

Thinking Through New Media 2006 Proposal

Developing a Digital Poem

In spite of its ubiquity, reading remains a mysterious and elusive act. While authors and texts provide ample material for critical study, readers leave little trace of their craft. With the HTML web page, however, we have a medium that simultaneously delivers and records information. The text itself can now track the methods, the habits, and the choices of the reader: these “stories of readership” are ours to record, catalogue, and analyze.

My goal was to write a work of electronic fiction that would take advantage of the “interactivity” of the HTML web page (that is, its ability to transfer information multilaterally) in order to record the stories of readership in the very text that collects them.

To accomplish this, I wrote “RSS Poem,” a dynamic web-based poem that reflects the context of its reading and the characteristics of its readership. Its PHP and MySQL programming acts as a mathematical constraint, or “story machine,” in the tradition of OULIPO[1], by compiling data from a variety of sources and assembling it into a poem. A mandatory reader registration form collects biographic data on each reader; other content reflects the circumstances of a particular reading, such as the time of day, date, weather conditions, breaking news, television schedules, topics on opinion blogs, and other current events.

“RSS Poem” is unique in that its readers are partly and passively responsible for the creation of the text. The poem is never finished, but exists rather as a series of unique versions that the computer program re-writes for each new reader. The poem thereby reflects not only its current reader, but also the history of its entire readership. As the reader (passively) contributes to future versions of the text, the meaning of the poem becomes explicitly social.

Although the content of the poem constantly changes, its form remains constant. Like the Surrealists’ *cadavre exquis*, each subsequent version of the “RSS Poem” comprises a series of fragments culled from a variety of sources and reassembled according to a series of complex algorithms and conditions. But whereas the *cadavre exquis* poem reflects its authors and authorship, “RSS Poem” reflects its readers and readership.

My paper outlines the ways in which “RSS Poem” allows the reader to determine the text, explicitly linking the process to Reader Response theorists such as Stanley Fish and Robert Scholes: the poem does not exist as an objective literary text until a reader makes it such; each reader’s personal biography lies at the center of the text; and the text is a social event that creates a community and common culture.

For my presentation, I will talk briefly about the history of automatic poetry, demonstrate how the dynamic poem works, and trace the development of “RSS Poem.”

[1] In 1960, French-speaking authors and mathematicians formed “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle,” or OULIPO. Their aim was to create works of literature by using constrained writing techniques, often based on mathematical principles, such as palindromes, lipograms, grids, and puzzles.