



Introduction: What Is “Creative Making As Creative Writing”?

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ABSTRACT

This special issue of the *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* centers on how creative writing changes when writers actively engage computers as nonhuman collaborators in “creative making.” Using examples from McGurl’s *The Program Era*, Emily Dickinson, and the crowdsourced “translation” of Melville’s classic into *Emoji Dick*, Berens suggests that creative writing methods have long been procedural and technologic.

There are many forms of creative making. This special issue features creative writers that

- Write code to output novels
- Redefine how we think of writing’s “container”
- Demonstrate aspects of the digital-first, multimodal writing classroom
- Modify or remix existing artworks

Berens supplies three modes to preview the issue’s 11 essays: a word cloud of the 45 most frequently occurring words, thematic clusters, and narrative descriptions of each essay. These modes of reading prompt consideration of tradeoffs we make between speed and precision when we read in online environments. A note on open access publishing, and suggestions for further reading about the role of electronic literature in creative writing studies, conclude the essay.

ESSAY

This special issue of the *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* centers on how creative writing changes when writers actively engage computers as our nonhuman collaborators. Creative writing has always involved creative making. Handwriting, paper, and occasionally needle and thread were technologies Emily Dickinson used to transfer the cadence of her poems to paper. Her hand-stitched “fascicles” (booklets) were flattened when they were printed in a massively accessible writing technology, the book. The online [Emily Dickinson Archive](#) makes Dickinson’s poetry yet more accessible than print, and remedies some of the infelicities caused by printing. Readers can zoom into an inscribed scrap of paper more closely than one could do using a magnifying glass at a rare books library. Dickinson demurred from sending her poems to a printer. Handwritten, they remain ungoverned by printing and typographic formats that standardized the expressiveness of her dashes, multidirectional layouts, gaps, and other uses of space. For Dickinson, as for many other pre-computational creative writers, the medium was always part of the message.

This special issue offers eleven essays and artist’s statements about how computers broaden the lens on what counts as writing. Writing has long been associated with a stricter style than spoken word, a distinction linguist Gretchen McCulloch labels “Edited English.” Unedited English used to be ephemeral—letters, grocery lists, notes tacked on community boards. Today, unedited English in social media platforms and texts on our phones dwarfs the output of Edited English. And yet, our habits of reading and thinking are influenced by the multitude of hours we log reading and writing in environments where Unedited English is the norm (Hayles 2013; Vadde 2017; Ramdarshan-Bold 2018).

The linguist McCulloch’s book *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (Riverhead, 2019) argues that digital-born writing is developing complexity. She cites a study that found “15-year-old users in 2016 wrote more complex posts than users of any age in 2008” (quoted in Shirky, 13). Writing as a vehicle of complex thought evolves as we become more fluent in digital-born technologies. Most creative writing instruction remains book- and print-centered even though most people have daily experiences of writing expressively using digital tools like:

- **voice-to-text**, because typing on a virtual keyboard is small, clumsy and error-prone;
- **autocomplete**, because the machine learns most frequent words, and people value speed when we are texting;
- **emojis**, of which there are now 2,823 in the Unicode Standard.



Fig. 1: Evolution of the emoji set 2014-2019. Images: Apple (2014-2018), Emojipedia (2019).

Instagram poetry, memes, bots, netprovs, fanfic and other forms of creative authoring that use cellphone and social media software are a burgeoning form of creative making. Whether or not such work is “literary” is a matter of debate (Berens 2019a, Berens 2019b, Flores), but its popular influence is undeniable. Instagram poetry—digital-born and then printed in books—accounted for 60% of 2017 poetry bestsellers in the United States (NPD Group, 2018). It’s a way for digital-born authors to convert their social capital, which online enriches only the media companies that host their work, to financial capital accrued through book sales.

As one example of creative making, *Emoji Dick* tests the limits of how old converts into new. A translation of Melville’s famous novel made by over eight hundred people who spent approximately 3,795,980 seconds translating *Moby Dick*, *Emoji Dick* is conceptual writing more along the lines of Kenneth Goldsmith than Herman Melville. Each Amazon Mechanical Turk worker was paid five cents per *Moby Dick* sentence translation into emojis, and other workers were paid two cents for voting on the quality of three translations of the same sentence and selecting the best one. In my undergraduate class “Digital Literary Studies,” I ask students to take out their phones and translate “Call me Ishmael” into emojis. I have yet to see a translation that duplicates the exact same sequence of emojis used by another student, and that’s just three words of *Moby Dick*. Neither Fred Benenson, who conceptualized and compiled *Emoji Dick*, nor Lisa Gittelman make a case that emoji translation shows fidelity to the original. “*Emoji Dick* is a book that in a real sense cannot be fully named—the name of which cannot be pronounced—since an accurate rendering of its title includes an image,” Gittelman notes (2018). We can’t even speak the title without denaturing it.

Emoji Dick is an edge case of how digital-born writing generally doesn’t *remediate* (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) print-centered writing or writing practices. When it does, as in Instagram poetry, it’s because the printed result fits pretty seamlessly into legacy systems and habits. Instagram poetry doesn’t stretch the notion of digital writing, but *Emoji Dick* and the 11 essays in this special issue do.

Definition and Types of Creative Making

In “creative making,” the medium is an active agent in meaning-making, not an invisible container that drops from reader awareness, as when we turn the pages of a book. Creative making is also not to digitize existing content, as when a Word doc manuscript file is coded in XML for publication as an ebook (leaving aside the fact that almost all aspects of book publishing are digital except for the printed output).

There are many forms of creative making. This special issue features work that

- **Writes code to output novels**, in essays by Zach Whalen and Piotr Marecki;
- **Redefines how we think of writing’s “container”** in essays by Aaron Tucker, Joshua Korenblat, Mez Breeze, and Annie Abrahams & Emmanuel Guez;
- **Demonstrates the digital-first, multimodal writing classroom**, in essays by Michael Dean Clark, Saul Lemerond and Liza Flum & Emily Oliver.
- **Modifies or remixes existing artworks**, in essays by Khaliah Petersen-Reed and Lee Skallerup Bessette; (Zach Whalen’s adaptation of the children’s nursery rhyme “The House That Jack Built” would also fit into this category).

Three Ways of Reading Themes In This Special Issue

I’ve created three ways readers can preview this special issue: a word frequency visualization, thematic clusters, and narrative descriptions.

As readers progress through this preview, they trade speed for nuance. A word cloud is the fastest way to see the major themes, but it does not make evident the relationship between those themes. Thematic clusters disclose relationship among the essays in each category; however, several essays share traits with other thematic categories. Clusters are a closer but imperfect visualization.

The most precise but slowest way to preview the essays is to read the short descriptions. The tradeoff of speed for nuance is one we make many, many times every day. In the seconds you spent reading the previous sentence, Google served responses to [630,000 queries](#). Most people check their phones approximately 52 times daily, except for those between the ages of 18-24, who check 86 times daily, according to [Deloitte’s Global Mobile Survey Report](#) (2017). It’s well known that we are living in an “attention economy.” How does this fact influence what counts as creative writing, and how we teach it?

Finally, “book.” Both Whalen and Marecki wrote programs that outputted books: an 800-page children’s novel (Whalen); a printed walkthrough of an iconic Polish Atari game, the book made today using software from the 1989 Atari system (Marecki). Books remain a remarkably useful literary technology. They are random access devices that can be skimmed quickly or reread slowly, depending on the reader’s choice; one could say that reading books is also “a series of interesting choices.” “Generated” novels, whether from source code or from human writers (in the eighteenth century, these were called “hacks”), are made by following a precise set of rules. Human hacks and generated novels persist in today’s literary marketplace, as Simon Fuller and James O’Sullivan show in their distant reading of James Patterson’s novels, “Structure over Style: Collaborative Authorship and the Revival of Literary Capitalism” (2017).

Preview #2: Thematic Groups

“The Machinic Author”

- Zach Whalen, “The Many Authors of *The Several Houses of Brian, Spencer, Liam, Victoria, Brayden, Vincent, and Alex*: Authorship, Agency, and Appropriation”
- Mez Breeze, “Creative Making in Virtual Reality Literature”
- Aaron Tucker, “Machine Co-authorship(s) via Translative Creative Writing”
- Annie Abrahams & Emmanuel Guez: “The Machinic Author: on *The Reading Club*”

Access

- Khaliah Peterson-Reed, “Fanfiction as Performative Criticism: *Harry Potter* Racebending”
- Lee Skallerup Bessette: “This is (not) a Game: The Adjunct Experience as Playable Fiction”
- Joshua Korenblat, “Making *Basho & Friends*, a Literacy Game For Tablet”

Media Archeology

- Piotr Marecki, “Atari, Creative Making & Zombie Computers: *Robbo. Solucja*. [Robbo Walkthrough]”

Pedagogy

- Michael Dean Clark, “Toward Disruptive Creation in Digital Literature Instruction”
- Liza Flum & Emily Oliver, “Digital Participatory Poetics and Civic Engagement in the Creative Writing Classroom”
- Saul Lemerond, “Creative Writing Across Mediums and Modes: A Pedagogical Model”

Preview #3: Narrative Description

Annie Abrahams and Emmanuel Guez reflect on The Reading Club, an online venue for simultaneous, collaborative reading and writing, both of which occur within a precisely defined framework: «reariters» are invited to read a given text and to rewrite it within a set number of characters. The public also gets involved, reading and commenting in a chat field.

Lee Skallerup Bessette asks: “How can a never-ending, running, 8-bit game be a piece of protest art?” In examining her own experience in a networked, improvised Twitter game meant to protest the treatment of adjuncts, the artist explores issues of agency, exploitation, and the very nature of games and playing in her artist’s statement on her scrolling game “Adjunct Run.”

Mez Breeze examines virtual reality literature from an applied point of view: she’s made a VR that readers can experience either using a VR headset or a browser, scrolling around in modelled 3D. Go to her essay to get the link and passcode, and dive in!

Michael Dean Clark wrote a manifesto for the multimodal classroom, exhorting creative writing teachers to abandon legacy pedagogies in favor of disruptive, student-driven course experiences. This work should include explorations of digital culture, means of production, multimodal literacies, and connections with various definitions of literature ranging from print to auditory to visual forms.

Liza Flum & Emily Oliver facilitate students’ critical community engagement through digital pedagogy and final projects in which students use digital texts to respond to current events. Starting with a widely-circulated elegy of the Orlando Pulse mass shooting, their course fosters students’ civic imagination and invites students to make connections among their own lives, their communities, and poetic civic media. They include the full syllabus at the end of their essay.

Joshua Korenblat walks readers through *Basho & Friends*, an in-progress prototype for an interactive children’s book accessible via tablet. Children ages 8-13 collaborate with young Basho, the legendary medieval Japanese founder of haiku poetry, engaging with Basho’s story in an historical context and practicing haiku to see themselves as authors of their life stories.

Saul Lemerond describes his multimodal creative writing course where students are required to produce work in different creative modes on a near-weekly basis. He challenges students to produce memes, television scripts, comic book storyboards, slam poetry, blogs, and podcasts. Students do these along with assignments requiring them to write creative nonfiction, short stories, screenplays, and poetry.

Piotr Marecki's essay examines the current demo-scene built around the history and making of *Robbo*, a legendary Atari game built by a teenager in 1989. *Robbo. Walkthrough*, a new book that is one output of this generative game, provides, among other things, critical commentary on the value of “zombie” computing, which is when a platform (like Atari) is not updated for contemporary operations but remains a vital authoring system for a subculture.

Khaliah Petersen Reed shows that fanfiction writers are blurring the distinction between creative writing and literary criticism. Through performative criticism enacted through writing fiction in open, online environments, Reed looks at racebending fanfic that discloses and intervenes in the racial gaps of the *Harry Potter* series.

Aaron Tucker explores three of his own “machine translations,” including a chess game where each move prints a line of poetry. Human-computer interaction with randomness and chance give space to challenge a human-centered understanding of “reading” and “writing.” In examining his artistic process of creative making, Tucker theorizes how collaboration with machines encourages a type of literature that helps us better understand how digital interfaces affect everyday life.

Zach Whalen reflects on creating a computer-generated children's book and its source text, the Python script he wrote to produce it. Whalen includes the Python script in an appendix, and links to his GitHub repository. Whalen uses the children's book to illustrate the challenges that computer-generated texts pose within the scope of digital creative writing studies, such as the role of the “author” when collaborators include hundreds of people who wrote and modified a program, and methods for teaching computational creative writing to undergraduates.

A Note On Open Access

Open Access refers to free, unrestricted online access to academic case studies, journal articles, and books. The *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* is OA because access fees limit the free flow of ideas, a core early Web principle. I am grateful to the Rochester Institute of Technology for supporting the journal with server space, paid student PDF design labor, and the RIT Scholarworks management software.

Writers are typically not paid for their contributions to scholarly journals because their salaries are supposed to fund at least part of their research. But as access to tenure-track jobs constricts—tenured and TT jobs are now just 24% of the humanities professoriate—it is even more vital that our research outputs be made available freely to all libraries and people.

This special issue engages another form of openness, publishing work from people on the full spectrum of academic employment: unaffiliated artists, tenured professors, early career scholars, graduate students, and tenure-ineligible scholars all have space here. Independent artists are three of our thirteen authors. This diversity in work experience and perspective strengthens the issue

because it shows how approaches to creative making as creative writing are situated in the particular employment and other contexts of our lives. Most scholarly journals are produced by and for researchers at R-1 universities. Not every reader has those needs, goals or resources. Fandoms and other online communities of amateur experts—the people who share code snippets, write fanfic, annotate crowdsourced materials—are an important if distributed audience for this special issue.

Further Reading

The history of “creative making as creative writing” stretches back at least forty years—longer, if one starts with Christopher Strachey’s [LoveLetters](#) generator made in 1952. Scott Rettberg’s *Electronic Literature* (Polity, 2018) is an excellent overview of the field from avant-garde, pre-digital antecedents to present day. The interactive book [Pathfinders: Documenting the Experience of Early Electronic Literature](#) by Dene Grigar and Stuart Moulthrop, who also wrote a printed book based on the Pathfinders documentations, *Traversals: The Use of Preservation in Early Electronic Writing* (2017), helps to remedy the sobering problem of electronic literature obsolescence. How to make a field’s literary history if the works no longer run in contemporary operating systems and software? Judy Malloy’s edited collection *Social Media Archeology and Poetics* (2016) traces social media’s origins in 1970s ARPANET research, among other early networked communities decades before today’s corporate ownership of most social networking.

The [Electronic Literature Organization Repository](#) preserves access to some creative literary making starting in the 1990s. It documents also the prominent role of women creative makers in early electronic literature. Thanks to the preservation efforts led by the Electronic Literature Organization’s Dene Grigar (President 2013-2019), the ELO Repository is an accessible, easy-to-use and free resource. Grigar is also founder and director of the [Electronic Literature Lab](#), which has (at time of writing) 61 vintage computers and over 300 works of early electronic literature.

Exemplary works of electronic literature available in a browser are anthologized in three peer-reviewed [Electronic Literature Collection](#) volumes, [1](#) (2006), [2](#) (2011) and [3](#) (2016). The *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 3* features 114 works from 26 countries and 13 languages. This global reach is a key aspect of this international community; it transcends the silos of commercial publishing territories. Resources by and about non-North American creative making creative writers are abundant: [Po.Ex](#) archive of Portuguese Experimental Poetry, the [Russian Electronic Literature Collection](#), and [Arabic electronic literature](#) mapped by Egyptian scholar [Reham Hosny](#) are just a small sampling of the global record of electronic literature.

Conclusion

“Creative making” is guess-and-check tinkering with digital-born literature: literature meant to be read on a networked computer. Creative making is not a new approach in creative writing; writers have long taken a heuristic approach to craft at least since the “Program Era,” Mark McGurl’s phrase for the institutionalization of creative writing instruction in higher education and its effect on postwar American literature (2009). Workshops, portfolios, readings: these staples of creative writing instruction transmute when we invite computation to play a more active role.

This special issue aligns with creative writing studies’ interest to theorize how creative writing practices engage larger questions of power. Loren Glass’s edited collection *After the Program Era: The Past, Present and Future of Creative Writing in the University* (2017), and Juliana Spahr & Stephanie Young’s long article, “The Program Era and the Mainly White Room” (2015) examine conditions of privilege in creative writing programs. Alongside these works, Adam Koehler’s *Composition, Creative Writing and the Digital Humanities* (2017), and *Creative Writing in the Digital Age* (2015), edited by one of this issue’s featured authors, Michael Dean Clark with co-editors Trent Hergenrader and Joseph Rein, disclose the extent to which creative writing studies should also consider how print-first creative writing instruction meshes with mobile-first daily life.

“It has been my experience,” says Saul Lemerond in his essay in this volume, “that students coming from creative writing programs end up writing fiction and poetry (usually for print mediums) because that is the tradition in which they’ve been taught. It is not difficult to learn the fundamentals of these [digital] mediums; however, if you don’t know the fundamentals of their construction, their existence ends up residing on the opposite side of a mysterious and frightening barrier that many students would love to cross but do not know how” (5).

These 11 essays suggest ways writers cross that barrier together.

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BIOGRAPHY

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