Marko Niemi

Stud Poetry (2006)
http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/niemi__stud_poetry.html

Marko Niemi, Finnish "translator, drop-out mathematician, poetry engineer," began writing

digital poetry in 2000.[1] He has produced many skillful graphical, animated, kinetic, interactive,

videographic, and mathematical works.[2] He edits *Nokturno*, an important online archive that houses

new works, and until 2009 produced a blog, *Nurotus*, which served as an informative resource for

digital and concrete writers.[3]

Stud Poetry, made with JavaScript, adapts the poker game "Five Card Stud," played with

words—selected from a translation of Baudelaire's poem "Correspondences"—instead numbers on

its cards. The game begins with a prompt for viewers to enter an identity, and then play with virtual

competitors given the names of historically known poets, such as Mallarmé, Jean Moréas, Rimbaud,

Valéry, and Verlaine, commences.[4] While just a trope for Niemi, who uses these names figuratively,

an orientation towards virtual embodiment of known forces and forms ostensibly bestows a literary

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[1] A basic introduction to his work appears on the website *Minimalist Concrete Poetry*; see, http://www.logolalia.com/minimalistconcretepoetry/archives/cat_niemi_marko.html (9/11/08).

[2] Thirteen of Niemi's works are housed in the "minimalist concrete poetry" section at logolalia.com, including "Please Touch Me" (http://www.logolalia.com/minimalistconcretepoetry/archives/marko-niemi/touchme.html). Other works by Niemi include: TWELVE DIGITAL POEMS BY MARKO NIEMI (*Unlikely 2.0*), http://www.unlikelystories.org/07/niemi0107.shtml (2007); *a as in dog*, http://www.logolalia.com/a-as-in-dog/; *ZAUMACHINE*, http://vilt.wordpress.com/2008/09/09/zaumachine-door-marko-niemi/ and http://www.dirkvekemans.be/marko-niemi_zaumachine.html (2008).

[3] See http://www.nokturno.org/marko-niemi/ and http://nurotus.blogspot.com/.

[4] Several contemporary works mingle with, or virtually embody, dead poets. For example, in Millie Niss's *The Electronic Muse*, a generator with editorial functions, the user may write in the style of John Hollander, Harryette Mullen, Shakespeare, and others; Carpenter's *Erika* enables users to use vocabularies by Dickinson and Conrad, with grammars by Blau duPlessis, O'Hara, Plath, Snyder, and others. In another of his works, "60 Letter Dash," Niemi also incorporates names of the dead poets Prévert, Péret, Aragon, Éluard, Desnos, Breton. If the player does not enter her/his name, the moniker "Our Humble Poet" appears in its place.

identity on the work, as does the fact that—like Baudelaire's poem—the device creates a strange

resonance between iconic information and verbal information. In *Stud Poetry*, the characteristics of

the named poets influences the game's progress inconsequentially, but does put players in an

imaginary company of poets and thus infers their own role as poet. Although the game only vaguely

announce its aleatoric conditions in advance, everything transpiring with regard to language

presented in hands of *Stud Poetry* is randomized, and personal styles of play do not emerge as a factor

at any point (i.e., Rimbaud is never found to be a more aggressive or skillful player than Mallarmé,

and vice versa). Naming, thus, becomes part of the fiction of the piece, something used to create a

fantasy scenario and creative backdrop for its users. These designations can also be seen as a joke

that adds levity to *Stud Poetry*'s spirit of game, which, in all, may not be taken seriously by either

gamers—who discover developing strategies for play are futile—or poets who desire a larger

dictionary with which to "compose."

In *Stud Poetry*, players are given 100 chips and compete in a series of hands—given the

options to "bet," "call," "raise," "check," or "fold"; each play deducts a non-adjustable amount (one

or two chips) from the player's account.[5] Players, unaware of any worth assigned to word(s) beyond

the semantic, place bets. She or he might do so according to the face-value or meaning of the

content, but given the game's identity as poker, attributes of value to the game (e.g., finding pairs or

three-of-a-kind words) are also intrinsic. As the game progresses, lines of minimalist poetry manifest

on the screen. A player who continues to "call" rather than "raise" (which seems to push the game

forward), extends the game's duration; doing so, while potentially tedious, suitably gives her/him

more time to read and contemplate the composition underway. Ultimately, an entity wins the hand

arbitrarily and losses and gains for each player are tabulated by the program. *Stud Poetry*'s instructions

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[5] `Providing a way to determine the increment of the betting might increase` *Stud Poetry*`'s entertainment value (for gamers interested in competition), but engaging interactively beyond the level of calling or raising would also distract players from the text.`

reveal that, "The relative value of the words is randomly assigned each time *Stud Poetry* is started" (Stud).[6] Such randomness makes it impossible for players to develop expertise, or skills enabling them to succeed consistently in the competition; logic and rules of poker do not apply. Instructions to "build as strong a poetry hand as you can" are a capricious assignment when the rules and values of words keep shifting (Stud). For example, the player decides if the alliteration found in a three-of-a-kind hand is a worthy bet without knowing of its quantitative value. Such "free-floating signification" unquestionably adds a degree of mystique to the project, which will frustrate players preferring fixed rules for play.

The following study sets present examples of several instances of *Stud Poetry*—featuring output that demonstrates the development of linear sequences. These illustrations reflect how poetry materializes through the game's course.[7] Records of who won these hands were not recorded, but the poems are preserved. Fig. 29 shows a playing scenario evident near a game's end (i.e., all cards have been dealt and final bets are happening):

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[6] An examination of the code of *Stud Poetry* conducted by David Shepard shows how the best hand is determined and how the computer-controlled players make decisions at random. *Stud Poetry*, observes Shepard,

> includes two new values to consider, two arrays called tightness and aggression at lines 38-39. The program uses these arrays to determine each computer-controlled player's playing style; at line 302, in the function WantToFold, if the player's tightness is greater than a random number, then the player folds; otherwise, he stays in. These two arrays are filled with random numbers in the Initialize function; the player's name is merely decoration. The word-cards are selected randomly from the AllWords array, which is filled before the game begins, and their value is determined by their position in the deck; nothing intrinsically makes "temple" worth more than "nature," and no routine determines what makes a straight aside from these random values. Suggesting that not only meaning but poetic skill are the products of chance, *Stud Poetry* makes language a game of which one figures out the rules by playing. In fact, checking to see what words are worth in each specific game is impossible by viewing the code; the randomness of the selection process precludes this. There is also no Royal Flush hand; no set of words is best. The game therefore portrays language both as a system of which one can never entirely control or understand and as a generator of free-floating signification (Finding).

[7] The first hand was played with Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Moréas; in the others, Valéry replaces Moréas.

Paul Verlaine	81	19		◆green	♠respond	◆escape	♥living		Check
cf	81	19		♠green	♣respond	♥word	◆nature	♠familiar	
Stéphane Mallarmé	81	19		♥green	♠balsam	♠living	◆echo		

Fig. 29. Marko Niemi, *Stud Poetry*. 23 May 08.

Given the emerging content, Niemi's green background not only simulates a casino table but embodies other thematic concerns. A surprising nature-oriented poem made of fragments comes forth: "green respond escape living (Verlaine)/green respond word nature familiar (cf)/green balsam living echo (Mallarmé)" (23 May 2008).[8] A brief utterance, itself considerably a fragment, the poem projects a thematically calculated reminder of contemporary environmental conditions (or possibilities) more than insinuate anything the poet-persona constructed (e.g., Mallarmé) historically said or did. Using the "suit" assignments, the following multi-vocal poem can also be imagined and built from the same example: "green escape/nature/echo" (diamonds), "respond/green familiar/balsam living" (spades), "living/word/green" (hearts), "respond" (clubs). Reverberation of "green" strengthens the poem's focus. Conditions under which virtual, randomized, "collaborative" poems are composed (by the program) and/or found (by the player) in *Stud Poetry* do require a suspension of a reader's need for conventional syntax, but this should not overburden anyone attuned to contemporary poetics. Players who appreciate Dada will find pleasure in the haphazard methods of composition, and as is often the case in such calculated yet randomized configurations, poetic logic is reached.

Natural sensations emerging above also dominate the first, second, and fourth iterations of another hand (without suits): "dark/afar/symbol/vast/symbol ecstasy/sound" transforms into "dark balsam/afar pillar/symbol sound/vast observe/symbol ecstasy ecstasy/sound rich," and, eventually (after two players fold), "symbol sound pillar balsam/vast observe incense

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[8] The "line" of the player always contains one more word/card than everyone else's since one card from every other player is hidden.

symbol/symbol ecstasy ecstasy afar word/sound rich rich afar" (23 May 2008). Prominence of the

word "afar" adds a contemplative, meditational scenario, or capacious dimension: the inclusion of

this single new word shifts the focal point, adding a sense of pursuit into the verbal mix. Repetition

of the word "sound" suggests intonation of the words, and may become a part of the player's

experience. New poems evolve as each hand progresses, and with each new hand—to a point.

These examples notably feature fortuitous lack of common language—sharing only

"word"—giving them a sense of variation. It would be mistaken, however, to insinuate vocabulary

as an expansive component in *Stud Poetry*, as only forty-five words are included in its database.[9]

Thus, the contents of many hands are comparable. To combat utter redundancy, Niemi employs a

technique of including words that can serve both as nouns and verbs (a role played by "echo" and

"sound" above, and by "light," "glance," "color," "incense," "perfume," and "escape" elsewhere),

which maximize versatility within a limited vocabulary. The minimal number verbs included in

Niemi's database do complement its nouns and adjectives effectively. By including adjectives more

or less relating to matters celestial or natural (e.g., "green," "living," "familiar," "vast," "dark,"

"afar," "rich"), the author points the narrative towards particular poetic concerns or objectives.

Reading through two stages of another hand reveals the strong presence of repetitive

language in *Stud Poetry*, but also how the same (repeated) words can function variably and reflect

different sensibilities. The line, "have/color/rich/nature/rich afar/color" advances, and with

another card becomes, "have escape/color glance/rich infinite/rich afar light" (Stud). We see many

of these words in examples above, but the addition of the word "color" alters any previously devised

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[9] Niemi lists the words in *Stud Poetry* (selected from a translation of
Baudelaire's poem "Correspondences") as: nature, temple, living, pillar,
escape, word, man, forest, symbol, observe, familiar, glance, like, long,
echo, afar, dark, unity, vast, night, light, perfume, color, sound, respond,
fresh, skin, infant, sweet, oboe, green, prairie, other, rich, have, expanse,
infinite, thing, musk, incense, sing, balsam, ecstasy, mind, sense (Email
10).

connotations. Furthermore, here we begin to see how the dynamics of gradual expansion add poetic value to the work. With each addition of a word, most significantly from "have/color" to "have escape" at the beginning, a change in overall meaning occurs. In this hand, which players may not read as complete individual (horizontal) lines, or as finished vertical constructs until *Stud Poetry* recognizes a victor, Baudelaire "wins with his pair"—"glance rich infinite color glance"; whether the line is superior to Mallarmé's "sing have escape escape infinite" (which also includes a pair) remains in question (Stud). Players interested in competitive aspects of gaming will encounter frustration with arbitrariness devised in Niemi's system, but the output nonetheless provokes thoughtful evaluation. In this example, does the richness of seeing infinite color trump singing for escape? Is observation (i.e., glancing) valued more than escape? Winning always involves having a pair, two pairs, and three of a kind, but assignation of what combinations are rewarded by design eludes logic. So much randomness occurs that to think while playing is unnecessary—leaving room for consideration of the text. No reason is given why a "nature" pair beats a "dark" pair, or why a "symbol" pair beats "unity" and other pairs, or why a "word" pair beats "nature," "living," or "unity" pairs (Stud). Players simply receive and must accept results they get.

Hands of *Stud Poetry* ensue differently each time and individuals engaging with the game occasionally win hands. An atypical but interesting way to use the program, and get a sense of the type of poems *Stud Poetry* capably makes, is to fold immediately. The hand continues to play itself out on auto pilot; words successively appear on the screen as a type of animated linear cut-up.[10] Following this procedure clinically orients players, and allows them to develop a sense of the poem's performance without the realm of competition. Playing conservatively, folding from seemingly hopeless hands before losing too many chips and watching other players vie for the victory, prolongs the experience of a game. *Stud Poetry*, approached observantly, may engross players, and

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[10] An animated documentary of a sample hand is also provided, as a "demo" linked to the Introduction.

provide many hours of peculiar stimulation. In effect, players sit down at a virtual table, with virtual others, and play a virtual card game with a roving set of rules and values.

The possibility that *Stud Poetry* may not be taken seriously by either gamers or poets warrants further consideration. Serious gamers take pride in manipulating elements and understanding a game's mechanics in order to control its outcome; random elements of *Stud Poetry* thus ensure that winning feels hollow. Game players are accustomed to having a sense control, which they use to their advantage and achieve victory. A lack of finite determinations as to what words have higher values than others (i.e., hierarchy of the word values that replace card numbers) will certainly be a source of frustration, as it creates a scenario where many losing hands ensue. On the other hand, in a literary sense, assigning values to the words presents difficulty because—especially in poetry—their importance depends on where, and in what context, the author places them. If the values of words change, randomness and not knowing the strength of a hand introduces new dimensions of luck, which could be regarded as fun (particularly for non-poker players), but this is not what most gamers seek. Most gamers see a point in having (and following) standards and rules, which can be memorized and used strategically—elements all but absent in *Stud Poetry*. In that sense, lack of confidence in knowing values for each word may create the biggest breech of conviction or respect from the gaming community. In ordinary games, identifying connections between words is not required, and since words function as currency here, uncertainty dominates and may provoke players to eschew the game and move on to something more familiar.

That card values have been replaced by poetic words makes the game a worthwhile example of literary possibility. During each round, players receive a miniature poem open to interpretation. Minimalist in scope, Niemi shows how much can be done with a small vocabulary when combined with skillful programming and design. At the end, all remaining players' cards are visible and those cards can be used to construct an overall poem based on the sequence of the particular game that

was played. Specific orders in which cards are dynamically added or removed—a direct function of game play—become *Stud Poetry*'s artistry. *Stud Poetry*, however, gives users little opportunity to interact directly with the words presented; it lacks in its ability to enable manipulation of the literary material. As foe, the programming involved does not anticipate moves made by players but rather randomly generates play, and then tabulates its results.

Niemi's idea to combine poetry and a casino game allows players (including students acquainted with computer games but unfamiliar with literature) to have fun while simultaneously learning about a different type of poetry. His efforts may disgruntle, or amuse, yet also teach something. Beyond demonstrating that winning sometimes involves chance, the player's purpose becomes not to win, but to understand the language behind discovering how to win. *Stud Poetry* leads engaged players to look more deeply into the meanings of (and potential for) words in the deck, an act more momentous than having a winning hand. Winning a game of *Stud Poetry* involves totally random principles. In contrast to a real game of cards, no logic or way to develop strategies exists. To non-gamers, this poses no problem—after all, plenty of ordinary virtual poker games are available; having a non-competitive, odd, creatively based alternative to them is welcome. Words in *Stud Poetry* come together in ways ordinary language does not, and thus, theoretically express emotion and/or feeling and/or experience or cognitive processes a player might never think of, or know, until the words are dealt. Lack of convention and abstraction lead to altered perception— players can never know what to expect from the process, or what results will unravel. Absent from the game is predictability; an overall interpretation cannot occur until the presentation of words concludes. This absence of certainty, elements of the fleeting encounter, and ephemeral negotiations with language combine to make *Stud Poetry* an interesting, if limited, literary experience. Having multiple decks of cards, each containing different themes, would bring Niemi's project to a new level. As a singular prospect, *Stud Poetry* transports a player's imagination or sensibility in a particular

direction. Having more decks, customized to offer a range of concerns, or made to be customizable by the player (as is Nelson's *Poetry Cube*, and other works enabling users to provide vocabularies), could inspire further play. Limitations to its present form may disincline players, even those who enjoy the work, from returning to it often.

As does Andrews in *Arteroids*, Niemi bases *Stud Poetry* on a known game. A poem modeled after, or based on, a card game represents a new approach, although completely randomized, Dadaist approaches to digital composition are historically commonplace—here given a novel twist by associating the literary endeavor with an already popular recreational activity. Niemi presents a lofty context for this project, writing, "*Stud Poetry* is a game of courage and faith, and a bit of luck, too. To become a great master…you need to believe in the power of words, their magic capability to move mountains, minds, and souls" (Stud). *Stud Poetry* derives power through the interplay between its literary aspects and its nature as a game, although poets accustomed to traditional verse will not detect any type of logical poem from the words given and will reject the game-as-poem on aesthetic grounds. Niemi practices a liberal (not literal) interpretation of poetry: arranging words (some containing pathos) together in a manner that, while poetic in its own way, ignores basic devices like rhythm or meter. Poets willing to accept experimental forms but who do not play cards may feel insecure because they do not possess the required skills to win; unless she or he understands the random nature of the device, lack of familiarity with the real game could affect a player's ability to interact properly with this digital poem. Nonetheless, through *Stud Poetry*, players indulge in a potentially endless poetic game of cards. After getting the feel of this game, or any, one can engage in much amusement involving exploration and interpretation of language. In one game I had a showdown with Valéry, with our randomly imposed words as currency. I somehow won, but then proceeded to lose the next game almost immediately. Experiences with *Stud Poetry*, while restricted, are curious, absorbing, and somewhat mysterious given their made-by-chance orientation. A type of

cumulative, shifting poetry can be written using the small vocabulary of the deck as a starting point.[11]

Niemi gives players language to work with, and a framework with which to build her or his own

speculations.

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[11] Building a story using words, phrases, or fragments found in *Stud Poetry* is another potential use for the output.