contributed to an expanded concept of the poem in which code now plays a role, as well as exploring how such poems often derive meaning from their own precarious existence in networked language environments.

To make the shift in perspective necessitated by poetry's migration into the digital medium, we need to first engage this paradoxical understanding of poetic texts as "language objects" defined by a kind of semiotic or aesthetic praxis as distinct from, for example, conceptual artists' use of text to merely convey ideas, or hypertext novelists' use of texts to tell stories. Alan Sondheim was one of the first to articulate such a semiotic/aesthetic praxis by coining the term "codework." Loss Pequeno Glazier in his book *Digital Poetics* later described the praxis of the language object in the digital sphere by using the term "object-oriented programming" to articulate his materialist digital poetics. Such discussions were later expounded upon by theorist Rita Raley, and practitioner/critic John Cayley in his seminal essay *The Code is Not the Text (Unless it is the Text)*. The notion of programming as a kind of writing itself evokes a way in which, more than ever, we might see poetic texts as process-based. I believe that such changes can best be illuminated by moving beyond the established surface-level and narrative discourses to examine the code elements (computational, algorithmic, ergodic, monadic) that have restructured language.

This awareness of "new media poetry" reaches back to intermedia, concrete poetry, sound poetry, and other innovative poetic traditions such as the *Oulipo* and the work of Jackson Mac Low. Manuel Portela emphasizes the continuity with concrete poetry in his essay *Concrete and Digital Poetics*, detailing the transition of Brazilian concrete poet Augusto de Campos and Portuguese concrete poets E.M. Melo e Castro and Tiago Gomez Rodriguez into the digital medium. Portela traces some of the continuities and differences between digital media and earlier modes of innovative writing by demonstrating how these poets adapted their concrete poems into "new media" versions.

One important difference that we see between hypertext writing and new media poetry is the development of moving or animated text. Matthias Hillner's essay *Virtual Typography: Time Perception in Relation to Digital Communication* explores moving text from a design perspective. Hillner articulates a divide between "real-time communication" and "experiential time," arriving at a proposed solution of temporal digital typography in which animated three-dimensional text could "merge into illegible elements," thereby allowing the reader time to pause for reflection and thought by means of a text that would "compromise the efficiency of reading." While this notion holds interest due to the arguments regarding perception and the visual nature of letterforms, the presence of moving text does not always signify work that engages with code or the medium in the ways I am talking about. Moving text that lacks such an engagement can result in what John Cayley refers to as "either new media concrete or filmic illustration."

Another very different notion of "illustrating" the medium appears in the broken-code practice of Mez, whose essay *\_Net.Drenching -- Creating the Co[de][i]n.Text\_* details her poetics of writing in an idiolect known as "\_mezangelle\_" which nods to the presence of the medium by incorporating non-functional code elements and chatroom-speak into her writing style. Such is one possibility for a textual surface which has been problematized by the code which underlies it. More significantly, this notion of "new media poetry" reaches forward to the emerging possibilities of codework to create participatory digital objects. Cayley in his essay *Lens: The Practice and Poetics of Writing in Immersive VR (a Case Study with Maquette)* argues for a distinct "phenomenology of text in space" that would create a new experience of language by demonstrating the potentiality for letters to define space in the digital environment. His "lens maquette" developed in the Brown

University Virtual Reality Cave provides a vivid new experience of "writing as an inscription surface for writing."

Cayley's influential work in this field, an exploration of the limits of legibility via translation with an emphasis on the individual letter or the "literal" (as analogue for the digital), provides a nexus for interpreting the intersection of image, text, and sound that we see in much new media poetry. Consequently, Cayley's work is a touchstone for a number of participants in the journal. Lori Emerson in her essay *Numbered Space and Topographic Writing* discusses Cayley's pieces *Overboard* and *What You Will* as examples of definitive new media poems which not only demonstrate "the difference that makes a difference" between paper-based and digital poetry, but also carry the potential "to do away altogether with our accustomed ways of understanding and interpreting texts from the starting point of genre." Meanwhile, Maria Engberg examines Cayley's piece *riverisland*, employing the dual approaches of new media theory and postmodernism to illuminate aspects of morphing in relation to code. Engberg's hybrid approach and her search to find terms with which to talk about code in literary terminology become illustrative of larger trends. For example, this is a medium in regard to which critics are still finding a vocabulary. If we choose to look at such engagements with legibility and the digital through the lens of "writing," especially in a networked context, it becomes clear that the tools of literary criticism and analysis which assume a static text object are only partially useful. A revision and a reassessment is underway to determine what might constitute the objects of study for writing in the digital realm, and the critics in this issue are well aware of the overhaul which needs to take place. One possible direction for exploration might be gleaned from the example of approaches derived from cultural studies that examine, as I indicated in the CFP, the "point where aesthetics intersects with politics to create dynamic attempts at social change."

The readership of new media poetry in a networked context creates another set of complications for the critic discussing work in this medium. Stephanie Strickland in her manifesto-like article *Writing the Virtual: Eleven Dimensions of E-Poetry* uses the term "poietic" to describe new media writing as a networked social practice exemplified by such characteristics as "communicative peers," "intense attachment at the site of interaction," "multiply-depicted time," and "ruin/aphasia." What does digital materiality consist of in a genre which has historically been influenced by vital innovative traditions such as concrete and sound poetry? Is the poem purely at the location where the reader receives it, or entirely on the code level, or suspended somewhere in the network? Phillipe Bootz in his essay *Digital Poetry: From Cybertext to Programmed Forms* argues for a version of the latter situation, in which the new media poem is defined by a "semiotic gap" between the *texte-auteur* (the code) and the *text-a-voir* (the display on a reader's screen). The situation is further complicated for Bootz by the introduction of his term *transitoire observable*, which refers to the variations that can occur when a program is run/read on different computer systems. According to this conception, neither the author nor the reader experiences the "complete" text, but both deal with only partial version of the poem.

Certainly any understanding of this complex textual situation must take into account Loss Pequeño Glazier's point that code involves the presence of "writing within the writing." In his article *Code as Language*, which might as well be our thesis statement for this journal, Glazier argues for a notion of language that explicitly refers to computer code. For him, new media poetry is poetry that engages the digital medium, and that medium is composed of code, itself an instance of "writing." Rather than troping the notion of code as procedure, concept, or some other abstraction, Glazier reminds us that new media poetry is defined primarily by engagement with actual computer code itself.

Code and the situation of networked media point to a potential evolution for the reader of such works. In her essay *Numbered Space and Topographic Writing*, Lori Emerson suggests new notions of the new media poetry reader by delving into concepts derived from mathematics and geometry. Emerson employs the categories

"Euclidean geometry" (a homogenous, objective space separate from the counter) and "non-Euclidean geometry" (a heterogeneous, constantly-shifting space inseparable from the counter), to determine the difference between new media and paper poetry. Emerson argues that the digital realm makes possible a counter/reader who is not separate from the activity of counting/reading itself, thereby evoking a shift in which the digital becomes a kind of immersive ecosystem and digital poetry (in conjunction with its reader) a form of artificial life. Emerson notes that the implied audience for such works would by necessity include both "literary-scientific researchers" and "scientific-literary researchers."

I am very pleased to present this special issue of *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, the result of a lot of hard work by all participants. I'd like to offer my enthusiastic thanks to the many peer reviewers who helped us work through the pile of over 70 submissions that were initially received. I'd particularly like to thank Sandy Baldwin, Maria Damon, Lori Emerson, Loss Pequeno Glazier, and Alan Sondheim for their advice in the critical final stages of this project.

The New Media Poetry and Poetics issue also features an adjoining gallery assembled at: <http://leoalmanac.org/gallery/newmediap> This gallery contains a range of new media poems that speak to some of the critical discussions in the articles.

### ***Author Biography***

Tim Peterson is a poet, art critic, and independent scholar. He is the editor of *EOAGH: A Journal of the Arts* and currently acts as a curator for the Segue Reading Series in New York City. His first book of poetry, *SINCE I MOVED IN*, is forthcoming from Chax Press in 2006. Chapbooks include *CUMULUS* (Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs) and *Trinkets Mashed into a Blender* (Faux Press/e). His poetry and criticism have appeared in *Antennae*, *artsMEDIA*, *Colorado Review*, *Fascicle*, *Five Fingers Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Jacket*, *RAIN TAXI*, *Transgender Tapestry*, and other places.

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**Nisar Keshvani, Editor-in-Chief**

Established in 1993, Leonardo Electronic Almanac is, jointly produced by Leonardo, the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology (ISAST), and published by MIT Press, is an electronic journal dedicated to providing a forum for those who are interested in the realm where art, science and technology converge. For over a decade, LEA has thrived as an *international peer reviewed electronic journal* and web archive covering the interaction of the arts, sciences, and technology. LEA emphasizes rapid publication of recent work and critical discussion on topics of current excitement with a slant on shorter, less academic texts. Many contributors are younger scholars, artists, scientists, educators and developers of new technological resources in the media arts.

### **New Media Poetics and Poetry Special**

Guest edited by **Tim Peterson**

- :: Code as Language - *Loss Pequeño Glazier*
- :: Lens: The Practice and Poetics of Writing in Immersive VR (A Case Study with Maquette) - *John Cayley with Dimitri Lemmerman*
- :: Numbered Space and Topographic Writing - *Lori Emerson*
- :: Digital Poetry: From Cybertext to Programmed Forms - *Phillippe Bootz*
- :: Concrete and Digital Poetics - *Manuel Portela*
- :: Writing the Virtual: Eleven Dimensions of E-Poetry - *Stephanie Strickland*
- :: \_Net.Drenching -- Creating The Co[de][i]n.Text\_ - *Mez*
- :: Morphing Into New Modes of Writing: John Cayley's riverIsland - *Maria Engberg*
- :: 'Virtual Typography': Time Perception in Relation to Digital Communication - *Matthias Hillner*

### **New Media Poetics and Poetry Gallery**

Curated by **Tim Peterson**

- :: Hymns of the drowning swimmer - *Jason Nelson*
- :: open.ended - *Aya Karpinska and Daniel Canazon Howe*
- :: MotionText Ferment - *mIEKAL aND and Camille BacoS*
- :: The Trustfiles - *Nadine Hilbert and Gast Bouschet*

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