Crowdsourcing and literature: A report from the project "Wiersze za sto dolarów"

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This text, which does not take the form of a classic academic essay, is – in accordance with the author's intention – a technical report from a literary experiment undertaken in the digital media environment. The analysed project was created using Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) crowdsourcing tools in 2017; its results are a poetry book by myself, *Wiersze za sto dolarów* (One-hundred Dollar Poems), published by the Korporacja Ha!art publishing house. Since it was the first such adaptation of crowdsourcing tools for writing in a language other than hegemonic English, this paper also discusses the phenomenon of the Decentring Digital Media, that is, the search for digital phenomena beyond the territories recognized as central in the digital media.[1]

Technical reports as a communication genre in the humanities, especially in digital media studies, are used especially by modern laboratories studying the digital humanities and the digital media. This project is rooted in the UBU lab (organized at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków) which brings together scientists, programmers and artists who deal with the changes in the creative process in the digital age, as well as create experimental digital works. The *Wiersze za sto dolarów* collection was developed in the laboratory as a scientific project, while the effect was commissioned for print at the publishing house, assuring distribution and circulation in the literary world.

Technical reports are also a useful form for describing current projects, work in progress and recently finished projects.[2] This form of communication is appropriate for describing digital projects because of the rapidity of communication and the curricular presentation of the experiment's premises, the process of its creation and the final results.

In 2009 Aaron Koblin and Daniel Masse created the project called *Bicycle Built for 2,000* (Koblin – Masse 2009), which consisted of commissioning Amazon Mechanical Turk employees to sing a fragment of a musical piece. The choice of piece was not accidental: the authors decided on *Daisy Bell*, an 1892 song known for being the first to use a speech synthesizer. In the public imagination it exists as the first song sung by a computer. The final result of the project by Koblin and Masse is a choral version of the piece, consisting of 2,088 voices recorded by people from 71 countries. For each accepted submission, the commissioners paid $0.06. The piece demonstrates very ably the human-machine relation visible in the example of Amazon Mechanical

Turk. *Daisy Bell* is a symbol of a human using a machine to perform a human activity, while *Bicycle Built for 2,000* shows the opposite situation, in which people are used, with the help of a machine, for performing automated activities. This dependency forms the basis for most projects realized using AMT.

The name Mechanical Turk itself, used by Amazon, comes from the 18th-century chess-playing automaton designed by the Hungarian Wolfgang von Kempelen. The Turk not only played chess but also won. As was later found out, the author of its success was a hidden chess master, who operated a human-like dummy. This is why the name was attractive to the modern corporation, as it evokes the idea of people subjugated to a machine. The Mechanical Turk can also be used as a metaphor for the human failure in creating subjugated machines in good faith, and ultimately becoming their poorly paid labourers.

The tool divides users into Requesters and Workers. Requesters can create a HIT (Human Intelligence Task) which they later administer, using the Create tab. Workers can, obviously, accomplish tasks and receive compensation. The rules of the game are determined by one side, which is the Requester. It is the Requester who proposes fees, number of hours, tasks and accepts or rejects finished tasks. The work relationship on Amazon Mechanical Turk is anonymous, both Requester and Worker use an ID.

Amazon Mechanical Turk offers Requesters a number of functions. They can select Workers. Thanks to the necessity of filling in questionnaires or tests (also prepared by the Requester) there is an opportunity of working only with experts in a given field (e.g. users of a given language). AMT has also become a symbol of low-paid work. The tool is infamous for Requesters paying extremely low wages, e.g. $0.02, or similar, for accomplishing a commissioned task.

CROWDSOURCING AND LITERATURE

It is a cliché that physical media condition literary qualities, and that at the same time literature, or in a wider sense, textuality, develops with technology. A good description of this phenomenon is offered by the term "remediation" (Bolter 2001), which points to the importance of the physical medium of a text. According to this understanding, oral literature has different qualities and favours a different poetics from printed literature in the form of a book. Also, in this understanding, digital media introduce numerous other features in the poetics. We will not enumerate and describe new genres of digital writing. It is, however, necessary to underline the fact that one of the features that characterize digital works, i.e. collectivity, or co-authorship, is rather rare in the analogue media. In Kenneth Goldsmith's understanding, writing in the digital age will also be characterized by uncreativity, an approach to writing that is more concerned with language managed as a database, rather than original creativity (the belief that the work is created from scratch and without any borrowing). Writing using AMT is a kind of digital writing characterized by uncreative strategies and co-authorship.

Many creators have decided to use AMT for artistic expression, and the platform itself has been attractive to artists since its creation. Gregory Laynor, Stephen McLaughlin, Kaegan Sparks and Vladimir Zykov have, as early as 2008, asked Turks

to write the first 50 words that came into their minds. They have published the results of their work on the blog *For Godot* under the title *I was told to write 50 words*. The project itself was created during Kenneth Goldsmith's writing workshop, and was later published in the most important anthology of conceptual and experimental writing, *Against Expression* (Goldsmith – Dworkin 2011). This project was later recreated in Polish, but without using AMT and without payment for providing the 50 words (Małecka 2015, 46).

One of the most spectacular projects using AMT is Fred Benson's experiment, which was realized with the help of Kickstarter. The author asked Turks to translate three times 10,000 words of the classic novel *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville into *Japanese emoji*. Next, the Turks voted for the best sentences. The project involved a spectacular number of Turks: more than 800 employees took part in the translation and voting. The Requester payed $0.05 for translation and $0.02 for voting.

Another important project for the mentioned *Wiersze za sto dolarów* are the visual works entitled *Ten Thousand Cents*,[3] which involved 1,000 Turks whose task was to redraw one part of a $100 banknote that had been divided into 1,000 parts. The Mechanical Turks who accepted the task did not know about the work of other platform users. Only the connected parts created the collective whole – a banknote that became a work of art. In this way the artist also discussed the subject of low-paid work. For each redrawing a Turk received $0.01. People from 51 countries were involved in the project.

Another literary and artistic project created using the AMT platform that was published in the form of a book was *Of the Subcontract or Principles of Poetic Right* by Nick Thurston. Published in 2013, the collection comprises 100 poems (numbered from 0.01 to 1.0) written by Turks divided by subject into four parts, each under a different title:

$ 1 Artificial intelligence
$ 2 Benefits of on-demand, elastic staffing
$ 3 Data cleansing, normalization, and deduplication
$ 4 Bellows, reeds, levers; a throat, a nasal cavity, a mouth of India rubber

The collected poems contain information about the sum paid to the Turks for creating the work, the maximum time of realization assigned by the Requester, and the real time in which the project was finished by the Worker. Some poems also problematize the work on AMT. For example, the poem 0.76, entitled Work is:

00:00:21 → $130,29/HR →1/1
Writing is much a hard job
Much rather words I would rob
Those people on Turk
They'll do all the works
So my brain I do not have to prod.
(Thurson 2013, 106)

Both these works were the starting point and inspiration for a Polish literary crowdfunding project, which at first was supposed to be an experimental translation of a book by Thurston with the help of Mechanical Turks (Wershler 2013).

WIERSZE ZA STO DOLARÓW AS A CROWDSOURCING PROJECT

The project *Wiersze za sto dolarów* took half a year. I created the first HIT on 23 January 2017 (on this day I also transferred $10 to Amazon's account as a trial). It was entitled in English "Order English to Polish translations by their quality". First I checked the poetics of the titles and detailed instructions used to address Turks on Amazon. I noticed that they were mostly very dry sentences explaining mechanical actions. It was important for me to copy this style. I put the first verse from Thurston's book into the commission and assigned the $0.22 fee for translation. I checked 60 days as a deadline for the completion of the task and published it as a HIT. Almost instantly I received a response from a human or *bot* that had translated the poem with Google Translate. I rejected this proposition, explaining that this tool couldn't be used, because what mattered to me was the quality and accurate use of Polish.

In the next commission I asked the Mechanical Turks not to use Google Translate. This did not help, and *bots* or people were sending automatic translations that were ridden with errors. It is necessary to remember that, according to the rules of Amazon Mechanical Turk, each checked task has to be paid for, and the Requester has to have enough money in the bank account to pay for the determined number of tasks. It is therefore impossible to commission an unlimited number of tasks and only pay for the best.

I learned how to manage my account and raised my qualifications as a Requester. After some time I was forced to abandon the translation project for a simple reason. Even when I set high fees and restrictions regarding Polish language proficiency, the Turks were still getting the better of me. I was receiving many translations with various errors, meaning that different, better or worse, translation software had been used for translating the same version. And when I introduced real constraints, requiring that Polish language tests had to be passed to remain in the game, no one participated.

Amazon Mechanical Turk is not registered in Poland, so the number of users is so small that a sophisticated work such as the translation of a poem cannot be done. The project was abandoned after publishing a few HITs.

At the time of publishing the first announcement about the translation of the poems, I decided to also try to commission poems written in Polish by the Mechanical Turks. I created my first HIT in February, and it was entitled in English *Order a poem in Polish*. In the advertisement I wrote "write a text that can be treated as a modern poem, in Polish." For search purposes I described the HIT with the keywords: writing, Polish, poetry. On the same day I already received the filled-in task that read "napisać wiersz współczesny" (to write a modern poem). The author was a Turk under the ID <u>A34P817FMJDWD4</u>. I was offering $0.22, the same as I had for the translation.

The next day I received a letter copied from the internet. I rejected the proposition, stating the reason, and adding that I was searching for unpublished letters. During the time of the project I had to reject many poems, as they were not in the Polish language. The texts were written in ungrammatical Polish; they were comments on movies pasted from a forum, etc. The first accepted letter for $0.22 was created on 25 February 2017, and was probably also written by a *bot* or a non-Polish speaker. How-

ever, I liked its potential for Dadaistic absurd and the fact that there appeared some, probably unintentional, rhymes:

> Baa, baa, białe owce,
> masz jakieś wełny?
> yes sir, yes sir,
> Trzy igły pełny.

> (Baa, baa, white sheep,
> Do you have some wools?
> yes sir, yes sir,
> Three needles full.)

In the next stages I changed the rules of the game, setting more and more constraints; finally I provided poems (by Dominika Dymińska, Szczepan Kopyt, Konrad Góra, Łukasz Podgórni, Tomasz Pułka) as examples of what a modern poem was. I also informed the Workers honestly that I intended to publish the poems, and that the copyright would be transferred to the Requester. One of the Turks copied my full commission and made it a part of the poem:

> Apr 7 2017, 09:25 PM PDT, AVMXY0VQQ9C6A, 0.22 $
> NAPISZ WIERSZ PO POLSKU NAPISZ WIERSZ WSPOLCZESNY PO POLSKY.
> WIERSZ NIE MOZE BYC NIGDZIE WCZESNIEJ PUBLIKOWANY. PRAWA
> AUTORSKIE PRZECHODZA NA REQUESTERA. REQUESTER MOZE
> OPUBLIKOWAC WIERSZ. WIERSZ NIE MOZE BYC SKOPIOWANY Z INTERNETU.
> WIERSZ MOZE BYC NA DOWOLNY TEMAT.
> NATIVE POLISH SPEAKER EQUAL TO 1
> MASTERS HAS BEEN GRANTED.

> Apr 7 2017, 09:25 PM PDT, AVMXY0VQQ9C6A, 0.22 $
> WRITE MODERN POEM IN POLISH WRITE MODERN POEM IN POLYSH.
> POEM CANNOT BE PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED. THE COPYRIGHT IS
> TRANSFERRED TO THE REQUESTER. THE REQUESTER CAN PUBLISH THE
> POEM. THE POEM CANNOT BE COPIED FROM THE INTERNET. THE POEM
> CAN BE ON ANY SUBJECT.
> NATIVE POLISH SPEAKER EQUAL TO 1
> MASTERS HAS BEEN GRANTED.

I decided to raise the fee of $0.22 and see if works of better quality would appear. I also noticed that, depending on the fee, the time of waiting for the completed task also changed. If I wrote $0.22 I had to wait a few weeks for a quality poem while, when I wrote $5 in the commission, the poems appeared immediately. Paradoxically, a $10 poem was the hardest to get. Immediately after I published the most financially rewarding HIT, there appeared responses in English or in ungrammatical Polish.

I set a constraint on myself to end my adventure with Amazon Mechanical Turk at $100, which was supposed to refer to the *Ten Thousands Cents Project*. I did not check on the Turks every day, but still quite frequently. It was a time-consuming task. I kept on perfecting new forms of advertisement, published examples of the poems, raised the fees and read new propositions from Turks. I also justified the reasons for rejecting poems. Altogether I created about 50 HITs, each containing up to even 10

tasks. I was also recharging the account with $0.22 to $10. In June 2017 I selected the poems and put them in the order of the fees I paid for them, from the lowest $0.22 to $10. I did not edit the poems in any way.

I did not inform anyone about working on the project. I was the only person who knew about it. It was important for me to have contact with Polish-speaking Turks and their idea of what a modern poem was.

CONCLUSIONS

Previous literary projects created on the AMT platform were in English. It is, in a way, a natural language for the tool. It is a cliché that English is the language dominating digital textuality. One of my aims as the originator of this project was to move the writing using crowdsourcing tools in the language of a semi-peripheral dominated (linguistically speaking) country. The use of a platform operating with global English and the Dollar currency (the payment was in American Dollars) clashed with a language with a weaker impact in the field of digital media.

The first observation arising from the clash between a dominant and dominated language is that, due to the small number of Turks working on Amazon that speak Polish competently, a large percentage of the submitted texts were either in English or in Polish, translated directly using automatic translator tools. This happened despite an explicit note in the HIT's content that the commissioned poems were to be created in Polish. The chosen poems, accepted and included in the book, contain either grammatical, linguistic and punctuation errors, or are written in very inaccurate Polish. I was interested in including such linguistic artefacts as well, as being highly significant to the project. The poems written in accurate Polish submitted for the project were rare.

Another visible difference when comparing the English- and Polish-language projects is the time of completion. While the propositions from the English-writing Turks were sent immediately, just after publishing the HIT, the submissions for Polish were sent slowly – the whole project took half a year. Furthermore, the smaller number of Polish speakers made the translation of the English text into Polish impossible. There was also a correlation between the fee offered and the time of the submission of the poems. In the case of a higher fee the submissions appeared much more often and more quickly than those with lower fees.

The project can also be viewed as a critical voice in the debate currently running in the literary field in Poland, that is, the poet's labour – the creation of a poem and payment for a poem. All of the projects that used Amazon Mechanical Turk problematize questions of copyright, appraisal of a work of art, collective authorship and the value of literary work. All of them are a voice in the case against human beings being exploited by digital tools; they critique virtual economies, crowdsourcing, digital reproductions and digital job markets. According to this reasoning the book is filled with prices, from the title to the data on each text. The composition of the book was also conditioned by the fee paid, from 0.22 to 10 USD. Mechanical Turks (or actually their IDs) also became co-authors of the poems. Texts were published under the Creative Common licence.

Writing using the Mechanical Turks is treated here as a genre of electronic literature, with its own traditions and canonical works. The Amazon Mechanical Turk platform offers some possibilities and some constraints (for example, the project was not advertised or publicized outside of the AMT). Those constraints and possibilities were used in the project.

Because of the anonymity of the Mechanical Turks, their (in many cases) scant knowledge of Polish and their use of translating tools, the collection can also be treated as a textual representation of the internet's unconscious and as a record of internet users' approach to the Polish language. In the titles of all the published HITs it was noted that the Requester had commissioned the writing of modern poems. Thus, the collection can also be an introduction to the question of what is collectively perceived in 2017 as a modern poem in the Polish language.

NOTES

[1] More on this phenomenon Marecki – Montfort 2017. Accessed June 26, 2017. https://academic.oup.com/dsh/article/doi/10.1093/llc/fqx010/3077164/Renderings-Translating-literary-works-in-the?guestAccessKey=c826650c-fbb3-4495-9d3b-7db4752cfb4f.

[2] More on technical reports as communication genre in digital media cf. Marecki 2015 and Montfort 2013.

[3] Accessed June 26, 2017. www.tenthousandcents.com.

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Crowdsourcing. Amazon Mechanical Turk. Decentring digital media. Electronic literature. Digital textuality.

The text is set within the poetics of a technical report, used to communicate the final results of projects in the digital media field. Its subject is the poetry collection of my authorship, *Wiersze za sto dolarów* (One-Hundred-Dollar Poems), written in Polish in 2017 using the crowdsourcing tool Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT). The project is discussed in the context of other literary works created with AMT, among others *On the Subcontract* by Nick Thurston. The paper discusses the features of the literary work created by the Mechanical Turks, the phenomenon of Decentring Digital Media and questions of authorship, art project appraisal, and creation as paid work.

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