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The Digital Diasthima: Time-Lapse Reading Digital Poetry

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Abstract

In moving texts, such as digital kinetic poetry, the reader-user might no longer control the duration of their reading, unlike the traditional and static nature of printed texts. The user deals with readable time versus executable time, the human time-line versus the machine time-line. By having an imposed and fixed number of milliseconds to perceive the text on the screen, the user might find themselves completing or imagining the unread text, following the dynamic forms with an imposed dynamic content. Yet, to understand the shifting reading patterns of digital poems, one has to consider another methods or tools that may complement traditional models. Therefore, performing a critical approach solely based in close reading methods might not accomplish a fully comprehensible reading of digital poetry. In this sense, following upon methods taken from other areas, e.g. time-lapse photography and R. Luke DuBois's concept of "time-lapse phonography" (2011), I introduce the notion of time-lapse reading as a complementary layer in order to close read disruptions in reading processes that demand a set 'experiencing' time when letters, words, lines or stanzas are replaced, with a case study on Philippe Castellin's *çacocophonie* (2013).

Keywords

Electronic Literature; Digital Poetry; Digital Diasthima, Time-Lapse Reading; Philippe Castellin.

Introduction

I am taking into consideration a critical reading of kinetic text, namely kinetic digital poetry. Kinetic digital poems are *performed* with time-based media as both a creative and a critical practice, e.g. onscreen running piece and live performance. In this paper, I am focusing on the critical *performance* executed when reading onscreen pieces, but also how its live performance might affect the very reading process. Time-based parameters operate as functions in diverse programming languages, allowing for a text or poem to run human language and/or code onscreen with a temporal interval determined by a precise number of milliseconds. Therefore, coding these functions helps creating dynamic text which, in turn, might result in diverse nuclei of creative practice: generative text, fiction and poetry, Flash-based or animated/kinetic poetry using other software, distributed/hybrid piece/practice, installation, site-specific installation, performance, real-time sensor-actuator work, and so forth.

Interactivity, Generation and Time-Lapses in Kinetic Digital Poems

One of the complex issues of close reading poetic text in motion is precisely and, first of all, 'just' reading. There are though two main modes underlying this issue: interactivity and non-interactivity. Interactive kinetic poetry often employs a degree of user participation or interaction, by means of mouse movement, keyboard input, joystick, haptic peripheral, touch-screen, sound or movement input captured by sensors (micro, camera, etc.), if one thinks of gallery-mounted pieces, database-pulling interference, etc. Nonetheless, interactive poetry might use several of these features and/or simply contain a speed controller, e.g. Rui Torres's *Mar de Sophia* (2005), Stephanie Strickland, Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo and Paul Ryan's *slippingglimpse* (2006) or Johannes Heldén and Håkon Jonson's *Evolution* (2013), which allows readers/users to change the speed at which the poem runs onscreen, in order to fully read the lines. [1] [2] [3] Hence, one is able to accelerate, slow down and sometimes even pause the unfolding poem. Non-interactive kinetic poetry presents no controller and, therefore, the reader/user might not be able to fully read the lines or words on the surface/onscreen level, if the running time is programmed to be quicker than human reading perception/cognition's skills – e.g. Philippe Castellin's *çacocophonie* (2013), Pär Thörn's *I Am* (2011), Scott Rettberg's *Frequency* poems (2009) and Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' *The Lovers of Beaubourg* (2007). So, if the reader is not able to fully read, how can they even close read? [4] [5] [6] [7]

Before replying to this question, there is another important distinction to be made, between generative and non-generative kinetic poems. Generative kinetic poems instigate a type of time-lapse, let us say, time-lapse α, which resides in the fact that the poem one reads or tries to read can always be different from screening to screening or, simply, if one refreshes the browser. Time-lapse α might then carry two problems: 1) one does not have sufficient time to apprehend the poem; 2) one tries to apprehend something always divergent. As of problem 2 some writers would vindicate that their pieces are intended to be conceptual, and, therefore, their argument relies mainly in the process, rather than in the output, which some would expect to count the most. However, other writers would advocate for the process as well as the degree of craft

achieved in the difficult task of creating poetic output out of a limited or unlimited pool of data, e.g. words. Non-generative kinetic poems, thus, might prompt a type of time-lapse β, which is precisely that of the above-mentioned problem 1: textual replacement might occur at a speed rate difficult for our (still) biologic eyes to cope with. Consequently, and returning to our question, how can one read something not totally readable, slightly readable or unreadable? Shall one create screenshots of parts of a poem evolving over time? Shall one screencast a complete running cycle of the poem? Yes, we can adopt one of these strategies. Yet, isn't this method – as Patricia Tomaszek (2013) referred – going against the very motional property of the poem? [8] Let me reformulate it, does one try to critique a poem's intrinsic dynamic and unfolding nature with a static and print-based reading paradigm? And, more, what if we consider a generative poem supposed to run over 2 x 60 minutes, 24 x 60 minutes, 1 year, 4 years, 23 years, 1000 years, n^x years? Can one actually critically perform close readings based on screenshots, lest to say, screencasts or video recordings? No, one cannot. So, I shall argue here, as I did before (2013), that generative art (visual, sound, textual, performative) is meant to be partially read, that is to say, insofar as one needs to extract a sample or pattern as a representation of totality. And that should be generally accepted, since the process fierce fully needs to be stressed. You wouldn't want to be in front of a machine neither for 4 years in a row, nor 1 week, so that you could experience a work of art, would you?

The Digital Diasthima: 7 Proposals to Approach Time-Lapse Reading

It is exactly at this point that time-lapse emerges as a significant reading method. In fact, one needs to acknowledge that same impossibility in non-controllable kinetic poems and allow for a meaningful time-lapse experience to fully flow within its creative matrix. That said, an interval or disruption is created when reading – what I have been defining as digital *διάστημα*, or *diasthima*, that is, a spatial or timely extension, dimension, interval, gap. The digital *diasthima* is a void, a blank moment in time and space, forcing a quicker human reading, which often ends/begins as a creative process itself by way of incomplete association, metonymy, and metaphor. If we can't read everything, what do we read then? We read what our brain selects and, if we start running the poem several times, we can then begin to read other paths as well. To sum up, I would pinpoint a time-lapse reading approach in these terms:

1. Don't be afraid of not reading everything.

2. Engage with the interface and reject frustration.

3. Be open to discomfort and don't skip the poem.

4. Avoid extracting meaning by merely considering static strategies.

5. Read the source code.

6. Read the surface(s).

7. Allow for *diasthimas* to performing a relevant role in your reading.

Time-Lapse Pho(n/t)ography Informs Time-Lapse Reading

Two good examples of a certain kind of *diasthima* are time-lapse photography and comic strips. One watches a movement scene evolving over time but one does not exactly know what happens in-between moments – it is unknown and uncertain, therefore requiring a shift in perception that erects meaning by association, either narrative thread, metaphoric denotation or synecdoche. And yet, the moments are static. Now, if one has *diasthimas* evolving with dynamic moments, the problem of reading becomes even more complex. Taking a different framework, but nonetheless relevant to our purpose, R. Luke DuBois's (2011) notion of 'time-lapse phonography' deals with "computing the spectral average of a sound over time" to achieve a system, or "temporal momentum," but also a transcoded reading (listening), in order to appropriate their sense of totality with partial episodes:

> How about if you've ever skipped to the next song on an album because you don't like the one playing. Even if you do like the song, do you always listen to the end?
> Like so much else these days, our listening experiences are becoming increasingly under siege by the funny feeling in the back of our minds that we don't have time to waste listening to things we don't necessarily want to hear. So we switch stations, skip to the next track, and cut off the song after the second chorus because, to paraphrase Gordon Gano, the third verse is usually the same as the first, more or less. (DuBois 2011: 248) [9]

If we consider non-controllable kinetic poems, in which the reader has no possibility to interfere with the reading duration, such as Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries' *The Lovers of Beaubourg* (2007), a Flash-based poem, Scott Rettberg's *Frequency* poems (2009), a poetry generator created with Ruby, Pär Thörn's *I Am* (2011), a poem pulling real-time lines from Twitter Search API with the expression "I am," or Philippe Castellin's *çacocophonie* (2013), we can conceive, for now, a particular kind of reading experience that comprises time-lapses as necessary for close reading the work.

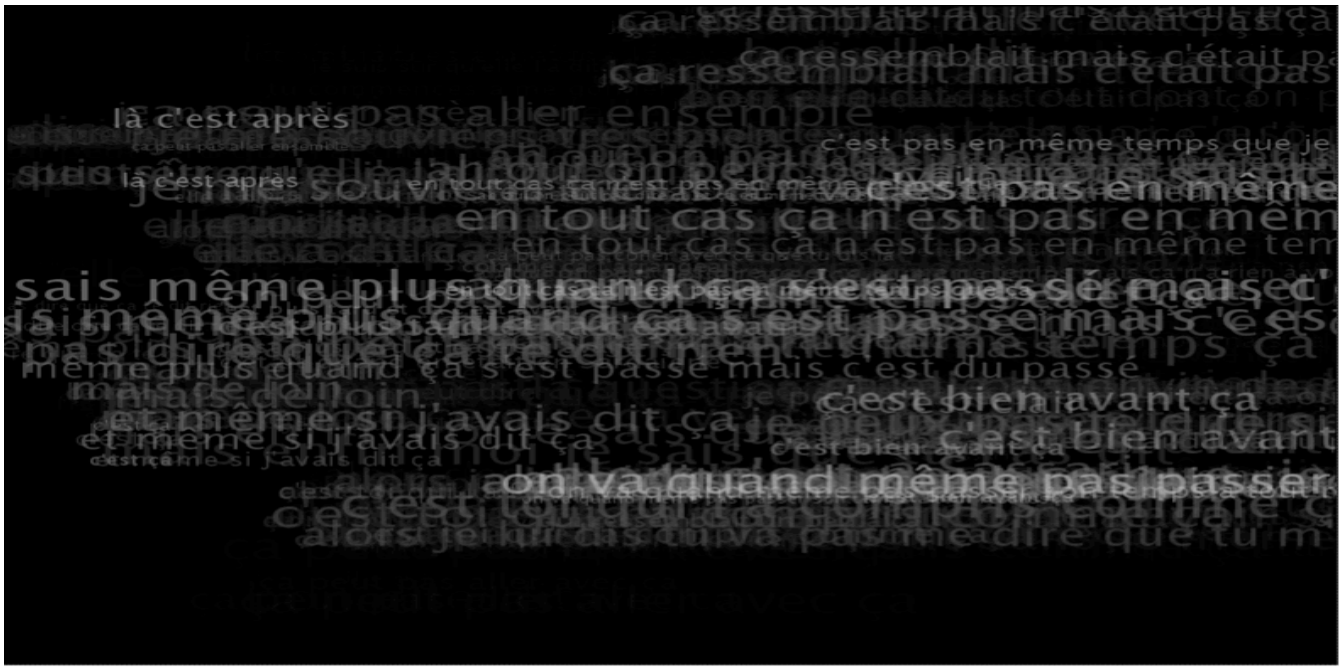

Figure 1. Philippe Castellin, *çacocophonie*, 2013 (screenshot).

Time-Lapse Reading Philippe Castellin's *çacocophonie*

I will thus focus on Philippe Castellin's *çacocophonie* (2013), presented on September 23, 2013, at the Centre Pompidou's BPI in Paris as a "lecture assistée par ordinateur" [computer-assisted reading], during the festival "Chercher Le Texte." Throughout the debate, Castellin showed how reading the same work (Figure 1), or, to be more precise, the same source text, varies depending on the speed and coding parameters attributed, whose outcomes are, in fact, different works, or different speed variations/versions of the same work.

Initially, with a word processor, the author read a static and plain text version of *çacocophonie*, pausing and performing, on a human readable level, the effects of a cacophonic dialogue poem between two characters. The work's utterance disclosed a strong sound poem, with the alliteration on "ça," "ce," "s," "ss," which stresses another thematic disclosure – that of a parody of an episodic conflict between "je" [I] and "tu" [you]. Moreover, the interplay between "ça" [this, it] and "là" [there] helped creating an atmosphere of resembling and opponent forces, which addresses the absurd construction of everyday love conflicts over small things. Now, the second stage of the computer-assisted reading comprised a dynamic and rich text version of the work. Built with Processing, the poem was animated in order to perform lines at a given on-screen speed. Whilst being machine readable, the execution of the code entailed still a fairly human readable experience, in which certain portions of the first version were visually and cognitively dismissed and others highlighted, by force of human brain selection. Finally, the third stage of this event used exactly the same process, although now the speed of each line appearance was drastically accelerated. By reducing a simple parameter, such as the number of milliseconds for line display, this time-based poem displayed on the Web is still readable by the machine. However, it stops being human readable, or on the verge of non-human cognition, as the speed rate allows only for certain words to emerge as meaningful, at least, at the conscious level. Even if this version does not use sound, all the different crafts around code, moving text and image create a synesthetic awareness. The quick juxtapositions of kinetic text displayed via software, hardware and network remain tacit features as if to understand that such poetic and reading interplay needs to be addressed in a different way.

Conclusion

Digital poems often bridge visual, sonic, and literary content. More, their *performance* is often an instantiation and extension of their distributed materiality. On some occasions, digging into the source code might provide new insights, comments (in *çacocophonie* there are only some indications about optimized browsers), that is, language or artwork which is still part of the code – some works have other works hidden in the source code, ASCII art, etc. – but not machine readable, and the discovery of codework, that is, creative and critical code that is manipulated in order: 1) not to be executed by the machine but to be read by hu-

mans; 2) not to be executed by the machine nor to be read by humans; 3) to be executed by the machine and to be read by humans. On other occasions, database aesthetics forecast the ground for input from real-time data sensors, SNSs APIs, user's input, and/or blended databases.

As evidence shows, digital works cannot be analyzed with the same critical tools as non-digital works. Therefore, it is imperative to research new models and methods, and to engage with discourses pertaining to the scope of works one is set to critique.

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Biography

Álvaro Seiça (b. 1983, Aveiro, Portugal) is a writer, editor and researcher. He published four poetry books, the most recent being *Ö* (2014) and *permafrost: 20+1 zeptopoemas sms* (2012). He holds a MA in Contemporary American Literature, with the thesis "Transduction: Transfer Processes in Digital Literature and Art" (University of Évora, 2011), winner of the Moser Prize 2013. Seiça has published several poems and essays on different journals. In 2007, he co-founded Bypass (http://bypass.bigcartel.com), a nomadic editorial and curatorial project. He currently lives in Bergen, Norway, where he is a PhD fellow in Digital Culture at the University of Bergen, Humanities Faculty, Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies.

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