

Kate Armstrong / FEEDS AND STREAMS: RSS POETICS

In this issue of *The Capilano Review* a selection of some of the foremost writers, thinkers and artists working today in the field of digital literature have contributed work that will be experimentally syndicated using RSS. The works are broken into discrete fragments and delivered in a never-ending iterative stream anyone who signs up. Thus the issue is intended as a dynamic cycle of remixed reflections, ideas, filaments, and images relating to or emerging from the context of digital writing.

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Even the acronym is manifold. RSS stands for Rich Site Summary, RDF Site Summary, Real Simple Syndication – whatever the semantics, RSS is an emergent standardized format that makes it possible for information of any kind to be sent as an ongoing feed, creating a world where cultural information is customized and spontaneous.

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Here is how you know RSS: you will have seen the tiny orange button on the blogs you read. You will have been offered the option to subscribe to any given stream, subject, tag, or person at any of the myriad points in the fabric of Web 2.0 living. RSS feeds out in an ongoing, dynamic process of perpetual becoming. Once this world has begun, how can it end?

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Here is why you will have used RSS: perhaps you have twenty favourite blogs or sites that you visit regularly. Maybe you are a digital soul whose number of sources has exceeded your ability to make a personal visit to each. If you already use an RSS reader, you have access to any free web interface by entering the address of your favourite sites enabling it to receive content continuously. Visit the website? How old world. Why would you, when it – when they – can come to you? An RSS reader, essentially, is a service that can parse any number of sources for updates, so that you don't have to visit the sites to get their information. The reader pulls it together for you, and rolls everything into one.

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The significance of RSS as a new standardized format derives from its capacity to use a programming language called XML to harness the ability to freely and dynamically distribute any type of information: not only text, but music, not only music, but video – in fact any granular, machine-readable feed from anyone using these systems. RSS is behind podcasting, blogs, and social networking. Consistent with one of its acronyms, RSS is simple, real simple. RSS means you can upload a dynamic playlist to your iPod every morning before you commute. RSS means you can track anything in the blogosphere that uses the word “rocketship.” RSS means that anything you write, I can see. RSS means... simple, syndication, stream.

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How might an RSS feed produce new art and digital literature? The automatic delivery of text fragments can generate new patterns of reading that come to be interspersed with regular life.

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The relationship to the screen, to the digital page, is changed by having material delivered through feeds. Instead of material coming together into one piece on one screen, where a person can “go” to read it, the material is always being sent out, always in flux. It is never finalized. This dematerializes the text even further beyond its initial immateriality as a digital work. Now the digital screen, too, is blasted apart, deconstructed, set adrift. Put into a framework of full, constant movement, the feed only asks the reader to turn it on, to subscribe, and then to receive. But this reception happens within the larger framework of multiple, manifold feeds, suggesting a culture that is being delivered and received from everywhere. Handpicked randomness, chosen by you, the viewer. You subscribe to a bicycling mailing list, a celebrity blog, a local newspaper, a band on MySpace, an industry newsletter, a city columnist, and an experimental novel. All of these works break into pieces and come your way. It is your personal world, subscribed to by you individually, delivered to you as it comes.

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Here is the other thing: continuity. Something is turned on, then it runs. For all you know, it will go on forever. The fact that it will likely end before forever is a fact we know about the world, about life, but it is not a foregone condition of the book or the artwork – not this one. RSS makes a place where the book can be as long, as continuous, as individual, and as randomly interspersed with the world, as life itself.

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Heraclitus: You can't step into the same river twice.

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Further, an RSS feed now means simultaneity. If we felt once in the early days of the web the strange power of the digital, where the work was everywhere all the time, we can now understand, via this textured, moving planet of feeds, not only that the work can be present everywhere simultaneously, but that it continues to change through context, perception and experience. In cognitive, social, political, computational, technological models, it is utterly manifold. The work continues and continues and continues to change.

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This issue of *TCR* marks a foray into how to bring digital literature into a new space, how to make it a thing in the world, functioning in a way that other cultural artifacts have taken to functioning. This is a way for literature to be found again in everyday life. It is an argument for using this technology for artmaking, and for bringing art, bringing writing, text, literature, into new spaces.

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RSS uses the standardized format of XML so that the material is ultimately flexible and can be transformed into anything, anywhere, at any time. Not only does the material, or what's better described as the immaterial dematerialized superflexible movement that is your new streaming world of text, come at you along with and within your life, but it changes depending on where you put it, and what you do with it. Perhaps it does not go into a reader, but into a new feed. As fast as an RSS feed can be pulled in, it can be fed out in a new form, a new context, further advancing the ultimate elasticity of the text. The material that is held inside a feed can be picked up and read by any system. RSS is the shipping container of data: a transcendent form that can travel, that can be filled. Like a book. Was this always the appeal of text?

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In a digital RSS poetics, the work isn't interactive, it is simply active. It is not about the decisions of the reader who changes the outcome of the pieces, it is about the reader him/herself: it is about this reader's world. It is the reader's experience, history, perception, inclination, passions, biases, and the array of other sources chosen by the reader in a continual, ongoing array of potential decisions that come to shape a person's stream – both incoming and outgoing in terms of what they read and what they produce. Because as fast as the information comes in, it can go out. The individual is the ultimate but still networked node, who reads and publishes, pulls and pushes, consumes and produces in an ever more integrated cycle. It is not the decisions made by the reader in the piece but those made by the reader in the world. It is another way, a new way, for the digital model to meet the physical, for the subset to dissolve into the superset, for art to meet and greet life.

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In generative digital literature, it is said that the work has the last word because the author and the reader are suddenly in the same position. The work is realized only in the instant that it materializes. But in this culture of feeds and streams, it is not the author that has the last word as in the classical model nor the work that has the last word as in the postmodern model of generative production. It is the reader who has the last word, because the work – after it is released from the control of the author and dissolved into a model of generative distribution – lands with the reader and accumulates there in a completely individualized shape. Not only is the final outcome individualized by becoming attached to the reader as s/he experiences the work, but the work becomes individualized as it blends with and is absorbed into the stream of information that is already coming to the reader. This is why it gets beyond the “work” – the work itself dissolves into experience. It is not only about remixing the world or the work, but remixing the world into the work, and the work into the world. The work enters a form so highly standardised it can travel anywhere, into and

out of any other model. It is not only XML, it is WOAML, work of art markup language, art markup language, art, language. It is the moment when art dissolves into experience, when art and life finally merge: the work meets the totality of the world and finds it can go anywhere.