Clutteralist Aesthetics and the Poetics of Whimsy:
The Work of Jason Nelson
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There is something incredibly consistent about Jason Nelson's hypermedia work. *Something*, yes, but it is hard to put your finger on that something. It is not that the works look the same, though they are recognizably Nelson works. And, there are themes and preoccupations that are repeated, populating a number of the author's works, but the utterances, one application to the next, are not posited as repetitions but as separate iterations, remediations of certain themes that lead to different sorts of interfaces and interactions, different modes and methods of signification. As such, the consistency has more to do with attitude and approach than content.

Nelson's *digital creatures*, as he calls them at his *secret technology* website (http://www.secrettechnology.com), are indeed odd applications. Like most creative hypermedia work they don't rest comfortably as one thing or another—they are not applications with an explicit use-value and they take some time to get to know. The works could be defined as poetry (sometimes), narrative (sometimes), interactive art (sometimes), or any mix of the above. In this regard, they are what they are—creative expression through technology: digital *creatures*.

Many of the interfaces for the various works operate in such a way as to—perhaps intentionally—mitigate the subjects of the work. Or, perhaps the mitigation is the content. One could call the design method here messy, and sometimes the applications seem fragile or touchy, maybe rickety. In calling the design messy, or the applications rickety, I in no way mean to imply that they are faulty. These attributes seem rather intentional and strategic. There is a blend of overload and reload in the work—the reload of common themes (death being the most common) and overload in terms of the use of media and their signifying properties.

An example of these methods can be found in Nelson's *Promiscuous Design*. The interface of this work is made up of what appear to be illustrations culled from a child's encyclopedia. Various races are represented, agrarian and industrial work flows, dairy cattle, and

manufacturing. On the right side of the interface we find two headings, *Channels* and *Frequencies*.

The *Channels* heading provides access to six checkboxes with somewhat cryptic titles—*pandemic affairs, marketing god and trees, felonious colors, some past travel fails, analogous to stuttering*, and *if broadcasts were boats*—and we initially have no idea what any of this may mean or what will happen when any of these boxes are checked. The *Frequencies* heading is below and is made up of a field of a dozen square buttons surrounding a field of five similar buttons. To a certain extent the interface is about inducing the user to activate these cryptic areas. And, once one does engage with these elements, the piece begins to open up.

Moving the cursor over the outside *Frequencies* buttons initiates an audio file that says "Shush." Clicking on the buttons plays additional audio files, sometimes adding diagrams or video to the general interface. The central *Frequencies* buttons, which are labeled "disrupt" upon mouse over, operate in a similar fashion, but here when the user moves the cursor over the added diagrams the interface is complicated by texts of some length, though mostly unreadable and sometimes rendered in reverse.

Checking any of the *Channels* checkboxes layers various words—*law, culture, the keel* to name a few—on top of the encyclopedia illustrations. Moving the cursor over these added words changes the word—*law* becomes *flightless, the keel* becomes *the boat*—and pops up a short poetic or critical text.

One of the texts that appear when the cursor is over the keel is quite telling as to what is being explored in the work:

We create artificial understandings, unreal meanings for our surroundings. Our diagrams map relationships to fit whichever mode we fancy. This work mirrors those false categories, the absurd and nearly random divisions.

In addition to the layering and altering of words and text, the *Channels* checkboxes add hand-drawn arrows onto the illustration, sometimes connecting words with images, sometimes connecting one illustration to another. Checking the box for *felonious* colors not only adds the word *law* to the interface but also produces circles and lines connecting the illustration of an

agrarian worker to that of a manufacturing worker, and the manufacturing worker to a commercial product.

These hand-drawn lines and arrows are sometimes employed to scratch out certain words or parts of words creating palimpsests that disrupt assumed meaning or increase potential meaning. The title of the piece itself is altered in this way. Appropriately, *Promiscuous Design* becomes Promiscuous ~~De~~sign...which is what we have here, promiscuous signs, a metaphoric display of the semiotic process. Or, a semiotics of semiotics.

Looking through Jason Nelson's catalog of work there are two things that definitely stand out, his willingness to consider the work incomplete—to let works go through various iterations—and a creative repurposing of appropriated code. His works *Dreamaphage* and *this will be the end of you* have both gone through a number of iterations, each very different from the other. The appropriation and repurposing of code, mostly actionscript for Macromedia [now Adobe] Flash, is evident throughout his catalog.

In Nelson's *The Bomar Gene* we find the well-known memory game *Concentration* repurposed as an embodied narrative device. The game is set alongside a ficto-biographical story that tells of an elderly woman who has collected photographs throughout her life and now has "hundreds of thousands of photographs pasted, glued, tacked to the walls and ceiling and floor" of her two-bedroom house, "each photograph...connected to another, lines of yarn or thin nylon cord connecting the pair." Connecting one photograph with its partner is what occurs in the game. In effect, the user mirrors the acts of the protagonist of the story by playing the game.

Other areas of *The Bomar Gene* include the coupling of a story of a mentally ill child and her art therapist with a color picker application, and the story of a young man with a propensity for numbers coupled with a pixel plotting array. Throughout this work we find this sort of appropriation and repurposing of fairly common Flash applications, here used as embodied narrative devices that extend the premises of the text-based stories.

Nelson's recent *This Is How You Will Die* is another fine example of this repurposing method. With this work the user is presented with an interface that mixes metaphors of game play, gambling, chance, fate, and divination. Set to a rather eerie soundtrack, the piece borrows from the devices of a slot machine, here called the death spin. As with a slot machine the user

engages five spinning wheels, but rather than the traditional cherries, oranges, and lemons these wheels contain short fragments of text that when read in conjunction with one another predict the user's death.

An example of a potential combination of texts reads:

Searching for your breakthrough poetry manuscript thrown out "accidentally", | a vagrant mistakes you for a 'parking lot god' and worships you with knives, | at least, for a few minutes you have given someone a defining purpose. | Instead of dieing completely, you fall into the middle space, space between molecules | Your ghost, specter, spirit, or banshee wanders confused until the sun explodes.

As the user continues to spin, demise points are added or taken away. Once the user's score drops below 10 play is stopped.

This piece rests somewhere between the oracular and the vernacular. In its use of a gambling metaphor it both makes points about life being based in chance and minimizes the direness of the question, *when and how will I die?* It is interesting for its combination of high and low concerns and demonstrates a rather conscientious appropriation of an application meant purely for entertainment, repurposing the application as something mysterious and quite poetic.

All in all, when we experience Jason Nelson works we are asked to take a leap, to read beyond reading, to look and listen and do. These works are born digital and rarely backtrack historically to moments before multi-modal new media signification. Perhaps then, they are works to be operated rather than read (in the strict sense). They are playful yet serious, demonstrative yet subtle, experimental yet realized. Mostly, though, they are good fun.