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Death of the Author? Death of the reader!

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Abstract

The paper takes a short look at the much discussed dismissal of the author in hypertext collaborative writing and discusses the role of authorship in three German collaborative writing projects. The results are:

- Collaboration sometimes works like collaboration with the 'enemy.' The pleasure of some collaborative writing projects therefore derives not so much from the story itself as from what the text reveals about its authors.

- The pleasure of some collaborative writing project lies in the setting more than in the contributed texts. What fails as Netliterature may get a second chance as Netart.

- If the program of a collaborative writing project automatically and randomly creates the links and develops the structure of the whole, it takes over the collaboration between authors and their texts.

The conclusion is: As the text itself becomes more and more part of a technical setting, and as the program moves more and more into the center, the project of collaborative writing gradually dismisses the reader. To a user who accidentally stops by and starts to read, the text itself doesn't say all that much. She has to become a writer, she has to join the authors, including their discussion group, in order to understand what's going on and to enjoy the project. One has to take part in this group, one has to read this 'text' to enjoy the other, 'official' text. Quality of text, in the way critics use to approach this issue, doesn't matter any more. What matters is the event of which one is part of. Someone who is not in the game might not enjoy watching it, unless he or she approaches for other reasons like researching the dynamic of the group, the 'social aesthetics' behind the text itself.

1. Authorship

When people started to write about digital literature they took --as it was to be expected-- their keywords and perspectives from contemporary philosophy. In those days, philosophers talked a lot about death: the death of truth, the death of "grand narratives", the death of identity, the death of the author. Hypertext seemed to fit perfectly into this way of thinking and feeling. We remember Robert Coover's proclamation to the audience of the *New York Times Book Review* in 1992: "hypertext presents a radically divergent technology, interactive and polyvocal, favoring a plurality of discourses over definitive utterance and freeing the reader from domination by the author." George P. Landow proclaimed the same ideas at the same time in his book "Hypertext. The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology" (1992).

The title was programatic and incited many misinterpretations. When Barthes and Foucault were talking about the author's death or dismissal, they meant the ownership of text in terms of creativity and originality, not in terms of combining its segments. In the writings of Landow, Bolter, and other theorists, the author's loss of sovereignty is perhaps better understood as the "reallocation of power from author to reader" (Landow). This person-person-opposition brings back the policemen in the discussion of power, whom Foucault dismissed in favour of looking at more complex structures. Thus, this sentence marks a betrayal of the discourse theory, though hypertext theorists claimed to embody it.

However, even in the misread sense, the author, writing non-linearly, is not dead, nor does the reader, configuring the text, occupy the same level of writing as the author. "Even an actor", Espen Aarseth reminds us, "interpreting a dramatic role on the stage or on film is closer than the hypertext reader to the creator's position." The author is to set up the links and therefore to control the reader's associations. And since the author --not the reader-- knows the password for the File Transfer Protocol she still controls the text after it has been published.

While the author is not dead, it is perhaps more appropriate to announce the death of the *reader*. Of course, this slogan can be understood in many ways: With respect to the click gesture, one could talk about the reader's transformation into a restless traveler through the world of text. With respect to the visualization of the web one could talk about the reader's transformation into a viewer. What I would like to talk about is the reader's transformation into an author. This does not refer to the wreader concept that has been applied to hypertext. This refers to collaborative writings, where readers are invited to become authors.

Collaborative writing is one of the main types of digital literature, which relied upon the arrival and existence of the Web. Of course, there are many ways to engage this sort of collaboration, regarding the relation of contributions to each other (linear

story, tree-fiction, assemblage of independent text segments), regarding multmediality, regarding the openness to the public and regarding the role that the project leader as well as the program plays in the setting. I want to discuss three examples from Germany, which handle authorship, readership, and cooperation in totally different ways.

2. Beim Bäcker

As we know from the dictionary, *to collaborate* means either "to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort" or "to cooperate treasonably, as with an enemy occupying one's country". When talking about collaborative writing we used to use the term solely in the first sense. In literature, people with whom we collaborate are anything but enemies. The following example shows to what extent collaborators *are* perceived as enemies occupying one's 'country of text'.

One of the pioneers of German collaborative writing projects is *Beim Bäcker* or *In the Bakery*. Carola Heine started this project in 1996 when she wrote about a woman who encounters three preschool girls in a bakery. The girls want to by lollipops, but are short a quarter. The woman is touched by these lovely girls, gives them the quarter, suddenly wishes for a baby, feels the need for a man and develops a sexual fantasy towards a worker having coffee in the background. Instead of talking to this man the woman buys herself a lollipop and leaves the bakery. And so the author leaves the text, leaving it to the next author to carry the story forward.

What we witness then is a fight for and with words. After the first author has introduced the female main character, another writer, a man, fills in some gaps. He turns the character in a direction the first author does not agree with at all. Now this author tries to rescue her figure and to retract the character the male author created. However, she can not just erase the former contribution: she has to take into account what has been said so far. This situation makes her both angry and inventive. It is interesting to see how she uses the information in the other author's contribution to get a different result, and how she implies some common prejudices about the male sex to get at her opponent. Here the cooperator is received as an enemy occupying one's own text.

It gets even more interesting when other readers turn into authors and jump in. Soon we can find all kinds of characters, not so much within the text as among the authors. There is the clumsy one, who does not really know how to pull it off. There is the obsessed one, who tends to find sexual connotations in everything. There is the inhibited one, who does not know how to deal with this. There is the politically correct one, who brings up racism and argues for solidarity. There is the social one,

who complains about the mess and calls for more cooperation, and there is the genius, who easily brings all the threads together again.

In the end, we realize that a new author hardly takes into account the legacy left by his predecessors. If they set up a meeting between two characters, if they close a contribution with an unexplained incident, the incident will not be solved, the characters will not meet, if the author who opened this track does not bring it to completion. Thus it turns out that collaborative writing projects are actually playgrounds for self-centered people, except for a few who suffer from the solipcism and nevertheless desire cooperation.

The pleasure of a collaborative writing project therefore is not as much the story itself as what the text reveals about its authors. There is a text beyond the text in which the authors are the characters. Part of this text is for example the fact that Caroline Heine, the first author, runs a women emancipation website which pops up with the slogan: "If she is too strong, you are too weak". The second author, on the other hand, runs a Man-Site, "where a man still can be a man", as the slogan spells here. It should not be surprising that both start to fight and that they abuse each other as 'incorrigible macho' or 'frustrated aggressive women'. The real story of this project, we can say, is the dynamic between the authors.

3. "23:40"

Whereas *In the Bakery* is a project where several authors write one linear story step by step, my next example insists upon the assemblage of independent texts. *23:40* or: *11:40 pm* was initiated by Guido Grigat in October 1997. This work's backbone is the 1,440 minutes of a day. Every minute of one abstract day is to be filled with a text that should somehow apply to this minute, either describing something that happened in this minute or describing something remembered in just this minute. The text can only be as long as what can be read within a minute, since after 60 seconds the current text automatically gives way to the next. Every text has its minute, and every minute has its time.

This setup marries features of written with oral communication. If spoken language frees our knowledge of an event from time and place, written language frees us from having to be present at the time and place this event is reported. However, in *23:40* we are tied to a certain time again: the reporter appears during his minute, if we are late we will miss the story. A consequence of this setting is, for instance, that a description of a sunset can only be read in the evening or, for whatever reasons, only in the morning.

Another consequence is the following: At 9:18 a.m. a person describes downloading and reading her emails. This is one of the most common sorts of texts in *23:40* mere descriptions of what the author happens to be doing. The person then encounters the message that his best friend from school has died. The next minute consists only of one sentence from the same writer, which translates: Real life sucks. The point behind this rather slangy phrase is that this is all we can read in minute 9:19. That means that the reader has to wait almost 60 seconds for the next text. And this means the author has his readers observe a minute's silence for his dead friend.

It is the setting rather than the text that is intriguing her. The attraction of this project lies in its program. One could even say, the program is the author, not because of the described minute of silence, that in the end was organized by the *author* using the technical setting, but because the program is the author in the sense that John Cage is still the author of his piano piece "4' 33'". As silent as Cage is, sitting in front of the piano, as empty each 'minute-page' steps in front of the reader. The only text the empty page offers is: Unfortunately the programm can not remember anything in this moment. Could you please help it. The minute calls upon the reader to write, just as the silent piano piece by John Cage calls the audience to fill it with noise. Who is the author: Cage or the audience, the writer or the empty minute?

Although the reader may contribute her text and 'fill up' the minute, this *wreader* nevertheless won't be acknowledged as the author. *23:40* does not show the names of its contributors. At where are normally looks for the author's name, one will find the name of this particular minute. Which makes, as I just argued, perfect sense. Just as it makes sense that the only name one finds is the project-leader's on the first page.

There are other interesting aspects we could discuss in this project. For instance the development toward a prefixed end. The project offers its readers exactly 1 440 opportunities to became an author and to put in their 'two cents'. The number of free pages decreases with each new contribution, and the *best time* is largely occupied, that is between 8pm and 10pm. Surprisingly, only a third of these opportunities is taken, which might prove that the best time of collaborative writing projects already is over. However, imagine the day, when there are only 10 minutes left, to became part of this project. And you don't know which minutes these are! - The attraction of this like many other collaborative writing project lies in the setting more than in the contributed texts. As the setting can be considered conceptual art one can say: What fails as Netliterature has a second chance as Netart.

4. Assoziationsblaster

The third example I want to show you offers absolute freedom to the reader as author. Whereas in the former examples the project leader herself includes each new contribution to the project, in *Assoziationsblaster* the program does the job and is, therefore, the only one who definitely 'knows' all segments in the text pool. The program also creates the links, which here are called associations. The links are established between texts which use the same words from a special list. If for example one sentence reads: "to be or not to be" and another sentence starts "she has been in the city", there will be a link between them because of the word *be*, provided this word is on the list of keywords, to which each reader who already has contributed at least three times can add a new word. In order to create ever new associations, the link from sentence A is not directly addressed to sentence B but to a program that knows about all texts entailing the word *be*. The link now will be randomly created each time one clicks on the underlined *be* in one of those texts. Click *be* in sentence A, and you get sentence B, go back and click *be* in A again, you will get C or D or G.

As one can imagine, the resulting associations are not always very meaningful, if words like *be* or *I* are on the list and if the linking is based only on morphological similarities. This type of association therefore differs from the concept of wit, where different words are linked together to show what different things actually have in common. In the Assoziationblaster *similar* words are linked together with almost no relation between the texts linked.

However, we don't have to take this project too seriously. It only pretends to be looking for truth by investigating how things in the world are connected. Moreover, it ridicules the notion of truth in random, mechanical, and intentionally silly associations. What really matters in this project is to blast open the connections of both texts and its writers. What really matters is the association of all contributors. The text may be meaningless for those who happen to find it on the web, but not for the contributors who evaluate each others contributions, create strange keywords, have the program link between them, communicate their success to each other in the project's discussion group

5. Collaborative writing's pay off

We have seen three very different ways of collaborative writing. In the first example collaboration took place between contributors and finally failed because of their inability to work together. In the second example the author collaborates with the program: it instructs the reader to become an author, it occupies the author's name,

and it creates, together with the author, the deeper meaning of the text. The third example shows collaboration almost solely at the program level. The program sets the links and develops the structure of the whole independently from the authors. How shall we read this shift from contributed text to the program, to screen-surface result depending on the hidden text of programming? Let's go back one step.

If in collaborative writing and interactive stories the reader becomes the writer, the question then becomes whether qualilty will be compromised in favour of interactivity. Marie-Laure Ryan has a convincing answer to this concern: "a plot that would not be very interesting for a pure spectator may become fascinating-just as playing a tennis game not worthy of televising may be a richly rewarding experience for the player. We are certainly not as critical of the scenarios that we generate as participants in games of make-believe as we are of the plots of classically staged drama."

I have great sympathy with this argument and want to conclude, that collaborative writing is more about the process of collaboration as it is about the outcome. Someone not *in* the game might not enjoy the story, unless he or she approaches for other reasons like researching the dynamic of the group, the 'social aesthetics' behind the text itself.

My conclusion is: As the text itself becomes more and more part of a technical setting, as the program moves more and more into the center, the project of collaborative writing increasingly dismisses the reader. To a user who accidentally stops by and starts to read, the text itself doesn't say all that much. She has to become a writer, she has to join the authors, including their discussion group, in order to understand what's going on and to enjoy the project. One has to read *this* 'text' to enjoy the other, 'official' text. Quality of text, in the way critics use to approach this issue, doesn't matter any more. One may even say: The text doesn't matter any more. What matters is the event which one is part of.