

Disasters Natural and Digital: the Secret Technologies of Jason Nelson

Like most people living in Europe during April 2010, for a couple of weeks my attentions were turned to the skies above and Iceland, where Eyjafjallajökul, a volcano with a name I could not even pronounce, was spitting enough ash into the sky to disrupt the travel plans of hundreds of thousands of people, myself included. It was, we learned, a minor catastrophe, if only a shadow of what may yet occur, when its cousin Katla blows. For a few weeks I became an amateur volcanologist. I followed every breaking news article I could click. I searched Wikipedia and learned of the 1821 and 1823 eruptions. The prime minister of Iceland told us that while Iceland was prepared, the world had better prepare itself for the eventuality that Katla will erupt, bringing with it far more serious disruptions. Delving deeper into Wikipedia, I learned of the 1783 eruption of Laki. I read that when Laki erupted, a CLOUD OF POISON GAS drifted from Iceland to Bergen, Norway. In Bergen it rained microscopic glass, and then hail, and then it snowed, and now I was confronting the distant but very real possibility that the eruption of a volcano in Iceland, a faraway place with very small horses and beautiful scenery, might result in clouds of suffocating gasses right here in Bergen. I kept following the links, and it only got worse. I learned that Yellowstone, the beloved national park in the USA and home to the Old Faithful geyser, actually conceals a SUPERVOLCANO, a caldera some 34 miles (55 km) wide by 45 miles (72 km) across. The last super eruptions of Yellowstone occurred some 2.1 million, 1.3 million, and 640,000 years ago. Opinions are divided, but math tells me every 600,000 or so years, this geological monster unleashes its horrible wrath on whatever lifeforms happen to be occupying the planet at that point in time. Which means, yes, we're due! Oh my.

All of this disaster calls to mind the work of digital poet, net artist, 2009 Weird Webby Award winner and all-around Flash freak Jason Nelson. The Oklahoman poet, transported by fate and employment to the Gold Coast region of Australia, is one of the most prolific and best-known digital poets working today. From down under, he crafts and unleashes his playful and disturbing works, which he describes as "creatures" or "monsters", on the unsuspecting Web, like a Dr. Frankenstein hiding out in his secret beachside lab in Surfer's Paradise. He has produced more

than 30 individual pieces in the past decade from his platform at <http://secrettechnology.com>, working in intermedial genres that dwell somewhere between poem, story, game, folk art, interface design, and documentary. His aesthetic is a uniquely strange one that fearlessly embraces all manner of noise and kitsch, yet it is also particularly native to the Web. Disasters and the absurd are both textual motifs and the governing principals of Nelson's approach to visual design.

Nelson's work is often darkly humorous. Take for example his online slot machine / micro-story generator "This is how you will die." Framed as a casual online game, the reader takes turns spinning a slot machine that delivers combinatory tales of his or her own death. Rather than cherries and lemons, the individual windows deliver tiles of tales, which may or may not make some kind of sense:

While walking to the office, in a slow swishing gate, to sign forms,
You fall into a dumpster, severing your wrists on broken stained
glass windows,/ at least, for a few minutes, you have given
someone/thing a defining purpose./ Your last few words are
heard by a nurse who uses them to charm rich women./ And sales
of your previous poetry books are still not enough to pay for lunch.

Of course, if I am not satisfied with this sorry tale of my fate, I can keep playing the game until I have used up my "demise credits." If I am confused by the strange rules of this game, I can even click on a button to "explain death." Not that it will make my "death spin" or the circumstances of life that preceded it, any less absurd. If spinning through multiple scenarios of my personal demise is not enough for me, I can visit Nelson's piece "Endings End" which will provide countdowns for 25 different doomsday scenarios of a larger scale than the termination of my own petty existence, ranging from "The End of Music" to "Monster Goldfish" or "Gut Spawn," the details of which are too sickening to divulge.

Nelson seems preoccupied with the idea that beneath the comfortable façade of everyday life, secrets are hidden. The abstract of his work "Between Treacherous Objects" explains, "these interactive layers are packaged by our obsession with objects and their terrible dark between." This piece showcases one of Nelson's interface innovations,

which has been to reject the web convention of a two-dimensional screen and insist that we navigate deeper, swimming into a three-dimensional axis. We navigate in layers between objects, such as a dumpster and a credit card, or a hamburger and a gun, or a bottle of prescription pills and a wedding cake, or a sofa and communications tower. Along the way, we might encounter poetic meditations; say on the history of dumpsters and garbage disposal systems alongside information about interest rates. Throughout the piece plays with our perceptions of the objects and rituals and contemporary consumerist life, and the secret relations between objects and the systems controlling their production and distribution.

Nelson's more poetic works are probably less trafficked than his "gamelike" creations. The three games in his "art game trilogy" play with the conventions of computer games to address subjects and aesthetics that are rarely encountered in computer games. The first of the trilogy "Game, game, and again game or Belief systems are small clumsy rolling-type creatures" is a game that adheres to the game-play style of platform computer games, such as Super Mario, but presents us with a world of roughly hand-drawn sprites and obstacles. Each level has a particular thematic, usually related to a particular theological or ideological approach to life – the levels have titles such as The Fundamentalist, The Buddhist, or The Capitalist. As the player progresses through the game, , short texts related to the theme of the level are delivered on the screen. Each level has thematic iconography, and video Easter eggs appear as the player progresses. On the Capitalist level, for instance, the player leaps onto dollar signs and receives short texts having to do with obsessions for certain shiny new objects (a brand new bicycle) and other fetishistic consumerist thoughts. The Easter egg is a short video of a Christmas scene, heaps of packages under the tree, while someone asks and someone else tries to remember if the family piano has ever been played.

The second game in Nelson's art games trilogy, "I made this. You play this. We are enemies." is both a meditation on the agonistic relationship between game developers and game users on one hand, and a deconstruction of the relationships between web users, developers, and web design conventions on the other. It could also be described, as by author and *Boing Boing* contributor Cory Doctorow, as just plain "*fucked up*" and "resembl(ing) the unmistakable bonkerosity of the complicated

sketches left behind the crazy people who used to sit at their own tables in the library.” The gameworld is made of up doodles and texts layered on top of levels based around some of the most popularly utilized web sites (Level 1 is Google, Level 2 is Yahoo, Level 3 is Fark). The result is a cross between a sophisticated semiotic commentary on contemporary digital culture and aesthetics and the insane ravings of a madman.

The third and most recent of Nelson’s art games, “Evidence of Everything Exploding” is based around the idea of conspiracy theories hidden in “semi-historical documents.” So where “I made this . . .” used popular websites to establish motifs, the levels in this game are built upon a collection of odd documents, such as a page of an old dictionary, an announcement of a Dadaist festival, a NASA moon flight plan, and Bill Gate’s “hobbyist letter”, which seemingly have no readily apparent connections between them. Along the way, the reader launches various written and spoken texts related and unrelated to the background material – a snatch of a Robert Frost poem attached to the dictionary, a bit of a Malcom X speech juxtaposed with a Dadaist environment. Some of the texts and visual symbols are more obviously related than others. On the Bill Gates level, his famous hobbyist letter attacking hobbyists who copy and use software is overlaid with phrases like “Mine mine all mine,” while the player is attacked by bees and wasps labeled BG and MS. While the message about the hypocrisy of Gates’ letter comes through loud and clear, why this level, for instance, is followed by a level dedicated to a 1918 outbreak of the Spanish Flu might be less apparent. Perhaps any attempt to “read” the game at all, to find meaning in these juxtapositions, is to engage in exactly the sort of conspiracy-theory activity the game is about and for which the infinitely interconnected Web provides a fertile breeding ground.

Nelson’s works ultimately remind us that in a network of endless connections, our paranoid thoughts are, after all, probably irrational and absurd. Then again, you never know. Sometimes an airborne toxic event floats right into your back yard.