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Interview

Authorship in *Inanimate Alice* and *Letter to an Unknown Soldier*: A Conversation with Kate Pullinger

Kate Pullinger's works incorporate rich design quality, an economy of language, and expressions of paradox. The digital work, Flight Paths, later expanded in the novel, Landing Gear, follows three individuals in London and a Pakistani migrant laborer who, in attempting to escape to the UK from Dubai as airplane stowaway, falls out of the landing gear of the airplane onto one of their cars in a London supermarket parking lot and survives. Letter to Unknown Soldier, which was created for the 100th anniversary of the First World War, invites the public to imagine the contents of a letter held by a statue entitled Letter From Home at London Paddington station. The series, Intimate Alice, is an interactive multimodal fiction which follows the experiences of a girl named Alice and her imaginary digital friend, Brad. The collaborative work combines arts of the graphic novel, gameplay, and interactive fiction. The multi-modal design offers an exciting model for bridging literary, cinematic and interactive genres.

Q: One of the things I noticed in your work is the following: often in media production, one goes from book to film, book to new media, or book to games. But throughout your career, whether in helping Jane Campion with the book project about The Piano or in your works like Flight Paths, you've often gone the other way, working from a cinematic, visual, or multimedia experience into writing. I'm wondering about the creative energy that comes from working across these very different forms.

KATE PULLINGER (KP): I really started thinking of digital media around 2001 or 2002, and I guess what's kind of surprised me over these last fifteen years has been the persistence and, indeed, the reliability of the book as a form. I have

found that surprising, but you know, if I'd been a wiser person I wouldn't have. For instance, the very large participatory media project, *Letter to Unknown Soldier*, was entirely conceived of as a digital artwork, but one of its outputs was a selection of 138 of the letters that we received about project which Harper Collins published as a book. The multimedia work *Flight Paths* led to the novel *Landing Gear*. I don't know exactly why that is except to say that I think, in my core, I'm a book person. That's not to denigrate or downgrade the work I do in digital media, not at all; they coexist very happily. But, I do think that one of the things that has come about because of digital publishing is that book publishing has had to up its game: books have become better looking and more durable than they were before digital publishing made its impact. The book is a physical object. It remains a reliable but also a beautiful and interesting form in itself.

Q: I see. It functions in a different way for you both in its creation and in the product. Maybe you can help us understand, then, what developing stories via a creative, digital process does for the book.

KP: Well, on a practical level, the work I do as a digital writer is always collaborative. I don't have any design schooling, and I'm not very interested in developing those skills. I took a decision fifteen 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 is a solitary task. That is something that I still really enjoy, but I think that part of why I enjoy it is because of all the collaborative work I do as well. The two practices work together very well, in sync. The solitary nature of the reading experience with a book, is different from the reading experience of digital media, and I think there's a co-relation there between the experiences of reading and writing. For me, they coexist and there's a productive, creative tension between them.

Q: Many of your works have a richly and often linear narrative approach. Do you feel that it's important to maintain the linearity of the story that you're telling, and would you consider working with more generative or recombinatory forms?

KP: I think that is true that I'm really a story person, a narrative person. I'm also very interested in the authorial voice. I think that the authorial voice can be a collaborative voice, but even when it's collaborative voice, there remains an authorial voice. I mean for me, that is what I'm interested in, both as a creator and also as a viewer or reader myself. So, I've never really been drawn to the

more generative side of creative projects in which many people that we all know do such beautiful work. For me, it's just a personal thing. I'm into story as the dominant mode for carrying whatever it is I was trying to get across.

Q: How has collaboration altered your creative process and how has that evolved?

KP: Part of what has made it work in this case is the fact that the producer Ian Harper, myself, and Chris Joseph have been involved with it from day one and continue to be involved with it. So although the team grows and changes, there's a continuity of that core team to work from. One of the things that I have enjoyed most about the addition of Andy Campbell to the *Inanimate Alice* team, is that the way Andy likes to work really chimes with the way that I like to work, which is highly iterative and very collaborative. We often work together through screen sharing. For instance, episode 6 of *Inanimate Alice* was built using Unity. We would screen share what Andy was working on in Unity. While I don't know how to code or work with Unity, I could see what Andy was doing and the way different artifacts and objects within the interface Andy was working on related to each other. The way technology can enable those kinds of forms of collaboration, where someone like me who is not a developer can really get on the inside where the IT developer is actually doing things, I think that's a really fun and interesting way to work. It is part of what I like best about working in small teams.

Q: I suppose it also constrains you in interesting ways and impacts your writing. I'm thinking that perhaps the technical requirements force a brevity that whittles big stories down to a very few words on the screen.

KP: Yeah, I think that the reason I've been able to that is because I spent the '90s in unsuccessful attempts to write for film and television. I had a short film made, a half an hour drama. The first thing I ever wrote got made. Then I spent the rest of that decade trying to get other projects off the ground and just failing abysmally, whilst at the same time continuing to write fiction—continuing to write short stories and novels. I think that rather unsuccessful apprenticeship was part of what enabled me to then move forward into thinking about writing for the screen, literally writing text for the screen as opposed to screenwriting. The tools that I developed through that decade trying to write for film and television enabled me to merge writing and digital media in a way that other novelists who hadn't done that might have found more difficult.

Q: That makes a lot of sense. When I look at Inanimate Alice or Flight Paths, they are cinematic. They could easily be movies. Your work also seems to successfully bridge popular and vanguard audiences, and you have developed your works to be commercially available. It's a very different approach as generally the markets for print fiction, games, digital art and electronic writing are further apart.

KP: I think that's an absolutely true thing to say. I've always been interested in accessibility. I guess that it also links back to what I was saying at the beginning of our discussion, of a kind of over-riding interest in story and narrative. And story and narrative, when looked at in that way, are sort of engines for accessibility. So, I guess it doesn't really matter to me that in the real world that there's a big division between the work that I do as a novelist and the work that I do in digital media. However, since I first started doing it, there has been, and remains, the case that traditional mainstream publishing is not remotely interested in anything to do with electronic literature or digital fiction or anything like it. And, that has been a source of frustration to me over the years. However, I think now I just feel much more accepting of it because I think that as the devices proliferate, as generational change takes place, then work in the digital realm will of itself become more and more mainstream.

Q: Do you find young adults or children report back to you about how they identify with Alice?

KP: Yes, they do, and I think that this is also one of the reasons it succeeded. Even though it's about a girl, boys like it because of its use of technology and games. And, of course, girls like it because it's about a girl. Something about the use of technology enables a broader audience. Publishing for children these days tends to be horribly gender specific. *Inanimate Alice* manages to sidestep that.

Q: It strikes me that along with cultural intersections, one of the things we get here is mobility. Inanimate Alice is notably very mobile: globally mobile and the stories are about movement, with her climbing houses and this sort of thing. And, I suppose the mobility is also cross-cultural, bridging the local sphere of the family and global forces ...

KP: I think for me that notion of the little family unit that is on their own and in their case on the move is something central. *Inanimate Alice* came about because the producer Ian Harper commissioned Chris Joseph and I to create these little stories about the girl, Alice. I was interested in this Chinese near future setting with this itinerant family, and when you got such a small family unit that is on

Figure 9.1 At one moment in Episode 1 of *Inanimate Alice*, Alice uses a map on her player to try to find her father.

the move all the time, it puts all kinds of pressures on the family itself as well as the members in it. I just thought that was an interesting setup for a story. But also her father works in the oil industry, so that kind of itinerant moving around the globe, working for big corporations, including some companies that are less legitimate, seemed to me to have lots of narrative potential. The decision that she wanted to be a games designer was a kind of happy, lucky accident for us. So, they move all over the world. Those two things are part of what has made it endure and part of why it has such a global appeal.

Q: Did Flight Paths develop in a similar way? How did its relationship to actual events impact the creative choices?

KP: So, Chris Joseph and I embarked on the creating *Flight Paths* together. We'd already been working on the first episodes of *Inanimate Alice* together, and I'd also already done the project, *A Million Penguins*. I was really interested in this notion of what would happen if you try to conduct the research for a project in public, online. So when we started the work on this, the first thing we started was a blog that was open to discussion. Then we moved to an aggregator; I think it was called a Netscape Universe. It was a kind of early aggregator. For that first phase, probably 100 people dipped into and out of the project, commented on things, sent in things: little bit stories, little animations videos, and things like that. I

originally came across the story of the airplane stowaway in a newspaper article from 2001. This story of a supermarket car park in Richmond near Heathrow where over the course of a decade more than a dozen bodies had fallen from airplanes. A newspaper article reported that a new body had appeared in the car park, and two investigative journalists had set out on the task of trying to figure out who this guy was, where he had come from, and how he ended up where he did. In that article they traced the man to Pakistan; he worked in Dubai. They talked to his family, and they figured out who he was. Ever since reading it, I had been taken by this notion of what kind of person would take that kind of risk. What would he think he'd be going towards? All those kinds of issues. So we embarked on a public discussion, and then at the end of the year we decided we'd work with story fragments, which is what *Flight Paths* is. I'd written an arts council grant to get funding to do the project, and as I was developing that grant, I realized that I would want to write a novel based on the story as well. So that was there in the mix from very early on as well. I think that this story really gripped me. I knew that it would be a story that I could develop in different ways. It's not something I'm working on now but I wouldn't be surprised if in your future a new version of that story emerges in some way. Particularly now, where we're seeing this huge mass immigration problem from the East to the West, that *Flight Paths* and *Landing Gear* deal with. These are issues that have been with us since the dawn of time, but currently, we seem to be going through an extraordinary period where these issues are really pressing.

Q: Many of your works crisscross the globe and draw attention to forms of transit and exchange. In doing so they present surprising and challenging moments of cultural and cross-cultural contact.

KP: Yes, that's a theme that I've returned to over and over again in lots of different ways. My novel *The Mistress of Nothing*, which is a historical novel set in Egypt in the 1860s, is about that very same sort of thing, which is the collision of cultures. *The Mistress of Nothing*, like *Landing Gear*, has as a character, this young Muslim man. The relation between Islam and the West is it something that I've thought about a lot over the last twenty years.

Q: Yes, and you look at this issue through a combination of narratives, graphics, and maps. I'm looking at the interactive Google map that compliments the book, Landing Gear. I wonder, was it hard to get Penguin, which is one of the biggest publishers anywhere, to support these interactive aspects, or did they suggest it? Is it something they were excited about?

KP: Yeah! That is one of the real exceptions. That came about through Doubleday, which is part of Penguin/Random House. After I'd finished writing *Landing Gear* and I was looking for publishers for it, I was really keen to see if any publishers would be interested in the fact that *Landing Gear* had this preexisting digital media work, *Flight Paths*, which had its own digital footprint and a preexisting audience. To their credit, Doubleday took it on and produced the API based on the first thirty pages of the novel. From that API they produced the interactive map and also released the API to any developers who might have been interested in it. I think it was really down to the fact that within Doubleday's Toronto office, there's an individual named Meghan MacDonald. She is a really innovative and experimental digital publisher, and this was really down to her. Where the novel was published elsewhere in the world, there was no engagement with the digital artifacts. So, it's kind of the exception that proves the rule. It was very fun for me. For them, it was an experiment. It was part of their marketing budget, and if they hadn't done that, then they probably would have made a book trailer or something like that.

Q: I wonder how these different forms might expand the kind of imaginaries that come out of a book. These very illustrated spaces are not quite graphic novel and not quite cinema; rather they set up a visual imaginary constructed through elements like maps, sounds, and game play. These seem to lead us through

Figure 9.2 In some instances, such as this image from *Inanimate Alice*, Episode 4, captions suggest dialog.

different kinds of worlds and reader or user experiences. I wonder if you think about it that way?

KP: Well, I think that's a real theme of today, isn't it? That absolutely interests me as a creator and also as a consumer of books and media myself. The thing I'm working on currently is a novel for a smart phone. I'm working with a German startup called OuLiPo. Where'd they get that name, I wonder! They are thinking very hard about what kind of text-driven fiction is native to the smart phone. We all spend a lot of time reading on our phones now, certainly I do, but we tend not to read books on our phones so much. So, they're really trying to think about what form is native to the smart phone. The story that I'm developing is really a story about technology, it's a story about ghosts and communicating with the dead through your phone. I think that ties into my general obsession with trying to think about how people use technology, indeed how young people use technology, and what kind of stories are there to be told.

Q: How do these different forms allow the narratives to take new paths or provoke choices you might not otherwise have made?

KP: You know I'm not sure. One thing I do know with hindsight is that it was very lucky that we that we decided early on that we knew that Alice, the character in *Inanimate Alice*, wanted to be a games designer when she grows up, so that gave us a narrative reason for using games, and I think that's part of why it's been a durable project. The form is indeed wedded to the content. Trying to figure out what kinds of content work in these new forms is part of what we'll be thinking about for the next few decades really.

Q: Working with ghosts also seems like a provocative and apt trope when we consider the ways old voices haunt new forms, right? I'm also thinking about how Letter to an Unknown Soldier, in which the form of the letters written at this moment, 100 years after the First World War, takes form through the crowd-sourced Internet medium.

KP: Yeah, I think that's really interesting as well. I gave a talk yesterday at the British Library comparing *A Million Penguins*, which is this collaborative novel project I was involved with in 2007, with *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 incredibly rapid and interesting change, where over the

course of seven years one would be able to embark on a project where 22,000 people felt able to write a very personal letter to a dead soldier. I think that's quite a remarkable change.

Q: Yes, it seems people are not only just accustomed to reading online, it is now the leading place to do a project that calls on user involvement like this, and therefore a most appropriate forum to initiate this kind of memorial. I was struck watching your Ted talk about Letter to an Unknown Soldier that we are at a time when we need to rethink where and how we memorialize things. And, this is a very different kind of surface than, let's say, a gravestone

KP: And, it turns into an archive. That's the other big change. *A Million Penguins* is lost now, whereas in *Letter to an Unknown Soldier* the need to be archived was at the top of our agenda from the beginning.

Q: How did Letter to an Unknown Soldier come about?

KP: It was the idea of my collaborator on that project, Neil Bartlett. He's someone who knows a huge amount about public sculpture, particularly public sculpture in London. In Britain, the centenary of the First World War was extremely important and an organization called 1418 NOW was commissioning artists to respond to it. Neil approached them with this idea, which was really conceived of as a digital artwork—a digital memorial. But Neil is a theatre maker and a novelist; he's a very non-digital person. At the time, he didn't even have a Facebook page. He invited me to be his collaborator on the project because he knew that I'd had lots of experience not just in digital projects but with participatory projects in particular. Neil had known the statue of the unknown soldier in Paddington station for most of his life. It's one of his most favorite public sculptures. Indeed, it's an extremely beautiful work of art. It felt natural to try to create a digital response to that statue. I mean, it's very unusual to have a statue of a soldier depicted, standing there; he's got this letter that he's just torn out of its envelope, and he's reading it. That's a very unusual depiction of a soldier.

Q: Although this was going to be a digital project, there were also many handwritten letters?

KP: The vast majority of them were digital. We conceived it always as a digital project. We spent a lot of time getting the website right. It had a form where you could upload or, indeed, write your letter, and you could attach photographs etc., to your letter. But we also planned from the very beginning to enable people to send letters through the post because we didn't want to exclude anyone who

Figure 9.3 This statue entitled *Letter from Home* at London Paddington station is the source for the project, *Letter to an Unknown Soldier*.

didn't have access to the Internet or wasn't comfortable using the Internet. We didn't want to exclude anyone. Particularly given the subject, the World War One centenary, we hoped that would get lots of older participants as well. We facilitated receiving letters from the post. But what surprised us is that we received somewhere between 4000 and 7000 letters through the post. I think there are a couple of reasons for that. For one, 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.

Q: The school kids even created spectacle out of their letters

KP: Yeah, I know that aspect of the project really took us by surprise, the fact that our project inspired a whole lot of other really extraordinary projects based around the letters. My favorite of those was one that I went to watch happen at a

secondary school in Hampshire where they got all eleven hundred of their pupils to write letters to the unknown soldier. They asked a couple of local primary schools to write letters to the unknown soldier as well. They put all the secondary school letters on to pieces of red paper and the primary school ones on pieces of black paper. Then, they worked with the school math department to try to figure out how to create a giant poppy with 1400 people on the playing field. They hired an aerial photographer to come photograph it. The BBC heard about it and decided to feature it on the news. On the day, there were 1400 children creating this poppy in the playing field by forming this poppy that the math department had worked out, and then holding up their red and black papers, with the primary school children in the middle. It was really extraordinary! They had local veterans out there on the field as well. It was a really magical and amazing day. There were a number of projects like that. Just recently a book has been published of all the letters that we received in Gaelic. It continues to have things happen around it, which is very gratifying.

Q: One of the things that particularly struck me with that story, and it's a part of our times, is the re-awakening to the materiality of differing forms of communication. The project is about both the material object of the letter and its content, and perhaps the ways materiality also shapes a practice.

KP: I think that's part of what appealed to people about the project. We made very sure that from the beginning that it was not going to be seen as a project that instructed people on how to write a letter. I think we managed to avoid that. It became more about the idea of expressing yourself in words directly to this figure of the soldier from 100 years ago and whatever that figure means to you.

Q: There's something pointed about it being in a train station, the dramatic moments of departure in stories and films, or of those waiting for a person who doesn't arrive and so forth, not to mention, historically the importance of the rail system for the British Postal Service, military and other institutions. I think the writing of all these letters offers a very lovely link between the old transport and the new form, the digital transport, as it were.

KP: The statue was erected by railway workers to mark those workers who were lost in the First World War. Of course, Paddington station was where soldiers who came from the west would come in to London before traveling across to ship out from Victoria station.

Q: What did you learn about memory and how people relate to memory from the project?

KP: I think one of the things that with hindsight we were very lucky about was that we did the project in the summer of 2014, as opposed to November 2014, which is when the official commemorations of the centenary took place. In the summer things were still fluid and more novel in interesting ways, whereas by the autumn it felt to me and to Neil that the official commemorations had put creative initiatives back into the realm of the Queen and the cenotaph. That kind of patriotism and rhetoric so easily becomes xenophobic, and the focus in November was very, very parochial. 1418 NOW is continuing to commission artists for other WWI centennials, and they're making a huge effort to make sure that they're very international and focused outward, looking at World War One through the prism of the Indian soldiers, the Sikh soldiers, etc. All this to try to prevent it from closing down in the way it did in November 2014. I think our project really benefited from managing to side step the official rhetoric around those commemorations.

Q: One of the things that so impresses me about the project is how it retains levels of ambiguity inherent in the memorial, the mystery of what's on that letter, and so on. It's very important that you have that physical base: there is this statute which people pass regularly, even every day, yet the same time, statues usually don't tell their stories. Usually to know more, one has to read the story into the statue or read something about a statue.

KP: Absolutely. The sculptor who created it, Charles Sergeant Jagger, also created the royal artillery memorial, which is in that roundabout in Hyde Park Corner. It was a very controversial memorial when it was unveiled because it depicts a dead soldier. It depicts a dead body lying under a blanket with his foot hanging out. That caused a huge ruckus when it was unveiled. I think that our relationship to a public memorial statuary in the cities around us is an interesting one. Neil knew the statue in Paddington very well. However, although I regularly use Paddington station to commute from because I live in London and I work down in the southwest, prior to starting work on the project, I had never even noticed him. This despite the fact that I would walk up and down that platform regularly. I think my excuse is that when you're on the platform you're looking at the train, because you're trying to get on the train, and he's on the other side of the platform. I think one of the things that the project did a good job of is getting you to look again, getting you to think again about what these memorials are, what they actually mean.

Figure 9.4 Screenshot from *Inanimate Alice*, Episode 3. Image by Chris Joseph and Peter Sobolev.