Dystopic plagiarized platforms: found text, corrupted code, and robotic poetics.

Abstract:

The (auto)biography of 김정은 (2020) is a conceptual 'found' artwork in VII parts. It combines found code with found text. Multiple 'found' computational pieces have been modified with vocabulary drawn from multiple speeches delivered by the current North Korean Leader, Kim Jong-un/김정은. In addition, vocabulary and phrases from journalism critical of the North Korean regime are also incorporated into these generative works. On the one hand, this work is an experiment in propaganda delivery: it emulates the relentlessness of the North Korean indoctrination machine and shows how born-digital writing can be stolen and misused; in so doing, it reveals digital literature's power. As part of this process, a Kim Jong-un 'poetic robot' has been created to demonstrate how such propaganda might be delivered/forced upon a populace. This work also seeks to capture the perspective of a curious, intelligent yet powerless North Korean citizen and demonstrate how they might (struggle to) engage with local culture. This paper reflects on this artwork in relation to Critical Code Studies (Marino, 2020). Specifically, it looks at how code can be adopted and exploited. Through practice-led research (Smith and Dean, 2009), this work deliberately exploits the code of multiple digital poets in order to show how such works might be corrupted. These subsequent works can be regarded as an example of third generation electronic literature (Flores, 2019). These works can also be regarded as an example of 'overt plagiarism' (Holland-Batt and Jeffery, 2020). If the works' 'fictional' construction is believed, then it would be an example of 'covert plagiarism'. Additionally, this paper looks at how this code and corrupted poetry could be reformed into robotic poetics (Winder, 2004). Through this extension to robotic poetics, this paper extends the notion of Critical Code Studies, by extending it to robotics, and interrogating what impact such an artefact has on transforming the initial work.

Key words:
Robotic Poetics – Dystopia – Overt Plagiarism – Found Text – Code Studies

The (auto)biography of 김정은 is a conceptual 'found' artwork in VII parts. It combines found code with found text. Multiple 'found' computational pieces have been modified with vocabulary drawn from multiple speeches delivered by the current North Korean Leader, Kim Jong-un/김정은. In addition, vocabulary and phrases from journalism critical of the North Korean regime has also been incorporated into these generative works. This work represents a 'dystopic platform'. On the one hand, this work is an experiment in propaganda delivery: it emulates the relentlessness of the North Korean indoctrination machine and shows how born-digital writing can be stolen and misused; in so doing, it reveals digital literature's power. As part of this process, with the input and assistance of Canadian industrial automation specialist Brett Griffin and *Griffin Prototyping,* a Kim Jong-un 'poetic robot' was created to demonstrate how such propaganda might be delivered/forced upon a populace. This paper reflects on this artwork, specifically in relation to how code can be adopted and exploited. In addition to exploring hypothetical propaganda platforms, this project also seeks to capture the perspective of a curious, intelligent, yet powerless North Korean citizen and demonstrate how they might (struggle to) engage with local culture. The work can be regarded as an example of 'overt plagiarism' (Holland-Batt and Jeffery, 2020), though within the diegetic 'world' of the piece, the smaller works would be regarded as 'covert plagiarism'. Similarly, the broader work as a whole would be regarded as an example of second generation electronic literature, while the smaller works within the diegetic world of the work could be regarded as examples of third generation electronic literature (Flores, 2019). Additionally, this paper looks at how code and corrupted poetry can be reformed into robotic poetics (Winder, 2004) and possibilities. Through an examination of this extension to robotics, this paper further interrogates what impact such an artefact has on transforming the initial code.

The initial inspiration for this work was to corrupt existing digital literature using the perspective and vocabulary of a totalitarian force. Six digital poetic works from the publication *Taper* (an online literary magazine for small computational pieces) were chosen: *for the pool players at the Golden Shovel* by Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, *US* by Nick Montfort, *If Jupiter had turned into a Star* by Everest Pipkin, *Thermodynamics* by Sebastian Bartlett, *Rise* by Angela Chang, and *(((((0))))* by Eugenio Tisselli. Works from *Taper* were chosen for two reasons. Firstly, the code of works published in *Taper* is free to use and open source. Secondly, *Taper's* submissions have clearly defined set parameters: works must not use any external libraries or APIs, nor link to any external resources, including fonts; and the works

must not exceed more than 2KB (2048 bytes). Therefore, these works allowed for a level of similarity that would allow the reader to consistently compare the impact on the various individual works. The vocabulary in these computational works was replaced with vocabulary taken from North Korean propaganda and works critical of the North Korean regime. Part I uses text of a speech delivered by Kim Jong Un at the military parade held in celebration of the 70th founding anniversary of the KPA, as reported and translated by the Korean Central News Agency and *North Korea: no liberty, humour, irony ... no love* by Christopher Hitchens. Part II uses vocabulary taken from text of a speech delivered by Kim Jong Un at the grand banquet hosted by Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People on March 28, 2018, as reported and translated by the Korean Central News Agency and *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag*, by Kang Chol-hwan and Pierre Rigoulot. Part III uses phrases taken from Kim Jong Un's 2019 New Year Address and *North Korea: Everything you need to know about the country* by the BBC. Part IV uses vocabulary taken from the Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit and *When North Korea Falls* by Robert D. Kaplan. Part V uses phrases taken from the Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula and *Tall storey? North Korea's infamous 'Hotel of Doom' to open shortly, maybe* by Justin McCurry. Part VI takes vocabulary from The Feats Performed by the Great Victors Will Remain for Ever and *Kim Jong Un has quietly built a 7,000-man cyber army that gives North Korea an edge nuclear weapons don't* by Ellen Ioanes.

This paper/project is an example of practice-led research. Practice-led research is defined by Smith and Dean (2009) as:

> an activity which can appear in a variety of guises across the spectrum of practice and research. It can be basic research carried out independent of creative work (though it may be subsequently applied to it); research conducted in the process of shaping an artwork; or research which is the documentation, theorisation and contextualisation of an artwork – and the process of making it – by its creator. (3)

This research, then, is a combination of all three of Smith and Dean's definitions. Smith and Dean continue to argue that the term 'practice-led research and its affiliates (practice-based research, practice as research)' (5) are used to make two arguments about practice. First, 'the creative work in itself is a form of research and generates detectable research outputs' (5).

The second argument suggests that creative practice can lead to specialised research insights (6). This paper, then, is an example of Smith and Dean's second argument in that it 'highlights the insights, conceptualisation and theorisation which can arise when artists reflect on and document their own creative practice' (6).

The work can also be regarded as a work of 'overt plagiarism' (Holland-Batt and Jeffery, 2020). The concept of found poetry – such as the cento as explored by the Dadaists and surrealists and more recently in works by American conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith, who regards poetry as an act of 'uncreative writing' or 'curation and transcription' – could be applied to this work. Within the diegetic world of the broader work, however, the code utilised could be regarded as 'covert plagiarism'. Covert plagiarism is defined as works that attempt to conceal theft. For example, Graham Nunn's 'Platypus' uses scaffolded plagiarism to 'covertly' plagiarise Helen Dunmore's 'Heron' (Passmore, 2013). Though Nunn later argued that he was performing a work of overt plagiarism, the lack of acknowledgement in the initial publication suggests otherwise. Similarly, the use of code by the fictional North Korean propagandists the work imagines would most certainly go unacknowledged.

The (auto)biography of 김정은 can also be regarded as an example of second generation electronic literature that contains third generation work. The second generation of electronic literature, Flores (2019) argues, begins in 1995 with the Web. This generation consists of 'innovative works created with custom interfaces and forms'. This generation continues into the present. The third generation, Flores proposes, starts around 2005. These digital works use 'established platforms with massive user bases, such as social media networks, apps, mobile and touchscreen devices, and Web API services'. This generation coexists with the second. *The (auto)biography of* 김정은 as a whole should be regarded as a second generation work of electronic literature. Contained within the work, however, are numerous shorter works that repurpose digital works from *Taper*. In and of themselves, these works would be regarded as third generation electronic literature.

In my paper, *Collaboration and authority in electronic literature* (2020), I argued that 'in digital literary practices code should be regarded as a meta-authority that denotes authority to specific components of the work'. *The (auto)biography of* 김정은 confirms this proposal. While the code of any work of electronic literature has the authority to denote power to the media fragments within the work, it does not have authority in and of itself. In *Critical Code Studies* (2020), Marino writes:

But the code is not enough in itself. It is crucial to explore context. Who wrote the code? When and why? In what language was the code written? What programming paradigm was used? Was it written for a particular platform (hardware or software)? How did the code change over time? *What material or social constraints impacted the creation of this code? How does this code respond to the context in which it was created? How was the code received by others?* [my italics] (28)

These latter italicised questions are of interest. In this work, I have proposed that a fictional North Korean propagandist has, within the social constraints of DPRK, appropriated this code. Through this work, which filters critical works of the DPRK into DPRK propaganda, I have also attempted to create what the experience may be like for an intelligent yet powerless North Korean citizen, and show how they might (fail to) engage with local culture. Firstly, the vocabulary is made up predominantly of propaganda, but it also contains comparatively smaller amounts of vocabulary drawn from works critical of North Korea. The final digital products therefore contain traces of criticism, but it is never potent enough to be persuasive. Yet beyond this vocabulary, there is also the retained code of the *Taper* works. Part of this practice-led research's purpose is to develop a work to test whether or not the poetics of the code itself communicated something fundamental that is perhaps in conflict with the intentions of the North Korean propaganda. Certainly, none of the creators of the original *Taper* works are North Korean propagandists.

It is therefore perhaps also important to disclose my own relationship to the DPRK. On a personal level, I have some experience with North Korea: as a lecturer at Tsinghua University in Beijing, China, I taught a handful of privileged North Korean students; I have journeyed to Pyongyang, North Korea with a British filmmaking company, where I engaged with a number of very privileged North Koreans; and have (cautiously) discussed these topics with North Koreans working in Beijing. The penultimate question posed by Marino (*How does this code respond to the context in which it was created?*), however, indicates that in creating and engaging with *The (auto)biography of 김정은*, one must also read it as a product of neoliberalism. The 'freedom' to create the work, in and of itself as a 'faux-propaganda' piece, is as much a product of contemporary neoliberalist culture, and as such provides insights into "my" culture as much if not more so than the DPRK's propaganda network and its impact on its citizenry. Propaganda is by no means exclusively practiced by totalitarian

regimes. This project therefore encourages readers to reflect on how any platform can be co-opted and exploited for propagandistic means.

Beyond these generational works, a robotic Kim Jong-Un was created to read the generational works. This emulated a potential propaganda device, similar to the radios installed in North Korean homes whose volume can be turned down but never off. Robotic poetics theorist Winder (2004) writes:

> There is a fundamental link between language and robots. Whatever material constitution they may have – arms and legs, cogs and wheels, and engines – the crucial ingredients, the ones that separate robots from wrenches, are their instructions. Instructions are perhaps inscribed in some concrete medium, but they are quintessentially abstract, existing more in the netherworld of code than in concrete form. That code netherworld is where humans and robots inevitably meet. It is where humans are most robotic and where robots are most human.

Winder defines robotic poetics as 'the study of robotic authors and the automatic generation of creative texts.' Going further, Winder defines future 'interwoven problematics' that concern robotic poetics: 'mechanization, combinatory, virtualization, and abstraction towards metastructures.' These generative works produce 'new' content. At the same time, they are very much delimited. And it is this delimitation that is 'exploited' by the fictional North Korean creator of *The (auto)biography of 김정은*.

Practice-led research is such that the creative interrogation often raises more questions than it answers. For now, it appears that on the question of whether or not works of electronic literature offer a perfect propaganda platform waiting to be exploited (dystopic) or a fundamental artistic impulse that is retained despite potentially nefarious amendments (utopic), it is likely not an either/or but a spectrum. I am left feeling much like a curious yet powerless North Korean citizen, unsure of what the future of such platforms will be, yet I remain alert, constantly listening for the feint traces of truth.

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