**“A More Developed Life”**

Jason Lewis

Presented at the 2nd Annual Conference on Typography and Visual Communication, University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece (July 2004)

I want to thank you all for coming to this talk, and the conference organizers for inviting me to join such an interesting crowd of typographic adventurers.

In preparing for this talk, I spent a fair amount of time re-reading/re-looking at some of Johanna Drucker’s works. **Slide: Drucker 1** Dr. Drucker is a professor at the University of Virginia who does a better job than most – certainly than me – in combining active intellectual practice, with a superlative creative practice, in both of which she is deeply conscious of the way writing technology affects what is written . She comes to the world of visual communication as a maker of artist’s books, with a deep, decades-long involvement with how the physical and visual materiality of text on the page informs its linguistic effect. **Slide: Drucker 2** The artist books she herself makes, some of which are flashing by you onscreen there, exhibit a visual complexity  in which text moves back and forth between language and image. This is a person who clearly doesn’t believe in the immateriality of the text. **Slide: Drucker 3** In her work, the visible form is neither decoration, nor embellishment, nor epiphenomenon, nor is it secondarily meaningful. It is intrinsic and inseparable from the words it materializes.

Prof. Drucker's work – academic and creative - is a direct challenge to those who wish to render the letterform neutral in its affect on the linguistic content. I tend to side with her in this neverending debate about the affect that typography has on the message of the text. **Slide: Comic.** Perhaps it's because I grew up immersed in comic books, where letterists employ an often astonishing admixture of typography with graphic design. **Slide: Poem** Perhaps it's because I've always been much more engaged with poetry, and spent a long time fascinated about what happens to my poems depending on which font I set them in. **Slide: Code** Or perhaps it's because I started programming precisely because of the almost alchemical materialization of very sterile text into action that takes place when you press "run".

Let me return to Prof. Drucker for a moment. Here's a passage from *Figuring the Word*, a series of short articles by and interviews with her:

> **Slide.** Information is part of each incarnation or embodiment-the material history of the artifact contributing to the way it is read… Though the sequence of material embodiments…is subject to the same kind of mutability to which an electronic document is subject, there is always a trace in material of the decisions, history, and effects of that material embodiment. By contrast, the electronic document has no stable material identity, exists ultimately as a disembodied code, and thus bears no "information" within its material form. It's the loss of this (often considered incidental)

> information which distinguishes the electronic from the material document.[1]

This is a somewhat disheartening thing to read about one's chosen medium – that it's construction doesn't embody any history, that it bears no "information" in its material form. I am not about to argue that code is embodied in the same way the printed page is, but I do think it's worthwile to consider the "materiality" of digital objects. The three different ways of working with text that I showed previously – comics, poetics and code - are what have guided my explorations of digital text. They all get to the question of the "materiality" of text in different ways.

**Slide: Activetext clip.** Itt's precisely because of the historical information "embodied" in the code of standard text-handling software that we – my collaborator Alex Weyers and I – started the ActiveText project in 1999.

At that point, standard software for displaying text treated typography as a fundamentally static medium, a way of translating the craft, detail and accuracy of the letterpress onto the screen and back out again to print. This structural bias towards print has meant that, typically, much time and effort had to be expended in order to make type behave dynamically or, harder still, interactively. It was more of a construction effort than a writing effort. There were some interesting efforts at engaging computation in an active way, such as LettError's Beowolf font or the work done at the MIT Media Laboratory's Visual Language Workshop. But, given our interest in writing with interactivity and

[1] Drucker, Johanna. Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics. p. 43. New York : Granary Books, 1998.

dynamic form and computation as an integral component of the text, we thought it worthwhile to spend time trying to create an actual writing environment.

**Slide: It's Alive!** This led to It's Alive!, a dynamic and interactive text editor.

*It's Alive! video*

**Slide: TextOrgan.** We took it one step further with TextOrgan, where working with text becomes a performative act akin to painting:

*TextOrgan video*

One signature aspect of this work has been to treat letterforms as raw material out which dynamic compositions can be made. Another is to use code to define different ways in which to work with that raw material.

In a way, my search for materiality in these experiments was something of an act of desperation - when I write, I don't use pencil and paper, nor do I turn to a letterpress for publication. I write onscreen, and I write things that are meant to be read onscreen – or, sometimes, when I'm feeling ambitious, projected on a wall – so I have to search for materiality in new places. But it's not only desperation. It's also a more general conviction that there is a materiality to digital objects, that their making leaves traces which we can decipher into a history of that object and that history exerts an influence on

the result. It's a question of where to look, and I look to the code. The code is that thing which persists, even as what you see onscreen changes over time, or in response to user action, or, as we will see on Monday when LetError presents TwinType, in response to the weather. The code has a history – programmers rarely start completely from scratch, they take snippets and scaffolding and architecture from previous work. If you look at code carefully, you can see that history, as the current controversy over whether Linus Torvald really authored all of the code in Linux himself or "stole" it from Unix provides proof. And, of course, it is that code which determines what gets materialized in front of the user.

**Slide: NextText.** So this all leads me to the present, and the future. The NextText of the original title for this talk is a new generation of digital text tools, and uses of them, that we have just begun working on this summer. **Slide: applications** The idea here is to take what we learned from the ActiveText work and implement a series of real tools – not just experiments – for doing this sort of work. SoftTyper will allow the user to design and define behavior for her own SoftTypes; Glyphkicker is a dynamic and interactive text editor modeled on It's Alive!; and TextEngine is a tool for performing text in live environments.

The even more important idea is to use them as part of a creative practice, as during the ActiveText work we had become so focused on coding that we forgot the writing part. To illustrate where the NextText creative effort is going, I'll show a couple of clips of work done by some of my students in Concordia's Digital Image/Sound and the Fine Arts

department. First up is an example of the sort of work we might see done with Glyphkicker. This is a short piece done by Brent Skagford, called “Velvet”:

Velvet

And the second is an example of the sort of work we might see done with TextEngine. This is an interactive installation created by Bruno Nadeau, called “Still Standing”.

Still Standing

Having at the beginning of this talk, cloaked myself in Johanna Drucker’s respectability, and then having shown my ingratitude by taking issue with her opinion of the materiality of electronic documents, I feel I must make amends, here at the end, by returning to a point of agreement. In Figuring the Word, she is asked what she thinks of hypertext as a literary form. The substance of her reply I leave you to read when you take my advice and all rush out to buy her book; bur reading her within the context of preparing the talk for this conference, the following anecdote caught my eye:

> **Slide.** While I was in the library yesterday I ran across a “multiple-choice, interactive” novel…about a murder in London. It was written fifteen years ago, so it was hardly innovative, but, in fact, that was what so surprising to me – here was this “ordinary”

> artifact, not even high profile or well-known, to show that the genre had had a more developed life than I had realized.[2]

It is my belief that, fifteen years from now, we will also look back and see that a new genre of writing had been bubbling under the surface for quite some time, and that we too will be pleasantly surprised at what forms the next text had taken as some creative types – writers, typographers, programmers – moved away from attempts to re-create the materiality of the printed word and explored the materiality of computational texts. And I look forward to the rest of the conference, in which I am sure that we will see plenty of evidence of an already "more developed life".

**Slide: Thanks.** Thank you.

[2] Drucker, p. 48.