

Second Manifesto on Text Liberation

A Preliminary Thesis Abstract

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To this point, the Internet Age has focused on the aggregation of text, rather than its dissemination. In the process we have reached a slightly odd situation in which we are surrounded by more words than ever before, while these archives remain mostly invisible to us. The vast repositories of accumulated wisdom we are starting to take for granted live not in the real world – our everyday world – but segregated behind screens, microscopically inscribed on unreadable media in an illegible tangle of ones and zeroes.

Think, for a minute, of the word “screen”. In its classical sense, a screen was a shield, a mechanism for blocking, a way to protect two things from interacting. Computer screens do much the same thing. They may allow us to peer into another, more magical world, much as a stowaway would peer through a porthole at a lush island paradise; but they also remind us that that world is separate, unreachable, untouchable.

I am most concerned with the physical manifestation of text, specifically digital text, because I believe that screens are an imperfect and limiting way in which to publish the written word. I base this not merely on aesthetics; nor on any specific nostalgia for the book; nor on any inherent Luddite bias against new technology. In fact, I am enthralled and amazed by the many ways in which words – and by extension, human thought – can be accessed, searched and published in digital form.

But public words demand physicality. To segregate these words behind the screen is to deny them in our daily lives, depriving us of the opportunity to engage with their ideas and thoughts away from the screen, and preventing those words from bringing meaning to the specific spaces they should rightfully inhabit. As such, digital libraries echo the traditional limitations of print libraries. They still require a certain level of intellectual expertise; they still must be “visited”; and the treasures that lie within can only be removed with some difficulty.

The time has come for the liberation of text. Words are the currency of everyday life – but the vast majority of written words we encounter in public spaces are dull and monotonous. They either tell us what to buy or what not to do, rarely providing the inspiration or joy so often embodied on the printed page.

Books, magazines and newspapers pose their own set of difficulties. They, too, confine and trap the written word within their own particular constraints. They belong to no specific location; they are everywhere and nowhere; and, as everyone who has been lost in a good book knows, to read is to remove oneself from the real world. Walter Ong notes that “writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself.” And yet the most compelling examples of written text in public spaces – from engraved inscriptions on public buildings to protest graffiti on the Berlin Wall – are at heart community-minded documents, capturing the same sense of shared discourse that characterizes oral conversation.

These types of public words represent an uncommon form of annotation. We are familiar with words annotating other words (footnotes, scrawling in the margins, the parentheses you see here), words annotating images (captions) or even video (subtitles). Why not take advantage of the new ubiquity of text to annotate reality? Since James Joyce’s *Ulysses* has inspired walking tours of Dublin, why not publish his work, literally, *in* and *on* and *around* Dublin? If the natural home of Emma Lazarus’ poem “The New Colossus” is the base of the Statue of Liberty, shouldn’t e.e. cummings’ “i was sitting in mcsorley’s” rightfully live on East 7th Street?¹ Might not this liberated text, lying in wait to be serendipitously found by the wandering public, bring new meaning to not only the text itself but also the space it inhabits?

We take words for granted simply because they are so ubiquitous. But words are special. They have the power to teach; to inspire; to inform. Given the opportunity to live in their natural habitats, they can participate – and flourish – as vital symbiotic participants in the rich ecosystem of our everyday experience.

¹ See Appendix.

Personal Statement

I came to ITP three years ago with just over five years experience in the world of words: first in traditional media, reporting in Russia for George Soros' *Open Society News* and the Moscow bureau of the *Chicago Tribune*, and then, bridging old media and new by designing and building an online repository of baseball history text for a small publishing consultancy. The idea behind BaseballLibrary.com was to publish two full-text encyclopedic baseball references, originally printed in 1989, on the web.

The job was originally an editorial one and it took two years of developing the site to finally leave old media behind. I can remember the exact moment it happened: the all-nighter in which I discovered the Perl programming language and the power of its text-processing regular expressions. Suddenly, the player profiles and features I'd been writing were no longer individual entities – they could be linked in unexpected places; chopped into distinct elements; repurposed in new forms.

Armed with simple text-recognition algorithms, my Perl scripts served as virtual editors, collating the text we'd aggregated in new and exciting ways. This was publishing in a radically different sense – not merely lining up words on pages, but using them to build and index a dense, three-dimensional archive that could be navigated through relatively simple means: the hyperlink. Along the way, I became convinced that the 21st century editorial mind must be complemented by a certain degree of technological knowledge – at the very least, an awareness of the new possibilities that programming and text processing can offer when applied to written work.

The pride I've always felt in the site, however, has masked a deep frustration that eventually led to my applying to ITP. The problem with a baseball history website, of course, is that the last place one wants to read the information is on a computer. Ideally, it should be sitting on your lap at the ballpark. Add to this an intense personal dislike of computer screens – which I find painful, like staring into a flashlight – and I became convinced that there must be some better way to publish the information we had collated, without sacrificing the new abilities of digital publishing discovered while developing it.

The question of how digital text archives can be published in ways that transcend the limitations of the computer and its screen has guided my work during my three years at ITP. Most of my projects have attempted in some way to make digital text more tangible in “the real world” and more relevant to everyday life.

The first physical computing project I built at ITP was a printing calculator, normal except for the fact that its keys were themes (such as love, happiness, sadness, and despair) rather than numbers. When a user entered a “poetic equation”, the device dispensed snippets of great poetry on labels that could then be applied to anything that struck the user’s fancy. When the project was presented at the 2003 Ubiquitous Computing Conference, most of the attendees decided to stick their poems on their chests, kindling a number of interesting conversations about decidedly non-technological topics – which I considered a rousing success.

The following semester, I developed an idea to mount word modules in the ITP elevator, modeled on the popular word magnets found on refrigerators. Each module had a simple 16-character LCD screen and a knob that could be used to select one of 255 words, sorted by part of speech. The word lists, designed to represent the distinct dialect of the chosen space, were selected from the student listserv; arranged together, the modules formed cryptic yet meaningful sentences and slogans. My fiancée and I have since mounted the modules in our apartment with words culled from our email correspondence so that we can leave messages for each other around the house, using our own words.

These experiments push the boundaries of what we consider publishing, in one respect merely because they do not view the book, the chapter or even the paragraph as the fundamental building block of a published work. Instead, the basic element might even be as brief as a single word. I still believe that the screen is still the greatest impediment to the flourishing of digital publishing, and that it is bound to evolve into a form radically different from what we think of today. What we consider to be a written work will continue to evolve along with it.

Appendix

The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus (1883)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glowed world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

I was sitting in mcsorley's by e.e. cummings (1925)

i was sitting in mcsorley's. outside it was New York and beautifully snowing.

Inside snug and evil. the slobbering walls filthily push witless creases of screaming warmth chuck pillows are noise funnily swallows swallowing revolvingly pompous a the swallowed mottle with smooth or a but of rapidly goes gobs the and of flecks of and a chatter sobbins intersect with which distinct disks of graceful oat, upsoaring the break on ceiling-flatness

the Bar. tinkling luscious jigs dint of ripe silver with warmlyish wetflat spluring smells waltz the glush of squiriting taps plus slush of foam knocked off and a faint piddle-of-drops she says I ploc spittle what the lands thaz me kid in no sir hopping sawdust you kiddo he's a palping wreaths of badly Yep cigars who jim him why gluey grins topple together eyes pout gestures stickily point made glints squinting who's a wink bum-nothing and money fuzzily mouths take big wobbly foot-steps every goggle cent of it get out ears dribbles soft right old feller belch the chap hic summere eh chuckles skulch....

and i was sitting in the din thinking drinking the ale, which never lets you grow old blinking at the low ceiling my being pleasantly was punctuated by the always retchings of a worthless lamp.

when With a minute terrif iceeffort one dirty squeal of soiling light yanKing from busy obscurity a bald greenish foetal head established It suddenly upon the huge neck around whose unwashed sonorous muscle the filth of a collar hung gently.

(spattered) by this instant of semiluminous nausea A vast wordless nondescript genie of trunk trickled firmly in to one exactly-mutilated ghost of a chair,

a; domeshaped interval of complete plasticity, shoudlers, sprouted the extraordinary arms through an angle of ridiculous velocity commenting upon an unclean table. and, whose distended immense Both paws slowly loved a dinted mug

gone Darkness it was so near to me, i ask of shadow won't you have a drink?

(the eternal perpetual question)

Inside snugandevil. i was sitting in mcsorley's It, did not answer.

outside. (it was New York and beautifully, snowing....