

PREPRESS draft of entry on “Collaborative Narrative” for *Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, Lori Emerson and Marie Laure-Ryan, eds. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Collaborative Narrative **Scott Rettberg**

Collaboratively written narratives are not specific to new media: a number of works within the Western cultural and literary canon, for example the epics of Homer, the Judeo-Christian Bible, and *Beowulf*, are believed to have been developed through collaborative storytelling and writing processes. It can however be said that collaborative writing practices are more prevalent in contemporary digital media than in print.

Electronic literature authors most often write within software platforms that are themselves “authored”—every time someone opens up Photoshop, or Flash, they are reminded of the long list of developers who actually wrote the software. So even making use of a particular application is a type of collaboration. There is a greater degree of transparency to the collective efforts involved in digital media production than to traditional literary production.

Network communication technologies more easily enable collaborative writing than did Gutenberg-era writing environments. Technologies as simple as email, Skype, Google docs, and various forms of file sharing make it almost as simple to collaborate with someone on a different continent as with someone down the hall.

Rettberg (2011) proposes a typology of participation in network-based narratives including: conscious participation, when collaborators are fully aware of the constraints and form of a project and the role of their contribution to it; contributory participation, when contributors take conscious steps to make their text or media available to authors or a system but do not know how it will fit into the overall project; and unwitting participation, where texts are appropriated by the text machine or harvested from the network. If contributory participation is the most common form of collaborative practice in, there are also many examples that make use of more appropriate methods.

An early hypertext fiction developed through collaborative writing practices is Judy Malloy and Cathy Marshall’s *Forward Anywhere* (1996). Initially written as an exchange of emails, in hypertext form, Malloy

describes it as a fictional “blending of two lives.” The piece explores both email and hypertext as conversational media. 1990s net art practitioners Dirk Paesmans and Joan Heemskerk likewise collaborated and presented their hacker-aesthetic browser-based works under the fictional collective identity of Jodi. On a different scale, the *Hypertext Hotel* (1993-96) produced by Robert Coover’s early electronic writing workshops at Brown University was a collaboratively produced narrative architecture, constructed incrementally by many writers over an extended period, subverting and expanding each other’s plot lines as they checked in and out of the hotel.

The hypertext novel *The Unknown* (1999) by William Gillespie, Frank Marquardt, Scott Rettberg, and Dirk Stratton is a collaborative fiction in web hypertext form, a sprawling comic novel about a book tour gone horribly wrong. The novel was very much the product of social writing, “jam sessions,” constrained writing games, site-specific writing practices, appropriation and other playful practices. As we wrote, we moved our eponymous characters like pawns, daring each other to write ourselves out of increasingly absurd scenarios.

Collaborative hypertexts can be structured in a number of different ways. The end product could be linear, where each author is building upon previous nodes or in some way stretching the context of a single coherent narrative, or could alternatively have a “branching” structure, as was the case in Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books. An early web experiment of the branching variety, “Adventure” was directed by Alan Firstenberg in the mid 1990s.

There is likewise a rich history of collaborative writing and coding practice in the genre of interactive fiction. After Will Crowther authored the original version of *Colossal Cave Adventure* in 1976 as a game based on his explorations of Mammoth Cave in Kentucky (see Jerz 2007), Don Woods, then a graduate student, ran across the game on a computer at Stanford and contacted Woods to ask if he could modify the game to introduce fantasy elements such as elves and dwarves. Wood’s version of the game became popular and in turn inspired a group of friends at MIT—Tim Anderson, Marc Blank, Bruce Daniels, and Dave Lebling—to create their own game, *Zork*, loosely based on *Adventure* but making use of a much richer storyline and vocabulary. That collaboration in turn led

to the formation of the company Infocom and generally to the birth of an entire genre.

Collaboration in digital narrative can scale from intense collaboration between two or three authors to more grandly conceived collective endeavors involving many contributors. *A Million Penguins* (2007) launched by De Montfort University and Penguin books was an experiment in collectively writing a novel in wiki, in which any visitor could modify the text, though some ongoing editing took place. In a report project organizers attested that though the project was not necessarily successful as a novel, it could better be understood as a successful “performance.”

The most successful recent large-scale collaborative writing projects indeed merge aspects of fiction, performance, and what might be called “architectures of participation.” Judd Morrissey and Mark Jeffrey et al.’s *The Last Performance* (2009) for example offers a collectively written text authored by about 150 contributors with a complex database-driven constrained writing environment. Also promising are Mark Marino and Rob Wittig’s recent “netprov” experiments such as Marino’s *Work Study Seth* and Wittig’s *Grace, Wit & Charm*, mixing structured preplanned narrative scenarios with collective improvisational writing performance and other performative writing practices.

SEE ALSO: database, email novel, experimental writing, hypertext fiction, performance, role-playing

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