A Platform Poetics

Computational Art, Material and Formal Specificities, and *101 BASIC Poems* (2013–)

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Merhi is a conceptual artist who deals incisively with digital and computational media. There have been some intriguing Atari 2600 artworks over the years, not only demoscene productions but also the large-scale *[giantJoystick]* that requires collaborative play (Mary Flanagan, 2006) and *A Slow Year,* a 4KB cartridge with four unconventional, haiku-like games (Ian Bogost, 2010). Merhi, however, is likely the first person to have used the Atari 2600 as an artistic medium, with his first works dating from 1985. His practice is a computational one, and includes writing assembly-language code for the Atari 2600 game system—a system also based on the 6502 processor, having it run in installations of different sorts—some non-interactive, some interactive.

One project from 2003 includes nineteen televisions, each with the text "JUSTICIA," one TV for each of the people killed in the protests against Hugo Chavez on April 11, 2002.[21] One of those killed was Merhi's cousin, and his cousin's Atari 2600 Jr. is used, in combination with a cartridge programmed by Merhi, to produce the video signal.[22] Other projects include an interactive, combinatorial poetry machine (*Super Atari Poetry,* 2005) that uses a trio of Ataris (with their emblematic joysticks), each connected to a TV.[23] As with other Atari poetry projects of Merhi's, this one subverts the expectation that the Atari 2600 is a visual game system rather than a verbal poetic one.

The effect of *Justicia,* for instance, would be very different (and much less) if Merhi had used standard Intel-based computers, or Macs, instead of his cousin's beloved game system. It would also not be as surprising to see a poetry machine made from contemporary computers, which we know to have text-processing capabilities. Creating a looping video and putting an inert Atari VCS in front of the display would probably have been even more unsatisfying. His selection of platform, and his having the platform actually generate the art directly before the viewer, has been essential to the way he engages with culture through this computational work.