Maguire, Michael J. "My cODEwORk ARTicle." *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, & Practices*. By James O'Sullivan. New York,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 289–295. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501363474.ch-025>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 08:35 UTC.

Copyright © Volume Editor's Part of the Work © Dene Grigar and James O'Sullivan and Each chapter © of Contributors 2021. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

My cODEwORk ARTicle

Michael J. Maguire

My cODEwORk ARTicle asks what does the term codework mean to me, to someone who has tried to understand and engage with (& in) it? Is it poetry or art, does it really matter to me as a digital artist what label is assigned to my practice. In this confined flat space it could prove problematic to strive to reach any definitive answer concerning praxes. Thus, I tried to pick up the concept of codework and shake it a little to see if anything useful, illuminating, informative, or even entertaining drops out as a result. Do we consider it poetry, categorize it as textual art? Let me shake (down) codework in four connected directions, and see if I can find (in) out anything from academic use or even entertainment value for the answer.

a mODE of cODEwork (mis)understood as Art
 Codework ART (mis)understood as Study.
 a mODE of cODEwork (mis)understood as Comedy
 Codework ART (mis)understood as Technological Writing

First, any writing about codework will always offer the opportunity to eulogize the work and works of Mez, (Netwurker/ Mary Anne Breeze), John Caley, Rita Raley, Alan Sondheim,¹ and several significant others. The practice, knowledge, and persistence of an activity called codework, its very existence, is owed to the insight and artistry of those four individuals. Dig into discussions from early exchanges on list-servs and later open deliberations on EBR.² Ted Warnell, Carl Banks, Florian Cramer, and Talan

¹http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/sondheim__internet_text.html.

²<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/tags/codework>.

Memmott are also among many others who have engaged with what might obtusely be argued to be an activity partly responsible for the gestation of specific types of intellectual framing of many contemporary born-digital creative practices and artifacts. Codework has certainly been influential in terms of born-digital poetry, promoting a programmatic paradigm, which has undoubtedly inspired at some level artists and poets who make modern digital poetry. Anyone who has fixed bugs in commercial codebases for a living might, however, rebut such arty neuro-flatulence by declaring that all code involves work, that's what its primary *function* is, what goes in must come out, it works, that code in a computer code context is ultimately karmic ... radiohead karmic ... he talks in maths, like a detuned radio ... electric, microelectronic, motherboards, always about numbers, the scientific, the logical appeals ... deductive, reductive, take the pencil, don't develop a million dollar pen, anecdotal, experiential, this thing won't do what you're telling it to do, write it, run it, compile it, break it, fix it, fix it better, better again don't break it, all your codebases are belong to us, it may well just be a cultural information thing à la Floridi's fourth revolution.³ Nick Montfort⁴ makes a strong case for programming as much as a social activity, engaged in by enthusiasts, as controlled computation culturally constituted solely by professional labor. Code and codemonkeys conceived as geek central is just that; a conception. Often behind conceptions lie assumptions and more often initial ignorance. The joy of learning, the joy of code that works, the joy of code work balanced only by the bliss of ignorance the enthusiasm before it ... breaks ... like a wave ... Breaks ... to wait for input ... breaks ... for respite ... breaks ... hearts ... breaks ... patience ... breaks ... and breaks again.

The interrogation of one's own art practice, the requirement for some fathomable progressive consideration of the motivation for first order technological creativity, understood perhaps as drive, as urge for new ways, new elements, nutrients that feed into a desire for computer-mediated experimental expressiveness, and which are therefore surely and admittedly sadly possessed of some narcissistic import. (un)Even technological refraction of a once clear-minded artistic intent to examine the freedoms promised by digital utopianism become blurred as code and language combine within and below surfaces and internal illocutionary assumptions. A history of codework can be drawn, as venom from a wound, by extracting meaning out of the collection of curated articles in the ELMCIP Knowledge Base⁵

³Luciano Floridi (2014), *The 4th Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴Nick Montfort (2015), *Remediating the Social University of Edinburgh ELMCIP*, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.

⁵<https://elmcip.net/>.

and elsewhere, it can be electronically or mechanically drawn like lazy lace curtains across the open windows of the creative mind by viewing, using, and exploring works by the aforementioned acknowledged, if not renowned, practitioners. It can be drawn, carthorse like, across the open landscape of our consciousness, drawn slowly, yet with a kind of flamboyant artistic absorption, between obscure rotating points within some Ciceronian hermeneutic circle. By buying into such acts of deliberate and controlled artistic literary endeavor, by ing convention, not adhering to a series of even our own expectations, nor casting ourselves against performative impulses to play with both sides of the rules of code, the affordances of language, and some ludological strain of combinational creative artistry. Is it a modern magic which you or I again, descending, might then simply call codework for the want of a more complex term. Acts of the apostrophes weighed and weighted on a byte-based biblical digital scale, a dimensionally strange combinational creative `<iframe>` that consciously sequestered away the child nodes in the night. If there's a fire in our head, we head out, we write, express, connect with something *natural*, we create, today our natural world resides, resituated within a networked, interactive narrative home. Our digitally ubiquitous environment means that out right is tethered to a line break, a closing tag rejected yet included, some syntactical abyss that stares right back until you fix that flaw. Literacy, whether visual, cultural, like numeracy, is eventually acquired, sweltering, drown, in such degrees of digital literacy, behaviors not bounded by Asimov, but unbounded by the laws of Moore,⁶ Metcalfe,⁷ and Parkinson.⁸ These three sides to the story of codework suggest a surface story that embraces personal, technological, and the aforementioned creative expression. Obviously, any such suggestions become themselves limited in their depth of understanding, the definite and definitive articles have their place, but only alongside or nested within. But The code is not The code when it sits on surfaces and lends itself to easy reach and shorter grasp, this digital dance of codework demands more complex steps and that the dancer submerges herself in deeper connotation and wilder submission.

Q: wot do u get if u stitch 2gether standardized literary conventions [think: the monumental output of bill Shakespeare = the staccato pulsings of emily dickinson] with coded poetics steeped in digitally-drenched communication?

A: mezangelle.

(<http://bit.ly/rfFpDH>)

⁶<http://www.moorelaw.org/>.

⁷<https://www.cs.umd.edu/~golbeck/downloads/Web20-SW-JWS-webVersion.pdf>.

⁸<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/parkinsons-law>.

Looking at the landscape of text, inscription above, from the back of Mez's print book⁹ I see that the above, the surface and the interior, the interior meaning, the suggestion, those potential combinations that originally begat recipes for creative computer based celebration and speculation. Calling it a creole is a myopic injustice, rather it is a linguist mountain, range of possibility within what Anne Balsamo has called the "technological imagination,"¹⁰ an opportunity to ascend and do some *dreaming within the machine*, en route, that adventure embarked upon becomes conducive in terms of the opportunities that chance itself affords, the very nature of random combinational creativity, the so very wrong of occasionally getting it so very very right, and now getting it beyond previous rights. The concept of poetics as coded becomes more than attractive as it gets less self-referential and mustering an academic will to studiously surrender to the ambiguity of others that reveals, is again its own contradiction evidencing itself. A computer-based counterpoint itself guilty of expression, judging any anchored point where, ambiguity and obscurity touches such *Lexia to Perplexia*¹¹ itself, the plastic (green)screen of technological phenomena beyond superficial comprehension, such *great work* wot makes us think, becoming a greater work that makes you think and feel, striving to find the greatest, offering thinking, feeling, a sense of wonder, purpose, relevance, connection, code.

When first publically presenting my then work in progress, "cAMEltext. Net" alongside Steve Gibson's "*Grand theft Bicycle*"¹² and Christine Wilks' "Underbelly"¹³ at the first transliteracy conference in the UK in 2008/9, I presented, discussed, and contextualized my making of the work by introducing my own nascent concept of: "Dreaming within the machine" as some speculative approach or *modus operandi*, some method of creating works of digital literature, which focused on the imaginative creative flow and an almost autonomic relationship with the enabling technological tools. Cameltext began as an artistic intention to engage with the inherently ecstatic Persian poetry of Rumi while attempting to carry multiple meanings close to the surface of dearly departed derivative drafts of work. By surface I refer to that easily interpretable layer of meaning which operates round and about deliberate acts of interpretation, reflection, analysis, etc. Not sign and signified more point, and pointed, point and pointy, in the same vein

⁹Mez Breeze, *HUMAN READABLE MESSAGES [MEZANGELLE 2003–2001]* (Traumen. at, 2011).

¹⁰Anne Marie Balsamo (2011), *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work*, Durham NC: Duke University Press.

¹¹http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/memmott_lexia_to_perplexia.html.

¹²<http://grandtheftbicycle.com/>.

¹³<http://crisscross.net/elit/underbelly.html>.

as John Lilis “anoint anointy.”¹⁴ My goal was to carry two meanings on the surface of the text, as with the descriptive term cAMEltext.Net which itself carries both the terms cameltext.net¹⁵ and AMEN on its surface, the second by deliberate use of dispersed capital letters. Camelcase consists of a mixed case writing system beloved of programmers, where normal capitalization conventions are not respected and the camelcase is used to highlight keywords. My draft work drew to itself three bounding parameters, camelcase, and the case of the camel as “a horse designed by committee,” a colloquial commentary upon collective or collaborative practices having the potential to be overtly flawed by virtue of their inclusivity and necessity for placation as cooperation. Finally, the quote from the Koran that one must: *Trust in God but tie up your camel.*

Again, as a faithful contradiction or an exemplary paradox of faith, in this instance some maybe creative god will protect you if you have a practical awareness of your own ineptitude. Then the ludological nature of my own work, representing the traversal of the poem as a game, with macro and micro goals which need to be achieved rather than merely read, strived to instantiate that framing triumvirate. Whether it was achieved in: “I AM the song THAT heard itSELF sing” is a matter more for other critics than for its maker.

Codework understood simply as some study of intellectual, cultural, born-digital, writing experiment can wrongly suggest a central critical path can become a simple vector of (in)accessibility to any later corporeal mentioned joy of codework, as a field of overcast endeavor, complete with hovering intellectual electronic kerstal above it, acts of deliberate interpretation and codification versus acts of spontaneous or instantaneous judgment, carefully carved in code, running revelations as a celebration of the prior foundational binaries that gave rise to preceding forms of inscription, whether blood on velum, grooves in stone, ink on paper, or green text on black screens, Codework seen as JavaScripted Jazz, a cultural artistic phenomena very much of our present.

They were the best of lines and the worst of lines, like exhausting long form literature, goatboy like, lazed lines, an infinitesimal infinity inversion on those stones, in those stones, found in that field, meaning something, if only she could read or speak Ogham, might it light a lantern upon Cuirithir and Liadain ? Instead it was the 28K light of ten men made mutant in Williams defender.¹⁶

¹⁴Carl Reiner, Steve Martin, and George Gipe, *The Man With Two Brains*, dir. Carl Reiner, perf. Steve Martin, Kathleen Turner, and David Warner.

¹⁵<http://digitalvitalism.com/RW05.html>.

¹⁶Digital Dickens. Unpublished email correspondence.

The moist sweaty pulsating joy of codework, jocular jouissance, playing with syntax, fumbling around in and out, out and in with language, tickling those traditional, normal, or accepted processes involved in writing and generating poetic expression, such salubrious creative acts may well mirror two fundamental approaches to writing comedy: begin with serious intention and enlist standard conventions, only post draft does the comedy writer look for the angle that helps to tilt his prose, dialog, or content towards that comic 15 degrees which yields the laughs, susceptible sometimes to unacceptable somnolence waiting for the serendipitous intervention of an aristophanetic comedy goddess, (in)complete with tyche somewhere in her name. The alternative is sitting down and approaching a codework project with that 15-degree comedic tilt already in place in the first instance. Combining code and an almost standard writing syntax, delivers an idiomatic, even alphanumeric palette of expression from which the maker of codework can chose, does she attempt to adopt a codeworker (netwurker) mindset and allow a freeflow of mixed (informed and practiced) expression from within that idiomatic mode, or draft, design, and refine, in the manner of the second comedy approach, post-structural outline, employ some wordplay fundamentals and perhaps magically morph the not so initially coded work into a kind of codework mode. Again, like the existence of God it may be very much a matter of personal veracity. Think different ... think syntactically ... think hexadecimally ... think underneath the box, and feel the difference at a deeper sense of completion should you be blessed enough to reach that point.

Shaking Codework as "technological writing, suggests in turn a from of digital writing, computer based or (re)mediated writing, locating it somewhere on a screen or in a space within creative writing practice." A start to sounding out, the resonance of the concept of autopoiesis coming to loudly dominate western workshop conventions, the idea of an individual voice seems to have propelled much of that pedagogical instruction and the field in general. Talent and craft and their role if any, in specific questions about codework-like creations, obviously arise from my own previously stated position as a writer who subscribes to the age-old concepts of vitalism, that while there is focus on dissecting the surface of craft, creating stages, both waypoints and prosceniums, and I welcome any renewed attention to the role of the subconscious and indeed the separate and certainly diverse idea of consciousness itself. The possibility of a superconscious influence on the entire writing process, the creative impulses and energies beyond the surface layers surely find their natural bedfellow adjacent and elbowing next to the concept of codework. While poets work a poem, and perhaps all writing is rewriting, there is always active the unconscious processes that make significant, yet mostly unacknowledged, contribution to the entire model of creative writing. Code, computer code, impels its author to acknowledge not only meaning and connotation but also function and

interpretation at a surface level, your voice is again karmic like code itself. But all of these explorations and speculations, while experience based, are open to individual understanding, epistemological framing, intellectual alignment, and obviously misunderstanding, by author, reader, maker, critic or passer by.

But misunderstanding is key here, whether it is the *Massage in brothal by the police* or the *Exe.termination* itself offered by the previously alluded to *Lexia to Perplexia*, it still offers a nonthreatening context for engagement, codework in some way highlights that potential, as a piece of information that subverts the standard expectation of the reader viewer and perhaps asks more difficult questions than a complex temporal forking path. Instead, a chasm of complex multiplicity sits like a loose thread waiting to be pulled, exponential potential lures through simple-seeming superficial signs. Come play this way, engage and immerse. I am as ever optimistic that Codework and its digital literature siblings will eventually find a home within the Irish Creative Writing firmament. Up until now it has been conspicuous by its absence in Ireland's creative writing literature, simply put; the field in Ireland has to date been oblivious of its existence and thus leaves an actual vacuum in relation to its study and growth. It is a fact that life tends towards complexity, organisms evolve, computers and our networked culture afford huge creative potential. The opportunity afforded by engagement and even misunderstanding of codework grows daily, and will eventually, in my humble view, come to find its place in the pantheon of creative cultural practices in Ireland and elsewhere.