

## **Bearing the Fruits of E-Poetry: A Personal Decennial View**

[A talk on this topic in 2.2 parts]

### **I. Meetings**

As an active researcher in the global community of electronic writers, I consider it an immense fortune to have participated in four of the five previous E-Poetry festivals, which enabled remarkable developments in my scholarly and artistic efforts. Beyond personal illuminations and gains, I am certain the efforts of festival organizers benefit and influence the overall cultivation and growth of digital literature.

My introduction to this community technically came five years prior to its formation when Loss Pequeño Glazier, John Cayley, Jim Rosenberg, and I first met and spoke together at a plenary session on electronic media at a poetry conference titled *Assembling Alternatives*; we all met again the next year in England for *Hypertext 97*, a trip to Stonehenge, and a reading in London.

Social and cultural outcomes arising from E-Poetry conferences are monumental in my experience for reasons beyond those I can enumerate now. Meeting and befriending Alan Sondheim, Philippe Bootz, Patrick Durgin, Jim Andrews, David Daniels, Lucio Agra, Giselle Beiguelman, Wilton Azevedo, Nazura Rahime, Fauzee Nasir, and others in 2001 led to countless personal expansions. I met Maria [Mencia], Judd Morrissey, and another cast of characters in 2003, people whose works I have followed closely since. Dialogs with these individuals and everyone I meet at E-poetry strengthen my understanding and perspective on the intricacies of our craft and literary poetics of all kinds. Conversations initiated at E-poetry catapult the engagement and investigation to previously uncharted places.

Through this festival my knowledge has intensified on a global scale. Naturally, I have greatly benefitted from five excursions to Brasil, where my milieu further expanded through meetings with Jorge Luiz Antonio, André Vallias, Augusto de Campos, and Marcus Salgado, who encouraged explorations into Flash programming (Vallias), Concrete poetry and anthropophagy (Agra & de Campos), and broadened my understanding of the avant garde poetics in Brazil and South America (all). Extending a simple, friendly conversation with Fauzee Nasir, over time, resulted in my Fulbright Scholarship at Multimedia University in Malaysia, where I accomplished all sorts of research in Hypermedia Writing. Further, while it may be difficult to appreciate now, seeing *the dreamlife of letters* and *Nio*—works essentially launched at the first E-poetry festival—blew, and opened up, my mind. Having so many peers in the field gathered in one place has such profound benefits. What enormous satisfaction I experienced knowing my initial articulations regarding anthropophagy (in Paris, 2007) led to all sorts of subsequent critical dialog on the subject in this community (including Roberto Simanowski's 2009 keynote in Barcelona).

What occurred onstage in last night's once in a lifetime event happened because of E-poetry and people committed to it. Half of grope uSurp has roots in E-poetry, half in contemporary poetics and musical performance. I directly met Lucio, Eugenio, and their work at E-poetry; I met Siew-wai while residing in Malaysia, an indirect by-product. After attending past E-poetry events, I wanted to make cool textual animations, make poems using MIDI, and wanted to join hands with other musical E-poets.

In 2001 I also performed with a band called 9 way mind, which had 9 members, and the only other one here today is Sandy [Baldwin]. Aesthetically I am compelled to note a transition from that band's emphasis on language to this band's preparatory focus on image and music.

These aspects of the continuum importantly show that any group, and by extension the community that supports the group, like the genre of digital poetry itself is amorphous, contains a type of plasticity. You will not always encounter the same insular troop or forms of works at E-poetry, and a casting of deep engagement, response, and inspiration leading to a broadening of knowledge persists. Since I feel this knowledge is worth sharing, I was inclined to publish reports after two of the festivals—and hopefully some of you saw my 50 page report in *dictung-digital* about Barcelona, a composition absorbing me for six weeks after returning [if not, see <http://www.brown.edu/Research/dichtung-digital/2009/Funkhouser/index.htm>]. I was truly impressed by Laura Borràs' efforts, and compelled to give anyone who could not be there a play-by-play from a front-row seat. If this is not scholarly love and appreciation, what is?

This progressive feedforward loop propels my writing and the writing of others, leading to growth of understanding in and of the field. Turn-ons and opportunities arise at every E-poetry, as they should—but these events do not magically occur without the efforts of others; so, to the organizers, now and forever, bravo! To everyone else, *carpe diem!*

Thinking back, and then looking out at today's audience, it is obvious E-poetry's *dramatis personae* and areas of emphasis fluctuate *and* have constants. About ten percent of those featured in the festival ten years ago attend this week's meeting, a remarkable fact since this is a much larger gathering of people (approximately 91 presenters, compared to 55 in 2001). Individuals identifying with E-Poetry then and now differ, and acknowledging this proves that the community is not a static entity. As in meetings of any group, attendance will vary, and, equally importantly, topical areas of interest evolve over time. For us this is particularly true, as technological developments influence discussions of artifice and its applications.

This is not a plastic enclave, yet since it, and the discipline of investigation never harden, both maintain *plasticity*. We exist in a state of being molded, receiving shape, made to consider many forms. When biological organisms with the same genotypes have the capacity to vary in their developmental pattern, in their phenotypes, or in their behavior according to varying environmental conditions, scientists say they have plasticity. Electronic poetry involves human input in production and consumption; recognizing plasticity as an aesthetic foundation for works proper *and* its community means we mirror the results of electronic writing to date. We have a given, though gradually increasing, number of formal founders and foundations to work with, and titles abundantly vary due to mediated flexibility. We have dependability and *deep bendability*.

Attaching significance to the medical connotations of this metaphorical aesthetic and social sensibility sheds further light, I believe, onto what we as E-poets add to the parameters of literature. Plasticity refers to the capacity for continuous alteration of the neural pathways and synapses of the living brain and nervous system in response to experience that involves formation of new pathways and synapses and or modification (or elimination) of existing ones. As critical readers of digital poetry, we must ourselves become moldable, capable of reshaping ourselves and our expectations on a text as a whole depending on what we encounter on the screen. As artists we require reformed conceptions, extending parameters and dimensions of reception beyond those ordinarily uses to absorb, or experience expression.

We operate as parallel organisms to those authors who choose to render plasticity, appreciate those who make literally difficult-to-read works via material obstruction or speed of presentation, who commonly implement unconventional, disconnected syntax and phraseology; those who rarely present ordinarily arranged language. These forces elevate contemporary titles

to poetic realms. We and it explode for awhile and singular measurements of our plasticity resist finite definition, and we thrive and survive.

Digital poetry and electronic literature would not have reached its present states without E-Poetry—and let's not say we believe it has yet reached its optimal conditions, or that no more debates are in the making.

## **II. Orders to myself, a decade in**

The artistic task involves observing and making connections between separate but poetically associable entities and edifying viewers through compelling presentations.

As critics, students, and practitioners of electronic poetry, we confront many issues. As I prepare my second book, a narrative about web-based works with numerous case studies, the many questions lead to so many more questions. So here's a brief list of recent registrations, offered as a set of practical guidelines for others to take note of:

- State up front what's compelling.
- Fortify descriptions of how authors and forms have evolved.
- Discuss the general responsive strategies; ruminate on their significance.
- Explicitly state how works are transformational, multi-faceted.
- How to describe the hybridity? Identify clearly the different registers?
- Make a case for why each artwork is important, problematic, extraordinary, what it aspires to do?
- Establish the conditions of ephemerality.
- Make the connection between plasticity and difficulty.
- Strongly examine the importance of prioritizing textual particulars and need for deliberation on such.

- Embrace the difficulties and what they mean. They: the superabundance of possibilities.
- “Draw the reader into the poetic core of the work”.
- Take the framework where it *can* go, use language mirroring the elegance that under discussion.
- What do the processes mean, beyond representing many approaches and frameworks?
- Deal with difficulty, disorientation, frustration, and what Francisco J. Ricardo dubs the “entropy effect”, and admit cannibalistic & transcreative practices contributes to them.
- Plasticity need not lead to frustration; there’s also poetical celebration through exuberance and media dynamics.
- Perhaps this is the “right time, but wrong place” for this type of work, as we do what’s become possible for an audience that’s not ready
- Is the name digital poetry part of the problem?

Being part of this community contributes to my need and desire to make such declarations.

### **III. A project nearly realized**

Just a few of you attended the session at the first E-poetry festival where I gave a paper titled, “Editing and Design 2K+: the Cybertext Issue of *Newark Review*”, which speculated on the design of a future issue of a journal I was then editing. In a timely coincidence, the first issue of *Newark Review* published since I gave that paper will become available in the very near future. While not entirely cybertextual, its interface is of the sort—its contents are organized via a tag cloud interface, engineered with a PHP script—and the publication is something I will proud to present. Some of its contents, particularly the *GTR Language Workbench* [<http://web.njit.edu/~newrev/3.0/workbench/Workbench.html>]  
—a piece of software engineered by Andrew Klobucar and David Ayre that is a type of “Photoshop for Language”—are

remarkably cybertextual, and we are publishing a beautiful work by David Jhave Johnston [[http://harp.njit.edu/~newrev/3.0/WEIRD\\_Jhave/](http://harp.njit.edu/~newrev/3.0/WEIRD_Jhave/)]. The URL for *Newark Review* is <http://web.njit.edu/~newrev/3.0>, and although it remains a work-in-progress, you can begin to explore it when you wish. Good ideas, for various reasons, often take time to reach fruition; if you have one, hold onto it and pursue!

—Chris Funkhouser, May 2011