New apps redefine poetry

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Poetry has been following the rules for centuries. From the strict structure of the haiku to the rhythmic rhyme of the ballad, verse can be daunting to both professional poets and amateur auteurs. But poems are also media for the masses and one Concordia researcher is using mass media to put them back in the hands of the people.

Jason Lewis's work is an integral part of Concordia's Department of Design and Computation Arts, with projects ranging from computer game development to typographic design. A poet as well as a techie, the associate professor is combining his computing skills with the act of literary creation to develop new methods of poetic expression through a suite of ten brand new digital poetry apps.

Known as P.o.E.M.M., short for Poems for Excitable [Mobile] Media, the project is a series of poems written and designed to be read on touch devices, from large-scale exhibition surfaces to mobile screens.

For Lewis, the fact that the iPhone and iPad are personal devices was key in P.o.E.M.M.'s development. "Poetry is an intimate medium but when it comes to digital poetry, the computer screen creates distance between writer and reader. Touch screens allow the audience to be drawn into a closer proximity to the computer screen than ever before," says Lewis, whose first digital poetry project for a touch-screen interface was created back in 2007, when the iPhone was in its infancy.

That artwork eventually went on to spark the entire P.o.E.M.M. project, which so far includes four apps: What They Speak When They Speak To

Me, [Buzz Aldrin](#) Doesn't Know Any Better, The Great Migration, and Smooth Second Bastard, which was released on June 26. The first version of each app is built around Lewis's poetry, but then each is extended to include texts by other poets, who write on themes ranging from miscommunication across language and cultural identity to the excitement of heading out into a great unknown.

Released as separate applications available for download through iTunes, and developed in collaboration with former computation arts student Bruno Nadeau, the P.o.E.M.M. apps allow readers to interact with the poem's text. New iterations of the apps will give users the chance to add their own words, use Twitter feeds to generate new strands of poetry, and to play with words, design and structure to generate original poems that can be rewritten at the tap of a screen.

Although it has yet to hit the halfway mark, the P.o.E.M.M. project is already generating positive feedback, having been awarded the Jury Award for the Electronic Literature Organization's annual exhibition, held June 20 to 23 in West Virginia. "It was an honour to be selected for the award," says Lewis, who travelled south to attend the opening gala. "It's great to have this recognition from the electronic literature community as a whole. Hopefully the apps will continue to garner positive attention as we round them out to an even ten."

Provided by Concordia University