

Spoetry
by *Fiona Condon*
interview by *Matthew Weiss*

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: boss wants to talk about harassment!
Date: April 4, 2012 2:06:11 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

my best wishes to you!
no more scares before nail fungus infections

shoot your gin into her vagina
give her hot pounding after alcohol
Jessica and Jessica twosome
in Moscow, i live alone now hooked up the internet

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: " Independent Men's Sexual Institute"
Date: April 4, 2012 2:09:53 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

spiky tapis munch kine
ahoy spore
i believe that my money will be safe in your hands until we meet each other
die busk chum
peter sheer

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: no jews allowed!
Date: April 4, 2012 2:10:01 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

lmao hey Fiona omg its been forever

i have concluded with the bank to transfer this money abroad
alternatively, we can both go into a joint partnership investment
and they went to sea in a sieve

but the frog when they had received this promise
buttkissing and normal

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: of the wild sea and i would have
Date: April 4, 2012 2:10:20 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

honestly you should take a look at this now

please be kind to write me back
i am residing in Accra ghana for asylum
i believe that my money will be safe in your hands until we meet each other

pick a watch that matches your eye color
gay and blue

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: perhaps his spirit was watching you asked softly
Date: April 4, 2012 2:10:38 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

i know you have been struggling with work

you're so Canadian...
eat your ability
vacation your fingertip
move towards the money

my mom swears by this
with a ring at the end of his nose

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: boss wants to talk about harassment...
Date: April 4, 2012 2:11:01 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

you can't forget about me Fiona

i feel on top of the world
i feel on top of the world
im so lucky i heard about this

photographed you secretly
through the silent-roaring ocean

and you?

you're so cute...
bite your professional
support your Hydrocodone
come towards the lady

providing a volcano power to you in bed
(costs like a cup of coffee!)

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: "lost love-warrior spirit?"
Date: April 4, 2012 2:11:08 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

lunch, supplement: fake
licentious: gnome peter hazy
bite, slum siege welch! spin

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: ROCK SOLID advice for the bed
Date: April 4, 2012 2:10:53 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

your problems have been solved

now every night i eat filet mignon
now everything is back to normal i paid off all my credit cards
i found this online

Fiona you need to keep in touch
i believe that my money will be safe in your hands until we meet each other

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: "fresco pitier banister"
Date: April 4, 2012 2:11:16 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

you need have no fears on that account

now every night i eat filet mignon

now i only buy designer clothes
i thought i would never get out of debt

honestly you should try this as soon as possible
please be kind to write me back

From: sleptown0@gmail.com
Subject: " no more scares before nail fungus infections"
Date: April 4, 2012 2:11:30 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

now i only buy designer clothes
this has changed everything
now i only buy brand name items
now everything is back to normal i paid off all my credit cards
now i move for the advice for the bed
and sang to a small guitar

seri0us and silent-roaring
providing a volcano power to you in bed

From: sleptown0@gmail.com
Subject: more information about taxes!
Date: April 4, 2012 2:11:37 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

silky weak chum apart?
ahoy smelt cask born
oops, i did it again
peter weak boob ah?
along trait tapis

From: sleptown0@gmail.com
Subject: no more scares before nail fungus infections!
Date: April 4, 2012 2:11:45 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

i can only gain a citizenship right by becoming a legitimate investor
alternatively, we can both go into a joint partnership investment
my father left a huge amount of money for me with 450kg raw gold gold
please be kind to write me back
lmao hey Fiona omg its been forever

now i'm living carefree
now i'm living carefree
this saved my life

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: and we went to sea in a sieve
Date: April 4, 2012 2:11:59 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

Fiona someone told me you need a new job

you're so preferred...
eat your price
bite your Moscow
work towards the vagina

dont keep hesitating
through the silent-roaring ocean

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: no more scares before nail fungus infections...
Date: April 4, 2012 2:12:07 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

you need have no fears on that account

now i'm living carefree
im so lucky i heard about this
now every night i eat filet mignon

my best wishes to you!
on that little heap of stones

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: "infection in our cinema"
Date: April 4, 2012 2:12:14 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

spore skua kine nitre
ahoy smelt cask born

and sang to a small guitar
jenny farm gamp born
spore skua kine nitre

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: and his horse could hardly make headway...
Date: April 4, 2012 2:12:22 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

damn you, answer me

im so lucky i heard about this thank god
now i only buy brand name items
this saved my life

you can't forget about me Fiona
please be kind to write me back

photographed you secretly

you're so strange...
bite your satellite
feel your lady
work towards the problem

you can't go wrong. it's doctor and herbalist endorsed
names of teachers

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: FW: with a ring at the end of his nose
Date: April 4, 2012 2:12:29 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

im so lucky i heard about this thank god
i can finally afford a new phone
finally making something of myself
finally making something of myself
now i creep for the Klonopin
i am tired of living singly

credible and golden
i think you will be attracted by kinds of items

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: no doctor allowed
Date: April 4, 2012 2:12:44 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

now everything is back to normal i paid off all my credit cards
little did i know there was an easy solution
now i only buy brand name items
finally making something of myself
now i creep for the AIDS
i am tired of living singly

lovely and on-line
i can fix your problems

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: sitting where the pumpkins blow!
Date: April 4, 2012 2:12:52 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

imagine what this can do for you and your family

im so lucky i heard about this thank god
this has changed everything
now i only buy designer clothes

imagine what this can do for you and your family
AIDS in Olympic pool

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: boy bites off own finger...
Date: April 4, 2012 2:12:59 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

personally i think you should get going soon
Cheerleader tests cannabis

licentious young Cheerleader
hear her moan
princess's hairy crotch
i can fix your problems

From: sleeptown0@gmail.com
Subject: " (costs like a cup of coffee!)"
Date: April 4, 2012 2:13:07 AM EDT
To: Matthew Weiss <heyredhat@gmail.com>

--- Codeine 15mg -- 30 for \$203.70 --
30 pills - \$ 78
30 pills - \$ 78
Vicodin ES \$4.40

trust me it's dreary

~ The Interview ~

Matt:

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

Fiona:

I'm a senior, studying Computer Science and American Civilization. I'm from Canada, which makes it kind of weird to study American Civilization. But it's an intriguing topic.

Matt:

Does Canada ever come up?

Fiona:

I actually have used Canadian television shows in papers. And I have to justify why I'm using something that's Canadian in papers that are ostensibly about America. And it comes up because oddly enough I've had a couple of professors and TA's who were Canadian. I don't know why they gravitate towards American Civilization.

Matt:

Do you see yourself as part of a Canadian intellectual heritage? You have Marshall McLuhan.

Fiona:

I guess so. I knew Marshall McLuhan was Canadian, but I didn't really associate him with anything uniquely Canadian.

Matt:

He was part of a group, I think.

Fiona:

I know there's a really good department of Media Studies at the University of Toronto.

[Matt looks it up,]

Matt:

Oh, they had Northrop Frye and Edmund Carpenter too! Well, how about that! Canada.

Fiona:

I honestly hadn't thought about whether there was anything uniquely Canadian about understanding media. But I really like Marshall McLuhan.

Matt:

Would you ever have yourself be represented as a Canadian artist?

Fiona:

Probably not, unless it was in Canada! I know in high school, when we'd read books, we'd focus on Commonwealth authors. I'm not sure exactly why. I'm surprised some people don't know what the Commonwealth is, and that there's this a network of countries. It's kind of a weird thing in Canada, because it's just a formal connection at this point.

Matt:

So, tell me a little about your project.

Fiona:

So, I did the *Spoetry* project for Daniel Howe's Programming for Digital Art and Literature class. It started because I wanted to do a project, and the working material that I had was some abnormally bizarre spam messages that I'd been on the receiving end of for a really long time. I had been culling them over the years. I don't know how I got into this loop, but a very high percentage of the spam messages I received were unusual. Some would be excerpts from children's books that I'd really liked when I was younger, which would be very disconcerting. Some would be very obscene. Especially the subject lines, anything to get you to click inside. And so I wanted to work with that and I thought what better than have it be distributed in the same way that I originally got it. So there's a java backend that sends it out as spam. It's kind of a frustrating process because it's difficult to actually get mail clients to tag you as spam, but not blacklist you at the same time in the modern internet. So that was a challenge.

I like how when things are perverse, they're often perverse in a way that's unrecognizably weird. I'm not sure who is writing these things, but there is clearly a different understanding between American consumers and whoever is the author of them about what is sexy or exciting. And at the same time, there are elements that are hard to ignore.

Matt:

It makes you wonder what they think they know about us.

Fiona:

Yeah, or like what a “love warrior spirit” is, or “cheerleader caught by blacks.” It’s perverse in a way that’s just a little warped, a little alienated from what you’d expect.

Matt:

So what was the process of putting each fragment together?

Fiona:

The subject lines are just actual subject lines of things that I got. Because I felt there was a difference between the subject line and the body. As in, subject lines are mostly trying to get you to click in. In terms of the bodies, I took the text and manually decided what the categories were. There were sentences, words, and short fragments. Then, I used a library that Professor Howe wrote, which was a grammar, and I wrote rules about how to combine and recombine them. So what I had in that file were a number of different types of poems, and those were defined by different rules which branched out. So the poems are highly likely to be different from each other.

Eventually, they boiled down to terminal bits which were chosen from the elements that I categorized in certain ways. The terminal things were actual phrases, like I said, this is macabre, or this is happy, or this is three syllables long. And those were the ultimate things that were reassembled by the grammar into the poems. And they’re generated as you send emails or as you’re flipping through them.

Matt:

How does it know how long to make each one?

Fiona:

Just the top level structure that defines a poem type. I have haikus. Like a fraction of them are haikus. Then, there are other less well-defined formats, more select things based on emotion or other more ambiguous types, rather than just syllable count. Some were just based on rhythm.

Matt:

How much of spam text do you think is itself computer generated? And how much do people actively write it?

Fiona:

It’s pretty easy to tell when you look at something alone, whether it’s been something written. Some will be personal appeals from scammers or fake women who link back to sex sites, or information about drugs. And for some, it’s very difficult to tell why it’s been sent to you. There’s a lot of nonsense language and language that’s clearly found text, like that children’s book, *They Went to Sea in a Sieve*. That was pulled in, and I have no idea why I was getting them, because they didn’t link back to anything and there was no opportunity for me to click

through and make money. But I wondered if it were sending me nonsensical enough things that they could throw off the spam filters and associate the sender.

It's kind of too bad I used gmail, which is very effective at catching these to the point that it would be a more interesting experience to receive them if some of them worked. Then you could see which ones get through and which ones don't.

Also, the actual algorithm that they use to prevent spam from getting through is very statistical, based in the content of the message. So sometimes I wonder how some of these are ending up in the spam folder if they're just complete nonsense. It seems like there should be no way to tell that they are spam. So it's intriguing that they are tagged that way.

In terms of found text, the interesting thing about that, is that even if it seems like it isn't working, it doesn't have to work very well for it to keep happening. People write these programs to see if they're effective, and if they're not, there's no reason to shut them down. It's kind of zero cost.

Matt:

Does having done this project affect how you look at spam?

Fiona:

Yeah, but maybe not as much as you'd think. I was already kind of reading spam in order to curate it, just casually, without thinking about it as a project or related to poetry. I think everyone enjoys some good found internet text. So I would say that it hasn't radically changed how I read spam.

Matt:

I think certain people have an intuition about the history of spam, the way spam has developed over the years, dividing it into different eras, and in these poems you can see all these bits and pieces that seem very contemporary, and some that seem from earlier eras. Especially these sort of "spore skua kine nitre/ahoy smelt cask born" stuff. I see words that look like that a lot in spam these days in particular.

Fiona:

Actually, now that I think about it, I wrote a history of spam as a class project when I was in high school, which I guess gave me a good sense of the kinds of algorithms that spam blockers use, at least. I think it's pretty tough to tell what kind of algorithms the people who generate the spam are using. But part of the charm, definitely, is reverse engineering them. It's kind of like a puzzle or a joke. You try to understand why someone would do this.

Matt:

What did people in your class think?

Fiona:

They liked it. It was a fun project to show because I had a way for people to use it and to interact with it, which was to sign up to receive the messages for a little while. And I did send

them out every day for a period. I didn't want to flood anyone's mailbox because when it gets going, it actually sends them out about as quickly as you can process them, or a little quicker.

But that was the exciting part, having a list of people who wanted to receive these spam messages. And then Ryan Lester remixed it. He took my source material more than the idea or the concept, but as I remember, it was a longer hand-assembled more cohesive poem that took bits and pieces from the poems that I'd sent him. It was nice to be remixed like that! Though, I think when you take the concept of distributing this as spam out of the equation, and when you break down the structure, which were the two conceptual elements, then it's a little ambiguous what exactly's being transmuted except for the charming phrases that pop up.

Matt:

Well, in regard to that, I would say that when I look at these poems, I immediately try to reconstruct some kind of personality behind them, just because it's from a single source. In the world of spam, what personalities do you think live there?

Fiona:

There was one email I used that was a spammer from another country trying to get you to give him your bank account information. But I didn't use multiple instances of that since one is enough to get the point across. There's also "women who like you," which is one of the characters in spam. I like that a little more for some reason. Maybe because getting you to send bank account information is pretty straight-forward, in terms of what you do and what that character is, which is just someone respectable who needs your help, and wealthy. But "woman who likes you": there's a lot more room for variation, so that's a more fun character. Nothing particularly interesting about the drug emails, except that it's more about who they posit you as, and what they think you're looking for, and their conception of what it means to have high status or high effectiveness in American society--watches and drugs and sex appeal.

If it had been easier to send the emails from different names, that's something I would have done. It's not something I dedicated a lot of time to figuring out technically. But definitely it wasn't a conscious choice to have it all be from the same email address! It's just the one that I registered.

There's another archetype of spam which is just trying to get you to panic so that you click in. And, there are also tricks. The other day my room-mate got a terrible virus on her computer, which redirected her whenever she clicked through from a link on google. She looked up information on the virus, but all the comments on the article were people trying to convince you to download what was purportedly a virus killer, but was really just another virus. Everywhere you'd turn, they'd hit every instance of a help page for this virus!

Matt:

There is a certain irony that they almost relish!

So, could you give some context in terms of how this fits into works you've done and works you plan to do?

Fiona:

I did a project last semester, again where I used found text on the internet to make poetry. But this time I wanted to use comments on html pages across the internet, which I saw as being kind of like secrets that the internet has. Comments on html pages are parts of the html document that aren't rendered by the browser, so unless you view the source there's no way to actually see what's inside them. I was expecting that there would be a lot of people writing angry things or funny things or just something poignant every now and then. I wrote a webcrawler that went around until I had around eighteen or twenty gigabytes of html, which is pretty significant since it's just plain text. But I found relatively little that was interesting. But I made poetry out of it anyway, and a webpage where you could make your own poems.

But I might try that one again, with comments in other kinds of code. While people mostly generate their html these days, people don't mostly generate their Java or their Ruby or whatever. So I think I might scrape public github repositories and see if I can find things that are more like conventional secrets there.

Then I wanted to do something like an internet repository where you could go and put whatever text you wanted in and it would use a Markov or an n-gram algorithm to decompose it and make something that over time would just become incredibly complex and incorporate enough disparate things that its output would be unpredictable.

Matt:

So people could just add to the collective consciousness.

Fiona:

Totally, but less structured and more just like junk. It would be constantly outputting and inputting. So you could see what goes up against something else, and see if you could still identify junks from different bits.

Matt:

So it seems like there's these two tools: n-gram stuff for like style, statistical stuff, and then there's a grammar for structure. But there's a huge gap, as far as I can tell, in people being able to do the same kind of statistical analysis on other kinds of structural features of texts. Understanding things about conversations, for example.

Fiona:

At the semantic level.

Matt:

Yeah, or actions that are causally related, say. I was curious if you'd thought about that. Rather than the author having explicitly to structure things, ways to get the structure itself out of data.

Fiona:

Well, you could use an algorithm that looks more like an unstructured or Markov algorithm, but on like chunks that are higher than letters and words.

In terms of conversations, I did a project related to that. I made this little interactive command line prompt and it would prompt you with questions that started out being general human questions about you, things only a human being could answer. You would hold down the spacebar and answer them out loud and it would record you. As it moved forward, it got more and more jumbled, and it would keep asking you questions, but which would eventually become simple arithmetic questions, then binary operations. And while you were answering these questions, it would increasingly throw back your own voice at you. This made it incredibly difficult to answer things because you were talking over yourself. Especially when you were answering binary operation questions and you could hear yourself answering other questions in binary. The units are very likely to overlap.

Matt:

It's also interesting, on an art note, that "association" has for a long time been part of the surrealist toolkit. In that case, you yourself make the associations without knowing how, and then the associations are analyzed. With these association algorithms we can be very analytical about what the associations actually are, which is probabilities laid bare. Ideas always come together no matter how far they're separated.

Fiona:

Yeah, on that note, I had an exciting moment this week. We read Vannevar Bush's, not *As We May Think*, but his second article about the Memex in an MCM class. The next day I showed up to my Computer Networks lecture, and it was the very beginning of the lectures about the web. And the professor, as a fun thing, did a talk about the Memex too. It's nice when these things combine. I think there's an interest in both the Media Studies side and also on the technical side. Why do we do the things that we do, and how do we talk about networks in a more meaningful way?

Matt:

Do you think you could ever be in a state when you might speak like one of these generated texts?

Fiona:

It's not clear that that isn't what we already do! But the associations take on a structure in a more complex way that emerges from the simple rules, that at the bottom are probably just associations.

Taking these classes at the same time, it's also interesting how much they interfere with each other. More so Networks interfering with the other two. Nothing really can interfere when you're just coding.

Matt:

Finally, I wanted to ask, it occurs to me that if generating this text is so easy, for all we know, all this seemingly useless spam is from giant botnets spewing art just like you!

Fiona:

Hah! That's probable.

Have you heard of @Horse_ebooks? It's a twitter account that spews fragments supposedly from ebooks about horses. The idea was that you could click the link and go to a place to purchase ebooks about horses. But it's not a very good website. People really loved this thing though and it became really popular about a year ago. At one point, it seemed to spike in popularity a lot, which happens with things on the internet. Someone later did an expose, and apparently at one point, one day last November, the guy who owned the account went back in and changed the algorithm. After that, it was a lot better at taking little fragments that are actually interesting and funny to retweet. The algorithm was changed from something that you had to have a subtle appreciation of found text to enjoy, to something that's just kind of funny all the time. And people do enjoy it! In the case of @Horse_ebooks, it seems like the creator noticed and fixed it to work better.

Matt:

And now it's just one of these characters that people know about.

Fiona:

Yeah. Character is a funny thing. Sometimes a spam account will tweet at you links and if you click them, who knows what will happen. But sometimes they'll build up a little character for the account so that you won't immediately doubt them, and report them.

Also, once I was followed and tweeted at by this woman, who tweeted aphorisms. Like "If you love something, you gotta let it go" or just "Out with the girls!" But at the end of every tweet, there would be a random string of all capitals. So it would be read like, "If you love something, you gotta let it goKGUQ."

I really enjoyed that. There was something really compelling about trying and getting just *this* close to correct at impersonating a human being, and then failing.