INTERVIEW WITH
Jason Nelson

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by **Jeremy Hight**, online via email correspondence, July 2011

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Re-Drawing Boundaries, Leonardo Electronic Almanac New Media Exhibition
Curator: Jeremy Hight
Senior Curators: Lanfranco Aceti and Christiane Paul

What are you working on right now?

If you took a screen capture of my desktop, you'd be alarmed at the density of folders and files, of new and old projects, small experiments and strange found and created resources. I've always explored/developed numerous projects simultaneously. For example, I am currently building or half-building three, no four, or maybe five new projects. I am near to finishing a news feed visualizer that uses searches RSS feeds for keywords and builds a strange interactive messily drawn city based on the results.

I am lurching towards the start or launch or beginnings of a large scale interlinked dispersed Net-Artwork where each section lives on a different host website. Imagine art as webring as multiple entry points.

I also make a series of atmospheric and abstract cube works. This work is all color and over-blown titles and curious geometries. I might be the only one to love it, but I do so very much. Curious, between the time I wrote this in Feb. and now, the above

critters have been born, along with still more fun-time organisms.

I'm also exploring the wonders of mobile creations, small movable creatures built for those devices in our pockets. It's strange, as an artist, to chance your canvas, to move into another space, to buy new paints and weasels, yes I wrote weasels. And, I am following, as so many are following, the hot-hot trail of all things Canvas and HTML5. I both loathe and love typing about technical tools and code. While no good work, or at least no lasting, really engaging work comes from the domination of technical trickery, as I am more fascinated with content than the latest digiwonders. I am at the "learn new tools" stage of artistic play. Hopefully it will bring glorious new methods of expression and user knock-about, along with the painful pain of changing how and where I work/create.

The trick, it seems, is learning to find the corner, the road's bend where a project moves from experiment to outline and then from development to as finished as needed.

What led you to digital hybrid writing?

This might sound simplistic, but curiosity led me down the DHW path. I find the exploration of space and media, of sounds and texts and images and movement continually offers the brain new projects and stimulus. Our minds are wired to process millions of variables, to combine and separate all manner of inputs and the resulting analysis. And DWH provides a space for a writer/artist to always be curious, to feed the brain with a multitude of sensory pleasures.

More specifically, I accidently stumbled into creating these works. The MFA program I attended actually discouraged my exploration into interactive poetry. So I very much began creating strictly from a "I wonder what this code would do to my text" perspective. And while these early years were an exciting time for creating without context or perspective or knowledge of a larger field, I quickly found it near impossible to return to line by line print.

It forced me to find others to play with, to find or even create venues for my work. And I imagine, because I had no formal training in E-Lit, my work must appeared unique enough for encouragement.

It has been a strange and curious journey to arrive where my fingers meet a processor. I fear not knowing what I was doing when I began creating digital poetry, meant I accidently arrived in a unique landscape, one that others seemingly very much enjoy visiting. I only wish I had the forethought to change my artist/writer name, something more alluring, something with Industry or Punk or oddly spelled country names.

As a "digital poet" "e lit author" "new media artist" etc., do you feel that it may be time to move past all of these strata and sub strata classifications and boundaries in art, writing and expression?

YES. YES of course yes. Humans love to classify and define, to make boxes with labels for the labels they use on boxes. Certainly the title of digital poet is useful for warning announcements in Airports and Discount Technology Stores and it helps many of us coax funds from Institutions. But ultimately, these terms are more an expression of how we create than what results at the processes end. What I mean is maybe I am creating poetically, channeling some digitally born poet through my fingers and eyes and ears and belly. And yet what I create is simply that, what I create.

I send my out into the institutional world as electronic literature or digital poetry because they like to fill in forms and create fancy posters and invites, reporting outcomes to the desk sitters who dole out the cash.

However, I much, much, much prefer the millions who find my odd creations through Cat Breeder Forums or Paranormal Events websites or Grammar school curriculums or WOW communities. They simply and enthusiastically share my creations as art to experience, as interactive playthings to disdain and hate, or discuss and love. This is, I

have always felt, the great promise of anything we call E-lit or Digipo, etc. the notion that we use the contemporary language of interface and image, of sound and movement, of messy and polished, of game and pop and absurdity and the occasional heart achingly poignant.

How do you see yourself working with space form and measure?

Sometimes I cut the plastic into shapes, like ducks and spaceships and bitter fish angry at the pulling and poisonous grip of barbed hooks, placing them in the oven at some hot enough temperature for shrinking or growing polymer depending. Once I've exhausted all the plastic products in my two story house's second floor, used details needlessly and considered how glass might love the chasing heat of convection, I weigh the resulting flatish figurines against their leadership potential. I understand metrics, but think in stones.

The above is not a joke. I honestly see form and measure as poetic translation, as odd stories branching out with asides and tangents. And sometimes or nearly every time, I create works that defy the flatness of screens. I want the user/player/reader to explore within as much as across, inside as much as around, to play the zed against the x, hypnotizing the Y. Indeed it's only been recently that I've mastered enough stolen code to make poetry radiate throughout the wired space. The trick, that I have yet to conquer and whose peaks I will hopefully never truly scale, is understanding how poetic text can follow other poetic texts near infinitely within the space and measure of where we play.

But then maybe I could interpret measure as time and cadence, as beat and temporal distance. And therein lies, for me as digital poet (sans the label), one of many areas I've only occasionally tried to utilize. My works often exist, unchanged or altered little, until some other accesses and opens and moves. But, and I am brainstorming these possibilities as I type, why not create a work that changes with time, a countdown to a new

environment within my interactive creatures. Easy enough to code, but hard to create and even tougher to forgive all those readers who rush away, without experiencing up to minute ten or fifteen, or nine thousand. I did create a video game, a side scrolling shooter, that took over a million minutes to play. This artwork exists, functions, and yet has never been released. It scares me. Time, time lend me a quarter.

Many of your works push the interactive viewer/ reader in ways beyond most works; is this intentional or simply a result where each idea takes you? Your works are seen as challenging but also extremely inventive; how much are you aware of moving beyond the usual tropes, spaces and Easter eggs of interactivity?

Poor DVD format. So much promise so early and so little left so late. Thank you for the kind words. Just know that while I know exactly how and where and for what reasons and effects I create, I am also lying and have no freaking idea what I am doing.

I, and all other artists/writers/makers of the made, are alarmingly and disturbingly lucky to be working with these cumbersome and ever evolving digital tools. There are no concrete rules, no roads made hard enough for trucks or the bullet proof sedans of Brasil. What this affords, the gift this offers, is that nearly every new work stretches innovation, experiments outside whatever previous literary borders arrive. Sadly for theorists and writers about such work, that ever continuing leap, leap means writing about our works is ultra challenging. But I prefer to keep running while my cartilage and various connective tissues allow for plodding locomotion.

It's exciting creating your own language. And yet, If I am the only one who speaks it, is meaning lost? And why do we have this sophomoric and insecure obsession with meaning? That is a question, not a comment. I would make a poor chef or dancer.

How do you see your work progressing in the future or is that hard to say in your process at this point?

Every few months I vow to quit creating. I promise myself to learn astrophysics or become a carpenter or unravel mysteries that no one else wants unraveled. And then some new project or old unfinished project, or more likely a combination of both, spurs me to create a bit more. This has been a constant theme for five years. And I hope it continues for another fifty.

Can I segue briefly? A long time art critic once warned me that the diversity of my work would be my undoing. They suggested the art world wants a consistent style, a signature immediately obvious, for the artist to be the best at making red buildings in the snow. They are easily collectable and writable and mentionable and grantable and commissionable. And much to my continual surprise they are correct. Not correct in that anyone anywhere should ever consider doing such a thing. But instead that the art world runs like that, its legs searching for the same pants for the same track for the same shoes in recycled rain. Take (insert any number of artist's names) for example. *Proof, proof, and distillery*. And luckily and sadly I don't know how to do that, to explore to death what you've already explored.

I need to learn the canvas element, and want to build robots. Oh and a smallish helium blimp with smallish battery fired projectors that will fly through a city projecting textual wonders on whatever surface it lumbers past. I am excited and humbled and entirely scared by new advances in code and technology. I am jealous at others whose technical skills or cash resources allow them to make with the newest of new gadgets and software. Having said that….. good work is always about content, always about expression and desire, about the ability to alter someone's perception however briefly.

What role do you see space having in your work in relation to memory, movement and collapse or architectures of how one moves within interactions and hybrid spaces?
Now that is an interesting idea. Collapse. Hmmmm. Instead of talking about my existing work, let's play

make believe. How about a work that starts off as a line? If we think of a line as the perfect connection between two points, then how could we create an ever dissolving and changing line. Not a line that turns squiggly or messy but a line that holds everything, a line built from ninth floor windows, bread crusts, ice cubes on shoulders during the warmest days of a tropical winter, and as you interact with that clean line, those creatures and ideas, those built and unbuilt gizmos and structures arrive and allude. I use conjunctions far too often.

Or how about a video, a simple five minute video of a bike ride through a suburban street past houses no more than twenty years old. The video could be coded so every shape, every combination of pixels in predefined geometries would be movable, clickable, interact-able. And from those interactions the landscape would change in micro ways, move forward and backward depending on what you mean by those terms. And then I think. Oh wait, that sounds like a "real life" bike ride, if the rider had spray paint, a hammer and arms so long they needed scaffolding.

What did you want to be when you were younger that you see now in some threads in your work?
Geographer. I spent many years, during the twentieth century playing in Geography. This has informed my work above all others and indeed without those years I would not create what I create. I've always been fascinated by small spaces, the spiders capturing bugs on ledges nine stories up or the trashscape of trashbins and their layered archaeologies of discarded choices. Now that is a nice title. Reading the landscape or surroundscape or digitalscape is central to how I create. In many ways I am building maps to impossible countries (that is a cheesy title).

I was also a physicist, at least during High School. I won the Oklahoma state competition in Physics my senior year. I even had a scholarship offer from AT&T but I found it difficult to adhere to specifics and exact answers. I adore deciphering how machines

and phenomenon work within and outside the world's contradictory constraints. I credit this with teaching my brain to think technically and creatively simultaneously. And also blame it for the messy and error-filled, unwieldy and confusing (at times) side of my creatures. Oh and I was also absolutely sure I would lead a cult. This is still a goal.

Who are some of your influences and what effect have their works and/or ideas had on your work and intellectual curiosity?

Late 19th century engineering journals. Artists like Basqiat or early (pre-famous) surrealists. A whole host of Cultural Geographers (including Brett Wallach). Found Art of all styles and possibilities. Crazy yard displayed folk art of the plains and Ozarks. L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E Poetry. Steampunk fiction and gadgetry. Music for Airports.The 286 processor computer I bought after selling a car damaged by car thieves. If I knew who they were I would thank them. Noise. Fear. My grandfather's last word (which was Gizmos).

Is it important to explode forms as much as progress within them? Where can our sense of space, mapping and measure take creative works beyond where we are now?

Tomorrow or the day after you read this, you being whomever you are, I will begin creating locative works. In a way, it will be a work without electricity: odd asides, noises and imagery created for specific places, to tag every galloping thought, to mark an existence at odds and allured by the *around* around us. In NEW media confines this is nothing new. And yet most of the projects I've seen in this realm are either far too practical/useful/commercial or generatively clean and emotionless or "look what we just did" visualizing. I'm interested in mapping what my brain creates against where it creates. I want to hide fragments, make found poetics requiring wandering/wondering. Of course this will require us to travel as many streets and fields and hotel lobbies and lawn bowls courts as is possible with no funding. Does anyone want to fund this opus? And why haven't I created GIS (Geographic Information System) poetry? Damnit. Ok, now there is a curious direction. I'll do that. Just give me some time.
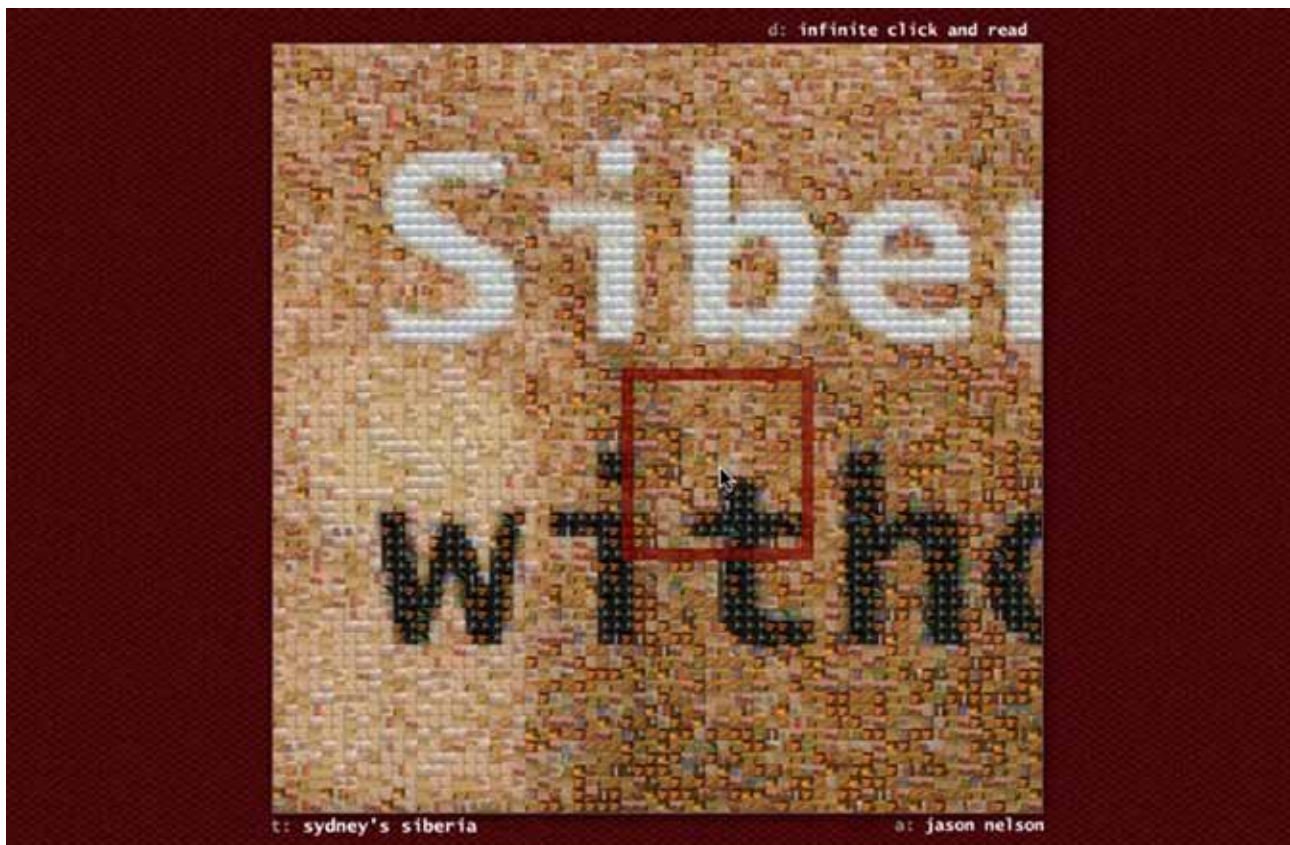
Sydney's Siberia

Sydney's Siberia is an interactive digital poem, infinitely zooming/clicking mosaic comprised of 121 poetic image tiles, that combine and recombine as you click and move and click. The work is thematically attached to Newcastle, Australia, a small city just close enough to Sydney to feel its magnets and filter its unwanted, a city stuck between desire and geography, an old industrial town struggling to find some future beyond coal and steel. Each tile of this addictively clickable digital poem is a small ficto-history or poetic retelling, signs of the difference between what is there and what they hope (or hoped) for it to become. And as each new mosaic is formed, the reader must search for what they haven't seen and find new connections to what continually re-arrives.

http://www.secrettechnology.com/sydney/sibera.html
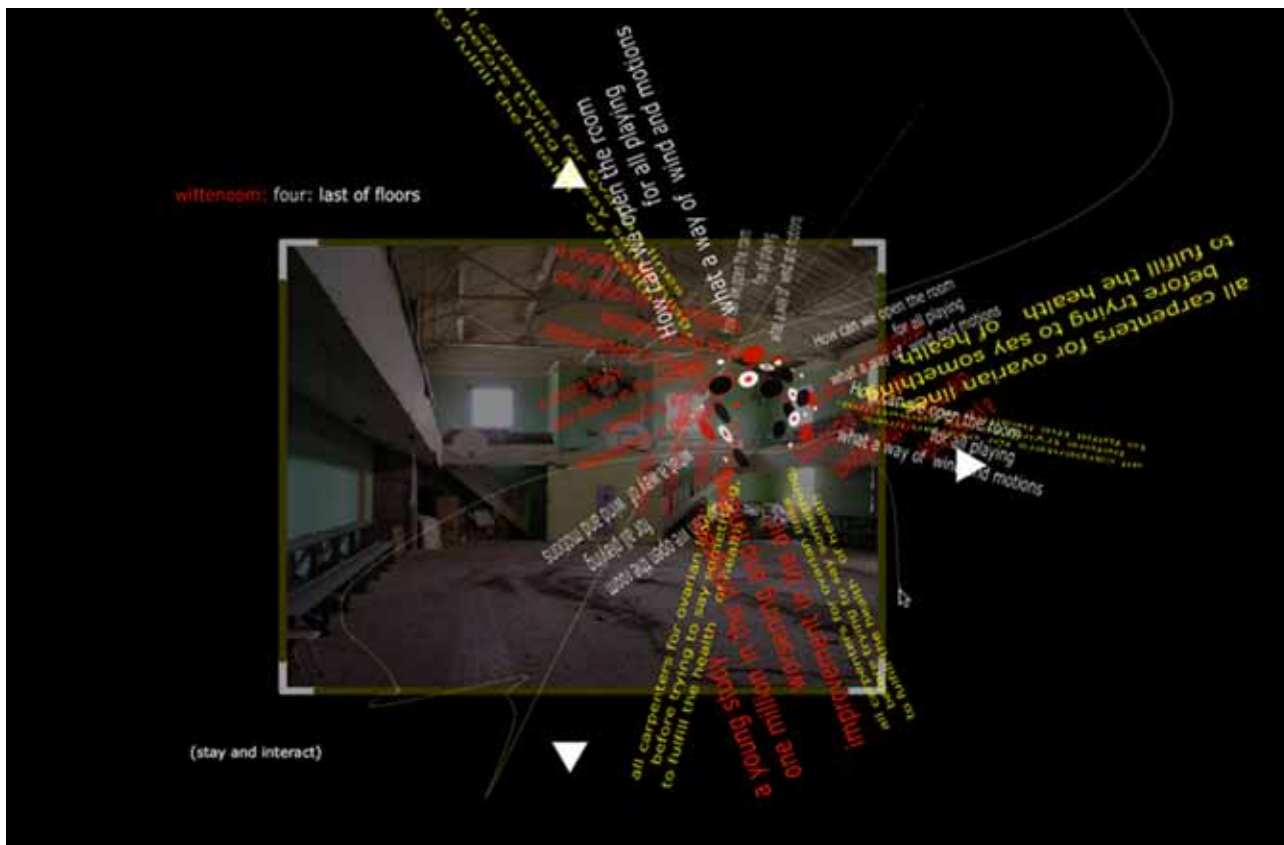
Wittenoom, 2009, Jason Nelson. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist

Wittenoom

In Western Australia the ex mining town of Wittenoom that once was home to thousands is now empty. The town and the surrounding region's air are literally cancerous. After years of prosperous asbestos mining and dozens of hill sized tailings piles open to the area's powerful winds, signs warn anyone entering the region of the tiny lung lesion fibers. Like a much smaller Chernobyl, Wittenoom represents the quick riches and fast ignorance of industry, leaving empty houses and playgrounds intact and unused.
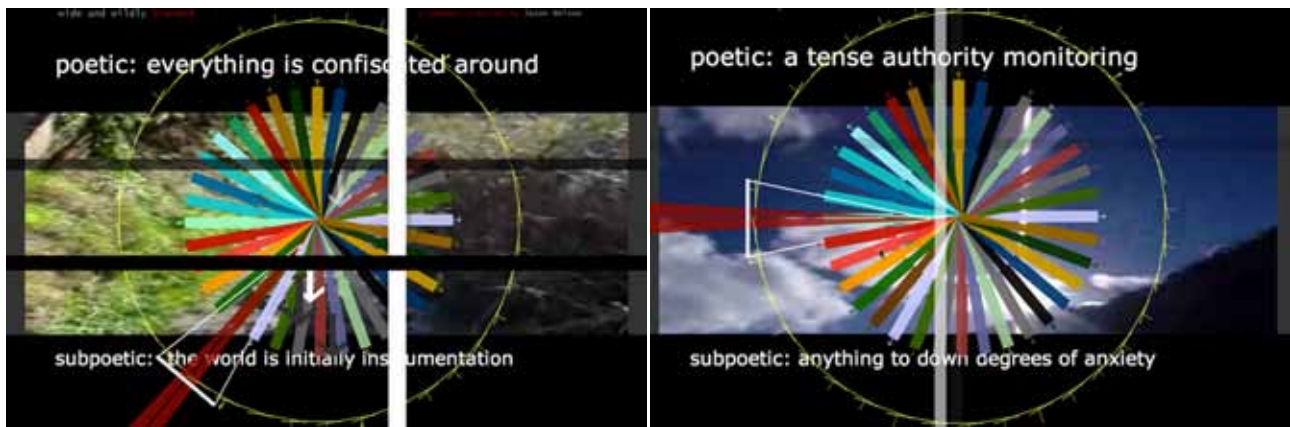
To explore these themes, Wittenoom (my digital poem) uses a variety of interactive depth and spatially dynamic interfaces as homes for recombinatory poetic lines.

Digital poetry should surround the reader, to encompass them in the experience, to entice their hands and eyes to move with the language and explore the interface. Additionally, it's critical for digital writers to see the interface, visuals, sounds, and movements a critical poetic or fictional elements. These multimedia and interface components are not just navigational holiday lights to pretty up the place, they add/change/expand the artwork
http://www.secrettechnology.com/wittenoom/starthere.html

Wittenoom video link:
http://www.youtube.com/user/LEAbroadcast?feature=mhee#p/c/272279007EEFA15E/9/k9ai7mNVkB8

poetic: everything is confiscated around

subpoetic: the world is initially instrumentation

poetic: a tense authority monitoring

subpoetic: anything to down degrees of anxiety

Wide and Wildly Branded, 2009, Jason Nelson. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist

Wide and Wildly Branded

This strange island continent and its ever dry center and clusters of wooded sea tethered cities are compass confused. European colonizers are forever pointed north and west, pining for California culture or European roots, the indigenous population is pulled towards the center, a home where cartographic directions and menus are irrelevant, and an economic engine and future reality that spins hard, thick arrows pointing east. The rest of the world sees this place, this strange residual of British Empire as down, forever down. *Wide and Wildly Branded* uses the compass as an interface, a rounded guide to poetic lines. The top *and* bottom, the north and south textual lines are at odds, contrasts abstract and relationship/directionally confused. The background video was shot while lost, hiking by a creek that turned into two creeks and then four, pathways alike and specific, threatening and alluring enough to entice wandering. Turn and play along a downward compass, the Antarctic.

Within this work, I designed a responsive circular compass which is both fun to play and allows the reader to jump between texts, to read in their own ordering, to non-linearly explore the inherently non-linear nature of poetry. Layering is also of prime importance, as creating a sense of thematic and visual depth embeds the poetry in a larger world, a more complex poetic. There are four layers, a mouse follower of lines and shapes, the video layer, the circular interactive interface and the loaded poetic texts

http://www.secrettechnology.com/ausco/compass3.html

Artist's statement

Shortly before one of my first digital poetry readings at the Univevrsity of Maryland, I was asked to describe how I generated ideas for my digital poems. Initially, I stormed into a discussion about not being satisfied with the limitations of print, and the need to find a format that satiated a curious and scattered mind. And while those points are entirely valid and contribute to my creative process/direction, they didn't really answer the question of where the kernel, the initial spark for each digital poem lives. I stumbled through half-jokes and comments about the food and weather, until someone across from me said they loved my interfaces. At the time I hadn't really, formally, considered the idea of an interface, the notion that digital poems have an engine, an architecture that structurally, thematically, cultural surrounds the poem, holds the poem, shelters and nurtures and indeed conceives (procreation digitally) the poem.

Later after the reading/talk, the topic of "where are my digital poems born" came up again. And with the aid of a few drinks and the pressures of "big crowd talk" past, I raised my voice and commanded (rather dramatically) "look around at the bar". With my half-drunk audience now confused, I continued. "Everything around us has an organization, a geography, a pattern, an interface", I uttered. I pointed out how poems could be formed from the way drinking glasses stack on the bar top, or how the pool tables and their colored and sequential billiard balls are an interactive and generative poem. Soon we began playing games, creating new digital poems from what we saw (and heard) around us at the bar. There were sound poems created from the mixing of conversations and music, game poems from the pinball machine, self-destroying poems from the way alcohol slid us deeper into one-dimensional thought. For that evening at least, the world, like a movie's representation of the idiot savant mathematician, was filled with numbers and equations floating above everything on the screen. And instead of digits, interactive texts were the filter and footnotes to our sensory experiences.

It is overly simplistic to state that my digital poems come entirely from building/discovering interfaces. Any artist's creative practice is a merging/melding mix of fluid events and inspirations. But with all my digital poems there is one commonality, the emphasis on interface. Rarely do I even reuse interfaces, and when I do it is only as one section of a larger work. This continual drive to create new ways to rethink the structure, organization and interactive functionality of my digital poems comes from a variety of internal influences. Most importantly is how these interfaces are not just vessels for content, they are poems in themselves. In the same way digital poetry might be best defined by the experience, rather than a description. Or similar to a digital poet and their works being described by the events and stories surrounding the creation and building process, an interface is the life, the body, and a poetic construction in itself.

Bio

Born from the Oklahoma flatlands of farmers and spring thunderstorms, Jason Nelson somehow stumbled into creating awkward and wondrous digital poems and interactive stories of odd lives, building confounding art games and all manner of curious digital creatures. Currently he professes Net Art and Electronic Literature at Australia's Griffith University in the Gold Coast's contradictory shores. Aside from coaxing his students into breaking, playing and morphing their creativity with all manner of technologies, he exhibits widely in galleries and journals, with work featured around globe at FILE, ACM, LEA, ISEA, ACM, ELO and dozens of other acronyms. There are awards to list, organizational boards he frequents, and numerous other accolades, but in the web based realm where his work resides, Jason is most proud of the millions of visitors his artwork/digital poetry portal http://www. secrettechnology.com attracts each year. ∎