

Recombinant Poetics

We are in the midst of profound technological changes that impact upon how people communicate, share knowledge and learn. Potentially, along with these technological changes comes a related change in poetics. Thus a techno-poetics is explored. Where once we focused on analogue media as the primary means of embodying our ideas through artifacts of thought, our understanding of reality is now interwoven (structurally coupled¹) with an expanded linguistics of interpenetrated fields of meaning.² Some would say this is not a techno-linguistics but an expanded computer-based environmental semiotics. In particular, virtual space becomes a mutable field for evocative exploration.

Computer-based environmental meaning is potentially explored through the authorship, inter-authorship, and operative experiential examination of a diverse set of media-elements and media-processes. The media that becomes evocative within this techno-poetic virtual environment includes digital video, digital still images, 3D digital objects, 3D animations, digital spoken and written text, digital music/noise — sound objects, and digital texture maps — both still and moving. Each media-element could be said to convey its own field of meaning. Varying combinations of these fields of meaning are experienced through fleeting electronic environmental perceptual stimulations. The mind-set of the participant represents another active field, and becomes dynamically involved in the construction of meaning. It is through the combination and recombination of these evocative digital fields of meaning, as experienced by an engaged participant, that a new form of poetics can emerge — Recombinant Poetics.

Computer-based environmental meaning can be examined through the operative experience of spaces that explore digital processes as brought about through mindfully-aware³ interactivity. In this computer-based space, our interactive exchange fields have shifted in emphasis from the direct and physical, to mediated electronic perceptual fields. So we ask, how should the techno-poetics of this moment be authored or inscribed? How should such inscriptions reflect the complexity of the history of our relations with this abstract landscape of media experience?

New technological systems enable participants to glimpse into the actual functionality of media-elements as they are explored through layering, juxtaposition and interpenetration. A techno-poetic mechanism has been authored that enables the observation of the contextualisation, decontextualisation and recontextualisation of media-elements in virtual space, through the direct experience of an operative computer-based meta-meaning environment. This environment enables the direct experience of mutable electronic space, exhibiting the fleeting relations between media-elements that arise through interaction. This device becomes a mutable digital inscription mechanism for a new field of poetics.

The computer presents an environment where one can generate, sense, operate on, transmit and interact with mutable dynamic media. Our relation to computer-based media-elements cannot easily be separated from other ways we have come to understand the world. Our sensual intake of computer-based experience functions in a fluid relation

to all experience – to the very manner in which we come to know reality.⁴ The media-elements mentioned above make up a set of variables that characterize a particular form of computer-based environmental landscape. This landscape is created through interaction with a generative virtual environment that I have authored in conjunction with the programmer Gideon May. The title of this work is “The World Generator / The Engine of Desire.” This is a specific generative virtual environment created as a new space for the production of fleeting poetic artifacts to be experienced in a fluctuating generative navigable electronic space. This is a space in which the participant inhabits a continuum bridging virtual space with perceptual experience.

Within this virtual environment each of these media-elements has its own communicative or evocative force⁴ that acts upon the others media-elements positioned in relative proximity. We continuously register these forces, bringing along our memory of relations with past experience — our own ongoing field of meaning production — consciousness. Meaning, within this kind of computer environment, is produced through the experience of a series of media-proximities and media-processes accessed through physical and intellectual interaction with this techno-poetic mechanism over time. These media-proximities and processes are not fixed but arise and function through this dynamic process of interaction with the participant. I have coined the term vuser conjoining the words viewer and user to articulate the participant’s relation to the environment.

A conglomerate media is derived in part from the translated digital traces of past media (film becomes digital video; text becomes digital text; photography becomes digital photography). This media becomes operative within a specific computer-based territory. A dynamic summing of meaning forces is ongoing during interaction within this environment. The history of media-proximities and processes intermingles with the history/memory of our bodily experience of non-computer-based proximities and processes. Real and illusory events come to inform each other. Memory and associative processes are subtly moving and shifting at all times in relation to the present context - a situation of media-proximities within a virtual environment brought about through generative emergent processes.

If one was to make a contemporary poetics to explore this active relation between ongoing experience, thought and memory, what would this poetics be? I have authored this techno-poetic mechanism, a specific generative virtual environment, as a means of computer-based inscription to examine and explore this question. This device empowers the participant to bring about interpenetration and juxtaposition of media-elements through their interaction with the following processes: construction processes; navigation processes; processes related to attributing, exploring and observing media behaviors; editing processes; aesthetic/abstraction processes; automated generative processes; processes related to the sharing of spatial interaction in a networked virtual space; and chance processes of a semi-random nature. This techno-poetic mechanism is organism like and functions in a self-organizing manner. The participant takes an active role in the generation and construction of meaning within this space.

Central to my techno-poetic device is the potential to transcend the use of words as a means of discourse, to enable the exploration of media experience in and of itself. Virtual environments are quixotic by their very nature. Words can in fact approach the relations that may be explored in this kind of techno-poetic environment, as this essay is seeking to do. Yet, this techno-poetic environment seeks to posit an experiential set of relations that transcends the ability of words to articulate the complexity of lived experience. Through use of this mechanism one does not ‘talk about’ how meaning arises within the techno-poetic environment – one experientially comes to understand this complexity. Meaning arises and falls away across a series of rhizomatic⁵ flows made operative within the environment. Words become a secondary approach to sensual computer-based environmental experience in terms of this techno-poetic device.

Recombinant Poetics⁶, the poetic field that I am here seeking to articulate, is informed by a range of topics and experiences. DNA and the dynamic technological processes that surround it become a vibrant metaphor. Questions surrounding the exploration of recombinant processes may become the dominating topic of our time. The living variable media of electronic processes becomes the metaphorical recombinant material of a contemporary poetics of flux. A Recombinant Poetic work presents a mechanism in which a user can act upon and explore varying juxtapositions of computer-based media-elements to examine environmental meaning within a mutable generative electronic environment. The generative component is essential to Recombinant Poetics and differentiates it from other fixed virtual environments.

We live within a social milieu where electronic media flourishes although this media is not primarily poetic. As suggested above, the sensual physical landscape becomes conjoined with an alternate sensual media-landscape. Generative virtual environments, as they intersect with physical spaces, form hybrid architectures. These new media-environments potentially enable a direct exploration and examination of meaning as it arises through interaction. My work entitled *The World Generator / The Engine of Desire* is an example of such a generative virtual environment. When I say generative I am suggesting that each exploration of this techno-poetic mechanism produces a different outcome based on the choices of the user as they operate within the authored constraints of the system. There is potentially no lasting artifact produced through use of this mechanism although the system houses an elaborate set of media-elements as construction material – media readymades. The work focuses on the exploration and examination of the ongoing experience of meaning in a process of becoming. This techno-poetic mechanism seeks to empower the user to construct poetic virtual worlds in real time as well as to navigate and experience those worlds in differing ways.

The World Generator / The Engine of Desire becomes operative through a new interface metaphor – a series of spinning virtual container-wheels. These container-wheels hold an elaborate set of authored media –elements: 3D objects, digital video stills, digital video loops, a litany of lines of poetic text, an elaborate series of sound objects (musical loops), a set of varying computer-based behaviors (one can make an object or image spin, rotate, follow a line, move in a spiral path, etc.), a selection of random functions, a series of system commands (“clear world,” “center world” etc.).

A surrounding “aura” can be toggled on and off to select a particular media-element to operate upon. When the “aura” is activated the user can attach a still as a texture map, attach a digital video to the surface of the virtual object, attach a sound to the object, attach behaviors to the object as well as superimpose sound objects with the initial selection. This “aura” enables what Erkki Huhtamo calls “World Processing.” One can easily edit the environment, making selections, changing entries, alternating choices, eliminating selections as well as instigating semi-random choices. One can even engage the construction of an entire virtual world through a particular menu choice. Stills and movies can also be placed in the environment. The above set of processes can also be explored in relation to digital movies and stills that can also be operated upon in the space as autonomous objects. Modular 3D text selections can also be positioned and affected by choices from the container wheels. The user inter-authors this environment. Media-elements already carry fields of meaning as they are experienced within the container-wheels before they are used as construction material. Meaning is in part generated and explored through dynamic interactive processes of re-contextualization.

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The participant spins these container-wheels from a physical table, makes selections with buttons built into this physical interface and constructs a techno-poetic virtual landscape. The world is presented as a large high-definition digital projection in a darkened room. A physical interface built into the table translates subtle human gesture into movement within the environment. This virtual positioning device enables one to navigate within the environment. One can move forward and backward, look up and down, turn to the left and to the right affecting the view of the virtual space. At any time during the selection process the user can hide the spinning container-wheels, enter the environment and move through the virtual landscape. The user can at will, call up the rotating selection menu as well as present a close-up version of the mechanism for detailed viewing. The participant can also preview sound objects and texts before positioning them in the environment.

The electronic media that is collected and housed within these container-wheels is alive with digital manifestations of inscription although these media-elements are entirely mutable through the actions of the participant. The dice have been loaded in terms of potential aesthetic outcomes by the intentional authorship of these media-elements. They begin as poly-valent evocative entities, housed within the container-wheels. The authorship of this elaborate set of media-variables is informed by transdisciplinary research and provides a loaded set of fields of poetic constraint for the exploration and examination of the user. The media-elements are not just simple examples of the above described variables. A number of aesthetic strategies inform the initial authorship of this particular set of variables. The authorship of this techno-poetic mechanism enfolds fragment-selections from a series of histories: The history of art; literature; philosophy; technology; the computer; as well as the history of the construction of meaning. These foci are all drawn upon in the authorship of this techno-poetic mechanism, and are

explored through the use of media-elements that exhibit a specific-ambiguity . This techno-poetic mechanism renders this media operative to the participant.

The vuser of the environment takes an active role in the construction of meaning through interaction. The initial set of media-elements forms a primary context. The vuser then disrupts this context by repositioning the variables across a “plateau” space, named after the book “A Thousand Plateaus” by Deleuze and Guattari. The vuser can explore placement, displacement, and replacement. The media-landscape is always mutable. Meaning arises through the sensual perusal of the environment as well as through the employment of media-processes that are available to the vuser to operate upon the media-elements. These elements take on meaning within an ongoing constructed context. These contexts are mutable and thus an accretive meaning for each media-element can be witnessed. Media-elements are inter-qualified by their proximity, behavior, abstraction, interpenetration, and the trajectory of vuser’s observation path. Highly abstract worlds can be facilitated. Meaning potentially passes through a series of differing states – from the clear - to the highly poly-semic - to states approaching the dissolution of meaning as deeply chaotic structures are generated. It is interesting to note that because the participant has followed the set of processes that alter the media –elements, that even the most chaotic of environments still carries traces of the initial media chosen to make-up that environment.

A body moves this physical interface to bring about digital-environmental changes. An actual physics brings about movement within an environment of authored abstract physics. Our biological nature becomes enmeshed with the digital. Central to this contemporary poetics is a sensual mutable multi-modal layering, enfolding a vast set of poly-valent media-elements exploring relations between text, image and music/sound. A delicate series of mobile thought processes arise through use of this game-like interactive techno-poetic mechanism. A layered landscape of media-elements becomes phenomenologically engaging in the exploration and examination of emergent meaning. Years of experiments from the fields of science, engineering, entertainment and art have yielded a hybrid series of vibrant yet mutant media-process that can be employed in the creation of a new poetics. This field of generative interactive media-poetry, Recombinant Poetics is a non-logocentric poetics. There is no hierarchy in the media-elements in that the vuser can choose from any media-variable in the construction of a mutable poetic virtual environment i.e. if the participant chooses they may select only sound objects to populate the “plateau.”

We are connected biologically (structurally coupled) to machines through thought. Thought is a biological process – a series of electro-chemical. As Ted Krueger suggests, machines are part of our ecosystem.⁷ Computer-based interactivity enables biological processes to spread across distance and time, to be encoded and decoded through digital artifacts and in turn, to influence and to be influenced from non-local environments. One cannot deny that the memory of past experience is drawn upon to explore new relational processes. As computer-based environments become central to our living, so to do affective media-environments, informing future understandings and enabling high-level communication and inter-authorship.

The intermingling and disbursal of illusionistic media-architectures – movies, commercials, entertainment, the web as well as our exploration of virtual environments, comes to inform our understanding of the world. Recombinant Poetics is a conglomerate-media poetics, drawing from a trans-disciplinary array of authored media-elements as a primary material for the interactive construction of a new poetics – a contemporary poetics exploring media combinatorics. The World Generator / The Engine of Desire contains media-elements that have been authored/chosen for their poly-valent nature. These media-elements are specifically-ambiguous, and shift in meaning in relation to different proximities within the virtual space.

The techno-poetic mechanism can also be experienced in a networked manner. Participants from different cities can enter copies of the virtual space simultaneously. A video-phone is presented on the interface table in the physical space. The users can converse with one another using the video-phone. The image on the video-phone screen is mapped onto a virtual object and becomes an avatar within the virtual space. This avatar registers the virtual proximity of the participants that are co-inhabiting the virtual environment. Each sees the virtual world from their own perspective. Each can make choices from the container –wheels constructing a collaborative experience of contextual generation. Again, emergent meaning production becomes a potential focus.

Nested within these choices from the container-wheels are high-level construction processes, where a single choice brings about the construction of an entire virtual world. I have coined the term Re-embodied intelligence to describe the encoding of particular sensibilities where the system can function as an extension of these (the artist's) sensibilities generating new virtual worlds based on the aesthetic parameters encoded in the system.⁸ The user can select these functions then alter the world to their liking or at any time erase an entire world and begin again.

Recombinant Poetics explores the generation of mutable poetic context. The emergent nature of the computer-based virtual environment is concomitant on human interaction with the media-elements and processes that are made operative within this techno-poetic mechanism. One could say that a number of artists are exploring this Recombinant Poetic strategy, employing different aesthetic and conceptual content to related poetic construction and navigation mechanisms. It is here registered that emergent content exploring complex human/machine relations is central to contemporary poetic experience. This becomes the defining feature of this new techno-poetic field of exploration – Recombinant Poetics.

- 1 see Maturana
- 2 see my Doctors Thesis – Recombinant Poetics...
- 3 see Varela

- 4 see Hayles. 1999. *How We Became Post Human* . Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, for a detailed discussion of human/computer relations.
- 5 Pierce's definition of the sign states:
- 6 A number of the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari are relevant to my work. See the following:
- 7 Recombinant Poetics was coined by Seaman ...
- 8 See Krueger website –
- 9 See ----- and my thesis

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