NEW TERRITORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH DIGITAL POET HELEN SWORD

Paula Green

The digital age has opened up new possibilities for poetry, not just in allowing wider global access to the poems and poets of the world, but in how we produce and engage with poems. In *99 Ways into New Zealand Poetry* (Auckland: Vintage, 2010), I used several of the poems on Helen Sword's website, *[The Stoneflower Path](#)*, to discuss what digital poetry can do along with the questions that it raises:

> While a reader needs to bring a static poem on the page to life through his or her intellectual, emotional and intuitive reading of it, and that event changes according to the perspective of a particular reader, the digital reader may also be asked to set the poem in motion physically. Sword's poems raise a number of questions about the use of technology in relation to the poem. Is it a matter of performing, translating or transforming a pre-written poem into a digital or hypermedia format? Or is it a matter of creating a poem that depends upon hypermedia for its very existence? In many cases, there is the option to read or hear Sword's digital poems as straight texts and audio files, but her consistent, and playful, transformation of poems visually underlines the notion that the way we ought to read a poem is never set in concrete (284).

Paula: Helen, digital poetry is like a new gift. It has an enormous range of possibilities that are not immediately apparent but that lead poetry in multiple directions. However, it is useful to identify two key approaches: digital poets can transform or translate an existing poem into the

new medium, or they can create new digital poems from scratch. Let's begin by exploring what digital technology can add to the existing poem in print.

Helen: That's the case of a poem that was 'born textual', then transformed into a new digital entity. I enjoy the challenge of digitizing an existing poem; but I also have some reservations about the process. Basically, you're taking a poem that already works perfectly well as pure text, and you're adding 'stuff' to it; in doing so, you're directing the reader's attention in a particular way. It's a bit like setting a poem to music: you're channeling the audience's emotions in one direction rather than letting them find their own path.

My very first digital poem was a 'translation' or digital interpretation of Apirana Taylor's poem *Hinemoa's Daughter* for the 2007 Great New Zealand Digi-Poem competition sponsored by the the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre (**nzepc**). The competition rules required me to use the audio recording of Taylor reading his own poem, so I decided to produce an interactive digital version that would allow readers to create their own sound mixes. I started with a visual image inspired by the first lines of the poem: 'Her hair is so long / you could plait it all the way to the moon / and weave it with a sprinkling of stars'. The image itself – three strands of text surrounded by stars and a full moon – is very simple and static. However, when you click on each of the stars you open a sound file linked to a different section of the poem. You can play these sound clips in any order; you can even click on a single star repeatedly to get a kind of echo effect. So the digipoem is very much my *interpretation* of Taylor's poem; I use visual imagery and sound to call attention to its braided images and interwoven voices. A different digital poet would no doubt approach the poem very differently.

Paula: Your music analogy underlines the strengths and weaknesses of translating a poem from a print to a digital version. It is also like taking a novel and transforming it into film - it becomes a different entity, which is going to have its own new points of entry that might be inspired, revitalising or, worst-case scenario, disastrous. You could also think of it as a cover version of someone else's song. You can produce something new and exciting and remarkable, but on the

40

other hand it is possible that if you lay down music and add visual images, you are actually drowning out the internal music of the existing poem.

Helen: Because I'm so conscious of this danger, I like to provide readers with other ways of experiencing that internal music. On my website *The Stoneflower Path*, every poem is offered in three distinct versions: as plain text *and* as voice recording *and* as a digital poem. So if you want to read or listen to the text of the poem on its own, you can. But you're also invited to compare the different versions and to make your own judgments about what is gained and what is lost when visual and hypertextual elements are introduced.

Paula: Let's turn to the poem that is created from scratch or 'born digital' – when it does not have its origins in print. As a start it would be useful to outline the key features that are available to the digital poet compared to the traditional poet.

Helen: Well, those features partly depend on the poet's grasp of digital technology. I don't write my own code; I'm completely dependent on commercial software programs like Dreamweaver and Photoshop and Flash, which imposes certain limitations on what I can do. But I've long since learned that the most striking and effective digital poems are often the ones produced using the simplest technology. So I don't worry all about the whizzy technological tricks I haven't yet mastered. Instead, I focus on making the most of relatively simple techniques, such as using hyperlinks to create a non-linear or random sequence.

Paula: Can you show us some examples that illustrate how a digital poem can change the reading experience for the reader?

Helen: One example is *Rēinga,* which appeared in an issue of *ka mate ka ora* [issue #7] devoted to poetry and the visual arts. I based the poem on a static image, a mosaic depicting an iconic New Zealand coastal scene. The original

mosaic now resides in California, but the digipoem gives it a new existence in cyberspace. Cape Reinga is the place in the Far North where, according to Māori legend, the souls of the dead leap down the roots of the old pohutakawa tree and start their journey to Hawaiiki. The poem begins 'at the place of leaping' – everybody gets the same first line, as you would when you read a traditional poem. But as soon as you start moving your mouse around to find the next link, you find you have two choices. There are two sailboats: one of them will take you to the line 'This is how I want to live'; the other one will take you to the line 'This is how I want to die'. It's your choice which of these forking paths you want to follow. From then on, every link you click on takes you to a new image based on the original mosaic; I think I used every single available Photoshop filter. And on each new page, the 18 pohutukawa blossoms, the 2 sailboats and the moon are all hyperlinks that lead you elsewhere. I have randomized the links as much as possible, so that there is no way I could predict anybody's choices, anybody's path through the poem; there are literally millions of different combinatory possibilities. You can go on clicking forever, or you can decide at some point that you are tired of it and stop. This is of course radically different from how a linear poem works, where you get the same poem every time. Or maybe it's not so different… even with a traditional text, every reader brings a unique perspective to the poem. So I guess you could say that I'm using the hyperlinks in *Rēinga* to call attention to the reading process itself, even while I'm playing with and subverting readers' expectations.

In another one of my poems, *Inspiration*, I use mouse-overs rather than hyperlinks to raise similar questions. Like *Rēinga,* this poem starts with a mosaic frame: I don't need to use the actual words 'mosaic' or 'frame' to let readers know that both images have a powerful metaphorical function in the poem. As you mouse around inside the frame, you discover that when you pass over the title, 'Inspiration', the word 'Plagiarism' pops up: it's the poem's secret title. And when you click on the title, the full text of the poem appears. But if you move the mouse around over the words, you discover that behind each stanza there is something else. For example, when you mouse over the opening lines of the poem – 'slanted stars / weight the truth' – you get a line from Emily Dickinson: 'tell all the truth but tell it slant'. Further down, when you mouse over the lines 'not text but texture'*,* you get a quote from Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire*: 'this was the real point, the contrapuntal

theme. Just this, not text, but texture.' For me, that line sums up my digital poetics. A poem like this does not consist of text alone: its meaning also resides in the mosaic frame, the mouse-overs, the way you read it. Through its very structure, the poem is letting you know that all its lovely lines have in fact been stolen from other poets. We could call this process *inspiration*, or we could call it *plagiarism*, or if we're literary critics we might call it *intertextuality*. In fact the poem is about what *all* poets do when they make a poem, and what mosaicists do when they make a mosaic: you smash stuff up, you reconstitute it. You make something new, but you do so by appropriating and transforming materials that others have used.

Paula: There is the crucial notion that when you write a poem it stands upon the history of poetry writing. In a way, you have shadow poems that drive your poetry and you have picked some that are illuminated behind your couplets. Which is really nice, I like that. The motivation behind *Inspiration* stands for any poem we write or read. When I read a poem, I have my own shadow quotations that I bring to my reading, that are lurking behind, and that are now jostling with yours.

Helen: I'm playing with my own composition process here, trying to incorporate that process into the final product. But I'm also trying to make a larger point about the poetic process in general.

Paula: Can you talk about how digital poetry draws upon traditional poetic tools? For example, there is a way in which any digital poem is going to be highly dependent upon *sound*, whether it is the audio track we actually hear or the way in which the words resonate in our minds.

Helen: When I'm working on a digital poem, or for that matter a traditional print poem, I'm always thinking about sound and performance, about the musicality of the language. I love reading poems out loud; I'm not one of those poets who believes that the words are happier on the page all by themselves or that they should be read with no expression. I'm interested in the

flow of poems through bodies: the poet's lungs, the listener's ears. That's why I've made audio recordings of all the poems on my website. Every single one of those poems – whether it was 'born textual' or 'born digital' – has passed through my vocal chords in that really visceral way. I don't use music much in my digital poetry, but I'm *always* writing for the voice.

Paula: Another strong feature of traditional poetry is *image*: the way a poem paints pictures through words. If you take the digital poem, image is going to be fundamental, but it is going to work in different ways.

Helen: I'm quite an imagistic poet even when I'm working with text alone. And I love colour – real colour, not just verbal descriptions of colour. So for me, one of the great pleasures of writing digital poetry is that I get to play around with images and colour and fonts and all those cool Photoshop filters. The risk, though, is that those visual features will simply add distractions to the poem or impose a kind of simplistic overlay, rather than challenging the reader's understanding and posing new questions. For example, if I write a poem about a sunset and then superimpose the text on top of an image of a sunset, I'm not really adding anything, am I? I'm simply showing the reader an aspect of the poem that is already perfectly obvious.

Paula: Maybe it is a case of movement or of juxtapositions becoming more fertile when you are absorbing a digital poem. If you have a poem about a sunset, and you've just got an image of a sunset behind it, the movement or juxtaposition is not particularly fertile. But if you juxtapose less obvious connections the resulting poetry might offer less expected relations. You can do this with words in a poem. In the digital setting you can do it with words and visual images in a way that opens or widens gaps for the reader's imagination.

Helen: At least, you hope the digital poem will open up those gaps. Your question brings to mind *Elegy for Ilinca*, a haiku elegy that I wrote in memory of a friend who died of cancer. Like *Hinemoa's Daughter*, this is an example of

a poem that was 'born textual' and later digitized – but in this case it was my own poem, not someone else's. I had this beautiful photograph I had taken in Mallorca the summer that I went to visit Ilinca, not long before she died. To me that photo was so powerful and evocative that I naturally wanted to bring the photo and the poem together. But the photo really has nothing to do with the poem. So when I present this poem to an audience, I like to read the poem aloud first and invite people to focus on its imagery: the mill, the children, the rooftop, the figs, the sandcastle, the hands, the music, the urn, the hat, the dark dreams. Then I show them the digipoem, which depicts none of those things; all you see is that beautiful stylized landscape, slowly darkening with each stanza, each click of the mouse. On the penultimate page, against a background of total darkness, you get two lines of text – '*barefoot, clear-headed,/ dancing on the starry roof*' – and then the final click takes you to the last line of the poem, '*Ilinca alight*', on a black page illuminated by stars. It's a pun, of course: Ilinca alights from the roof, but she also lights up like the stars. It's also a classic elegiac ending: the loved one has been absorbed into nature. The reader might not notice the 'alight' pun in the plain text version, but I make sure that they see it in the digipoem. At the same time, though, I'm aware of all the other visual images in the poem that have been erased by the power of that darkening landscape. It becomes a very different poem, a very different reading experience.

Paula: At the Going West Literary Festival last year, you also talked about poetic *form*, the way it can feel artificial but can also lead to unexpected places. How does poetic form work in the digital setting?

Helen: Well, writing a poem that is 'born digital' is in many ways analogous to writing a formally structured poem. In both cases I start out by setting up a technical challenge for myself – 'okay, I'm going to write a poem that fits within this structure' – and then the words have to follow, rather than the other way around. A formal rhyme scheme radically limits your word choice at certain key points in the poem: within that range, you've *got* to make one of those words work. And so you have to become quite creative about how you are going to do that.

Sometimes that process can leave you feeling as though you've produced something a bit forced and contrived, but when it works well it takes you to places you might not have got to otherwise.
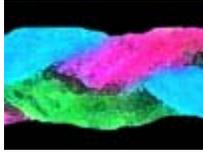
Many of my 'born-digital' poems started out as formal challenges. *Flagrante Delicto* was one of very first digipoems I ever wrote; I had this image in my head of a poem shaped like a braid, with three smaller poems woven inside it. When you read the plain-text poem there is no way you could know that the hidden poems are there. But in the digipoem, when you click on each of the coloured strands of the braid, the hidden strands of the poem are revealed. There's also a secret link on the word 'braid' inself, which leads you to the three secret poems laid out side by side. This poem shows how a digital poet can use colour and shape to give a new dimension to the language of a poem. But coming up with that language – writing a text that would fit into the shape I had in mind – was a formal challenge, definitely. The shape came first, the poem had to follow.

Recently I decided to increase the level of challenge by writing a 'born digital' sonnet – and what's more, a sonnet on a classical theme. In fact I ended up writing two parallel sonnets, as you can see when you mouse over the title page. *Arachnophilia* is written from the perspective of Arachne, who challenged the goddess Athena to a tapestry-making contest; *Arachnophobia* gives us Athena's side of the story. Arachne is the voice of the web, of digital poetics; she likes colour, she likes kinetic text, she likes to play with new media. Athena is the poetic conservative; she finds Arachne's work gimmicky, she wants the purity and delicacy of the words on their own. And I, of course, am sympathetic to both those views. So I am pitting their voices against each other without taking sides myself. You can click from the title page into either Arachne's or Athena's poem, and in either case you will find the first eight lines, the octet, perched like a spider on a web. But as you move the mouse to slide back and forth between the two voices, you'll find that they mirror each other – the two poets are echoing each other's accusations. And then when you click through to the sextet, you see six lines of text weaving horizontally and vertically across the page, but you can't tell who is speaking anymore; in fact both poets are saying exactly the same thing, they're not as far apart in their positions as they think. In the audio version of the poem, too, you hear

the voices weaving into and around each other. So once again I'm using the digital medium to highlight ways in which the print and the digital modes speak to each other.

Paula: Your digital poems seem to make links with the theories of readership and the reader that have developed over previous decades. There were also movements such as concrete poetry and Dadaism that created a new kind of liveliness on the page which was surprising and unexpected and required readers to read in a completely different way.

Helen: Like the concrete poets, I'm trying to set up a complex, visually compelling reading experience, one that engages the reader on many different levels. That's why nearly all of my digital poems are interactive – the reader is not just sitting back and passively watching a video. You are controlling where you go in the poem and the speed at which you travel.

Paula: Although you could argue that if you digitized a poem in a video format, in the spirit of a Len Lye movie, the textual movement would work on multiple levels with a soundtrack that was in keeping. Thus there would be ample opportunity for the reader to engage with the work in different ways.

Helen: That's a good point. Watching a movie is never an entirely passive experience; as an audience member you are always engaging with the work in some way. But nor is it a tactile experience; you're sitting there in the dark, with no influence over the movement or speed of the text. In most of my digital poems, I try to create an experience that is less like watching a movie and more like reading a book: you can flip through, you can linger, you can go forward, you can go backwards, you can read at your own pace.

Paula: As a digital poet, Helen, I think you are demanding a more proactive engagement, a mechanical engagement as well as an intellectual engagement.

Helen: I'm deeply interested in the materiality of the reading experience. And I'm also interested in exploring intersections between the material and virtual spheres. You'll notice that a lot of my poems incorporate digital photos of mosaics and jewellery – usually my own work – or of material objects associated with the writing process, such as books or paper or feathers. For example, my poem *Bookmark* depicts a book containing a hand-written poem with a homemade bookmark lying across it. I wrote the poem in memory of http://stoneflowerpath.com/bluebook/index.htmsomeone who died under very tragic circumstances; in contrast to *Elegy for Ilinca*, which is celebratory, this poem is not at all redemptive. So once you've clicked past the title page, all you can do is watch helplessly as the ink fades and the poem eventually disappears. Yet it's a very tactile poem. We think of books as material objects in danger of extinction, but this particular book becomes almost *more* real, more embodied and earth-bound, when it's projected on the computer screen. I've always been fascinated by the shape and substance of books – paper, typography, all that sort of thing – and I'm trying to extend that fascination into the digital medium, rather than allowing the digital medium to extinguish the material world.

Paula: Of course, the computer screen does not have the warmth and the intimacy of the book. Yet in a way you are reaching out for the personal, aren't you? When you are talking about your poems, I can see that they all have a strong connection to the personal. In a way that is putting the ticking heartbeat of the human into the digital poem.

Helen: I love experimenting with language and form, but I'm a lyric poet at heart. I am interested in making an emotional connection with readers, definitely. In fact, I've recently begun exploring the collaborative possibilities of digital poetry, which is another way of amplifying that 'ticking heartbeat'. At the Home and Away Trans-Tasman Poetry Symposium organized by Michele Leggott, I orchestrated two collaborative poems, *Archipelago* in Auckland
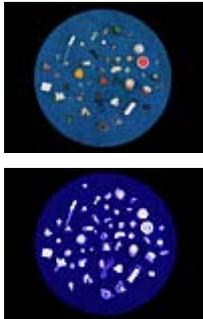
and *Astropelago* in Sydney; both poems were created in 'real time' by a group of poets who came together physically in a single room for just an hour or two. So the poems have one foot each in the material and digital realms. The poets have scattered now, but the poems are there in cyberspace for anyone to see: you can access them from Australia or New Zealand or any place in the world with an internet connection; you can send the link to your friend in Finland or Patagonia.

Like a lot of my other digipoems, these poems both have multiple entry points. In the hypertext version of *Archipelago*, for example, you can read all 50 lines of the poem in any order by mousing over the poets' names and the objects they contributed. But there's also a video, which makes for surprisingly compelling viewing: you get to watch and listen to the 50 poets creating this archipelago of separate islands in linear sequence, one island at a time. Plus there's a photo gallery containing digital artefacts such as the notebook paper where the poets scrawled their lines, which often didn't match what they actually said on camera. It's a rich and vibrant text that memorializes its own process of creation and pushes against the boundaries of what poetry can do.

Paula: One final question: can you name another digital poet who has influenced you or whose work you particularly admire?

Helen: Brian Flaherty is one of my favourite digital poets – and I'm also lucky enough to have him as a colleague at the University of Auckland. If you look at his work and mine you might note a few similarities: for example, we are both really interested in playing with colour. But his digipoems are all Flash movies, whereas mine tend to use lots of hypertextual links; he is more interested in scripting a kind of performance for you, whereas I'm trying to get the reader to click. Most of Brian's poems are concerned with what happens when you are hearing words and music and seeing images all at once and they're all going by quite quickly. And yet he is posing

many of the same questions that I am: What is a poem, and what strategies can we bring to our reading of a digital poem? I think *White Scarves* is probably his most interactive poem in this sense. You cannot just watch it straight through and then leave; you have to stay there for a while, you have to make active decisions about *how* to watch it.

Paula: I love the way Brian uses words and images in *I bought hats and shoes / It was a wild night*. The poem is like a little movie, but it's also unlike a movie. It is almost as though the words are the panning camera, as they physically move through Florence. It's a very slow, seductive pan.

Helen: Brian is not narrating the pictures, and the pictures are not illustrating the words. There are two narratives going on at the same time, juxtaposed. And he's added his own voice as well, which has been digitally modified to fit the noir theme. He's playing around with sound a lot more than I am, and with narrative sequence. I've found that it's very hard to create a sustained narrative when you're setting up non-linear structures.

Paula: Well, it would be a different kind of narrative, wouldn't it?

Helen: Yes, it would. I think a poem like *Reinga* does create a kind of narrative for the reader; I've structured it so that the lines can be read in any order. But all the pieces have to fit together in a certain way, and it can be quite challenging to get it right.

Paula: Ultimately digital poetry seems like new territory to me, it is completely open and the possibilities are endless. It is a big learning curve for everyone who engages with it - with risks to be taken and discoveries to be made. But at the same time, as you have said, you are drawing upon so many traditional poetic features.

Helen: I've learned a lot about how to approach the task from my students in [Poetry off the Page](), the undergraduate poetry course that I teach at the University of Auckland with my colleague and fellow poet Michele Leggott. Every year Michele and I have a few students who already know how to do all sorts of fabulous things on the web. But most of them are complete novices who struggle even to create a basic HTML file. And so we are constantly saying to them, 'Don't start with fancy ideas of what you *might* make the text and the images do. Start with what you *can* do, and then build your version of the poem from there.' And when they do it well, they do it brilliantly. So I have been persuaded that creating digital poetry is not really about having digital expertise. It's about bringing together text and image and sound and hyperlinks in new and thought-provoking ways.