Me and Kinetic Poetry

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Illustration 1: Screenshot of Aleph Null 3.0 chewing on bill bissett

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Kinetic poetry is poetry that moves; it's animated poetry. Since about the year 2000, or before that, I've said that I create *animisms*, which I defined as *kinetic poetry with soul*. My first kinetic poem was [Seattle Drift](#) in 1997. That was also my first DHTML/programmed poem. Much of my work since then has been programmed and animated, often with language. Usually it's interactive, also; it moves in response to the wreader's mouse and/or keyboard input. And it's almost always for the web; you read it in the browser.

You might ask *why animate language*? Isn't it *meant* to stay still and be read on a page? Usually it is. But I make stuff that's *meant to move*. And stop. And move...

Kinetic poetry often has a dual focus on the animation and the still. Mine has, anyway. Concern with the still composition relates it to the poemy poem's still existence on the page, to visual poetry's usual existence as a still visual composition, and to visual art. Selected stills of my kinetic poetry can sometimes be interesting, on their own, as works of art—by design.
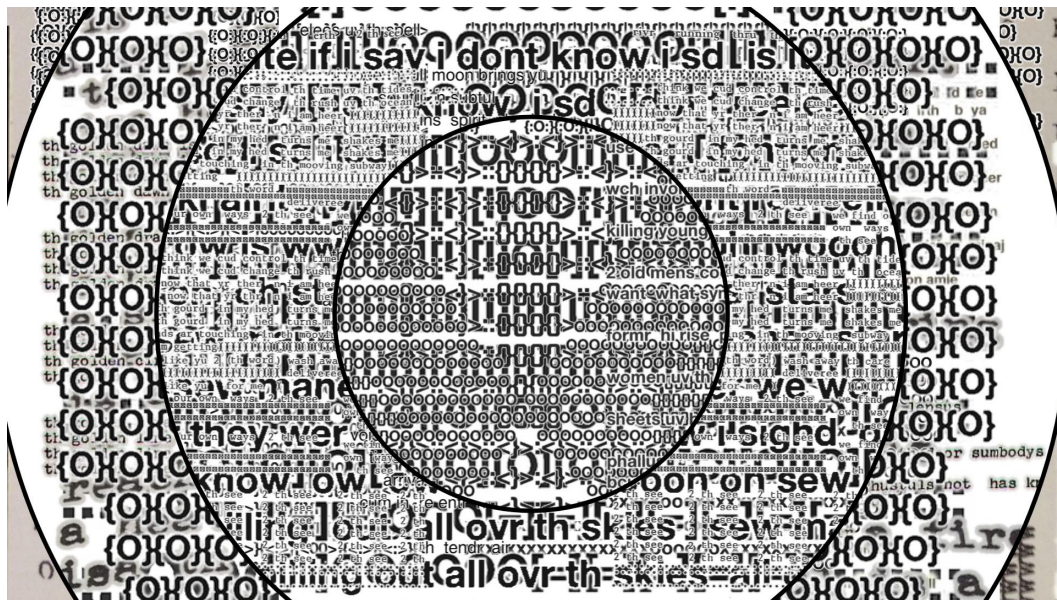

Illustration 2: Image 50 of 200 from slidvid 15 of Aleph Null chewing on bill bissett

There's usually a 'stop/start' button, and sometimes a 'create screenshot' button, as in [dbCinema](#) and [Aleph Null](#). One reads a still piece differently than one reads an animation in motion. In many of my animisms, I'm interested in creating good stills, and *also* sequences of stills (books, for instance).
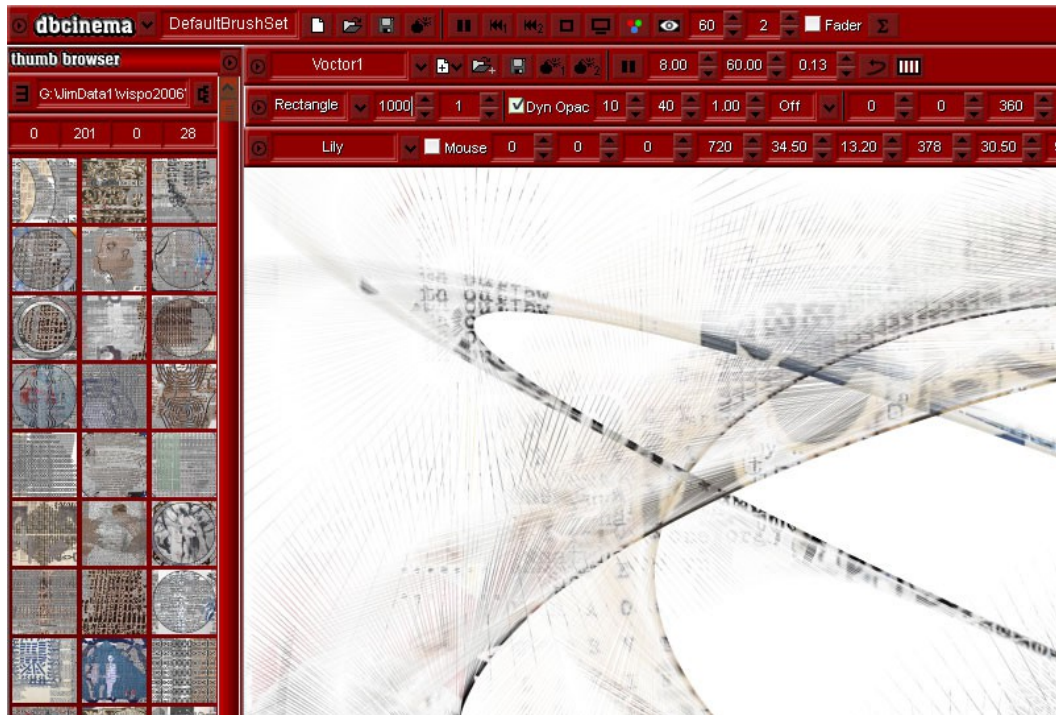
Illustration 3: From the Windows desktop version of dbCinema

But, *also*, I'm interested in creating animations engaging *as* animations, not simply as stills or sequences of stills.

Additionally, I wrote a program called Slidvid that I use to display slideshows of selected screenshots of the animations. The name *Slidvid* conveys the relation between video and slideshow that the program involves. It also implies it's video slid to the condition in which I render it. The Slidvid experience is different from the experience of the programs I write from which the stills are created. The dynamic never-exactly-the-same-twice programs are continually in a state of becoming. The slideshows have arrived, and been carefully selected, each and every frame. The dynamic never-exactly-the-same-twice programs are probably more interesting than Slidvids *as animations*. Whereas the Slidvids are more interesting as a collection of fluidly transitioning stills.

The most recent version of Slidvid has all sorts of features the first iterations didn't have, such as a carousel to navigate the slideshow and the ability to zoom in/out on the images.

Animations are also concerned with the qualities of the motion. Is it smooth? Jerky? Does it have a feel? An emotion? What does it *mean*? Does it remind one of human or animal motion? Does it live? Cuz it *must* if it's to be an *animism*. Is it *alive* with motion? Is it *lively* in the way that poetry is lively—*as language*—but *also* as animation? Does it have life as an animation vs as a sequence of stills? I try to create motion that is interesting *as* an animation, not simply as a *concept* through a sequence of stills. In other words I try to create *animisms*.

I'm also interested in the animation, of course, as a kind of narrative—insofar as narrative is all about how one thing leads to another. The sequence has to 'be going somewhere', as they say. Even if that destination is not the creation of a story in any obviously recognizable sense.

My work is never concerned to create a typically 'storyful' narrative. The *story* is typically an exploration of a compositional space, in dbCinema and Aleph Null—though sometimes—as in the text brush in Aleph Null, such as in my collab with Adeena Karasick—one can see a text revealed and readable over time—one word at a time, typically.

Illustration 4: Aleph Null 3.0 stopped on a frame of my collab with Adeena Karasick.

Or, as in the case of my Aleph Null 3.0 collabs with bill bissett, Jim Leftwich, Dan Waber, Nico Vassilakis, Ted Warnell, Catherine Mehrl Bennett, Andrew Topel, Maria Damon, , Jukka-Pekka Kervinen, Moribund Facekvetch, Klaus Peter Dencker, Jaka Železnikar, Karl Kempton, Brad Pasutti, Regina Célia Pinto, Stasja Voluti and others, one sees, over time, a collection of visual poems synthesized/remixed/collaged in many ways, giving one cumulative insight into both the underlying sequence of visual poems (by bill or Dan, etc), their relations with one another, and a creation of a new thing via their synthesis.

Or, in the case of Arteroids, the animation is an interactive game. The wreader pilots a text that s/he drives around the screen, seeking to shoot the texts that follow you and destroy you.

The motion of the 'brushes' in dbCinema and Aleph Null is via exotic functions. Marko Niemi showed me the basics, and I developed them a little further on my own. The basic thing about exotic functions is they often look like the *human hand* is creating the motion. And you can make them so that they never seem to repeat exactly the same way. Although they are mathematical functions, the

motion they produce has the character of the human hand sweeping across the screen. Exotic functions work really well as 'the hand of the artist', as it were; they work well in things like generative art where there's a whole lot of brushstrokes and 'painting' going on.

The motion in my other animisms is programmed via math functions of one sort or another. In Enigma n, the letters travel in circles. In Arteroids, the blue letters follow your text; the green letters follow straight line paths.

In general, the motion of onscreen elements in my work can be thought of as *behaviors* of those elements. Their motion is an important part of their *character*. Obviously that dimension of their character is lost in stills, though one sometimes sees the paths they have traced, which is another important property of their character. So too are the 'brushstrokes' they have rendered along the path.
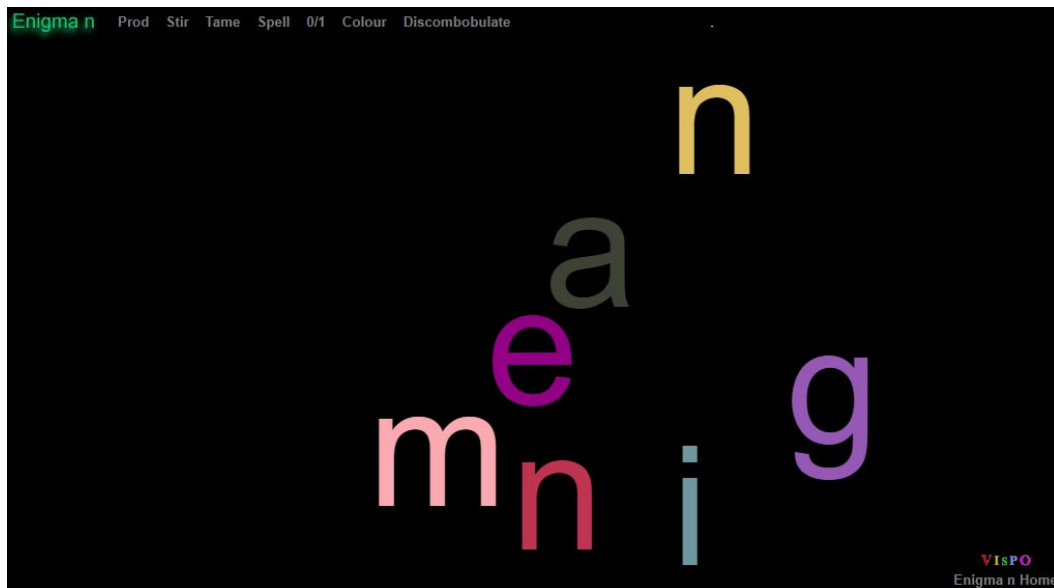

Illustration 5: Screenshot from Enigma n

It's been observed by many that *we read differently now*. It's been observed by just about everybody, by now. It isn't simply that most of our reading is of a monitor. It isn't simply that we go not so much from one page to the next as one screen to the next, one link to the next, one site to the next, one feed to the next, one video to the next. One frame to the next. It's deeper than that.

As I said at the outset, my work in kinetic poetry is concerned not only with animations but with stills. Typically, my kinetic poems involve an experience both of animation and of stills. You look at a still. You read it like you read a visual poem. Maybe you also read it like you read a poemy poem, if it's so configured. Or maybe it's more like a work of visual art. You read a sequence of stills, of screenshots, in a slidvid, a slideshow, which of course you can stop. And you can also experience the never-the-same-twice animation from which the screenshots were selected.

And that's a different experience than a slideshow of selected screenshots cuz the never-the-same-twice animation spends more time *becoming*. Whereas the selected screenshots are always big in *being*. They were selected cuz they have *completed* their becoming. They've *arrived*. As a poem. Or as a visual work. Or both. As a *composition* of some sort.

So my slidvids are sort of like a book, like a comic book of successive visuals, successive texts. See, I think my work offers *a deep experience of how we read*, now. It's a mixture of stills and animations. And interactivity that shapes the work. And right and left-brained stuff. To me, that's the sort of literary experience I look for in digital poetry. Something that gets into the new mind of how we read. Something that *puts it all together*.
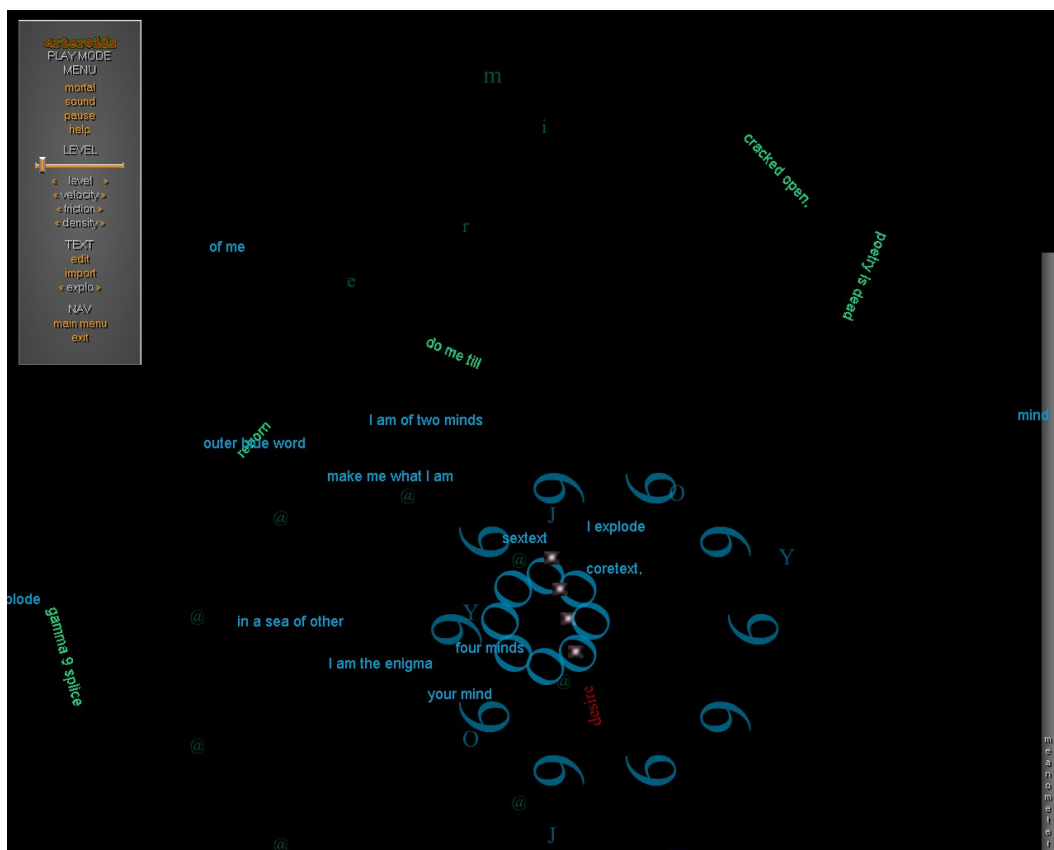

Illustration 6: Screenshot from Arteroids

We read differently now in that we are multimedia readers. That means not only that we go back and forth between reading and watching videos, but we are *intermedial* also; multimedia puts emphasis on the multiplicity of media; *intermedia* puts emphasis on the relations between media. We think more intermedially than before. Mixing arts and media together is more 'natural' to us now not only cuz we experience a mix of media in our daily computing experience, but because the web is so oriented to mixing fields, crossing borders. A synthesis of arts and media, which is what my work has been about *forever*, is

now an experience people seek—not to experience the *future* of literacy—but to experience an intermedial version of the *present* new multimedia literacy.

Also, my work is that of a poet and visual artist—but also a mathematician and software engineer. It's right-brained and left-brained. It's a synthesis of different arts and media, but it's also synthetic of the cultural chasm between the mathematical and artistic.

In Me and the Random I said I use the random to explore a compositional space. In Aleph Null and dbCinema, brushes sample randomly from sets of images or from buckets of different-colored paint and randomly move around the screen creating brushstrokes as they go. In Arteroids, the paths the green texts take are random straight lines. In the Stir Fry Texts, the random element is in the way the wreader mouses over the text. In Enigma n, the position of the circles is initially random. Etc.

The slidvids I create of selected screenshots of Aleph Null chewing on stuff, to me, look much better than Aleph Null in animation chewing on stuff. When Aleph Null is in action, most of the time it's in a state of *becoming*. But it has its moments when it simply *is*. I try to capture those moments, as screenshots, when it looks like it has *completed* some kind of composition. Given the number of underlying images I've fed it, and the nature of the brush itself, there'll be a certain number of compositions of which it's capable. I don't want ten screenshots of the same composition, basically. I want the experience of watching a slidvid to engage throughout.

The late Canadian poet bpNichol created some of the first programmed+animated poems in 1983-84 called First Screening. Up to that time, almost all programmed poetry was not animated. For instance, some early programmed poetry was such that you ran the program and it generated a never-the-same-twice poem that you could print out or view on the screen. It was primarily command-line-oriented. With kinetic+programmed poetry, motion becomes a generative engine, ie, new things are generated as the language moves around. But that isn't all the motion can do. Perhaps it traces out some sort of dance, as in bpNichol's Off-Screen Romance. Or perhaps it traces out some other action (not a dance)—or does something else entirely. In my work, usually the motion is in response to the wreader's actions/choices, as though the text is reading the wreader's actions. The point is that the kinetic dimension opens up the text to a great deal of possibilities. As text, but also as cinema, as game, as generative visual engine, and so on.

I've been corresponding with Yohanna Joseph Waliya, a Nigerian poet, since he contacted me and asked me to teach him about digital poetry. I don't teach at a University. So I was surprised at his request. This essay is in response to him asking me what my thoughts are on kinetic poetry.

We talked about the meaning and emotion of motion in kinetic poetry. He said math produces motion and motion produces emotion. Which isn't a bad start, but it's not that simple.

What produces emotion in writing is human sympathy. Sympathy with the plight or feelings/emotions and thoughts of others—or our recognition in ourselves of emotional connection with their situation or emotions or thoughts. It isn't motion that produces emotion. It's human sympathy.

But motion can be strongly involved in the emotion of a piece if it's somehow strongly involved in human sympathy.

Yohanna: Jim, see what's coming to my mind. Math produces motions and motions produce emotions in humans. This is the main idea that is occurring in my mind. This is what I want to justify in my research but I am not mathematician.

Jim: Math and programming produce motion. But it isn't motion that produces emotion, or not motion alone. What produces emotion in writing? Human sympathy, isn't it?

Yohanna: Yes, but I want to look good the motions that represent emotions in Digital poetry Digital poetry is different from traditional writing

Jim: Yes, digital poetry is different from traditional writing. But we feel emotion in sympathy with or for other people and their suffering and joys, and in recognition of our own suffering and joys. It isn't simply motion that produces emotion, Yohanna. The motion has somehow to relate strongly to feeling for other people, or humour, or deep insight...

Yohanna: Yes, that's what I am trying to with my research. How motions produce emotions in digital art

Jim: Motion does not produce emotion. But motion can contribute to the production of emotion if it's in strong relation to the above.

Yohanna: I am sure motions represent emotions in digital poetry Or then what is the sense of motions in Digital poetry or what does motions represent in reading digital poetry

Jim: It's the way things work together. The way the meaning of words can be made to work with motion. There's a phrase in English: "poetry in motion". Have you heard that phrase? It's usually used in reference to dance.

Yohanna: Yes, I did, but it is long time

Jim: Even in dance, it isn't simply the motion that produces emotion. It's the way the motion relates to the human situation, the way the motion relates to human emotion. The way the emotion of the music relates to the dance motion.

Yohanna: Let us take example the motion of text in you Seattle Drift as text dance. See the steps of text when you do the text Please it harmonise s the motion with the meaning of the text I maen enigma n No, Seattle drift I mean when one does the text

Jim: In [Seattle Drift](), it isn't simply the motion that produces emotion. It's what the motion means, and it means what it means because the words of the poem make it mean what it means. The motion is the 'drift'. The motion is a drifting of words off the page. Which is also a drifting from the scene of poetry ("I used to be a poem but drifted from the scene"). There's also a sexual element of dissolution in the poem losing itself. So you see it's not simply the motion, alone, on its own. It's the motion in relation to the meaning of the words and what the words make the motion mean.

Yohanna: Ok I can rephrase my research as "The semantic of linking motion to words in Digital poetry" The terms "multimedia" and "intermedia" are interesting, in this situation. So, motion = emotion (movement without = movement within) , if poetry is expressing emotion, where s the emotions in th digital poetry

Jim: "Multimedia" puts the emphasis on the multiplicity of media. Kinetic poetry is multimedia in that there is both 'the page' (books, literature) and 'the screen' (cinema). "Intermedia" puts the emphasis on the relations between the media. I have been saying tonight that the emotion is not simply a matter of the motion, of the cinematic, but the relations between the literary dimension (the words, and the meaning of the words) and the cinematic. It is understood "Intermedia" is not simply two unrelated media together. It's two media in deep relation.