Interactive, New Media Poetry: Is such a Thing Possible?

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Abstract: Using the methodology of practitioner-based enquiry this paper examines the conception, pre-production and production of a collection of interactive, new media poems. Blaikie, in Approaches to Social Enquiry, provides a summary of methodological approaches in an “attempt to highlight the complex range of choices which any researcher needs to make” (1993, p.215). These alternative positions indicate ontological and epistemological assumptions, the relationship of the researcher to the object of study, and the aim of the research. Blaikie goes to some lengths to deflect criticism of the dualism of his summary there is still “a fundamental choice to be made by the social researcher, a choice between very different ontological (realist v. constructivist) and epistemological (outside v. inside) positions” (Blaikie 1993, p.203). Practitioner-based enquiry allows the researcher to access the ‘inside’ perspective of the producer. Further, this position allows the researcher to examine issues of creativity, motivation, audiences, and cultural production.

Keywords: New Media, Creativity, Research in the Humanities

Introduction

This paper traces the conception, pre-production and production phases of the development of the interactive, new-media poetry piece called ‘Rock Paper’. ‘Rock Paper’ is based on an existing example of concrete poetry by Richard Tipping called ‘imagine silence’. Tipping’s work ‘imagine silence’ is a collection of eight poems, each poem is engraved into a basalt crystal approximately 70 cm long, 30 cm high and 30 cm deep.

‘Rock Paper’ is a ‘remediation’, to use Bolter’s terminology, of the existing work by Richard Tipping called ‘imagine silence’. Tipping’s work ‘imagine silence’ is a collection of eight poems, each poem is engraved into a basalt crystal approximately 70 cm long, 30 cm high and 30 cm deep.

‘Rock Paper’ uses the interface of a book. It is a flexible interface that allows the user to slowly turn the pages so that the next page folds over and covers the existing page. Alternatively, the user can ‘click’ in a corner and the page will turn quickly. The front and back covers are ‘hard’; they move like cardboard rather than paper. By clicking on the name on the back cover the book is turned to the front cover again. There is an index of first lines in the back of the book, a unique attribute of poetry texts, that allows the user to select a first line and the book will turn its pages to reveal the selected poem.

This example of interactive, new media poetry is a remediation of the original basalt version of ‘imagine silence’ and a remediation of the form and tradition of the poetry book.

Image 1 – The initial presentation of the book.
Ontology and Epistemology
Blaikie, in Approaches to Social Enquiry, provides a summary of methodological approaches in an “at- tempt to highlight the complex range of choices which any researcher needs to make” (Blaikie 1993, p.215). These alternative positions indicate ontological and epistemological assumptions, the relationship of the researcher to the object of study, and the aim of the research. Blaikie goes to some lengths to deflect criticism of the dualism of his summary there is still “a fundamental choice to be made by the social researcher, a choice between very different ontological (realist v. constructivist) and epistemological (outside v. inside) positions” (Blaikie 1993, p.203).

As an examination of the process of making an interactive, new media poem this paper assumes a constructivist ontology and an epistemological stance that positions knowledge inside the object of study. This stance underpins an investigation of the process of making from an insider perspective. Practitioner-based enquiry allows the researcher to access the ‘inside’ perspective of the producer. Further, this position allows the researcher to examine issues of creativity, motivation, audiences, and cultural production.

Methodology
As qualitative research, practitioner-based enquiry seeks “meaning (rather than generality as with its quantitative counterpart) and contributes to theory development by proceeding inductively” (Miller and Brewer 2003, p.193). Drawing on philosophical ideas in phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics and other traditions qualitative research can support the attention on ‘quality’ rather than ‘quantity’. The methodological lineage of practitioner-based enquiry includes ethnography, unstructured interviewing, participant observation and variations of “action research” and uses techniques that have “a long history of use and have developed authority and reputation” (Miller and Brewer 2003, p.5). Within this methodology, data collection methods include “extracts of natural language, such as verbatim transcripts of interview material and extracts from texts, discourse, personal documents, field notebooks and the like” (Miller and Brewer 2003, p.239).

Blaikie’s summary of methodological approaches suggests that the aim of research, on a continuum from explaining and evaluating to understanding and changing, also affects the choice of methodology. The action research and participatory action research parentage of practitioner-based enquiry implies that one of the aims of research is to instigate change (Blaikie 1993, p.211; Miller and Brewer 2003, p.225; Davidson 2004, p.145). Practitioner-based enquiry was employed to provide an understanding of the individual’s role in the creative process, its iterative and recursive nature, and an understanding of the power of reflecting on action. These elements are best described from inside the process. Further, the insights gained through reflection can then be used to generate change in the individual’s creative process and the associated product.

The disadvantages of practitioner based enquiry are similar to those of action research and other forms of participant observation research (McNiff 1988; Miller and Brewer 2003; Murray and Lawrence 2000; Zuzanek 2004; Robson 2002). The main criticism being, to use Robson’s version, “The insider may have preconceptions about issues and/or solutions”. The basis of this criticism is both ontological and epistemological. In terms of ontology, this criticism is valid only if the researcher accepts that the research could have been undertaken using a methodology based on a realist or positivist ontology where the researcher is situated outside of the research in a subject-to-object relationship. The criticism draws attention to the effect of an observer on the object of research as an unwanted artefact rather than accepting that this interaction, in a subject-to-subject methodology, as a source of data. Likewise, epistemologically, the criticism is valid if the knowledge base of the research is considered to be encapsulated in a theory, which is then brought to bear on research, rather than being an existing component of the
practice under investigated which is an advantage of the insider role of the practitioner/researcher. Other disadvantages, such as, lack of confidence, inexperience and of “not knowing what it is that you don’t know” can be seen as disadvantages of all forms of research.

The keeping of a production journal provides a body of data that can be analysed and used to illuminate production decisions in the making of the creative object. As Murray and Lawrence state:

The journal records the details of the process of problem formulation, derivation of a research methodology or enquiry strategy, and orderly reflection on the practice(s) selected to be at the centre of PBE. It should be noted that the journal is not conceived as a descriptive, chronological diary of events. Rather, it is literary device through which the problematic nature of educational enquiry is rendered intelligible, first to self...the journal proposes to offer the practitioner’s account as primary source material that may be later included in the data analysis section of more formal reports...such reports are regarded as summative, assessment artefacts. Worth is judged according to published assessment criteria, essentially an academic judgement, and by the rather more elusive indications of claims to knowledge that will be admissible, if open to further conjecture, in the public domain’ (Murray and Lawrence 2000, p.15).

The production journal for ‘Rock Paper’ was started on 5 March 2007 and ends on the 25 June 2007. It covers the production and development of 13 iterations of the project noting which elements were rejected and which were saved in each iteration. The journal also includes notes on conversations with Richard Tipping about textures, sound effects and, most importantly, about authorial intention.

**Issues – Authorial Intention, Creativity and Collaboration**

Giddens (1979), sees choice as an interaction of agency within structure, so much so that he coined the term “structuration” to indicate that the two always occur in tandem. The individual’s capability to choose between actions, actions that they may well be predisposed to take by the structures they engage with, that nonetheless best serve the individual’s intention in the production of a creative work, is a crucial feature of the creative process. However, Giddens would not suggest that intention and agency are sufficient to describe fully the creative activity, “all action, including creative and innovative action, arises in the complex conjunction of numerous structural determinants and conditions. Any concept of ‘creativity’ which denies this is metaphysical and cannot be sustained” (Wolff 1981, p.9). The systems model of creativity proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi sees “creativity as a process that can be observed only at the intersection where individuals, domains, and fields interact” (1999, p.314). A domain is a set of rules, forms and conventions, and the field, is that group “entitled to make decisions as to what should or should not be included in the domain” (Csikszentmihalyi 1999, p.315). The individual brings their intention and agency together with personal history and capabilities to the model. Crucially, the “numerous structural determinants and conditions” represented by the domain and the field, and the individual, are all of equal importance to creativity. The circular causality of the model allows creativity to be envisaged as the interaction of all three elements. Creativity, when seen as an interaction, as a process, is open to investigation and research through experimentation.

The process of making ‘Rock Paper’ is an experiment that examines the interaction of choices made by the poet (Richard Tipping) and the designer (Michael Meany). The experiment is undertaken using the insider perspective of the practitioner and accounts for numerous structural determinants including the intentions of both the poet and the designer.

The concept of authorial intention, that a text means what the author intended it to mean, has been strenuously debated. In the essay, “The Intentional Fallacy”, Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that:

> Whether the author has expressly stated what his intention was in writing a poem, or whether it is merely inferred from what we know about his life and opinions, his intention is irrelevant to the literary critic, because meaning and value reside within the text of the finished, free-standing, and public work of literature (Abrams 1981, p.83).

This argument became the cornerstone of the New Criticism movement that saw a writer’s statement of authorial intention as contributing to an “interpretive hypothesis” but not in itself deterministic (Abrams 1981, p.83). Many of the criticisms of “The Intentional Fallacy” center on its positioning of a literary text as a fixed object which is the same for both author and reader and to which a meaning can be ascribed. Calling attention to the indeterminacy of meaning Schlueter draws a distinction between “writerly” and “readerly” texts.

By “writerly” text, I mean a literary text before it is read; by “readerly” text, I mean that text as it comes into being, necessarily reconstituted, in the reading... For even as reader-response
theorists shift the focus of literary studies from
the text to the reader, they know well that any
analysis of the properties of the writerly text
must involve a reading which, because of its
interpretive nature, can never “accurately” re-
produce the writerly text (Schlueter 1995, p.27).

As a tool for ascribing meaning, authorial intention
may well be a blunt instrument. However, the notion
of authorial intention can be employed to illuminate
the choices made in the creative process. It can be
argued that the author, as part of a larger system of
circular causality and thus embedded within struc-
tures that both constrain and enable their actions
(Giddens 1979; Bourdieu 1993; Boden 1994, 2004)
makes intentional choices in the selection of instru-
ments and tools that are intended to achieve particular
aims or outcomes.

The complexity of this circular causality is radic-
ally increased when engaged in a collaborative pro-
ject. The authors of ‘Rock Paper’, Richard Tipping
the poet and Michael Meany the interaction designer,
brought to the project very different but complemen-
tary domains of knowledge. A production decision
that appeared transparent to one was opaque to the
other. The step in development between Version 06
and Version 07 was marked by a conversation about
our different intentions for the final piece. In Version
06 the ‘Rock Paper’ book appears on a background
of grass. This was an attempt to highlight the use
and positioning of the original basalt crystals. Taking
this one step further (or too far) a small ant-like in-
sert was added to the pages. It would crawl across
the grass and over whichever page was currently
displayed.

The production journal records an entry from
19/06/07 – “Richard doesn’t like the ants - pity. In
version 07 I’ll have a look for a different background
image. I think I understand why Richard doesn’t like
it - he has a kind of ‘purity of thought’ thing in these
pieces. Maybe I’m being too flippant”.

Version 07 was radically different. The book was
positioned on a tabletop, a timber background. This
change precipitated a raft of changes in border col-
ours and a remarking of all the individual page im-
geas in the book.

Conception

At the very early stage of development there was a
desire to produce an object that was deeply ironic.
The most obvious ironic moment is the ‘remediation’
of the book inside a new media production (Bolter
2005, p.28). Further, to produce a book that had
pages of stone that behaved like pieces of paper when
moved. Also, to produce a computer interface that
would be instantly recognisable to the user and sim-
ultaneously surprising. To include in the book those
elements that appear in traditional print poetry texts
– an index of ‘first lines’. The interactive, new media
object needed to do more than just pay homage to
its print ancestry; it needed to behave like a book.
Particular attention was paid to the form and format
of the book.

As the collection of poems that make up ‘imagine
silence’ have not been published in a print version
this interactive book needed to also reference in a
graphical sense the text-in-stone reality of the origin-
al production.

Pre-production

The pre-production phase includes the testing-out of
different interfaces, layouts and graphic designs. As
this is a formative stage of development the produc-
tion journal frequently records failed attempts, frus-
trations and false starts. An example of a false start
was an early plan to develop the book interface as a
calendar fold; this was quickly abandoned for tech-
nical and aesthetic reasons. The following entries
indicate how frustrating the testing out of ideas can
be.

6/03/07 - Calendar fold??? Easier said than
done. The script is still a bit of a mystery to me.
7/03/07 - I've got to give this up for a while.

Image 3 – Version 06 of Rock Paper on grass background.
10/06/07 - Getting the text to look like it's cut into the stone... This is tricky. The font Richard has used is a "Stone" font but it's too fine at this size to show the bevelling. Maybe some colour?

This pre-production phase illustrates the recursive nature of creative activity. A task once started is attempted, redefined, re-examined and started again. To purposely abandon a task to undertake another is a common method for allowing time for the initial task to be reassessed. For Wallas this period would be defined as 'incubation' and for Schon this is 'reflection on action' (Schon 1983, Wallas, 1976).

Production

Saltz suggests “three crucial features that distinguish interactive media from linear media” (2001, p108): random access, the ability to move between non-contiguous media segments; an arbitrary link between trigger and output, where there is no fixed or mechanical link between the input trigger and the output; and, media manipulation, the ability to create variable links between trigger and output and to manipulate on-the-fly the display of sequencing.

‘Rock Paper’ meets all of these requirements but it does so in an oddly linear fashion. The physical interaction with each page is bookish and linear, as is the fast click and turn that is more like a hypertext link. The most interactive element of the book is the index of first lines; this is also the literary of devices link. The most interactive element of the book is the index of first lines; this is also the literary of devices used in the text, which will automatically turn the pages back to the selected poem.

The great irony is that when tested, users did not know what to do with a book presented to them on a screen. The sensorial dissonance between page and screen meant that instructions had to be written into the inside pages telling the user how to continue. The book opens on one click but the internal pages behave more like pages that need to be individually turned. An entry in the production journal dated 23/06/07 illustrates the shock of this revelation - “Richard showed the copy I gave him to a couple of people – ‘Should we put in instructions?’ Instructions on how to use a book! Maybe this really points to the fact that most poets are not geeks and few geeks are poets”.

This project has highlighted the very different expectations that traditional aural and print-based poets have about how poetry should behave.

Conclusion

Interactive, new media poetry: adjective, adjective noun. In any string of word the nouns and verbs carry the greatest load of meaning. The qualifiers, like adjectives and adverbs, modify the basic meanings. So… interactive, new media poetry… Is such a thing possible?

Yes, interactive, new media poetry is possible. It is possible as a sub-domain of poetry but this does not automatically grant it any further status in the domains of new media or interactive design. The domain of poetry is elusive. That is, the concept of poetry is obvious. The word alone may call to mind a literary figure or even a line from a favourite poem. However, any attempt at defining poetry as a cultural form is elusive. In previous decades the word art and concrete poetry movements competed with more traditional poetry forms for acceptance in the domain of poetry. Using Csikszentmihalyi’s model of creativity, domains evolve and develop as a result of ideas being accepted by the social field of experts (Csikszentmihalyi 1999, p.315). Just as concrete poetry, like Richard Tipping’s ‘imagine silence’, has been accepted in the domain of poetry, so too will the form of interactive, new media poetry.

However, the path to acceptance is highly contested. The meme is a useful metaphor for configuring the deep relationship between the field and domain of poetry.

A meme is a self-replicating unit of data that materializes itself as an instruction for the human mind that gets passed on whenever one human imitates another. Building on the cognitive speculations of Daniel Dennett and Douglas Hofstadter, and especially on the writings of biologist Richard Dawkins, who first coined the word “meme” in order to evoke its biological counterpart, the gene… (Dougherty 2001).

Both Dawkins and Dougherty point to the metaphorical status of both genes and memes questioning their status as being “actually self-directed entities” (Dougherty 2001) “In neither case must we get mystical about it. In both cases the idea of purpose is only a metaphor, but we have already seen what a fruitful metaphor it can be in the case of genes” (Dawkins 1976, p.196).

“It should be noted that the cultural artefact – the tune, painting, poem, for example – is not a meme itself, but a vehicle by which the meme, an idea or internalised representation is externalised” (Barrett 2004). Interactive, new media poetry is, using this understanding of memes, simply yet another cultural form for externalising, manifesting ideas.

“Competition among new memes is fierce; few survive by being noticed, selected and added to the culture” (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, p.372). This argument would predict that some forms of poetry will not be accepted by the field and will not be transmitted to the domain. In the case of interactive, new media poetry the adjectival terms are domains in
their own right. The domain of interactivity is a sub-domain of human-computer interaction that finds expression in interface and game design. Likewise, the new media domain is typically concerned with the ‘remediation’ of existing cultural forms for delivery across wired and wireless networks, for example, digitally delivering a movie so that it can be downloaded and viewed on a mobile phone. As noted above, the domain of poetry is particularly flexible in its ability to incorporate new forms and styles. The use of practitioner-based enquiry in this case clearly illustrated the competition between the domains that contributed to the production of ‘Rock Paper’. The competition between the domains of interactivity, of new media, and of poetry produced a cultural object that no one domain would have encompassed. Further study in this area will need to account for the effect of the social fields associated with each of the domains. For example, would a game designer value interactive poetry highly enough to introduce it to the domain of interactive design?

References


About the Author

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Michael Meany is a lecturer in communication at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Michael’s background includes careers as a freelance writer, a typesetter and publication designer; and as a playwright. From these varied careers, Michael brings to his teaching an eclectic mix of skills. His research interests include: script writing and virtual environments and narrative/interactive media design.
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