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COLLABORATIVE NEW MEDIA POETRY

Mixed and Remixed

Thomas Swiss and Helen Burgess

To hear the critics tell it, one problem with emergent digital literary and art forms is that they don't yet have established stars. Where's our Shakespeare of the Screen? Our Pixel Picasso? How long before we have a Digital DeMille? The assumption is that we'll have them eventually—undisputed geniuses working in what is now generally called “New Media.” But behind this assumption is another assumption, one with a long, thorny history—that the “best” or “most important” art is created by an individual, a single pair of hands in the study or studio.

This chapter focuses on collaborative, new media poetry; that is, poetry in the context of networked and programmable media involving multiple “authors” working in conjunction with one another. Such projects take place, of course, within the larger context explored throughout this book: how digitality allows for and even encourages participation in the making of culture and, in this case, cultural objects. In particular, we want to talk about the way collaboration, facilitated by digital technologies, “works” in the writing and reading of new media poetry. As an example, we look at a specific digital poem, *Blind Side of a Secret*, from two different perspectives: a writer (in this case, Thom), and a reader (Helen). We ask: how does collaboration happen in the composition process? And how, in the reading process, do we account for multiple authors, including artists, poets, and software packages?

This paper is split into “voices” (Thom and Helen). But these voices, like the voices in *Blind Side of a Secret*, should be considered “mixed and remixed”: in the process of writing this essay, we have mixed and remixed each other's prose to come up with a narrative that satisfies the demands of two genres: the artist's statement and the academic critique. In a fitting parallel, thus, we offer this essay as an exercise in “collaborative writing about collaborative writing.”

New Media Poetry: A Collaboration Between Authors and Machines

New media poetry—composed, disseminated, and read on computers or other screens—exists in various configurations. Many of these digital “events,” to borrow a term from N. Katherine Hayles, are kinetic, visual, written, and sounded, published in online journals or displayed in art exhibits and stored eventually in archives (Hayles, 2006, p. 187). Unlike mainstream print poetry, which typically assumes a bounded, coherent, and self-conscious speaker, new media literature assumes a synergy between human beings and intelligent machines. In the case of new media

poetry, the work sometimes remediates procedural writing, gestural abstraction, and conceptual art, while contributing to an emergent poetics.

New forms of digital poetry, especially collaborative digital poetry, challenge already contested terms such as “poetry” and “literature,” and further complicate boundaries between literary genres. New media poetry brings together writers, artists, graphic designers, sound technicians, musicians, and computer programmers. This new community constitutes a kind of artistic underground, a literary movement that alternately challenges or ignores the institutional apparatus for “traditional” or “mainstream” poetry. Yet, as new media poetry attempts to move from the margins to the mainstream, from “noise” to “music,” its growing community of artists and critics—its participatory culture—represent and institutionalize this new work in time-honored ways: through its explanatory and theoretical writings; through venues such as meetings and conferences; through prizes, contests, and other public awards; and through the development of publishing outlets.

Of course the terms “mainstream” and “margin” are relational and always shifting. Indeed looking at the rhetoric of and about new media poetry as it plays out among texts, audiences, and institutions is a powerful reminder that the meaning of the term “literature” itself is always up for grabs—and that new media poetry, whatever the future might hold for it, is currently the site of many important conversations, struggles, and debates.

The Internet, of course, plays an important part in the story of collaborative new media poetry (and digital literature in general) because it increasingly connects people who share similar goals and interests, and enables writers and others to generate and disseminate ideas and creative work. It also allows for the sharing of files between artists, writers, and critics who have never met, and provides a “publication” venue for works that might never otherwise gain a wide audience. In this sense, the Internet is yet another collaborator in the composition and critical process, albeit a primarily passive one. And beyond that, we have yet another layer of invisible collaborators: the authors of software packages, who define what is technically possible in the building and dissemination of a particular poem. All of these extra voices are part of a collaborative new media poem.

Many Hands, Voices, and Drafts: Thom Writes

As a poet, I began my own collaborative, Web-based work with visual and sound artists ten years ago—with a sense that the opportunities and demands of Web-based poetry, like many other new media practices, have their roots in the shared notion of community that was integral to the development of the Internet. I was also increasingly interested in new approaches to thinking about time and the text. Many of my collaborations are embodied in Adobe Flash, a vector-based animation software, used, for example, by programmer/artist Motomichi Nakamura to create our poem *Hey Now* (2002). The collaboration had its roots in conceptual art.

Under my direction, I had two of my friends read various sections of a poem I had written titled “Hey Now.” After that, Nakamura and I began experimenting with the idea of “wrapping” language. Following the ideas of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, contemporary artists well-known for wrapping artifacts, buildings, and landmarks with various materials, we were interested in what “wrapped language” might look and sound like. Christo’s “The Pont Neuf Wrapped, Paris 1975–85,” for example, draped the famous French bridge in fabric, and was widely regarded as a fascinating experience for its viewers because wrapping and unwrapping objects hides and then re-reveals the familiar, allowing us to see objects in a new light.

In the case of our composition, the poem is hidden and revealed by animated characters who whisper gibberish before speaking verses of a cut-up poem I wrote. From games, we developed

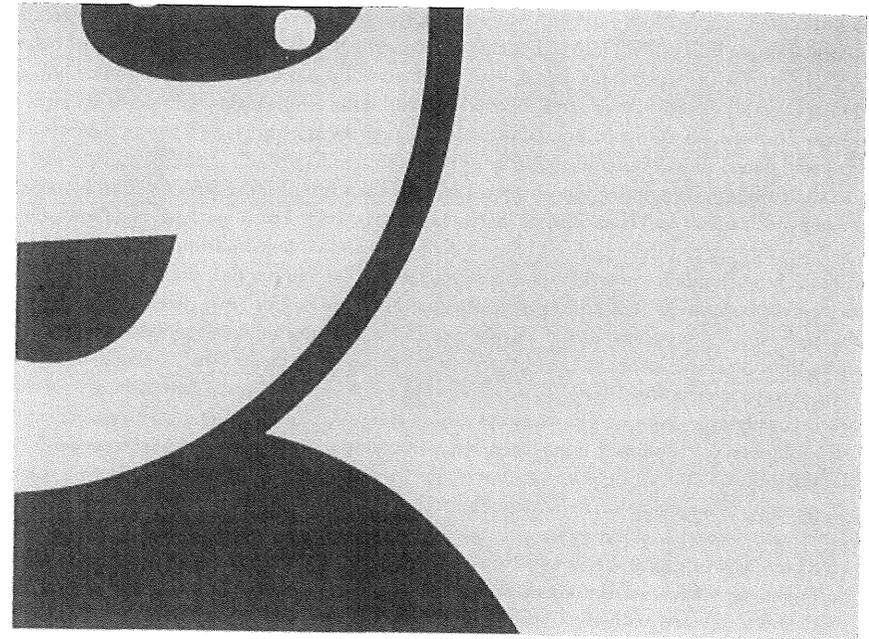


FIGURE 8.1 *Hey Now*, by Thomas Swiss and Motomichi Nakamura
Source: www.ibiblio.org/nmediac/heynow.html.

the notion of a pacing cartoon man on the screen, who, when clicked by the viewer/reader/user, kicks the head of a figure who whispers like an alien before launching into the next animated section of the poem. “Readers” of new media poems are often challenged to make sense of synthesis; it’s an opportunity to broaden interpretations and to look critically at how language is shaped by new media.

Collaborative work redefines artistic labor in what is for me (and many of my collaborators) new and complicated ways: what is the relationship, for example, between my language and the images and sounds others create, even if under my “direction”? How do the images and sound “change” the meaning of the language (and vice versa) and in what ways can the piece be said to still be a “poem”? Collaboration allows writers and artists—like myself and those I compose with—to reconsider both our work and our identities, to literally see them anew, as we move from individual to composite subjectivity. Yet while the art world has often been open to collaborative work—in the long shadow of Duchamp’s experiments with Man Ray, the shared labor of producing art in Warhol’s Factory, the many hands needed to make a film—the poetry world has typically had a hard time accepting collaborative work, although our digital times and newly developing collaborative, participatory communities are changing that.

My second example is a poem titled *Blind Side of a Secret* (2007), a project that includes three finished texts. While I had a hand in all three pieces, much of the compositional labor, much of the art, fell to others. Two of my graduate students, Pam and Bastiann, read the lines of poetry I had written—Pam in English, Bas in Dutch and English. A programmer friend, John, recorded their voices, created the sound files, and mailed them along with my comments, notes, and ideas to a team of digital artists I had invited to work with me. Yoshi Sodeoka is an artist, designer, and

musician based in New York City. Nils Mühlenbruch was trained as a sculptor, lives in Amsterdam, and runs a site called Drifter TV. Motomichi Nakamura lives in Brooklyn; he only uses the colors black, red, and white in both his digital work and his paintings. I've never met Yoshi or Nils or Motomichi face to face; I "met" and collaborated with them all through the Internet, and it was through this medium that we all participated in creating the poems by exchanging files, emails, web-based drafts, code, revisions, and so on.

In the collaborative spirit of this chapter, I will tell the story of *Blind Side of a Secret* by incorporating commentary by Helen Burgess, a scholar I corresponded with via email and file sharing. Here I am turning to thinking about new media poems and education. Burgess had written me out of the blue, wanting to work with and critique *Blind Side* for an article she was writing about new media poetry in general and, specifically, the three versions of "my" poem that had been published. Helen is interested in the current gap in the literature on new media poetry from an "under-the-hood" perspective. Like others teaching digital literacies, she's noticed how few critical texts provide both a reading of a digital poem as it is *presented*, and a discussion of how that work is *actually put together*, i.e. how, in the case of *Blind Side*, it is composed with participation from a number of "authors," using language, software packages, code, and multimedia files, including sound.

"Generally," Burgess writes in an unpublished paper,

all teachers of digital works have to work with is the "finished product"—for example, I might ask students to look at a work like "Inanimate Alice," and talk about how the medium interacts with the narrative, what the color/image/navigation choices mean for the work, and so on. But what we don't have access to is the process of collaboration, the collaborators' notes and emails, and the original files that put the whole thing together mechanically.

(Burgess, 2009)

Those files can be revealing—and helpful in teaching students both how to read and write new media poems, how to collaborate, *how to participate*, in the processes or making digital poems themselves.

Reading Many Voices: Helen Writes

Blind Side of a Secret has been "published" in three versions in an online literary journal; it has also been seen in art exhibits and shown, on French television, as a short, experimental film. Let's call these three different versions "iterations"—since "versioning" wrongly suggests a creation order, an original.

Swiss begins with phrases, lines, and fragments of his own creation and then mixes them with portions of a short story he appropriates:

I hate secrets. No, that's a lie, and here I was hoping to tell you the truth. Start again.

I hate to be on the blind side of a secret. That's more like it. Sometimes I'll be shown, let in on, something that seems a real secret to me, I'll be allowed to stand right up against it and look all I like, but I still won't understand. I might as well be staring at a length of algebra, an unknown language—it will have no meaning for me. Worse than that, I will know that it must have a meaning for somebody else. So I'm stupid. No one needs to hide this from me, it is, quite simply, beyond me. I am on the blind side.

(A. L. Kennedy, *So I Am Glad*, p. 22)

Using this remixed text as a working script, all three iterations of *Blind Side* feature two of Swiss's students: Pam S. (who read the lines in English) and Bastiann V. (who reads the lines in English and again in his native Dutch).

Rather than muddy the waters with numbers, which are both non-descriptive and possibly suggest that one of these three is the "real" poem, I'm labeling them by the principle variable in each case, which is the collaborating artist. Thus, *Blind Side Moto* refers to the linear Flash version co-authored with Motomichi Nakamura; *Blind Side Yoshi* refers to the QuickTime version co-authored with Yoshi Sodeoka; and *Blind Side Nils* refers to the *interactive* Flash version co-authored with Nils Mühlenbruch.

Blind Side Yoshi is a QuickTime movie. Another hand in this collaboration, John B., a programmer and friend of Swiss's, sent Yoshi Sodeoka .mp3 files of two readers speaking the lines of the poem, and Sodeoka took the sound, chopped it into pieces using a program called Recycle, remixed it in Logic Studio, composed an electronic music soundtrack, and mapped the sound to visuals using a sampler and Adobe After Effects. The result is akin to a music video: it plays through from beginning to end, with visuals and aural synchronized together.

Blind Side Moto is also a synchronized video, this time animated in Flash format. It plays through from beginning to end without requiring user input. *Blind Side Moto* is a good example of the way Flash is often used as an animation medium—it features multiple characters or cast members, each of which is tweened, and the resulting animation plays out like a movie. Flash is best known as "time-based media"; Katherine Hayles identifies, with some exceptions, a characteristic of Flash poems as "sequential with little or no interaction" (Hayles, 2008, p. 28).

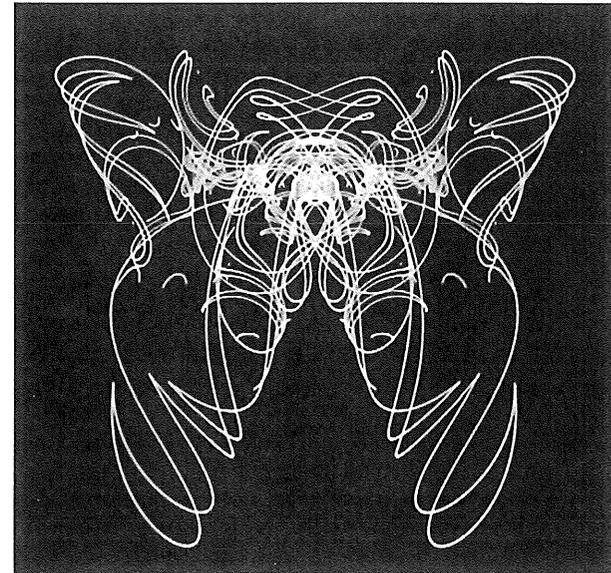


FIGURE 8.2 *Blind Side of a Secret (Blind Side Yoshi)*, by Thomas Swiss and Yoshi Sodeoka
Source: www.hyperrhiz.net/hyperrhiz04/12-gallery/37-blind-side-of-a-secret.

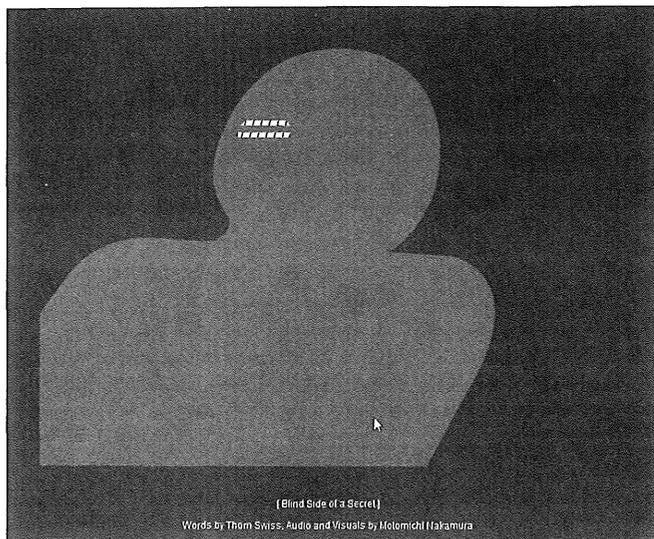


FIGURE 8.3 *Blind Side of a Secret (Blind Side Moto)*, by Thomas Swiss and Motoko Nakamura
Source: www.hyperhiz.net/hyperhiz04/12-gallery/37-blind-side-of-a-secret.

Blind Side Nils, the piece I want to concentrate on, is also a Flash poem. But unlike *Moto*, the *Nils* iteration is interactive, requiring the reader to click on different sections of the movie to trigger animations and lines of the poem. Thus *Blind Side Nils* bucks the non-interactive tendency in Flash poems by being a piece that is “time based” in the sense that snippets of the poem are triggered and “play,” but at the same time there is no logical ordering to the piece, and, more crucially, all the action exists on the same screen. There are no linkable, progressive lexia here, nor is there “progression” in the sense of time passing. The poem does not evolve or exhibit cumulative behavior. *Blind Side Nils* is thus unusual in the sense that it is a “time-based” poem that refuses to have any truck with time. It is a singularly self-contained piece that retains more than most poems its “object-ness.”

One way to look into *Blind Side Nils* is to use three keywords adopted from the software the programmer used to create his iteration of this new media poem: trigger, layer, and module. To look at how the poem is constructed, we’ll need to go into Flash and see where the trigger points are, and what is on individual layers, and how the layers are clumped into modular chunks.

When I first opened up *Blind Side Nils*, I was in for a surprise. Just from looking at the end-user version of the poem, I was pretty sure I could figure out how it was put together. The standard way to put navigation into a Flash piece is to place all the objects into layers in one timeline, place markers at various points on the timeline, and then make objects clickable so that one can jump from one part of the timeline to another. So, I was expecting to see a very long, stretched out timeline with many layers and a lot of markers to jump back and forward, like *Blind Side Moto*.

Instead, Nils has chosen to go for a much more modular approach. Each line of the poem with its corresponding animation has actually been made into a separate “movie clip,” like a mini-movie. Then, all those movie clips have been placed on the stage in a single frame, all active

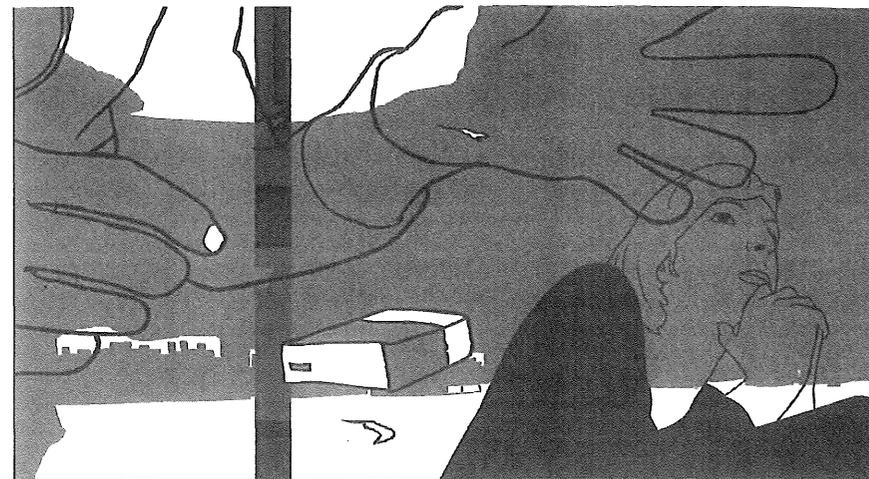


FIGURE 8.4 *Blind Side of a Secret (Blind Side Nils)*, by Thomas Swiss and Nils Mühlenbruch
Source: www.hyperhiz.net/hyperhiz04/12-gallery/37-blind-side-of-a-secret.

and waiting to be triggered. Nils has created a nice rhetorical move in his implementation: he’s layered his modules (by placing each movie clip module in a layered timeline) but also modularized his layers (because each module is made up of its own layers). This modularity is central to the reconfigurable story the poem tells: She comes home early. She sits on the edge of the bed. She tells the *story* of coming home early. She says she was driving. Is she speaking to him in bed, or is he at the doctor’s overheated office? Or was it her at the doctor’s office, leaving to come home early, telling the doctor the story of the sky turning red? And in the speaking, what is his, and what is hers, when the library contains unused sound files of them both reading the same lines?

Why does the way Nils has constructed the poem “under the hood” matter so much? Well, it tells me something about the way this particular collaborator approaches the poem. He doesn’t see *Blind Side of a Secret* as a single narrative in time, a poem that is a river that you jump into and out of according to user clicks. This would be a kind of Formalist approach, with the “original” poem being the *fabula* and each clickable “reading” another *sjuzet*. Instead, he sees it as a completely modular grab-bag, where even the underlying structure is unordered—or rather, it is ordered spatially, not chronologically. By collapsing the timeline into modular chunks, he has *collapsed the time of the poem itself*.

Blind Side Nils suggests that new media poems possess the ability to confound the distinction between orality and literacy by confounding the distinction between space and time. The way Nils has constructed his layers of sound and image atop one another, in a single frame, belies our usual understanding (laid out by Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, among others) of the way space is visual, while time is oral/aural (Ong, 2002, p. 32; McLuhan, 1995, p. 300). *Blind Side Nils* incorporates both; thus, one experiences orality with the performance of each line (not because it is recorded sound, since recording in itself is a kind of transformation of sound from the oral to the written register, but because the performance is varied, responsive to audience, and made up of repeatable chunks like epithets), while at the same time one views the whole poem like a single page of text, spatially structured—what Laurie Petrou characterizes as the “simultaneous space” of

concrete poetry (Petrou, 2006, p. 2). By placing all the clickable parts of the poem in a single frame, Nils has created a kind of spatial time machine.

In this iteration of *Blind Side*, the “secret” subject of the poem is paralleled by the inherently secret nature of the Flash poem (in the sense that we only ever see the “final version” as it is *played*, not as it is *constructed*). One of the conclusions we can draw from this is that it is imperative that we have access to the source files that were used to create new media poems before we can really understand them. But it’s not just access that counts—it’s the ability to read the source files. This is why, I think, it’s crucial that readers of new media poems, students as well as critics, know how these authoring tools work, and how each authoring tool defines or constrains the composition of the work itself. Without this knowledge, we are indeed left on the blind side of a secret. As A. L. Kennedy—in the passage Swiss appropriates for his own text—writes: “I’ll be allowed to stand right up against it and look all I like, but I still won’t understand. . . . I might as well be staring at a length of algebra, an unknown language.”

Conclusion: Thom and Helen Write

New forms of digital poetry, especially collaborative digital poetry, challenge already contested terms such as “poetry” and “literature,” and further complicate boundaries between literary genres. Collaborative new media poetry brings together writers, artists, graphic designers, sound technicians, musicians, and computer programmers. Working together, they work *against* the worn cliché of the lone writer or artist, a cliché that still defines how we think about the production of literature and art. Collaborative digital poems invite shared participation; each contribution is meant to be as important to the process of composition as all other contributions. Contributors have equal permission to add, edit, and remove text and multimedia characteristics. The composing process is recursive, each change prompting others to make more changes. The question asked in *Blind Side of a Secret*—“What was his? What was hers?”—becomes complicated in a process where “his” and “hers” is intentionally remixed by authors, artists, and algorithmic processes.

The “authorship,” in some instances, does not end with the release of a new media poem. Every “reading” of *Blind Side Nils* is a kind of remix, as the user decides where to click next, and which voice to listen to, providing yet another layer of authorship to the poem. But beyond interacting with the “finished” poem, it is a useful exercise to conduct a “deeper” reading, if one is to get a sense of the full richness and collaborative nature of a poem made up of many voices. Thus in terms of reading, teaching about, and learning from collaborative new media poems, it is important for readers to have access to the processes of collaboration, the collaborators’ notes and emails, and the original files that put the pieces together mechanically. These digital files can be revealing to critics and helpful in teaching students how to read new media poems; they can also help students and others learn to participate in the collaborative processes of making digital poems themselves.

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long before the rise of the Internet.