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Comment on Florian Cramer's "Digital Code and Literary Text"

By Anja Rau

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If computers can be built from broomsticks and if any digital data, including executable algorithms, can be printed in books, there is no reason why computer network poetry couldn't or shouldn't be printed as well in books.

In his paper presented at poesis symposium in Erfurt this year (and published in Dichtung Digital), Florian Cramer falls into the same trap he warns the reader about a few paragraphs earlier: he confuses the text with the storage- or carrier-medium.

When I read a printed book, I don't care how the ink was mixed and the type was set. I do not set out to decode the patterns made by the inky atoms on the page (might be fun, though ...). When I read a digital text, I don't care to look at the code (might be fun though ...). And when I write for print publication, I don't really care about the printing process either, my publishers takes care of this. Basically, I should be able to put together a storyboard for a cool piece of digital literature and hand it over to my publishers who'd then take care it gets coded and put on a suitable carrier. (Currently, this is all about money. Publishers don't do that, and artists don't do that because programmers are expensive. So writers in the digital medium usually have to write their own code, as well.) (The market for CD-ROMs is just not big enough - which fact I'd put down the the exorbitant prices of CD-ROM. I pay 20 DEM for a paper-back - and about 100 DEM for a CD-ROM. They say CD-ROM often costs as much as a movie to produce. Give me a CD for the price of a movie, or, as I can keep the CD, for the price of a paper-back, and I'd buy a lot more CDs than I currently do. I also might be willing to pay the price of a hardcover for an special edition box every now and again ... As far as I see right now, this is the only way the CD-ROM market could take hold and more artists could dare produce digital texts.)

Still, I wouldn't agree that the above "fact" makes for the codedness of a text to be its formative property. Cramer tries to prove his claim by

proving that there is no digital text, just digital information and that the computer privileges the alphanumeric over the pictoreal because the translation into code is loss free from alphanumerical text and lossy from image and sound: "We may automatically search a collection of text files for all occurrences of the word "bird",

but doing the same with birds in a collection of image files or bird songs in a collection of audio files is incomparably tricky, nasty and error-prone ..." This is apples and pears again The computer can recognize patterns in any sort of information but meaning in none. "bird" is a pattern, but "a bird" is a concept. I cannot throw my computer 150 photos and tell it to find one where Peter has his cute smile. I can only tell it to look for oval shapes in a specific pinkish tint. Similarly, I can tell my computer to generate a text file from the (scanned) image of a printed text, but I cannot tell it to abstract and translate my thesis so I can send it to a publisher in the States.

Digital text has properties that only digital text has and that printed text hasn't. Conceptually, alphanumerical digital text should have more in common with pictoreal digital text than with alphanumerical printed text. Codedness is one of these properties, but not the only one and, I'd say, not its most characteristic one, either.

Approaching digital text in terms of code may indeed be an interesting journey. imho Cramer is right to suggest that "computers and digital poetry might teach us to pay more attention to codes and control structures coded into language in general". What I don't like is the exclusiveness of his approach: the (digital) text is the code and the code is the (digital) text. All other concepts of digital text are gratuitous. ,,,

Look for the unified world formula that comes free with every seventh copy of this paper ...

When Cramer claims that there is no digital text or digital medium even, only analog output generated from code and that the preferable kind of digital writing is "codework" in ASCII or Peal or ... that's an aesthetic postulate - but also a political one. Cramer cites hacker-ethics. But in one half-paragraph he also allows a glimpse at his agenda:

"Much digital art and literature became testbed applications for new commercial browser features and multimedia plugins like QuickTime, Shock-Wave and Flash, but by this locked itself into industry-controlled closed code formats, thereby assuming an uncritical, after all affirmative role in the proprietary reformatting of the Internet."

It's true and it's sad that much well-programmed entertainment on the web is just that: entertainment. Or advertainment, created with the sole purpose of penetrating a company's message or to establish a certain technology as a standard. But this general condemnation of all that is not text-only, made by and for the pale and lonely graduate-student-of-literature-with-programming-skills that I have seen so often in the German scene is so limiting and counterproductive.