

Let's play OuLiPo: machine writing practice as play

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to contextualize machine writing – literature produced through algorithms or constraints – as a form of play. Machine writing scholarship is often stunted by the unreadability of many of the genre's texts. In response, this paper shall draw on game studies approaches to analyze machine writing communities and practices. A brief history of machine writing will be followed by an analysis of two case studies: the loose collective of Online Oulipians behind *oulipo.social* and NaNoLiPo, and Benjamin Grosser's anti-surveillance tool, *ScareMail*. The approach suggested in this paper focuses on the procedures behind machine writing, rather than the textual outputs.

Keywords

Machine Writing, Digital Poetry, Play, Cybercultures

INTRODUCTION

Machine writing refers to the production of literature through the explicit use of algorithms or constraints. Beginning in the 1960s, the OuLiPo group is seen as a turning point in the genre, with the rise of creative coding and online communities pushing machine writing into non-literary traditions (Roque 2011). Despite a long history, critics have often struggled to develop methods for analyzing the genre. Machine writing has generally received partial examination in broader projects (Aarseth 1997; Funkhouser 2007), while other scholars have proclaimed that the genre defies close reading altogether (Weanus 2011, p. 30). These examples highlight a need to shift perspective.

Instead of analyzing machine writing as traditional literature, this paper will attempt to analyze it as a form of play. Concepts such as procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007), expressive processing (Wardrip-Fruin 2009), and a comparison between machine writing communities and the text-based game *Nomic* (Suber 2003) will be employed. The analysis will be achieved through two primary case studies: the loosely organized "Online Oulipians", and Benjamin Grosser's *ScareMail* (2018).

Online Oulipians include posters on the social network *oulipo.social* (RJL20 2018) and its recent spin-off, the writing "contest" NaNoLiPo. The original OuLiPo began as a group of writers and mathematicians developing rules or "constraints" for literary production (Motte Jr 1986, pp. 1-3). *Oulipo.social* is inspired by the group, transforming OuLiPo's lipogram constraint into a formal posting rule by banning the use of the letter "e". The group has led to the creation of NaNoLiPo, a month-long event where each day presents participants with a different OuLiPo-inspired constraint (Seyffarth 2018).

Proceedings of DiGRA 2019: What's Next?

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Throughout NaNoLiPo, participants work towards creating small works of poetry and prose, responding to one another's subversions or exploitations of the rules. While the texts themselves are often interesting, the interaction between NaNoLiPo players in response to the daily rules invites critique.

Benjamin Grosser's *ScareMail* is a Gmail plug-in that adds a block of machine written text to emails in order to fool NSA surveillance. The tool reflects the capacity for machine writing practice to shift into political discourse. Grosser has observed the "rules" of the NSA (emails are collected if they include particular words), and created a game from it, with the goal of rendering the NSA's database obsolete. The machine written texts Grosser creates are not particularly interesting in and of themselves. Instead, the procedure they are born from stands as a form of political protest against surveillance.

This paper will begin with a brief overview of machine writing and the literature surrounding it. Then, through a discussion of the Online Oulipians and Benjamin Grosser case studies, the potentiality of analyzing machine writing as a form of play will be explored. This paper does not call for an abandonment of literary theory in studying machine writing, but instead encourages the inclusion of game studies to better understand a form of writing that is often seen as impenetrable.

BIO

Cameron Edmond is a PhD student in Macquarie University's Department of English. His thesis explores the poetics of machine writing, and how they forecast a potential future for AI literature. He has taught across computing and media departments on videogames, cybercultures and Australian media. His creative practice has involved stints in narrative design, short fiction, and music journalism. His research interests include videogames, experimental fiction, online communities, beat culture and mythology.

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