Comedies of Separation: Toward a Theory of the Ludic Book

Brian Kim Stefans

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Abstract

To date, small effort has been given to create a general critical vocabulary for describing the wide range of digital literary works. This paper attempts to describe a range of effects in digital literature—relating to time, power, scale, duplication, being, and the ontology of the database—and introduces a new concept, the “simple,” here understood as a node of text/algorithm interaction. Several small-scale works that operate on one or two new media principles can be grouped under these simples. Cumulative works (such as the magisterial “88 Constellations for Wittgenstein” by David Clark) here known as “ludic books,” are described as being composed of several of these simples.

See also the accompanying slides.

The Ludic Book

This paper takes as its guiding spirit not the ideas of Marshall MacLuhan but rather MacLuhan and Quentin Fiore’s famous collaboration, The Medium is the Massage. My focus will be on a set of digital literary works that embody a ludic nature that is presaged in that book, characterized by the teasing and economical nature of the writing (MacLuhan called his paragraphs “probes”), a recursive nature in the use of imagery (such as when images repeat across sequences of pages as a sort of wayfinding tactic), the play of tension and stasis in page design (building on the ideas of Bauhaus typesetting), a tweaking of genre conventions (including that of the “book”), and a use of imagery in an “iconic” and idea-oriented rather than illustrative way, suggesting a relationship to the practice of détournement described by the Situationists. These digital works share certain conventions that I think are of increasing familiarity to the reader of electronic works.

- Pseudo-agency: apparent control given to user when in fact highly manipulative
- Closed work: total control over functionality of piece rather than network or randomized instability
- Iconic over realistic imagery: preference for the “intellectual” over the “pathetic”
- Database feel: illusion of limitless set of data when really reconfiguring closed set
- Sign-play: making a word or image appear to be one thing, but showing it is another
- Genre-crashing: works mix documentary, fictional, essayistic, confessional aspects
- Fetish-worthy singularity: an auteur’s sensibility infects writing, graphic design, sound, and interface

Before going forward, however, I’d like to make a digression (in fact, the body of this essay) into an examination of what I’ve termed “simples,” which are basically the text/code nodes that form the building blocks of larger, cumulative, virtuoso “ludic” works. A “simple” is characterized not by its textual specifics (it is not a word, a part of speech, a unit of syntax, a practice like translation) or by some aspect of computer culture (code, the ubiquity of computers, networks, processing speeds) but the specific points where these two concepts collide. The creator of large-scale ludic books assembles “simples” into a coherent, stable album of activities, effects, events, and engagements in support of the presumed “content.”
One can isolate these simples by looking at several hitherto uncategorizable digital text projects—most of which seem to be a version of “folk art” that went viral—acquire family resemblances to other “one-offs,” often by artists who never went on to create sizable bodies of work. These smaller works—not “ludic” books but manifestations of the simples that compose them—are important because they point to certain affective properties in digital works that can easily be missed. By “affective,” I mean the manner in which these works test human reactions; to this end, the affect is not one of the classic ones that we associate with human physiognomy—such as surprise, joy, or anger—but those that one might associate with dysfunctional, abnormal psychologies—hyperactivity, confusion, indifference, and even autism. To this end, the affects I hope to describe are related to “comedy”[1]—which, in Bergson’s reading of humor and laughter, is related to the surprising discovery of mechanical, thoughtless nature of organic, warm human activities (such as talking, walking, and even dreaming). This isn’t to say that these works are “funny,” but that they derive their primary effects from the inability of computers to approximate human behavior—literally, to their lack of cybernetic adjustments, since there has yet to be a successful work of electronic literature that approaches true cybernetics despite all the celebration of this possibility.

Comedy of Subjection: How Fast?

Among the many sub-genres of electronic literature is a class of works that could be called “word movies.” My own “Dreamlife of Letters” is often taken to be one of the central examples of this subgenre. But whereas the “Dreamlife” is primarily seductive—its intension is to be beautiful in a conventional sense, in the way that movie titles are innocuously soothing to watch—works that engage in the “comedy of subjection” are in fact jarring, often annoying, often trying of the human capacity to keep up, or, conversely, to slow down.

Young-Hae Chang’s “Dakota” might be most exemplary of this genre. It is characterized primarily by its cooptation of the entire screen with words that appear and disappear according to the mandates of the jazz track that forms its soundtrack.[2] No compromise is made to adjust to the rate of human cognition—complex words or phrases can disappear before one’s had time to absorb them, while others linger pitifully on the screen longer after their apparent importance in the sentence has waned. Further complicating this activity is the fact that the sentences themselves are rarely structured conventionally—that is to say, efficiently, primed for maximum absorption—but rather meander as in speech, adding clause upon clause as the story or thought continues. As “Dakota” is primarily narrative—though, based on Pound’s first two Cantos,[3] its narrative invariably swerves into direct address, arcane references to other writers (Richard Ellman, for example), unheralded intrusions of minor characters, etc.—one feels quite pressured to keep up. “Dakota” is no impressionistic word salad that seeks to make the viewer aware of the infelicities of digital textuality but an interesting story—a road trip with teen sex, booze, and violence. The subjection is, to this degree, political: One is put in a position of lacking information, of desire,[4] and yet is not permitted to read ahead, read quicker or slower, re-read, or even annotate. The work would be unbearable in a theater; If Andy Warhol trained the average moviegoer to feel free to take a cigarette break in the middle of a film (most of us still don’t), Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries trains the viewer of computers to pay very close attention for short bursts of time.

Another work that engages in the “comedy of subjection” is William Poundstone’s “Project for a Tachistoscope [Bottomless Pit],” which, like “Dakota,” tells a story, with words appearing and disappearing (this time at a mechanical rate, the metronome replacing jazz syncopation, and with even less syntactical coherence), but this time with “subliminal” text and imagery appearing between the words of the primary text. The politics of this piece are more overt, at least if we consider “subliminal” messages essentially a version of mind control. Another piece I would lump into this subgenre is my own “Star Wars, One Letter at a Time,” which is a presentation of the first draft of the Star Wars screenplay—one of the most famous texts in the world—one letter at a time, appearing and disappearing at a rate determined by random-number generation (to imitate the variable speed of the typist, George Lucas). Jörg Piringer’s very recent piece, “unicode,” shows, in his words, “all displayable characters in the unicode range 0 – 65536 (49571 characters), one character per frame.” This video is 33 minutes long, and introduces us, without commentary, to the various layers of political consideration (such as which characters to include from non-Roman alphabets) that went into the canon of “unicode” characters.
Tangentially related to this category of works would be the (no longer functioning) applet to Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget*, which is largely unreadable because it is so relentless and, in fact, incredibly boring (a virtue in the artist's eyes). Noah Wardrip-Fruin's "Screen" also bears relationship to this category as it presents its text one word at a time with the comforting voice of a narrator as soundtrack, but then subjects the reader to the dissolution of the text in a video-game like environment (the 3-D space of Brown's Cave) in which the player is supposed to return the words to their set places in the syntax—only to have them eventually all fall away, as if being flushed down a toilet bowl, at the player's feet. Though this note of interactivity would seem to exclude "Screen" from a group of works premised on fascistic control of the reader's rate of intake, the fact that the user invariably fails in this game is a note of masochism that is unique in digital literature. A relatively soothing piece called simply "Ah" by the Dutch artist/writer team of K. Michel and Dirk Vis involves a sequence of words floating right to left, straying and overlapping and eventually exiting the screen, regardless of the reader's comprehension. Another work of mine, "Suicide in an Airplane (1919)," which depicts words in animated "hand-written," even penciled scrawl breaking up before the cut to a new, clean page space, is also tangentially related to this "comedy."

These works deny tactility—they don't want to be touched. To this degree, they respond to the increasing emphasis in digital culture for greater tactile relationships to the computer, even if it's in the rather magical experience of having water start running, or a toilet flush, merely by waving your hand in front of an electronic eye. They stand in counterpoint to works like Camille Utterbeck’s "Word Rain," which at most can be described as a beautiful toy, in that their rejection of human interactivity suggests an Apollonian indifference to play, or even conversation. I am reminded of the short story by Donald Barthelme called "The Explanation," in which one is periodically reminded of the indifference of textual art works to their inability to provide, without mediation, a true image.

Q: What is she doing now?
A: Taking off her jeans.

Q: Has she removed her blouse?
A: No, she's still wearing her blouse.

Q: A yellow blouse?
A: Blue.

Q: Well, what is she doing now?
A: Removing her jeans.

Q: What is she wearing underneath?

Q: But she's still wearing her blouse?
A: Yes.

Q: Has she removed her panties?
A: Yes.

Q: Still wearing the blouse?
A: Yes. She's walking along a log.

Q: In her blouse. Is she reading a book?
A: No. She has sunglasses.
Q: She’s wearing sunglasses?

A: Holding them in her hand.

Q: How does she look?

A: Quite beautiful.

Following this text is a large black box—the recurrent motif in this short story—that exaggerates the text’s, or maybe the page’s, ability, despite its opacity, to incite and manipulate desire without passion or motivation, and in fact with indifference.

**Comedy of Dysfunction: How Broken?**

Another class of digital literature works takes an open stance against the clean functionality of commercial web design, while at the same time teasing the user concerning his or her own anxieties about the transition from the stable, tactile page and the electronically supported, depthless computer screen. These works highlight the inherent “brokenness” of digital textuality—which is to say, if a writer’s job is considered complete once that draft has passed through the eyes of the editors and met with approval, and if the graphic designer’s job is complete once the text has been set, the colors sorted out, the pages printed and bound, etc., the web writer and designer’s job is never done, as digital conventions change (HTML supplanted by XML, new versions of Google Chrome not able to run older Java code, etc.), texts invariably get hacked and/or, if they are of any interest, get recombined into new texts, even if the text is merely a page of Google search results. People on the reading or using end of things are simply never quite sure if they are seeing what the author/designer intended—links break, interfaces become too arcane, 404s blossom out of indifference of web masters, downloads of images fail, etc.

If the Situationists argued for détournement—the collaging of two unrelated images or texts to create a new, politicized meaning—as the final artistic act possible after the spectacle has infused all creative functions with bureaucratic, soulless regularity, the Internet seems to argue that this collaging has itself become regular and soulless, lacking any of the passion of, for example, Raoul Vaneigem’s arguments in the *Revolution of Everyday Life*, which called for a complete overturning not only of political but sexual and creative norms. Works in this group negotiate this loss of political valence in the Surrealist collage while nonetheless engaging in a critique of normative Internet conventions.

The works of the artistic duo Jodi.org (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans, Dutch and Belgian, respectively) might be most exemplary of this type of work. From the beginning of their careers as net artists, they have exploited a true hacker’s sensibility by literally taking over the user’s/viewer’s computer, blanketing the screen with a zany array of small text browsers that appear and disappear in random locations (annoyingly—I just made the mistake of revisiting their site) exaggerating code’s ability to infect an individual’s work space with total indifference. Jodi could be considered “text artists” to the degree that code—both as image of text and as text metamorphosing into *action*—plays a huge role in their work. Slightly more conventional in his relationship to reading is Jason Nelson, whose early works involved densely overlayed graphic interfaces that presented poetry—algorithmically generated, animated, able to be manipulated, etc.—works that nonetheless were to be considered conventionally “beautiful.” At some point, however, Nelson began to embrace the *ugly*; his works began to employ everything from hand-drawn scrawls, poorly shot films, clumsily recorded audio tracks, and goofily drawn graphics, etc., as if mating the aesthetics of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the California assemblage artists. Though he has continued to work mainly in Flash, the assault on the visual and interactive sensibility common to professional Flash applications is salient. His most notable work, “Game game, game, and again game,” was an innovation in digital literature in that it used a very basic video game template—help your character escape from some vertical (i.e., gravity affected) maze by jumping and moving, avoiding floating thingies and exploiting wormholes—but overloaded this game space with scrawls, poorly scanned texts, and twirling thangamajigs right out of Duchamp’s “Anemic Cinema.” Nelson’s “This Is How You Will Die” functions like a conventional recombinant digital literary work, using the structural premise of Raymond Queneau’s “Hundred Thousand Billion Sonnets” to produce an infinite number of funny horoscopes out of a few sets of text; but again, the user is bombarded with graphics such that the useless features stand in stark contrast to...
Other works that would engage in the "comedy of dysfunction" include two by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and David Durand (et al.), "Regime Change" and "Newsreader," which link through the clever use of n-grams countless new stories together to create largely illegible text collages. These works were created with political intent, and hence directly refer back to the Situationists' practice of dérive (wandering) and détournement (collage), though absent the satirical sensibility, one can't help but think the political charge is severely curtailed. The work of Australian author "mez" (Mary Ann Breeze) is another version of the comedy of dysfunction to the degree that she originally presented most of her writing—expressed in a highly artificial digital/human creole dubbed "mezangelle"—in public forums in which she seemed, unwillingly perhaps, to pose as the "spirit of spam," or maybe the "spirit of the virus," breaking up the streamlining of communications once celebrated as the prime quality of the Listserv. Talan Memmott’s "Lexia to Perplexia" (and, indeed, any work that falls under the category "codework") would be another obvious candidate for this category. As its title implies, "Lexia" is far from a conventional "hypertext," which valorizes the clean functionality of moving from lexia to lexia to create new forms of narrative, but instead overloads the interface with graphics, hidden links, crazily hybridized language, etc. such that the user can't help but get lost. Memmott’s later "Self Portrait(s) [As Other(s)]," a much more accessible piece, is premised on the idea of the accidental mash-up of formulaically written biographies of early great Modernist painters and the creation, there from, of grotesquely generic stories of genius, travail, innovation, accomplishment, and death. “Semantic Disturbances” by Andreas Jacobs—essentially algorithmically generated text image art—and “PlainText Performance” by Bjorn Magnhildoen—a single page of “codework” inspired texts that more or less scrolls at will—could be part of this group. An early harbinger of this style is Charles Bernstein’s illustrated essay, “An Mosaic for a Convergence,” which took the concept of anti-design as far is it could go while linking the design-elements quite securely to its quasi-polemical argument, a unique distinction of Bernstein’s work in prose and poetry.

I’d like to take a leap here and suggest that the common thread of pieces engaged in the comedy of dysfunction is their “zany” aspect—the appearance that mechanization has gotten in front of the organically human (thinking again of Bergson’s theory of laughter) but has not yet become entirely untethered from human interaction. Sianne Ngai defines the zany as a “performative style [that] has a stressed out and desperate quality that immediately sets it apart from its less vehement, more easygoing comedic cousins (like the goofy or silly),” which she relates to a decidedly post-Fordist condition in the human workplace; one of her key examples is the famous factory scene from the I Love Lucy show. The works above all reflect conditions of even (or perhaps more often) the lowest form of information manager—the mouse whose trackball doesn’t work well (in “PlainText Performance”), the hacked computer (Jodi), the stumbling on a piece of “outsider art” during a Google search (the work of Nelson, Bernstein, etc.), the crazy juxtaposition of stories—some replete with misinformation—when stumbling around Wikipedia (“Newsreader”).

Comedy of Reduction: How Small?

It’s no secret that much of what we call “electronic literature” derives from the experiments in a reduced form of writing by “concrete” poets such as the Noigandres group in Brazil (formed in the 1950s, and consisting of Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, etc.) and Eugene Gomringer in Switzerland among countless others. One of the launching pads for much of the important digital poetry was Kenneth Goldsmith’s website ubu.com, which almost exclusively contained, in its earliest incarnations, images scanned from such canonical works as Mary Ellen Solt’s Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology, Clark Coolidge’s early pointillist work (some of which included only word fragments, such as “ing” and “ed”) in books like Space, and Aram Saroyan’s minimal (though not technically concrete) poems collected in Pages and Aram Saroyan. Among the most famous of the latter are the one-word poems “lighight”—the subject of much controversy given that he had recently received a major NEA grant—and (one of my favorites) “lobstee.” The comedy of such poems involves the visual pun, the presence of typographical architecture even in the most basic poetic construction (exploited, of course, most by e.e. cummings) and, in the case of Saroyam, the abundance of new information exploding from a typo. The painter Ed Ruscha might be considered an honorary member of this group of poets, as he likes to situate single words or short phrases in elegant, practically burdensomely ornate contexts—many of these images are collected in his book, They Called Her Styrene.
Several works that can be called “digital literature” trouble this line between the visual and textual arts, primarily by destabilizing what can be called the “hermeneutic drive” by conventional literary critics. Any of the conventions of academic interpretive or evaluative practices—decoding and re-inserting historical contexts, observing how the text reveals the material conditions of society, discerning the authorial voice in seemingly “objective” writing, parsing sentences and reducing them to digestible nuggets while maintaining the liveliness of poetic ambiguity, offering theses on why the use of certain stylistic traits are somehow “superior” to those found in lesser works, etc.—are not able to be applied to works of one or two words.

Among the works in this category is Peter Cho’s “Wordscapes,” a collection of single word Java applications (one for each letter of the alphabet) that contain a minimal amount of interactivity but which, with increased engagement, reveal several poetic truths about the word itself. Building on the basic premise (in Asian art in particular) of the intermingling of presence and absence, foreground and background, dominance of black or white as “figure” and “ground,” etc., Cho elaborates, word by word, a synaesthetic linguistic universe in which the letterform is perfectly allied with its color, movement, response to user interaction, and setting, returning, to my mind, the presence of the hand (in this case, of the coded hand) to the inscription of a word, as in traditional calligraphy. A companion piece, “Letterscapes,” performs similarly but with individual letters. The Flash application created for *Bembo’s Zoo: An Animal ABC Book* by Roberto de Vicq de Cumptich is, perhaps unintentionally, also exemplary of this category of digital text art. This piece, an alphabetic bestiary, is comprised of 26 short Flash animations, during which the individual letter, presented in Bembo, explodes, multiplies, and dances in an abstract way, only to settle, at the last possible moment, into the form of the animal being named; the letters of the word “Giraffe,” for instance, after frenetic dodging around the screen, eventually compose an iconic image of the animal before fading quickly from view (an act of “cruelty” not unlike that in our first “comedy”).

Works I’ve already mentioned, such as “Star Wars, one letter at a time” and “Ah...” also engage in this basic principle or “reduced” language presentation. Another digital poem, “Basho’s Frogger,” is not quite so minimal in its construction—it is, indeed, a fully functioning video game, a recreation of the classic Frogger but with the first line of logs removed such that the frog only has the option to run back and forth or jump in the river—but makes its case as a digital literary object after the frog has died three times, at which point the high score screen comes up with the three highest rated players being named: frg, pnd, plp. If a classic haiku is comprised of two unrelated images with no authorial intervention to describe their relationship, then “Basho’s Frogger” is an exemplary satire in that the playable image and the inscrutable text are juxtaposed in a surprising and intellectually fulfilling way, while the text itself (which forgoes the classic syllable count, a bugaboo of English-language haiku writers, for no syllables at all) is an accurate translation of one of Basho’s most famous haiku. Another largely comedic work, the “World’s Smallest Blog,” is a fully functioning website (created in Flash) that measures only 18 by 18 pixels. It contains a gallery of animations, video (I guess that makes it a “vlog”), a newsfeed (“asteroids launched”), a gallery of classic images from Western Art, a collection of haiku, a webcam, a search box, and a fully functioning game of Pong.

David Johnston’s series of Vimeo videos, “Muds,” which he describes as “palpitating word forms,” contrasts animations of words created using 3-D software (such as Maya) in videotaped “real” spaces, the words often decomposing, morphing, and doing otherwise disgusting things in such a way that their viscerality trumps the photographed space itself, also overriding the antiseptic quality of 3-D modeling. Jörg Piringer’s series “Soundpoems” and the iPhone app “abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz” link the single letter to its uttered human sounds, such that when the letters are sent off into screenspace, they acquire agency (flying around like airplanes, for instance) and form new phonetic clusters upon collision with other free-floating letters—a “g” colliding with an “a” to form “ga.” Piringer’s investment in the artistic possibilities of single letters have led him to the creation of extraordinary videos and live VJ-style performance pieces that take on a symphonic element with the aid of high amplification. “Family Tree,” by the Dutch team of Rozalie Hirs and Harm van den Dorpel, is a little more elaborate linguistically; it is basically a playable chandelier-shaped object in which an abstract family tree—composed of “mother,” “father,” various punctuation marks, and occasional phrases like “was undone by” or “butterfly of tales”—hangs before you as some sort of harbinger of a cursed future.

I’ve already linked these pieces to precursors in concrete poetry. Novelistic precursors include the later writings of Samuel Beckett, in which every element of the page-based narrative art is reduced to the simplest words, often repeated to obsession, but to horrifying effect. The novels of David Markson, which
are presented as single sentences, often composed of plain facts with no apparent narrative driving them, makes a similar gesture (I am ignoring, for the moment, a cache of digital works that rely on single-sentence constructions derived from particular databases). This brand of comedy, which Kenner dubbed the “comedy of impasse,” is premised on the reduction of the human subject to a series of intertextual machinations. Single-word works such as these can be seen as illustrations of the post-apocalyptic failure of the author to confront, assimilate, and eventually exploit the stresses of writing in a technological society. These pieces are like the towel tossed in late in the match, at which point the fighter just wants to return home with some semblance of self-esteem.

Comedy of Excess: How Much?

This works in this fourth category, as much of the work in the fifth, are not “digital projects” per se. For the most part, their final product is a book of some nature, and in many cases computer technology plays no role in their creation. Many critics of digital literature, such as Stephanie Strickland, avow a demarcation between works of literature that are “born digital”—which presumably means that they were written exclusively for presentation in digital environments regardless of their textual qualities, or were composed by computers themselves—and works that function just as well on the page, and indeed have no presence at all on the web or other form of digital distribution. To my mind, this is inherently a false dichotomy. Several works of print poetry that have made excellent transitions to digital environments, such as e.e. cummings poetry as animated by Allison Clifford in “The Sweet Old Et Cetera” or the children’s book “Bembo’s Zoo,” explore several of the features of digital technology (mostly outlined above) in ways that supersede their “birth” in the “analog.” The works that fall into the category of the “comedy of excess” reflect one aspect of database culture that most works “born digital” are in fact unable to accurately chart, which is the imposition of the possibility of an exhaustive compilation and/or organization of knowledge, in often arcane and seemingly inhuman ways, in our daily lives. The fact that these works find their hold in the world of print culture, rather than the digital—where the seemingly “infinite” information of the database is merely assumed, if never truly examined—is the tripwire that signifies their primary aspect as “comedy.”

Primary among these works are the books of Kenneth Goldsmith, prime mover (along with his theoretical wingman, Craig Dworkin) of a movement of literature dubbed “conceptual writing.” These works, like those of the minimal poets mentioned above, take as their starting point the travesty of the idea of the “author” in an age of textual oversaturation. How, in a textual universe characterized by the instant destruction of texts by algorithm, the instant transportation of texts from one context to another by hyperlinks and search engines, the instant de-singularization of texts by instant linkages to other similar texts with impersonal “suggestions” on sites such as Amazon, is one to write a subjectively nuanced text that expresses a unique human vision? The solution, in the mind of the conceptual writer, is not to “author” texts but merely move them from one realm—quite often, the realm of the trivial, the taboo, the ephemeral, the arbitrary, the arcane, not to mention the boring—into the realm of the monumental, which, in conceptual writing terms, often means “the doorstop”—the encyclopedic book. This morphing of the antics of digital culture, which multiplies the content of the Library of Congress at a rate incalculably large each hour—into the increasingly fetishistic world of the book collector is at the core of this group of works. In fact, these works end up not being characterized by “excess”—they don’t, in fact, go on forever (as an algorithmic work like a poetry generator might)—but by their framing and the very restricted, often simple-minded, textual economy they enact and embody.

There are several examples of such excessive texts that emerge—like the works of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, Jodi, or the creator of “Mouchette” (discussed later)—out of the art world. Fiona Banner’s book-length project, The Nam, is the transcription of her own verbal transcription of six American movies that use the Vietnam War as their setting, such as Apocalypse Now or Platoon, which she describes as if she were actually there witnessing the events—that is, as if the movies weren’t primarily fictions, and as if her role in their depictions were entirely naïve. She thereby recreates the infamous (if not entirely verifiable) experience of the first viewers of the film of a train pulling into a station who reacted with fear, mistaking the indexicality of film for “reality.” The Nam is a thousand pages long, and certainly requires more reading time than the viewing of all six films. Another project that is an urtext of the “comedy of excess” is Andy Warhol’s novel, A, a novel, which is merely a transcription of a day, or night, in the life of Warhol superstar Ondine. Warhol had several different transcribers for each chapter (or hour) of the project, each of which was...
permitted to perform the transcription in whatever fashion he or she would like (famously, Maureen Tucker, drummer for the Velvet Underground and present-day Tea Partier, refused to transcribe the manifold obscenities).

Contemporary works that reflect this comedy of excess include Goldsmith’s Day, which is an unedited transcription of a single issue of the New York Times (September 1, 2000), including its advertisements and its (now no longer included) stock figures. The resulting product of this tiresome task is a huge book filled with details of such seemingly trivial events as a tennis match by Andre Agassi, which at the time owned a particular charge for fans, one now lost to history. None of the graphics, line breaks, font changes, or text boxes are included from the original newspaper, though paragraph breaks are mostly observed. Text is returned to the truly material, as the user-friendly (though highly manipulative and certainly ephemeral) construction of a daily newspaper is rendered grotesque by its very size in a huge, unindexed book. Another work of Goldsmith’s, Fidget, is a word for word transcription of the author recording every movement he made in a single day (he wore a tape recorder to capture his text) entirely uncensored, including everything from the author drinking coffee, going to the bathroom, masturbating, and eventually purchasing a flask of whiskey to alleviate the extreme nature of his self-assigned task. No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96 is perhaps the most lyrical and economical of these “excessive” works; it contains, in alphabetical order and divided by syllable count, all of the phrases Goldsmith managed to collect over a roughly three-year period that ended with the “schwa” sound—words like “far” and “ah.” If Fidget, with its fetishization of the acts of a single day, takes Ulysses as its ghostly predecessor (he enacted the piece of Bloomsday), then No. 111 is Goldsmiths’ answer to Pound’s Cantos—a global, multivalent, multi-lingual, encyclopedic, cumulative work but paying no heed to the artistic integrity implied by “song,” the poet, meter, ethics, politics, etc. The very leveling of all of the spoken and written data that is included in No. 111 implies an egalitarianism that can only be rivaled by Whitman in his longer paratactic passages from Leaves of Grass, in which images of victims of insanity, the toils of the worker and the beauty of virginal women are collided without comment. No. 111 makes the works of poets such as who devote lengthy (though relatively short) works to obsessive practices look timid and mannered by comparison.

Darren Wershler’s The Tapeworm Foundry: and or the dangerous prevalence of imagination is another key text in the comedy of excess, containing as it does a fantastically diverse and irreverent list of impossible-to-enact performance art ideas, all separated by “andor.” Dan Farrell’s The Inkblot Record transcribes exhaustively the reactions of several thousand patients’ reactions to Rorschach tests—again, rendered alphabetically, like a “pataphysical dictionary of paranoias.” Farrell’s readings from this text are characterized by their apparent lack of affect as his voice moves through horrifying, revealing, funny, and embarrassing reactions to this now discredited gauge of psychological stability. Simon Morris’s retyping of the entirety of Jack Kerouac’s On the Road, which he published as Getting Inside Jack Kerouac’s Head, matches the heroic, nirvana-infused moments of Kerouac’s typing of On the Road on a single scroll with a slavish, abject process of merely aping this achievement. Vanessa Place’s Statement of Facts skirts illegality while playing on the public’s fascination with sexual crime by presenting, largely unedited, the required “statement of facts” documents in the cases of sexual predators in Los Angeles, people she in fact represents in her day job as an attorney. A final work, Paul Chan’s “alternumerics” (to be discussed later), a series of artistic fonts that replace letters with words and phrases, can sneak into this group as, once the fonts are installed, they can be used to create an infinite amount of new texts, even by converting an existing text (such as, say, Little House on the Prairie) into Chan’s font inspired by the writings of de Sade.

Conceptual writing can be said to play on the transition of print to digital paradigms in textual production—constricted economies of information are bull-dozed by often worthless abundance. However, one can also attest that conceptual writing is a result of the increasing presence of surveillance in daily life, not to mention the prevalent databasing and commercializing of seemingly trivial visual and textual activity. On Facebook, for example, textual production proceeds at a pace we simply can’t comprehend, and users’ behavior is constantly modified by the potential for global embarrassment; the “story of the tribe,” the “memoir,” bits of satire, poetry and pornography, and political “witnessing” are all being folded into the dominant über-text of the archive.
A common description of the trajectory of English-language experimental poetry in the wake of Modernism has been the progression from lyrical singularity to greater textual and subjective fragmentation. Starting with the triumvirate of Pound/Williams/Eliot, through Olson and books like Ashbery’s *Tennis Court Oath*, then overseas to continental figures such as Marinetti and Schwitters and a revived Gertrude Stein, and finally through the Language Poets (and those loosely affiliated such as Susan Howe and Clark Coolidge), writers have worked toward investigating the power of the fragment, in a quest to disrupt normative modes of linguistic communication, not to mention the grand narratives and the spectacle. However, a counter-tradition of experimental poetry has found its roots in the experiments of the Oulipo, a group of writers who, allied with mathematicians, sought to counter the march of the fragment (or Surrealist-inspired “associative” writing) to produce works that are formally elegant, inscrutable, and even populist in motivation. The Oulipo has produced both novelists of general repute—Italo Calvino, George Perec, and Harry Mathews have all been accepted into their relative national canons—as well as several poets, though their most notable poet, Raymond Queneau, made as large an impact as a writer of fiction as he did in poetry. One can observe a turn in English language poetry—in an attempt to escape the aggressive stance of much Modernist literature, perhaps?—to the creation of poems that, formally, move inward. Both Louis Zukofsky’s “A” and James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover*, widely divergent as they are, share the distinction of being highly formal works informed, and infused, by the play of numerical and alphabetical games. Concurrently, American poetry entered into a love affair with the sestina, that most classic but never stentorian playful form, with writers as varied as Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery, Harry Mathews, and Anthony Hecht producing sestinas that have entered the poetry canon. Concurrently, the American writer Vito Acconci—who would find greater fame as a performance artist and architect—created a large body of work (collected in the exquisite *Words to Cover a Page*) that deleted the role of author entirely, to the degree that Acconci himself was just carrying out a program to “cover a page.” Acconci was a great inspiration to the “conceptual” writers, as described above, but Acconci himself never created a very large literary work, and his works never quite engaged the “social” to the degree that say *The Nam or Day* did.

These writers and artists have inspired a number of writers in the digital era to hypostatize the properties of lyric to the point of near claustrophobic restriction. Most notable among these poets is Christian Bök, a Canadian who took Perec’s lipogrammatic challenge to produce major works of literature—written in conventionally acceptable “high” style—without the use of certain letters (in the case of Perec’s *A Void*, that letter being “e”), and conceived of a project in which he would write a five-chapter narrative poem in which only words that utilized one of the five vowels would be used in each such designated chapter. The “a” chapter, for instance, dedicated to Hans Arp (all of the chapters are dedicated to artists whose names fit the constraint), uses only words that have “a” as a vowel and no other (including no “y”) such as “banana.” *Eunoia*, the resulting book, took seven years to write (the same number of years it took Joyce for *Ulysses*), and has become a milestone in the trajectory of algorithmically constrained, but human-generated, literature; it reflects better than any digital project the operations of human creativity when it’s devoted to satisfying the demands of an inhuman algorithm. *Eunoia* is “recursive” to the degree that every sentence, every word, refers back to the algorithm governing its writing, not to mention the constraints of normative grammar and paragraph structure itself. Unlike other writers of neo-Oulipian works, Bök took pains to make his prose poem as beautiful stylistically as any fine piece of prose, not to mention funny and engaging as a story.

Nick Montfort and William Gillespie’s “2002: A Palindrome Story” is a work of 2002 words, published in 2002, that reads—as its title suggests—both forward and backward. Though the story itself is barely discernable given the amount of neologism, ellipsis, syntactical contortion, and plain flummery that had to be employed to complete the work, it has inspired an entire glossary describing the activities therein, and does at time read very poetically. Craig Dworkin’s textual works, though often classified as “conceptual” writing, actually shares more with the tradition of extreme literary (as opposed to personal or performative) constraint outlined here. His sequence, “Fact,” changes with each performance or publication, for with each iteration heresearches the exact physical make-up of the medium—paper, screen, etc.—on which the text is being presented. As Goldsmith has noted, “Fact” is “a self-reflexive, deconstructed meditation on the act of writing and of publishing, with an emphasis on the materiality of language.” Daniel C. Howe and Aya Karpinska’s interactive digital poem cube “open.ended” displays many of the features of the “comedy of recursion,” though not to quite this extreme a degree. In the piece, which exists as a Java applet online, the user rotates two translucent cubes, one tucked inside the other, each of which contains text on its sides;
when the user chooses, she stops the cubes from rotating and the two texts become superimposed, revealing (after the deletion of certain words) a new text, mostly of a lyrical character. My own work, “Kluge: A Meditation,” attempts a similar sort of recursive (or perhaps merely recombinant) trick by providing the user with access to several “sub-poems” that construct new texts out of the pre-existing texts, which themselves have been written according to Oulipian constraints (each paragraph containing 20 lines of text exactly 60 character spaces in length across). Finally, Nick Montfort’s recent project, “ppg256,” a series of Perl scripts of exactly 256 characters that produce new poems, are possibly the epitome of this trend, as the mathematically inspired textual constraint is being applied to a textually productive program, hence bringing the journey of constraint from the hands of Oulipian mathematicians back within the fold of the code.

These pieces address the deeply incestuous, redundant, chaotic, and uneconomical nature of digital text distribution by imposing impossibly strict controls over the production of new texts. Unlike conceptual writing, which reframes ephemera from the endless flow of largely passive textual production (talking, digital “chat” sessions, trial transcripts, digital plagiarizing of classic works, etc.), constraint-based writing seeks to reify classic lyric form, rescuing it from the inherent destruction of mindless algorithmic activity. But whereas the sonnet can be associated with the rise of subjectivity in poetic art—the first form where autobiography was truly accepted as content, the “I” being traceable to a biographical author—the writers of constraint-based literature succeed in driving out subjectivity, which they see as having become calcified through abuses by such camps such as the Surrealists (with their emphasis on automatic writing) and the Confessional poets (with their emphasis on psychological extremity), through the imposition of impossible constraints, even if, finally, the authorial affect survives in the work’s “style.”

Comedy of Simulation: How Fake?

One of the central features of Internet writing of all stripes since the beginning of its life as a public network was the possibility not only of misinformation but of the simulation of individuals, organizations, and other social (and biological) entities. An under-recognized genre of electronic literature has been the plethora of sites that, either for satirical or artistic reasons, have sought to imitate a web presence. Many of these sites are inspired by the classic Situationist principle of—as the name implies—creating situations that somehow break or trouble the clean functioning of the spectacle as it permeates our daily lives. The most basic level of this type of creation is the mash-up, which, like a détournement, takes pre-existing artistic or linguistic elements and collages them to create new wholes. Most “mash-ups,” however, declare their political message (when they have one) quite vulgarly and hence ineffectively, or destabilize any sort of rhetorical charge with a retreat into meme-encoded humor—dropping a cat into a Presidential press conference, for example, and Photoshopping a phrase over it. When the Department of Homeland Security first released its series of airplane-emergency-type icons that were intended to depict what to do in case of terrorist attacks—a series of figures having airplane seats burst into flame beneath them, walking by suspicious bags, etc.—the Internet, as a seemingly unified force conferring judgment, immediately blossomed with fake Homeland Security sites that involved much of the same information, but which re-captioned the icons to mean all sorts of devious things.

One of the most notorious simulated persons in the early days of Internet art was “Mouchette,” named after the Robert Bresson movie of the same name. The site immediately impresses one as having been created by a young girl, and contains all sorts of imagery one would associate with a child-like sensibility—flowers (with ants crawling on them); a picture of the girl herself (looking unhealthily pensive); a brief, simplistic biography of who she is (she lives in Amsterdam, is 13, etc.). However, on further examining the site (which is suspiciously in two languages), one comes across crazy chat rooms concerning pornography and mental instability, pages suggesting that Mouchette herself suffers from amnesia, images of children’s toys that have been rendered grotesque by being photographed so close, etc. The creator of Mouchette is known but remained anonymous for many years. Another piece that plays on simulated web identity is Keith Obadike’s “Blackness for Sale,” which existed as an eBay entry for several weeks before it was finally taken down by the administration. As a short burst of satire, “Blackness” is brilliant in its outward transformation of its commercial context—bathed in the egalitarian ethos of the early web in that it makes an entrepreneur of anyone, but which nonetheless supports the capitalist mission of rendering all things, even concepts, objects of exchange—into something akin to the slave trade, though in this case, the body is not being
More sophisticated (and hence not entirely "simple") versions of this tactic include Whitehouse.org, which launched during the Bush II era, and is designed to look much like a government site, with recent headlines, free stuff to download, heroic photographs of the Capitol, and positive slogans. However, all of the text on the site is satirical, mostly of the Onion-type variety but crossing over into some deeply offensive territory. Among the best features of the site, which was created in the lead up to the Iraq war, is a series of downloadable images that take the stylistic traits of classic WWII recruitment posters but transform them into self-incriminating jingoistic perversities featuring the likes of Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, and George W. Bush himself. The Yes Men, now famous for their impersonations of various types of specialists in international forums and even on television, started as web activists by creating a website that claimed to be that of Dow Chemical, in which they apologized for the Bhopal disaster of 1984. Though the website was eventually discovered and taken down, the Yes Men took the basic principle of impersonation a step further by making appearances on national television as representatives of Dow Chemical. Their most famous website, www.gatt.org, claimed to be a "corrected" website for the World Trade Organization, and was so effective that the group received several e-mail invitations to speak at WTO-related events, some of which they accepted and turned into startlingly caustic performances, many of which are captured in the Yes Men documentary.

Shawn Rider’s “myBall” is a Flash application that advertises a new toy that is “a robotic friend and robust parental surveillance unit”; it is less political so much as ‘pataphysical, as it rearranges certain vectors of thinking—the complex interplay of technological progress and the persistence of such biological necessities as human touch—and offers, based on these rewired premises, a solution that is as impossible as it is seductive. ‘Pataphysics itself has made its presence in various forums that are normally reserved for “objective” or non-fictional stances, such as the science lecture. Suffice it to say, the versions of satire that the Yes Men and the ‘pataphysical lecturer represent a new “mainstreaming” of subversive literature that the simulacra-rich tide pool of the web incubated and eventually set free on the world.

Comedy of Duplication: How Many?

One of the most salient properties of new media culture is the infinite reproducibility of digital copies of a digital "original." Coupled with the near-ubiquity of the web in Western and most Asian cultures, the field is set for numberless variations on the comedy inherent in the vertiginous stage beyond the "age of mechanical reproduction." Whereas Benjamin, in his seminal essay, described the fading of the aura surrounding the unique art object—one invested with a degree of the sacred due its singularity—brought on by photography, we can now point to a period in which the original is itself digital, and the copy not a compressed, bowdlerized version of something “real” (with its infinitely richer informational content) but an object itself with, importantly, the air of the singular, the sacred, still clinging to it. The presence of a piece of net-art on a computer screen (often with accompanying sound) transforms the computer into an art object itself; this, after all, is the primary characteristic of a Turing machine, that it can function as an infinite number of proper “machines” based on the symbols (or code) operating within it. The Internet also represents a final stage in the trajectory of media distribution that can be said to start with print messages (conveyed by couriers who could receive replies and consequently could be killed) and the postal service (which is ideally indifferent to the messages transported), moves on to the broadcast model (which involves a central broadcast station and numberless receiving units, radio and television being the obvious manifestations of this), and finally the distributed model, in which there is no central station, reply and response is not only possible but encouraged, and the “message” transferred is not a mediated version of an analog original but the duplicate. Lawrence Lessig describes this progression, and the implications for copyright law, at great length in Free Culture; Internet radio, for example, provides “an unlimited number of radio stations that a user could tune in to using her computer, [a]nd because the potential audience for Internet radio is the whole world, niche stations could easily develop and market their content to a relatively large number of users worldwide.” In this new world order, the “niche” market loses the connotation of being marginal, specialized (i.e., of interest to the very few), and therefore a second-tier player to the “mainstream”—in fact, the “niche” is global. The confluence of these forces—the infinite duplication of an artistic “original,” the air of the sacred clinging to artistic productions, the reach of the Internet beyond geographical and temporal limitations, the relatively uncensored transfer of messages across the web, and
the presence of “niche” markets that are in fact ubiquitous—sets the stage for numberless variations on the comedy of duplication.

An undervalued quality of the work of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (described above in the “comedy of subjection”) is the fact that several of their works have been published in several languages; for example, their piece “Samsung” has versions in English, Korean, French, German, and Spanish along with a “Tango” version (also in English). In all, they have produced original works in 17 languages. The artistic duo is composed of one native-born Korean and one native-born American; presumably, the Korean versions could have been written by Young-Hae Chang and the English by herself and her partner Marc Voge. But common notions of authorship, translation, textual “originals,” and depleted copies are thwarted by the fact that several works don’t appear in Korean at all (works listed as only being “Turkish,” however, come with English subtitles), and that no translator is ever credited for their pieces. This unlinking of textual production with any geographical or cultural specificity (their location in Seoul being just a matter of habit and convenience) and even authorial specificity—we can’t compare the English original with a French translation created by the author himself, as we can with Beckett—creates incredible problems for the scholar attuned to a hermeneutical model of reading premised on the “close reading” of textual nuances, hidden intentions, intertextuality (a scholar of English looking for logopoeic resonances in Turkish literature?), etc. Philological readings quite obviously are impossible; YHCHI seems the complete opposite of Joyce’s project in Finnegans Wake, though the multilingualism of their project seems to beckon for it. Many of YHCHI’s pieces mimic the broadcast model of message transmission—a common trope of theirs, most visible in “Cunnilingus in North Korea,” is the parodying of government propaganda—though they don’t, in fact, seem to invite feedback, at least not through the more pedestrian if digital channels (e-mail and Facebook, for example).

Other works that come to mind include Paul Chan’s fantastic set of artistic fonts “alternumerics,” many of which replace individual letters with entire words and phrases (from the writings of Fourier, for example, or in one instance the lyrics of 1970s love songs for the lower-case, transcriptions from sexual harassment cases in the upper-case). Chan’s fonts are like a virus one invites into one’s computer, rendering the machine largely useless for common message creation. Nonetheless, basic words—“hegemony,” for example—typed in these fonts exaggerates the fragility of digital textuality, which is that text (merely code) can easily be assigned completely arbitrary, though systematic, new meanings with the flip of a glitch. Chan’s experiments with distributed art came to a head when he started posting posters (in the form of Acrobat files) based on his own photographs taken in Iraq in the months before the invasion in 2003; one can call this a form of digital wheat-pasting, as these letter-sized protests began to appear in countless cities around the nation.

The graphic designer and artist Julet Martin created a very interesting piece, “oooxxxooo,” in the late-1990s that nicely illustrates the challenges to the lyrical subject in Internet poetry. The pointillist, often poignant, moments of longing in the piece are crowded out by ASCII characters that seem to suggest her drowning in networked subjectivity. Charles Bernstein’s graphical essay, “An Mosaic For Convergence,” also from the late ‘90s, is replete with haplessly duplicated imagery (created, I believe, by his children using an Apple children’s graphics program), poems that are haphazardly reproduced on the screen right next to each other, letters of various colors forming annoying backdrops to the “content” of the essay, and generally terrible typography and graphic design, all combining to mock, gently but surely, the precious (but false) singularity of a poem printed on fine paper with lovely typography in a durable binding—the poem caught in the act of aspiring to fetish object. A final example of the “comedy of duplication” comes in the form of probably the most famous Internet meme, which involved the injection of the phrase, “All Your Base Are Belong to Us,” into countless photographic contexts. The origins of this project, and how it found its way into a single-Flash movie (with pulsing techno soundtrack), is too long to include in the present essay (there are countless pages, and even video, explaining its origin). Suffice it to say, the total effect of seeing this menacing phrase—presumably said by invading aliens in the form of Japanglish, and really just a poorly translated squib from a video game—appear in photograph after photograph, as signs at Alcatraz, as traffic signs, as a Wheel of Fortune phrase, etc., is one of paranoia about the permeability of all facts of culture by a self-duplicating message. That the message is almost entirely meaningless—its power lay in its very ubiquity, augmented by the broken syntax that screams “foreign menace”—only forces the question of what, if anything, lies underneath our most cherished and stable cultural institutions (the economy and
Conclusion

In David Clark’s dizzying *88 Constellations for Wittgenstein (to be played by left hand)*, which I invite you view online before reading the rest of this essay, we can observe the presence of these simples in a large-scale, cumulative work that I have dubbed “The Ludic Book.” The idea is not that *88 Constellations* enacts any of the simples in their entirety, but that one can begin to break apart the features of this large work into conceptual components using the list of simples as a diamond lens through which to view it. The apparent integrity of the whole thus shatters into kaleidoscopic pieces that can be observed in isolation.

- Pseudo agency: apparent control given to user when in fact highly manipulative (not open-world, star field only leads you to closed Flash movies)
- Closed work: total control over functionality of piece rather than network or randomized instability (it’s stable and unchanging)
- Iconic over realistic imagery: preference for the “intellectual” over the “pathetic” (few photographs or videos, most images act as signs)
- Database feel: illusion of limitless set of data when really reconfiguring closed set (group of unsorted short movies, inability to chart progression through “stars”)
- Sign play: making a word or image appear to be one thing, but showing it is another (image games/morphing in films, gestalt switches)
- Genre-crashing: works mix documentary, fictional, essayistic, confessional aspects (characterized by digression, associative thinking)
- Fetish-worthy singularity: an auteur’s sensibility infects writing, graphic design, sound, and interface (he’s made an object of beauty)

As for the simples themselves, they acquire a certain philosophical import (to be further elaborated in a later essay) when we link them to certain concepts and physical, even metaphysical, phenomena that generally form the foundations of much scientific and philosophical thinking—i.e., the “grand themes.”

1. Comedy of subjection: power
2. Comedy of dysfunction: tool (being)
3. Comedy of reduction: logic
4. Comedy of exhaustion: mass/energy
5. Comedy of recursion: sign (being)
6. Comedy of simulation: belief/truth/desire
7. Comedy of duplication: time/space

By “tool,” I am thinking of Heidegger, but more specifically Graham Harman’s adoption of Heidegger’s tool theory as a way to describe all relations between objects what is generally termed “object-oriented ontology,” in which the category of objects extends to “a mailbox, electromagnetic radiation, curved spacetime, the Commonwealth of Nations, or a propositional attitude.” To put it reductively, it is only when a tool becomes broken that its tool-being becomes tangible to the intellect (thus, for example, it is only when a toxin is released into the air that one becomes aware of the atmosphere’s status as a “tool”).

The comedy of recursion does something opposite to the comedy of dysfunction: It turns the sign in on itself to such a degree that the sign’s indexical properties are entirely elided and the sign forfeits all potentiality as representative of objects.

The schematized aspects of the “ludic book” can be linked to the seven simples pretty strictly, though the bullet points below are surely open for revision. Suffice it to say, the “ludic book” only works along the axes of the simple—somewhere between its complete absence and its totalizing presence—rather than simply enacts them (no ludic book, which can take years to create and hours to explore, can afford to be entirely “cruel,” for example).

- Choice vs. passivity: comedy of subjection
Accessibility vs. complexity: comedy of dysfunction
Iconicity vs. realism: comedy of reduction
Database infinity vs. closure: comedy of exhaustion
Wavering sign/gestalt vs. indexicality: comedy of recursion
Truth vs. fiction (genre-blurring): comedy of simulation
Bookish singularity vs. reproducibility: comedy of duplication

These smaller comedies are linked to something I call the “comedy of separation,” which, though it lives in the title of my essay, I will withhold describing for now. However, the basic idea is that language usage has progressed through history from something that we closely associated with the body and “presence” to being largely transferred, even “understood,” by other language, namely code. The major milestones in the progression of speech and language can be roughly schematized like this:

0: (body)
1: speech
2: writing
3: movable type
4. executable code

If we add just another level of detail to his schema, we can see that language usage has progressed in a somewhat circular fashion, with simple marks or strikes (indentations on bullae, binary code in punch cards) and simulation (mimicry ironizing the emotions, block print reproducing hand script) as recurring features.

0: (body) = crying/yawning/laughing, etc.
1: mimicry \[21\] → speech/language
2: bullae marks/drawing → writing
3: block print → movable type
4. punch cards → executable code \[22\]

The comedy of separation occurs when the machine is employed to exaggerate this very progression of language from being an “inarticulate” expression of an inner state of, say, pain or hunger—an expression that in tribal culture probably had many receivers who responded with naive immediacy—to being the plaything of algorithm itself, indifferent to the individual’s situation (of pain, of hunger, of isolation) in the physical world. This helps, if anything, to explain why truly “subjective” writing, such as lyric poetry and confessional autobiography, feels so strange on the Internet; it’s not that the Internet is “public” since after all people read lyric poetry and confessional biography in public venues, but that text on a computer is supported by, and subject to, the operations of algorithm—the “flickering signifier,” as N. Katherine Hayles has termed it. Once again, I would like to reserve this argument for a later essay.

Brian Kim Stefans is a professor of literature and new media in the English department of UCLA. His forthcoming book of poems is titled *Viva Miscegenation*, due in December 2011. His website is [arras.net](http://arras.net).

**Notes**

1. As the accompanying PowerPoint illustrates, I am inspired in the use of the word “comedy” by Hugh Kenner, especially in his 1963 book, *The Stoic Comedians*. However, due to space constraints, I will reserve outlining this connection for another paper.

2. It’s worth noting that Saul Bass’s title sequence for the film *The Man With the Golden Arm* was set to a jazz soundtrack.


6. A contrast to this would be “They Rule,” which, though database-generated, operates like a database-driven satire to the degree that the creator’s thesis rings clear through every moment of engagement.

7. Both of these works can be viewed in their entirety on ubu.com.


10. The tapes upon which this text was based were recorded over several years, actually, but the fiction has persisted that it was a “day in the life” in order to maintain the connection with Joyce’s Ulysses, which, for the conceptual writers, is one of the few actual works of fiction whose conceptual frame—and the inherent comedy of its excess—is compelling. Joyce is one of the central figures in Kenner’s study, The Stoic Comedians.

11. The actual “schwa” sound permits for more words than Goldsmith permitted, but he limited it to mostly words ending in “r” and “ah.”

12. “Sunset Debris,” a work by Ron Silliman, composed entirely of questions, is one example.

13. Poetry (July/August 2009).

14. The “Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus,” for example.

15. Ready.gov launched in February 2003, although they no longer employ these icons.

16. They created an earlier site, www.gwbush.org, which is no longer live and which I have never seen.

17. Chris Csikszentmihályi’s lectures might be a touchstone here, such as in his lectures in which he describes military technologies that he has developed that are intended to save humans from harm but which turn out to be more deadly than human soldiers themselves. I can’t actually cite a reference here, but I attended one such lecture when he gave it as a job talk at Brown University in 2007. The MIT New Media lab and NYU’s ITP program both seem to specialize in the development of ‘pataphysical software and hardware, though always with the secret ambition of commercial use. Architects seem to be most prone to ‘pataphysical thinking. Constant, for example, who was associated with the Situationists, often proposed impossible-to-build projects based on perversely rational principles; later architects such as Rem Koolhaus and Arakawa/Gins seem to do this with some frequency.


19. This rich quote appears numerous times on the web, though I am having a hard time finding the author. It is probably Harman himself; he is prone to eclectic lists in his writing.

20. Harman uses this example in Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures (Zone Books, 2010).

21. “Mimicry” as the possible origin of language usage is my own untested, pet theory.

22. Writers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Steven Pinker, Denise Schmandt-Besserat, Walter J. Ong, Marshall MacLuhan, and Lev Manovich (among many others) can be used to describe specific points in this progression, with theorists of the “gestural origins of language” lingering early in the progress.
Ludic Architecture. · 16 June 2010 · He separates game and narrative as well. However, in contrast to the approach mentioned above, this separation does not apply to the level of the game’s syntax; instead, he transfers the narrative of a computer game to the level of its reception or interpretation. Backe develops a model with a trichotomy of sub-, micro-, and macrostructures in which he distributes narrative and ludic elements. These structures are distinguished into world-rules (substructure), aims of the game (microstructure) and meta-rules (macrostructure). Separation and Its Discontents and millions of other books are available for Amazon Kindle. Learn more. Enter your mobile number or email address below and we'll send you a link to download the free Kindle App. MacDonald pursues his theory into the first half of the 20th century, claiming widespread endogamy and also exceptional reproductive success for Jewish populations. I would like to see some evidence. My observations, having lived in California, Washington DC, Germany and now Ukraine, are that Jewish families have faced the same reproductive struggles as Gentile families.