The House of Dust

A reconstruction in Python

Original work

Alison Knowles & James Tenney, 1967 — a FORTRAN IV program on a Siemens 4004 that generated quatrains of the form A HOUSE OF <material> / <location> / using <light> / inhabited by <inhabitants>. Widely cited as the first computer generated poem. The original punch card source does not survive.

This file

A faithful reconstruction of that program written by Nick Montfort (copyright 2014, 2024), part of his Memory Slam: Batch Era Text Generation collection. Not the original 1967 code — a re implementation of its logic, recovered from the poem's published output.

License

Source

nickm.com/memslam/the_house_of_dust.html

Held with

the two 2016 A House of Dust journals (Alison Knowles) in this library; the original 1967 Something Else Press book remains on the collection's hunt list.

```
#!/usr/bin/python

# The House of Dust
# copyright (c) 2014, 2024 Nick Montfort <nickm@nickm.com>
# inspired by a 1967 program by Alison Knowles & James Tenney
# intended to work in Python 2 (>= 2.5) as well as 3, however:
#
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# without any warranty.
#
# Updated 10 March 2015 to remove a duplicate value in "place".
# Updated 17 November 2015 to remove a near-duplicate value in
    "inhabitants".
# Updated 31 May 2018 for compatibility with Python 2 (2.5+) and 3.
# Updated 1 January 2024 for Memory Slam 2.0.

from random import choice
from sys import argv
from time import sleep

material = ['sand', 'dust', 'leaves', 'paper', 'tin', 'roots', 'brick',
    'stone', 'discarded clothing', 'glass', 'steel', 'plastic', 'mud',
    'broken dishes', 'wood', 'straw', 'weeds']

location = ['in a green, mossy terrain', 'in an overpopulated area',
    'by the sea', 'by an abandoned lake', 'in a deserted factory',
    'in dense woods', 'in Japan', 'among small hills',
    'in Southern France', 'among high mountains', 'on an island',
    'in a cold, windy climate',
    'in a place with both heavy rain and bright sun',
    'in a deserted airport', 'in a hot climate', 'inside a mountain',
    'on the sea', 'in Michigan', 'in heavy jungle undergrowth',
    'by a river', 'among other houses', 'in a deserted church',
    'in a metropolis', 'underwater']

light_source = ['candles', 'all available lighting', 'electricity',
    'natural light']

inhabitants = ['people who sleep very little', 'vegetarians',
    'horses and birds',
    'people speaking many languages wearing little or no clothing',
    'all races of men represented wearing predominantly red clothing',
    'children and old people', 'various birds and fish', 'lovers',
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    'people who enjoy eating together', 'people who eat a great deal',
    'collectors of all types', 'friends and enemies',
    'people who sleep almost all the time', 'very tall people',
    'American Indians', 'little boys', 'people from many walks of life',
    'Negroes wearing all colors', 'friends',
    'French and German speaking people', 'fishermen and families',
    'people who love to read']

def stanza():
    text = 'a house of ' + choice(material) + '\n' + \
           '      ' + choice(location) + '\n' + \
           '           using ' + choice(light_source) + '\n' + \
           '                 inhabited by ' + choice(inhabitants) + '\n'
    return text.upper() if (len(argv) > 1 and argv[1] == '-c') else text

print()
while True:
    print(stanza())
    sleep(8.0)
```