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The writing system at play

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What is writing for? The standard answers would include Halliday's (2003) ideational function for communicating ideas and interpersonal function for relating to other people, or else the written language as a permanent record. Few would mention the idea of play.

Yet many people enjoy playing games with writing, whether in the form of letter rearrangements of *Scrabble*[®], anagrams in crossword puzzles, ambigrams in tattoos, iPhone games like *Scramble*, cross-language puns in billboards (Stefanowitsch, 2002), or signs, such as the following one supposedly posted in a Bucharest hotel lobby: "The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable" (quoted in Vaid, 2006). Attributes of the writing system are exploited by poets, such as the [twentieth century] lack of capital letters in e.e. cummings' poetry or the [seventeenth century] use of shapes as in the angel-shaped poem of George Herbert, *Easter Wings*. Prose also exploits the writing system, as in the [eighteenth century] twirling of Uncle Toby's cane in *Tristram Shandy*, the flowing LED capital letters of *Chicago* by Jenny Holzer, or the [twenty-first century] *Tyne Line of Text Flow* by Carol Sommer, Sue Downing and William Herbert, whose texts range from Latin to text messaging over 120 metres of Newcastle pavement. Significantly, this paragraph started with letter games and ended with public art: the writing system is played with in many ways and many different levels.

Richard Gregory once observed that the distinctive thing about language is that it can create fictions, meaningful statements which do not correspond to the "real" world (Gregory, 1974); Jean-Paul Sartre argued that the crucial aspect of human language is its ability to describe what is *not* (Sartre, 1958/1943). The boundaries of human rule systems can be explored and deliberately transgressed. As depicted in Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1955), play is a central aspect of human culture. According to Gregory Bateson (1972, p. 180), the meaning of *play* is "These actions in which we now engage do not denote what these actions for which they stand would denote". Hence in writing system terms, play is when things are *not* what they seem, when written text is used in ways that deliberately transcend the typical mode, drawing

attention to the limits of that mode and providing “a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 28).

The contributions to this special issue exemplify different ways in which the writing system can be used for play. Iris Forster, Susanne Borgwald and Martin Neef explore interjections and onomatopoetic devices in comics in Germany. Tomi Melka and Jeffrey Stanley look at the writing system invented by Luigi Serafini for his fantastical encyclopaedia, the *Codex Seraphinianus*, writing used as art form. Abbie Grace, Nenagh Kemp, Frances Martin, and Rauno Parrila are concerned with the inventive medium of text messaging in two groups of English-speakers. Giovanni Depau examines the street graffiti of Sardinia in terms of its manifestations of Italian/Sardinian bilingualism, unlicensed writing used to create identity, and Caroline Tagg and Philip Seargeant describe the bilingual play in social messaging on the internet among Thai speakers of English. This small selection of papers shows the range and wealth of information that can be gained from studying the writing system when it is “different from ordinary life”, that is to say at play.

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