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A Way Is Open: Allusion, Authoring System, Identity, and Audience in Early Text-Based Electronic Literature

Judy Malloy

In tenth-century Northern France, Archdeacon Wibold created *Ludus Regularis*, an algorithm-authored game of dice in which clergy gambled for virtues (Pulskamp and Otero 2014). Centuries later, Wibold's dice-won virtues (chastity, mercy, obedience, fear, foresight, discretion, and piety, etc.) are parroted in the words that poet Emmett Williams selects for his algorithmically authored *IBM* (virgins, yes, easy, fear, death, naked, etc.). Subsequently, in the 1970s at MIT, where Wibold's *Ludus Regularis* was probably known to mathematicians and students of chance (Kendall 1956: 2), the virtues of *Ludus Regularis* were replaced by treasures, as the authors of *Zork*, led players through the perilous Great Underground Empire in a quest to acquire nineteen treasures (Anderson et al. 1977–9). Beginning with Wibold's *Ludus Regularis*, this artist's chapter explores early text-based electronic literature and its precursors through the lens of textual, intertextual, and algorithmic allusions—whether intentional or zeitgeist inspired.

Part 1

Ludis Regularis

Hunted by bow and arrow-armed demons, crowds of people climbed the Ladder of Virtues in medieval icons and manuscripts (*Ladder*), acquiring virtues as they proceeded upwards towards heaven. The concept of the Ladder of Virtues was popularized by Saint John Climacus, but it was a tenth-century archdeacon, who, when canon law forbade clerics vice-ridden gambling, created *Ludus Regularis*, a game in which clergy could gamble for virtues.

To devise an authoring system for *Ludus Regularis*, Wibold, Archdeacon of Noyon, utilized throws of four dice. Three were cubes imprinted with groups of vowels on each of the six sides; the fourth, a tetrahedron, was imprinted with consonants on each side. Functioning to a certain extent as variables, virtues—each obtained by a combination of vowels and consonants—were grouped by ones (charity to wisdom); twos (remorse to reverence); threes (piety to exomologesis); and so forth. Once a cleric had won a virtue, it was no longer available. The cleric with the most virtues was the winner (Pulskamp and Otero 2014).

But all throws of the dice did not result in obtaining virtues. Indeed, in a recent session using John Ensley's emulator, which Richard Pulskamp and Daniel Otero provide in their comprehensive paper on *Ludus Regularis*, the first two plays resulted in no virtues, but on the third, "perseverance" was acquired.

Gentleness, liberality, wisdom, remorse, joy. The effectiveness of generative literature depends not only on how an authoring system will produce the chosen words, phrases, or lexias; but also, on the chosen words themselves.

Part 2

... what the poem amounts to, if carried out too far, is an eternal project, and, for most of us, eternity is more time than we have at our disposal for perfecting works of art ...

—EMMETT WILLIAMS

In the twentieth century, the lists of words that Fluxus poet Emmett Williams chose for *IBM*—first created without a computer in 1956, computerized ten years later, when he was asked (probably by composer James Tenney) to create a computer poem—reflect a different era, although one not necessarily without theological echoes: money, up, idiots, sex, like, quivering, evil, old, red, zulus, ticklish, kool, going, black, jesu, hotdogs, coming, perilous, action, virgins, yes, easy, fear, death, naked (Williams).

Williams' authoring system was not based on random algorithms (except possibly for "1. Choose 26 words by chance operations – or however you please") but rather was based on imposed constraints. Each letter of the alphabet was assigned a word: A = money, B = up. To begin the process, a word was chosen, "IBM," in this case. The correspondingly lettered word was then substituted, resulting in a phrase: "Red Up Going," which appears as a title. The process was then repeated as the poem expanded: "Perilous like sex, Yes Hotdogs ..." (Williams).

Part 3

The canary chirps, slightly off-key, an aria from a forgotten opera.—Anderson et al. (1977–9). Like the altered translations that occurred in 1985 when Norman White's *hearsay* was passed (on I. P. Sharp's' ARTEX network) from Toronto to Des Moines to Sydney to Tokyo to Vienna and onwards until it returned to Toronto (White 2001), allusion is a fragile concept for working artists. A work is seen ten or twenty years ago and vaguely remembered. The work of John Cage lying in the background of mid- and late-twentieth experimental composition, not always acknowledged but often there (Kostelanetz 1988: 199). The work of Sonya Rapoport in the San Francisco Bay Area, instilling the idea of computer-mediated installation in the collective mind (Couey and Malloy 2012: 37–50). Fluxus tradition expanded and alluded to in the immense number of boxes as containers for words that comprise Jean Brown's archives (Getty). Icon-laden stamp art from Ed Higgins, echoed in the interface for my *A Party at Silver Beach* (Malloy 2003); the way video artist Joan Jonas integrated myth and life—her video *I Want to Live in the Country (And Other Romances)*—alluded to in the concluding "Song" of my *its name was Penelope*—although if I hadn't told you this, you would never know.

At MIT in 1977, whether or not with knowledge of Wibold's game, the virtues of *Ludus Regularis* were replaced by treasures, as the authors of *Zork* led players through the perilous Great Underground Empire in a quest to acquire nineteen treasures: the jewel-encrusted egg, the clockwork canary, the crystal trident of Poseidon, to name just a few.

If—despite limits on what you can carry and hostile encounters with the thief, a troll with an ax, the Cyclops, and other obstacles—all nineteen treasures are acquired, and they are all placed in a trophy case, you don't precisely get to heaven. What you get is a map that leads to *Zork II*.

Building on Gregory Yob's *Hunt the Wumpus*, Will Crowther's *Adventure*, and *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Zork* was created for the PDP-10 by Tim Anderson, Marc Blank, Bruce Daniels, and Dave Lebling. It used a sophisticated parser; incorporated MIT Culture (Montfort 2005: 95–117);

incorporated random elements; created a sprawling world model, the Great Underground Empire; and spawned the historic interactive fiction publisher, Infocom. The authoring software was Zork Interactive Language (ZIL), written with MDL.

Zork begins in an open field, west of a white house. The door to the house is boarded. Useful commands are: open, read, drop, N S E or W, climb, go down, enter, take, get, eat, move, turn on, diagnose, Odysseus (used against the Cyclops), give, say hello to, listen to, damage, echo, light, launch, attack, kill, wait, walk around, yell, smell, count, what is, wind up, pray, repent.

Along the way, readers are asked to consider issues of computer-mediated literature:

The [windup] canary chirps, slightly off-key, an aria from a forgotten opera. From out of the greenery flies a lovely songbird. It perches on a limb just over your head and opens its beak to sing. As it does so a beautiful brass bauble drops from its mouth, bounces off the top of your head, and lands glimmering in the grass. As the canary winds down, the songbird flies away.

(Anderson et al. 1977–9)

Part 4

Chaunce of the Dyse

Over the centuries, sometimes purposefully, sometimes with serendipity, in electronic literature and its precursors, narrative devices emerge, submerge, and emerge again, from a tenth-century bishop's dice-driven gambling for virtues; to allusions to the worldly Chaucerian narratives of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury in the dice-driven *Chaunce of the Dyse* (Hammond 1925; Mitchell 2009; Sergi 2011); to echoes of *Chaunce of the Dyse* in the computer-mediated output of an electronic literature-influential triangle of two men and a computer—as Lytton Strachey's nephew, Bloomsbury-bred computer scientist Christopher Strachey, and Manchester University's historic mainframe computer, aka the Manchester University Computer (MUC) (probably the Ferranti Mark 1, which was prototyped by the Manchester Mark I), and Alan Turing, the man who designed a hardwired, noise-based random number generator for the MUC—collaborate in a series of groundbreaking computer-generated love letters created with Strachey's software and Turing's hardware (Strachey 1954: 25–31).

There are fifty-six predominantly Chaucerian-allusive narratives of love, infidelity, virtue, and vice in the circa fifteenth-century manuscripts for *Chaunce of the Dyse*.

Sometimes attributed to John Lydgate, *Chaunce of the Dyse* consists of three introductory stanzas, followed by the lexias, each pictorially keyed by combinations of the throw of dice. Like *Ludus Regularis*, *Chaunce of the Dyse* is not based on the sum of the throws but rather on the fifty-six sets of combinations that throwing three six-sided dice produce.

When *Chaunce of the Dyse* was played/performed, a master of ceremonies (concealing his or her complicity with country bumpkin words—"First myn vnkunynge and my rudenesse") read the opening ballad. Each player rolled the dice in turn and keyed the results to the corresponding text. In the process, the character of each verse was projected onto the recipient, who read the words aloud—whether to honor, merriment, or innuendo.

... The Chaunce of the Dyse haphazardly throws up allusions, attempting by chance to close the gap between literature and life, past and present, "game" and "earnest." This is the way the game produces, for a coterie of readers, the conditions of possibility for events to happen that confer unforeseen meanings on literary experience, respectively and prospectively.

(Mitchell 2009: 63–4)

Based on then relatively contemporary works, such as Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*, texts were personal, satirical, literary, character building, character destroying, embarrassing, pleasing, comedic, sardonic. Additionally, as if they were lexias in a work of generative hypertext, each lexia/node was both compactly written and intuitively linked to the other nodes. In *Chaunce of the Dyse* " ... intertextual allusions produce striking echoes across the texts," Mitchell observes (2009: 62).

It should be noted that although the texts appeared sequentially on the manuscript, their reading was determined by a random process. Contingently, when in 1995 then Xerox PARC researcher/artists, Cathy Marshall and I, provided randomly generated hypertext as one choice of reading our alternating lexias for *Forward Anywhere*, we created an interface that emphasized the difference between writing and reading the texts. Cathy writes:

The fluidity of the process obscured the complexity of the structure. The piece is both densely interconnected, and loosely woven. The question then became, how do we express the process, make it accessible to a reader? Should we expect a reader to experience the screens in the same order in which we wrote them? Should we put the reader in front of a CRT in a darkened motel room?

(Judy: black vinyl headboard) I have the lights turned out. Yellow words emerging from the black monitor ...)

(Malloy and Marshall 1996)

Part 5

You are my ...Five hundred years after *Chaunce of the Dyse*, in the early 1950s, computer scientist Christopher Strachey, who was working at that time for the British National Physical Laboratory, wrote a program for the MUC in Alan Turing's Lab.

Utilizing Turing's hardwired random number generator, which improved pseudo-random results, Strachey's groundbreaking love-letter generator created a possibly endless series of letters that beginning with "You are my"; parsed and randomly inserted variables, and were signed "Yours — (adv.) M. U. C."

Honey Dear

My sympathetic affection beautifully attracts your affectionate enthusiasm. You are my loving adoration: my breathless adoration.

My fellow feeling breathlessly hopes for your dear eagerness. My lovesick adoration cherishes your avid ardour.

Yours wistfully

M.U.C. (Strachey 1954)

Sometimes along creative ways, books fall open in interesting places, as they did for Verdi before he wrote *Nabucco* (Verdi 1942: 80–93).

Sometimes ideas are *in the air*: "So I think that what appears to be my influence is merely that I fell into a situation that other people are also falling into," John Cage once modestly observed (Kostelanetz 1988: 206).

Sometimes, an influence can be suggested, but there is no definite proof. Oxford-educated Chaucer scholar, Eleanor Prescott Hammond, wrote the classic paper on *Chaunce of the Dyse* in 1925. Her work would very probably have been known in Bloomsbury circles. And (whether consciously or not) the shifting gender identities and texts of changing ideas of love, randomly assigned in the *Chaunce of the Dyse*, echo in the 1950s in the process of Christopher Strachey's MUC Love Letters (Gaboury 2013)—and later occur and reoccur in the lives and generative poetry of the extraordinarily brilliant Fluxus couple, not-couple, couple, Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles.

Part 6

House of Dust

In New York City, after composer James Tenney presented a workshop on FORTRAN to Fluxus artists in 1967, Alison Knowles wrote the generative poem *House of Dust* (realized by Tenney), and her then

husband, Dick Higgins, created and programmed *Hank and Mary, a Love Story, a Chorale*.

Into the variables for *House of Dust* (originally titled “Proposition for Emmett Williams”), Alison Knowles inserted a centered identity, evocative of her interests in natural materials, as illustrated in the variables and output below:

a house of (leaves, stone, dust, sand, wood, paper)
 [place] (underwater, in dense woods, in heavy jungle undergrowth, by the sea, in green mossy terrain, among other houses, on an island)
 using (all available lighting, natural light, electricity, candles)
 inhabited by (friends, children and old people, people who love to read, vegetarians, horses and birds)
 generating, for example:
 a house of house of wood
 in a metropolis
 using electricity
 inhabited by friends and enemies (H. Higgins 2012)

Part 7

Hank Shot Mary Dead

Created in the same time period as Knowles’ “Proposition for Emmett Williams,” *Hank and Mary, A Love Story, A Chorale*—written by Dick Higgins and programmed in FORTRAN IV by Higgins and James Tenney—is remarkable for the complex polyphonic ballad it produces with the permutations of only four words: “Hank Shot Mary Dead” (D. Higgins 1970).

Hank and Mary moves darkly down continuous feed computer paper, with increasingly complex repeated columns of the chorus/continuo “Hank Shot Mary Dead” playing against/with permutations such as “Mary Shot Shot Hank”; “Shot Shot Shot Shot,” and finally:

Dead Dead Dead Hank
 Dead Dead Dead Shot
 Dead Dead Dead Mary
 “Dead Dead Dead Dead” (D. Higgins 1970)

Part 8

Uncle Roger

Female narrators are unexpected in this world of men and mainframes, particularly when the historians are men. Unless the protagonist is male-created, such as Joseph Weizenbaum's innovative ELIZA/DOCTOR—which seeped so thoroughly into NPC (nonplayer character) dialog in interactive fiction—when the observer is a woman, arguably the narrative changes. For instance, in *Uncle Roger* (Malloy 1991), a male obsession with the speed of the chips (“... humming ‘fast fast fast’ softly to himself. I could see his black shoes and brown socks moving on the pink tiled floor”) runs in the background to the touch of the hand or the intimate moment:

Jeff and I were in the top bunk. I put my hands on his body. It was dark, and the train rocked gently on the tracks as it moved swiftly along towards San Francisco.

(Malloy 1991)

Nevertheless, with a few exceptions, such as “House of Dust” and *Uncle Roger*, the early history of electronic literature is dominated by the quests of men with big machines. Moving backwards in time:

Part 9

Stochastische Texte

The idea was suggested by Stuttgart philosopher Max Bense. The input was fed into the formidable Zuse Z22 computer. To create *Stochastische Texte*, in the late 1950s, German mathematician and computer scientist (then student at Stuttgart), Theo Lutz, entered words from Kafka's *The Castle* into a program that parsed pseudo-randomly selected variables into semi-logical texts (Lutz 1959).

Arguably, a few years after Strachey's paper was published in *Encounter* in 1954, algorithmic strategies influenced by those used to create Strachey's Love Letters were used in 1959 to create *Stochastische Texte*. A primary dissimilarity between these two electronic literature precursors hinges on the textual differences between Strachey's playful romantic language and Lutz' politically charged remix of *The Castle*.

Kafka's evocative language is not evident in *Stochastische Texte*:

The tower above him here – the only one visible – the tower of a house, as was now evident, perhaps of the main building, was uniformly round, part of it graciously mantled with ivy, pierced by small windows that glittered in the sun, with a somewhat maniacal glitter, – and topped by what looked like an attic, with battlements that were irregular, broken, fumbling, as if designed by the trembling or careless hand of a child, clearly outlined against the blue.

(1969: 12)

As set forth in his *Augenblick* paper, the English versions of the words that Lutz chose were:

THE COUNT THE STRANGER THE LOOK THE CHURCH THE
CASTLE THE PICTURE THE EYE THE VILLAGE THE TOWER THE
FARMER THE WAY THE GUEST THE DAY THE HOUSE THE TABLE
THE LABOURER OPEN SILENT STRONG GOOD NARROW NEAR
NEW QUIET FAR DEEP LATE DARK FREE LARGE OLD ANGRY

In these words, there is a strength that suggests that they may have been deliberately (not randomly) chosen. What energizes this surprisingly plain list is the way Lutz chose to direct the computer to parse together two sentences on each line, using “is” as the predominate verb, and the way that the program concatenated these sentences with either a period or “and” or “or” (as if they were search terms) or “therefore.” The result is effective, in part because rather than evoking the encounters with inexplicable bureaucracy that are a theme of *The Castle*—encounters that will resonate more directly in subsequent works of electronic literature and its precursors, from Perec’s *The Art of Asking Your Boss for a Raise*; to the introductory language of *Moonmist* (Galley and Lawrence 1986); to the nearly insolvable puzzles of Graham Nelson’s *Curses*—*Stochastische Texte* is strong in its activist-resonant choice of words, as if it is a response to *The Castle*, rather than a direct echo:

... A CASTLE IS FREE AND EVERY FARMER IS FAR.EVERY
STRANGER IS FAR. A DAY IS LATE.EVERY HOUSE IS DARK. AN
EYE IS DEEP.NOT EVERY CASTLE IS OLD. EVERY DAY IS OLD.NOT
EVERY GUEST IS ANGRY: A CHURCH IS NARROW.NO HOUSE IS
OPEN AND NOT EVERY CHURCH IS SILENT.NOT EVERY EYE
IS ANGRY. NO LOOK IS NEW.EVERY WAY IS NEAR.NOT EVERY
CASTLE IS QUIET.NO TABLE IS NARROW AND EVERY TOWER IS
NEW.EVERY FARMER IS FREE. EVERY FARMER IS NEAR ...

(Lutz 1959)

In *Augenblick*, Lutz observes that:

... It seems to be very significant that it is possible to change the underlying word quantity into a “word field” using an assigned probability matrix, and to require the machine to print only those sentences where a probability exists between the subject and the predicate which exceeds a certain value. In this way it is possible to produce a text which is “meaningful” in relation to the underlying matrix.

Part 10

I AM THAT I AM

While cutting a mount for a drawing in room No. 25, I sliced through a pile of newspapers with my Stanley blade and thought of what I had said to Burroughs some six months earlier about the necessity for turning painters’ techniques directly into writing. I picked up the raw words and began to piece together texts ...” (Gysin 2001b: 126)

In Paris, beginning in circa 1959, Brion Gysin and William Burroughs built on Tzara’s “*How to make a Dadaist Poem*” (92: 39–41) to formalize a “cut-up” composition method. Burroughs may have used a proto-cut-up method in the writing process for *Naked Lunch*. Gysin migrated the cut-up method to computer-mediated poetry, creating the meaning-laden permutation *I AM THAT I AM* and the five-word literary theory permutation *NO POETS DON’T OWN WORDS* (both works programmed by Burroughs’ lover, Ian Sommerville).

Contingently, in his innovative theory cipher *Não*—exhibited using an LED display on an electronic signboard at the Centro Cultural Cândido Mendes, Rio de Janeiro in 1984—Eduardo Kac differently interprets the combination of “no” (não) and “poets,” while at the same time exploring the display and reading of digital poetry (Kac 1982–4).

As Burroughs once observed “When you cut into the present, the future leaks out” (Burroughs 1986).

Part 11

Interplay

In exploring the rhizomes of electronic literature, it should be remembered that to create many early works of electronic literature, cards were punched and then feed into a room-sized mainframe, resulting in continuous feed paper print-outs (Funkhouser 2012: 243–4). For instance, James Tenney

realized Alison Knowles' *House of Dust* by programming it in Fortran IV and running it on a mainframe at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn:

The computer generated four hundred quatrains before a repetition occurred. As Knowles describes it, a foot-high stack of computer printout appeared one day on her doorstep.

(H. Higgins, Introduction 2012: 195–6)

When Bill Bartlett created *Interplay* for the Computer Culture Exposition at the 1979 *Toronto Super8 Film Festival*, for many of the participating artists at I. P. Sharp terminals (in Canberra, Edmonton, Houston, New York, Toronto, Sydney, Vancouver, and Vienna), continuing dialog on computer culture emerged on continuous feed paper (Bartlett 1979).

When Roy Ascott produced the 1983 collaborative fairy tale *La Plissure du Texte*, as it traveled from artist to artist in eleven cities including Pittsburg, Vancouver, Vienna, San Francisco, and Toronto, an improvised, collaboratively authored text was printed out at many of the nodes on its journey (Ascott 1984: 24–67).

In these works, in which the artists themselves were the audience—accompanied by the sound of the printer, as the text moved from node to node—harkening back to the intertextual allusions in *Chaunce of the Dyse*—the narratives played off each other.

But when Art Com Electronic Network went online on The WELL in 1986, the nature of the environment for electronic literature changed radically, as not only did Director Carl Loeffler situate experimental writers in the midst of The WELL—including John Cage, Judy Malloy, Jim Rosenberg, and Fortner Andersen—but also sysop Fred Truck created UNIX Shell Script-based menus on which to publish electronic literature (Malloy 2016: 191–218). Some of the members of the audience were known because they responded online to ACEN works. Some were not. As the narrator's dream illustrates in *Uncle Roger*, there was a palpable feeling of the presence of the audience, even though they were not seen:

Everything I typed on the keyboard showed up on a large screen which filled the entire wall at the front of the room. Five men in tan suits were sitting around the screen, watching the words as I typed them in.

(Malloy 1988)

Contingently, although the details are beyond the scope of this chapter, it should be noted that reference to the works of each other were of value in the creative practice that emerged from ACEN. And sometimes the fine line between poetic allusion and the passing back and forth of ideas that occurs in any group of artists is immaterial in the merged creative process.

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