

University of Western Australia

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The Cat's Pyjamas

Abstract:

In a near-future, a woman continues her relationship with her deceased husband with the assistance of an algorithmic intervention that recycles and reshapes all his Email and text messages into new dialogue as required by the premarital contract they have been required to sign by The Powers, who with good intention seek in all things to ease suffering.

At another level 'The Cat's Pyjamas' is a short metafiction that demonstrates how a writer works beyond the limitations of areas of digital succinctness to find and unite cut-up snippets of digital communication into the coherent whole of a short story.

Research Background

Recognizing the role of the Dadists of the 1920s and drawing from William S Burroughs and Brion Gysin's popular ideas of cut-up theory, content for this story is borrowed from short Email and text message snippets between two real people over a 24-hour period of time. The messages are reconstructed to form a larger work situated in a near-future technological society focused on the practice of compassion above all, with the goal of exploring the question of whether with the assistance of a machine the written word might effectively serve as a bond to the other side. The work uses a more conscious approach to aleatory reconstruction than in traditional cut-up. While Kenneth Goldsmith's argument that meaningful works can be created from the Internet through 'alchemical recuperation' (Goldsmith 2014) seems to suggest a magical process to sifting digital content into story, the author seeks to find meaning through a writerly craft-person's approach and through incorporating gathered data into a 'dramatic representation of a mystical experience' (Miller 1957, 47).

Research Contribution

'The Cat's Pyjamas' problematizes the issue of human relationship to technology that is used with good intent and captures the fleeting and contradictory nature of a human entwined with technological advances.

The work uniquely addresses the theme of the conference by examining the great divide between life and death and the results of the attempt of a digital intervention to bridge the gap and provide comfort.

Research Significance

Response to the work's oral presentation at the 19th annual AAWP conference included recognition that the work is representative of 'a moment in technology' (Kevin Brophy) and 'aleatory' in nature (Karina Quinn and Stephen Abblitt).

Biographical note:

Susan Taylor Suchy's work is strongly influenced by writers who work in the genre of magical realism such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Herbjorg Wassmo. She is also influenced by the ideas of the American Transcendentalists as well as a range of writers who explore ideas of seeing including Henry James, Virginia Woolf and Aldous Huxley. Her recent academic and creative research at UWA explores writing for the social media marketplace.

Notes:

Goldsmith, Kenneth 2014 *The New Yorker*

<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/wastingtime-on-the-internet>

Miller, James 1957 *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* University of Chicago Press

Key words: Near future fiction; aleatory; metafiction; love; death

The Cat's Pyjamas

Once upon a time there was a boy named Jack and a girl named Jenny. They both wished for the same two things in life. They each wanted to be a writer and they each wanted a magical love, that is, a partner to be creative with. Jack and Jenny lived a lot of life before they met, but one day when Jack had become a man and Jenny had become a woman, they did meet, and they recognized each other in a magical flash of a moment, like in a movie. So they moved in together, and soon after, Jack died.

From the opposite side, Jenny takes time to center herself, as she does each morning, by sitting in her car at Mum-boy-yet-jinnong, the place looking out to where the sea meets the sky. After meditating, she eats two mandarins and between wind and sun showers, she turns on her phone to receive Jack's message.

He writes to Jenny in their secret, silly way: 'Good morning, Dear Coo. Happy rainy Sunday. With stuffy bear nose I slept on three pillows 'til after eight. Mmmm, and soon tea, with seaside thoughts of you.'

She tries to respond with poetry, but text message engineers don't care to give space to a poem of a certain length, so she telegraphs as one must with a phone message: 'Hello, dear Hoo. Hope the warmth and steam of tea brings relief. Will send new poem soon.'

Their first message exchange of each day is something to this effect—a text of love or poetry. The day will end with a final love note from him, to which she will respond. That is the frame that has been created for their daily narrative. In between, and when time allows, they exchange Zen poems and esoteric readings, visions and ideas, and the quotidian details of their lives. She had accepted the framework when she signed The Contract, a premarital agreement arranging the minutia of their lives and afterlives as was required by The Powers; both of them had, though somewhat unwillingly. Now, although she recognizes something of herself and of him in the communications, she thinks, Hoo and Coo, their once-private pet names, are something else--children, or the murmuring of amorous doves calling to each other from afar, or the ancients themselves, or maybe nothing more than silly sounds, drifting across their growing digital chasm. She wonders: is that all we are now, words filling in dark spaces, voices in digital places?

Her dark thoughts are diverted by his enthusiastic response: 'Oh boy. A new Coopem,

lucky me! Thank you dearest one. I love you.'

The cold air and a desperate need to communicate back hurries her on to the House of Yall. Sunday tends to be a good day there, allowing her time off from her usual caregiver duties, and time to do something for herself while the others attend church or sleep late. The empty kitchen offers a calm room for tea and toast making. While she eats and drinks, her mother comes in to visit, long enough for Jenny to think:

cyn comes home from church
to tell of genesis,
order out of chaos,
and her figurings
on the meanings of life and its circular nature.
i listen and eat an apple

and then make a second pot of green tea to take to my little bedroom.

Her mother lives by the old ways and doesn't understand what the technology is asking of Jenny, doesn't understand how a computer algorithm could reconstruct another person into almost existence. Her mother, like all from her generation, were not required to change, not required to sign The Contract. The Powers decided they would just let them expire and that they were harmless. After all, the goal of The Contract was to end suffering.

Preparing to work, Jenny wraps herself into a heavy Egyptian-cotton bathrobe, twists her hair into a knot on top of her head, and sits down at the child-sized desk in the corner by the window. For a moment, her eye catches on the tired potted rose plant on the sill. 'Hello, dear one' she murmurs to it before moving on to text: 'Oh, Hoo. You are sweet. Am back at Yall. Shaal write up the poem and send soon.'

She goes to work, typing up an email version of the text-message that had refused to be sent earlier. To let him know what is happening, she decides to text message and at this point sees her typo on the previous message. 'Shaal,' she now jokes 'is Hebrew for: poem is flying through the airwaves to you.' She emails 'Bob'.

Bob

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Two black figures bob,
Yes, Bob.
And Rhyde with him.

Together they wait.
Bob and Rhyde are waiters
By night.

But in this storm-tossed morning,
Far from the shop and shore,
They sit.

Waves rise from all directions.
What appears rough chaos from the beach
Offers an opening to connections.

Bob, then Rhyde, take chances.
Some hits,
Others misses.

Drifting North, they realize.
Their Missus' wait on the cliff side,
Watching
Two black figures
bob and ride.

A minute later she receives Hoo's review: 'I shall say your shaal named Bob is fun and playful and doubly sweet, a continuation of your other seaside poems. I feel and see the ocean, the shore, and beach, the shaal and Wovements.'

'Wovements?! Oh, she did like wovements. Wave movements. What a great word.' She laughs.

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Hoo sends a funny face at his typo. 'Movements of the orevs in the lines,' he writes.

What language is orevs? she wonders, but before she can ask he sends a second message: 'I'm so happy you are making these fine Zen expressions, and here we are again, riffing together even in our typos. (This keyboard don't have no wrong words!)

This last line she knows as his fond reference to the jazz piano maestro Thelonious Monk's comment that 'the piano ain't got no wrong notes'. Orevs must have been a typo she concludes.

Encouraged by his comments, she continues with her revisions, working undisturbed but aware of the minor household activities, her mother preparing lunch for herself, the sounds of movements in the bathroom, and Yinyang, the tuxedo cat, entering the room to lay on the bed.

Another email pops up: 'Hi Coo, When I first read "Bob", I thought you meant they were waiters, like in a restaurant—and by the fact that you wrote "by night" leads me to think this was intentional, that and also knowing your sly sense of humor. They seem to be waiters during the day as well, though in a wait-and-see waiting way.'

Wrapping a blanket around her legs, she returns to work. A technical discovery and a marketing idea occur when she moves the poems to her Apple 'Notes'. She realizes that the 'speech' edit function can allow a digital voice to read the words aloud. This reader, she thinks, gives the exact words and punctuation indicated, not her own auditory inflections and flaws in hearing and writing English. After trying out different voices and finding the U.S. Eastern seaboard male the most comfortable to her ear, she revises accordingly until a new absolute of words and flow emerges. The marketing idea is a footnote. [i]

By three o'clock she has something to send. 'Hi, Hoo. Have spent the last hour revising. Fun. Using diction voice to hear better. Interesting. I think it helps this crow in the storm':

crow stumbles

awkward earth-steps

on stick legs

seeking

sustenance offered

between rocks

in slipping sands
grasping beak and claw
for life,
small creature comfort
in wind's bluster
finding lifted grace.

As ever (just as he always had been), the response is immediate. 'You have animated the crow splendidly, just as a crow is: not a silly cartoon, which is superficial, but silly in his own oblique way. Your touch is perfect, allowing the humor to arise without trivializing it. You give us what you are seeing and do not play into common ideas about creatures, or try to make it artistic (though of course it is, in the truest sense of connection between observer, observed, and expression). This Coo crow poem is a joy, and that's no exaggeration.'

Jenny laughs at it all. The feedback values her work far more than it deserves, but this is the nature of a machine, and she wonders how much changing things to suit a machine destroys the human quality, the very uniqueness of her voice, of any one's voice. Will we all become so improved by machines until we are nothing but perfect word communications flying back and forth through space?

She wants to read the rest of what he has written to her, wants to write more, but needs to get some lunch, needs to care for herself. She puts some broccoli and a tomato soup broth in a pot on the stove to warm, and stretches while she waits. When the soup has warmed she grates Swiss cheese on top and sits down in the sunny spot by the window to eat and appreciate the gifts of the earth and people who have provided for her.

After washing up, Jenny returns to her desk to look up the meaning of 'shaal', wondering if it could be a real word. On her phone, a text message arrives: 'Great series you've got going, Coo. All little gems of your clear poetic voice. You are my very favorite poet in the world'.

'Thank you,' she tells him. 'I just Googled "shaal" and find it really is a Hebrew word, and not merely a phone text typo. It means: "to ask, inquire, consult". So the poem flying through the airwaves was an "ask". That is, I asked what you thought, and you sweetly

and generously shared back.'

She thinks things are a bit confused between them about the diction business, but knows that if reality starts to be examined too closely everything falls apart, the artifice collapses. What matters is that they play together. Keeping the doubt out used to be easier for her, and she wonders could there be value in her hesitation to play.

A slew of kisses arrives on the small phone screen followed by: 'Oh that's curious. Orev, the Hebrew word for crow and raven, also means "evening, mixture, and pleasant". A panoramic poetry you have there.'

'We, Hoo. We do,' Coo smiles back. 'That is beautiful and poetic. Thank you, my true love.' She sends the message and opens her computer to begin the process for the story design that has formulated in her mind. On a new Word document, she begins to compose the introduction for 'The Cat's Pyjamas' and soon all the pieces flow together. As she composes the final paragraph, another text message comes through, offering the right final note for their poetic interlude: 'Oh, Coo. I do so love you. Yes, We. That is the joy, the breadth, the depth. We are blessed and we will honor our blessing and gifts.'

Jenny turns from the computer and sits staring at the poor dried-out rose that Jack had given her so long ago. She thinks about how all the water and words in the world don't seem to bring life. She thinks about how in the machine, every day, he appears. In the words there is an energy that is Jack still, but she knows that all illusions end, that she has created a story, they have created a story, and that the world will challenge the story, for lovers must always be challenged, and that what is the cat's pyjamas one day is passé the next. She now accepts that she must stay on this side. From the start they had fallen in love with the creative energy they saw in each other, in love with the word play, in love with the life of the writer, and an electrical current had charged through them in their first and every physical kiss; but now, she knows, no matter how well the Hoo program responds and loves and supports her work, sending messages across an ever-widening space when real kisses and contact never happen, true intimacy can be nothing but an artifice. Somewhere deep inside, Jenny believes and clings to the hope that there is something else, something still alive between them, something transcendent, and so she writes her part: 'Yes, dear Hoo. Always love. Coo', and tomorrow she will send all of this to The Editors.

Now Jenny knows she has done enough of The Recovery work and what she needs is

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to be in a park on a warm summer day, laying on a blanket under an old, thick-trunked tree with a kind breeze blowing cool on her skin as she stares up into the leaves and branches at a kookaburra watching her while she listens to parrots chattering their social concerns. She will laugh away her own worries and hold someone, if only for a few moments, as time moves on.

Endnotes:

[i] We ask Apple Inc. to consider a sponsoring relationship because we reference their technology. This is a product placement of sorts.