Max Kanter

Final Draft – Digital Poems

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**Redefining a Reader’s Interaction with a Poem**

During our visit to GAMBIT, Philip Tan said to our class that video games are simply the natural progression of games into the digital era. Likewise, digital poetry can be thought of in the same way. Digital poems use the fundamental ideas of the art form, but take advantage of and explore the unique aspects of the new medium to create some innovative. What interests me the most are the ideas that redefined the way readers interact with the poem and significance of the technology that enabled these ideas.

The most important way readers interact with a poem is how they consume it. A traditional poem can either be read aloud to a listener or read by a reader. The variety of media that are used in a digital poem allowed me to challenge this assumption in my digital poem. The piece I created allowed a reader to traverse an audio recording of a poem by hovering over the words of the poem that were printed on the screen. It allowed for the benefits of a spoken poem – the reader can hear the inflection, cadence, etc. of the author – as well as the benefits of reading a poem – the reader can progress at his or her own pace. Combining these two modes of consumption lead to a reading experience that the reader guides, but does not have complete control over. This resulted in a blending of author’s intent with what the reader brings to the poem. As a side effect of this, not only does the experience vary from reader to reader, but also from time to time for one reader.

The dynamic nature of digital poems means that authors can explore the possibility of reader interaction influencing the presentation. Unlike traditional poems, the presentation of a digital can be determined at the time of presentation. An excellent example of this is the poem by a group of three kids in the class about control. They had the reader use the arrow keys on the keyboard to direct the visual progression of the poem. The group took advantage of the digital, dynamic medium by purposefully responding increasingly unpredictably to reader inputs as the poem progressed. The user interaction meant the reader actually experienced what the written words were communicating. Conversely, in a traditional poem, a reader has to take the words in and mentally construct meaning out of them. Here, the digital medium allowed the group’s message to be communicated in an extremely powerful way.

Unfortunately, creating the most innovative reader experience with a digital poem has a high barrier to entry. It took me hours to create the code for my poem that played multiple audio clips depending on computer mouse position, in addition to years of learning how to doing the coding itself. This marks a large difference from traditional poems, which anyone who can write could make an attempt at creating. This barrier to entry, however, makes digital poem especially interesting to me. When I saw demos, especially the ones from the guest speakers, I was often left wondering how an author technologically created the piece. This is somewhat analog to when I wonder how an author came up with a beautiful line in a traditional poem.

I think a next step for digital poetry is a way to make it just as accessible as traditional poetry. There is an indication that this is already happening. Amaranth Borsuk, for instance, mentioned that she had easily repurposed an open sourced programming library to implement the augmented reality effect in her piece. It would be very interesting to see the poetry created if the technological challenges of creating a digital poem were completely abstracted away.