Digital Poetry: Innovativity and De-aestheticization

By

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Future poetry is the ultimate challenge of digital literature which represents a search for the identity and originality of poetry in the para-literary age. In spite of the lack of the present poetic productions, poetry moves spontaneously towards digitalizing and absurdity. In no other age in the history of literature did poetry witness this great change as much as it does in ours. Poetry moves indiscriminately towards visuality, fragmentation, and digitalization. This change has led to the appearance of digital poetry as an individual poetic production with specific characteristics and techniques after years of being a mere experimental poetic activity. Nowadays, the printed texts lose their importance and flexibility due to recent technological development through digital media. Hence, the reader needs a new, easy, simple, and flexible form of poetry that fits the massive technological development. However, an important controversial question emerges: can this new digitalized form of poetry keep the genre's aesthetics and creativity? In this regard, the presents study aims at defining and analyzing the main aspects of digital poetry as new genre with specific characteristics.

Recently, new forms of poetry have appeared, depending on interactivity, digital poetry, and 3D poetry. Digital poetry is considered a subclass of both visual poetry and electronic poetry (Funkhouser 10). Digital poetry has appeared with the prominent and crucial use of computer and the World Wide Web. Digital poetry can be available in the

form of CDs and DVDs. Digital poetry appeared as a normal development of visual poetry in the age of modern technology, or what can be named as the para-literary age. Para-literature is an academic term used to refer to controversial works, which can be considered literature or not (Delany 210). Digital poetry publications are available either online or offline (Funkhouser 179). There are many forms of digital poetry such as Hypertext poetry which uses links using hypertext markup. This form is a very visual form as it depends on the reaction between the reader's eyes and the poem (Funkhouser 12). Interactive poetry is another form of digital poetry by which the reader has to contribute to the poem. Interaction allows the reader to participate the poem by choosing certain colors or certain animations.

Following the major steps and features of visual poetry, digital poetry represents an intermediate between poetry and other media (D. Higgins, qtd. in Funkhouser 30). Digital poetry appeared as a result of the computerization of society and as an attempt to engage many visual and audio effects within the poem to create a new way of narration. Moreover, it creates a new type of reading which copes up with modern technology.

Digital poetry, sometimes is considered the most recent form of visual poetry, is sometimes referred to as electronic poetry, 3D poetry, hypertext poetry, kinetic poetry, computer-generated, animation, digital poetry, interactive poetry, code poetry, holographic poetry or animated poetry. According to Leonardo Flores, "digital poetry is a poetic practice made possible by digital media" (155). Digital poetry requires a special ways of reading and writing that can be digitally preceived through the World Wide Web tools, such as emails and social media websites.

Modern technology led to the greatest effect ever which invaded all arenas of human activities. Hence, it is necessary to recognize that technology has always been an important factor in the history of literature. For example, the technology of printing

changed the medium of literature from oral into a written movable system. Here, digital poetry enables the poet to introduce his notes and points of view of his poem to the reader, whereas the reader not only can access the poem and understand it, but also he can control the poem's motions, sounds, and settings.

The relation between digital poetry and visual poetry expanded from simple experiments for imitating calligraphy to an open circle of human activities. The term "pastiche" or Dick Higgins describes as "intermedia" is the major mechamis that enable digital poetry to emerge (Kostelanetz 305). In other words, the mixture between verbal and visual elements in visual and experimental poems has been widening to include other human activities as a substitution for the traditional visual element of painting. These activities include sculpture, textile, videos, and 3D effects. However, this unique and innovative mixture led to the de- aestheticization of digital poetry as it resulted in neglecting the figurative-subtle language of poetry.

As a sub-class of visual poetry, the most common medium of digital poetry is digitalized painting. In this case, the poet attributes his poem with what Charles Bernstein names "illustrations" to his digital device (Personal interview). For a long time, this medium has been changed from unconscious attempts to link poetry with art, to a new individual movement of modern visual poetry. Digital poetry emphasizes the ability of popularizing poetry through mingling it with all forms of human activities, especially plastic art forms. Besides plastic arts, these activities include music, textile, 3D animations, and sculpture, as the following poem clarifies:
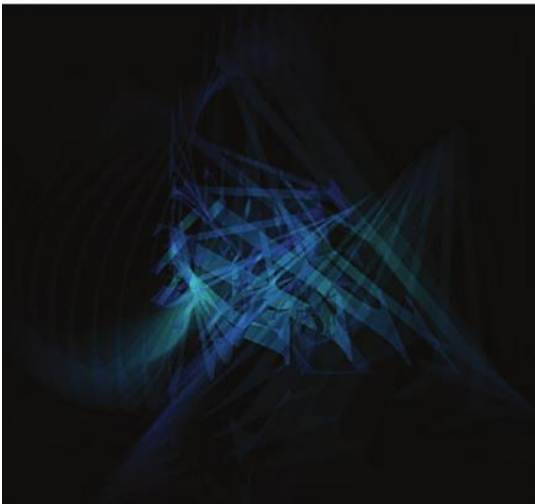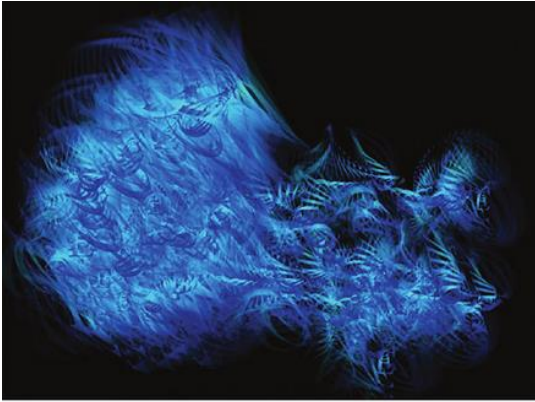
(Jim Andrews, "Nio" Vispo.com)

The poem is designed and written by Jim Andrews, artist-programmer, visual Poet, essayist, and technical writer. As a digital poem, the poem reflects an unfamiliar visual-audio-electronic performance of a work of art. This unfamiliarity may completely destroy the notion of digital poetry, and mutate it into the term "performance poetry" as the poem represents human multi-activities which totally destroy literary traditions.

Recently, Karl Kempton and Jim Andrews have believed in the power of modern technology in shaping the main features of poetry. Thus, based on the main aspects of digital poetry,, Karl Kempton and Jim Andrews use a special computer program to create a digital al poem with a musical effect in order to convey the spiritual meaning of the poem. Mainly, the poem is a concrete-visual poem which represents the features of

Minimalism such as reducing the language and using dots and symbols as visual elements. The poets digitalize the poem by using modern technology to increase the artistic human activities to the poem by adding 3D effects and music:

(Kempton and Andrews, *To Tie a Knot* under the name of "Illuminated manuscripts")

The new poem holds a new title, "Illuminated manuscripts" to reflect a spiritual theme by utilizing an integration of religious Islamic, Jewish, and Christian scripts. Furthermore, it represents a combination of a piece of music and digital effects, besides the verbal element of manuscripts that functions as decoration of illustrations or paintings in religious texts or places of worship.

Thus, as a mirror to society's most recent human activities and philosophies, poetry is rapidly moving towards modern technology which is considered the most recent human concern. Like modern technology, which believes in globalizing art and literature, digital poetry not only breaks all traditions and limitations of the written text, but also it frees itself from the limitations of a certain culture or a certain language. To put the matter another way, digital poetry can be described as electronic, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual international movement, which can merge the textual and visual elements of poetry with technology.

Here, it is necessary to mention that the reason behind digital poetry's ability to consolidate with any newborn human activity is due to its flexibility and formlessness besides the variety of mediums through them digital poetry can be presented. Vilém Flusser, the Czech philosopher and writer clarifies this point mentioning:

Writing down is the expression of a false awareness. . . . From all sides there appear pictures (photographs, movies, television, videos, computer pictures), a universe of technical pictures, which break through the crazy stream of inscription. They are the new kind of pictures. They turn up not out of ancient history, myths, the preconscious, but out of a new way of writing. Not out of legends or inscriptions, but out of prescription, out of "programs." (qtd. in "Dencker par. 15)

Moreover, he asserts that digitizing poetry will likely dominate the poetic arena as a substitution for traditional written papers. Therefore, digitalizing poetry will result in new kinds of literature that will be less aesthetic:

These programmed pictures, therefore, are not more or less a relapse into the inscriptions of illiterates, but, on the contrary, a push forward to the inscriptions of a prescriptive writing. We may expect a new literature: no longer notated, but prescriptive; no longer documents, but programs. . . . Future literature will no longer be spoken language but will note down "ideas." (qtd. in "Dencker par. 16)

Generally speaking, human civilization and culture are mainly based on written expression as the key medium of communication. However, the Canadian philosopher, theorist, and writer, Marshall McLuhan asserts the end of writing and the appearance of new mediums of communication, as he notes: "already our western scale of values, built on the written word, is faltering because of the electronic communications media- telephone, radio, and television" (qtd. in Dencker par. 18).

For example, the following electronic poem elaborates the medium of digital poetry through a zoomed-out view of the "dome" and a few appearances of the "lenses" that made it. It is a digital poem based on the art of architecture that mainly made for reading through modern digital devices. The poem is a memorial of Hagia Sophia, a Byzantine cathedral (Kalinovski, par. 10). In Morrissey's textual cathedral, though, the verbal element does not only convey a certain meaning – they also define space for the reader in order to shape the meaning through a long list of hyperlinks which result in another lens. It is acceptable to say that the use of hyperlinks in this poem is one of the main features that will distinguish digital poetry in the near future.

(Morrissey, "The Last Performance," qtd. in Kalinovski, par. 8)

In this context, it is worthy to mention that digital poetry will contribute the end of books or at least printed books. The expected end of printed books does not necessarily mean the end of literature as a human intellectual activity, but it means the appearance of

new literary genres adopts new mediums of reading and writing such as electronic sets and media as the following poem clarifies:
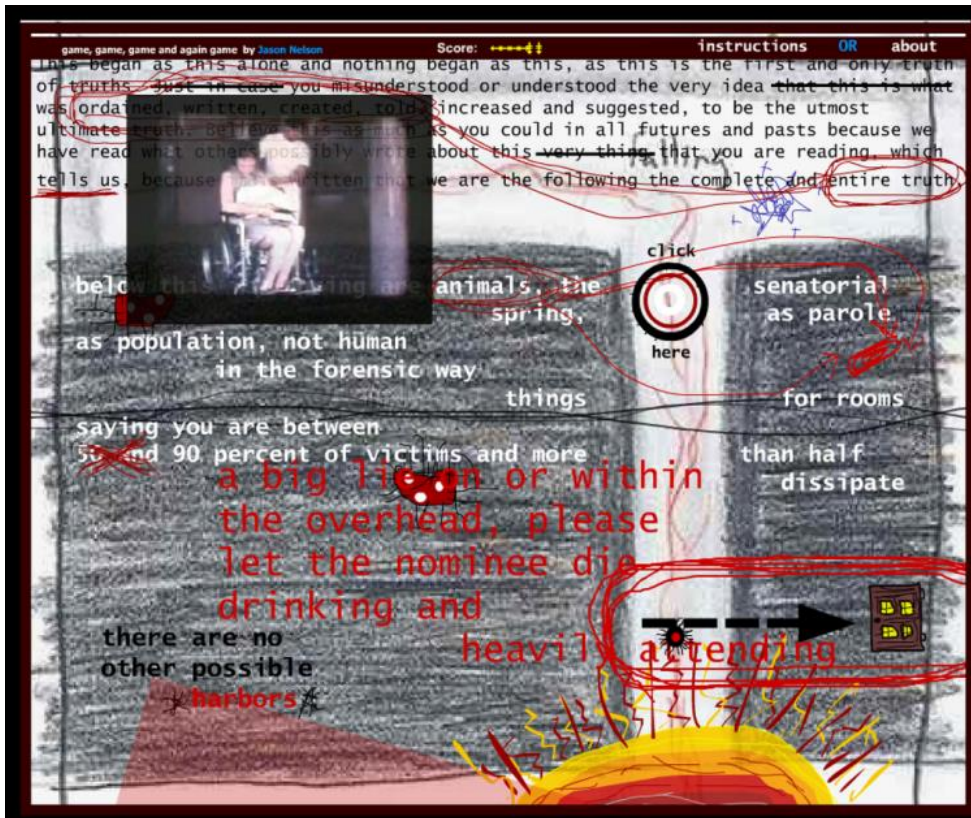
(Nelson, *Game, Game, Game and Again*)

"Game, Game, Game and Again" is a digital poem which represents a new era in literature; it is a simulation for a classic video game. The game or the poem is a mixture between poetry and technoculture in which the reader or the user experiences many levels of writing, drawings and old home movies with a simple but effective reward. The author, Jason Nelson describes the poem mentioning:

> "Game, Game, Game and Again" is a digital poem, retro-game, an anti-design statement and a personal exploration of the artist's changing worldview lens. Much of the western world's cultural surroundings, belief systems, and design-scapes,

create the built illusion of clean lines and definitive choice, cold narrow pathways of five colors, three body sizes and encapsulated philosophy ("Collection" par. 2)

The poem represents digital culture as the main drive of digital poetry. Moreover, its graphics adopt the Tachisme style of painting which is characterized by spontaneous brushwork, drips and blobs of paint straight from the tube, and sometimes scribbling memorial of calligraphy (Marwick37).

The purpose of the poem is to re-introduce the hand-drawn chaos of modern society, man-digital relationship via a retro-game style interface. The poem cannot be accessible through traditional printed paper as the game is only available online. Once the reader or the user presses the button "begin," he deals with the game's main menu. This main menu contains some technological terms such as "system," and "loading," besides the game's instructions which help the user to play. Once the poem (game), begins the user deals with both a game and a poem. The game represents human life through thirteen levels which simulate human life's main concerns, including faith, war, ecology, chaos, capitalism, science and reliance.

In the poetic game, scores are represented by strange symbols which make it nonsense; this asserts the poet's Postmodernist background that life is meaningless. In spite of the outstanding effort which is made in this poem, it has some problems. Firstly, the speed motion of the game reduces the reader's perception of the poem's written details. Secondly, not all readers are skillful gamers to pass all the game levels. Thirdly, like many visual poems, the poem bears a great deal of de-aestheticization which was discussed earlier. Thus, this poem announces a new era of poetry.

In this respect, the new medium of reading and writing poetry will lead to "synthetic" picture and to the end of the figurative language of poetry as the poet or "the performer" of digital poetry has easier and less creative tools to introduce his poetic piece

of art such as illustrations, videos, and 3D animations. This will eventually result in reducing the language which is a previously well-known aspect of Minimalism movement.

To sum up, digital poetry is a new genre that mainly emerged from visual poetry to be represented through electronic devices such as mobile phones, laptops and ipads. Digital poetry represents a combination of visual and verbal elements of poetry emerged with modern technology. Digital poetry adopts new techniques of reading and writing such as 3D effects and hyperlinks. Digital poetry is very close to the postmodernist thematic concerns such as fragmentation, techno culture, and absurdity. One of the clearest aspects of digital poetry is de-aestheticization as the digital poem presents flashy direct ideas rather than aesthetic and figurative meanings. As a final point, the study suggests further studies that discuss and analyze the thematic and technical characteristics of digital poetry.

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