

## **New Media Literature**

**Thom Swiss and Maria Damon**

This chapter discusses creative writing in a digital mode, starting with a rough description of current literary new media practices. We then offer an impressionistic view of some promising thinking about the field from a number of writers, largely from the perspective of a developing new media poetics. We conclude with readings of literary digital works, discussing some of the issues of creative practice and alternative canon formation in this burgeoning genre-which-may-or-may-not-be-a-genre.

While a full accounting of creative new media writing is not possible at this early moment in the field, a number of critics have begun to chart the landscape. What constitutes electronic literature? Brian Kim Stefans, a key figure in both the writing and criticism of new media literature, offers the following as he considers forms of writing that are informed by new ways of thinking inspired by digital technology. Stefans is attempting to categorize forms of writing that are organized according to the principles of the database or work primarily as texts distributed over the internet or work in a manner that somehow relies on computer technology in the writing. His list includes:

- \* Classic hypertext fiction, in which different pages of writing (often called ‘lexia’) are maneuvered by the reader by clicking on words or images.
- \* Interactive fiction and literary games, in which the user is typically the ‘hero’ of a story and must input commands to navigate a literary piece, solving it like a puzzle in the manner of early text-playing/role-playing games.
- \* Animated poems in which the viewer/reader is not asked to do anything but watch and listen while text performs before them.
- \* Conceptual blogs and websites that explore particular types of writing.

\* Non-electronic conceptual writing that explores some aspect of writing that relates to a 'database aesthetic,' i.e. a collection of fragments that are organized in a mathematic or otherwise highly systematic way.

\* 'Wordtoys', a more sophisticated form of classic hypertext, in which the user is invited to play with an experimental interface **in** such a way that new textual creations are manufactured in real-time.

\* Installation texts, which **take** place in a VRML environment or in galleries.

\* Email, collaborative art, and other forms of writing that take advantage of the forms of communication peculiar to electronic media.

\* Computer generated texts, in which a computer program helps in the creation of the text, or in which a web spider culls live text from the internet to create the work.

According to Talan Memmott, these and other varieties of an emergent practice called new media poetics offer not a neat taxonomy but a restless 'taxonomadism' (2006, p. 380). Adalaide Morris notes that if 'new media poems could be plotted on a grid, their characteristic links, perspective, access, determinability, transience, dynamics, user functions, and coding strategies would variously overlap and differ. What gives them their family resemblance is an imagination that mobilizes programming code as a poetic device' (2006, p. 44).

The growing and complex electronic literature community brings together artists, graphic designers, sound technicians, musicians, and computer programmers. But in the 'official' world of creative writing and writers, digital literature is still thought of by many mostly in terms of 'computers' –a great daisy chain of scanners and software programs, digital cameras and recording devices – rather than in terms of practice. Of course 'practice'

does include the various uses of computers in the composition of New Media writing, but it also includes the organization of the production and consumption of this work.

Like other 'new' literatures before it, digital fiction and poetry are self-consciously experimental. Now more than a decade old, the practices of and discourses about electronic literature in the Age of the Web are increasingly mature and expanding. In the fashion of most experimental writing, however, writers and critics of electronic literature began by defining the work through its differences from 'traditional' literature. Early commentaries often highlighted the aesthetics of 'rupture' and 'disruption', the ways in which electronic literature challenged common assumptions about reading and writing. More recently, there has been an attempt on the part of both authors and critics to understand electronic literature in an historical context that locates this work along side other kinds of creative work, including extra- or non-literary art practices such as sound art, illustration, photography, graphic design, and film.

Morris points out that:

recent criticism veers sharply from the apocalyptic celebrations of first-generation electronic literature: not only will digital writing not put an end to books... it is not necessarily more subtle, more properly post-structural, more accomplished, more important, or even more interesting than print writing. Far from displacing print, in fact, new media texts frequently depend on a differential relationship with analogous or related print materials. (2006, p. 31)

'The most interesting exemplars of digital poetics to date,' Marjorie Perloff writes, 'have tended to be what I have called elsewhere differential texts – that is to say, texts that exist in different material forms, with no single version being the definitive one' (2006, p. 286). On a similar note, critic Alan Golding emphasizes the 'playful reciprocity' between print, digitized, and three-dimensional forms of the same material, arguing that this reciprocity undoes the notion that one medium can supercede or even suppress another.

As we have noted, critics have also begun to look at the connected structures that produce and circulate new media poetics, examining electronic archives, digital websites, new media journals, and pedagogical innovations. A number of important Web-based journals have emerged in the last decade, providing outlets and encouragement for

literary experiments. Like the ‘little magazines’ that helped create the modernist canon in the years between 1912 and 1920, these resolutely non-commercial electronic journals with minuscule staffs are creating version 1.0 of the New Media literary canon. Their editorial stances and missions echo those of earlier journals like *The Little Review*, *The Dial*, and *Close-Up* – little magazines that questioned the literary canon of their time – and, like them, contemporary electronic journals solicit the work of promising new digital writers along with ‘more established’ experimental writers.

Like the early little magazines, too, some of the Web-based literary journals are shaping a new literary canon by providing a forum in which New Media writers can act as critics, writing about and supporting each other’s work. They are reproducing the role assumed earlier in this century by poets acting as critics – writers who began to give the first, tentative shape to what has become the received high modernist canon. Other emerging institutional support for the production and reception of electronic literature includes dozens of university courses, online working groups for writers, meetings, conferences, prizes, contests, and other public awards.

At this point, we want to focus more specifically on some critical notions that inform our own thinking about new media poetics and ‘creative writing.’ In *X*, Barrett Watten challenges the habit of describing artistic practices in relation to fixed positions of form, genre, discipline, and cultural meaning and proposes in its stead a more inclusive and dynamic formulation of an expanded field of literary, visual, and digital practice. As Morris writes about Watten:

Beginning in the premise that the form of making is itself an intelligence, Watten lays out a structural logic common to radical poetics, conceptual art, and digital aesthetics. His lucid delineation of this logic emphasizes its double structuration in negative and positive practices: its dialectical and historical efforts to dismantle customary standards of judgment, on the one hand, and its generation of new cultural meanings and possibilities on the other. “The expanded field of poetics,” Watten writes, “leads thereby to the making of art in new genres, as a self-reflexive moment within practice that creates grounds for new meaning.” Watten’s analysis returns us to a vision of new media poetics not as technologized bells and whistles but as a crucial form of thinking and writing in a cybernetic world. (2006, p. 61)

Watten's expansive rewriting of the logic of creative practice in cyberspace provides an important framework-cum-catalytic-nudge for considering how current formulaic standbys in the institutionalized "Creative Writing" world might cede to wider, more generative possibilities that could, in turn, replenish more conventional writing media. If "the form of making is itself an intelligence," then a philosophy which values process without undue emphasis on product can undercut some of the rigidity of standard approaches to, for example, the "workshop model" of creative writing as institutionally practiced, in which finished products are brought in by students for evaluation by an established writer and a group of the student's peers, a select community operating under the aegis of, but often in tension with, an academic literary department—a group of students that has been assembled through a process of application and admission by a panel of academically credentialed writers. As new media writing itself becomes institutionalized and folded in to standard creative writing curricula, as a still-emergent canon appears to be taking shape, and as the borders between the mainstream and the outside are still porous and malleable, this subfield has the opportunity to enfold into its offerings writing and writing practices that seriously challenge what has emerged as standard operating procedure in the "creative writing" world as represented by the explosion in MFA programs, the establishment of AWP (Association of Writing Programs) complete with yearly conventions, publications, and generally-agreed-upon curricular values and formats. Though not every program follows these mandates, and some have very much embraced alternative models of writing praxis (notably in the United States the Poetics Program at SUNY-Buffalo, which offers a doctorate in English for practitioners of "avant-garde" writing, and the MFA in Poetics at Naropa University) these values can be summed up in an email I recently received from the current director the MFA program in my institution: "Year after year we engage with 15 students in our genre and encourage their talent. That is all that the CWProgram is interested in: we have no theory, we have not agenda except the excellence of the writers in our charge..." The denial of the possibility that world-view, theory or intellectual engagement might in fact be an integral aspect of "writing" leads to the perception that these programs are anti-intellectual, isolationist and operating in a pre-1968

world that, in history's subsequent judgment, gave the phrase "ivory tower" its pejorative force. Internal logic has it that "theory" distracts from and dilutes a visceral connection with The Word; one could argue, as this volume intends and as the Watten piece certainly does, that "theory" is a form of shorthand for an ethically engaged, self-consciously reflexive, intellectual curiosity about the world and there is no "writing" apart from this engagement. In what follows, three instances of authorship-outside-the-norm, and writing that represents a range of engagements, will be presented as potentially reinvigorating a set of institutional practices that, one could argue, can in the extreme begin to erode a solid and non-alienated writing practice. Working at the forward margin, the vanguard, of hypermedia and new media theory and praxis, these writers may themselves never be folded into the mainstream, but will inhabit a position of salutary adjacency (will "interface," in the jargon of our medium) to the practices of the institutions that currently regard them with some mixture of excitement and trepidation.

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**If the process of poesis, of making, can be generalized beyond the purview of an over-disciplined "creative writing" practice so that writing is not seen as an activity separate from daily living and the many opportunities for creative intervention we are afforded in the course of the everyday, then the resistance to "sitting down to write" –generally far greater than the resistance to "writing" tout court –can be dramatically mitigated. Most**

obviously, if writing is not a separate activity or a practice involving isolation, then playing off of others' activities, collaborative writing, can become an epiphenomenal expression of social interactivity. The internet, with its strong horizontality and generatively rhizomatic qualities, lends itself well to creative activity that engages a sort of undifferentiated, pre-Oedipal libido that Julia Kristeva has associated with "poetic language," and that aptly characterizes online writing communities such as Flarf as well as the brilliantly broken effluvium of Alan Sondheim's polymorphously perverse output, both discussed below. The very word "output" helps to rid creative writing of its overly disciplinary, almost scientized trappings in favor of a (post-Romantic in its own way) trope of quasi automatic writing, suggesting both the mediumistic and the technologized aspects of digital innovations in the literary world. This rhizomatic model, moreover, enables the breakdown of authorial investment in "Creative Writing"'s systems of discipline and reward: print publication, sales success, cultural prestige. These forms of new media writing can bend and fracture writing practices away from an ossified disciplinary Parnassus toward an emancipatory semi-anonymity, though even in this murky utopia there is regulation and evaluation: the highly publicized and successful US internet project Poets Against the War, initiated in 2003 by Sam Hamill after a White House poetry event was canceled after rumors that Laura Bush would be handed an anti-war anthology of work by invited writers, was so deluged by antiwar poems from writers worldwide that the website became hierarchized into poems by "named" poets and those by "open submissions" poets. (Eventually there was merchandize available too, for those wanting support the maintenance of the site.) By taking a few steps back and revising some of the groundrules of post-Romantic, hyper-disciplined "creative writing," a field of libidinal spontaneity can reinfuse poetics and writing practices with both pre- and post-disciplinary vibrancy. In what follows, three instances of authorship-outside-the-norm, and writing that represents a range of engagements, will be presented as potentially reinvigorating a set of institutional practices that, one could argue, can in the extreme begin to erode a solid and non-alienated writing practice. Working at

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### **1) mIEKAL aND's Synaesthetic Vision**

'Hypermedia and permaculture' is the surprisingly intuitive yoking that characterizes the cultural aims of Dreamtime Village, an intentional community founded on anarchist principles in the tiny, unincorporated village of West Lima, in the heart of the non-glaciated ('driftless') bio-region of Southwestern Wisconsin. The area's hills, twisty river and road passageways, bluffs and valleys form a natural haven for a myriad of dissenting communities that live close to the ground and whose reigning ethos is that of do-it-yourself; these include groups as disparate as the Amish and Dreamtime. The many literary productions that come out of Dreamtime are incorporated under the general rubric of the non-profit Xexoxial Endarchy: Xerolage is a series of print journals featuring single-author issues of photocopied, collaged material and visual poetries; Xexoxial Editions, also a print venture, publishes 'experimental' books by a range of well- and little-known writers including Charles Bernstein, Bern Porter and Hannah Weiner; Driftless Media, an online enterprise, produces multimedia compositions; [www.spidertangle.net](http://www.spidertangle.net) hosts an online gallery of visual poetry as well as a listserv devoted to the same topic; [www.joglars.org](http://www.joglars.org) features online multimedia collaborations between Dreamtime/Xexoxial cofounder mIEKAL aND and others.

In a related project, aND is attempting to grow, in this fertile Zone 3-4 climate, all forms of food-plant known to global civilization. The over-arching aim is networked, ecological, creative health imagined in a local/global continuum in which every facet of active life reflects a non-alienated, synthetic, synaesthetic relationship to theory and practice. These practices comprise a lived epistemology. Primary among aND's tenets is that language is an integral aspect of the global ecosystem, a belief reflected in several of his online works, including Literature Nation, a long meditation on the pleasures of 'landscape;' Flora Spira, which explores what poet Armand Schwerner called the

‘language of plants;’ The Babylon Ministry of Misinformation, an antiwar piece that emphasizes ancient Iraq as the cradle of alphabetic writing; and ‘Seed Sign: for Philadelpho Menendez (?),’ an elegy for the Brazilian new media/visual poet whose death aND learned of while harvesting false indigo seed pods. The rough-hewn look of the piece, which features letters made of false indigo seeds morphing to form anagrams of the dedicatee’s name and a female voice keening a self-invented pronunciation of that name, is consistent with aND’s lived connection to ‘culture’’s etymological roots in working the land. His creative writing practice, undivorced from the larger eco-picture, is a form of linguistic ‘husbandry’ that avails itself of ethereal technology and the networks implicit in the world wide web’s own place in the ecosystem (in contradistinction to such low-tech ‘nature writers’ and polemicists as, for instance, poet-farmer Wendell Berry.)

## **2) Alan Sondheim’s Benjaminian Imperative: the Ethical Commitment to Debris**

Alan Sondheim, coiner of the term ‘codework’ and pioneer in the foregrounding of programming language as formal and theoretical, thematic concern and expressive technique. His oeuvre is extensive as he is compulsively prolific as a documentarian of all the detritus of the inner and outer world, natural and social, intellectual and visceral. If aND’s poetics challenges the isolation and purity of the discipline of creative writing as traditionally envisioned, Sondheim’s writing theory/practice challenges conventional formal values of the ‘well-wrought urn’, the carefully honed and endlessly revised ‘objet d’art’ which revolves prettily in its glass case with all traces of anguished labor removed.

Sondheim experiments in music, film and photography, writing. But many new media writers do this. Sondheim’s work, however, glories in excess, in messiness, in overload, in performative self-disclosure that pushes the boundaries of comfort, in a kind of manic erudition whose aim is to create, create, create and reflect to the world its own cracked and manic impulses both destructive and emancipatory. It is ‘incorrect’ in many respects, refusing the constraints of thematic and formal decorum. Some of his pieces, which he posts every day to a host of listservs, consist of strings of *recherché* words: ‘burmatibet burmbar burmeister burmeselolo burmeso burmic cbrm cerma cerman chirmar cirma

clearmuddy confirmed coterminous countermovement' ('lovely irma input'), or wild confessions mixed with notices about how to access his most recent creations:

Lurs what else can I say

They're not really lurs.

<http://www.asondheim.org/lur1.mp3>

<http://www.asondheim.org/lur2.mp3>

I'm feeling incredibly sick or I'd write something clever.

I'll be sick tomorrow at the jet d'eau where it's true bird flu.

Give me bird flu and/or give me death. Lacan said it was some sort of wage but no one gets out alive.

O Lurs!

Rather than a laziness about editing and revising, this inclusiveness is a diasporically-driven, principled commitment to debris; no phenomenon is unworthy of examination, beneath salvaging, alien. Sondheim's creative practice/theory lives out Walter Benjamin's exhortation that 'nothing that has ever happened should be lost for history'. How would a traditional, evaluative, revision-oriented Creative Writing workshop handle this documentarian/creative tsunami? Editing and revising is so not the point; Sondheim rewrites the terms in which artifacts produced under the rubric of 'creative writing' can be experienced, evaluated, related to. This excess is an ethics, one that challenges both traditional 'creative writing' conventions and the restrained, elegant beauty of much of the emergent canon of new media literature.

### **3) Flarf: Badness Unbound**

Finally, a collective writing project has emerged that is in some sense an explicit attack on all the pieties and platitudes of Creative Writing as it has emerged as an institution rather than a lived practice – as well as on the pieties and platitudes of social life in general. Paradoxically, Flarf, as it is known, achieves this aim precisely by embracing and playing with all that is 'bad', sentimental, hackneyed, predictable and serious, reveling in silliness as it may reflect a post-9/11 sense of the inadequacy of writing as Writing.

Flarf avails itself of internet detritus; much of its material comes from ‘google-sculpting:’ performing a Google search on a set of terms (‘Republican’, ‘I believe in’, ‘Anne Frank’, ‘squid’, ‘awww yeah’, ‘Britney’, etc.) and working with the results. The ‘stoopider’ the results, the more delighted the reaction as individual members of the collective (manifesting primarily as a listserv, though a few readings, a ‘Flarf Festival,’ and many single-authored books have resulted from the mayhem) post and respond to each other’s provocations.

Even as certain Flarf poems, and the technique itself, are being introduced into Creative Writing classrooms (to much resistance and much pleasure), Flarf has been criticized for its use of racist, homophobic, misogynistic language, and for its unself-conscious disregard of the means of production undergirding its methods (Google’s complicity with the Chinese government’s censorship policies, for instance, or the majority-whiteness of its membership); Flarf members respond much in the spirit of Lenny Bruce that offensive language surrounds us daily in every medium, and how better to defang it than to play with it in this decontextualized, idiotic and hilarious idiom? Perhaps, because its practitioners are serious poets goofing around but becoming increasingly serious about Flarf as their ‘real work’, Flarf will have more difficulty making its way into the mainstream; but perhaps for the very same reason it can be more easily incorporated. What follows are two send-ups of ossified Creative Writing workshopping conventions; the first is by Gary Sullivan, and ventriloquizes a student-peer, in this case the West Wind, responding ultra-fatuously to a piece brought into a workshop for critique, in this case by Shelley; the second, by Tim Peterson, is a cathartic payback for many bad workshop experiences. Enjoy.

***THE WEST WIND REPLIES TO SHELLEY***

Great title! Clever! And I really like the opening stanza, too. But I think you could maybe strengthen it with a couple of ‘action words’ (I didn’t want to be \*too\* invasive, so I just put in spacers like <> where you could add something of your own!):

O Shelley, the giant <ACTION WORD> of glorious romantic poetry history  
 You, whose eternal <ACTION WORD> power influences those who read you

Had idealized me, a wrongly portrait of <ACTION WORD> god

I mean, they wouldn't have to go right there, exactly. Those are just suggestions.

I really liked the next stanza \*a lot\*. Especially Ceres. Ceres! You only mentioned Ceres once, and I'd like to see more of Ceres, actually! I added some to what you wrote:

Ceres! The winged Ceres-seed cannot be blown without Ceres' wing  
 The Ceres-seed cannot be grown without the 'Ceres' presence of Proserpine (aka Ceres)  
 The bounteous Ceres, but not I (other-than-Ceres), can sentence the Ceres-fate of Ceres-growth

Maybe I went overboard with Ceres? I mean, you know. But maybe sprinkle a few in there.

II

I love how you numbered the sections like this. It makes it clear that there's this ... like ... 'shift.' But, okay, I'm lost when you write:

O Shelley, the ghost of fantasized ode of me

Huh??? I think you need to be clearer there. 'Ode of me'? Oh, wait, no. You mean that's the West Wind speaking? Okay. Yeah ... I see that now.

You, whose potency [Great noun!] affects those who heard you  
 Had mistaken med [typo?], a mighty destroyer and preserver

... like ... \*computer\* pre-server? Because then you'd need a hyphen there. I think those are just called 'networks.'

The sky cannot be stirred without the clouds dancing [great images!]  
 The lightning can not struck without the Pegasus with thunder belt  
 The almighty Zeus, but not I, can accompany the rainfall

That is \*such\* a powerful stanza. It's like, couldn't you really just end it there? 'Rainfall.' Because then it ends with that, like, falling of the rain.

III

See, because you're going to start wearing on your readers' patience if you go on too long. I think, though, that this one is okay.

O Shelley, the great admirer of the unseen west wind

But, isn't all wind unseen? Why point this out???

You, whose interpretation of ocean had misled those who pray you  
Had addressed me [Great use of IRONY!], a supposing ruler over the roaring  
ocean [EXCELLENT!]

The wave cannot abstract without the hard surface of coast  
The crevasses cannot be cleaved without the order of Neptune  
Sun, water, weather, but not I can control the marine

I admit I'm a little confused by the above. 'hard surface' is \*hard\* ... and  
'crevasses' is \*soft\*. Especially if they're being \*cleaved\*.

#### IV

O Shelley, the fanciful player of imagination  
You, whose lyre had instructed many those who inspired by you  
Had kindly made me a musician, of the divine natural

I like the above stanza VERY MUCH. But, I had this idea – couldn't you  
substitute, like, a 'regular joe' name for Shelley up there? Because it's kind of  
getting repetitious. So, like:

O Sam, the fanciful etc.  
Julie, whose lyre had etc.  
Had kindly made Mark etc.

Or am I being ...? Well, never mind.

The forest cannot sing without the leaves branches suffering

\*Powerful.\*

The lyrist cannot be sound with the absence of Euterpe

??? Did you mean Europe?

A splint, a drop, a tick, but not I, can stroke the great inspiration

Now, see, someone's going to think that's a \*sexual\* metaphor. Like, to 'stroke  
the great inspiration' ... right?

#### V

O Shelley, the romantic lover of west wind  
You, who had made my glorious, as Homer had attempt me  
to blow Odysseus back to Ithaca  
Had acquainted only this:

when I am present, spring will not be far behind

I'm having a problem with this last stanza. I mean, you're going along there, through sections I-IV, and you end up ... here? With this? Isn't it kind of a let-down?

I did a rewrite, just a tweak here and there, to 'pump the level up' a bit:

O Shelley, the romantic lover of west wind  
 How do you like it?  
 MORE MORE MORE! How do you like it, how do you  
 Like it? MORE MORE MORE! How do you like it,  
 How do you like it? MORE MORE MORE! (Fade-out.)

### *Tarzan Workshop*

Here is poem. Describe poem. Does poem feel 'earned'? What are 'formal characteristic' of poem? Is A) lyrical, B) narrative, C) meditative, or D) rhetorical? Because those only options for what poem can be. Is better than last poem? If not, Tarzan think student slipping. Write down suggestion for poet, and now Tarzan proceed to 'fix mistakes' in poem. Does poem feel 'welcoming to Tarzan reader'? Tarzan personally think 'loaded gun' is mistake –poet should change to 'fluffy bunny rabbit' to not intimidate Tarzan. That cheap move. Describe 'music of poem' – do poem voice sound 'flat' here? Do poem show 'Tarzan mind at work'? In order to 'fix,' poet need make exactly like ideal poem which Tarzan have in mind but which he never reveal. Student keep until get right. Other student here write more close to Tarzan ideal poem, so Tarzan make jealous by give other student all Tarzan praise and attention!!! Tarzan bet student feel shitty now, right? Tarzan know how to write Tarzan poem, student not allowed artist. Student apprentice, Tarzan train student write poem like Tarzan write. Have read all book on Tarzan syllabus composed entirely of book written by friend of Tarzan? Good, if student write like friend of Tarzan book student soon publish by Copper Canyon Press no time! But wait! Tarzan no got to best part, which mean REVISION! Ah, yes, revision. Do student know Louise Gluck make over FORTY DRAFT of single poem, and over half of draft just CHANGE SEMICOLON? Do student know that most 'serious poet' do nothing than sit at desk and REVISE POEM ALL DAY LONG? Because Tarzan poem 'never finished'! Tarzan teach strive toward make 'perfect' curious 'inwrought Tarzan thing' which ideal form and which also Stand Up To Test Of Time, because Tarzan poet not live in this world. Nosirree, live in next. Ugh.

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Flarf:

About Flarf. [epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/syllabi/readings/flarf.html](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/syllabi/readings/flarf.html)

Some Blogs maintained by Flarf members:

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