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Commentary

Collaborative Voices: Kate Pullinger's Digital Authorial Voice

Anastasia Salter

Kate Pullinger describes herself as a writer for both print and digital platforms, placing the emphasis of her practice on the act of writing rather than the technology that powers each of her diverse fictions. Her work across forms and media suggests that the authorial voice is not dependent on work in isolation: her approach to collaboration reflects the interdependence and intertwined demands of text, image, and code. Her projects reimagine the book while reflecting the dramatic transformations in the primacy of digital discourse through the last decades. From her approach, we can draw powerful models for how individual authorship with a strong narrative emphasis can co-exist and transform to suit changing platforms. These intertwined demands of text, image, and code shape both the collaborative imaginative process and the readership: they reflect a process of imagining together, and likewise invite the reader in to play different parts within the works (sometimes even as another anonymous collaborator).

Kate Pullinger was one of the contributors on an early attempt to define the type of literacy required to navigate this type of changing, multimodal work: importantly, the team suggested that “the characterization of transliteracy deliberately refuses to presuppose any kind of offline/online divide; indeed it posits a complete interpellation of one by the other within everyday life” (Thomas et al. 2007). This concept of transliteracy and its demands upon creators, readers, and critics might seem at odds with Pullinger’s own apparent philosophy: she divides her own work between digital and print, online and offline, even as she continually pushes the boundaries of both. She identifies as a writer first, but her work imagines a future that is meaningfully multimodal

and transmedia. It is in these apparent contradictions that her contributions to the field lie, particularly in marking a clear space for “book people” and literary writers in electronic literature’s practices.

Digital Fictions of a Book Person

Pullinger’s emphasis on the literary perhaps stems from her own acknowledged status as a “book person.” Pullinger has maintained her emphasis on writing first and foremost throughout her fifteen years and counting of working in electronic fictions. Writing in 2012, Kate Pullinger commented: “For me the future of writing has to be the future of literature—what else is there to care about, if not literature?” (Pullinger, Riposte to Curtis White’s ‘The Latest Word’ 2012). This focus on literature is particularly Pullinger’s own work, which is certainly a testament to this conviction that “literature is evolving,” but outside the discourse of electronic literature it may be difficult for her digital fictions to be recognizable (Pullinger, Riposte to Curtis White’s ‘The Latest Word’ 2012). As a writer of literary fiction, however, she is better positioned than most to bridge the gap between platforms, and she has even gone so far as to take some of her works to reimagine and extend into traditional print (most notably *Landing Gear*, a novel sequel to “networked novel” *Flight Paths*). This seemingly effortless transition between platforms moves in the reverse of the expected adaptation pathway from print to digital and thus illustrates the truth of Pullinger’s commitment to writing and narrative first, in whatever form best suits the experience.

This emphasis is not to be confused with a print-focused, text-driven approach to electronic literature. On the contrary: Dene Grigar observed that Pullinger’s early collaborative work can be placed among those that break our expectations of interface and interaction: the headset-powered, breath-responsive work *The Breathing Wall*, for instance, is very different from the turning of a page (2008). Astrid Ensslin goes further and calls the work an example of “cybertextual retro-intensionalization,” a “kind of transmedial and multimodal ‘reading’ that is governed by corporeal processes operating in competition with mental forces” (Ensslin 2011). The work’s physical demands on the reader foreshadowed Pullinger’s later emphasis on the reader as a potential collaborator, making the experience and revealing or navigating the text through a variety of interfaces and inputs.

Pullinger's work has evolved rapidly: just compare the interface and visual experience of the first *Inanimate Alice* episode (showcased in the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 1*) to the fourth (included in the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 2*). Of the works in that first collection, John Zuern observes: "The letter is at once image and information, simultaneously the trigger of sensual experience and of cognitive expertise, as well as, in many instances, the stimulus to a bodily response" (Zuern 2007). But even in this relatively text-driven era of electronic literature, Pullinger's work stood out for her intentional emphasis on multimodal elements beyond the written word. Many authors who work in electronic literature are their own collaborators, and intertwined practices of writing, code, and design are commonly seen as requisite skills for building work of this kind: as N. Katherine Hayles has argued, "the fact that creators of electronic texts always write code as well as natural language has resulted in a significant shift in how writing is understood" (Hayles 2004, 80). This expectation of hybridity has played an important role in shaping how the field is imagined, particularly in terms of the poetics of code.

However, Pullinger takes a different approach which has become fundamental to her digital work. As she notes in the interview, "I took a decision 15 years ago that I would stick to what I was good at which is writing and I always have to collaborate. The key difference is that to write a long form prose text, it's a solitary task." This acknowledgment of the need for different skill sets to work on digital work is a recurring theme in Pullinger's discussions of her process: writing in 2008, she commented on her disinterest in digital works that are only text, and noted "I was afraid that, in order to create digital work myself, I'd have to become the world's worst web designer. But then I had a breakthrough: I realized I did not have to learn how to manage hugely complex visual interface, all by myself, I could collaborate" (Pullinger, *Digital Fiction: From the Page to the Screen* 2008, 121). This refusal to see digital writing as requiring code is itself a political as well as an aesthetic choice, and it becomes particularly significant in the context of electronic literature as a field that typically emphasizes code-centric (and traditionally male-coded) labor (Salter 2017). Importantly, Pullinger continues to describe these processes of collaborations in terms of co-present engagement in the non-textual elements of a work: she describes in the interview that the process of working on *Inanimate Alice* with Andy Campbell involves the exchange of screen sharing, which allowed her to "get on the inside" of the development process. This is not the model of the writer as originator, absent from the making; instead,

Pullinger is present as the work is being imagined and embodied, allowing for meaningful transdisciplinary co-creation.

Imagining the Collaborative Authorial Voice

This co-present, collaborative approach is the essence of Pullinger's redefinition of the authorial voice for the multimodal context of electronic fictions. As she addresses in the interview: "I think that the authorial voice can be a collaborative voice, but even when it's a collaborative voice, there remains an authorial voice." The authorial voice comes with the intense baggage of the capital L literary, suggesting an overseeing control that doesn't seem to leave much room for collaboration. Yet Pullinger's description of how she envisions the authorial voice operating in the electronic literary owes less to that model and more to other media, such as the techniques for establishing the consistent voice of characters in a television show where multiple authors will contribute over months (or years) while striving to maintain an underlying consistency. This is not surprising as Pullinger credits her own experience trying to work in film or television with her ability to bridge the approach of a novelist with that of "writing for the screen, literally writing text for the screen as opposed to screenwriting."

Pullinger's own evolution as writer for the screen occurred at a time when she noted that everyone was becoming accustomed to the shift from print to writing online. In the interview, she compared the experience of two collaborative projects, *A Million Penguins* and *Letter to an Unknown Soldier*.

One of the things I realized was that in the seven years between those two projects people became entirely accustomed to writing online. In 2007 they really, really weren't. I think that's an incredible rapid, interesting change, where over the course of seven years we would be able to embark on a project where 22,000 people felt able to write a very personal letter to a dead soldier.

The *Letter to an Unknown Soldier* project recalls many of the web-based experiments that emerged in the intervening years, most notably *PostSecret*, a communal art project started by Frank Warren in 2005. Like *Letter to an Unknown Soldier*, the project resulted in several printed books. Anna Poletti observed how the project "mixes Web 2.0 modes of publishing with handmade texts and commercial book publication," a model that bridged the gap between the physicality of the written letter and the digital, social, user-generated content

of Web 2.0 (2011, 30). Similarly, the “about” section of the *Letter to an Unknown Soldier* digital project emphasizes this intersection of the private expression of an individual text with the collaborative, public space of the web:

In a year jammed-full of WW1 commemoration our project invited everyone to step back from the public ceremonies and take a few private moments to think. For us, it was important to provide a space for people to reconsider the familiar imagery we associate with the war memorials—cenotaphs, poppies, and silence. We asked people the following questions: if you could say what you want to say about that war, with all we’ve learned since 1914, with all your own experience of life and death to hand, what would you say? If you were able to send a personal message to this soldier, a man who served and was killed during World War One, what would you write? (Pullinger & Bartlett, *Letter to an Unknown Soldier* 2014)

However, Pullinger notes that the responses included primarily digital letters, with only about 4000–7000 coming through the post (more than anticipated.) Pullinger speculates in the interview regarding the reasons for handwritten participation given the ease of digital submission: “I think for a lot of people the novelty of handwriting a letter and posting it was part of why they wanted to participate in the project. But also, on a more practical level, we had quite a lot of school children participating, and schools often preferred to do things on paper than on computers.” *PostSecret* benefited from similar novelty while simultaneously relying on memetic imagery and combinations of word and pictures that evoked a strongly web-based aesthetic: heirs to these types of confessionals tend to be exclusively digital, circulating on networks such as Tumblr and Instagram where imagery can be easily reposted and reimagined. This type of work is simultaneously massively collaborative and intensely personal.

Futures of Collaborative Electronic Fictions

In 2010, Pullinger observed her own anxiety regarding growing corporate interest in “electronic” books:

Personally, my current anxiety around the form is that the kind of work I’m involved in, digital fictions like the latest iteration of *Flight Paths*, will be completely swept aside and obliterated by the Great Machine of Corporate Publishing as it discovers the huge potential for digital fiction, and that works of this type, with their hand-made and very personal aesthetic, will soon look

like a movie I made on my mobile phone when everything else looks like *Avatar*.
(Pullinger, Riposte to *A [S]creed for Digital Fiction* 2010).

This concern has thus far proved unwarranted: Kate Pullinger's current work draws on but also resists the top-down, pseudo collaborative models of "corporate" publishing, and in turn current corporate publishing is being influenced by the type of indie work that Pullinger's electronic fictions represent. The intimacy of many of Pullinger's project defies the larger, changing teams behind them: trauma, loss, grief, and individual experiences are at the heart of her electronic fictions. As the expectations of electronic fictions increase with the interventions of new technologies and ever-higher resolution, Pullinger is continuing to navigate the potential pull of the corporate model: *Inanimate Alice*'s seventh episode is funded as a collaborative project involving the production of a series of virtual reality episodes, and Pullinger admitted in the interview that "it's not entirely clear what everyone's roles will be. I think that it's inevitable that as a project grows these things come under pressure and hopefully that's creative pressure." Such pressure might further evolve Pullinger's conception of the authorial voice as simultaneously collaborative and intimate, but her substantial body of work makes clear that the role of writing (and the pursuit of the literary) will not be eclipsed by the demands of any platform.

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