

Pitch: become rich and famous! Submit to Hyperrhiz today! Free cybernetic implants!

Although this workshop is mostly about the creative process, I wanted to focus on what to do with the code/multimedia works at the other end of that process – i.e. where do they go? How do we evaluate them? And how (or should) we try to ensure their long-term survival?

I thought I'd bookend this talk with two statements that express the neurosis that comes with working with machines in my capacity as an editor of the new media/net art journal *hyperrhiz.net*. So here's the first one:

“It is, as it were, the ground zero of all hermeneutically-inclined theorizing: on the one hand, a body in all its vulnerable nakedness; on the other, media technologies in all their mindless impartiality; and between them nothing but the exchange of noise that only a certain amount of focused delusion can arrange into deeper meanings.” – Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, from Intro to Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*.

I'm going to start out by enumerating a few of those “focused delusions” that I see in my work as an editor. Marjorie this morning pulled out a fabulous quote about editing being an afterthought in the creative process, and we all laughed, so that's a good starting point for this paper, since what I want to do is talk about the intellectual work of the editor. And what I'm particularly interested in is how machinic the process of electronic *editorship* and *critique* might be – not just in terms of instrumental mechanization but also in terms of what kinds of operations can we do that are entirely new.

Electronic editing is quite like some old print editing processes, specifically *homiletics*, which can be defined as the study of the analysis, classification, preparation, composition and delivery (Encyc. Britannica) of sermons – and note how this has to do with the sacredness of the text, its inviolability. It's true that much of what an editor does is what Nick called "refactoring" and "compression" in the wiki. But there's also a lot of synthesis work to be done. In any editorial process, the editor is tasked with selecting and make a remix of the works in a way that makes sense as an "issue" (& I'll come back to this remixing later). For the moment, though, let's talk about the everyday practices of the editor.

I: the Machine Editor.

I'll start with the idea of the editor as a kind of machine. How much of what I do is fairly mechanical in nature? There are three key questions I have to ask myself:

- How do I deal with the review process?
- How do I deal with attribution?
- How do I decide what to archive, and how do I do it?

1a) firstly, the review process itself.

This one's the easiest one to routinize and mechanize, with tools like e-journal, so I won't bother talking about it except to say that email is both a friend and an enemy in this regard.

1b) secondly, the problem of attribution.

One of the issues with archiving, as Ted Nelson has been pointing out, is attribution: but not just attribution of content. There's also attribution of form to consider, i.e. what software packages or languages do we use? Alan pointed this out yesterday - when we re-use code (modules, etc from the web), we don't usually attribute it (except maybe in the comments).

The problem with citation, or even transclusion, is that it's really designed for attribution of content, rather than the *form* of a media composition. One solution to this is to look back again at an old print tradition, which in this case is the *colophon*. Why choose the colophon and not attribution? Because traditionally a colophon deals with the aspects of the "assembly" of a book - font, designer, printing process. I posit the use of a colophon in recognition of the movement from creative attribution to the role of the machine in the creation of a piece. In other words, "This is the tool I used" as well as "this is the intellectual trajectory I followed". Surprisingly it's actually very hard to get some artists to volunteer this information - perhaps because it would suggest a machinic element to their work.

Perhaps, though, what is needed is a hybrid, a kind of "critical colophon", because one of the open questions would be what happens if the code *is* the intellectual trajectory of a piece?

1c) thirdly, moving onto archiving, or lasting structures.

Last year the ELO through Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin authored a pamphlet (encyclical?) entitled "Acid-Free Bits". This crucial document points to a recognition that electronic works, which are ephemeral in nature because of the constant turnover of software and hardware, need to be preserved in some way. Two early suggestions in the pamphlet are 1) to preserve working, antique platforms with each work (last year at the ELO symposium, for example, the "door prize" was an early, working Mac, now practically an antique, with a full complement of software and creative titles), and 2) to try and convert the works into a standards-compliant, future-proofed format insofar as we can.

Perversely, though, electronic media *wants* to disappear. William Gibson messed with our notions of preservation when he put together *Agrippa*, the book that destroyed itself, so I thought I'd talk briefly about intentionally ephemeral media works. Certainly there's something attractive about the ephemeral/instantly erasing work. And perhaps it takes us back nostalgically to the time before writing, the age of orality. In fact, perhaps it would be better to compare media works not with print texts but with performative/installation art pieces. Two examples of embodied "writing" can illustrate the disappearance of creative writing and/or critique through performance. I'm thinking about Marcel O'Gorman's *DREADmill* (2006-2007), and Dene Grigar's work in *When Ghosts Will Die* (2005-2006) and *Rhapsody Room* (2007-2008). Because each is a performance, the work disappears as they are displayed – more like performance/oral tradition/RUN_TIME works than writing.

(as a sidebar, this is similar to Alan's q to Mary yesterday about students presenting papers (do they give actual demos of the code?). & what we see is some kind of split going on between explanation & presentation (again critique & performance).)

This is not to say that these ephemeral works will be lost though. Of the recommendations in *Acid Free Bits*, it's the lowest-tech, most enduring one that takes my fancy. The study suggests that exhaustive documentation (not *recording*, but *description* – maybe you could call it *ekphrasis*) is perhaps the best way to preserve pieces that might inevitably decay. What's interesting is that the best documentation of new media projects can be so low-tech. Matt Kirschenbaum notes,

Despite its being a uniquely volatile electronic object -its own internal mechanisms radically ephemeral by both intent and design- "Agrippa" has proven remarkably persistent and durable over the years. No model of digital textuality that rests upon the new medium's supposedly radically unstable ontology can be taken seriously so long as countless copies of this particular text remain only a search query away.

This method of preservation is the product of, as Matt calls it, a "complex network of individuals, communities, ideologies, markets, technologies, and motives". I think of it as the "crowdsourcing" model of preservation.

II: The machine critic

Now we've dealt with the machine as editor, so I'll move on to the idea of the machine as critic. I was struck by what Andy Oram said yesterday, that the "distinction between expression & function is almost impossible to sustain". Although an editor functions as a re-factory, if you like, he/she also has to conduct the work of critique, in order to figure out what's worth passing on for review.

What is critique? Most immediately, it's

- a way of identifying patterns
- visualization of important images (machine eyes?)
- most importantly, an intellectual uncovering (and I'll come back to this

definition later, since it's only half of the story)

The first two are parts of the process we could also possibly automate, given the right set of technologies and knowledge bases. Once we've automated the process of identification and visualization/recognition, we need to get onto actually commenting on the work. I've dredged up some more print words, which I'm sure I won't do justice to, but here goes:

First off, there's the *Postil* or *Postilla*: which is a medieval Latin term for a marginal note or a Biblical commentary affixed to a text. This is an operation you can see worked out variously with Nelson's sidebar transclusion, or with forms of tagging and notation, like Mark Marino's "Marginalia in the Library of Babel". And it's fairly

straightforward because it seeks basically to explain, rather than interpret.

The next step is to move onto the potential critical role of the machine. I've got another two old words here: *exegesis* and *eisegesis*. The word *exegesis* can mean explanation, but as a technical term it means to draw the meaning *out* of a given text. *Eisegesis*, on the other hand, means to read one's own interpretation *into* a given text. In general, *exegesis* presumes an attempt to view the text objectively, while *eisegesis* implies more subjectivity. These are the job of the human critic, the undoing/uncovering/ and perhaps even vandalism or destruction of cultural materials. What I suspect (and maybe I'm wrong) is that one could automate the former (*exegesis*), given enough of a knowledge base, but maybe not the latter (*eisegesis*).

SO what's the point of doing all this explaining and analysis? I'd say it's to reveal something, to see what happens when we rip off the scab. Criticism does this explicitly, through analysis, while creative writing does it implicitly, through stagings of formula and meaning. The machine could be thought of as a combination ripping/suturing tool, allowing us to explicitly both stage meaning and analyze meaning in an electronic environment. So I thought I'd be a traditional critic for a moment, and ask whether a machine could be taught to do it (or if we'd even want to).

I enjoyed Rita's discussion yesterday of death, dying, and decay in the works of texts like Agrippa. & I especially liked the way she formulated it as "the dynamism of decay" rather than an absence. Stephanie also talked about the "layeredness" of occultation (hiddenness), & I have the perfect example here, which is "GOO", by our very own Sandy Baldwin, from *hyperrhiz 02*.

<quicktime layers are stripped away to reveal the skull>

I love how this piece reminds me of Holbein's "The Ambassadors" - where the skull is there, but only if you turn the painting almost side-on. The act of turning off quicktime layers is kind of the same. (Slavoj Zizek does a very nice analysis of this in "Looking Awry", where he talks about the way that the only way you can confront death is by turning everything else sideways so it's unrecognizable).

It's fully fitting that there would be death underneath this piece, and under many pieces, because that's the ultimate fate of multimedia projects: just by their format they're already halfway to death with obsolescence.

Now, I want to say that the above piece of analysis might be mechanized. But ultimately, for me it is John Cayley's question from yesterday: "does this speak to the heart and mind"? A machine critic will automatically read all those Quicktime layers (and recognize them as individual layers) but how would the machine be able to pull out & recognize that one layer, and recognize the "heart and mind", the poignancy or the abjectness of the death signifier? (& this is the difference between sight and recognition).

So the question is, is machine critique even something we should attempt? Should we be trying to squash electronic works into a print-based model of presentation, analysis, or even preservation? Or should we try to do something different with our machines, and make a new mashed-up genre that both archives pieces and recontextualizes them.

In the spirit of Gibson's perverseness, then, I'd like today to embrace the ephemerality and multimediality of the works, and suggest that we might consider going back to the far more Homeric, oral tradition of recombining elements from multiple sources. In other words, chop multimedia works up until they float around in free fall, and then stick them back together in unexpected ways. You could call this recombinant or "run-time" archiving. I'd love to get hold of the Eastgate catalog, for example, and build a machine that would randomly sample the works, extract screens or sections, and then recombine them to create a new work. This would be like the machine in orbit in William Gibson's *Count Zero*, which grabs pieces of flotsam and arranges them in forms that are heartbreaking and inhumanly human.

For my own purposes, what I'd like to do is to try to get an excerpting system going at *Hyperrhiz*, a kind of machinic editor that would excerpt random pieces from the works in the journal, and string them together and re-present them on the front page (& if anyone can help me do this, I'd be open to suggestions!).

There are, of course, some basic problems with such an exercise. How do we capture flash? audio? video? the "interactive"? php? Laurie was talking to me about this yesterday & it seems like we'd have to convert every sample to one format (probably image or video). In order to do this, we'd have to follow Rita's quote of Matthew Fuller: a "standardization as pre-condition for transmutability" (ie changing from one state to another). The "channels" would have to be flattened (as in Photoshop and most other

track-based authoring systems). My question is, would this process be scholarship? Creativity? Or would it be tool-creation and coding?

I'm kind of torn. On the one hand, I want the machine to be able to try a mashing up and re-presentation of works - particularly if there is an element of randomness that could be left in it, like Gibson's machine. In addition, it's a dream we academics often share: that we could "automate" our writing in some way, snip out the neurosis that is inherent in writing. But on the other hand, I'm a little apprehensive about what machine critique means for the role of the critic as we've traditionally imagined it. If a machine *could* learn to pick out the "unconscious" of the text, then we might not be left with much to do. So I'm going to end here with a final quote, to express that apprehension:

This is the ultimate horror: not the proverbial ghost in the machine but the machine in the ghost: there is no plotting agent behind it, the machine just runs by itself, as a blind contingent device. Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies*