

Performing E-Literature | E-literature Performing

by Lori Emerson

If electronic literature is emergent, generative, interactive, kinetic, tactile; if the textual elements of electronic literature are only one part of digital version of a verbi-voco-visual complex, then how will e-literature authors Jim Andrews, Kate Armstrong, Ian Bogost, John Cayley, Erin Costello/Aaron Angelo, Marjorie Luesebrink, Mark Marino, Nick Montfort, Brian Kim Stefans, Stephanie Strickland "read" from their works on Friday January 6th? What does such a reading look like?

One answer is that we wanted to see if we could extend the e-literature exhibit not just into the performative - for, arguably many of the works on display are performative in their right - but into the live performance. However, such an exploration has to remain open-ended and undecidable; the exploration of what it means to "read" or "perform" e-literature has to change and adapt for every text. For example, there is no way to know once-and-for-all how Nick Montfort reads his 2009 work "[Taroko Gorge](#)" - a Python poetry generator that creates a nature poem each time it is run. But perhaps we can say this: 1) while the poetic quality of the generated text is something to marvel at, a live performance of "Taroko Gorge" likely highlights the temporal, fleeting quality of the work and of digital computer processes in general (instead of static words on a page, we have ever-changing text that reflects the underlying time-based processes of algorithmic generation); 2) a live performance also reminds us that while the use of an algorithm to generate literary texts does undermine assumptions about authorial intent, self-expression, even the literary, to some extent our interest in authorial intent can shift to the very human programmer standing before us, reading one possible result among many from his elegant script.

Our reading also highlights those works which strategically nestle themselves between analog and print as a means by which to use print to comment on the digital and the digital to comment on print. For example, a live "reading" of Erin Costello and Aaron Angelo's site-specific installation and performance "[Poemedia](#)" poses many challenges to the conventional notion of a poetry reading as the work originally consisted of one hundred fifty 8.5" x 11" sheets of card stock suspended one to eight feet above the ground with live and/or recorded video projected onto the sheets. As Costello and Angelo put it, "Poemedia" asks, "what is the role of poetry, page poetry specifically, in a digitized, information saturated world?" As such, just as "Poemedia" enacts a thinking-through of the state of poetry today that is unavoidably enmeshed in practices of remix, search, and the disintegration of clear boundaries between literary and artistic genres, a reading or performance of it will likely also enact a thinking through of the poetry reading that normally features a single author, reading predictable and supposedly original text.

Our reading will also feature game designer and critic Ian Bogost reading from "[A Slow Year](#)" - a so-called "chapbook of game poems" that consists of four slow-moving, contemplative, text-free games ("spring", "summer," "autumn," "winter") for Atari VCS and an accompanying book of related yet separate print-based computer-generated poems. "A Slow Year" joins a growing number of e-literature works that do not contain any text at all but whose inspiration comes at least partly from poetry (in this case, Bogost attempts to translate poetic principles of Imagism into the realm of the videogame). But, aside from the difficult question of what makes a work literary if it contains no text - and one possible answer to this question is that distinctions between genres in the digital are impossible, and so pointless, to maintain - what is there in "A Slow Year" to read or perform? Perhaps Bogost will stand-in as us, as readers/viewers, performing our own interpretative acts to ourselves as we try to make sense of such a work.

And of course, it's worth pointing out that Bogost will reveal only one possible answer to the foregoing questions during his January 6th reading, a reading which overall will only suggest momentary, emergent, even fleeting "solutions" to the productive problems of reading or performing electronic literature.