

## *No Media, or Code/Work*

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Sandy Baldwin, charles.baldwin@mail.wvu.edu

"For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other." - Fanon

"... one can speak of code only if it is already the code of the Other, and that is something quite different from what is in question in the message." - Lacan

"Objects and events are not primitive experiences. Objects and events are representations of relations." - von Foerster

"Domains are generated by the space of potential breakdown of action." - Winograd and Flores

### Prospectus

There is no net. This means, at least, that there are only specific protocols and machines, actual sites of human-computer interaction. Everything works as if the computer were right against me or inside of me, growing out of me or into me. The interface is not a sign but a site of contact and inhabitation. I am right up against the screen. I am not in a relation to the net but in relation to the imaginary net, in a relation to otherness, in a relation of *inter-faciality* (following Emmanuel Levinas and Alphonso Lingis). Secondly, it means that these sites and inhabitations are in a constant flux of projection and introjection, flows of perception and fantasy as we imagine relations to the net. The circulation and validation of statements about the net is built on these imaginary relations, a circulation that enables the theory hope of speaking of the net, the ideological hope of the net as a future beyond the real of our bodies. *No Media, or Code/Work* is part of the collapsing imagination of the net. It is a book written to discover the everyday *relevance* - in Alfred Schutz's sense - of the imaginary net.

Perhaps the net more or less exists. It does not literally exist but it exists as literature. The imaginary net is collapsed on the literary net, ruptured from within by everydayness. The non-existence of the net can only be understood as a literary problem, as a continual tending towards literature. This tendency is not the state of certain works but the partial manifestation of the net through diverse writings. The problem can be formulated precisely (following Maurice Blanchot): what must the net be if net literature is possible? By net literature I do not mean the transfer of literary institutions to the net, nor the possible invention of new institutions, nor a problem of defining electronic or digital or online literature, but a problem of writing the net as the problem of literature. I mean the constant writing of the net as a literary production, as a fictional medium and means of narrative projection, but also - given the imaginary net, the net fiction - I mean the constant breakdown of the net and return to everyday phenomenology. The literary non-existence of the net is

read by absent bodies (as developed in the phenomenology of Drew Lederer). I call this constant proto-writing *codework*, using a term coined by Alan Sondheim. I single out Sondheim's work because my book is in many ways a thinking through of his ideas, even when I am not directly concerned with his writing. *No Media, or Code/Work* is a book about the practices and problematics of codework. While codework is an emerging topic in new media studies, my project is the first sustained description and analysis. Codework is less a genre than a loosely-organized field of practices and genres. A focus on codework broadens scholarship beyond the currently dominant discourse of "new media." Codework deals with the net as formed of writings and writing practices, from the granular level of TCP/IP to complexly graphical virtual worlds. Codework problematizes the production and consumption of net writings, and leads to a rigorous and critical exploration of the conditions for theorizing the non-existence of the net.

Codework is difficult to define but can be described. It can include writing where surface text is the result of underlying code processes, as in a web page, but also where text is an output of coded processes, or where a writer creates an allusive code-like pidgin language (e.g. the work of MEZ). In general, codework describes the intersection of computer code and human language. There are already canonic codeworks in the field of digital poetry. Loss Glazier's *Digital Poetics* (Alabama 2002), which established the continuity between innovative creative writing and digital literature, pointed out the importance of code, where the algorithmic and combinatorial nature of digital writing provides the conditions for new forms of creativity. This emphasis continues in the academic study. The recent *New Media Poetics* (MIT 2006) makes code the central category for defining new media poetics, and Katherine Hayles' *My Mother was a Computer* (Chicago 2006) foregrounds the connection between code and digital literature. Beyond digital literature, other research areas in digital culture are also increasingly focused on code. Alexander Galloway's *Protocol* (MIT 2005) theorizes code as the organizing principle of contemporary society. Similarly, Lawrence Lessig's influential formulation of "code as law" describes an intersection of regulation and action resulting from the transformed textual and legal environment of cyberspace, but crossing into and structuring our everyday political and social selves.

I take codework as one description of the everydayness of the digital. In contrast to the emphasis on control in Galloway's influential reading of protocol, *No Media, or Code/Work* argues that codework requires a reformulation of the domain of protocol *itself* as undetermined and transitive. Codework is irreducibly fuzzy and problematic. What is not codework in the empire of media? The importance of code renders everything code. Yet the reverse is true as well: if codework can be defined by the mixture of performance and statement, production and product, then it follows that there can be no final accounting for the work or the code involved. All codework involves some resistance to theory, some illegibility. Codework is smeared with

reality, with relations to otherness. Rather than a genre or style, I insist on the problematic of codework as opening onto conditions of production and meaning-making. In short, codework is new media poetics. My point is not to replace other forms of new media art with codework. In fact, I am not concerned with new media art per se, at least not as an institution within a larger field of digital culture. Rather, I see codework as an emergent potential everywhere in the digital. I am concerned with the poetics of the digital rather than with digital poetics, with "the becoming literary of the literal" described by Jacques Derrida.

Codework is a problem not in the least because there is already too much codework. Code is everywhere in contemporary theories of digital culture, as part of an iconoclastic turn from the deceptive representations of the interface to the promise of deep access to the source of these appearances, a promise of what Friedrich Kittler calls the "sociology of the chip." Codework easily becomes genre and methodology, a writing practice that exploits intersections of code and natural language, and a discourse that emphasizes underlying hardware and protocols. In opposition to this, we must acknowledge no possibility of a final and total accounting for the "source code." Codework presents the problem of the interface at its most intense or terminal, and must be held against the institutionalization of something like "new media poetics" or "digital writing" as a canon of works and authors, of practices and genres. For this reason, there is hardly any codework, and what there is remains singular and minor, but with a critical function (its work). Codework is the ghost in the machine.

## Table of Contents

*No Media, or Code/Work* consists of six chapters of approximately thirty manuscript pages each, as well as a brief introduction and conclusion, for a total of about two-hundred pages in manuscript. All the chapters currently exist as partial drafts.

New media theory fetishizes the computer as the exemplary new medium, as a "meta-medium" (per Janet Murray and others). *No Media, or Code/Work* is a book of poetics, not theory, and for poetics the computer is not a medium in any sense of the word. **Chapter 1** seeks to destroy the term "new media." New media means nothing more and nothing less than circulating statements determining what can be said and performed in relation to certain technologies. This discursive field is supported by practices of subjection and corporeality, practices that form a *habitus* in Pierre Bourdieu's sense (following Erwin Panofsky), which leads us to see and experience something called new media. In turn, the correlation of this field of statements with material practices is a condition for capitalization. Firstly, the physical capital of technological devices, networks, and so on. Secondly, the intellectual capital that leads to a new discipline and academic departments, to publication and grants, and to interlocking investments which cross academia, industry, and

government in the form of new media expertise or "know how." This is trivially evident in recent publications — all from MIT — presenting a kind of semantics of the field: *The Language of New Media* (2001), *The New Media Reader* (2003), *New Philosophy for New Media* (2004), and *New Media Poetics* (2006), et al. These practices enable an empire of media, both as a totalizing institution and as a condition of truth or empiricity. In turn, so-called new media theory is a self-referential discourse of invented positions and debates. Critical differences are defined by their relation to other positions within this field. The object of the theory is simple: to maintain hopes and expectations for the continued capitalization of the field. All this is predicated on the underlying stability of the field, in other words, on the shared assumption of intelligibility, the assumption that new media are objects of knowledge and will always yield their meaning or "readability." Media theory smugly confirms itself in thematizing these preconditions, but it is only through a civilizing process of commitments and bonds that we accede to cultures of readability.

**Chapter 2** argues that new media poetics is a crucial site in the empire of media. I include diverse artistic practices within new media poetics, from net.art to electronic literature. These practices model inclusion and exclusion on aesthetic differences, offering terms and criteria for "works" of new media, and establish conditions of taste, preference, and propriety. The point is not the internal politics of academic fields of art or poetry. New media poetics is at best a compensatory discourse for the emptiness of "new media." New media is not "at best," however, and its theorization participates in and builds on the truth of the institution it works on. The focus of the chapter is a case study of the discourse of E-Poetry in relation to the loosely organized practices of codework. The dynamics of academic discourse around E-Poetry involve complex determinations of inclusion and exclusion. The faux-code writings of MEZ are embraced not for the rupturing and smearing of identity across multiple "avatar" writing personae, but for their polysemic wordplay and their finely crafted surface — that is, for their tendency to coagulate and read as "poetic works." The recent interest in flarf, a writing derived from collaged Google searches, enters the field of new media poetics framed by existing poetic practices. Flarf is anointed as the apex of poetic exploration of new media precisely by its presentation as a work of poetry and by the simultaneous occlusion of the writing practices producing the work. By contrast, the codework of NN/antiorp or Alan Sondheim destroys and erases framing conditions of readability, disrupting protocols and refuses consensus. If flarf is interesting for its normative and canonizing tendency, NN/antiorp and Sondheim's work is interesting for its singularity and heterogeneity. Attempts to exclude or tame these works through discussion and analysis leads to hysterical outbreaks that illuminate the machinery of value and taste in the empire of media.

**Chapter 3** attacks the symbolic framework for understanding digital code as mappings of content in relation to a form. All belief in the web is part of this

fantasy of code, from Vannevar Bush's Memex and Ted Nelson's Xanadu, to the latest iteration of Web 2.0. Such a model of code operates at every level, from the current differentials in silicon flip-flops to high-level object-oriented programming. Codes can be as abstract as the specifications for TCP/IP packets or as social as the codes of etiquette in an internet chat room. In every case, there are specific conditions for communication and consensus, and specific infrastructures of monitoring and control. In other words, there is an underside or unconscious to code. Within the symbolic framework I am describing, a given new media object "works" by the clean and readable function of this source. The theoretical dividend is clear: a critique of digital unreality qua social reality. In theories such as Laurel's "computers as theater" or Manovich's "database as symbolic form" or Hayles' "inscription technologies" (to name only a few), the theoretician grasps the conceptuality of the social through the symbolics of the digital. New media theory is a machine reducing representations to symbolic production of the imaginary. The point is not the representation per se but the fact that the digital represents systematically, with efficiency and clarity. Even putatively alternative practices such as gaming mods rely on inverting the symbolic. The digital is a smooth and pure system of representational material for theoretical understanding of social reality. New media theory is constantly renewing the existence of the digital through this critique. The digital is a playground, a pleasure palace for theory. In short: the digital is theory's perversion, its zone of perverse pleasures. This zone is only possible by treating code as a barrier or exclusion, as a framework that produces symbolic orderings without this framework ever becoming manifest. Within the critique of the digital is a non-system of messy re-mappings of the real. In the theory and practice of interface design, for example, we find a production of a symbolic structure that represents and contains objects. From the first - my examples are drawn from Douglas Engelbart, Alan Kay, and from early work at the MIT Media Lab - the interface is conceptualized as a space whose functionality is self-evident proof of this conceptuality. In fact, the screen is a continuous spew of perception. *Interface* means projection and introjection, in the sense of Victor Trausk's "influencing machines" or Hans Bellmer's dolls or J. G. Ballard's disaster landscapes. Everywhere in the digital there is rupture and flow; everywhere there is bit rot, quantum tunneling, and software glitches. The computer must be understood through Julia Kristeva's *abjection*, through Lingis' *excesses*. The non-linearity of digital is only secondarily a symbolic framework for aesthetic production; it is primarily non-linearity as the hysterical embodiment of the real.

**Chapter 4** returns to the genealogy of computability and information theory to show the work of emptying out and formalization to arrive at the digital sign. The early work of Turing and Shannon remain the pre-condition for new media to function as objects of knowledge. At the same time, the theoretical critique of new media - as in Hayles' famous reading of Turing and Shannon in *How We Became Posthuman* - relies on showing the limitations of these mythic stories.

The posthuman critique requires the symbolic addressing and placement achieved in Turing and Shannon to establish its own claims. The paradox is that both Turing and Shannon tell stories of continuous flows channeled and parceled, leaving structures we call computation and information, and leaving the conceptualities underlying the familiar user interface and programming language. At the same time, in Turing and Shannon (and in every case), emptying out and formalization is accompanied by the production of codework, by works of code that re-project and splay reference across structure. As a result, structure and sign, form and content are an imbricated mess. Turing must move from the impossibility of the discrete machine to the heuristic possibility of computation, while Shannon's information theory describes the sign devoid of semantics only because meaning is smeared across the whole of the informatic circuit. Rather than information as an empty form, as new media theory argues, codework means information in-formed with content at every level. The myths of computation and information obscure the pre-broken domains of new media protocols and mechanisms. In the example of hypertext, new media theory is committed to the link as an object with specific features and hypertext as a work built around links. Hypertext is allowed to be complex, coming in 576 varieties for Markku Eskelinen, but new media theory remains blind to the legal rulings on the general status of hypertext and to the industry encoding of proprietary controls and of linking functions at all levels of hardware and software. The problematic of codework means recognizing a generalized linkage and the web as a mass of potentially interconnecting partial inscriptions.

Chapter 5 offers an extended typology of genres of codework, understood as diffuse writing practices in relation to the protocols of new media. Example genres include machine logs, cryptography (e.g. hash collisions), code obfuscations, email etiquette, spam, hacker jargons, and IRC chat. The new social software of Web 2.0 continues the typology by discovering new forms of daily intimacy through folksonomic connection. Each genre in the typology presents a pre-broken domain of writing and reverie that become readable only through parceling into zones of control and resistance, economy and sociality. I use the typology of genres to present codework as an exemplary literary practice. By literature, I do not mean belles-lettres and certainly not identifiable genres. Nor am I referring to poetry, but what I mean is close to *poesis*, to poetics as technical self-production. While I am not concerned with literary works per se, I do claim that there are works and genres because of the work of literature. (If this is paradoxical, it is because it is part of the underlying problematic that is literature.) Rather, I mean literature as what takes place within the machine and takes the machine to a new place (exactly Derrida's "becoming literary of the literal"). By literature, I mean a problematic coterminous with the computer. They are the same: the computer is where literature becomes, and codework is a provisional approach to this becoming. The computer is a machine haunted by literature. The contemporary appearance of this problematic as codework is specific to literature as a

modern institution. I hold onto "literature" precisely to work within and against what we think we understand by this term. My goal is to show the becoming-literature of the computer, and this means setting codework as a practice of writing against media theory: not as a corrective supplying a better or more accurate theory but as a practice that acknowledges the priority of what happens at the interface. Codework against theory and for the computer as a form of life.

**Chapter 6** offers two extended case studies of codework genres. First, ASCII/Unicode standards, which provide the framework for the web's phenomenology and determine the appearances and conditions of experience. The accomplishment of Unicode is a total transcription system of all possible characters. As a condition of exchange, Unicode becomes a medium of value and measurement on the net. At the same time, I show how the rigid systematics of these standards emerge from negotiations around the geopolitics of language and the disposition of actual bodies. The second case study examines avatars in virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life) and computer gaming (e.g. Half-Life). Avatars are typically understood and discussed in terms of visual representations, but I show that the identity problematics of avatars emerged from text-based chat environments and continue to be framed through writing. The emphasis on the range of symbolic choices available through the visual representation makes avatars models of a kind of weak performativity, always modulated by a symbolic framework and its enabling protocols. By contrast, I argue that avatars as codework can only be understood through direct mapping of the absent body. Subjectivity is distributed and spread across the visual field as an intentional projection, as in the avatars of classical Hindu myth. I draw on the virtual idols and *kiss* dolls of *otaku* culture to examine the collapse of the visual into libidinal flows. Gaming is always played - that is, written - towards the other as a ritual of disclosure and unveiling.

In conclusion, the literary problematic of codework in relation to the imaginary net poses the question of *the end of the net*. On the one hand, a relation to digital eternity as the promise of the net; on the other hand, what can be done in the absence of the net, in its already ruined state, in its constant collapse back into the everyday.