Toward a Digital Poetics for Children

Richard Flynn, Georgia Southern University
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I must say at the outset that my title is overly ambitious. In this short paper I can only hope to sketch questions—and not having my crystal ball handy, I can’t provide clear direction for the future. The questions I’ll sketch grow out of the conclusion to my recent essay for the *Cambridge Companion to Children’s Literature*, “The Fear of Poetry”:

The internet has potential for presenting poetry in attractive formats, though it does not seem to have begun to fulfill that potential. And no matter how useful various technologies may be, they are no substitute for the embodied experience that characterizes the young child’s first encounter with poetry. Children can only have a valuable ‘inter-media-ated’ experience if they are media literate, and media literacy can only be learned if there is a foundation of meaningful literacy to build on. Poems that challenge beyond their surface appeal, that will inhabit children and encourage them to inhabit language, are indispensable, if only we can see and hear them. (89)

In keeping with the conference theme, I decided to take a serious look at the state of digital poetics and children’s poetry. Such a poetics, I have discovered, is still in its infancy. While there is a growing and increasingly sophisticated body of criticism about electronic literature, including significant work about digital poetics, little of it takes work for an audience of young people very seriously. Some of what passes for digital poetry is of questionable merit, such as my new favorite, “Stud Poetry,” in which I can play card sharp to the symbolists. On the serious side, the Internet has been extraordinarily useful for hosting important archives, such as “PennSound,” “UbuWeb,” “Electronic Poetry Center,” and sites...
hosted by the Academy of American Poets and the Poetry Foundation, among others, but these archives either pay scant attention to children’s poetry (though “UbuWeb” has a hilarious collection of children’s records such as “Charlie the Hamster Sings the Ten Commandments”) or they present a picture of children’s poetry that is depressingly condescending to young people.

Most children’s poetry available on the Internet appears not as digital poetry but as what media scholars J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin call “remediated” versions of print texts. The transfer of an earlier medium such as a print text to the visual realm inevitably changes the nature of the printed object (and not always for the better, as I can attest from my experience of negotiating Remediation through “NetLibrary.”) As Bolter and Grusin write,

Digital visual media can best be understood through ways in which they honor, rival, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print. No medium today and certainly no single media event seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other social and economic forces. What is new about the new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of the new media (15).

In the latter case (in which older media refashion themselves), this can result in setting up impediments to the use of the earlier text: for example, digital rights management on music files or the way “NetLibrary” forced me to retype rather than cut and paste the preceding quotation. In the case of poetry (which Randall Jarrell likened to the making of “stone axes” [94]), remediation should make poetry easier to access, in ever more attractive formats. Why get in the way? As children’s poet J. Patrick Lewis says in his annoyingly titled essay, “Can Children’s Poetry Matter?” “Few if any adults are capable of convincing a ten-year old that poetry can be as much fun as volleyball or video games.” Lewis’s description of the ways in which poetry has been and continues to be remediated for children in the classroom is worth quoting here:

American children grow up in a country that poetry forgot—or that forgot poetry. The reasons are not far to seek. I have visited four hundred American elementary schools here and abroad as a latter day Pied Piper for verse, and I can confirm that too many teachers still swear allegiance to an old chestnut: the two worst words in the language when stuck side by side are “poetry” and “unit.” The poetry unit is normally a pinch of Frost and Emily, a tickle of Jack Prelutsky, Shel and . . . “Goodness, there’s the bell.”

For awhile, it appeared that the well-financed Poetry Foundation was paying attention to promoting children’s poetry, but it appears that after some initial enthusiasm, it hasn’t done much with it. However, the second children’s laureate, Mary Ann Hoberman, is a real poet and, in my opinion, a big improvement over the first laureate, Jack Prelutsky. Among the few children’s projects it has
undertaken is a collaboration with HBO to present short poems in the “Classical Baby” series. Selected clips from the cable series are available as streaming video on the foundation’s website so that poems remediated for television are further remediated for the Internet. The foundation disseminates and remediates “old media” print poetry (and analogue audio recordings of poetry), but it does not promote the creation of new media digital poetry that explores the interaction between text and code. This is not in and of itself a bad thing, but how effective is the remediation? In the excerpt “Very Valentine,” an audio of Stein reading is grafted onto an animation of a ladybug poet who composes greeting cards on a typewriter. The video abstracts the famous “Very Valentine” passage from Stein’s “Idem the Same: A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson,” so that Stein’s poem is severely truncated, making it far more ordinary sounding than it actually is. (Stein reads the poem in its entirety on “PennSound.”) Exposing children to Stein is laudable, but one wonders about the message the clip communicates; it suggests that writing poetry is an old-fashioned—even an outmoded—activity. Perhaps this domesticated Ladybug Stein is better than no Stein at all, but the simplistic presentation of poetic creation strikes me as condescending to young audiences.

Through its “Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute,” the Poetry Foundation has also spent the last year or so working on what it calls the “Poetry in New Media Project.” Its seventy-four-page final report, issued on March 9, 2010, is titled “Poetry in New Media: A Users’ Guide,” which strikes me as a misnomer in that it has precious little to say about poetry produced for new media. Rather, the first two-thirds of the report concerns itself with intellectual property issues, and the rest has to do with the dissemination of print poetry on the Internet. The report pays scant attention to the ways new media might employ innovative ways to facilitate the making and/or presentation of poetry, and it pays only slight and quite problematic attention to children’s poetry.

Among its recommendations, the report proposes the “Creation of a National Study Group to Develop a Set of Modular Poetry Guides” (41–45) “meant to help people of all ages engage with poetry in a variety of settings, with new media as central to their delivery” (41). What they actually propose, however, are a relatively tired set of recommendations that make very dubious assumptions about young readers, such as, “Select great poems that are simple enough in their vocabularies and syntax to be accessible to young people and to those who are not yet comfortable with reading poetry” (44).

One of the working papers, “Technology: Poetry and New Media” by Rick Stevens, a professor of computer science at the University of Chicago, identifies some key issues, including “algorithmic content,” “interactivity,” “viral distribution,” “social networking,” and more. Stevens is well aware of developments in digital poetics and electronic literatures, and he identifies a number of key resources that could facilitate one of his major recommendations: “to develop a core technical literacy campaign aimed at writers and poets to enable them to understand the significance and impact of technology on their field.”
I was very surprised to find myself listed among the report’s “Key People and Organizations”: “Theoretical discussions of children’s poetry and children’s access to poetry, initiated by poetry scholars such as Richard Flynn, have been and continue to be influential in identifying and grappling with questions of preserving poetic knowledge and developing means of embracing and challenging new media’s relation to poetry.” My surprise was compounded by puzzlement and a degree of consternation when I found none of my writing on these matters cited in the working document. Neither Stevens nor anyone else on the task force ever consulted with me. Stevens also cites leading authorities on electronic literature such as N. Katherine Hayles and innovators in digital humanities such as Alan Liu, and although the bibliography in the working group’s official final report includes references to important work in digital poetics, the content of the report remains remarkably uninformed by those references. Nor, for that matter, does it pay more than lip service to Stevens’s working paper.

But I am particularly concerned with opportunities for children to explore poetry via new media, with particular attention on fostering experiences in which children may find themselves actively engaged with poetic language. Had the working group actually attended to current “theoretical discussions of children’s poetry” taking place in The Lion and the Unicorn award essays, or in work by scholars such as Joseph Thomas, Angela Sorby, myself, and others, they would have recognized how mistaken they were in promoting truly awful examples of children’s poetry in the digital realm. It’s not as if they hadn’t discovered the existence of such “theoretical discussions,” but there’s little evidence that they read any of them. In Stevens’s report, children’s poetry falls under the subheading “Poetry and social networking”:

Contemporary research is being done in literature, linguistics, and education on the significance of new media and its relation to poetry and other literary arts. The Lion and the Unicorn publishes an annual awards article on significant children’s poetry produced that year, and scholars of children’s poetry are beginning to explore how social-networking sites encourage the writing and sharing of poetry and how easy-to-access poetry texts and lesson plans on sites such as www.poetryforkids.com make poetry available daily in the classroom. Some scholars have compared the online presence and familiarity of some online poets such as Kenn Nesbitt and Bruce Lansky to the “schoolroom poets” of the early 20th century, such as James Whitcomb Riley, whom almost every schoolchild studying in the United States would have read, memorized, and performed.

The hyperlink provided takes one to the vanity project of one Marc Duggan hawking his mawkish wares. I suspect that this is a mistake and that the report is meant to link to “Kenn Nesbitt’s Funny Poetry Playground—Poetry4kids.com” <http://www.poetry4kids.com/>. Had Stevens or the working group actually read any of the Lion essays, they would have quickly recognized that Kenn Nesbitt and Bruce Lansky exemplify a relatively bankrupt aesthetic in the world of children’s poetry, an aesthetic that I have often criticized and that has
been repeatedly questioned in the current theoretical discourse in children’s poetry. Nesbitt’s page is devoted to the promotion of the poetry of one Kenn Nesbitt, whose work includes such gems as “The Tighty Whity Spider” (sic) from Nesbitt’s latest collection, *The Tighty Whitey Spider and More Wacky Animal Poems I Totally Made Up*.

The Poetry Foundation has managed to exploit Web 2.0 fairly effectively, with Facebook, Twitter, and even an “app for that.” But, as with much on so-called Web 2.0, most interactivity has to do with sharing and commenting on links, or obtaining remediated text through the handheld device (and when are they going to allow their app on my Android device?). The Foundation’s iPhone app operates like a mood ring: “Give your phone a shake to discover poems that fit your mood.”

Even taking into account YouTube videos, children’s poetry is an activity that is as highly mediated by adults acting as gatekeepers as any print production. Too often, the Internet is put to dubious uses such as the games and pedagogical materials that purport to be designed to help teachers get kids excited about poetry but that seem to have the opposite effect. More often than not these are the same stale exercises that have long existed in the analogue realm. Take this version of poetry Mad Libs from “Instant Poetry Forms” created by Alyssa Cummings, Certified Poetry Therapist and Founding Director (1997–2005) of the Educational Technology Training Center of Burlington, NJ. Using the “Instant William Carlos Williams” form, I composed the following ditty:

This is just to say
I have hired the therapist
that was in
the instant poetry business

and which
you were probably saving
for your 19th nervous breakdown

Forgive me
it was a pleasure
so certified
and so certifiable

Poets and scholars who explore digital poetics for adults such as Loss Pequeño Glazier or N. Katherine Hayles insist that it is “the confrontation with technology at the level of creation [that] distinguishes electronic literature from, for example, e-books, digitized versions of print works, and other products of print authors ‘going digital’” (Electronic Literature Organization). The creation of such work requires expertise in programming languages, and such artists and critics insist that “code must be considered as much a part of the ‘text’ of electronic literature as the screenic surface” (Hayles 35). Critics like Hayles go so far as to insist that electronic literature “both reflect[s] and enact[s] a new
kind of subjectivity characterized by distributed cognition, networked agency that includes human and non-human actors, and fluid boundaries dispersed over actual and virtual locations” (37). In any event, producing and reading such texts requires a great deal of skill and knowledge, and for the writer it requires multiple literacies.

While I may have to be dragged into fully embracing the “post-human” future, I believe these new literacies including code as language might usefully be taught to children. Right now, it seems to me that children’s agency in navigating digital poetry is hampered not only by their limited repertoire and lack of literary and technological know-how but by the dearth of innovative digital texts. Despite young people’s highly developed hand-eye coordination and facility with games and texting on handheld devices, the idea that children are naturally adept at negotiating electronic media is wishfully optimistic romanticism.

Creating digital poetry that will engage children requires a great deal of knowledge and sophistication. The most successful example I’ve found is Chris Joseph’s “animalamina,” which describes itself as “a collection of digital poetry for children that uses interaction, animation and optional sounds and music to uncover each poem through movement around an A to Z of interconnected scenes.” An intelligent series of alphabet poems intended for children ages five to fifteen, this collaboration between Joseph (under his pseudonym, babel) and several traditional visual artists and computer programmers emphasizes the materiality of language in the digital realm, and it engages itself with the history of pictorial alphabets since the “first known English pictorial alphabet” produced by John Hart in 1570. Initially begun as a print project, Joseph discovered that the use of flash animation and randomization techniques enabled him to translate his “own love of children’s poetry” into the digital realm. Joseph explains:

Digital artists are developing very exciting new directions in poetry and storytelling, yet the availability of specifically digital poetry for children (rather than online versions of print poetry)—remains extremely limited. There may be several reasons for this: writers and artists often prefer to create work for mature critics and exhibitions, as adult audiences tend to be seen as more financially or personally lucrative in terms of career development; creating pieces for children is also seen as less contemporary or ‘sexy’ than creating pieces that explore mature or technological themes. In addition children are relatively invisible as a specific audience for digital works outside of computer games and educational software, with the result there are fewer public arenas for new digital content for young people.

I found little out there besides “animalamina” that takes both digital poetics and the audience of children seriously. Nevertheless, I am hopeful that whether we are discovering more sophisticated and attractive ways of remediating print texts or exploring new ways of increasing children’s agency in poetry’s digital realm, engaged adults may work beyond their gate-keeping roles to encourage
children to discover new possibilities for innovation. Facilitating innovation depends on an awareness of traditions—on renovation, what the modernist poet Ezra Pound called “making it new.” As Johanna Drucker said way back in 1982, “the invention of electronic media does not threaten the existence of traditional written forms. The old rituals do not get obliterated, negated by the invention of new technology but the place of new technology invents another space. Another dimension in the field of writing” (235). In the world of children’s poetry, we have only taken baby steps in inventing new dimensions. We have our work cut out for us.

Notes

1. URLs for all Web sites mentioned in this article appear in the appendix.
2. Lewis was unaware of my 1993 essay bearing the same title. I sent him a copy.
3. Stevens consulted Lorinda Cohoon (his sister-in-law) about children’s poetry. She seems to have steered him in some of the right directions, though he doesn’t seem to have availed himself of those resources fully.
4. See Glazier, Digital Poetries and “Code As Language.”

Appendix: Poetry Web Sites Listed in the Order in Which They Are Discussed


PennSound: <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/>

UbuWeb: <http://www.ubu.com/>

Electronic Poetry Center: <http://epc.buffalo.edu/>

The Academy of American Poets site: <http://www.poets.org/>

The Poetry Foundation site: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/>


NetLibrary: <http://www.netlibrary.com/>


PennSound clip of Stein poem: <http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Stein/1935/Stein-Gertrude_A-Valentine-to-Sherwood-Anderson.mp3>

“Poetry in New Media Project”: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/foundation/newmediaproject.html>


Specific terms in the Stevens Report:

“algorithmic content”: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/foundation/newmedia-StevensReport.html#algocontent>

“interactivity”: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/foundation/newmedia-StevensReport.html#interactivity>

“viral distribution”: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/foundation/newmedia-StevensReport.html#viraldistro>

“social networking”: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/foundation/newmedia-StevensReport.html#techandsocial>


“Key People and Organizations”: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/foundation/newmedia-StevensReport.html#keypeopleandorgs>


Poetry Foundation on various platforms:

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/poetryfoundation?ref=ts>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/poetryfound>

iPhone: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/iphone>

“Instant Poetry Forms”: <http://ettcweb.lr.k12.nj.us/forms/newpoem.htm>

“Instant William Carlos Williams”: <http://ettcweb.lr.k12.nj.us/forms/williams.htm>

“animalamina”: <http://www.animalamina.com/>

Works Cited


Toward a Digital Poetics for Children 425


