

# The Verse-O-Matic

**James G. Robinson**

Interactive Telecommunications Program

Tisch School of the Arts / NYU

142 Nelson Street, #3

Brooklyn, NY 11231 USA

+1 347 613 6239

[jgr225@nyu.edu](mailto:jgr225@nyu.edu)

## ABSTRACT

This paper details the "Verse-O-Matic", an otherwise ordinary printing calculator designed to solve poetic equations rather than mathematical ones. Instead of a numbered keypad, the device's keys represent poetic themes, which can be combined to select and print snippets of great poetry. Just as the invention of the electronic calculator made relatively complex mathematics accessible to the masses, a poetry calculator elevates everyday discourse by making verse more easily accessible to all.

## Keywords

Calculators, poetry, digital publishing, handheld devices, literary databases.

## CONTEXT

Before the introduction of the portable electronic calculator in the latter half of the twentieth century, solving mathematical equations was a time-consuming activity. Indeed, it was a rare mark of genius to be able to calculate complicated sums quickly.

The same situation exists today with poetry, a discipline that can be as relevant and meaningful to our lives as mathematics. Just as a proliferation of numbers have helped to revolutionize science and finance, a democratization of beautiful verse can add greater meaning and context to our relationships with each other, our lives and our environment by elevating our communication beyond cliches.

Why is poetry largely ignored in today's society? To a large part, it is because it is perceived as inaccessible. One must be highly motivated to begin an exploration of poetry

without any previous exposure to verse; as a result, verse is seen as the domain of highly educated and/or pretentious types. (Of course, those of us in academia know that the two are by no means mutually exclusive.)

Secondly, poetry is sometimes viewed as irrelevant. That may well be a perception borne of ignorance, since, in today's society, poetry garners widespread attention only when it offends us, not when it enlightens us. Witness the recent furor over a poem written by New Jersey poet laureate Amiri Baraka, which led some to call for the abolition of his \$10,000-a-year post. [1]

The Verse-O-Matic attempts to remedy this situation by providing a convenient, accessible interface to classic and modern poetry, requiring only a curiosity about life and rudimentary knowledge of a mathematical calculator.

## Other Poetry Projects

This project is not the only effort to seep poetry to unexpected corners of everyday life. Robert Pinsky's *Favorite Poem Project* featured dozens of Americans reading their favorite poems on PBS' *Newshour With Jim Lehrer*. The selections were chosen from over 18,000 submissions. [2] Recently, the Poetry Society of America's *Poetry in Motion* campaign has enriched the public transportation systems of 11 United States cities with snippets of verse. "We want to surprise people with it, to put it in the very space where it's not supposed to be," executive director Alice Quinn said in 2001. "Everything else on the subway is trying to sell you something. This offers instead a metaphysical moment in the subway." [3] It is in this spirit that the Verse-O-Matic was designed.

## DEVICE DESIGN

### User Interface

The Verse-O-Matic is designed to look exactly like a regular printing calculator, with one exception: the usual digits are replaced by nine words, each representing a different poetic theme or emotion: LOVE, HAPPINESS,

*Copyright © 2002-03 James G. Robinson*

*All rights reserved.*

BEAUTY, HUMOR, AGE, NATURE, SEPARATION, SADNESS, and DESPAIR. Despite the transformed key meanings, the universally-recognized calculator format allows new users to easily grasp how the device is meant to be used without special instructions.

### Interaction

When a key is pressed, the calculator searches its memory to select all of the poems that refer to that theme. Additional themes can be added ("+" = AND) or subtracted ("- " = AND NOT) from the poetic equation simply by pressing the appropriate keys. When the user presses "=", the equation is completed and the calculator prints a randomly-selected poem that fulfills all of the thematic boundaries that the user has set.



For instance:

```

“LOVE”
+
“SEPARATION”
+
“SADNESS”
=
    "This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath,
    May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet."
    WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE [4]
    
```

If no poems are found, the device beeps twice and lights a warning lamp. The equation resets and the user is prompted accordingly.

### Output

In the first prototype, the poem was printed on a mailing label, rather than a supermarket receipt (as originally conceived). This allows the poem to be easily shared once read; it can be used to seal an envelope or affixed to a personal calendar. The printout also affords a tactile intimacy with the words that cannot be matched in the hulking glare of a computer monitor.

When this project was first demonstrated at NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program, its endlessly-inventive students found a host of novel uses for the poetry stickers. Snippets of verse can now be found in the most unexpected places, from trash can lids in the student lounge to microchip programmers in the physical computing lab.

### PROTOTYPE

The original prototype for this project was built using a custom-made keypad and a standard commercial label printer interfaced serially with a Toshiba 335CDS laptop running Linux. The laptop and label printers, while bulky, were used so that a preliminary prototype could be easily constructed and tweaked according to user feedback. In later iterations of this project the laptop will be replaced by a microcontroller and the label printer by a custom serial printer, each embedded in the calculator itself, so that the entire device is completely portable for use anywhere.

### Software

Poems are stored in a simple database on the host computer, maintained by a Perl program that monitors the input from the keypad and distributes text to the serial printer accordingly. New verse is entered into the database via a web-based CGI form on the local machine's Apache server, accessible either locally or through a connected LAN. In future prototypes this network could be extended to the Internet so that poems can be collected from around the world.

### FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The poems on each device need not be standard to each calculator. Just as poetry is a deeply individual and personal means of expression, each calculator could be loaded with diverse collections of verse. A wireless connection could permit users to share their poetry with others anywhere -- on the street, in the subway, or in a workspace. This could be enabled through an infrared connection, as is used on handheld devices, or via an 802.11b wi-fi connection to more remote devices.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to Dr. Natalie Friedman, Director of the Writing Center at Marymount College of Fordham University for her useful perspectives on poetic themes, and to Camille Norment, adjunct professor at ITP, whose patient encouragement inspired me to pursue this idea to completion.

### REFERENCES

1. Pearce, J. When Poetry Seems to Matter. *The New York Times* (February 9, 2003).
2. Rosenberg, H. 'NewsHour' Finds Poetry in the Soul of America. *The Los Angeles Times* (May 1, 2000) p. F1.
3. Coeyman, M. To Her, Every Spot Needs A Touch Of Poetry. *The Christian Science Monitor* (April 3, 2001) p. 17.
4. Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*, act 2, sc. 2, l. 121-2

