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Can a Woman Be Wooed by a Computer Program?

By Erika Chavez, *The Orange County (CA) Register* - February 22, 2008

She was smart. She was pretty. She liked poetry by Pablo Neruda.

He, a student at the Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf, was also smart. And athletic. And funny.

But the self-professed computer geek was most definitely *not* a poet. In fact, he preferred limericks to Longfellow. So on that Valentine's Day in 2006, he wondered: Could a computer create the kind of poetry that wins a girl's heart?

Josh Allmann was determined to try. "I wanted to do something heartfelt yet off the beaten path," said 21-year-old Allmann, who grew up in Irvine and graduated from University High in 2004. "I write programs, not poetry, so I put those skills to good use."

Allmann dug up an existing algorithm that used something called the "Markov chaining technique". A Markov chain is a series of random variables that uses probabilities to determine what comes next. Markov chains appear in everything from mathematics to music to gambling to Google searches, but Allmann decided to put a different spin on the algorithm by feeding it poetry.

A computer science major, he created a program and entered a selection of poems by Neruda, a famed Chilean poet known for his passionate works. Then he sat back and watched it generate new ones.

The results were by turns awkward and awesome. There were some clunkers, like this one:

It's a winter
Space stretched out
And the oceanic
Snail:



Josh Allmann wrote a computer program to help win the heart of his former girlfriend. Today, he's hoping to find new applications for it. He plans to display it at the Imagine RIT Innovation and Creativity Festival on May 3. Photo by A. Sue Weisler. [See full-size photo](#)

Green,
Innumerable,
Immaculate
Nipples
Of nature

Actually, there were a lot of clunkers, and most of the works read like poetry Mad Libs.

"Ninety percent of the time, it makes no sense," Allmann said. "But once in a while, we have a few gems that really wow people."

Like this one:

And I, was without a face
and it was no more
Than thou and I forget you
Because we are just one
And we'll keep going on together
Against the secret thread of our weeks,
which released
one by one, so many hours
for honey and silence
for so many useless things
which nobody broke
but which got broken anyway.

The program is a melding of Allmann's passions: computers and language. "I've always been interested in the natural language process," said Allmann, who became deaf at age 2 when he had meningitis. He spent countless hours lost in books, analyzing passages and writing stories of his own.

The Rochester Institute of Technology's National Institute for the Deaf was a natural fit, with its support services for 1,100 hard-of-hearing and deaf students who study, live and socialize with hearing students at the campus in New York state. He made the cross-country move with the blessing and support of his parents, who nevertheless try to get him to visit Irvine as often as possible.

He will graduate from RIT/NTID in 2009, and hopes to attend graduate school and study computational linguistics and natural language processing.

The poetry program will have its public unveiling in May, at the Imagine RIT Innovation and Creativity Festival. Hundreds of students will showcase their creations, and Allmann is busy dusting his off and teaching it new tricks.

"I want to feed it some philosophy," he said, and is also mulling the idea of using it for assignments in a creative writing class. He's also smoothing out the word selection probabilities, since the linguistic structure of poetry lends itself to disjointed new creations.

Allmann also keeps busy playing water polo; he was a member of the U.S. water polo team at the 2005 Deaflympic Games in Melbourne, Australia. He's also a member of his school's College Bowl academic team and will compete in New Orleans this summer.

And about that girl...

Her name is Lauren, and the poem sealed the deal that Valentine's Day.

Lauren became the computer geek's girl.

But it took a minute of explanation.

"I ended up having to explain the whole thing to her, because the poem only made the vaguest sense," Allmann said. "I hope that says more about Neruda than it does about my program."

But the sentiment came through loud and clear.

"She was like, 'Aw, you wrote me a ...program!'" Allmann recalled.

The romance was brief but sweet, and the two have since parted ways. Allmann is philosophical about the short-lived love.

"Algorithmic prowess is no match for the real thing," he said.

When it comes to finding love, Allmann says he isn't likely to try another poem.

"This once-offbeat path is now beaten, so I'm actually trying to think of other angles to take," he mused. "Maybe something to generate flattering compliments or coy love notes? That could be a big hit...I'll let you know how it goes."

Rochester Institute of Technology

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