writing as metadata

semester	fall 2019
title	art750: writing as metadata
location	yale university, 107 green hall
time	tuesdays 1:30–5:20pm
instructor	laurel schwulst, laurel@linkedbyair.net
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class website	http://suddenly.rocks

overview

let's expand what we consider writing to be, and where and how it can live.

at first, when we think of "writing," we might recall primary literary objects like essays, articles, poems, novels, books, etc.

but technology has changed writing (and reading) forever. the surfaces and contexts have grown exponentially. one such surface is "metadata."

the word "metadata" was created by combining "data" with "meta-," which means "transcending." so "metadata" is literally "data about data." metadata is the information we create, store, and share to describe things. it is the oxygen of information systems and comes in many forms.

the primary features of software we use every day are metadata-driven. we might listen to music on spotify or itunes; post photos on instagram; locate videos on youtube; manage your finances through quickbooks; connect with others via email, text, and social media; and store lengthy contact lists on our mobile devices. all these content comes with metadata… information about the item's creation, name, features, etc.

web pages often have metadata embedded in them. so in this class, we'll learn beginning web markup and programming (html, css, javascript, php) and web publishing skills (using a hosting provider through sftp and ssh, connecting hosting to a domain name). no prior programming experience is required to begin.

the poet tan lin writes, "people forget a book or codex is a technology. just as metadata tags are used to comb through information, reading, too, is a kind of search function." that said, not all projects assigned in this class need be made with code. we will explore how books are metadata-driven expressions too.

in this class, we'll pay special attention to metadata, treating it as a writing surface. any well-rounded work (not only writing, but art, design, music, etc.) treats its metadata carefully. metadata can add to, or even be the essence of, the story. metadata often lives on in ways we don't expect.

writing is hard
but what if...
writing = finding
writing = harvesting
writing = connecting

metadata is boring
but what if...
metadata = story
metadata = juice
metadata = soul
metadata = alive

poetry is too much
poetry is too raw
but what if...
poetry = wallpaper
poetry = transitions
poetry = timing

languages (programming, foreign) are complicated
but what if...
language = way of understanding the world
language = light

structure

over the course of the semester, this class will meet 13 times—once a week. participants will be assigned 11 readings and 5 projects. one defining characteristic of this course is that projects overlap, so participants will be expected to be working on them simultaneously and show progress on multiple projects at once (see "calendar" for details). participants will also be responsible for maintaining an up-to-date class website to house reading responses, projects, and project documentation. in-class activities include: constraint-based writing exercises, lectures, discussions, group and 1-on1 critiques, coding demonstrations, small group activities, and project presentations.

tools

- computer (mac*, pc)
- a modern web browser (google chrome*, mozilla firefox, safari)
- a text editor (atom*, sublime text, vscode, brackets, coda)
- a hosting provider that supports php (nearlyfreespeech.net*)
- a domain or special subdomain for this class (name.com*)
- an sftp program (transmit*, cyberduck, filezilla)

* used in class demos

readings

readings are assigned each week (excluding the last week). participants are expected to complete each reading and post 3 questions or topics for discussion by midnight the night before each class to their class website. all readings are texts unless otherwise specified below.

r1 … understanding metadata: what is metadata? what is it for? — jenn riley, 2017
r2 … octavia butler and samuel delany in conversation at mit, 1998
r3 … alt text as poetry — shannon finnegan, 2019–
r4 … on translation — minae mizumura, 2004
r5 … when the internet asks you to fill out a form, do it — paul ford, 2016
r6 … once it's typed it's published — john chris jones, 1979
r7 … digital: a love story — christine love, 2010 (game)
r8 … eleven minute painting — tan lin, 2002 (video)
r9 … interview with tan lin on bomb — katherine elaine sanders, 2010
r10 … rediscovering literacy — venkatesh rao, 2012
r11 … the rejection of closure — lyn hejinian, 1983

projects

p1 … portrait

choose an object that represents you. create a list of 25 metadata for this object. then create 25 unique webpages. each webpage must contain one metadata text. focus on formally and conceptually depicting this quality while obeying the given constraints (which can be seen in detail on the class website). these constraints are designed to help you focus on and experiment with each unique technology (html, css, javascript, php). once all 25 webpages are complete, create a landing page and a consistent navigation to move between the webpages.

<u>p2 … 3*n images</u>

bring in 3 images that are as dissimilar to each other as possible. then using all images brought in by the class together, create your own image taxonomy. decide on which metadata you'd like to store for each image. consider writing and presenting image descriptions. place the images into at least 5 or more categories, tags, folders—your own filtering system. present your system in three different forms: a map, a publication, and a video.

<u>p3 … writer's notebook</u>

poet judy malloy explains, "a writer's notebook is not a final paper but rather reflects the development of a work or series of works. in the informal, recursive, yet productive practice of creating notebooks online, ideas and sources are developed and slowly emerge." in a similar spirit, create and maintain a web writing notebook where you regularly note the evolution of your projects and thinking for this class. you can also show any regular "harvesting" of texts or source material you do here. you might also consider some writing constraint(s) in process or technology. keep it simple—try using one single html page, for example. or you can use a web product or service you're curious about. host on your class website.
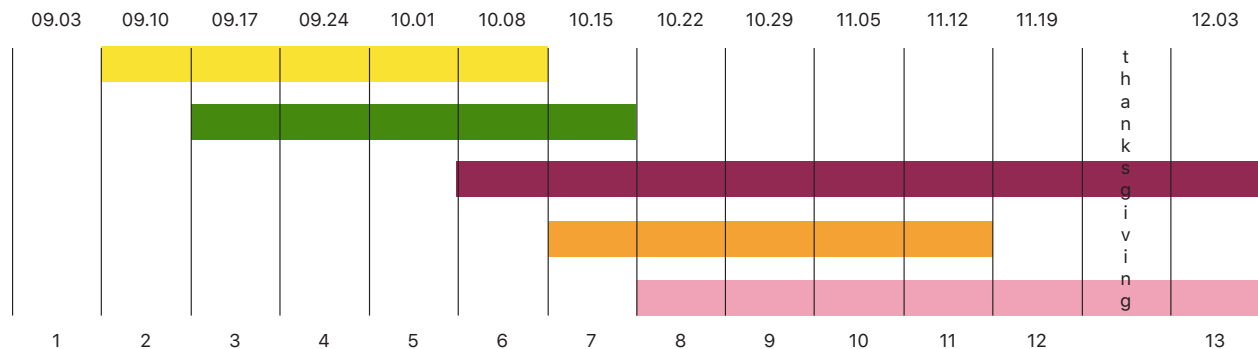
<u>p4 … publishing as side effect</u>

in medicine, a side effect is a secondary, typically undesirable, effect of a drug or medical treatment. but what if a side effect could be therapeutic, or beneficial to your practice, and in the form of a written publication? in this spirit, create a new publication process. aim to form a subconscious publication or series of publications. "once it's typed it's published," wrote designer john chris jones, who noted this process might involve "speed, risk, and enjoyment." to begin, identify something you do regularly. for example, it could be getting a project done, sending emails, taking screenshots, paying someone, etc. how could publication be a natural side-effect of something you already do? how can publishing be lighter and faster?

<u>p5 … screensaver as score</u>

create an event score. (a score is a text or graphical notation that serves as a proposal or instructions for future actions.) then make a screensaver for use in the background of your event. (a screensaver is a graphics program that helps prevent static images from burning into the phosphors of cathode tube monitors and causing permanent damage when the computer is not in use. but modern monitors are not susceptible to this problem, so today the function of screensavers is debatable. they might simply be symbols of ambience, similar to hold music or subway art.) your screensaver should be built with html, css, and javascript and published at a unique domain name with a title and favicon. finally, present your screensaver in its idealized environment. your choice of physical set should hint

towards the action. (is the screensaver projected like a monument? or is it on a computer, tablet, phone? what other objects are near it? what kind of world does your action happen in?) if desired, perform your action with your screensaver. if not, present the score with your screensaver.

calendar

09.03	09.10	09.17	09.24	10.01	10.08	10.15	10.22	10.29	11.05	11.12	11.19		12.03

thanksgiving

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13

- 🟨 p1 … portrait
- 🟩 p2 … 3*n images
- 🟥 p3 … writer's notebook
- 🟧 p4 … publishing as side effect
- 🟪 p5 … screensaver as score

<u>09.03</u> … 1
introduction, harm's lecture, setting up hosting, folder poetry

<u>09.10</u> … 2
html, r1 due, p1 everyone shows their objects

<u>09.17</u> … 3
css, r2 due, p1a (html levels) due, p2 everyone shows their 3 dissimilar images

<u>09.24</u> … 4
javascript, r3 due, p1b (css levels) due, p2 first sketches

<u>10.01</u> … 5
php, r4 due, p1c (javascript level) and sketch of navigation due, p2 in-progress

<u>10.08</u> … 6
r5 due, p1d landing page and navigation system complete, p2 in-progress, p3 start

<u>10.15</u> … 7
r6 due, p2 final, p4 show first sketches

<u>10.22</u> … 8
r7 due, p4 in-progress, p3 show evolution

<u>10.29</u> … 9
r8 due, p4 in-progress, p5 event score sketches

<u>11.05</u> … 10
r9 due, p4 in-progress, p5 screensaver prototype

<u>11.12</u> … 11
r10 due, p4 final, p5 screensaver prototype, p3 update on progress

<u>11.19</u> … 12
r11 due, p5 final screensaver and score due

~ thanksgiving recess ~

<u>12.03</u> … 13
r12 due, p5 final exhibition of screensavers in their ideal environments

eligibility

~12 spots available. priority given to first year graduate students in the graphic design MFA. if more than 12 people come to the first day, you will hear from me via email by friday, september 6th about your status in the class.

attendance

attendance is important. three or more absences will result in a failing grade. three or more late arrivals (more than 15 minutes late) equals an absence. if you absolutely must miss class, please email me in advance.

academic integrity

students will become familiar with using pre-existing language, images, and software as raw material while creating entirely new works. while making websites, we will learn which technologies could be appropriated and how to properly credit their inclusion.

from academic integrity at mit: "writing code":
https://integrity.mit.edu/handbook/writing-code

writing code is similar to academic writing in that when you use or adapt code developed by someone else as part of your project, you must cite your source. however, instead of quoting or paraphrasing a source, you include an inline comment in the code. these comments not only ensure you are giving proper credit, but help with code understanding and debugging. … you should not simply re-use code as the solution to an assignment. like academic writing, your code can incorporate the ideas of others but should reflect your original approach to the problem.

try retyping someone else's code instead of copy and pasting it. be careful about pasting huge blocks of code. remember to do things one step at a time so you truly understand each piece of code's unique function.

technology policy

while this course is about technology, the policy in this course is simple: be considerate of your fellow classmates. for example, if someone is presenting their work, don't simultaneously use your device. put your cell phones, tablets, and laptops away in order to provide the presenter your active attention.

publication team

this class will have an outside publication component. (i would like to publish aspects of this class to the world in some way—the format is up for discussion.) i am looking for 2-3 volunteers for the "publication team" who would help author and shape this with me.

credits

this class that has been generously shaped and supported by many, including melanie hoff, rosa mcelheny, dan michaelson, mindy seu, dan taeyoung, and harm van den dorpel. special thanks to john provencher for design inspiration on this year's class website. and thanks to ayham ghraowi and sheila levrant de bretteville for helping start this class last year in its prior form, "programming as writing."

this document

last updated	september 2, 2019
version	2
note	the information in this document is subject to change. please refer to the class website, http://suddenly.rocks, for the most up-to-date version.