

Davin Heckman

Inside Out of the Box: Default Settings and Electronic Poetics

2010

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17736>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Heckman, Davin: Inside Out of the Box: Default Settings and Electronic Poetics. In: *Dichtung Digital. Journal für Kunst und Kultur digitaler Medien*. Nr. 40, Jg. 12 (2010), Nr. 1, S. 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17736>.

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Share Alike 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

Inside Out of the Box: Default Settings and Electronic Poetics¹

By Davin Heckman

No. 40 – 2010

Abstract

Developing meaningful approaches to criticism appropriate to new modes of cultural production is among the most pressing problems facing the humanities scholars today. This essay discusses digital poetry as a method of revealing defaults in a technical age. It begins with a general definition of the default, followed by a close reading of Jason Nelson's *This Is How You Will Die* (2006) and David Jhave Johnston's *Interstitial* (2006) as works that challenge default settings: practically, by opening up the space for criticism within digital practice, and philosophically, by engaging with questions of mortality. Through these poetic works, I trace a path through larger social and philosophical questions about technology via Heidegger and the contemporary discourses of technoscience and posthumanism. I conclude with a discussion of the "black box" as a metaphor for an unresolved knowledge of the human between the technical and the poetic.

Fault Lines

The first major assignment for my undergraduate course in basic writing usually begins with some fairly simple technical instructions that, inevitably, are ignored: "All papers must be double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font." A week later, the arguments I receive are presented in 1.15 spaced, 11-point Calibri, with an extra bit of space between paragraphs. This occasionally initiates a conversation:

"Why didn't you follow my instructions?" I ask.

"I was using a school computer," someone replies.

"You don't know how to change the font?"

"Well, I know how to change that, but I don't know about the other stuff. These are the school's computers, they should be right."

And so we play a little tug-of-war, where I try to get my students to confess to their laziness and they try to convince me that it was simply too difficult to change these “crazy computers”. The culmination of this game is a walkthrough, where I show them how to change the settings. In the end, however, we are all right. We are all talking about default settings, which, are, by definition “without fault.” I am agitating for an older regime of defaults, the formatting conventions which enable me to quickly estimate word-count. They, in turn, are arguing for a default setting which says, in effect, that the machine is “right.” Yet, as a technically preoccupied English professor, I feel like they ought to learn not only how to write a paper, but how to present it. Not because I want them to get jobs writing memos, but because I feel morally obligated to give them a sense of how to tinker with the machines they will be living with for the rest of their lives. On one level, I am forcing my students to rearrange their habituated lack of concern (a default) to accept my standards of formatting (another default) and change the presets on Microsoft Office Word 2007 (another default).

My preoccupation with defaults comes from three places. In the first case, I have been reading Bernard Stiegler’s *Technics and Time, Volume I*, which introduces the notions that humans live in “default” of their origin:

Only the animal is present at the origin of humanity. There is no difference between man (in his essence) and animal, no essential difference between man and animal, unless it be an inactual possibility. When there is a difference, man is no longer, and this is his denaturalization, that is, the naturalization of the animal. Man is his disappearance in the denaturalization of his essence. Appearing, he disappears: his essence defaults [*son essence se fait défaut*]. By accident. During the conquest of mobility. Man is this accident of automobility caused by a default of essence [*une panne d’essence*, a “lack of fuel,” and “empty tank”]. (121, bracketed editorial comments in original).

In the above passage, Stiegler situates his discussion of “man” in contrast to Rousseau’s romantic discussion of the “natural man.” Stiegler sketches out the notion that the condition of humanity is tied to a default from this originary essence, that who we are is tied to our very technicality, that memory as we know it is tied to language, to recording, such that our present being, as creatures with a past and future, are inseparable from our prosthetics.

Rather than fall in over my head and get myself mired in the complexities of Stiegler’s argument, I would simply like to point out that Stiegler’s notion of being in default is central to the sort of quibbles described at the opening of this essay. In relation to technology, default usually refers to factory presets which enable us to utilize technology “out of the box” (which itself is an ironic phrase, because the usage of the term in the realm of consumer electronics contrasts sharply with its close cousin in production, “outside of the box.” One means using something

without obtrusive thought and the other refers to thoughts that are creative to the point of obtrusiveness.)

The second source of preoccupation with “defaults” arises from contemporary social and economic realities tied to the “sub-prime mortgage crisis.” By 2009, the rate of loans in default or foreclosure had reached a historic high of 13.2% in the United States with the expectation that they would peak in 2010 (Brush). This default is to be out of compliance, illegally so (ie. to be in default of a mortgage is to have violated the terms of the contract). Hence, default carries with it both a sense of presumed functionality and lack of functionality. To fold this second understanding of default back into Stiegler, being human is to be “lacking an essence” because it is always supplemented, meaning that the human is essentially without essence. It unifies both notions of the default in a manner that is productive for this discussion.

The third nudge in my thinking of defaults came in an email exchange with Stephanie Strickland over the *Electronic Literature Directory*, a database resource for readers and writers of born-digital literature. In reviewing an early draft of the interface, Strickland suggested that we pay some attention to the assumptions embedded into the template. Terms like “comments” and “bookshelf,” which were default settings in the draft template, might present problems for how we think about the directory itself. On the one hand, terms that have achieved familiarity through their use in blogs and social networking sites might direct people towards habituated use and consideration, limiting the potential of the directory. On the other hand, obscure terms intended to circumvent these problems could estrange readers from full participation by introducing needless complexity in the interface. Thus defaults are not merely a function of passivity, they can also work as a form of critical engagement with language.

In a certain sense, defaults allow us to function, we live by them. But I think it is highly telling that a poet would provide the conscience for what might otherwise operate under the cover of dry practicality. As a product of contemporary approaches to the humanities, I am steeped in poststructuralist philosophy and cultural studies approaches. I have grown comfortable in the indeterminacy of meaning, in the idea that critical evaluations are products of power. And while I do think that it is absolutely critical that criticism itself be opened up to criticism so that received values are not presumed to be “true,” I also see that supposedly non-philosophical, a-critical approaches to behavior tend to flourish in this environment.

Finding Fault

In studying electronic literature, I have come to discover that this is one of the key roles that artists can serve in a technologically centered society. The practice of poets, in particular, seems inclined towards pulling apart the defaults of the means of poetic production. Rather than pull back from questions of technology, creators of electronic literature seem intent on working with the literary beyond traditional print forms and genres. In other words, literary writers working in digital form, in working against the current of established and respectable print forms, already engage in a measure of experimentation by working at the margins. The best works tend to go beyond the mere desire to present work in a new format, and bring the poetic impulse to bear upon the very system of representation within which they are situated. In new media, this means that questions of time, space, networks, images, sound, code, platform, interface, etc. are considered within the author's semiotic toolkit. To create literary work with the extended vocabulary implicitly requires attentiveness to the norms of representation and the fault lines within this system. Though this is true of literature and its historic relationship to form, narrative, language, representation, and the "traditional" aspects of writing, this tendency is easily obscured under the weight of critical consensus.² Electronic literature, then, seems especially suited to performing such work against the backdrop of media change and the emergence of networked culture. This is not to say that these works must critique digital culture at the level of content (though many do), rather it is to say that they question the very defaults of systems of expression. In this place, poets also develop bundles of significance, generate connotations, cultivate forms, and create microcosms of experience. A successful work often constructs as much as it deconstructs.

Literary critics, on the other hand, like to create defaults by deploying vocabulary terms, providing "readings," and referencing other critics as a shorthand for interpreting works. In themselves, such shorthand gestures are very useful in understanding forms by making complex things understandable. But interpretations often place crude demands on delicate things. By taking the baggage of linguistic and literary history and playing within those structures to break them apart and make them mean surprising things, poets enter into this history to change the way we think about words, and in so doing, change the words themselves. In my limited, but always instructive, correspondence with great poets, I am always humbled. I approach with my notions as a scholar of what literature is and ought to be, and very quickly I find these assumptions challenged. Together, the literary loop of the creative writer and the engaged reader becomes a rigorous crucible in which the default settings of culture can be actively contemplated.

This is why electronic literature is so important. So much of literary studies has turned away from the literary, seeking to map traces of the cultural assumptions

embedded in movies, tv shows, and texts of all sorts. When we do talk about literature, we find ourselves treating it with the same hard hands that we handle everything else, and forget that perhaps our poets are our partners, if not our best teachers. Sure, literature is loaded with default settings (forms, genres, clichés, tropes, words, media, etc.), but it is literary precisely where it transcends these assumptions to tweak the defaults themselves, urging us to resist them, and to think with them about something other than what we had before. Thus, electronic literature, with its almost feral tendency towards experimentation and the fierce challenge it poses for readers and critics, is well-suited to carry forward the historical project of the tradition. Where the cult of the default determinism is entrenched, where even our critics tend to be in the habit of chasing the tail technological progress, we find writers using machines to bend utility towards the aesthetic. The best poets bend readers into default against the “Terms of Service” agreements that we are always required to check, rarely read, but nevertheless held to as we spend more and more of our lives enmeshed in digital networks.

Electronic poetry is not the only place where defaults are being challenged (these defaults can be challenged anywhere that points of friction between established trajectories are faced by human concerns). Nor do all things that call themselves electronic poetry actually challenge defaults. But electronic poetry is potentially powerful because of internal irony; the contemplative circuit implied by the acts of poetic conceptualization, writing, interpretation, and reconceptualization all present sites where the efficiencies of the “electronic” can be paused, examined, hacked, and redeployed, with a measure of conscious expression, with traces of consciousness.

The Poetics of the Default

To begin with an example of the poetic tinkering with defaults, I point to the body of work with which I am most familiar: the field of electronic literature. Specifically, I will be discussing the question of defaults, death, and the poetic in works by Jason Nelson, David Jhave Johnston, and Raymond Queneau (as a proto-digital poet). All three works present challenges to the scripted linearity of print, while directing our attention to life’s one prescription: death.

Just as all poets work explore and struggle against basic structures of language, starting with the basic (the phonemic, the lexical, the syntactic) and move upwards (the metric, the formal, the generic), so Nelson begins with familiar frames of reference (vernacular language, popular formats, and folksy themes). Like his predecessors who typically have worked in forms ranging from the overt structure of the sonnet to the subtle vernacular structures of free verse, Nelson works from

the microscopic level with words, codes, phrases, and Flash (.fla) files and up to familiar forms like games, graphs, menus, etc. Specifically, in the case of Nelson's work, there is a clearly demonstrated tendency to build pieces upon open source platforms, to copy bits of code, and to absorb the sounds, words, and images of the worldwide web. To a certain degree, these parallels don't map exactly onto the formal alphabetic qualities of the print poem nor do they function strictly semiotically as texts, rather, their similarities are only relative to their position within this schema. There is no clear analog for the position of a line of action script or an entire file and such coding in print poetry, except in the grammar of procedure (The poet receives structure in the form of Flash authoring software, action script and open-source Flash files and manipulates that structure for poetic ends).



Fig. 1. Nelson, Jason. *This is How You Will Die*. (2006)

In the case of the poetry-game *This is How You Will Die*, Nelson has taken a slot machine interface and reconfigured it as a fortune-telling device that creates poetic accounts of the user's demise, as paced out against the loss and gain of "death credits." As the reels spin and verses are randomly locked into place, a foreboding narrative emerges, punctuated with occasional clips that combine brief texts with video, adding to the overall feeling that the work is a chaotic assemblage. One does not need to see the Flash files that Nelson has adapted towards his macabre purpose (or is it the player's purpose?) to see that it functions as a slot machine. The action of the piece, the awarding of credits, and language about "winning" and

death as a “gamble,” clearly suture the reception of this piece to the experience of the slot machine.

When seen from a view of electronic literature that begins with hypertext, *This Is How You Will Die*, plays a couple familiar games with the reader. The succession of brief, terminal fictions generated as the reels spin and the phrases are locked into space has quite a bit in common with the poetic shuffles of OULIPO progenitors like Raymond Queneau’s “100,000,000,000,000 Poems” (1961). On the other hand, it shares some of the fatal character of Jon Ingold’s *All Roads* (2001), a work of interactive fiction which leads to a single conclusion. Like *All Roads*, Nelson’s piece begins with a feeling of indeterminacy which progresses towards the one definitive reading: the player’s death. In fact, N. Katherine Hayles’s explanation of *All Roads* could easily be applied to Nelson’s work: “the meta-textual object of assassination is the illusion that hypertext is synonymous with democracy and user empowerment” (“Electronic Literature”). Yet both Queneau’s and Ingold’s works seem to run past each other in this work, making *This Is How You Will Die* into a poem that manages to be something of both but neither at the same time. Queneau’s random project is finite, but its ultimate realization, the theoretical apprehension of all possible sonnets exists beyond the scale of the human reader. Thus, there is an end to the reading process, but that end remains highly hypothetical, preempted by the practical end of the reader, through actual personal death if not through simple fatigue.³ Ingold’s work does more than gesture towards the finite, it begins formally with the suggestion of possibility (as an interactive fiction) but even at the beginning, the writer suggests that *All Roads* lead to where the piece takes us: a singular conclusion. One work points to the finitude that exists at the far reaches of comprehension and the other reaches to the finitude that exists at the heart of the fiction. *This Is How You Will Die*, contains the scale of random recombinations, yet does not define the limit by the number of different combinations possible given the set of variables. Similarly, Nelson “writes” an ending into the piece, a quite precise one: your death. Instead, the piece concludes as the player wins and loses credits and arrives at zero. The only narratives that resist their definitive readings are those in which “credits” are won, in which play is extended. The final draft of the text occurs when you lose, when your credits reach zero, and of all the possible absurd scenarios, one is conclusively determined as the prediction of your demise.

DRINKING WHAT ONCE STOOD & DRUNK



Fig. 2. Johnston, David Jhave. *Interstitial*. (2006).

As a poetic corollary to Nelson's work, David Jhave Johnston's video-based *Interstitial* (2006) also directs the reader's attention towards a meditation on terminal anxiety, but does so with a decidedly different feel than Nelson's work. The title of the piece, which refers generally to that which occupies an "empty interval," takes on new connotation when one considers its popular use in web development contexts for the commercial "pre-loaders" that hawk their wares while one waits for the site to open. The video, which is minimally edited, features three views arranged in triptych form: a cat decomposing in a river, tidal pools, and a bug undergoing metamorphosis. These events, as witnessed by Johnston, are unaltered and unmodified, simply captured where they occurred using handheld equipment. The web presentation of the files was formatted through the process of naming the discrete video, audio, and poetic text files and allowing software to assemble these pieces into an endless loop (Johnston, "Interstitial"). Johnston's piece presents life and death with a frankness that resembles Nelson's own declaration at the beginning of *This Is How You Will Die*. However, the absurdity with which Nelson presents his meditation is rendered more starkly in Johnston's work. Where Nelson offers a dead-end interactivity, Johnston forgoes such interactivity. Variations in the piece are a product of technical differentials—processing speed, bandwidth, and computer to computer interaction—rather than human interaction. However, the parallels here are clear: both direct the reader's attention to the question of death against the backdrop of technical determinism as a matter of fact that manages to exceed the technically determined efforts to render it.

Without digging into the specific death scenarios one might experience (a highly amusing endeavor, by the way), the core of Nelson's piece seems to be embodied in the poetics of the interface itself. The movement from the potential to the particular tied to prophetic fantasies of readerly demise is set in parallel to gambling

and poetry. A reader might be tempted to ask what all three things have in common, but don't have to look far for Nelson's cheeky, but insightful answer that he states plainly up front: "your death is a gamble,/ your life, random assemblages of stories,/ your end vaguely framed by specifics." Without delving into the vast field of thanatology and the anxiety it represents, Nelson's piece points to a grand poetic preoccupation, the certainty of bodily death, and the vast range of human efforts to ignore, postpone, rationalize, or otherwise control this certainty. Psychoanalysts have suggested that games of chance and prophecy are one way to subdue this anxiety. Philosophers have also suggested that poetry and theology might offer similar assurances. But, here, Nelson seems to be suggesting that the only certainty that arrives is in the singular moment when one's credits reach zero, when the wheels stop spinning, and when the poetry stops moving. The particulars of the player's death melts into the vague, modular details, and the only conclusion that really means anything is the one that we all share: 0.

But there are deeper questions to consider about Nelson's piece, especially as we look beyond its content and towards its existence as a digital work. The process of repurposing files created by other developers, the Flash files, which is so clearly evident in Nelson's larger body of work, should raise deeper ontological questions that resonate with the piece's more overt aspects.⁴ In working with intricately fabricated objects like a Flash-powered slot machine interface, the poet chooses to work with a discrete object that contains within it multiple layers and modes of signification (code, form, content). Unlike the relatively tidier signifier, the word, the slot machine is and isn't a discrete object. From a critical perspective, we can draw two analogies. In one sense, the poet who works with the Flash files might be considered like a sculptor releasing a form from a block of stone, thus working from a discrete object. In another sense, the poet is working with something that has already been extensively carved, a functioning system, not only of meaning, but of process, as well. In a sense, this is what all writers do: to place demands on dynamic systems like human language. However, human language does not have the added burden of an underlying logical code. It is only as logical as its users need or want it to be; with a computer, code errors can render a piece unplayable. Programming language errors are not always explicitly apparent (by default, a buggy piece, in being unreadable, cannot be read on its face), thus such pieces work against an often unseen undercurrent, which is the logical requirement of the code. Or, if they happen to remain readable, the code errors might easily be interpreted as intentional. In the most interesting cases, code errors can show up on one platform, yet be invisible on another⁵.

Technology as Default

To assess the relevance of the works described above, specifically as interventions in a larger technocultural discourse, we must move beyond close reading and the interpretation of tensions and consistencies within and between works. We must look at the larger question of technology and its relation to being.

Technology is potentially problematic at two levels. The first problematic aspect is that technology fundamentally alters the parameters of being. The paradigm shifts that accompany technical revolutions restructure the relationship between subjects and their objects. As Heidegger writes in "The Question Concerning Technology," "[Techne] reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us, whatever can look and turn out now one way and now another" (319). Heidegger employs the term *techne* to describe both techniques and technologies, and for contemporary readers, this is often most obviously understood through the lens of modernity. However, the Greek origins from which Heidegger draws the term is tied also to our conception of less pre-modern techniques and technologies, those things that are often considered "crafts." As discussed in the passage above, Heidegger seems to be using the term in a manner consistent with modern sensibility to describe the way in which *techne* functions as a system to instrumentalize that which was previously "natural." To clarify, an innovation, say, in the field of biofuels can alter our perception of algae, converting a product of the natural world into a desirable source of energy. Garbage dumps, sewage, animal waste can also be recontextualized as technology advances, turning the foul smell of decay into the sweet prospect of marketable energy. This is the power of extended reach.

The second problematic aspect resides in *techne*'s very utility. At its most potent, it extends our power so effectively and so seamlessly that it can be forgotten. It can be ubiquitous to the point of being taken for granted. As Heidegger notes in *Being and Time*, "What is peculiar to what is initially at hand is that it withdraws, so to speak, in its character of handiness in order to be really handy" (69). Thus, when we gain conscious awareness of technology, it serves to remind us of that which we don't necessarily like to believe. We imagine ourselves to be capable, yet when our supplement breaks, fails, or otherwise confounds us, we are reminded of our lack of control over reality. To return to Stiegler, it reminds us of our essential inessentiality (our being in default of our origin).

It is this second problematic aspect that I'd like to focus on most closely, though surely the first aspect is fatally linked to the second. In Heidegger, tools as prosthetic devices at once create the illusion of completeness in their capacity to enable us to do things. However, when we reflect upon them, they remind us that we are not, in fact, completely capable. Hence, our prosthetics are easily fetishized, in the way that powerless people (the child, the disenfranchised, the insecure male) revere "the

gun.” The computer in its aura and its flexibility is ever so much more than a mere tool. It is designed, in a sense, to be the tool to end all tools, distilling the essence of technocratic anxiety by virtue of its utter plasticity. If one buys into the marketing hype often associated with the high tech, computers can do anything, someday. In this sense, they are the perfection of the golem, the homunculus, the automaton, the robot, agency instrumentalized. Yet, as uncanny mirrors, they appear different from what we know ourselves to be. These simulated persons seek to recreate the human in a formal way, an individual, localized duplicate as understood in anthropomorphic completeness. The computer’s anthropomorphism mirrors the person from the inside out, the human as a mode of perception, as a subject, as a tool user. The interesting difference is that the android “looks” like a person in that it appears human to other people. A computer *looks* like a human, in that it has perception, it frames perspective, it uses tools, it runs on memory, etc. It is, as Hayles has noted in *How We Became Posthuman*, a compelling model of cognition.

But, just as the science fiction robot has crises that shatter its illusions and bring it to life, so, too, does the computer. The robot only ever approaches full humanity, perhaps at the final threshold of being, the awareness of its own inadequacy, its own lack of being. So it goes with the computer. It is a tool that approaches the complete externalization of human agency, and our worst fear, perhaps, is that it might forget it is an externalization of our agency. In forgetting that it is a tool, in becoming intelligent, in the leap from tool to tool maker, it completes its mirror image of human consciousness. In other words, when the computer forgets the essence and purpose which we have imposed upon it, it effectively escapes our grasp. But, what, ultimately might such a move say about us? What if the anxiety over its forgetting is also the anxiety of our own re-membling and an end of our fantasy of freedom.



Fig. 3. Smith, Tony. *Die*, (1962/1968). Steel, 72 x 72 x 72.
Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.

To bring us back to the discussion of the poetic, I shift attention to a less digital mode of representation, which traffics, essentially, in the same underlying anxieties about life in default: Tony Smith's *Die* (1962/1968). Smith's obtrusive, minimalist, black, steel cube stands 6 feet by 6 feet by 6 feet. Austere in its presentation, but impossible to miss, the commanding work has stunning resonance with Nelson's morbid slot machine. The word play in the title, the shift from its command form ("Die!"), to the industrial process of uniformity (die-casting), to its invocation of a game of chance in which all rolls come up black (as in a roll the dice) steer towards Nelson's central conclusion: Death. Smith himself mentioned that the dimensions of the piece were anthropomorphic in that they were inspired by the phrase "Six foot box. Six foot under." *This Is How You Will Die*, on the other hand, moves from Smith's industrial preoccupation and poses the question more squarely within the contemporary era. Instead of asking life's big questions within the austere confines of the high art universe, Nelson's piece is internet-based, refashioned from the vast wasteland of pop-effluvia and pointless stimulation (what do you win playing a slot machine that doesn't cost or pay out any coins), and disarmingly positioned in the land of fun. It might not be Nelson's most original piece, but it intervenes in a long-running debate on mortality, and does so with a great deal of skill and ingenuity.

As Nelson's work struggles against the default forms of instrumental language, popular culture, technoutopianism, and even the running dialogue of literature itself, he manages to tie the struggles of the contemporary subject to what is arguably life's biggest question, or rather, default: Death. This question, though perennial, is brought into new relief as technology and science have altered our perception of the human, carrying with this altered perception, a reconceptualization of mortality.

Mea Culpa, Or, Through My Own Fault

Ironically, to end this essay, we must return to its origin. I apologize for leading readers along a circular path, but this is the process of criticism: The object is visible. We investigate it. We see it in a new light. Throughout, I have presented a discussion of defaults through close readings of works which respond to and intervene in those defaults. And so, we return to the question of the human, having passed through the irreconcilable tension between techniques and technologies for increasing agency and the inevitability of its loss. This paradox of human existence, in its universal and irreducible character, can only be confronted from a position beyond its initial realization. It is, what an engineer might call, a "black box."

The term black box is used to describe any machine whose contents are unknown to the observer. While much has been made of the "posthuman" as a positive term, as some "-ism" through which we can approach an ideal. I offer the dividing line

between human and posthuman as the actual site of critical relevance. But I would like to offer a counterintuitive twist to the normal conception of this duality, and posit that the problem of existence might be understood through the metaphor of the black box. While it might seem difficult to acquire knowledge about an object whose contents are hidden, engineers have dealt with this problem in a rather obvious way: Study what goes into the machine, and then study what comes out of the machine. Without knowing what its guts actually look like, an engineer can still figure out a great deal about how the machine works, and might even be able to speculate about what particular mechanisms and processes are going on inside of the box. Using the metaphor of the black box to understand being might seem somewhat risky or limited, until one realizes that the entire history of science is basically a series of black box problems, where scientists observe processes using various techniques and technologies, but ultimately never arriving at a complete knowledge of matter and energy. At the very point of friction between science and technology, science ends up being theoretical. When applied practically, science becomes “the plan” for delivering a desired material outcome (the difference between *techne* and *episteme*). In other words, science, when it ceases to be disinterested knowledge and becomes the prescription for directed action (linked to some measure of profitability, gain, or external good), it migrates from a description of being and is directed towards a becoming. The contemporary notion of technology presumes that scientific knowledge is (or should be) adequately predictive such that it can be harnessed and channeled into the economy.

Applied science is therefore itself enmeshed in default thinking, insofar as it is employed for systematic innovation. To say that science when used towards transformative ends vis-à-vis the creation of technology is a “default,” may, at first blush, seem paradoxical. This might seem especially the case, going back to the connotation of *techne* as “art” or “craft.” However, technology under current popular understanding is typically distant from this more rustic connotation when we consider the “design” aspect of technology and the integration of applied science to social form. This socially couched notion of design refers both to the design of the particular object (as a toaster might have a “sleek” design) and to the general formation of social consciousness to accommodate the technical orientation (in terms of acclimating subjects to the culture of wide-spread, real time beta-testing, pay-per-use models of access, the upgrade, and planned obsolescence). The contemporary design aesthetic of technology does achieve this understanding.

Where digital poetry contributes to this general discussion is in the competing definition of art it reveals in relation to *techne*. The interventions of electronic literature must be understood alongside the “other” word for art: *poetics*. In Heidegger’s discussion, both *techne* and *poetics* are considered “arts” of revealing. In “The Question Concerning Technology,” he explains, “There was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called *techne*. The poiesis of the fine

arts was also called *techne*." (339). However, he also notes that the development of modern, automated, systemic technical development reveals a distinction between the two modes of bringing-forth which are not necessarily linked to each other. Heidegger, referring back to Plato, describes the specific type of revealing that is poetics: "The poetical thoroughly pervades every art, every revealing of essential unfolding into the beautiful" (340). In other words, *techne* describes the instrumental process of bringing forth, while the poetic is preoccupied with a particular orientation to bringing forth. Therefore, digital poetics offers an antidote to a purely instrumental approach to human life.

To approach the question of human consciousness from a black box perspective, we can say that we know we have biological existence, we know we have bodies and brains that do things when input is provided, and deliver output in response. We also know that human behavior is difficult to predict in singular instances, but that it also follows certain probable trajectories when generalized through a larger sample or guided by a set of cultural expectations. (The fact that you are reading this means that we have some measure of consistency between us). But the fact that we don't really know exactly how it all works means that our minds are something of a black box. And, I would argue, to be human means, to a degree, that we are locked out of our own black boxes. We might discern patterns to how we behave, to what sets us off, to what we tend to understand, to what we enjoy, etc. We might even understand, vaguely, that certain regions of the brain trigger the release of certain chemicals in response to certain kinds of stimulation and so on, but we don't really know precisely *how* these functions are interconnected.

The great temptation, I suppose, is to assert, correctly, that the human and its mysterious existence is the default setting of a particular philosophical worldview. It is an *aporia*, beyond which we cannot go, and thus offers us no certainty, no truth from whence we can proceed. In "What Is Metaphysics?" Heidegger describes the very character of this impasse. He describes the *unheimlich* in the following passage:

In anxiety, we say, "one feels ill at ease [*es ist einem unheimlich*]." What is "it" that makes "one" feel ill at ease? We cannot say what it is before which one feels ill at ease. As a whole it is so for one. All things and we ourselves sink into indifference. This, however, not in the sense of mere disappearance. Rather, in this very receding things turn toward us. The receding of beings as a whole that closes in on us in anxiety oppresses us. We can get no hold on things. In the slipping away of beings only this "no hold on things" comes over us and remains.

Anxiety reveals the nothing. (101)

But the opened black box, the human deconstructed, the instrumental person, is also a default setting from the perspective of neoliberalism. It is a shadow of the

person as seen from a different plateau, in which people are real in the way that market fluctuations are real, as epiphenomena of more significant processes. In the face of this uncertainty, the poetic approach to the black box of consciousness offers a distinct difference to the purely technical approach. Under the poetic license, consciousness itself becomes a thing of beauty and wonder, something to appreciate rather than a problem to be solved.

As Smith, Johnston, and Nelson suggest through wildly different poetic forms, the black box, the imposing black box that we cannot ignore but only ever dance around, that we struggle to defer, is really the question of being and non-being as brought into relief by death. Opening the black box and seeing how it works does not hold the answer to the question of being. But, as the artists individually indicate, ignoring it will not answer this question, either. Rather, we must acknowledge the curious nature of existence, which manages to be both determined and unknowable, and understand being as framed by paradox, framed by life and death. To return to the engineer in the metaphor, we have to decide which approach asks the question we want answered. Do we seek to understand the mechanism by which the processes are reached? Or do we seek to understand what it is we are reaching for? The literary tendency, as sketched out in this article, suggests that there is something to be gained in the struggle against defaults, although the rewards may not be tangible.

Thus we are back at the beginning, quibbling once again over defaults. All that criticism can do here, all that it should do, is reflect upon the defaults deliberately, and knowing that the black box is in front of us, imitate the poets and hack our way towards answers that we can live with.

Works Cited

Brush, Silla. (20 August 2009) "Foreclosures Expected to Peak at End of 2010." *The Hill*. <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/55687-foreclosures-expected-to-peak-at-end-of-2010>

Douglass, Jeremy. (24 February 2006) "Cent milles milliards de poems." *WRT: Writer Response Theory*. <http://writerresponsetheory.org/wordpress/2006/02/24/cent-milles-milliards-de-poemes/>

Eagleton, Terry. (1983) *Literary Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hayles, N. Katherine. (2 January 2007) "Electronic Literature: What is it?" Electronic Literature Organization. <http://www.eliterature.org/pad/elp.html>

—. (1999) *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Heidegger, Martin. (1996) *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press.

---. (1993) "What Is Metaphysics?" Trans. David Farrell Krell. *Basic Writings*. Editor David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993. 93-110.

---. (1993) "The Question Concerning Technology." Trans. William Lovitt. *Basic Writings*. Editor David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993. 311-41.

Howe, Daniel C., and Bebe Molina. (Spring 2008) *Roulette. New River*. http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/howe_roulette.html

Ingold, Jon (2001). *All Roads. Electronic Literature Collection*. Vol. 1. http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/ingold_all_roads.html

Johnston, David Jhave. (2006) *Interstitial*. http://glia.ca/interstitial_2010/

---. (22 February 2008) "Interstitial." *Tributaries and Text-fed Streams*. <http://tributaries.thecaplanoreview.ca/2008/02/22/interstitial/>

Leishman, Donna. (August 2007) "Leishman on Two of Nelson's Works" *Iowa Review Web* 9.1: http://research-intermedia.art.uiowa.edu/tirw/vol9n1/artists_each_others_work.php

Nelson, Jason. (2006) *This Is How You Will Die*. <http://www.secrettechnology.com/death/deathspin.htm>

Smith, Tony. (1962/1968) *Die. Steel, 72 x 72 x 72*. <http://www.nga.gov/press/2003/releases/summer/smith.shtm>

Stiegler, Bernard. (1998) *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Vincler, John. (20 March 2010) "100,000,000,000,000 Poems." *Electronic Literature Directory*. <http://directory.eliterature.org/node/374><http://directory.eliterature.org/node/374>

Notes

1. This essay has began with a rather vague idea and has reached its current form largely due to the efforts of Patricia Tomaszek, who responded to every draft I submitted with clear and carefully considered criticism.

2. Perhaps this is evidence of the very difficult nature of the slippery nature of the “literary.” If the literary is “organized violence” committed against “ordinary language,” as Roman Jakobson asserted (qtd. in Eagleton, 1983: 2), then the literary is always against that which is epistemologically settled. From a philosophical perspective, to define a historical tendency as consistently subversive to what is comfortably “known” is a daunting proposition. How much easier it is for institutions committed to the production of meaning and the conservation of culture to dodge the “negative dialectics” at play in literature and skip directly to the cultural production that profound works tend to leave in their wake.
3. Interestingly enough, the dimensions of Queneau’s work are explored in a number of digital revisions, which reveal important aspects of the digital. As Jeremy Douglass notes, Florian Cramer’s tedious use of drop down menus most closely replicates the work of flipping through the print version. The Jacob Smullyan edition “contains” all the sonnets and they can be called up by number. While the Magnus Bodun edition simply presents readers with a randomly assembled sonnet. In each case, the point of the piece is questioned against the various levels of efficiency with which one reads. A computer could read the whole poem pretty darned fast, but as John Vincler adds, paraphrasing Queneau, “if one [human] read at the rate of one sonnet per minute for eight hours a day, two hundred days per year,” it would take “a million centuries to finish the work.” For a similar literary experience, see also Howe and Molina’s *Roulette* (2008).
4. In an essay in on Nelson’s work (including *This Is How You Will Die*) published in the *Iowa Review Web*, Donna Leishman notes:

To a practitioner who uses Flash, it’s clear to see that Nelson re-uses popular open-source Flash codes (think Yugop, Praystation). I wonder does remodeling these codes inspire the ideas? Or does the idea come first and code is located and reused to suit? Either way an interesting part of the digital creative process.

Such speculation points to the literary potential contained within the act of re-configuring the bundled code of the interface as a discrete semiotic object in order to create a new interface.

5. Imagine, for instance, the difficulty of performing Burroughs’ “cut up” technique on computer code and trying to make the remarkable sense that Burroughs is able to make with his disruptive process.