

The Role of the Reader in Performative Digital Poetry

Karin Wenz (Maastricht)

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action

(William Shakespeare, Hamlet III, 2)

When we are confronted with poetry using a digital medium operating in real time, the focus lies on processes of sign production rather than on the object. We could even say that the object is the process initiated by the user and therefore dynamic; the material for the artist is the programming computer language as much as the natural language in which the poem will appear on screen. Based on an understanding of digital poetry, like the above formulated, many different expression forms are included, ranging from hypertext to text generators to digital performances. In the focus of my investigation are digital performances, specifically the recent development of performative digital poetry. Digital performances have been described by Dixon (2007, 3) as works in which computers play a key role and actors are either surrounded by screens projecting digitally manipulated signs or actors are part of a virtual environment in which the performance takes place. Dixon describes experiments since the 90ies in which digital technology and live performance are combined. They are not only well known in dance and theater but also in the field of digital poetry when we look at readings of digital poetry by Loss Glazier and others, who – from early times on – combined text generators with poetry reading, thereby breathing life into the digitally generated poems that consist of text the author had not seen himself before.

Loss Glazier's readings can be understood as one individual actualization of a poem by the author supported by the machine whereby the machine chooses from an underlying database. Loss Glazier embodies the ideal and the empirical reader in the moment of reading as he is the one who had chosen the data, written the program on which the combinations are based and he is the one actualizing one specific reading for his audience. We as empirical readers also have the opportunity to access the poems by interacting with the machine.

Even though the live performance is an important element in the work described above, a recent change can be observed from generative digital poetry to performative digital poetry, changing the focus from generative to performative. Shapiro asked in 1986: “Is there a way in which the essential ‘writing’ of poetry might become part of the performative nature? Is there a way of reconciling the written character of poetry with action?” (Shapiro 1986: 157)

Performative digital poetry seems to be an answer to Shapiro’s questions as it promises to have found the way by combining written poetry on screen with the performative nature of live action.

Performance

Important in the discussion of digital media is the interactive potential they promise in opposition to analogue media. However, in the case of performance art – and the particular relationship between art and audience and the feedback between audience and performers/art work – interactivity is a quality live performance stand for. When an actor appears before an audience, he or she is affected by the audience’s response.

Performances have the function to de-mystify and make the art work, the author and the creative processes transparent to the public. Artists in performance art want to give insights into the process of art creation but also show how the communication between art work and human is established – and in the case of technology used the communication between art work, human and machine. The presence of the artist him- or herself in the performance does not only stand for authenticity of the art but also makes the artist an object and instrument of presentation (cf. Almhofer 1986, 138).

For digital performance ‘digital’ is understood as a technical concept to analyze the influence of digital technologies on stage, screen, installation art, and site specific performances. ‘Digital’ refers to a specific technique of encoding data (sound, images, music, and movement) to communicate or modify them and thereby offers a new paradigm for performances. Performance has been described as the non-participatory live presentation of body movements, images, and sounds. However, this is only one aspect as the term is also used to refer to the performance of a machine in operation, e.g. the performance of a computer system. This dual meaning “points to some general aspects of

performance, for example that it is an authorial execution system, an execution system that has a main actor. Performance can be understood as the presentation, the making present (and perceivable) of the results of an execution.” (Broeckmann 2007, 199)

Performative digital poetry includes both aspects: it uses a new way of scripting live performances in which the computer is a main actor in the creative process.

In digital performances the relation between the performer/actor on stage and the controller on or off stage is interesting as well. Is the controller identical with the performer, is the controller the artist or is the controller the machine, which is in dialogue with the performer? Broeckmann (2007, 200) describes this as “the tension of the struggle between human and machine in an open, unstable system.”

I want to describe performances on stage as the recent work by Loss P. Glazier, Wilton Azevedo or Aya Karpinksa, but also performances in virtual environments as the work by Alan Sondheim. For the presentation here I will focus on Glazier’s and Sondheim’s work because of time constraints.

Loss Glazier used generative poetry for his performances from his early experiments on. His performances changed when he started to use the rhythm of the poems as the accompanist of performances of a group of dancers. As the author had not seen the poems before his readings, the dancers are not prepared which poetic combinations they will have to dance to. Performative digital poetry uses digital poetry as script for improvisation, in which key words are combined with specific movements.

These performances seem to force us to reconsider criteria we once formulated for digital literature.

Texte-à-voir

Does performative digital poetry herald a new era in digital poetry? The object of digital poetry has been claimed to be the process initiated by the user and therefore dynamic.

What is processed and made visible on screen is what Philippe Bootz (2007) calls the “texte-à-voir”, the shown text, what we are given to see and what is only a selection of the underlying artwork. For digital poetry the processes executed by a programming language is the material the artist uses. Following Burgaud (2006) the user is “reading a process” or as Philippe Bootz (2007) puts it: the reader has to follow a dual reading:

reading the text on screen and reading the process on a meta-level. With the focus on the processes instead of the “object” the description and analysis of digital poetry is facing the problem that what the reader can see on the screen is not enough to understand the art work. Especially the transitions from a conceptual verbal art read in front of a computer screen mostly by an individual reader to installation art, caves, to performances on stage including text, music, and dance and to performances in virtual environments such as *Second Life* ask for descriptions that are able to deal with the dynamics of those processes.

Philippe Bootz (2007, 92) states that “*the reader cannot construct a meaning of the work without constructing at the same time a meaning of the totality of the situation of communication*”. While in the case of digital poetry, the reader faces the textual representation on screen, which is only a part of what the work consists of, he gives meaning to his own ergodic work while he interacts with the shown text. Thereby he applies a double reading: reading the representation on screen and his own interaction with it. In the case of performative digital poetry the reader’s situation is different. The ergodic work takes place on stage between the machine and the actor/artist while the reader takes over the classical role of a spectator in most cases. In Loss Glazier’s performances while reading his poems out loud to the audience, there was an interaction in so far as the database used usually established a reference from the data to the communicative situation (e.g. using vocabulary of the national language of the place where the performance took place, comments to the audience in between the reading). In case of a more complex situation on stage where author/performer and a group of dancers react to the generated text on screen, the interaction takes place primarily between the performers on stage and the machine generating the text. The short video example shows that although the database refers to the place by using French for the performance in Paris, the ergodic work takes place without the audience. The double reading and the reflexive moment of a reader reflecting on his own ergodic work and his reading process is shown to the audience through the performer(s), however the reader steps back safely and observes. The audience in digital performances unlike in installation art or virtual environments is confronted with a situation in which the double reading takes place on stage only. The double reading creates a sign for the reader in his own reading process. In

the performance a new sign is created, which is shown in the performance to the audience. As discussion with the artist after such a performance show, the interpretation of the sign shown to the audience is a difficult process even when the concepts important in digital poetry are well known to the audience as a re-reading is not possible and a video recording a part of the performance usually is of low quality and lacks information as in the example from *Loss Glazier*, where the dancers are seen on stage interacting with the text but the reader and his interaction with the machine has not been recorded.

This case described above in which the sign is part of the whole situation in which the communication between work, author who is the reader at the same time, the computer and the audience takes places and the sign is not inherent in the work represented on screen only, we are confronted with a meta-sign, or as Bootz calls it a meta-work. This meta-sign has been created for an observer watching the reader reading. In our example we watch the author being a reader reading his work. The interpretation of this situation asks a lot of knowledge from the audience (or the meta-reader) about the underlying concepts, the technology used, the processes active in the performative act. “For meta-reading, the activity of reading is an expressive level of the communication between the author and the meta-reader” (Bootz 2007, 97).

Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s (2007) distinction between instrumental texts and textual instruments adds to an understanding of the specific case of performative digital poetry. Instrumental texts are texts to be played. This holds true for digital literature in general as an ergodic work is needed – or a playful approach to the work to interact with it. As Wardrip-Fruin (2007) has shown, instrumental texts are performative as they ask the reader to actively engage in processes by which the texts appear on screen, are changed and transformed by the underlying computational processes. They ask the reader to interact with them on a meta-level as they require knowledge of how to engage with them and develop skills to improve these performances. In addition to the term double reading by Philippe Bootz, Wardrip-Fruin adds the element that is typical for ergodic work as for play: the replay. Repetition and thereby an increase of skills in the use of the technology and the interface is necessary to reach a level on which the double reading can take place. Until the reader reaches this level he is caught in an “aesthetics of frustration” as Bootz (2007) calls it.

The textual instruments on the other hand are texts that can be used as accompanist in performances in which action on stage is harmonized with the rhythm of the digital poetic text. Although Wardrip-Fruin did not use this concept to refer to the recent development of digital performative poetry the text functions here as a script that has to be read, interpreted and executed in the artistic performance adequately. What has changed from generative poetry in which the processes had to be executed by the reader to performative poetry in which the performer(s) are representative readers on stage is the role of the author, text, reader and in case of performative digital poetry the role of the performer and of the environment in which the performance takes place.

The authors are the artist creating the work and the computer generating the final outcome. The text consists of several levels: the surface we can read on screen or we can listen to additionally as in many performative digital poems plus the underlying database and program with which the text on the surface, the shown text, has been created. The readers are the performers who are reading and interacting with the shown text and the audience who turns into a meta-reader ideally, watching a reader in his ergodic work in the communicative situation.

Codes-a-voir

From a semiotic standpoint the subtitle chosen here “codes-a-voir” does not make any sense as a code is a text as well. However, I have chosen this term to refer to specific examples of performative digital poetry for which the conceptual background lies in codeworks, digital poetry written in a programming language, the code, or using a hybrid form between natural language and code. The examples I want to introduce here are videos made by Alan Sondheim in *Second Life*. Avatars created in this virtual Online environment and a modification of the program made performances of these avatars possible that do not simply simulate “real” human movements but led to disturbing images as in the video “What remains”.

The lyrics of the poem read, while the video is shown begins as follows:

“What remains after the filtering, after the protocol, after numeration and de-numeration. What remains after the orbits, after the rockets, across softwares and hardwares.”

The text describes the process of modifications on the code level as well as a metaphorical level by referring to life, science and technology. On the visual level beside seeing an avatar who does not represent the ideal of a perfect, idealized body as most avatars in *Second Life* do, the graphical layer that is included additionally shows how 3-D objects in virtual environments are created on the basis of abstract, geometrical figures. This video had been uploaded on YouTube without any explanation that this is a work of art, or a performance in *Second Life* based on artistic concepts, nor that this is a modification of the underlying programming code. The reaction of YouTube users and other *Second Life* players are either reflecting the aesthetics of frustration shown in comments as in “i guess something went wrong with the rendering LOL” or the comments on another video with the title “Avatar nude sex second life performance”, which are formulated as follows: “okay.....highly disturbing, therefore it should be flagged”, “Whoever made this video is a faggot.” “‘Performance’ piece of shit. What the fuck is wrong with your head you fucked up weirdo retro hippy bitch. Second life is as gay as you :)”, “If only Jack Kerouac had lived long enough to see this...he probably would have gone into used car sales. Bad singer, bad sex, bad poetry - The future is yours!”

Where do we find the meta-reader in this case? The problem here is that this video, a performative digital poem, has been uploaded under the tags *Second Life*, *Avatar*, *Sex* thereby attracting an audience with very clear expectations: they hoped to see either a fan video of a player from *Second Life* or an explicitly pornographic video about two avatars in *Second Life* during sexual intercourse – this last expectation results in the fact that you can only watch the video when you login and fill in a form that you are over eighteen. The meta-reader turns out to be an ideal in this environment that does not match the empirical reader reached on this platform. Although there could be an interaction between artist and audience here as the comment function would also give Alan Sondheim a place to react to his audiences’ comments, he does not interfere here, but simply uploads a new video in his channel without reacting to the comments. Is this a sign that the interaction between art work, author and reader/audience is not even in the focus of performative digital poetry anymore? While on the one hand performances either on stage or in virtual environments seem to attract a new and broader audience than those

very abstract, conceptual generative poems from earlier digital eras, the ergodic work that was asked from the audience/reader seems to be taken back to the artist/performer thereby giving more authority to the artist than to the audience. This leads to a disempowerment of the empirical reader in those cases in which he is not able to reach the level of a meta-reader.

In his discussion of digital performances Broeckmann (2007: 205) states that we deal with “artworks that enforce a logic of experience which surpasses our subjective control.” In those cases discussed here I dare to question whether performative digital poems do not only surpass the control of the reader but also of the author who has in mind an ideal, which the empirical reader can hardly achieve.

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