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Poetry is a belligerently low-tech activity. What does a poet need other than a piece of paper and a pen (and sometimes not even that)? This image of poetry-writing as a low-tech activity fits in neatly with the conventional image of poetry as an ancient art, and of the poet operating in a bardic, shamanistic, or otherwise premodern way. In contrast, while music is also an ancient art form, it is unambiguously, and unproblematically, associated with high-tech settings, as the names of some of its styles suggest: techno, electronica, dub, synth pop, circuit bending, and so on.

Poetry does, however, exist in forms other than the graphic, typographic, or performative ones conventionally associated with it. The rise of digital poetics in the last half century or so is the most obvious instance of poetry exceeding its traditional low-tech boundaries. In a sense, almost all poetry today is ‘digital’, in that it is produced, and often read, on a computer. But the term ‘digital poetics’ generally refers to poetry that employs digital technology in ways that go beyond mimicking ‘analogue’ technologies (such as typewriters and books). According to Christopher Funkhouser, ‘A poem is a digital poem if computer programming or processes (software, etc.) are distinctively used in the composition, generation, or presentation of the text (or combinations of texts)’.\(^1\) The recent development of smart mobile devices, and their software applications (‘mobile apps’), opens a new frontier in which digital poetics can be developed. It is certainly the case that the forms of digital poetry – described by Loss Pequeño Glazier in *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (2002) as hypertext, visual/kinetic text, and works for networked and programmable media\(^2\) – seem especially pertinent for devices that are mobile, networked, and offer interactive interfaces that allow for new ways of arranging data.

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\(^1\)Poems, one of the better media apps, includes audio recordings of actors such as Helena Bonham Carter and Bill Nighy reading classic (that is, mostly out-of-copyright) works by poets such as Kipling, Browning, Betjeman, and various of the Romantics.

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Mobile apps, more commonly known as apps, are software applications for the various platforms used by smart mobile devices. These apps, which exist in their thousands, are purchasable from within a device itself. They can be used to play arcade-style games, find a restaurant, record music, process photographic images, read a book, or whatever. My focus
for Apple's iOS (an operating system that supports mobile devices such as iPhones and iPads). Some of these apps may exist for Android operating systems.

There are three main classes of poetry app: informational apps (such as databases and reference books); media apps (which include audio, video, e-book, and e-journal content); and compositional apps (which include apps that offer writing spaces with built-in tools such as rhyming dictionaries, apps that generate text for recombinant composition, and apps that offer both of these things). Informational apps are the least 'present' of these groups. They include the Glossary of Poetic Terms app, and the Australian Poetry app, which is a database (developed by Australian Poetry Ltd) of information concerning Australian poets, publishers, festivals, and journals. For the remainder of this essay I will concentrate on media apps and text-generating compositional apps with regard to three main aspects: what they offer users who are interested in digital poetics; what they offer users with regard to poetic networks and accessing content; and what the design of such apps tells us about poetry's place in the wider literary and digital cultures.

Since the 1980s there have been three main developments that have moved, at least potentially, digital poetics from the domain of the specialist (working, say, within a large educational institution or with some knowledge of computer programming) to that of the generalist. These are the development of the home computer, the internet, and mobile smart devices. Despite these first two developments, it would be true to say that digital poetics has failed to enter the mainstream of poetic production in most Anglophone countries. While the word-processing software used on home computers had a maximal impact on poetic production and dissemination, it had a less pronounced impact on the development of a digital poetics per se. It did not, for instance, lead to a mass revival of concrete poetry. While the internet has had an enormous impact on the dissemination of poetry and the development of poetry networks, especially since the rise of online social-networking services, the promise of a proliferation of new poetic forms engendered by the internet has remained largely unrealised.
marginal, though various forms of sounded poetry are increasingly visible, or rather audible⁴, especially with the advent of online hosting platforms such as Soundcloud. In other words, in accordance with the idea of the low-tech poet, print-era aesthetics continue to dominate poetry, even as poetry exists within an ever-widening digital context.

Poetry Everywhere appears to be proselytising for poetry, as its name might suggest. It describes itself as attempting 'to reach new audiences with the power of great poetry, and to increase poetry's presence on television and the web'.

This dominance of print-era aesthetics can also be seen in the poetry apps so far devised for mobile devices, especially (perhaps ironically) in the class of apps I have termed 'media apps'. The relative cheapness of digitising out-of-copyrght text and producing simple audio-visual content has led to the development of a number of media apps that include audio, video, e-book, and e-journal content. But such poetry apps are largely uninterested in a digital poetics that goes beyond dissemination and presentation. The 'low-tech' end of media apps are heavily text-based apps. A number of these, such as the Love Poems app ('The 100 Best and Most Favourite Poems for Lovers and Couples'), are designed for a market that associates poetry with romantic expression and print culture. However, whether Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' or Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' will 'do it' for such a market is an interesting question. Similarly directed towards a romance market, the Romantic Love Poems app includes poetry of no clear provenance, let alone authorship. Lines such as 'I love everything about you / Because it's you' are entirely representative.

As these examples suggest, the editorial standards and production quality of media apps vary considerably. Not surprisingly, apps that include media other than text usually show higher editorial standards. iF-poems, one of the better media apps, includes audio recordings of actors such as Helena Bonham Carter and Bill Nighy reading classic (that is, mostly out-of-copyright) works by poets such as Kipling, Browning, Betjeman, and various of the Romantics. Along with the recordings, texts are included, and audio recordings of the poems can be made by the app user her- or himself. The poems can also be 'favourited' (à la Facebook)
and organised into thematic categories, such as ‘Bedtime’ and ‘Lessons for Life’. Again, though, one is left wondering about the appeal that such products have for their intended readership. Under the 0–6 age group for ‘Bedtime’ is Coleridge’s ‘A Child’s Evening Prayer’: ‘And O! preserve my brothers both / From evil doings and from sloth’.

Words that Burn, a free poetry app based on the print/audio-CD poetry anthology of the same name (2008) by the late writer and ‘poetry promoter’ Josephine Hart, includes the usual out-of-copyright suspects (the Romantics, Kipling, et al) as well as more modern and modernist poets (including Eliot, Auden, and Plath). These more contemporary choices also remain relatively ‘safe’, sticking to works most likely taught in university curricula. The list of actors who read is certainly impressive and eclectic, including Jeremy Irons, Juliet Stevenson, Bob Geldof, and Roger Moore. (Geldof and Moore read Yeats and Kipling respectively). The recordings are a mix of audio and video of varying quality. Edward Fox’s reading of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, for instance, is marred by audience noise and a distant microphone. It seems these recordings were made as part of a concerted proselytising project on behalf of Josephine Hart. According to Sue Arnold, writing in The Guardian, Hart would ask ‘famous actors to read her favourite poems for love not money – not even expenses – in front of live audiences and then send unsolicited recordings of the event to every secondary school in Britain’. As with iFPoems, the recordings are all ‘straight’ spoken-word recordings.

In terms of their visual design, such apps commonly gesture, in ways that we might call ‘kitsch’, to the trope of poetry-as-ancient and poet-as-premodern (or early-modern). The Poet app, for instance, uses typographic imagery of books and pens.

The app of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Raven’ may initially seem more aesthetically sophisticated, employing music and sound design. But the choice of text and the graphic-novel style visuals suggests that this app is designed to appeal to a young-adult demographic that is attracted to the genre of print graphic-novel adaptations of classic texts. The choice of poem, then, as well as the designs, fits well with an existing genre of works that presumably caters to both an educational market (since ‘The Raven’ is a standard school and university text-choice) and a young-adult one.
editorial and design decisions.

Also sticking to a text commonly found in university curricula is the app of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. More expensive than most, this app is an exceptionally stylish display of the multimedia potential of a mobile app. As well as including the text and manuscript facsimile of Eliot's poem, the app includes 35 video commentaries from figures such as Seamus Heaney, six audio recordings of readings of the complete poem (including the two that Eliot made in 1933 and 1947), copious notes and annotations to the text, a gallery of still images, and a specially filmed performance of the poem by the actor Fiona Shaw (which I found particularly compelling). The app's software design allows for seamless integration between these parts. One can switch between text and manuscript by swiping left or right, view Shaw's performance alone or synchronised with the text, shift between readers at any time, and so on. This media app is both elegant and genuinely useful for anyone interested in *The Waste Land*, and it is a rich educational tool. As the impressive list of credits shows, such quality requires significant development. (*The Waste Land* app is a co-production between Faber & Faber and Touch Press, incorporating video and audio recordings from the BBC and text from *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*).

The Poetry Everywhere app is another high-quality media app, and while its name might suggest that it is seeking to promote or disseminate poetry universally, its current version contains poetry readings by poets (such as Billy Collins and Adrienne Rich) from only one place: the Geraldine R Dodge Poetry Festival, the largest poetry event in North America, and one of the few events in an Anglophone country where poetry can be seen to have a mass audience. The production values of these videos of live performances are extremely high (not surprisingly, since one of the app's developers is the public television station, WGBH, and since the content was designed to be broadcast on local public television stations). Poetry Everywhere offers a vision of cultural citizenship not readily seen in Australia, with its vastly different broadcasting conditions and attitude to philanthropic culture. The Geraldine R Dodge Poetry Festival is sponsored by the Geraldine R Dodge Foundation, which was created with an $85 million endowment from Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge. Another co-developer of the Poetry Everywhere app is the Poetry Foundation, which
Perhaps as a result of such sponsorship, Poetry Everywhere appears to be proselytising for poetry, as its name might suggest. It describes itself as attempting ‘to reach new audiences with the power of great poetry, and to increase poetry’s presence on television and the web’.

The educational and promotional (if not proselytising) air about these apps is no doubt consistent with the otherwise minority position of poetry in contemporary Anglophone literary cultures. Certainly, the Poetry Foundation (which has also developed an app called ‘Poetry’, after its journal) has considerable resources to undertake such promotion, and its apps are sophisticated, well-designed examples of their kind. But they could be said to rely on notions of poetry as a ‘wisdom’ discourse. Their Poetry app, for instance, allows users to navigate the content by scrolling themes listed across the top of the window (forming combinations such as ‘Grief & Love’, ‘Anger & Aging’ and so on). Even as it offers ways of navigating poetry via these ‘wisdom’ thematics, the app also, of course, has a link to the Poetry Foundation’s print journal, illustrating how apps in poetic culture are being used in the same way that print publications elsewhere are using apps to develop audiences. Such audience development can also be seen at work in the Poetry Daily app, which offers a poem a day from various high-quality sources – books, magazines, and journals – allowing readers to save their favourite poems. The Poem Flow app (curated by the Academy of American Poets) also gives its users a poem each day, but the app also allows the kinetic presentation of text. This kinetic presentation is editable, however, only to the degree that users can control the speed at which text appears on the screen. The poems can be shared via email and social networks, and additional poems can be bought. (A year’s worth of poems costs $2.99).

Media poetry apps, especially ones such as Poetry Daily and the Poetry Foundation’s apps, allow users to access large amounts of high quality poetry for little or no cost. But in addition to offering free or cheap content, media poetry apps tend to suggest two things. Through their design and marketing, such apps illustrate how poetry is generally conceived of in ‘safe’ terms, consistent with poetry’s marginal status. In terms of their visual design, such apps commonly gesture, in ways that we might call ‘kitsch’, to the trope of poetry-as-ancient and poet-as-premodern (or early-modern). The Poet app, for instance, uses typographic imagery of books and pens. Similarly, iFPoems uses book symbolism, married to
natural imagery (a tree made of texts, surrounded by books that are either birds or falling leaves). *(The Waste Land* app, appropriately for an app of a modernist poem, studiously avoids such visual tropes).

Sendapoem is an eccentric app that has no editable settings, but which generates a complete ‘jabber nonsense poem’ in one of six European languages at the push of a virtual button.

The relative lack of risk regarding the development of these apps can be seen in how they are designed to appeal to educational and juvenile markets. Such apps trope poetry to educational and young-adult markets as various recognisable discourses: wisdom, romance, or self-expression. Apps such as iFPoems and Poetry Everywhere also trope poetry in heritage terms, attractive to a middle-brow audience, offering users access to ‘great’ works. Again, *The Waste Land* app is the notable exception here, offering instead a kind of ‘cool’ and unfussy sense of scholarship.

So far I have concentrated on apps that deliver content to poetry consumers, however they might be conceived. In this sense they are participating in developing ‘digital poetics’ in terms of dissemination, networking, and presentation. But what about apps that are compositional tools that develop digital poetics as a compositional practice? While apps generally are potentially powerful forms of software, the degree to which they can be used for ‘high-end’ purposes, especially with regard to artistic production, is a question that has still not been answered. Apps, after all, are for the most part very cheap (usually no more than a few dollars), and they are, like any software, dependent on the limitations of their devices. In the field of music production there are numerous apps that advertise themselves as ‘real’ production tools. However, to what extent they deliver on such promises is debatable. Apps that present themselves as mobile Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs), for instance, are currently seen by most DAW users as more akin to audio sketch-pads than fully fledged mobile virtual recording studios (though this may soon change with the release of a 48-track, 24-bit DAW app by Wavemachine Labs). For most poets, the textual equivalent of a musical sketch-pad is a note pad, an inherently low-tech thing. If an app attempts to present itself as a poetry composition tool, one of the key challenges it faces is how that tool is different from a simple virtual notepad or word processor.
such as the Pages app. In other words, any app that seeks to move beyond simple note-pad technology is moving into the realm of digital poetics, as defined at the beginning of this essay.

A move towards digital poetics can be seen through the inclusion of text generators in many compositional poetry apps. However, while apps that include text generators may evoke (for instance) the aleatoric proceduralism of the avant garde, in which chance is strategically incorporated into the process of artistic creation, they are usually marketed, like other poetry apps, in terms of traditional ideas about what constitutes poetry, or in terms of poetry as a game. Rather than avant-garde proceduralism, then, the analogue equivalent of such compositional apps is more often 'fridge-magnet poetry'. This is directly reflected in the names of the Poetry Magnets app and the FridgePoet app.

As is common with a number of these apps, Poetry Magnets is described in the App Store in terms of a game, rather than a writing tool: 'Poetry Magnets is a fun way to build poems! Select a category and pass around your iPad with your friends. Great way to embarrass or impress your friends!' Poetry Jumble, as its name suggests, is a game in which users are required to drag the relevant words into lines of canonical poetry. Instant Poetry HD urges consumers to 'Have fun creating your own beautiful, passionate, and romantic poetry, with your own pictures as backgrounds!...Send your creations to your significant other for a romantic surprise, or to your friends to make them smile!' As these descriptions suggest, the writing of poetry is conceived of in terms of nonprofessional play and in terms of traditional ideas of poetry as intersubjective and unproblematic personal expression, often of a romantic nature. The developers of PortaPoet, for instance, state that their app can be used for 'Writing Notes to go with the flowers you want to send', 'Wedding speeches', and 'Song writing'. Poetry as an accessory of self styling, especially for a young-adult market, can also be seen in the visual design of some of these apps. The Poetry Creator / Verses app, for example, is clearly appealing to such a market, with its bright 'Smiggle'-style design.

Compositional apps that generate text (rather than those that offer tools such as a rhyming dictionary) nevertheless offer users the ability to write computer poems, poems algorithmically generated by computer software, even if such an ability is conceived of in terms of play and self-styling. As Funkhouser notes, there are three types of computer poems:
‘Works are either permutational (recombining elements into new words or variations), combinatoric (using limited, pre-set word lists in controlled or random combinations), or slotted into syntactic templates (also combinatoric but within grammatical frames to create an image of “sense”’). Of the apps considered here all but one are combinatoric. The exception is Sendapoeem, which creates permutational computer poetry. Sendapoeem is an eccentric app that has no editable settings, but which generates a complete ‘jabber nonsense poem’ in one of six European languages at the push of a virtual button. Here’s one I generated earlier:

Do myster,

Alm lush giggle fait?
Bed wait,
Can from he cho,
Dark echo?

There are air bease,
Blow crease
Mout awe in bay.

If this poem evokes an avant-garde aesthetics, it does so by raising issues to do with authorship and usage. Would one publish such a poem? If so, under whose name? The issue of text generation is one that, according to Roberto Simanowski in *Digital Art and Meaning* (2011), draws attention to the limits of the avant garde. Discussing the oft-discussed ‘death of the author’ in poststructuralist literary theory, Simanowski writes that

there was another demise of the author, one that poststructuralists and postmodernists rarely thought about: the replacement of the author by the text generator. Strangely enough, in this case, theoreticians in the field of digital literature argue for the life of the author, stating that she survives in the output of the machine because she has configured its databases and algorithms. All the nonsensical text generated by the computer is related to the way it has been programmed. Does such downplaying of the role of the computer in favour of human agency reveal an unconscious technophobia in the midst of our much-vaunted technophilia? The author is dead, long live the author?²

This is an interesting polemic, especially with regard to apps, where the user has not revealed her or his agency through programming or selection of source text. It is notable that the emphasis on games and interpersonal
app users from considering the issues of authorship that Simanowski raises.

Design and marketing are not the only relevant points here. While compositional apps might resemble the algorithmic software programs that poets, such as John Tranter, have used to produce computer poems\(^7\), the apps’ limitations make them notably less flexible tools. The Break Down program, used by Tranter to produce text (subsequently heavily revised) for his collection of stories *Different Hands* (1999), allows the user to decide upon the source text that will be used to generate new text. Compositional apps lack this ability, which is key – as suggested by Simanowski – to producing digital poetry as traditionally conceived in avant-garde circles.

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Compositional apps, like the media apps, tend to present poetry as a game, associated with a self-styling that is allied to either juvenile or middle-brow forms of literary subjectivity.

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The operating systems of smart mobile devices, however, do make apps far easier to use than conventional computer programs such as Break Down. The touch screen interface means that text can be generated and moved with an ease that early exponents of computer poetry could only have dreamed. Instant Poetry (surely an ironic title for a poetry compositional tool) offers the following features common to most compositional apps: it allows the user to generate and move text with the touch screen, it has Facebook integration, it allows the text to be recorded as audio, and it allows text to be emailed as a picture. As with any tool, the possibilities of fashioning compelling poetry in such a context depends on the user’s patience and skill. As the above lines suggests, ‘compelling’ in digital contexts may relate to finding unexpected connections (especially metaphors) between textual elements.

For the most part, these compositional apps are relatively simple. Poetry Magnets, for instance, allows the user to endlessly scroll through a seemingly random list of words. The word sample can be programmed only to the extent that the user can choose a category. The app’s categories, once again, illustrate something about what poetry app developers see as intrinsic to poetic discourse for their perceived audience. They include ‘Mythical’, ‘Religious’, ‘Romantic’, and ‘Zombie’. 
The Poetry Creator / Verses app has the most sophisticated GUI (graphical user interface), allowing users to determine the degree to which the text produced will include ‘if, ands, buts, etc.’, as well as other syntactical and lexical features. The app also allows for the in-app purchase of additional words lists. These include ‘Shakespeare’, ‘LOL-tionary’ and ‘60s Words 1 & 2’. The category ‘60s Words 1’ includes such decade-specific words as ‘beard’, ‘hollow’, ‘explode’, ‘coffee’, ‘authentic’, and ‘deranged’. This app tends to emphasise unexpected juxtapositions. Or else perhaps that is simply how I see them, primed as I am by literary history (Ern Malley) and what I know of avant-garde digital poetics.

Of these apps, only Touchwords attempts to use the touch screen interface as an integral feature of the app design, rather than just a tool for moving words next to each other. Touchwords uses a battery of gestures to generate text (which can be integrated into text produced by the user). As the App Store description states, ‘Your gesture style determines the types of words that appear’. (I have yet been able to produce a word using the ‘two-finger rotate’ style). An up–swipe will give you words such as ‘summit’, ‘pink’, ‘up’, ‘skies’, ‘epic’, ‘peak’, ‘chimney’, and ‘praise’. A down–swipe gives words such as ‘lumbering’, ‘ice’, ‘murk’, ‘ghost’, ‘forbids’, ‘lowly’, ‘black’, ‘light’. Clearly, this is an unsophisticated tool, unable to take into consideration, for instance, scansion. (And it is also one that might invite critique when it comes to its Manichean oppositions). Some may find that its degree of randomness makes its usefulness extremely limited, though others may see randomness as key to their form of digital poetics.

As I have been suggesting, the main problem for these apps with regard to producing digital poetry is that their users cannot add to or alter the text included in the app’s sample library. Despite the relative sophistication of a smart device’s interactive GUI, none of the apps currently available for the iOS operating system allows a user to produce poems by using source text of their own choosing. This is a major disappointment for anyone wanting a compositional poetry app to be more than a novelty. (And something that web-based poetry compositional tools do offer).

These compositional apps, like the media apps, tend to present poetry as a game, associated with a self-styling that is allied to either juvenile or middle-brow forms of literary subjectivity. While anyone with time and patience could fashion interesting poetry from them, it is not
to me, again, whether the target audience would be willing to undertake such aesthetic work. Text-generating apps offer random and recombinant forms of composition, but without drawing attention to the poetics and semiotics that such approaches may imply. Nor, despite the use of a touch screen, do these apps, with the possible exception of Touchwords, highlight the interactivity between body and machine in writing poetry (an interactivity that is usually invisible in the profoundly naturalised act of writing with a pen or typing on a keyboard). In addition, while such apps are obviously interactive, they do not produce interactive works (other than the interaction of sharing work on social networks). Lastly, these apps show no interest, despite the graphic capability of smart devices, in static or kinetic visual poems (with the exception of determining the window’s background), nor do they engage with hypertext or multimedia (other than the capacity for some of them to make ‘realist’, uneditable audio recordings).

Writing in the mid 1990s, Charles O. Hartman reflected on the way that computer-human interaction has often been imagined in heroic and utopian terms, with humans and computers inevitably coming into deep and close colloquy.

In the strange relationship between vernacular and avant-garde cultures formed in such apps, we may or may not be seeing an emergent digital poetics. Certainly, it may be unwise to discount the compositional possibilities of such apps on the basis of their simplicity or apparent naivety. Just as the networking possibilities of such apps have yet to become apparent, their aesthetic functions may not yet have become apparent through use. As Daniel Miller writes in *Stuff* (2010), with regard to the notion of inherent capacity in computer technology, ‘the problem with the idea of inherent capacity is that usually we don’t know what this is until it is manifested in usage and meaning. We know of many cases, such as texting, where something was built in as capacity but the cultural genres it gave birth to were never anticipated by its designers’. Poetry apps may, or may not, produce unanticipated genres of poetry or modes of literary sociality. Popular music is filled with examples of artists using simple technologies for surprising ends (such as the hip hop producers who used the E–mu SP–1200 drum machine as a sampler).
'avant-garde' notion. In their Introduction, the editors of p0es1s: The Aesthetics of Digital Poetry discuss digital poetics as inherently radical and experimental:

As a form of language art within media art, digital poetry literally holds the most radical position — radical in the sense that its main focus is both media-caused changes in language and the linguistic base of the digital medium. As a form of language art within literature, digital poetry expands and renews the program of experimental forms of writing that developed especially in the second half of the century.²

The apps that I have discussed here are notable for offering a version of digital poetry that is vernacular, nonprofessional, and game-based.

Writing in the mid 1990s, Charles O. Hartman, in Virtual Muse: Experiments in Computer Poetry (1996), reflected on the way that computer-human interaction has often been imagined in heroic and utopian terms, with humans and computers inevitably coming into deep and close colloquy. Considering the way that such future interactions were troped, he observed that poetry often stood as an index for the deeply human that computer intelligence needed to aspire to: 'The ability to write poems is the talisman by which we’ll know that computers have really arrived'.³ Hartman, as a relatively early exponent of computer poetry, is understandably suspicious of such a notion. But the tension between the paradigmatically human activity of writing poems and the putatively mechanistic processes of computation remains oddly present in mobile apps, especially in the design of their GUIs.

But, as these apps show, computation and composition are not dialectically opposing things. Indeed, one might say that digital poetics (along with music) paradigmatically illustrates this point. Computation and composition exist in a dyadic relationship, something not often apparent when we think about poetics in traditional terms. Whatever their limitations, then, these apps might force us to consider further what creativity is (and how it might differ, for instance, from games or 'mere novelty'), and the structures (partly random, partly controlled) in which creativity can happen.
notes


