

Lexicon

Andy Deck
Artist

Artcontext.org
artcontext@teacher.com

ABSTRACT

Lexicon is an extensible online artwork that invites public collaboration. The work addresses the relationships between verbal and software languages, and between free expression and coercion.

Keywords

Word play. Visual poetics. Programming. Interactivity. Creativity.

1. ENCOUNTERING SOFTWARE

Understood as an interactive experience, Lexicon is a form of software that has to be discovered rather than immediately understood. It offers a series of encounters: with programmatic images, and with strangers who are visiting the piece at the same time. People passing through the Lexicon, are its performers. The patient and the curious may discover that with words they can control the sequence of events, as Lexicon's authors.

1.1 Word and Image

Understood as a tool, Lexicon combines word play with image processing. Each of Lexicon's visual effects and transitions is associated with a word. Arranged in various combinations these word produce visual phenomena that could be described as interactive montage or even, perhaps, as creativity (yours, not mine).

2. CONSTRAINTS

2.1 Beyond Interactive Spaces

Just as the astronaut broke free of the reality of his native world in landing on the moon, the cybernaut momentarily leaves the reality of mundane space-time and inserts himself into the *cybernetic straitjacket* of the virtual-reality environment control program [1]. – Paul Virilio

Most graphical interactivity has come to resemble the exploration of preconceived spaces. It differs little from video games etched into mazes of ROM (read only memory). Fascinating, perhaps. Targeted at the consumer, these spaces are

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not conducive to metamorphosis and reorganization. Lexicon deemphasizes spatial navigation, emphasizing language and performance instead. This is not to demonstrate that by eliminating the spatial metaphor in interactivity we will suddenly elude the *cybernetic straitjacket*, but rather, to delve into the problem of public creativity in cyberspace.

2.2 Participation

Lexicon invites participation at a number of levels, including the writing of scripts that affect what others experience when they visit the site. This writing is easier than it may seem. There are special words that cause visual effects to occur when a script is "running"; however, people can make meaningful scripts even before they understand how Lexicon works. This leverages what people already know, and tries to make the learning process less rigid.

2.3 Kinds of Expertise

Lexicon balances the image between the time-honored practices of written narrative and the often frustrating dominance of programming codes in digital media. Collaboratively, participants can intervene either as authors who understand words and their meanings, or as programmers, or via a middle-path that involves a little of both roles. Of course, people can simply click their way through the piece, as spastic apes always do when browsing the Internet. (Actually, call me cynical, this is the path of least resistance and the one I think most people will follow, too. So be it.)

2.4 Authoring Software

At the divide between verbal composition and computer code, Lexicon reveals parallels, possibilities, and significant differences. When communicating with words, humans generate an enormous variety of combinations and meanings. Almost everyone can do it, too. The situation for computer-mediated communication is somewhat different,– especially if images are involved. Visual creativity in interactive media is mired in complicated "authoring" software and programming. Lexicon points graphical interactivity toward the dialogic model of spoken languages, and the uncertainty of shared experience. Like stage plays, the various performances of a Lexicon's scripts can produce diverse results. Lexicon offers a live telematic medium for communication and verbal-visual composition.

3. ILLUSIONS OF CREATIVITY?

However, significant aesthetic biases are more deeply embedded in the software, in the codes that actuate the scripts and translate words into imagery. There are limits to the variations of imagery that can be achieved through changes of sequence and performance. In this regard, Lexicon frames some important

questions about the nature of creativity in the context of software. Who will expand the vocabulary?

3.1 Literacy as Commodity

Whereas in speech anyone can coin a neologism without special training, programming visual poetics requires specialized knowledge. Lexicon is designed to allow its vocabulary to grow, yet it does not offer a northwest passage to avoid the expertise problem. Whereas the dominant paradigm of software development treats code as a commodity provided to consumers by experts, Lexicon articulates the linguistic character of software and asks whether something of the old, free-speech paradigm can be salvaged.

3.2 Conclusion

People who are familiar with the Java programming language (or who are simply ambitious) can add to Lexicon's vocabulary using the Lexicon Development Kit (LDK). It is unclear whether this will inspire and enable much participation. Even if it does not, Lexicon will have demonstrated problematic changes in language, authorship and creativity that do not appear to be well understood by the public,— or by artists for that matter. Moreover, it may serve to illustrate concretely the linguistic importance of the open source movement, which, after all, is more than just a vague artsy meme. The Lexicon codes are in fact available for review, revision, and cooperative invention.

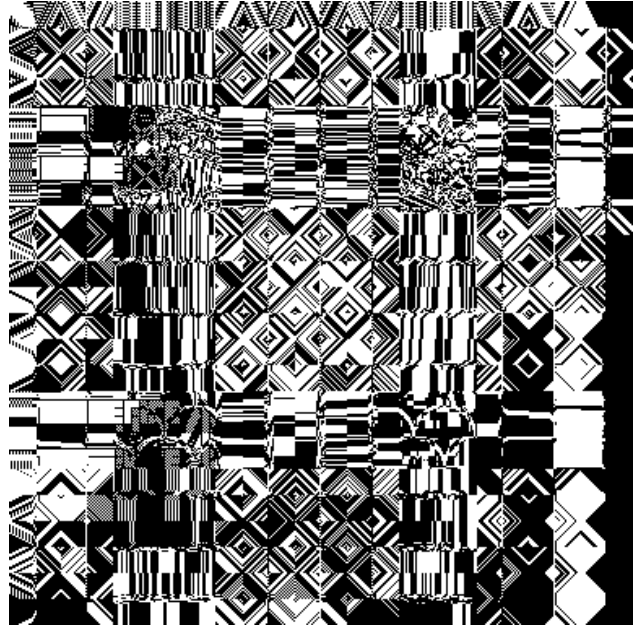


Figure 1. An image from Lexicon, artcontext.org/lexicon/

4. REFERENCES

- [1] Virilio, Paul. *La vitesse de libération*. Editions Galilee, 1995.