

Introduction: *New Media Studies*

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Two years ago, Alt-X, in conjunction with the trAce on-line writing community, launched its first international hypertext competition. Our first set of co-winners were a collaborative authoring team that goes by the name of The Unknown, and the Australian artist Jenny Weight. Our judge, Robert Coover, chose two winners instead of one because they each, in their own way, highlighted the expanded concept of literature that is beginning to heavily infiltrate the (for the most part) banal fields of cyberspace. There is a marked difference between these two award-winning on-line works (see www.altx.com for details), the most obvious difference being that The Unknown traces a more familiar multi-linear narrative path that we associate with pre-Web hypertext, like the disk-based titles from Eastgate, whereas Weight's work requires a completely different kind of interactive-reading experience, one that emphasizes the graphical elements of an emerging digital language focused on the graphical interplay between the visual and verbal. In other words, The Unknown's self-titled work is a "hypertextual metafiction" with a decidedly narrative spin, whereas Weight's contemplative and "arty" site presents a more simplified navigational system, one whose meditational "links" are also hypertextual even as they feel less dependent on using the Web as a medium to transmit what we have come to think of as a "literary" experience.

This double selection by Coover two years ago was an early warning sign to both trAce and Alt-X. Clearly, there were problems with calling a Web-based event an "international hypertext competition." First, as Sue Thomas, the Director of trAce, pointed out to me as we launched our new call for entries this summer, "the event is web-based: therefore it is international." And to call all Web-based writing hypertext, even if html still rules, seemed out of touch with all of the new on-line work that has been materializing over the last few years. Let's face it, on the Web, everything

becomes hyper (this is what internetworked computer-mediated environments do to our "post-pomo" condition), and all of the post-structuralist/deconstructionist hybridizations of the past 40 years (my entire life!) have consistently asked us to see all media as a kind of Text—even if the very foundations of that theory-production are now easily absorbed into a proactive practice of network conduction performed in the liquid architecture of—what else—cyberspace?

And why the need to emphasize "competition"? So that the winner can get a teaching job? Actually, Web-based writers are indeed getting tenure-track teaching jobs, in disciplines like Communications Art, Information Design, and New Media Forms (what ever happened to "Creative Writing"?). But, still, Web-based writers activating themselves in the ever-expansive on-line writing world must, like all start-up cultural producers in the Web economy, thrive on a kind of networked "co-opetition" that playfully yet strategically positions their interlinked go-for-broke home pages in a way that enables them to attract external links, eyeballs, connectivity, immediate feedback, and other new forms of social contact. The Writer as Network Conductor cum On-line Writing Community Citizen.

"International—hypertext—competition."
It sounded too redundant. Out of touch.
So very 1997.

As a result, we changed the name of the descriptive part of the award to New Media.

Which could just as well have been New Improved Media (though some would argue)...

...i.e., our award's new name is an attempt to acknowledge a Writing Beyond Category that is intervening within the e-commerce world of the Amazonian Monster-Dot-Coms whose still-life "click-thru" mentality equates clicking with consuming, with double-clicking so as to redouble the consumer as consumable—as consumed.

On-line Buying as Post-Pomo Narrative

Experience? Was it as good for you as it was for me?

Here's to you my fair young Hypertext—may you rest in peace.

Or, to put it another way: hypertext is but one element, an important one, in a greater on-line writing practice that is now becoming something like an Internet Art practice. We are now entering a place—a space of mind—where the author is not dead (nomo pomo!) but, rather, reconfigured into a network practitioner. One who uses the Web to evolve a cross-disciplinary/cross-media writerly agenda that intervenes in the everyday life of mainstream cultural production. There are signs of this everywhere.

In an ironic twist of fate, this year's Whitney Biennial featured an array of subversive Internet Art, the first time in 25 years that a new genre was included in this definitive survey of American art (the last genre to be included was Film/Video). Nine works of Internet Art were chosen and three of these works featured I-art pieces composed by writers published by FC2/Black Ice Books (RTMARK, FAKESHOP, GRAMMATRON), and a fourth work was written by the novelist Darcy Steinke (*Blindspot*).

The recent explosion of new media writing production has also led to an increase in critical approaches that try and respond to the emergent work being produced by digital writer-artists. As Peter Lunenfeld remarks in his new book, *Snap To Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media and Cultures*, "formerly discrete photographic elements blend even further into the computer's digital soup of letters, numbers, motion graphics and sound files: what is crucial is that all of these and more are simply *different manifestations of the data maintained in binary form*." Writing, music, visual images, coded links, colors, speech, rhetoric, pedagogy: it all comes down to ones and zeroes, babes.

Coming to grips with what this all means will take a generation or two, no doubt. But there is a growing body of critical work in new media studies that attempts to contextualize these changes for us. It's not easy, for, as Lunenfeld reminds us at one point in his book while pointing

to a particular Web site as a tutor-text to help articulate his argument: "Like so much of electronic media, Web sites should be critiqued along the lines of live performances (which are time-based and not necessarily accessible to the reader) rather than as discrete objects...."

In this emerging field of network-distributed, binary-based, writing-art, there are no unique objects (imagine the difficulties the Whitney had displaying this ever-changing work over their in-house network connection). Hermeneutics as metacommentary in the literary sphere gives way to joyful acts of discovery, like when someone sends you an e-mail with a Web address that simply says "check this out!" And if you trust their judgment, maybe you will do just that.

Even so, there are many books coming out now that try and discuss the relationship between technology, art, and culture. Two of them are reviewed in this issue of *ABR*: Eugene Thacker reviews Richard Coyne's *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real* while Bruce Clarke takes on Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Also in this focus, on-line writer and novelist Adrienne Eisen reviews a couple of on-line writing sites that feature this emergent binary-art mix, and I also offer an essay on new media writing styles and the blurring of publication/editing and exhibition/curating practices.

One final word: the Bruce Clarke essay comes to us from the *electronic book review* [www.altx.com/ebr]. *ebr* is a constant source of energy and inspiration for those of us engaged in the emerging field of new media studies, and their new design and database upgrades promise to change the way critical and artistic communities collaborate in ongoing-ongoing writerly production.

Mark Amerika's GRAMMATRON was one of the first Internet art works ever selected for the Whitney Biennial. His books include The Kafka Chronicles and Sexual Blood. He was recently appointed to the Fine Arts faculty at the University of Colorado, Boulder.