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## Reading (Between) Machine

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American Book Review, Volume 35, Number 2, January/February 2014,  
p. 6 (Article)

Published by American Book Review  
DOI: [10.1353/abr.2014.0017](https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2014.0017)



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situating the volume in aesthetic and historical context, are available as explanatory information for the uninitiated, the book on the face of it seeming to show the audience not just the script but also the strings, a backstage or open cabinet view that ostensibly makes the reader privy to the means by which the illusory magic is generated. (It is not for nothing that the title of Wershler's essay should be a markup command: "Title of Essay in Plain Type.") In this respect the actual content of the poems is almost beside the point,

mere linguistic material that serves retroactively to emphasize the idea—the whole of the planning, decisions, and processes that govern its own realization. But for all of its foregrounding of this idea, *Of the Subcontract* holds to a degree of opacity with respect to its procedures, recognizing the actual labors of writing only in terms native to computational capitalism, as efficiency metrics, and withholding the individual signatures of the "Turkers" whose poems have been included. It is unfortunate then that user names are in effect hidden

within the cabinet, the one piece of machinery that needs to be hidden in order to preserve the auratic spell of conceptual art. This tells us all we know and need to know about the nature of the social contract in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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### BETWEEN

#### PAGE AND SCREEN

Amaranth Borsuk  
and Brad Bouse  
Siglio Press

44 pages; paper, \$24.94  
<http://www.betweenpageand-screen.com>

For those who believe that the *avant la lettre*s remain on the page, a recent work of multimedia literature can get you up-to-speed in playful and poetic ways. Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse's *Between Page and Screen* is an augmented-reality book of poetry: a codex filled with QR ("quick response") codes that trigger a networked Internet connection to produce concrete poetry between the space of the page and the screen. The work's title suggests its technopoetic and pedagogical pursuit. *Between Page and Screen* is about the in-between, and it provides a bridge between pages and screens, poetry and games. It crosses over and comments upon the connection between machine reading and machine writing, between augmented reality and avant-garde literature. It pulls highbrows, academics, and intellectuals into the digital sphere, where others have been reading for a while now. And it does so with rich, rigorous poetics that model the future of the literary by demonstrating how machine writing can be very, very good.

Every page of this finely made little letterpress-like book contains a QR graphic: a small black square comprised by a geometric pattern set against the stark white page. That's it, there's no text to read, just geometric shapes. The omnipresence of such images in our networked world—where they grace every commodity, from hammers to novels—has taught us that these data-imprints require a machine reader to translate them into content that can then be parsed by a human reader. When this little book is held up to a web-camera on the reader's computer, and that computer is connected to the Internet, specifically to the URL associated with the book, then a digital connection is made between the QR code and [www.betweenpageandscreen.com](http://www.betweenpageandscreen.com). The result is a projection of three-dimensional concrete poetry that appears, as if by magic, and beckons to be seen and read. Upon unleashing this poetry, the reader is struck by the notion that she is not the only reader involved in the processural poetic of *Between Page and Screen*. The work exposes the book to be a reading machine that, rather than standing in opposition to digital technology, can be purposefully connected to the Internet and its networked reading practices.

Book-based QR-based literature is nothing new, and to share one example I'm going to shift from discussing American poetry to a lowbrow cousin that seems to occupy the opposite literary

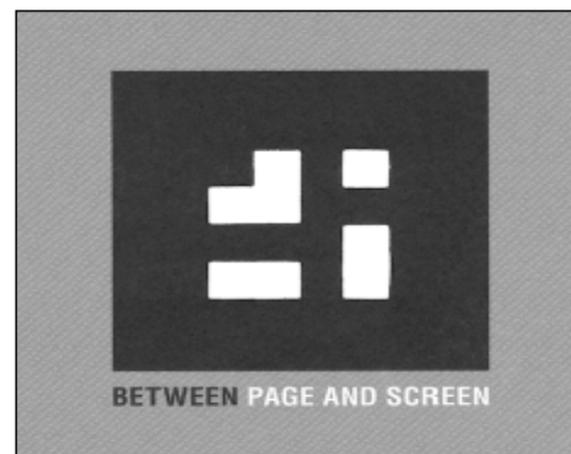
register: the Playstation WonderBook version of *Harry Potter, Wonderbook: Book of Spells* (2012). To dip down a little more, let me quote Jeff Rubin, host of the online show [jeffrubinjeffrubinshow.com](http://jeffrubinjeffrubinshow.com) on "College Humor," as he introduces the augmented-book. He describes *Wonderbook: Book of Spells* as representing "how the Playstation has improved books." This statement is said tongue-and-cheek, for, as one of the casual but astute co-hosts then responds, "Great, it's like a book you can't read without plugging yourself into a television...the perfect book!" The couch-critics (they actually are sitting on a couch) then debate the genre of this Wonderbook: is it a game, a book, a "window"? The same questions could be posed about *Between Page and Screen*. The book's publisher, Siglio Press, describes itself as "an independent press dedicated to publishing uncommon books and editions that live at the intersection of art & literature," and it claims to publish works that "defy categories and thoroughly engage a reader's intellect and imagination."

### *Books and digital codes, pages and screens, work together to co-produce cutting-edge literature.*

If *Between Page and Screen* is the result of this quest, then this little independent publisher just might just have more in common with Playstation than we might think. So, what do we see by positioning Siglio and Playstation side-by-side and reading between the pages and screens of the wonder books they publish? Isn't it obvious? Both use QR codes to display the magic of reading, to invoke the potential spell a book can cast.

*Between Page and Screen* is very much about books and the wonder of this older medium. The work contains an epistolary correspondence between two entities: P and S. Does P stand for "Page" and S mean "Screen"? Yes, but that's not all. We are told on the last screen that P and S also stand-in for "post-script." "Post-script" implies text that comes after a primary text but also a temporal period that follows the end (in this case) of a certain form of textuality. So, P and S refer to media formats and also medial epochs. Ours has been called the post-print era, but *Between Page and Screen* suggests that the separation of page and screen into distinct medial categories and temporal eras just might be misguided. We are told in this book's post-script, "There is no post-script." *Between Page and Screen* suggests that books and digital codes, pages and screens, work together to co-produce cutting-edge literature.

What connects and lies between P and S? Answer: Q and R. QR codes enable the correspondence between P and S. They procure the machine writing that enables human reading; they are the book's actual content, the visual poetry laid out on its pages. *Between Page and Screen* promotes a focus on QR codes as programmatic codes, which call forth executable code through



Detail from cover

an Internet connection, and also as "bibliographic codes" (Jerome McGann's term) that illuminate the programmatic protocols of the codexical reading machine. In an era of "convergence culture," wherein readers are producers and content streams across multiple media platforms, we need not be beholden to traditional categories and constraints for describing and isolating media or genres or historical trajectories. *Between Page and Screen* argues this point by producing a hybrid reading practice that is not just about using multiple media but also about bridging and blending them. The work invites us to read for connections between old and new media, between different types of machine writing.

The correspondence between P and S contains a meditation on an evolving relationship and on the evolution of a writing surface. The third page depicts a letter from S to P: "I take your point. I didn't mean to cut." The rhetoric of pointing and cutting comes from the history of books: the yard or pointer stick used to read the Torah scrolls; the cutting and scraping of calfskin to erase unwanted marks from early manuscripts. It is fitting that S (or screen) uses this language to address P (or page), for a reader who knows the medial history of the page would keenly feel the diction's double-edged meaning. *Between Page and Screen* rewards readers with knowledge of book history as well as those interested in etymology and philology. This work may use new technologies to present machine writing but it does so in ways that turn our attention back to more traditional modes of literariness: books, words, text, and, yes, media.

This is why *Between Page and Screen* is so important. Borsuk and Bouse introduce QR codes and machine writing in ways that expose and make poetic (and pleasurable) the kinds of technological augmentation already underway in our digital culture. The work educates as it pricks, pointing out our discomfort with machine writing but following it up with S's sheepish apology: "I didn't mean to cut."

Jessica Pressman is a Visiting Scholar at the University of California, San Diego, and the author of *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (2014).