

<nettime> Ted Warnell interview on the poetics of programming  
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**[The following essay on & interview with Ted Warnell just appeared at trAce. For Nettimers, it contains - among others - some nice stabs at Macromedia Flash. Posted here with kind permission of trAce, Randy and Rita. -F]**

## **Ted Warnell**

by Randy Adams

*This article first appeared at trAce, October 2002,  
<http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/showcase/index.cfm?article=24>*

Code poet and digital artist Ted Warnell hails from the small Canadian city of Medicine Hat, where the South Saskatchewan River snakes across the plains, about one hour north of the American border. You do not have to drive far beyond the outskirts of Medicine Hat to feel like you are in the proverbial middle of nowhere. It is a landscape of vast distances, a favourite subject in Warnell's digital images from the 80's and 90's. There is a certain formalism in the design of many of his web pages, possibly a nod to his real landscape, but his work is anything but free of content.

Self-employed since 1983 as a systems analyst and programmer specializing in corporate database management, Warnell came to poetics through working with computer languages - machine code, assembly language and programming. He fuses digital imagery with markup language (HTML) and code (JavaScript) to create his web art and poetics. His source material is "code and data, program logic, information from cyberspace, all things digital." He has even found a creative use for spam.

His work is often delightfully whimsical, like fly paper from his ADVEXP series, where the viewer interacts by using their mouse to arrange and rearrange flies on black squares - the visual pattern is linked to the literal in an ingenious manner. But the interface is not obvious - typical of much of Warnell's work, the task of discovery is squarely on the viewer. Another whimsical piece is his Y2K calendar, a 16 month calendar you can download in a single file or "in three smaller files (with some assembly required)". In PbN does Windows, presented as a series of help files for Windows - how to arrange icons, choose colour schemes, use NotePad, work the mouse - each set of instructions is delightfully offbeat.

On a more serious note, in TOWERS, from Warnell's REALIZATION series, two vertical bars (2100 pixels high X 210 pixels wide) stretch empty and black down the page. The viewer scrolls to the bottom where jumbled text and binary code lay in seeming disarray. The text includes a URL to the collaborative project text\_TOWERS, begun by Miekal And in commemoration of the World Trade Centre. "The works at Realization are like sketches," says Warnell. "Parts of which may later find their way into larger works."

Warnell's trademark project, Poem by Nari (PbN), now spans seven years. "It means poem bi nary, poem binary," he says. "Mark Amerika was first one to get it, in 1997. PbN is myself and friends, not Ted Warnell all by his lonesome." An early advocate of multi-authorship, Warnell's PbN is the result of creative collaborations with artists, writers, and computer programmers in Europe, Africa, Australia, Asia, and South and North America.

Warnell's work has been widely published online including in Alt-X and The Iowa Review Web, he is represented in the Rhizome ArtBase. He has been poetry editor for the hypertext/hypermedia literary journal BeeHive. In 2001, he conceived a concept cover for the online version of Pif magazine, with graphics and coding for animated and interactive artwork for 12 issues. From 1995 to 2001, warnell.com grew to "32 megabytes, 2,800 Web files, 1,100 HTML pages, 1,600 media files, 1,000 Web links, 350 contributing and collaborating artists."

Rita Raley, who teaches digital humanities and global literary studies at the University of California, names Warnell as one of a handful of prominent practitioners of codework. This work includes many 'quick and dirty little ditties', like fragments, as well as complex code poems like Berlioz - 'a roll-your-own tone poem in fourteen movements' which includes input from Mez, Talan Memmott, Jim Andrews, Thuan Tran, and Brian Lennon during a creative exchange of ideas on the webartery email list.

Sometime in 2001, Warnell's output slowed to a trickle: "I am more fully in the real world these days vs. the cyber world. Haven't stopped entirely, of course. But slowed down a bit - channelling creative energies into the promo work I'm doing with the dancers at The Doll House, a nightclub featuring exotic dancers - a variety of promo products for their stage show, posters, fridge magnets, lighter wraps, prints, cigarette packs, key tags, t-shirt x-fers, and the like."

In the fall of this year, Warnell received a grant from the Electronic Word program of the Canada Council for the Arts, so his creative juices will be focussed once again on a project for the web.

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Chat interview with Ted Warnell  
(with guest Rita Raley)  
[Time: Thu Sep 19  
18:35:19 2002]

**Adams** >> I understand you have been self-employed since 1983, as a systems analyst and programmer specializing in corporate database management. You were involved with the miningco? (now about.com)

**Warnell** >> Yes, programming for business from 83-98. On the internet since 1980 and the web since 1994. My web site a Room without Walls came online in 1995.

Miningco was 97. I defined and developed the Art & Technology site for them. Original A&T articles still are found at ZINEn

Miningco fired me for putting Poem by Nari on their A&T site, and for not being a team player. Funny, hired as an independent web artist and fired for not being a team player. Huh?!? The experience put me off of corporate internet, but I still am grateful for the opportunity to participate in their venture.

**Adams** >> You have a background in photography?

**Warnell** >> Enthusiast. Have had a camera for 30+ years, no exhibits.

**Adams** >> But you have exhibited on the web. I especially like the project with your daughters.

**Warnell** >> The project continues today, but is no longer being published on the web. It started in 93-94 as a way to learn imaging. Poem by Nari projects are my primary publishing focus since 1996.

**Adams** >> I suspect, though, that your visual sense, even with your code poetry, is influenced by your work with imagery. The viewfinder = the computer screen = rectangular format. I mean, your layouts, they are quite formal, visually.

**Warnell** >> Oh, yes. My visual sense certainly predates the web, and even the computer. With the computer, my work is what the computer, screen, and a client-server environment demand - it is tuned to those requirements. It is influenced, too, by interface design as that is where we work, and what we do there needs to function. I am interested, too, to break and bend these rules and requirements...

Virus2 for example, bends the idea of a Web browser cookie file by treating the cookie as a computer virus.

**Adams** >> I remember viewing the source code of Virus2 and thinking how a portion of it reminded me of a virus under a microscope. Some of your code/text looks like an image file opened in a text editor.

**Warnell** >> Some of it is exactly that. Code is visual, to be looked at. It also is 'real' (functional) in some cases. Or a mix of both, often. Beyond the mechanics and technicalities is a rich world of the conceptual.

The computer is unique in many ways; it is the first invention that as a tool extends the mind, like a hammer extends the fist in a physical way. If this is true, and I think so, then computers, the internet and web, etc., are first and foremost conceptual animals.

The computer is a conceptual tool.

Exploring digital media for me means more than exploring technical physics - we can explore concepts and interactions. We can move the creative process from private to public - a work of art need never be finished by the artist, but can be endlessly recreated by a viewer. Creative production moves away from the lone artist to all viewers - viewer/client becomes a creative participant.

Poem by Numbers and Berlioz require viewer participation in creative realization of a finished product -- and that is the idea. Berlioz mimics the participatory email list process from which source material for the work is derived. Poem by Numbers is a tongue-in-cheek look at point-and-click art production with programs like Flash.

Thing is, here is this new mind tool that is rich with possibilities to realize more than just physics. Why then are we still interested to use it to look at yet another rendering of a tree? Digital media can do so much more - conceptually. I am interested to explore what more.

**Raley** >> One thing I notice about the recent genre of, let us call it, Flash poetry, is that much of it seems simply to display the technical capability of the software. That is, sometimes one wonders if a Flash poem or story could really just function as a Macromedia demo? So I wonder if you have a particular relationship to Java or JavaScript that is not possible with a Macromedia product; would you be willing to think about it in terms of freedom from constraint'?

**Warnell** >> I must confess to not knowing much about Flash. There are constraints still in JavaScript, a browser, the Net itself, computers.

**Raley** >> Well I suppose one difference is that one really has to work within a particular production environment's constraints -- in some way the formal properties of a text are dictated by the program.

**Warnell** >> Working with these constraints is a challenge, for sure.

I prefer working at levels below those of typical WYSIWYG application as constraints are fewer.

Another way to say WYSIWYG might be, 'what you see is what we give you to work with'. Thanks, but I'll program it myself. Source code for all PbN works is there below the visible page - if you're so inclined, then you can take it and re-program it for yourself.

**Raley** >> A poem like your Lascaux.Symbol.ic seems very different to me. It certainly has a visual style but the style of the programming is equally amazing. So one thing I appreciate about your work is the extent to which the programming has an aesthetic quality that I do not see in most Flash poetry.

**Warnell** >> Programming style for my HTML and JavaScript works is structured as for C programming, a language I worked with for many years. I guess old habits die hard.

Flash is 180 degrees opposite to the reality of client-server network environments like the internet. It is wrong and bound to failure, in my opinion. And I am afraid of it.

**Adams** >> Because the platform may disappear? Like 8 track cassettes?

**Warnell** >> That it will disappear is a certainty. I don't hate Flash or Macromedia. Nor am I opposed to artists doing whatever they want with this or any other software, but products like Flash work against the grain here, and that does concern me.

From my perspective, regarding artists and the new media, it isn't about control any more, but open and free dissemination of our creative effort. We cannot control an end-user's experience of our work because we're not supposed to - this is most natural on a client-server network like the internet, and assuming that the net is not ultimately owned by a corporation.

Proprietary programs such as Flash are about control. Dead end.

**Raley** >> I understand you have just received a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts. Will you be producing something specific for your grant?

**Warnell** >> Yes, the Eden database. As Eve was banished from paradise (Eden, conceptual) to the physical world, I will return descendants of Eve from the physical world to a conceptual Eden. The Eden database is cyber, digital, conceptual. It will be filled with data/code digitized directly from flesh via a digital camera. Not banishment, but reversal. Or perhaps, restoration.

Eden will do a few more things, too, like visualize huge quantities, and demonstrate/realize how data is sliced, diced, and cooked a million different ways. And you thought giving out just your name was no big thing. And your telephone number. And purchase habits, times, dates, products, subscriptions. A growing database of us, sliced and diced with programming. To what end?

**Raley** >> Interesting because I certainly want to see in some of your work a kind of cabalistic fascination with numbers and/or patterns – another link to the biblical, that is.

**Warnell** >> Book of Job might be such a work. This work was referenced in my Eden proposal to Canada Council as a 'conceptual database' in that it treats chapters and verses from the biblical Book of Job as files and records.

My fascination with numbers and logic -- these are devices I use frequently in my work. You will have to look beyond them to see what really is going on. I hope you might.

**Raley** >> I'd like to ask how you understand the relations between "technical" and "creative" work? How do you think of your writing vis-à-vis application and programming?

**Warnell** >> I'm not sure I differentiate these to any great degree. They are one and the same to me. Above and below, they are written/created. We look beneath the surface as that is where much of what we do here exists -- 'the code is the work is the code'... Mark Amerika spoke of this in his 1997 essay, Surf-Sample-Manipulate: The Pseudo-Autobiography of A Work-In-Progress.

It is not possible to separate code from work in a digital realm. Both are to some degree technical, and both are creative.

**Raley** >> I used to make the argument that a multi- or hyper-media critic did not have to have a technical knowledge equal to that of the artist - this came up at an ELO panel in April. But your work certainly compels me to rethink this line. Before I used to argue that a certain analogy to fine arts criticism could be set up, whereby one could say that a precise knowledge of the chemical composition of paint was not required to read Cezanne and so too one did not require a precise knowledge of say JavaScript in order to read a Warnell poem.

**Adams** >> Ted, were you involved in poetics pre-web?

**Warnell** >> No, not pre-web. I came to computers in 1978 and quickly discovered that programming code could be as challenging and creative as making art. From 78-93 I was more involved with programming than art. My interest in poetics has evolved with the PbN projects.

**Raley** >> I can see the influence of graphic arts in e.g., White Wedding in Texas.

**Warnell** >> Yes, many people see this influence in my work. I do love graphic arts, especially drawing.

**Raley** >> It is hard to believe that you did not write before programming.

**Warnell** >> Well, programming is inherently poetic, or might be. It is part science and part art, of course. What I write now is programming and graphical...

**Adams** >> So the programming language defines your code poetry?

**Warnell** >> If you mean that my code poetry works often are a reflection of their own programming, then yes, you could say that the programming language defines the work, or defines it to some extent. I am not slavishly bound to this idea of code poetry as actual, operable program code, though - the idea is irrelevant to me.

**Raley** >> There is an interesting organic-inorganic dichotomy. So in Niku Codepo for instance you talk about code as bones and text as flesh. It is an interesting metaphor - linking I know to Alan Sondheim's work. I thought that in some way your poetry can be read as offering an extended commentary on code itself vis-à-vis poetic and ordinary language.

**Warnell** >> The work visualizes a concept of the message subsumed by the communication - content impaled by protocol. It realizes both the idea expressed in Alan's message, and communication of the idea.

All of my works, but especially my code poetry works, are keenly aware of their existence on the page (screen) and below - the 'neath text' as my friend and fellow web artist Jim Andrews vispo.com refers to it (code) - and so might offer some commentary on these things. Truthfully though, I am not exactly certain about what those comments might be :)

**Raley** >> In the latest Electronic Book Review, John Cayley makes a distinction between "codework" that has a genuine addressee, and materially changes the text in a visible way, vs. codework that uses elements of code - he calls it pseudo-code.

**Warnell** >> Both are fine. I use code and pseudo-code and no code as required by a given work. While I certainly can appreciate machine generated and modulated works, I am not bound by the idea that digital code works must necessarily be executable code works.

**Adams** >> Peter Howard wrote, "Anyone who uses computers as part of their art has to allow for or accept that what is ground-breaking today may be buried tomorrow."

**Warnell** >> We can temper future losses (possible/probable) by staying clear of those things that are shown by their history to most likely disappear sooner rather than later, e.g., non-standard, proprietary, commercial programs and web browser plug-ins - by staying close to the real core of things.

Web art might have the potential to bring about real new thinking and a new art, but it will take real time for these things to happen. If you are a web or net artist, then do yourself a favour and give yourself as much time as you can. And good luck to you.

Thx 4 th chat R & R - best 2 u /t.

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Rita Raley is Assistant Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she teaches courses in the digital humanities and global literary studies. She is completing work on one book, *\_Global English and the Academy\_*, and also currently at work on a book about digital textuality. Her most recent articles address hypertext and performance and the electronic empire and her ancillary research topics include codework, net.art, courseware, and molecular computing.

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