

(NON)material text

Keith Tam

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Experiment number 0.1

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nontxt.tumblr.com

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A project (stream of consciousness) on the acts and technologies of writing, editing and publishing

(非)物質文本

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A snapshot of nontxt.tumblr.com in
reverse chronological order
7-8 March 2020

Keith Tam

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as at 9:38 pm, 8 March 2020

(non)material text experiment number 0.1

First published on 9 March 2020 at 12:30 am as a PDF document on nontxt.tumblr.com, then available at lulu.com as a print-on-demand publication or digital download.

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Set in Charter TTC by Matthew Carter and FF Real Text Pro by Erik Spiekermann and Ralph du Carrois. Cover set in Noto Serif and Noto Serif Display by Steve Matteson.

8 hours ago

[image: a still from *The Simpsons* showing Lisa Simpson poring over a Chinese keyboard with a couple of thousand keys¹]

I write a lot more comfortably in English than I do in Chinese, probably because I think in English most of the time, especially in my professional life, or anything theoretical. But it also has a lot to do with the technology involved in composing Chinese words. In a post from three hours ago, I wrote ‘congruency or fluency between thought and action’ as one of the factors when looking at how differently we write using different technologies.

When I write (type) in English, my fingers work at a similar speed as my mind – the two are synchronised with each other, so my thoughts flow through smoothly and quickly. Not the same when I write by hand because I’m very slow when writing with a pen. Before I could capture my thoughts as marks on paper, my ideas would slip away. As for Chinese, I mostly use an input method called 速成 (Pinyin: *Sucheng*, Jyutping: *cuk1 sing4*), where each key on the qwerty keyboard is assigned a Chinese character part (which themselves are full characters), which can then be combined to form characters. It’s a simplified version of 倉頡 (Pinyin: *Cangjie*, Jyutping: *cong1 kit3*), where you type five of these character parts to get exactly the character you need. Sucheng allows you to type the first and the last of these character parts, then choose from a list of candidate characters. Not a easy way to type, and difficult to learn. I frequently can’t find the characters I need, and have to resort to several other input methods (phonetic or handwriting). Thought and action definitely not in sync.

That still from *The Simpsons* always make me smile. Note the repeated characters. (from a Tweet by Kristie Lu Stout)

(written in Byword², a Markdown editor)

1 Available from <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CiTrxQSUkAEO96y.jpg> retrieved on 8 March 2020.

2 Byword is a Markdown text editor, available from <https://bywordapp.com/> retrieved on 8 March 2020.

8 hours ago

A few thoughts on viewport size when writing (typing):

When one composed on the Monotype or Lintotype hot metal casting machines, there was no way to preview what you have typed at all – no viewport. One could only find out after the type has been cast. In other words, writing blindly. (though composing on these machines can hardly be called ‘writing’, but it’s doable)

If you have a large viewport when composing, you can see where you are in relation to the stream of text that one has already written. One can navigate back when editing. Or the text can have some sort of semantic structure (tagged as you write) where you can navigate via an outline.

If you have a very tiny viewport that can only accomodate a few words at a time, then you can verify what you have input but still have no easy way to visualise what you have written, or navigate back. A one-character viewport would only be useful for verification.

What benefits would writing blindly be? Or there is a geographical separation between input (private) and output (public)?

(written with Markdown in Tumblr site)

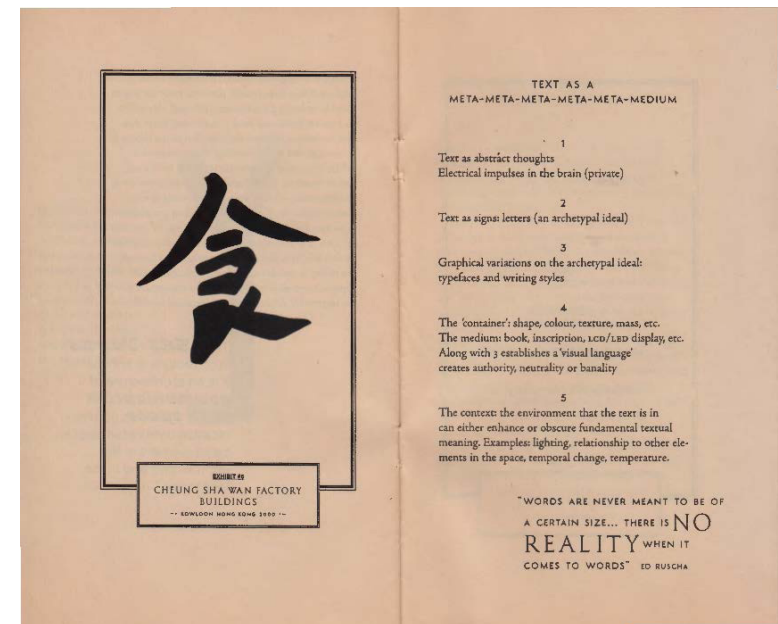
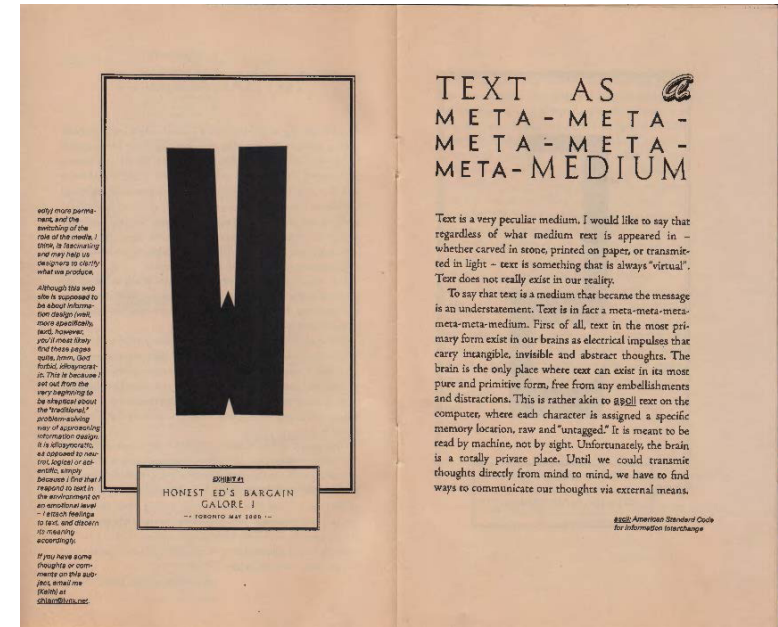
8 hours ago

Apparently the seed for this project was already planted 20 years ago. Posting something this old poses the risk of making a fool of myself, but I’ll do it anyway.

This was from one of my grad projects when studying at Emily Carr. I proposed that ‘text’ is always ‘virtual’ (non-material?), and that it is a meta (×5) medium. Apparently I also treated the accompanying website for my project an ‘electronic sketchbook/composition book’, so this is site really is nothing new.

These rather half-baked thoughts from 20 years ago are what would now be called geosemiotics, a branch of linguistics and an extension of the study of multimodality³. See Discourses in place: language in the

3 ‘Multimodality’, available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multimodality>, retrieved on 8 March 2020.



material world⁴ by Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon, where they look at interaction order, visual semiotics and place semiotics.

(to save myself from further embarrassment, I won't upload the horribly dated website)

Text as a Meta-meta-meta-meta-meta-medium

Text is a very peculiar medium. I would like to say that regardless of what medium text is appeared in – whether carved in stone, printed on paper, or transmitted in light – text is something that is always 'virtual' – text does not really exist in our reality.

Text is in fact a meta-meta-meta-meta-medium. First of all, text in the most primary form exist in our brains as electrical impulses that carry intangible, invisible and abstract thoughts. The brain is the only place where text can exist in its most pure and primitive form, free from any embellishments and distractions. Unfortunately, the brain is a totally private place. Until we could transmit thoughts directly from mind to mind, we have to find ways to communicate our thoughts via external means. In order to solve this problem, humans then devised ways to code these thoughts in graphical forms – the written languages. As soon as we transcribe our thoughts onto a two-dimensional surface using a written language (making it public), a number of factors begin to come into play. First and foremost, there is the code that tells us that 'this is something that can be read, in this particular way.' In order to be recognized as such, a text has to follow a pre-defined set of rules that governs the basic construction and arrangement of each letter (in the case of the Latin alphabet). Meanwhile, the idiosyncratic decisions that we make when transcribing text gives it another dimension of meaning – the typefaces or styles of writing. This is another level of coding that may or may not be decoded by the reader. Then there is the container as mentioned above – the shape, the texture, the mass, the colour etc. And finally, there is the environment (the context) that the text is in – how other elements

4 Scollon, R; Scollon, SW (2003). *Discourses in place: language in the material world*. Oxon, UK: Routledge.

in the environment enhance or fight with the text, and how other external factors such as lighting, temperature, the obscuring of the text affect the perception of the text.

- 1 Text as abstract thoughts in the mind (private)
- 2 Text as signs: letters (an archetypal ideal)
- 3 Graphical variations on the archetypal ideal: typefaces and writing styles
The 'container': shape, colour, texture, mass, etc.
- 4 The medium: book, inscription, LCD display, etc.
along with 3 establishes a 'visual language'
creates authority, neutrality or banality
- 5 The context: the environment that the text is in can either enhance or obscure fundamental textual meaning
examples: lighting, relationship to other elements in the space, temporal change, temperature

(written with Markdown in the Tumblr site)

9 hours ago

Bookmarked

List of word processors – Wikipedia⁵

10 hours ago

Although the author has long been dead⁶, the author still carries some sort of aura (authority?) perhaps, to have something in print or in wide circulation. Or does authority lie in the publisher who holds the resources necessary to get one's work out there, or indeed the editor or reviewer who decides whether the work should be published at all? Though the

5 'List of word processors', available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_word_processors retrieved on 8 March 2020.

6 Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press.

threshold for getting things published is very low now, in terms of resources needed and access to distribution networks.

At what point does a work become published? How about things that are floating around on the web, things that are still in progress and waiting to be edited, and still evolving all the time and continually being edited (the Print Wikipedia project⁷ comes to mind)? Or texts that reside in a public, dynamic, collaborative document on the web where multiple people contribute and own. Or the paratexts (comments, annotations) that continuously influence the original text and the author is compelled to make continuous edits.

And what really constitutes a 'work', is it the fact that it is bound and presented as a coherent, 'closed' object? Once it is 'open', or when it is incoherent – is that still considered a 'work'? Are social media posts 'works'?

(written with Markdown directly in the Tumblr site)

10 hours ago

The Olympia typewriter I had when I was 10 or 11

Typewriter: Olympia AG, Carrera, Daisy Wheel, Portable Computer System, circa 1989⁸

Photographer: David Thompson

Source: Museums Victoria

Copyright Museums Victoria / CC BY (Licensed as Attribution 4.0 International⁹)

⁷ Print Wikipedia, available from <http://printwikipedia.com/> retrieved on 8 March 2020.

⁸ 'Olympia AG, Carrera, Daisy Wheel, Portable Computer System, circa 1989', available at <https://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/items/833996> retrieved on 8 March 2020.

⁹ 'Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)', available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> retrieved on 8 March 2020. Image on the opposite page.

11 hours ago

I love typewriters. In fact anything with a keyboard on it, for as long as I remember. I asked for an electric daisy wheel typewriter (fancy!) for my tenth or eleventh birthday. My mum taught me how to type on it (of course with two spaces after full stops). I think this was the one.



11 hours ago

We write differently when we use different writing technologies, eg pen on paper, stick in sand, typing on a manual typewriter, tapping on the small screen of a phone, etc. Just how different, and what are the factors? Are we talking about the simultaneous processes of ‘generating a stream of ideas’ and ‘committing those ideas in letters words sentences and paragraphs’ and the physicality of ‘producing the marks that represent language on a substrate’ or ‘preserving ideas represented by linguistic symbols through digital codes in a memory location’?

Here is a tentative list of factors

- speed
- accuracy
- ability or ease of correcting mistakes
- congruency or fluency between thought (ideation) and action (preservation, or production)
- genre (and the associated conventions), formality (this does have to do with technology if the writing technology itself is the actual medium of consumption, but a text written can always be transferred into another medium or context)
- permanence
- ability to see part-whole relationships as one writes
- scale (visibility to the writer in terms of viewport size mainly but could also have something to do with consumption)
- time constraints (?)
- resources available for differentiating (emphasis for example) and structuring (separating thoughts into units in some sort of fashion) the text
- stake or risk involved (this has to do with ease of correction perhaps, but I’m thinking things like exams, forms, etc. where once one commits it’s done – the stake or risk might be high. Does this have to do with writing technology?)
- private or public, audience

(started writing in the bathroom with the Notes app on an iPhone SE, then finished in the Notes app on an iMac)

(NON) MATERIAL TEXT A STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS ON THE ACTS AND TECH OF WRITING, EDITING AND PUBLISHING

What if we take some text that's obviously not finished and not proverbially 'published', or to actually get it published? What happens

5 HOURS AGO

Just playing

7 HOURS AGO

- ✧ Just getting some ideas down
- ✧ writing, editing and publishing as performance
- ✧ intertextuality (hypertext and such)
- ✧ semantic markup (HTML, Markdown, etc.)
- ✧ databases and CMSs (and visualisation of data that describe texts)
- ✧ notes, drafts and edits as a process
- ✧ content and (fixed and dynamic) presentation (including paper, different modalities)
- ✧ production of texts across manual, mechanical, electronic, digital and
- ✧ connection between the acts of ideation, composition and
- ✧ spatially organised texts, linear stream, vertically organised texts, (written in Chrome on the Mac in the Tumblr site using Markdown)

12 HOURS AGO

Resisting the temptation of editing the posts that I've published. Not Another thing to think about: will my writing change when I change (still in bed on my iPhone Xs Tumblr app) (First sentence of the first post was written in that evil Flowstate app I only got one useful sentence out of five minutes of continuous typing, writing sessions later.)

14 HOURS AGO

Curious. The term 'writing' combines (implies?) both the act of Ideas flow out in the form of words and, if referring to the physical (marks on paper) as well – a third thing that the term writing implies, a bit more nebulous and tentative in terms of the shape and form that Of course there is a difference between the words 'writing' and of formulating ideas at all. Conjuring up an image of a boss dictating well be gendered by the way). And the 'typing pool'. Not a word that's In my first post I wrote how the making of this blog will be and the same. On second thought that actually won't be possible. While tend to just let ideas flow, I'm writing this text in private right now and see me write and edit in real time, and the text won't be made public the acts of writing, editing and publishing into one performative act? I committed into prose: no chance to go back to what has been written No opportunities to structure your thoughts other than what's available punctuation, casing (to use the Latin script as an example) not even line/ of that broadcasted/streamed as a live performance. Something to think (written in bed on my iPhone Xs in the Tumblr app on a Saturday

14 HOURS AGO

Media theory of composition - Wikipedia
Media theory of composition - Wikipedia
EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG
Something to look into

20 HOURS AGO

An evil writing app – don't try this at home
Flowstate is a writing app that will delete everything if you stop Flowstate is billed as the "most dangerous app." It's hyperbole, of THE VERGE

20 HOURS AGO

This blog is a brain and bookmark dump for thoughts and ideas is about the materiality and non-materiality of text. The text won't be composition book at best.
I write and do enjoy writing, but am certainly not prolific. Sometimes nice to get published, but I often suffer from writer's block – which, is supposed to be therapeutic – the process of writing, editing and Typing pleases me, and so is putting pen to paper. And recently I will cover a lot of territories, some of which I don't know what they desktop publishing, database, hypertext, apps, platforms, devices, etc. etc. Obsolete tech like typewriters, typesetting machines, character And yeah, typography, if I get round to it.
There you have it, the first post. Planning to post daily, see if that

20 HOURS AGO

Ask me anything
keithnamet

(NON) MATERIAL TEXT (非)物質文本 (NON) MATERIAL TEXT

A stream of consciousness on the acts and tech of writing, editing and publishing

AND TECH OF WRITING, EDITING AND PUBLISHING

coherently edited and present it in a way that looks as if it were then? Does it still constitute a 'work'?

visual, auditory, video, and such and how content is manifested across networked environments (see Lickiss 2019) production (whatever that means) nested texts – differences in describing these semantic relationships

easy but I'll try, device or writing tech. Will keep recording that in each post.

that threatens to delete everything if you stop typing for three seconds. Will do some more experiments in that app and post straight from the

transforming ideas into words and composing the words themselves. act of writing, the commitment of these thoughts into a tangible form Writing on screen in a text processing programme on the other hand is the writing takes. 'typing' as well. Typing sounds mechanical, without referring to the act something for a secretary to bash out on the typewriter (the image may relevant with today's text processing tech. therapeutic, as the acts of writing, editing and publishing will be one I have not been heavily editing or polishing my text here so far and am correcting and editing as I go along. This act is not public, you can't until I press the 'publish' button. How might we develop a way to unite guess this is entirely possible. One continuous stream of consciousness to fix mistakes, or have second thoughts on ideas that you've put down, intrinsically to the language/script's orthography; glyphs, word spaces, paragraph breaks, and certainly no semantic tagging of any sort. And all about, morning. It's now 7:50am.)

(NON) MATERIAL TEXT experiment number 0.0
A snapshot of the blog in the last 20 hours as a PDF publication
Scheduled to be published on nontxt.tumblr.com as a PDF document at 12:30 am on 8 March 2020
Text and design © Keith Tam, 2020
Typeset in Noto Sans and Serif, an open source font family by Google

typing course, but there's a grain of truth to it. The software is a writing an

about writing, text, text processing, composition, and anything that polished, and it might not make sense at times. It's a glorified public I manage to write something, most of the time I struggle. It would be some might say is just an avoidance of writing, that's all. So this blog publishing are one and the same. find writing on my iPad with Goodnotes utterly enjoyable. This blog are yet. Digital stuff like markup languages, word/text processing, Physical stuff like pads of paper, notebooks, writing tools, calligraphy, generators and the like. The process of writing, editing, publishing, etc. works. Bye for now.

nontxt.tumblr.com

11 hours ago

(non)material text experiment number 0.0¹⁰
The first 20 hours of the blog as a PDF publication

20 hours ago

What if we take What if we take some text that's obviously not finished and not coherently edited and present it in a way that looks as if it were proverbially 'published', or to actually get it published? What happens then? Does it still constitute a 'work'?

1 day ago

Just playing¹¹



10 Image shown on page 13, original size 297 × 420 mm. (non)material text experiment number 0.0, available at <http://keithtam.net/nontxt/nontxt-a3-no-o-o.pdf>, retrieved on 8 March 2020.

11 Original size as an InDesign document 297 × 420 mm (spread).

1 day ago

Just getting some ideas down

- writing, editing and publishing as performance
- intertextuality (hypertext and such)
- semantic markup (HTML, Markdown, etc.)
- databases and CMSs (and visualisation of data that describe texts)
- notes, drafts and edits as a process¹²
- content and (fixed and dynamic) presentation (including paper, visual, auditory, video, and such and how content is manifested across different modes)
- production of texts across manual, mechanical, electronic, digital and networked environments (see Lickiss 2019¹³)
- connection between the acts of ideation, composition and production (whatever that means)
- spatially organised texts, linear stream, vertically organised texts, nested texts – differences in describing these semantic relationships (written in Chrome on the Mac in the Tumblr site using Markdown¹⁴)

1 day ago

Resisting the temptation of editing the posts that I've published. Not easy but I'll try.

Another thing to think about: will my writing change when I change device or writing technology. Will keep recording that in each post. (still in bed on my iPhone Xs Tumblr app)

- 12 Goins, J (2017). 'The system I used to write 5 books and over 1,000 blog posts', available from <https://medium.com/better-marketing/the-system-i-used-to-write-5-books-and-over-1-000-blog-posts-5872451d7461> retrieved on 8 March 2020.
- 13 Lickiss, M (2019). *Design perspectives on multimodal documents*. New York: Routledge.
- 14 'Markdown is a text-to-HTML conversion tool for web writers. Markdown allows you to write using an easy-to-read, easy-to-write plain text format, then convert it to structurally valid XHTML (or HTML).' Gruber, J (2014). 'Markdown', available from <https://daringfireball.net/projects/markdown/> retrieved on 8 March 2020.

(First sentence of the first post was written in that evil Flowstate app¹⁵ that threatens to delete everything if you stop typing for three seconds. I only got one useful sentence out of five minutes of continuous typing. Will do some more experiments in that app and post straight from the writing sessions later.)

1 day ago

Curious. The term ‘writing’ combines (implies?) both the act of transforming ideas into words and composing the words themselves. Ideas flow out in the form of words and, if referring to the physical act of writing, the commitment of these thoughts into a tangible form (marks on paper) as well – a third thing that the term writing implies. Writing on screen in a text processing programme on the other hand is a bit more nebulous and tentative in terms of the shape and form that the writing takes.

Of course there is a difference between the words ‘writing’ and ‘typing’ as well. Typing sounds mechanical, without referring to the act of formulating ideas at all. Conjuring up an image of a boss dictating something for a secretary to bash out on the typewriter (the image may well be gendered by the way). And the ‘typing pool’. Not a word that’s relevant with today’s text processing technology.

In my first post I wrote how the making of this blog will be therapeutic, as the acts of writing, editing and publishing will be one and the same. On second thought that actually won’t be possible. While I have not been heavily editing or polishing my text here so far and tend to just let ideas flow, I’m writing this text in private right now and am correcting and editing as I go along. This act is not public, you can’t see me write and edit in real time, and the text won’t be made public until I press the ‘publish’ button. How might we develop a way to unite the acts of writing, editing and publishing into one performative act? I guess this is entirely possible. One continuous stream of consciousness committed into prose: no chance to go back to what has been written to fix mistakes, or have second thoughts on ideas that you’ve put down. No opportunities to structure your thoughts other than what’s available intrinsically to the language/script’s orthography: glyphs, word spaces, punctuation, casing (to use the

¹⁵ Flowstate app, available at <https://apps.apple.com/hk/app/flowstate/id1060276201?l=en> retrieved on 8 March 2020.

Latin script as an example) not even line/paragraph breaks, and certainly no semantic tagging of any sort. And all of that broadcast/streamed as a live performance. Something to think about.

(written in bed on my iPhone Xs in the Tumblr app on a Saturday morning. It’s now 7:50am)

1 day ago

Media theory of composition – Wikipedia¹⁶
Something to look into

1 day ago

An evil writing app – don’t try this at home

Flowstate is a writing app that will delete everything if you stop typing

Flowstate is billed as the “most dangerous app.” It’s hyperbole, of course, but there’s a grain of truth to it. The software is a writing an [...]

THE VERGE¹⁷

1 day ago

This blog is a brain and bookmark dump for thoughts and ideas about writing, text/word processing, composition, and anything that is about the materiality and non-materiality of text. The text won’t be polished, and it might not make sense at times. It’s a glorified public composition book at best.

I write and do enjoy writing, but am certainly not prolific. Sometimes I manage to write something, most of the time I struggle. It would be nice to get published, but I often suffer from writer’s block – which, some might say is just an avoidance of writing, that’s all. So this blog is supposed to

¹⁶ ‘Media theory of composition’, available from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_theory_of_composition, retrieved on 8 March 2020.

¹⁷ ‘Flowstate is a writing app that will delete everything if you stop typing’, available from <https://www.theverge.com/2016/1/28/10853534/flowstate-writing-app-mac-ios-delete-everything>, retrieved on 8 March 2020.

be therapeutic – the process of writing, editing and publishing are one and the same.

Typing pleases me, and so is putting pen to paper. And recently I find writing on my iPad with Goodnotes¹⁸ utterly enjoyable. This blog will cover a lot of territories, some of which I don't know what they are yet. Digital stuff like markup languages, word/text processing, desktop publishing, database, hypertext, apps, platforms, devices, etc. Physical stuff like pads of paper, notebooks, writing tools, calligraphy, etc. Obsolete technologies like typewriters, typesetting machines, character generators and the like. The process of writing, editing, publishing, etc. And yeah, typography, if I get round to it.

There you have it, the first post. Planning to post daily, see if that works. Bye for now.

¹⁸ Goodnotes is a notetaking app, available from <https://www.goodnotes.com/> retrieved on 8 March 2020.

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