Navigating *The Forest*

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ABSTRACT

The Forest, my ongoing collaboration with online SPAM bots, may be most succinctly understood as a (slightly tampered-with) machine capable of producing a constant stream of digital poetry. The creation of such writing perhaps requires minimal effort compared to what is needed for its interpretation. This essay attempts to situate *The Forest* within a field of precedent work in and about combinatorial poetry, namely that of Burroughs and Calvino. It also explores the media through which the work may be experienced, which, though web-based, clearly retains many of the tropes of cinematic experience described by Manovich.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

A.m [**Miscellaneous**]

General Terms

Experimentation, Human Factors

Keywords

digital poetry, interpretation, new media objects, modes of experience

1. FOR REFERENCE & ILLUSTRATION

The work discussed in this paper may be readily accessed (in one of its forms) at this website:

http://www.waterandlight.net/theforest

Reading the essay in conjunction with a visit to the site is recommended.

2. BACKGROUND

I began my foray into the world of web publishing in 2006. Immediately, I began to experiment with a set of pre-packaged tools offered by the Yahoo! web hosting service. Among other things, this included a script designed to provide a guestbook where visitors to my site could enter comments, ostensibly about the site or its content, and see them published immediately and publicly. Around the same time, I began to notice a profusion of SPAM arriving in my email inboxes. Often intrigued by the seemingly random strings of words these emails contained, I sought to illustrate my admiration and enjoyment of this digital poetry (despite being unaware that such a term existed). I chose particularly interesting SPAM messages and began copying and pasting them into my guestbook, while simultaneously enabling and modifying the program's emoticon feature. In this way, certain character combinations in the text were replaced by animated graphics. The effect was visually striking. I was attempting to create a metaphor, conveying my personal feeling that this SPAM was art, by stylizing it visually. Soon, my cutting and pasting became unnecessary for the project as SPAM bots discovered the guestbook and began posting to it directly.

3. THE LITERARY MACHINE

Combinatorial poetry is not a novel concept. Burroughs describes an attempt in the 1920s by Tristan Tzara to assemble poetry extemporaneously by drawing words from a hat. [1] *The Forest* operates much on the same principle, but with a much larger hat. Lacking intimate knowledge of the workings of SPAM bot code, I can only speculate as to the exact origins of the textual fodder regurgitated onto the guestbook page, but let us assume that the words and phrases are either taken from terms entered into search engines by human users of the world wide web or intended to emulate the syntax and content of those search terms. In a way, the text is a mirror, reflecting the preoccupying thoughts of everyday web users.

Authored text; that collection of words composed in a motivated way by a particular human, requests (implies, demands?) a particular reader, specifically, one who takes the mindset that the author is attempting to convey a specific meaning, and who hopes to understand its particulars. The subject position in this case constitutes an attempt on the part of consciousness to discover itself in the other, i.e., the reader looks to find the meaning of the text as the author intended it within her own mental landscape. She seeks to think as the author at the moment of inscription.

Certainly, the myth of singular authorial determinism is rarely embraced wholeheartedly, as many readers understand their roles as active creators of meaning. *The Forest* playfully highlights this agency of the observer in the signification process, a power often made transparent in more conventionally authored material. Calvino: "The literature machine can perform all the permutations possible on a given material, the the poetic result will be the particular effect of one of these on a man (sic) endowed with consciousness and an unconscious, that is, an empirical and historical man (sic). It will be the shock that occurs only if the writing machine is surrounded by the hidden ghosts of the individual and his society." [2]

Thus, we may understand any meaning derived from the text as a culturally mediated projection on the part of the user. Coupled with an already mirrored surface (the collected search terms), *The*

Forest provokes contemplation of fragmented thoughts whose origin might as well be oneself (given a viewer who uses search engines). And if interpretation of one's own thoughts proves difficult and/or multiple, one might emerge to revisit authored writing and find it also to afford less certainty and more room for play.

This peculiar readership resonates, though only partially, with Aarseth's discussion of nonlinear text: "This self-consciousness forces us to take responsibility for what we read and to accept that it can never be the text itself." [3]. Hypertext is described as a script laden with forks, and thus relies on the reader's navigational decisions for propulsion. Close inspection of a page in *The Forest* reveals possibilities for hypertextual direction; one can click a link and head off into the world wide sunset. But this is not a completely relevant feature of the work, and the non-linearity of hypertext can be disputed (the possibility of multiple trajectories does not change the fact that each is still linear). More remarkable is *The Forest*'s bizarre similarity to the *I Ching*, noted by Aarseth for its function as an oracle. The text maintains an ambiguity so insistent as to answer any question equally well (and thus entertain any interpretation).

Recall that Tzara's performance of combinatorial poetry took place within the context of the surrealist movement. Perhaps that is one appropriate ancestry to claim for this work: no strict sense is easily made of its content or scale, yet each comprising piece *seems* comprehensible in isolation.

4. INTERFACES

"The new media object consists of one or more interfaces to a database of multimedia material." [4] Manovich provides a convenient categorical definition for the new media art object. The Forest has been presented in various forms, each utilizing a different interface:

First, access to the work is available to anyone with an internet connection. By browsing to the site on a personal computer, the user finds it possible to experience the site in an essentially cinematic modality. That is, she sits in front of a screen that presents a moving image (Manovich's "dynamic screen" subtype [5]), a virtual space separate from the physical space inhabited by her body. The action of the scrolling text is reminiscent of rolling credits at the end of a film.

Cinema's purchase on this interface is tenuous, however. In addition to a relatively passive, immobile mode of viewership, mouse clicks and key presses allow the user a directly creative (interactive?) role. The page may be scrolled at will. Perhaps more importantly, anyone can add an entry to the guestbook, putting them on common footing with SPAM bots.

The piece has also been installed in a quasi-gallery setting. [6] The installation consists of slightly outdated computer hardware positioned on and beneath a dilapidated desk and chairs. The user is still confronted with a screen, but now the screen is contextualized within a mildly dream scene-like environment (as opposed to the ideally dark, transparent movie house). This complicates the notion of the screen as a virtual window by adding a layer, a physical window, to the experience.

Perhaps the most cinematic manifestation of the work is a video loop entitled *Lindsey Lohan Drugs*. [7] This piece is projected like a film, but onto a gallery wall instead of a movie screen. Though the viewer's body is limited in its capacity to move freely while viewing the work, by no means must she remain still.

A printed excerpt entitled *Lumber* has also been shown. One massive page, the print acts as a different kind of screen with resonances spanning Manovich's historical trajectory from Renaissance painting to computer monitor. [8]

The fact of staging multiple interfaces, as Manovich explains, can be seen as a representation (or performance) of the tendency in new media work (including *The Forest)* to invite multiple interpretative, experiential, and use strategies.

5. REFERENCES

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