Griffith University

Komninos Zervos

Teaching Creative Writing in Cyberspace

In 1997 'Writing for the Web' was introduced at Griffith University, Gold Coast, as a four-week unit of the first year subject 'Effective Writing'. The following year the four weeks were expanded to fourteen and offered as a subject in its own right, which counted towards a major in Creative Writing in the Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Arts (Communications) and Bachelor of Creative Arts degrees. In 1999 a CyberStudies major was introduced, as part of these Arts degrees, offering the subjects 'Writing for the Web' and 'CyberStudies' in first year, and in later years: 'Writing for Multimedia', 'Creating Interactivity', 'Digital Production Methods', 'Experimental New Media', and 'CyberFutures'. The major also included subjects from other areas: 'New Communication Technologies' and 'Communication and Cybertheory' (from the Communications major), and 'Cyborgs and Shopping Malls' (from Cultural Studies).

Naturally the question was asked: Why should we teach computer code and graphics, animation, digital video and sound software programs to creative writing students? Surely this is the domain of a Design school, or an Information Technology school, not a School of Arts.

And naturally we answered that our teaching needed to keep up with the virtualization of the publishing and book-selling industries online, and we were aware that the world wide web presented interesting new interactive forms, providing dynamic new mediums for artistic expression. The code, or HTML, is itself a medium for creating interactive interconnected documents, and learning this new 'language' (it isn't really a computer language, but rather a setting-out language, or mark-up language, hence HyperText Mark-up Language, HTML) demystifies and empowers. Being able to create and publish worldwide all in the same day is achievable and attractive to today's writers.

A recent Queensland University of Technology study of students entering universities revealed that, despite the commonly held belief that young people today are computer whiz kids, they are not very computer-literate beyond the computer game and simple word processing. (Foreshew 15) These findings are confirmed by the experience of having taught 'ART 1111 - Writing for the Web' over three semesters and two intensive Summer Schools. Not only are many students only basically computer-literate, they also lack knowledge and prior use of the world wide web and email as research tools and as creative mediums.

The CyberStudies major aims to allow students to fully understand developments in the creative arts (visual, textual, performative) and media arts within the context of the world wide web and interactive media formats. As potential artists in cyberspace, students require new tools, and call upon new technologies, in order to do the work of digital storyteller, digital artmaker, digital performer, digital documenter of life. New languages of discourse continue to be defined; new issues keep emerging. The interconnected interactive future requires people used to operating in three-dimensional creative environments, requires the reading and interpreting of symbols and signs, and requires new concepts of community, communication and collaboration. The creative use of technology by art practitioners, teachers and theorists is facilitated through analysis and understanding of fields such as the

virtual, coupled with practical and generic knowledge of the way computers, networks, multimedia and the world wide web operate.

The word 'virtual' needs to be immediately addressed, as its clear and consistent understanding is crucial to certain aspects of this paper and the future of writing. 'Virtual' already has many signifieds, one of the most common being 'non real', or 'not there'. Also 'virtual' is associated with 'reality', due to one of the earliest possible applications of computers and cyberspace. The 'Virtual Reality' (VR) environments of 'shoot-em-up' games technology, where people wear VR glasses and hold controllers and jerk in various directions for seemingly no reason, is probably another image that is a signification of VR. The virtual, as associated with VR, is seen as a kind of pretend reality, or make-believe. The virtual has also been described as an artificial reality, a reproduction of a reality we know. The word 'virtual' seems to have acquired the sense of a negative state, a state of not-being, not-real, not-there, not-anything - an otherness that many cyber-feminists have been quick to recognize.

The etymology of the word, however, traces its roots to Middle English usage and the meaning: 'possessed of certain physical virtues, from Medieval Latin *virtualis*, from the Latin *virtus*: strength, virtue. Date: 1654'. This definition, from the online *Webster's* dictionary, does not have negative connotations. The philosopher Michael Heim defines 'virtual' as a philosophical term meaning 'not actually but just as if'. (Heim 160) Paul Levinson defines a 'virtual' X as what you get when the information structure of X is detached from its physical structure. (Levinson 363)

Peter Skagestad, in his address to the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, thoroughly researches the word 'virtual', its origins as an adjective, its use as a noun and its introduction into the language of computers, cyberspace and everyday life. He makes a strong case for the word, and the concepts it embraces, to be seen from a more positive perspective. Of the two modern usage definitions, Skagestad shows 'Levinson's to be closer to the *Baldwin's Dictionary* definition penned by Charles Sanders Peirce, i.e. "A virtual X (where X is a common noun) is something, not an X, which has the efficiency (virtus) of an X"'. In reminding us that Peirce is the universally acknowledged founder of modern semiotics, Skagestad goes further in claiming that Peirce placed virtuality at the centre of his doctrine of mind, knowledge and language.

Pierre Levy in *Becoming Virtual* eloquently proposes the virtual as a process:

> In scholastic philosophy the virtual is that which has potential rather than actual existence. The virtual tends toward actualization, without undergoing any form of effective or formal concretization. The tree is virtually present in the seed. Strictly speaking, the virtual should not be compared with the real but the actual, for virtuality and actuality are merely two different ways of being. (Levy 35)

Levy extends the work of Gilles Deleuze, who introduced the concepts of virtual, actual, real and possible in *Difference and Repetition*, his doctoral dissertation of 1979:

> The only danger in all this is that the virtual could be confused with the possible. The possible is opposed to the real; the process undergone by the possible is therefore a "realization". By contrast, the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself. The process it undergoes is that of actualization. (Deleuze 207)

If one accepts this definition of virtual as a problematic or process, one can ask the question, what is the virtuality of poetry? What is the thing that poetry as a process is trying to address? What is the function of poetry? The phenomenologists might say there is no function at all, no absolute meaning to anything, so why try to define poetry this way? Paul De Man reminds us of the futility of literature:

> Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge "reality", but because it is not a priori certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not a priori certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language. (de Man 168)

Nonetheless poetry has been spoken, written, read and experienced for thousands of years and despite the uncertainty of the nature of being itself, it is still valid to ask what is the problem that poetry tries to solve.

I believe this is the question the virtual process of poetry asks: How do words express and communicate what is felt via the emotions, is observed with the eyes, is thought by the mind, is heard by the ears, is smelt by the olfactories in a code others will decode by their own mechanisms? And the listeners, the readers, the web users, how will they receive that code, and decode it by their own means of signification?

The solutions of the past, to this virtual problematic, have given rise to sub-genres and styles of poetry, like the limerick, the haiku, the tetrameter, the cinquain, etc, and to all forms of presentation or performance. These have been viable but only ever partial solutions, all attempted actualizations of the same problem. The evidence of the virtual process is expressed as real poems in real books in real libraries and bookshops and personal archives, or real performances to live audiences, or recorded collections of live performances, or real website locations showcasing real cyberpoems created for and by the vector of cyberspace.

Of course, new poems are possible in similar styles to those already identified. Also possible are new actualizations, new solutions, new genres. The internet and computers have facilitated the production of new actualizations of poetry, just as writing and the printing press as new technologies encouraged new genres previously.

The digitization of text, image and sound has revolutionized the creative artist's workplace, in terms of ease and efficiency of use in creation and reproduction. The interconnectivity of the world wide web has provided a new exhibition, distribution and publication network for artists. We have seen a transference of the print publication industry to the world wide web, the sale and distribution of print products via online booksellers, the online presence of mainstream publishers promoting their authors and products, the electronic versions of literary magazines, and the appearance of totally digital online literary magazines (e-zines). Douglas Adams' exclusive internet publication and Steven King's most recent free offering of a novella over the internet (400,000 downloaded in the first 24 hours of release) have marked a new era in print publication. John Tranter has embraced the internet with his successful international poetry publication *Jacket*:

> The shift to the Internet is the most significant change that publishing has seen this century. An earlier change, the move from metal type to photo-lithographic printing, was also important, but it wasn't what the trendy pundits call a "paradigm shift"; the Internet is. (Tranter)

Tranter's online publication may have a more international audience than print published literary magazines, but they both serve the same purpose, and the desktop publishing skills for print magazines are just as difficult to learn as HTML for web-based publications.

Most university English and Australian Literature departments and creative writing programs have established online sites and web based publications. Australian poets have also been quick to set up their personal websites: Coral Hull, Billy Marshall-Stoneking, Richard Tipping, Phillip Salom, John Kinsella, Pam Brown, to name a few. These advances have had their affect on the publishing industry because the world wide web competes so efficiently in the areas of production and distribution. But these activities simply translate from one medium to another. The poetry published in these web publications looks like

pages from a print publication, addresses the same issues as print published poetry, and is presented in a way that resembles the structure and organisation of print published books and magazines. Such publishing has been called *transmediation* or *remediation*. It is a realisation of an already possible rather than an actualization of the virtual.

George Landow, of Brown University and hypertext evangelist, states that:

> What is perhaps most interesting about hypertext, though, is not that it may fulfill certain claims of structuralist and poststructuralist criticism but that it provides a rich means of testing them. (Landow 10)

Landow uses the terms 'hypertext' and 'hypermedia' interchangeably to argue for a richer experience of hypertext over traditional print publication of branching narratives. But hypermedia literature is distinguished from solely text-based hypertext by the introduction of image, sound, animation, random selection, intelligent objects, etc.

Hypertext fictions, which we associate with the world wide web and cyberspace, were already possible and realised in the print medium. I do not see hypertexts as new actualizations of literature in cyberspace, although hyperlinking may facilitate the construction and presentation of these texts. To construct the simplest of hypertexts requires a basic knowledge of HTML code, but a great knowledge of writing practice. One must have this basic knowledge of HTML though; the code remains invisible like the invisible knowledge behind literary devices, or the typesetting instructions, or editor's mark-ups on a draft manuscript.

Most importantly, however, the interactivity possible in cyberspace holds the greatest potential for the conception and development of new art. New literature that performs itself is already in abundance. The world wide web allows a poetry which performs itself 24 hours a day, seven days a week, without the author needing to be present. This can be perceived as digital performance of poetry that allows the user some control over the navigation and some decisions over how texts are accessed. In a recent article in *TEXT* I describe seven forms of writing, created by and for, and only able to exist on, the world wide web, with references to practitioners.

Janet Murray sees the future of narrative in cyberspace as extending or enhancing the experience of interacting with a fiction in new ways. Through *immersion*, *agency* and *transformation*, hypermedia heightens the pleasures of traditional media and creates a uniquely new experience. Immersion is achieved in cyberspace relatively easily. Practically any world or scene can be constructed in three dimensions, the user able to navigate through the space of the fiction rather than over the surface. Objects within the scene, even if these are text objects, can have pre-programmed behaviours which can be triggered by the user's interaction. In cyberspace you can fly, move across terrains much faster than you could possibly walk in physical space, teleport to other areas, other environments, other planets, other spaces.

In traditional narratives, scenes and characters are developed over time - as we know more about characters and the places they inhabit we become more engrossed in the story, more immersed in the narrative. Also our disbelief is suspended over time; we gradually begin to be immersed by the action.

In three dimensional cyberspace environments, we are immediately placed in a space we can see, interacting with objects, words or characters; our immersion is almost immediate. Agency also aids in the rapid suspension of disbelief; one more readily believes an object that offers valuable information, endowing these imaginary objects with 'life'. The user's concepts of time and space are radically affected by the ability to navigate through spaces faster and to go to places previously unavailable. Murray argues that in cyberspace we not only suspend disbelief but are encouraged to 'create belief'.

Murray also states that digital narratives allow us to enact our stories and not just witness them happening.

> Enacted events have a transformative power that exceeds both narrated and conventionally dramatised events because we assimilate them as personal experiences. (Murray 170)

In 3-D environments, *because* of their constructedness and constructability, we can collide objects/ideas/places/spaces that may never connect in the real world. These (sometimes bizarre) collisions can trigger new kinds of knowledge within us. In cyberspace, there is no real sense of resistance to the world - so, you can fly, but you can fly through pre-designed walls. It is difficult to see the relationship between self and world when the negotiation of our own identity in relation to the cyberscape is thus problematised, because the boundaries between self and world are blurred by the lack of definable perspective in these reconstituted forms of embodiment and place.

In this way, what we 'see' is different in cyberspace than in reality because our relationship to the world undoes many of our notions of being separate from our surroundings. Thus, in cyberspace, what we see does not establish our place in the (virtual) world. On the contrary, it places our position (our relationship to the world) into question. When we question this relationship, we open ourselves up to the potential of learning. In this way, cyberspace offers a vast potential for uncovering that which we don't know.

At the same time, we 'know' this is an illusion. We know that we are really in our lounge room/computer lab, smoking a (real) cigarette/picking our (real) nose. Our eyes are deceiving us. It is this awareness of the constructed nature of virtual space that widens the gap between what we see and what we know. In creating this space, virtuality offers the potential to explore this seeing/knowing tension. Because the gap is expanded there is more room to see the discrepancies, the contradictions, the holes. In this way, virtuality promotes the discovery of new ways of thinking about the relationship between our sensory experiences and our knowledges. Because the virtual/reality dichotomy is a (false) construct, that which we learn in cyberspace is applicable to our selves in real space. So, new ways of thinking/seeing/knowing that are revealed to us in the virtual world do not vanish when we turn the computer off.

My own specific area of interest in Cyberpoetry (poetry that can only exist in a hypermedia form on cd-rom or the WWW) offers random moments of illuminating poetic satisfaction, and often highly relevant human insights, through very robotic text generating software programs - digital programmed Gertrude Stein-type cut-up machines. Cyberpoetry allows another physical dimension for words to exist in, move around in, and perform in, apart from the two-dimensional surface of the page and the linear arrangement of the sentences on a page. There are not the traditional devices of rhythm, metre, or even rhyme when words are suspended in a three-dimensional space; but there are new devices of motion, colour, depth, action, and weight of words that can be used by the cyberpoet. This literature exists in a space and not on a surface or landscape. This space is being explored, this is the area of the unknown, this is a virtual space where thinking is required to solve new problems, actualise solutions, speak in new languages, new voices.

In offering a CyberStudies major in a school of arts to creative writing, theatre and visual arts, and communications students, we are not only encouraging the use of technology as tools in an art practice, but concurrently placing students in an unknown space where they have to think creatively. It is easy to see in cyberspace what already exists in the 'real' world; it requires creative solutions to envisage narratives that don't yet exist.

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Komninos Zervos convenes the CyberStudies Major at the School of Arts, Griffith University, Gold Coast campus. He is currently a PhD candidate at the School of English, Media and Art History, University of Queensland.
The virtual Komninos has had previous actualizations of performance poet, microbiologist, youth worker and coffee lounge proprietor.
He is the editor of the TEXT Special Issue Website Series No 2*, Writing On-Line/On-Line Writing*