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### **The Present and Future of Humanist Inquiry in the Digital Field**

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# No User Required: Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries and Digital Humanist Inquiry

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## ABSTRACT

This paper utilizes selections from the digital Flash poems/texts of Seoul-based art duo Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI) to try and formulate a new mode of close “reading,” one that takes into consideration the way in which these, as well as other, new media texts reconfigure the process of reading. YHCHI produces texts that raise questions regarding user agency, conceptualizations of interactivity, and even the place of the humanities scholar in the age of the digital.

## General Terms

Documentation, Performance, Design, Experimentation, Human Factors, Standardization, Languages, Theory.

## Keywords

Electronic Literature, Literature, Poetry, Performance, Theory, Reading, Feedback Loop, Interactivity, Parallel Authorship, Humanist Inquiry, Genre Categorization.

## 1. START

As many theorists have stated, electronic literature is a new medium that deserves to be studied with its own unique set of methodologies and tools. It is not enough to simply read a new media text as one would read a print text. In *Electronic Literature*, Katherine Hayles argues that “to see electronic literature only through the lens of print is, in a significant sense, not to see it at all” ([1], p.3). Thus, it becomes necessary to take into consideration all of the unique aspects of the text/medium, including software, platform, script, code, font, multimodality, interactivity, etc. This paper posits a reworked, or in the parlance of the digital humanities, an *updated* method of close reading, one that takes into consideration the wholly singular forms and idiosyncrasies of new media, broadly conceived. This paper utilizes selections from the digital poems/texts of Seoul-based art duo Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI) to try and formulate this new mode of close “reading.”

The tutor texts for this analysis have been chosen specifically for their difficulty; here, difficulty is conceptualized as the texts’ inability to fit snugly within the nascent canon of electronic literature. These works lend themselves particularly well to humanistic critical analysis because of their inherent hybridity.<sup>1</sup> They are positioned apart from the interactive, multidirectional works of new media that emphasize co-determination,

user/reader/system feedback loops, etc. However, the works are simultaneously far from the traditional print text. Thus, these works exist in a kind of permanent liminality. Through an analysis of the texts’ form and content in relation to the work of contemporary critics including Katherine Hayles, Alan Liu, and Rita Raley, this paper examines the texts’ treatment of reader control, interactivity, directionality, and feedback.

As much of the contemporary discussion suggests, the humanities have been traditionally concerned with authorial and readerly agencies; humanities scholars invest themselves in analyses of thematic, formal, and structural intersections, particularly those situated between present works and their historical counterparts. In the work of YHCHI, we see a redistribution of agency in the unidirectional nature of their Flash texts. Although the reader/user has the ability to start, stop, or restart the animation at any point, the intelligent machine/algorithm running the piece is in the executive position. Thus, it becomes necessary to renegotiate previously stable notions like “reading.” Is *reading* in the digital moment (re)fashioned as something that more closely resembles *viewing*? Finally, there is a sense that the humanities can help to construct a framework for treating notions of activity and passivity, user agency, as well as self- and co-determination of textual meaning and experience in the context of electronic literature, and more broadly, the digital humanities.

It will be useful to begin with a brief introduction to the structure and format of a YHCHI text. Each work, produced by artists Marc Voge and Young-Hae Chang using Adobe’s Flash, consists of a series of animated screens of text synchronized with music. Each screen of text is rather simple, containing only a limited number of words with the result that the displayed sentence or phrase is always truncated. To continue the minimalist theme, an overwhelming majority of their pieces utilize only a single font, MONACØ, and a single pair of colors, black and white. The animations begin with a title page and proceed to flash from the first block of text in the series to the next in time with the music. YHCHI’s choice of soundtrack often takes full advantage of jazz music’s potential for fast and syncopated rhythms. Thus, the end result is a fast-paced, visually simple montage of text and music. However, despite their minimalist aesthetic and apparent simplicity, these texts are conceptually dense and when critically engaged with reveal abundant contradictions and complexities vis-à-vis both user navigability and ease of generic categorization.

For a variety of reasons, the texts produced by YHCHI are difficult to navigate and position within the established conventions and categories of (electronic) literature or poetry. In terms of user navigability, the most significant difficulty has to do with the lack of user control. The user can activate each animation by clicking the title's link on the YHCHI website<sup>2</sup>; however, once a given animation has been initiated, it cannot be paused, fast-forwarded, rewound, or manipulated in any way by the user. Thus, while viewing the piece, the user surrenders control and is relegated to a rather passive position. Writing within a field that is particularly concerned with notions of machine intelligence and agency, it is crucial to note that the user's experience is facilitated and executed by a computer algorithm. It is therefore the machine that occupies the executive, active position, while the user attempts to piece together the fragments of text the program flashes in front of him/her.

In addition to this rather unconventional method of user navigation, the texts also reject scholars' attempts to categorize them as particularly *new media*. Although this set of texts are designed, programmed and viewed exclusively on computers, they do not take advantage of all of new media's capabilities. More specifically, these texts are *unidirectional* rather than *multidirectional*, *two dimensional* rather than *multidimensional*, and finally, *linear* rather than *nonlinear*. Typically, new media texts are known for their ability to adapt as users respond to given content, creating what is referred to as a feedback loop. In such a scenario, the work provokes a certain response in the user, which in turn, shapes future iterations of the text during that interaction. In contrast to this type of dynamic, YHCHI's text sequences are programmed and established before a user is ever present; as previously mentioned, the user has no influence over how the text proceeds.

Another hallmark of new media absent from the YHCHI canon is the use of multidimensionality in terms of space and time. In the contemporary digital moment, advanced computer software allows artists and writers to craft multidimensional worlds within the space of the computer screen, pushing the limits of human visualization and imagination. The works of YHCHI, on the other hand, look very similar to the typed blocks of text one might encounter in a basic text document. In fact, ignoring their obvious similarity to the pages in a book, the progressive blocks of text can be traced back to an even older technology. In *Modern Modernisms: Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries and Digital Modernism*, Jessica Pressman describes the way YHCHI's flash texts harken back to Bob Brown's "Readie," an early twentieth-century invention that mechanically scrolled text across a film screen.

Katherine Hayles is quick to point out, however, the difference between the mechanized scrolling of the "Readie" and the algorithmic progression of the YHCHI animations. With regard to YHCHI, she explains, their "aesthetic departs from the mechanical version insofar as it involves the rapid processing of code by an intelligent machine, the interaction of language with the execution of code, and the global reach of networked and programmable media" ([1], p.126). It is important to note that along with this two-dimensional aspect, we once again see a reduction in the agency of the reader.

Along with their aforementioned unidirectionality and lack of interactivity, the works of YHCHI are also linear in terms of narrative structure; when strung together, the blocks of text on

each page construct fairly standard English sentences that contribute to the formation of a rather linear plot or story. This inherent linearity contrasts new media's capabilities for unconventional, nonlinear narrative structures. Even in the earliest form of electronic literature, the hypertext fiction, readers were able to construct complex and disorienting stories by clicking on different hyperlinks within each set of lexias. Often, since the direction of the story's plot was user-created and not predetermined, stories could have seemingly infinite combinations of outcomes. In contrast, YHCHI's texts are programmed to run from the first word in the sequence to the last in the same progression every single time the file is accessed and launched; no matter how many times the story is started, stopped, or restarted, the sequence maintains its preprogrammed structure. Keeping the issues of directionality, interactivity, and linearity in mind, this investigation will now look closely at a specific YHCHI text.

*Morning of the Mongoloids* is one of YHCHI's most emblematic pieces and for the purposes of this investigation it can be taken to be representative of the YHCHI *oeuvre*. It pairs black text on a white background with syncopated jazz music. In addition to its characteristic minimalist aesthetic, *Morning of the Mongoloids* is both unidirectional and linear and further possesses no mechanism through which feedback might flow from the reader to the text or vice versa. To further characterize it as something more closely related to a print poem than a new media work, its themes and plot are not particularly dependent on the medium for clarity or ease of understanding. The poem tells the story of an individual who wakes one morning after a night of debauchery to find he or she has been physically transformed into what is, in his or her eyes, a rather unappealing creature.

Despite its apparent "print-ness," however, the difficulty of the text rests in the fact that although it, like the rest of YHCHI's works, does not make use of many of the capabilities of new media, it is not a print work. Instead, because it is programmed and viewed exclusively on a computer, it must be taken to be a work of new media at the most fundamental level. The fact that it rejects many of its medium's potential advantages simply confuses the investigator's ability to reconcile it with the rest of the canon; it is this irreconcilable aspect that makes this text and those it embodies so fascinating.

This difficulty begs the question of whether or not YHCHI is, effectively, protesting a reductive taxonomy of new media artworks. What does it mean to be a *new media* work while rejecting most of the *new* capabilities of various media? Can the canon of electronic literature and poetry be as fluidly adaptive as the texts it attempts to catalog, thereby making room for works like these that so blatantly reject categorization?<sup>3</sup> It is these and more similar questions that will shape the course of humanities studies in the digital moment.

The works produced by YHCHI fundamentally "test the boundaries of the literary and challenge us to rethink what literature can be" ([1], p.5). It is this moment of recognition that will effectively reposition the focus of digital humanist inquiry in the twenty-first century. Instead of focusing on a comparative analysis that constantly seeks to relate new media texts to their print predecessors and vice versa, the new school of the digital humanities will have to examine new media as "an entirely different artistic production that should be evaluated in its own terms with a critical approach fully attentive to the specificity of the medium" ([1], p.23). Although at times crafting an entirely

new framework of analysis to examine only a small corpus of digital literary texts may sound overwhelming, it may be reassuring to understand that all “literature in the twenty-first century is computational,” that “almost all print books are digital files before they become books; this is the form in which they are composed, edited, composited, and sent to the computerized machines that produce them as books” ([1], p.43).

Furthermore, in the same moment that humanities scholars rework their understandings of literature, it also becomes necessary to renegotiate a term like *reading*. In the context of YHCHI, reading becomes something more like viewing. Thus, the literary scholar’s notion of close reading has to be adapted in order to address new types of texts that reject its conventional conceptualization.

In closing, the purpose of this analysis was not to highlight what some more traditional literary scholars perceive as a frightening moment in the history of literary analysis. Instead, I wanted to draw attention to the fact that these types of texts do as much to confuse our understanding of terms like *new* and *media* as they do to blur our once stable definitions of *literature* and *reading*. Instead of isolating themselves within one camp or another, literary scholars should borrow research methodologies from both

new and old forms of literary media in order to execute the most provocative and useful research. By blurring the line between software or platform studies and traditional literary criticism, it is my hope that literary scholars will be able to more effectively map the network of intersections between literature, technology, and culture.

## 2. REFERENCES

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