

E-CyberDigital Poetry: To Grasp or to Build a Genre Identity through a Term's Choice?

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Abstract

In recent years, the field of digital poetry had at least three major critical monographs discussing the genre and its state-of-the-art. Loss Pequeño Glazier (2002), Brian Kim Stefans (2003) and Christopher T. Funkhouser (2007) have not only introduced new critical perspectives, but have also discussed the genre's problematic definition and its denominations' variety: e-poetry, cyberpoetry and digital poetry.

Considering Theo Lutz's *Stochastische Texte* (1959) as the first work of programmable poetry, one should note the genre's long history of practice in spite of its shorter history of critical writing. Therefore, the way authors have been coining and defining the genre itself claims for a theorization standpoint and helps shaping the field towards a specific path and perhaps a crystallized historical construction.

Do the referenced terms position their authors in a similar flow of thought? By following a concept's trajectory and the author's choice, one must consider the fact that its crystallization will shape future critical writing. In this sense, it is important to discuss this diversity and track important differences. Therefore, I argue that one needs to identify an option towards genre definition and keep a solid and accountable reference to it. For that matter, I find digital poetry a suitable concept to adopt when considering works of poetry that take advantage of networked and programmable media.

Keywords: Electronic Literature, E-Poetry, Digital Poetry, Cyberpoetry, Digital Poetics, Genre Definition

Poetry engaging with computational and programmable media has been a field open to experimentation since, at least, 1959, the year when Theo Lutz, under Max Bense's

guidance, published his “Stochastische Texte” [Stochastic Texts], an article presenting his permutation investigations on Franz Kafka’s *Das Schloss* [The Castle] (1926) using a text generator for poetic creation on Zuse Z22. Thenceforth, programmable poetry via electronic and digital media has come a long way, particularly after the widespread access to the World Wide Web, in the 1990s, when language, code and network started sharing a common space.

Notwithstanding, the genre and its multiple subgenres have undergone various classifications and, more precisely, various umbrella terms, depending on the creative or theoretical author, the period of creation or theory, cultural and national historical traditions, and language, which surely manifest different stages in the evolution of the field. A brief, even if debatable, exposition can help mapping part of this diversity and quickly understand the panoramic discussion about the field’s nomenclature.

In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, between the 1960s and 80s it was popular the label “computer poetry,” in close affiliation with “computer art.” One could recall Marc Adrian’s work and text at the exhibition *Cybernetic Serendipity* (1968), Edwin Morgan and Margaret Masterman’s work or Richard Bailey’s *Computer Poems* anthology (1973). In France, several threads, with Abraham Moles, Paul Braffort, Jacques Roubaud, Jacques Donguy, Jean-Philippe Balpe, Philippe Bootz, Philippe Castellin, Jean-Marie Dutey, Tibor Papp, Alain Vuillemin and others helped establishing the term *poésie générée/assistée par ordinateur* (computer-generated/assisted poetry) and *poésie numérique* (numerical poetry). In Portugal, still in the 1970s, with the diffusion of information theory and cybernetics, it was introduced the concept of *literatura cibernética* (cybernetic literature) and *autopoesia* (automatic poetry), with Pedro Barbosa’s *A Literatura Cibernética 1: Autopoemas Gerados por Computador* [Cybernetic Literature 1: Computer Generated Autopoems] (1977). Barbosa’s concept would evolve as *ciberpoesia* (cyberpoetry) in the 1990s. This concept would be considered in the late 1990s and 2000s by other authors, such as Brian Kim Stefans (2003), *apud* Espen Aarseth’s “cybertext” taxonomy. Moreover, during the 1980s, E. M. de Melo e Castro (1988), a pioneer of videopoetry, described the creative relation between computation and poetry as *poesia informacional* (informational poetry) or *infopoesia* (infopoetry), whilst Silvestre Pestana even referred to some of his own poems as “video-computer-poetry” (1985: 205). In Germany, during the 1990s, with the emergence of the Internet, the German school renames the field as *netzliteratur* (net literature), in connection with the label

“net.art,” paying considerable attention to *digitale poesie* (digital poetry), with Johannes Auer, Jörgen Schäfer, Peter Gendolla, Friedrich W. Block, Christiane Heibach, Florian Cramer, Saskia Reither (*computerpoesie*) and Beat Suter. In Brazil, one shall acknowledge the *poesia de computador* (computer poetry) by Erthos Albino de Souza mostly developed during the 1970s. Eduardo Kac, a pioneer of holopoetry in the 1980s, disseminated a broader category of “new media poetry” (1996), whereas Jorge Luiz Antonio, researching electronic poetry (2005), inventoried tens of different labels concerning computer-mediated poetry. In the U.S., with the models of the Electronic Poetry Center (1995-onwards) and the Electronic Literature Organization (1999-onwards) the genre has been defined as “electronic poetry”, with Loss Pequeño Glazier, Stephanie Strickland, N. Katherine Hayles, Talan Memmott, Scott Rettberg, Nick Montfort, Sandy Baldwin, amongst others, as main advocates. Both “e-poetry,” an abbreviation of “electronic poetry” (a simile with “e-mail” and “electronic mail”), and “digital poetry” became widespread terms during the first decade of the 21st century and still prevail today. They are employed in a commutable manner by a more heterogenous group (in terms of language, region or nationality), such as John Cayley, André Vallias, Friedrich Block, Karin Wenz, Roberto Simanowski, Christopher T. Funkhouser, Rui Torres, Manuel Portela, Maria Engberg, David (Jhave) Johnston, Judd Morrissey, proving the very essence of a global community of authors.

A basic argument cannot offend, nor be dismissed: we are primarily speaking and writing about the same thing, or a set of common things, when we refer either to computer poetry, infopoetry, new media poetry, cyberpoetry, electronic poetry or digital poetry. However, it is relevant to pinpoint the most recent full-length models about the genre and certainly why it is important to discuss them in order to, at least, keep a defensible and unique concept throughout one’s study. Writing on a subject such as genre construction and analysis cannot be an innocent task. Therefore our options must be accountable for it.

Loss Pequeño Glazier’s *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (2002) presents several distinctive “material qualities” of electronic media and “conditions” of digital poetics, arguing for a coherent model of electronic poetry within the broader spectrum of digital poetics. Simply reading this sentence, one can already locate the ambivalence of definitions in what touches the coinage of the genre itself. On the one hand, throughout the monograph, *poetry* acquires a meaning of “innovative poetry” (1, 181). On the other hand, there is a high degree of ambivalence concerning the term

“digital poetry,” even if Glazier clearly clarifies: “There is no agreed-upon term for digital poetry. It will sometimes be referred to in this volume as digital poetry, electronic poetry, e-poetry, computer-poetry, or computer-generated writing” (181). Besides these designations, one also finds “Web-based electronic writing” (5) and its shorter form, “e-writing” (2). Such an acknowledgement, even if the author does not specify latent reasons in the footnote, serves as a proof, at least, of a problem to solve, perhaps in the future. Yet, in what future span?, one might ask. It should be the time to address it.

Considering the discussion of genre coinage, the reader is forwarded to chapter 8, “Future Tenses / Present Tensions” (153), which has a strikingly symptomatic passage of Glazier’s lack of cling to one term, when dealing with the accurate scarcity of professional, academic and institutional regard, and inclusion of the field:

A great hindrance is the nonexistence of any commercial or commonly accepted tool for the creation of digital poetry. Part of this could, of course, be attributed to the inattention given poetry in general. But for e-poetry, this deficiency seems to go even further; for e-poetry is neither accepted by other non-poetry digital practitioners nor generally by print poets.

The field of electronic poetry practice is, of course, well established and broadly defined. The possibilities for digital poetry extend (...) (154, underlines added)

This confusion recalls the installment of diverse designations during previous art movements, e.g. *Art Nouveau*, whereas, according to the country, the style assumed different nouns: *Jugendstil*, *Modern*, *Arte Nova*, *Modernisme Català*, *Secession*, *Stile Liberty*, *Glasgow Style*, *Tiffani Style*, etc. It is worthy to notice that these nouns, although referring to a common set of aesthetic principles, also referred to specific singularities of each country’s architectonic and artistic history and culture, and became manifest in the diversity of styles within the same style. Notwithstanding, one might argue that digital poetry is neither a style, nor a movement, and that an idea of national borders and styles is misfit to engage with the discourse of networked and programmable digital poetics. Well, indeed, but, at the same time, sharing a common set of principles, procedures, programming languages and styles, the authors of digital poems and, moreover, of critical writing on digital poetry tend likewise to define their vocabulary according to preexisting national, linguistic, literary, aesthetic and political values. If not, as already noted, one should question why is the term *litterature numérique* prevalent in France, *electronic literature* and *digital literature*

in the US and Canada (having been adopted by other countries), *ciberliteratura* in Portugal, *netzliteratur* in Germany, and so on.

Nonetheless, in fact, Glazier recognizes “that we are faced with not only a lack of a uniform practice in electronic poetry but also an inadequate vocabulary for discussing e-poetries” (162). If it is true that he presents other examples of taxonomy, such as Eduardo Kac’s broader label of “new media poetry” (1996), the discussion of why one should attain oneself either to computer poetry, new media poetry, electronic poetry, cyberpoetry or digital poetry still remains to develop. In spite of this, Glazier’s writing development crystalizes around the term “e-poetry”, which can be inferred as an aesthetic, literary (*ars poetica*) and even political choice. Developing three points on the present characteristics of e-poetry, and particularly four points for the future of the genre, Glazier main theoretic model focus on how electronic media can be understood “as a *space of poesis*” (5), i.e., a space for poetic production. As he rightly points out, innovative poetry has always been aware of the process, procedure and the material medium for creation, as well as its distribution and dissemination. Thus, for the first time, innovative poetry in digital space enables creation and dissemination via the same medium. As the author asserts: “Digital innovative practice can add to the possibilities of print the concept of programming as writing and the real-time action that programs realize” (177).

In *Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics* (2003), Brian Kim Stefans attests as well for an overarching idea of digital poetics, although recognizing cyberpoetry as a legitimate term that can be ironically defined in what it is not. In his “Reflections on Cyberpoetry”, Kim Stefans states: “It is assumed that cyberpoetry exists, though whether as a subset of poetry or the larger sphere in which literature exists, we are not sure. It is assumed that cyberpoetry is nearly a school; that it almost consists of certain theories” (43-44). Not exposing those theories, the author contends: “Cyberpoetry does not exist” (44). For Stefans, cyberpoetry as a “genuine verse-form” would

have several singular positive definitions. I can define it only in negatives: (1) the lack of limitation to black and white words on a page, (2) the lack of the possibility for mechanical reproduction (there being no original), (3) the lack of closure and the lack of the lack of choice. (45-46).

This inverse maneuver, escaping circumscription, is later turned positive. If not, let us attain to these notes: “the very life of cyberpoetry” (49) is the “contrast between

artifice and function, this evasion of monotony” (48), that is, “To the extent that the hyperlink aspires to programming, it is cyber; to the extent that it revisits the promises of literature, blah” (49). What Stefans is trying to reach at is that truly and unique programming interfaces with renovated literary concerns are the basis and promise for a sense of what cyberpoetry might bring into play and innovate.

Since this volume is an anthological collection of critical writing as well as creative works, the author specifies cyberpoetry as being a genre but nonetheless treats the cyberpoem as a “computer-poem (hereafter known as CP)” (63), which directly involves source files and algorithms. Stemming from the 1970s field of Computer-Generated Literature (CGL), “computer poetry” was a popular definition used in the 1980s to describe poetry written with computer-based programming languages, a fact one can associate, as mentioned, with the spreadable concept of “computer art” during the same decade. Thus, Stefans proclaims primary characteristics – routines and processes – specific to the *poiesis* of computer poetry as having already been present in the aesthetics of Language Poetry (LangPo), and namely in the “protosemantic” approach of Steve McCaffery: “McCaffery (...) describes the fundamental structures in place for the production of a CP: source text, process, and “creative concentration” – what the poet-as-editor does with the output. The process or demon of a CP, which is embodied in the code, is also part of the creativity – perhaps even the central part” (88-89). Here, it is evident one of Stefans’s main ideas: the importance of both coding and crafted language. Of course, much of the poetry based on instructions and commands presented to the reader, disassemble and assemblage, have been a key component of experimental practices since the 1960s, but specially, sampling, appropriation and remixing have been dominant literary techniques in today’s conceptual and digital poetry.

Although Stefans’s theoretical approach does not aim to thoroughly systematize the genre and its specific features, but introduce them as thematic discussions or else as comments to a creative work, e.g. “Stops and Rebels: A Critique of Hypertext,” his insights nevertheless lack an objective discussion of what might mean typing “cyberpoetry” and not “digital poetry” or “e-poetry,” besides neglecting what exactly does the author intends to bring up of new material concerning an adoption of the term “cyberpoetry.”

A very important project addressing digital poetry aesthetics and its state-of-the-art has been *poesIs*, a body of exhibitions and symposiums on digital poetry that

took place in Germany in 1992 (*p0es1s: digitale dichtkunst*, curated by André Vallias and Friedrich W. Block), 2001 and 2004, creating pathways for the collection of essays *p0es1s: The Aesthetics of Digital Poetry* (2004). Not only have these groundbreaking exhibitions and study provided complementary viewpoints on the principles and aesthetic characteristics of the field, but have also settled a bold and cogent argument for defining the genre as “digital poetry.” In the introduction, the editors Friedrich W. Block, Christiane Heibach and Karin Wenz have argued for “artistic projects that deal with the medial changes in language and language-based communication in computers and digital networks. Digital poetry thus refers to creative, experimental, playful, and also critical language art involving programming, multimedia, animation, interactivity, and net communications” (2004: 13). The authors recognize that such label is similar to “electronic poetry,” “new media poetry” and “cyberpoetry,” yet the selection of the adjective *digital* alludes to “its symbol or semiotic nature that influences the ever-so-effective culture of computer technology” (13), thereby in accordance with the digits 0 and 1 chosen as distinctive marks. This argument is fruitful, even if sometimes the reference to “language art” can be considered too wide-ranging.

Building and commenting upon both Glazier, Stefans and the *p0es1s*'s viewpoints, Christopher T. Funkhouser's *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959-1995* (2007) elaborates an extraordinary historical construction of the field and delineates an unprecedented attempt to define the genre in terms of its varied subgenres and *prehistoric*¹ forebears, from Theo Lutz's *Stochastische Texte* (1959) to the spread of the World Wide Web (1995). As Sandy Baldwin points out in the foreword to this book, “The definition of *digital poetry* remains up for grabs. (...) Even the enthusiasts of digital poetry (...) cannot agree on the definition of *digital poetry*” (2007: xv). Baldwin presents Funkhouser's effort in opposition to Glazier's perspective of “how e-poetry is made” and to Stefans's cyberpoetry perspective, “primarily define[d] in the negative, as distinct from printed poetry” (xvi). In doing so, Baldwin prepares the terrain for what he considers to be Funkhouser's “open method.” Even if Funkhouser's historical approach is malleable and open to inclusion, another positive value which comes out of his method is closure, insofar he delivers a frontal assertion on defining the genre from the beginning, proving one should cope

¹ The different historic lineages exposed by Funkhouser as being “prehistoric” perhaps hint at E. M. de Melo e Castro's classification in *Poética dos Meios e Arte High Tech* (1988).

with a justifiable term when prompting a digression on the field: “Digital Poetry is a new genre of literary, visual, and sonic art launched by poets who began to experiment with computers in the late 1950s.” (1). As the author states, it is true that “digital poetry is not a singular genre or ‘form’ but rather a conglomeration of forms that now constitutes a genre” (1). It is also true that it “is an evolving process,” a genre still in the process of becoming, of developing and acquiring new languages, techniques, processes and forms, and, so, of representing definition challenges. Still, that does not preclude him from objectively pinning his choice on the term digital poetry, “with purpose and conviction” (22). Thus, in the section called “Discussion of Genre” (22-26), Funkhouser defines the genre as “represent[ing] a spectrum of computerized literary art that can be appreciated in the context of the poetic tradition” (24), and despite the fact that digital poetry “does not mean that is what it should be called or that [it] is what every digital poet is going to label what he or she does” (22), a digital poem *is* “if computer programming or processes (software) are distinctively used in the composition, generation, or presentation of the text (...) combin[ing] poetic formations” (22), a position he maintains in his most recent study (2012).

Contrast-based arguments do also exist. Lori Emerson, establishing a distinction between print and digital poetry, defines it as “poetry that is mediated and/or modulated by a computer in such a way that constitutes a departure from what I term ‘bookbound poetry’ [since] we cannot discount the importance of the medium for the reading/experience of the text but neither can the medium be the defining feature of the work.” (2008: 118) As with Glazier, Emerson focuses on the material qualities, arguing “digital poetry is in fact the *rematerialization* of language in the digital realm.” (10)

Shifting now from monographic studies onto autonomous essays, other authors have made important contributions as of characterizing either dimensions or transformations operated in digital poetry. On the one hand, regarding its dimensions, in “Writing the Virtual: Eleven Dimensions of E-Poetry” (2006) Stephanie Strickland presents the term “e-poietic” as a fusion of *poetic* and *poiesis*, thus signaling the notion that poetry in electronic environments undergoes a continuous process of construction. Although Strickland uses the terms “digital poetry,” “electronic poetry,” “e-poetry” and “Web poem,” her incidence is on “e-poetry.” The carefully presented dimensions help characterizing what the author conceives when speaking of “intense attachment” created by electronic media, hybridization of language and code or

different modes of “time” in e-poietic productions. On the other hand, Friedrich W. Block and Rui Torres, in “Poetic Transformations in(to) the Digital” (2007), emanating from the *p0es1s* introduction (2004), set five relevant conceptual characteristics of digital poetics, namely, medial self-reference, processuality, interactivity, intermediality and networking.

In my view, one of the most comprehensive attempts to deal with the present genre discussion has precisely been Friedrich W. Block’s essay “How to Construct the Genre of Digital Poetry: A User Manual” (2010), where one finds the genealogy of several of the above-mentioned concepts, as well as an intelligent preoccupation with the fact that genres “as cultural means (...) help to develop certain subsystems within the art system,” being “forms of institutionalization, which treat a variety of phenomena in communication and cognition in terms of invariety and a reduction of complexity.” (391) As a malfunction of criticism and classificatory literary systems, this assumption could not be truer. As far as one does not over-strict their inclusion system, one should also bear in mind a single nomenclature for a genre approach. And thus, as with Funkhouser’s position, Block investigates a term or a variety of terms [“(x) poetry,” 398] and exposes the importance of the *poetic* in *poetry*, reminding Glazier’s argument in “The Conditional Text: Siting the ‘Poetry’ in E-Poetry” (2004).

Following the exposed, one surely extracts good arguments, analytical perspectives and principles from those authors that do not compromise themselves or opt for a specific term with explicit grounds. The fact is that objective models do not exist and might never exist. Yet, grasping a genre identity might well be possible when consciously adopting one term and a set of principles. In the post-Web era, let us then attempt to build digital poetry as a genre that encompasses poetic crafted work, which:

- 1) Is processual, recursive, self-referential mediated and/or self-reflexive;
- 2) Uses programming languages and scripting;
- 3) Engages with code and may engage with the mash-up, hybridization or effacing boundaries between “natural language” and code in a multilayered manner;
- 4) May take advantage of hypermedia files and inputs, such as text, image (static or moving) and sound;
- 5) May sample, appropriate and remix preexisting textual material from other texts and/or dialogue with other textual machines;

6) Engages with a database, e.g. source material allowing either for real-time text generation and/or combinatorial techniques;

7) May take advantage of the network as a real-time creative and reading experience and/or reader/user input, prompting collaborative environments;

8) Elicits a paradigm shift in reception, distribution and reading strategies, whether by prompting an unconventional interface, kinetic text or interactive features;

9) Uses online and/or offline technologies;

10) Is single or multiscreen-displayed, human and/or machine-performed and may include virtual, augmented or mixed realities;

11) May be decentered distributed, via websites, social media and other online and/or offline dissemination platforms.

This general draft does not pretend to be a definitive check mark list, nor can possibly cover all the diverse manifestations and the subgenres that presently and in future might be regarded as pertaining to the digital poetry genre, insofar the creative processes regarding experimental poetry are rapidly undertaking an osmosis with other artistic domains. Moreover, it allows for contributory fringes as authors engage with the field and create newly unexpected and truly unique poetic and digitally mediated works.

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