

Office for Language Under Capitalism

Kathy Wu

"This is a web-based interactive 'poem' that is accessed through a cell phone, intended to simulate the leanness of capitalist language under bureaucratic conditions. Highly creative and made me laugh out loud."

ICIDS 2021 Jury

Office for Language Under Capitalism

Abstract

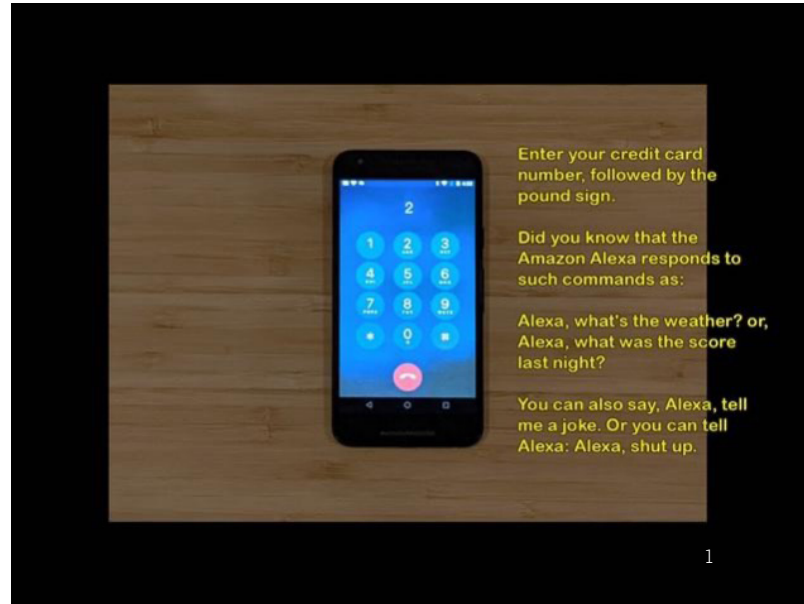
This interactive, audio-based web poem plays out through a fictional bureaucratic phone call: “Press 4 to hear about Language Under Capitalism.” In this simulated phone call, a computer-synthesized female voice speaks out different phrases depending on the path you choose. In this project, I’m interested in what happens to language under specific sociopolitical constraints. Language under capitalism compresses itself—it minifies into lean, neat boxes fit for work and production. It does not rebel, it does not deviate; it eclipses the possibility of what could be in our relationships. For instance, we are all writing and producing language all of the time. During the work week, our writing is texts, emails, letters, these linguistic expressions are focused on labor and logistics: “Thank you, have a nice day,” or “Best regards.”

Keywords

Audio collage, non-linear narrative, digital poetry, political critique, labour

Description

This project was originally made during the first year of COVID-19, as a meditation on invisible work which we are disconnected from. Or ways that we are connected to each other across borders and economic class if only for a moment through moments of transaction and servitude. It's intended to mirror transactional interactions we are familiar with—being on hold, checking out at the automated kiosk—while breaking the fourth wall and inviting you to consider the human aspect on the other side. The language is a collage from various real-life phone calls, my own writing, and a subset of 3,000 search results scraped from Google search filling in the phrase “Thank you.”



A screenshot of a code editor window titled 'thankyou.json'. The window displays a list of 34 lines of text, each starting with a line number from 1020 to 1053. The text consists of 'Thank you' followed by various phrases such as 'for fruit basket.', 'for smoking.', 'for fishing.', 'for fast reply.', 'for fast action.', 'for fast response.', 'for favor.', 'for family.', 'for fathers.', 'for fathers.', 'for after interview.', 'for funeral flowers.', 'for food.', 'for father's day.', 'for after a funeral.', 'for firing me.', 'for following me.', 'for funeral flowers.', 'for funeral food.', 'for funeral for coworkers.', 'for funeral.', 'for funds.', 'for funding.', 'for funeral home.', 'for funeral meal.', 'for five.', 'for funeral flowers.', 'for favor.', 'for food.', 'for favoring me.', 'for funeral food.', 'for firing me.', 'for following me.', and 'for watching.'. The editor interface includes a status bar at the bottom showing 'Line 2, Column 1', 'master', 'Tab Size: 4', and 'JSON'.

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1020 Thank you for fruit basket.
1021 Thank you for smoking.
1022 Thank you for fishing.
1023 Thank you for fast reply.
1024 Thank you for fast action.
1025 Thank you for fast response.
1026 Thank you for favor.
1027 Thank you for family.
1028 Thank you for fathers.
1029 Thank you for fathers.
1030 Thank you for after interview.
1031 Thank you for funeral flowers.
1032 Thank you for food.
1033 Thank you for father's day.
1034 Thank you for after a funeral.
1035 Thank you for firing me.
1036 Thank you for following me.
1037 Thank you for funeral flowers.
1038 Thank you for funeral food.
1039 Thank you for funeral for coworkers.
1040 Thank you for funeral.
1041 Thank you for funds.
1042 Thank you for funding.
1043 Thank you for funeral home.
1044 Thank you for funeral meal.
1045 Thank you for five.
1046 Thank you for funeral flowers.
1047 Thank you for favor.
1048 Thank you for food.
1049 Thank you for favoring me.
1050 Thank you for funeral food.
1051 Thank you for firing me.
1052 Thank you for following me.
1053 Thank you for watching.
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Kathy Wu is an interdisciplinary designer and artist interested in the possibilities of language arts and executable poetry. She holds a BFA in Graphic Design from RISD with a concentration in Literary Arts. Her work is interested in making invisible things tangible or seen. She is particularly interested in questions of automation, data, labor, and our relationships with technology and work.