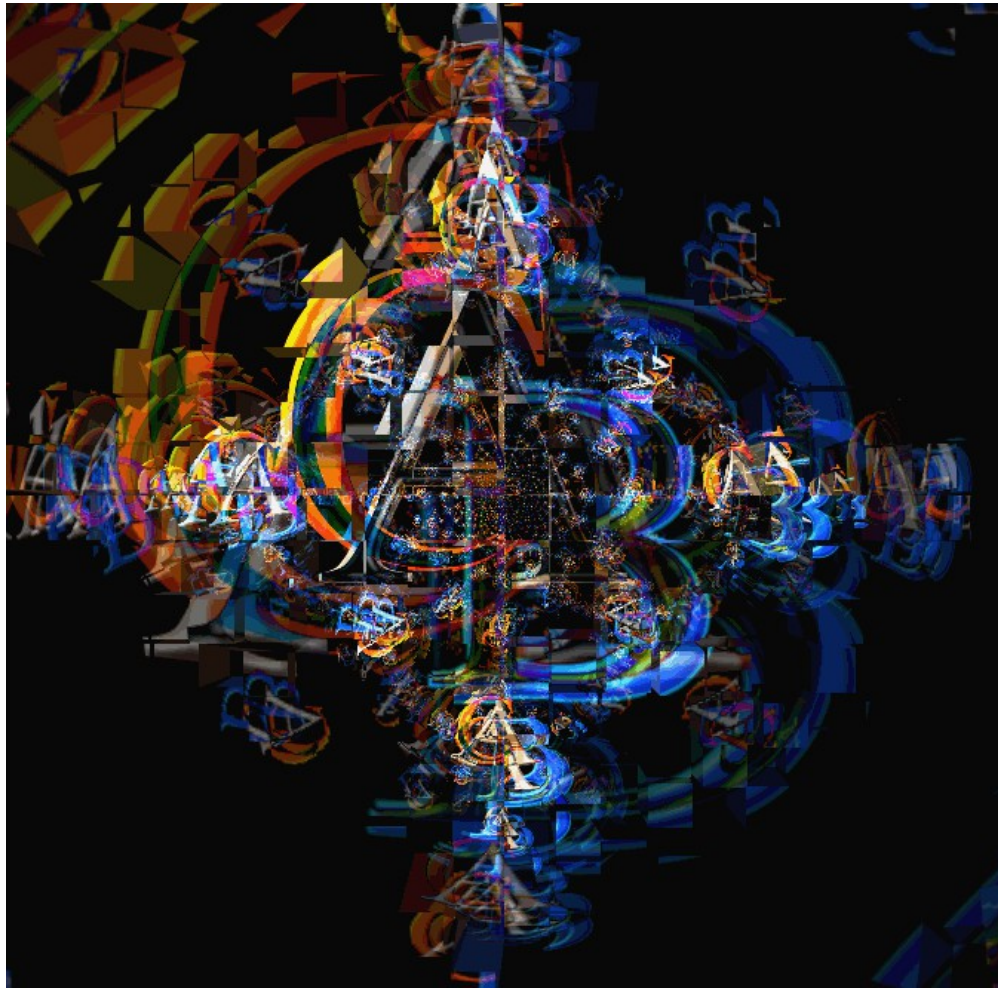


Digital Poetry in Digital Literacy

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*ABC Architecture,
Jim Andrews, 1999*

Digital Poetry in Digital Literacy

Poetry has been associated with the teaching of literacy for a long time. Because poetry, in some ways, is the cherry on the top of literacy. In poetry we see something approaching our full humanity expressed in the technology of writing. Writing is a complex, subtle, highly expressive technology. Poetry is typically considered the highest form of writing because that's where we learn how to feel—and sing—with language. Language in poetry can carry feeling, song, emotion, attitude, the tone of the inner voice, as well as thought.

And much more. One of the interesting properties of contemporary poetry is that there is no type of writing that poetry can't use for its own purposes. Poetry, like the universe itself, apparently, is continually expanding. As language expands, in some ways but not others, so does poetry. And as our collective experience changes in the world, so too does poetry explore the new languages of the day that inevitably arise from time and change. Poetry pushes the capabilities of poetry and language, tests it, throws it off a cliff, retrieves it, does it all again. In a heroic attempt to remain fully human in the face of technological change, tyranny, suffering, misinformation and the forces of dullness. Fully human, but expanded. Like poetry expands to comprehend more of the world.

Computing environments have changed our typical reading and writing environments a great deal. We now typically read and write not only language but also images, sound, video, and code/programming—and, of course, these are coded in various layers of languages from binary machine language to assembly language to ASCII to Unicode to MP3, MP4, JPG, PNG, GIF, SVG, HTML, CSS, JS, Python, HTTPS and whatnot, on and on. We also see many texts in foreign languages, whether we speak them or not.

Also, the texts we read are often now interactive. Programming responds to what we write. All this changes what it means to be literate in the contemporary world.

Just as poetry, for at least hundreds of years, has been the apogee of literacy, so too with digital poetry in digital literacy.

My first experiences with using electronic technology artistically go back to my radio days in the 80s. Let me tell you of the dawn, for me, of understanding something about using technology artistically. Because it's relevant now to our digital experience and to digital poetry/literature.

I produced a literary radio show in the 80's each week for six years. At first, what I did

was tape poets and fiction writers reading, and aired that. Sometimes I would do a bit of production on the material.

But then I heard a life-changing tape from Tellus. It was their #11 issue, [The Sound of Radio](#), and it featured work by [Gregory Whitehead](#), Susan Stone, Jay Allison, Helen Thorington and others. It was miles beyond what I was producing. It was interesting radio art. I was just putting work for print onto tape/radio. The Tellus tape was audio writing. This was art in its own right. Especially in the case of Whitehead and Stone, it was poetry not first written for the page, but composed with recorded sound from beginning to end though, of course, there might have been a script of some sort.

It wasn't simply that it was impressive technically, as produced audio. The point is that, as interesting poetry to listen to, as recorded sound or as radio, this was more interesting than listening to poets read their print poems. Some of them described themselves as *audio writers*. Whitehead did a tape called [Writing On Air](#); another work of his was called [Disorder Speech](#). These writers, also including William S. Burroughs, Paul Green, Douglas Kahn and Rod Summers, took radio and recorded sound seriously as artistic, writerly, poetic media. It was literary inscription in sound, on tape, in radio. Well beyond the *sound effect* or *radio drama*. And it opened up great vistas to me in the realm of poetry and language.

I started corresponding with and reading [essays by Whitehead](#) about radio art and the art of sound. Not only was Whitehead producing fantastic audio—he was writing about the poetics of radio art [brilliantly!](#)

I began to realize that creating exciting art for a particular medium was not the same as simply making art developed for one medium available in a different medium. Why is that?

Art that uses the special properties of its medium in interesting ways is not a weak echo of some other medium. The radio I'd been producing was not the art itself. It was providing an inferior experience of the books that the authors were flogging. The books were the art itself.

If you're not channeling the energy that flows through the special properties of the medium, those channels may work against you because energy flows through them whether you channel it or not. If you're not channeling it, the attention it gets—just by virtue of the nature of the medium—can be noise distracting the audience from whatever channels you are using.

I like to create textual works that are like the usual textual experience of print—or the simulation of print on the monitor. But then they suddenly depart from that whole world, take flight into the new programmerly medium of the computer with its mouse/keyboard interactivity and its luminous, dynamically changeable monitor/display. I've been doing that since my 1997 piece [Seattle Drift](#). Much of my life's work has been about trying to create a new type of poetry/art in browsers, trying to understand the literary and artistic dimensions of the programmerly, interactive and visual possibilities available with computers on the Internet.

This morning, I watched a [video](#) of Mark Knopfler talk about how he originally wrote “Sultans of Swing” on an acoustic guitar, but then redid it significantly after he started playing it with his electric stratocaster. “It was the nature of the sound from the stratocaster that made me change the music all around.” The song was, apparently, originally quite country and folksy. Playing it with the strat inspired a magical transformation on it into one of the greatest songs in rock and roll.

Dialing in the special properties of your medium is a lot like dialing in the special properties of an instrument you're using.

This topic about the value of dialing in the special properties of the medium is sometimes called *media specificity*; it's associated with the writings of the US American art critic [Clement Greenberg](#), primarily, perhaps, but the way I think of it predates my knowledge of Greenberg and is more associated with Gregory Whitehead and Marshall McLuhan. My friend Jeremy Owen Turner tells me that thinking on the matter goes back to Kant.

When people associate this topic with the term *media specificity* and associate it with Greenberg, they often give it short shrift. Because Greenberg didn't present *media specificity* very well, as in his injunction to *paint flat, because canvases are flat, and avoid 3d representation because canvases are flat*. Which is at least as much about championing abstract art as it is about plumbing the nature of painting. And there are other reasons why Greenbergian aesthetics are discounted, these days. But, as Jeremy pointed out, the topic actually goes back to Kant. It isn't a specifically Greenbergian topic. And if we phrase it as a dialing in of the special properties of an instrument you're using, it makes a lot more sense.

When we create something for digital media, we often *do* actually use a number of instruments. A word processor. A graphics program. Perhaps a video editor. I also use an HTML editor—mine is called [VSCode](#). I write HTML, CSS and JavaScript with it. I also sometimes record sound, edit and mix it. And combine it via interactive programming. And with visuals.

In digital media, everything is coded in zeros and ones, whether it's text, image, video, sound, or whatever. The languages in which the zeros and ones occur are typically different, but nonetheless, this common binary fundament, this common binary brine brings different arts and media into a kind of proximity that previously was unheard of.

This is all territory of digital poetry. Poetry is involved in our intensest use of language—and, in the digital, there are different languages to code different media—language and code are much broader in the digital. And all that language can be part of digital poetry. Poetry is all about our intensest engagements with language. Computers are both number and language machines.

So if we ask what the relevance of digital poetry is, say—and by that, I don't simply mean *digitized poetry* but poetry where the *computer is crucial* both for the *production* and *appreciation* of the work—we can say that it's important to digital literacy, to being fully literate in the digital. That also means it's important to the song in the heart.

Digital literacy is not only in knowing how to avoid being scammed and how to google the information you want, and how to check to see if it's accurate information—though that's important to being digitally literate—as opposed to being an easy mark for misinformation and scams.

It's also important to get a feel for how emotion and affect can be involved in interactivity. And how video and text can work together. And how sound and text and visuals can work together intellectually and emotionally. An important part of our contemporary computing experience is multimedia, the experience of several media at once. Multimedia poetry is intermedial, it relates the media, it makes them work together as one integrated experience. That is part of digital literacy too.

Poetry is where/how we learn to feel with language. Digital poetry is where/how we learn to feel with our expanded/changed language we experience in computing environments, our intermedial language, our interarts language, our new media language that is a confluence of language, image, sound, and interactivity.

While the digital can give us print and video and sound, etc—they're all just coded in zeros and ones—digital art is more than a bunch of old media tacked together. It's a new art form in itself. It isn't simply that it's uniquely multimedial or even intermedial, though

that's an important part of it. And it isn't simply that it's interactive, though that's important too. And it isn't simply that it's programmable. In his book [A Philosophy of Computer Art](#), Dominic Lopes proposes—as many others have—that computer art is, in fact, *a brand new form of art*. And if that's true, then simply digitizing other forms of art does not suffice to experience *computer art*—which is art in which the computer is crucial for both the *production* and *appreciation* of the art. It's art in which the computer is *crucial as the medium*.

Marshall McLuhan said that technologies are extensions of our senses. The telescope and microscope let us see things we can't see with the naked eye. Telescopes and microscopes extend our sight into the large and small. Telephones extend our hearing and voice over great distances. Technologies extend senses, our bodies, our capabilities. Computers extend our memory and our cognitive abilities.

We can know things with a google that otherwise would take us considerable research. We can now write songs and even videos with AI *prompts*, written things. You can literally write a video. The formerly-dreaded command-line is making a comeback, big-time. The GUI was all about replacing the command-line. The GUI was total visualization of the previously textual, the command-line. Now the hot job is *prompt engineer*. Writing has many, many forms. This is but one of them. Yet they are all related in their primary focus on *language*—albeit an expanded sense of *language*, that also comprehends *code* as a part of language, or a type of language.

Computers extend our senses, bodies, and abilities/capabilities, but it's digital poetry and other digital art (computer art) that extends our humanity throughout our new dimensions. Without computer art, the extensions of us we acquire via the digital are as claws without feeling. Digital art gets the blood flowing through our new appendages, gets the feelings going. We begin to be able to think and feel at once—together—with computers, through intermedial, interactive, interestingly programmed computer art. Without computer art, computers are merely *productivity tools*, machines you use (some would say *slave over*) at work. Digital art turns them into extensions of our humanity. Using computers creatively, beneficially for the betterment and delight of our fellow human beings is an important part of what digital poetry aspires to.