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Topdown Digital Literature: The Effects of Institutional Collaborations and Communities

Yra van Dijk

‘Participationism plagues us. More than dismantling or distributing power, we’ve invisibilized and extended it’.
Not an alternative, 2010

Abstract

Contrary to what one might think, institutions play an important role in the production, preservation, and funding of electronic literature. Due to the absence of traditional gate-watchers like publishers and newspaper critics, the function of selection, distribution, and reception of this work has been taken over partly by anthologies, reviews and criticism that are produced in an academic climate. Artists need the necessary channels for preservation, distribution, and critical evaluation of the work, channels that have the power to create “cultural capital”. Even the production of work often takes place in an academic or institutional setting. Literary festivals, conferences and workshops form temporary communities in which planned collaboration takes place. This article addresses institutionalized and planned collaboration and its effects on the production, the presentation, and the content of digital literature.

Introduction

Although digital arts seem so experimental that they operate far from traditional institutions, they are partly dependent on academia and on government funded projects. Like authors who work in print, authors of e-literature too need an institutional context in which their works can be credentialed and valued, economically and symbolically. Digital literature is rarely “sold” like print literature, and its producers have to find alternative funding to be able to produce work. Here we will look at institutionally funded projects based on collaboration. In these instances, the community of artists that produces a work has come into being in an institutional context (a festival, a workshop, a project). The “autonomy” that the authors of *Collaborative Futures* (one of my test cases) see in collaboration seems not to be necessarily at the basis of collaborations in digital art. We will look at collaborations that are not autonomous, in the sense that they are in fact funded and sometimes initiated by some institution, mostly in the end by the government itself.

This is a rather paradoxical situation, since collaborations in 20th century art and literature were mostly born from a discontent with mainstream and canonical art and its institutions (cf. Green 25). Our first question is whether collaboration in an institutional context loses its

potential of rebellion against canonization. Is it a “fake” avant-garde, in the sense that the seemingly progressive is a sign of complicity?

The general conception of collaboration sees a strong connection with political action or even anarchy (Lind; Green). In digital literature we find some political collaborations, like the literary community “[Circulars](#)” that was formed with the explicit intention to protest against the invasion in Iraq in 2003, stating that “poets, artists and critics respond to the U.S. Global policy.” The supposed political quality of collaborations will be looked at in the analysis of literary digital communities.

Not only on an institutional or political level transformations seem to have occurred in the cultural value of collaboration. In visual arts of the 20th century, it was a “strategic but almost terminal means of shedding traditional signs of unwanted artistic personality” (Green xiii). The second issue that will be confronted here is whether this model applies to the digital writers discussed in this paper. Is collaborative authorship an expression of the rejection of traditional “artistic personality”?

A third and final issue is the influence of the mode of production on the content of the work. Collaboration in modern and postmodern art could be presented as art itself (Green xii): the event of the collaboration takes the place of the object produced. Similarly, institutional collaborative authorship, which is part of the creative process, ends up becoming an important part of the work. As has been pointed out by Simon Biggs, funding institutions have “the potential to directly impact on how this work is produced, maintained and disseminated” (345). What has not been looked at yet however, is the impact that the institutional context has on the actual content of the works produced. Thus, the influence of planned collaborations on both the presentation and the content will be addressed in this article. Not only the work will be studied, but also its paratextual context: the frame that presents a work, in which the circumstances of collaboration are described. How do we get knowledge of the collaboration, what were the original intentions, and what is the intended or unintended result?

The first case addressed is the book *Collaborative Futures*, written over five days (January 18-22 2010) during a so-called “Book Sprint” that was part of the Transmediale festival in Berlin. Five writers, one programmer and one facilitator collaborated on the production of a book – without any preparations – the only predetermination being the title: *Collaborative Futures*.

The second case analysed is work created in a yearly Dutch project called *Poetry on the Screen*, funded by the Dutch Foundation for Literature, in which six couples (each consisting of one poet and one new media designer) are offered the opportunity to collaboratively produce a digital work. The results are then performed at the festival Poetry International Rotterdam.

The third work discussed is *Palavrador*, an electronic artwork produced through collaborative authorship under the direction of Chico Marinho. The project was conceived and produced during the 38th UFMG Winter Festival in 2006, in Diamantina, Brazil (it was funded by the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil). The Electronic Literature Organization has admitted a video describing the work in the second Electronic Literature Collection, where *Palavrador* is said to be “conceived and implemented as a result of synergetic collective assemblage of ideas and activities of a wider group of authors with backgrounds in the arts, literature, and computer science.”

Paratexts in Digital Literature

How do we *know* that a work of art is produced in collaboration? The presentation of a literary text usually takes place by means of what Gérard Genette called the “paratext”. This is the threshold of the text: everything that helps to present the text, to ensure its “presence in the world” (1). Paratexts are worth studying, since they may not only inform us on the social and economic networks that the text is involved in, but also on the ways in which our interpretation of the text is influenced by these extra-diegetic elements. Authors’ intentions and strategies are communicated through them, and implicitly a great part of the work of interpretation is in fact based on paratexts, rather than on texts. Although Genette’s theory was designed for the book, digital born literature has paratexts too, although their nature and function differ from paratexts in print literature. Firstly and most importantly, the authors’ influence on paratexts has grown. Although critics point out that the “romantic” author, the inspired genius, has been replaced by new models of authorship in new media (Manovich), the author seems to be re-entering through the back door.¹ More than in print work he, she or they frame their own work. Often the author is the “publisher” of her own work, maintaining a personal website, on which value-enhancing descriptions of the work are to be found, some times written by the author, “autographical”. She performs as her own agent as well, “selling” the work on blogs, in personal correspondences, conferences, and in performances. The digital author, in short, is her own editor, publisher and agent, taking care of framing, publicity and canonization.

A second characteristic seems to be that a further merging of text and paratext is taking place, as Lunenfeld argued.² Stewart reached the same conclusion on the basis of his paratextual analysis of the work *Inanimate Alice* and suggested we change our ideas of a separate text and paratext: “Hence, rather than preconceiving these functional elements through a print-based binary (i.e. either “text” or “paratext”) it might be more effective to reconceive (and analyze) them as being positioned by their context along a theoretical axis, in which Genette’s idealized “paratext” is positioned at one end and the idealized ‘text’ is positioned at the other” (72). However, in avant-garde and postmodern literature, the distinction between text and paratext was blurred and deconstructed in a similar way. The “rigid demarcations” that Lunenfeld identifies in print literature (15) are not always so rigid.

A third aspect of digital paratexts is to be found on the level of changed quantity and quality. As far as quantity goes: it is not that the amount of paratexts has grown in digital literature, but the availability and the closeness to the text has augmented. In the print era, there were physical steps to be taken between reading a text and reading the library catalogue description of that text, for example. Digitally, these paratexts are only a few mouse clicks away – like the source code, which gives information on authorial intention and that we may incorporate into the category of “paratexts”. The Internet has partly taken over the role that social spaces and institutions play in print literature.

In our present case, the consequence of this visibility of the paratext is that the circumstances of the production of a collaborative work are very conspicuous. In terms of institutional collaboration, this may add “symbolic capital” to a text and establish a hierarchy within the domain of digital texts. This confirms what Baetens and Van Looy remarked on e-poetry specifically, that though delocalized, it has rapidly developed a closed canon, with a relatively small number of gatekeepers: “...in the age of globalization, it seems that the mechanisms of power, i.e. of selection, promotion, and exclusion, are strengthened rather than weakened” (2).

The analysis of both text and paratext, and the ways in which they merge, will tell us more about the intended and unintended effects of collaboration.

Test Cases: Collaborative Futures



The first case addressed is *Collaborative Futures*, first written over five days (January 18-22 2010) during a so-called “Book Sprint” that was part of the Transmediale festival in Berlin. Five writers, one programmer and one facilitator collaborated on the production of the book. Five days later 200 copies were printed and distributed at the festival.

In June 2010 a new group gathered to edit, partly rewrite and add content to the first edition of *Collaborative Futures*. This second “Book Sprint” lasted three days and was part of the exhibition “Re: Group Beyond Models of Consensus” at the Eyebeam Centre for Art & Technology in New York. The presentation of the second edition took place in conjunction with the arts collectives “Not An Alternative” and “Upgrade NYC”.³ The project was hosted by Transmediale, together with FLOSS Manuals (a non-profit foundation focused on the production of free manuals about how to use free software). Transmediale is funded (among others) by the Kulturstiftung des Bundes, Germany (‘the Ministry of Culture’, Germany).

The book-project has its own web site. Its front page displays the book title and a subtitle, which emphasizes the collaboration: “The future of collaboration, written collaboratively”. Beneath is a Marshall McLuhan quote, again about collaboration: “As new technologies come into play, people become less and less convinced of the importance of self expression. Teamwork succeeds private effort”. The opening screen of the site continues to describe the situation from which the book sprint started: “Six people were locked in a room in Berlin’s IMA Design Village for five days to produce a book with the sole guiding principle being the title – *Collaborative Futures*. They had to create the concept, write the book, and output it to print in 5 days”.

Rather out of line with the McLuhan motto, the paratext emphasizes the “private efforts” of all authors: the two men who initiated the book sprint, Adam Hyde and Stephen Kovats, and the five (male) authors are introduced personally, with photographs: personal identity and content are closely linked. Collaboration, in this case, does not mean that the importance of authorship has diminished, or so it seems. This is a point explicitly confirmed by the authors: online and social media link cultural products even more to identity than before. They want to express “this is what I made”. Even the copyright of the book has been carefully distributed over the various authors of the different chapters: the intellectual ownership of the text is not shared. We are far away from the intentional confusion that Picasso and Braque created by leaving off signatures of their work.

This does not mean that “ownership” should be understood as it is in print culture. Firstly, the entire text created during the “Book Sprints” is made available for free online, which is the first goal of its initiator, FLOSS Manuals. Secondly, other authors were allowed to rewrite and add content to the text half a year later.

Not only the paratext emphasizes collaboration, the text itself is about collaboration. The authors were invited to come to Berlin and write a “speculative narrative”: that was all the information provided beforehand. It turns out that “narrative” is not exactly what it is, rather a non-fiction book on collaboration, which argues that “rules for participation, established guidelines for attribution, organizational structure and leadership, and clear goals are necessary for participation” (4).

This implies that the text is its own paratext – it describes what it is, and in which tradition of digital and non-digital cooperation it operates. It is extremely self-reflexive and the authors are aware of it. They point out that their work is “fundamentally a reference to a particular micro-community” (7).

The first point of reference for the authors is collaboration in the world of science – and more specifically the free software movement – they protest against the commercial social tools the Internet offers. The keyword is “autonomy” from “pressure from state, religion and market”, and even “anarchy”. The argument is against the shadow of economy which looms large, as opposed to the economy of love and care, which is rarely acknowledged as “productive – a personal section of the book, on breastfeeding, is illustrative. The paradox is that it is tempting to call a collaboration “productive”, but that this places the world again in the light of economy.

Secondly the framing of the collaboration is addressed – the invitation to join is already a threshold and a means of selection. Even if the selection is not intentional, there is unintended selection because only people with sufficient means and time can react to an invitation.

Thirdly there is the reason for collaboration: the utilitarian perspective. Although there is no financial profit, there may be acknowledgement and the feeling that you have contributed to something that can possibly be of interest to you, as in the creation of free software: “productive selfishness” (34). The authors emphasize that the individuality of authorship has been relatively short-lived, starting with the print culture. In the Middle-ages collaboration followed automatically from the technological restrictions, they argue.

At all levels of the argument the authors warn against idealization of collaboration: “Online communities are not organized as democracies” (44). Hierarchies are organized along the lines of contribution: who works hardest is the most important. An important issue the authors tackle is the risk of “process fetishism”: “there is a risk of making a fetish of process over product, of the act of collaboration over the artifact that results from it” (45). Collaboration may be fun only for the people involved.

The curators of the NY exhibition, quoted in the book, take up this critical stance: they want to analyze the idealization of participation and demonstrate that power does not necessarily always comes from above. We have to be aware that we have not deconstructed power but have only relocalized it. Participation therefore can turn into a vector for dominant ideologies as easily as it can liberate: “participation plagues us” (48): governments and “cultural entrepreneurs” can’t get enough of it. The aim of writing Collaborative Futures was to write a

guide for a “more positive collaborative future”, and the authors conclude with a description of their own working process: “In June 2010, the book was rewritten as a part of the Re:Group exhibition at Eyebeam, NY. This second edition invited three new collaborators to challenge the free culture sentiment underlying the original writing. The result is a deliberately multi-voiced tone pondering the merits and shortcomings of this new emerging ideology.”

The authors also do reflect on the dubious nature of “autonomy”: It is worthwhile to be suspicious of those people and projects who claim to be autonomous (135), but not on the irony that digital collaboration ends up in a printed, and even reprinted book: the product seems to be as important as the event.

Even if the authors were physically present in the same room during the writing and rewriting processes, they did collaborate online via a software called “booki”. This online creation is one of the characteristics that distinguishes it from the next example, where collaboration was not necessarily online, although the products were.

Poetry on the Screen



“Poetry on the Screen” is a yearly project first organized in 2004 by the Dutch Literature Foundation and Waag Society, and since 2008 also by the FVADA (the Fund for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture). The project offers poets and writers the opportunity to develop and present, in collaboration with designers in new media, a literary work for the screen, a work that explores how language, visuals, sounds and movements might intensify each other. Writers and designers in new media may send in their concepts once a year. The funds evaluate the requests and suggest couples of approved writers and designers, if the proposals are not already written by a couple. Each approved plan is awarded a “working grant”.

This example of planned and funded collaboration starts from the premise that different professional skills are combined in a work of digital art: new media design and programming on the one hand, and literary writing on the other; the “distribution of labour”, as N. Katherine Hayles calls it (cf. “The Time of Digital Poetry”). As we will see, this premise has its influences on the works produced.

The works thus conceived are performed during a festival or other literary event, and subsequently made available on the website [Digidicht](#) that launched in 2008 by the same institutions as the above mentioned. This website is guided by the ambition to create a Dutch virtual platform where poets, visual artists, designers and others can meet, negotiate and

cooperate in order to create new forms of electronic literature. Those involved are encouraged to explore how electronic text, image, sound and interaction can intensify each other.

Digidicht has both a public and interactive space. The homepage displays both completed works (the full-grown harvest) and initiatives to works (the beans underneath).



Screenshot from Digidicht.

The works published on digidicht.nl can either be found at the homepage, or under the tab “de werken”. Besides a screenshot of the work, its title and its creators, the tab also reveals the works in creation and the publication date of finished works.

At the 28th of August 2010 digidicht.nl had published 52 completed works. 31 of them were created through the project “Poetry on the Screen”, 20 through workshops organized by Marcel van der Drift (programmer of the website), only one project was created on digidicht.nl itself.

What are the effects of this institutionally planned collaboration? First of all, one could say that the project is successful in the sense that some of the works created in it have been canonized. Two of the works have been admitted in the ELC 2 (Rozalie Hirs and Harm Van den Dorpel “[Family Tree](#)”, and K. Michel, and Dirk Vis “[Ah](#)”), others have been presented at national and international festivals and conferences⁴

Here I will focus on three works that were created in 2010, and performed on the Poetry International Festival in the same year: the stopmotion animation [Smeekbede](#) by Jan Pieter van Laar and Mustafa Stitou, the interactive [A potential polyphony](#) by Jaap de Jonge and Henk van der Waal and [Welkom Vreemdeling](#) by Dirk Vis and K. Michel.

The first characteristic of these examples is the paratext. The works are presented on a website that is linked to the symbolic capital of the art and literature foundations on the one hand, and are performed on the prestigious festival Poetry International on the other. Because of this double presentation, the works are explicitly embedded in a highbrow literary and

artistic context. None of the short introductions mention the collaborative nature of the work: they only describe what is happening in it.

Secondly, the extent to which each artist has kept his or her individual style in the collaboration may differ. Since different professions are brought together in the collaborative project, not always an integral cooperative work is produced. *Smeekbede* for example is an animation of paper cuttings, on the rhythm of a poem performed by the author's voice. However pretty the result is, the styles of the poet and the designers stay separate, and the video is presented as a supplement to the text. In a video of the "making of" by the Van Laar studio, we only witness the crafting of the animation. As the "studio" in their name (significantly reduced to a single male authors name which is Michiel van der Laar by the institutional paratext) indicates as well, the paratextual demonstration of Van Laar is explicit in its rejection of romantic authorship: emphasis is on craftsmanship, technical mastery, and not so much on individual expression. The content of the poem, though read with a solemn voice by the poet, is rather ironic and tongue-in-cheek, too.

In the next project, "A potential polyphony" by Henk van der Waal and Jaap de Jonge, we see a similar divide between the text and the design of the work. Texts are based on an existing volume of poetry in print, which gives the digital work the quality of a remediation, too. Only the third work does not show any distinction between the two disciplines of design and literature. K. Michel and Dirk Vis have worked together more frequently in this same institutional context, creating six works of which one was published in the *Electronic Literature Collection 2*.

As the authors explained during the festival were they performed, their intention was to design a work for Schiphol Airport, which has since then indeed shown it. The work is an animation in which letters in white circles dance around, forming words in two rows in the middle, then changing to form new words. The text consists of the names for the game "musical chairs" in different languages: Hungarian, German (journey to Jerusalem), Polish (hot chairs) French (dancing chairs), etc. Obviously, the work is iconic, the words perform the game themselves. It has some edge to it, since there is always too little room in this game, and one person is "left out" – which is exactly what is happening to strangers under the Dutch right-wing government in the 2010's.

Remarkable about most works on digidicht.nl is the absence of paratext on the nature and the process of collaboration: the emphasis remains on the product rather than the process.

In visual art, collaboration affected the content of the artwork and led to alternative authorial identities. Here, on the contrary, we do not seem to encounter a displacement of stable, autonomous subjects. In this kind of institutionally initiated collaboration we should take into account that it is not necessarily an interdisciplinary collaboration. Professionals from different disciplines may work separately on a text, much as in the manuscript era or in visual arts, were "master craftsmen" (Green xv) may be needed to assist in the creation of the actual work. The difference is that there is less of a hierarchy between "art" and "craft" in the digital literary creations under scrutiny here.

Palavrador

This [work](#) can be found on the website of the Electronic Literature Collection 2. Again we will look at the paratextual presentation first. This anthology gives two descriptions of the

work: one is allographic and the other autographic. The text provided by the authors begins as follows:

Palavrador is a poetic cyberworld built in 3D (“Palavrador” comes from the Portuguese word *palavra*, which itself means “word”). Directed by Francisco Carlos de Carvalho Marinho (Chico Marinho), it was nonetheless conceived and implemented as a result of synergetic collective assemblage of ideas and activities of a wider group of authors with backgrounds in the arts, literature, and computer science. ... Palavrador implies action; the creative achievement of words in symbiosis with humans and the autonomous poems (bots) adding new perspectives to art and literature by incorporating ideas from others disciplines such as computer science and biology.

The emphasis in the description of the work is on the “autonomy” of the poems, and on the activity of the reader/player, who has to choose between two avatars. Remarkably, if one enters the work there is only another paratext, a movie in which a text is read on the intentions and characteristics of the collaboration. The description of the process has taken over the product, and *Palavrador* may be said to be even more self-reflexive than *Collaborative Futures*.

The text read in the video is in English, spoken not by one but by various voices – the collaboration is even to be found on this formal level of the paratext. The text is a long description of the process of making the work – emphasis here is not so much on practicalities (who did what, how did the artists go about dividing the work etc.), but on the more abstract results and goals of the cooperation. A voice-over accompanies the visual images with the following text:

Produced in 2006, sponsored by UMG, 15 days, authors and professors, used the true interdisciplinary methodology to create content that would reflect science, art and philosophy”. Collective authorship mixing visual art, literature, music and motion.

Such proposal wasn’t thought out in advance. The workshop was not part of the official program, and emerged from the spontaneous and self organizing transdisciplinary activities of the people involved in it. The results and the consequences of this group work were bigger than the sum of the parts. This is a typical behaviour of a complex system that produces emergent property. Since it is an object of creativity on the perspective of art. Palavrador is a collective poetic, integrated, and multifragmented expression which contains diverse world visions.

Thus, text and paratext merge and emphasize the close relation between content and collaboration; interdisciplinarity is the explicit goal: “It was conceived and implemented as a result of synergetic collective assemblage of ideas and activities of the whole group”.

The paratextual text continues to describe what a reader of the work would see and experience. As is common in paratext, but less in autographic paratexts, the text has a strong evaluating character: it “sells” the work. It claims to bring new conceptual possibilities, and to bring new perspectives to art and literature from other disciplines like computer science and biology. Curiously, the poems are advertized as being “autonomous”, and the “freedom” of the work is emphasized. Contrary to our first two examples, these authors seem to connect to an avant-garde discourse in which it is necessary to stress the distance from the field of mass

production, “that of business, power and institutionalized authority” (Bourdieu 39). Whoever operates in this part of the field has an “interest in disinterestedness”.

Conclusions

The goals and the creative energies of the community are to an important extent concerned with the description, the establishment, and the rules of the community itself. The function of digital collaboration therefore resembles what Jakobson in his communication theory called the “phatic” function – which performs primarily a social task: the confirmation that communication is in progress. I would propose to create an analogous category for this self-reflexive collaboration: phatic collaboration. “Phatic” is Greek for “spoken” or “I speak”, so “phatic collaboration” would mean collaboration that we talk about.

Not all collaborative works are phatic, obviously. In “Poetry on the Screen” most works produced are not self-reflexive in nature. What we did see, however, is that the content of these works is often indirectly concerned with polyphony, interdiscursivity or interculturality.

Secondly, again contrary to some of the earlier experiments in the 1960s and 70s with collaboration in visual art, in all three cases presented here the emphasis is on the material result of the collaboration: *Collaborative Futures* even going as far as to make a reprint. Still, the artistic act seems to reside already in the collaboration itself, like Burnham pointed out: being part of a team, even a research team, may already be an artist’s identity. He suggested “that the presentation of systematic structures of information and assessment had become intertwined with artistic identity” (qtd. in Green 64).

A third conclusion is that contemporary collaboration is not always a political or poetical choice: the necessity to cooperate may be a consequence of the software used in the digital work, which demands a technological knowhow in addition to literary know-how: often authors and new media artists/engineers need to join forces to make a work. In that respect, contemporary online literary collaboration resembles medieval collaboration in book making. This technically “forced” collaboration has always been present in visual arts, where artists collaborate with craftsmen. Especially in the case of “Poetry on the Screen” we could see this kind of relation – the new media designers emphasising their “craft”. From this follows the fact that collaboration generally implies interdisciplinarity: we indeed see this in all three analyzed examples, implicitly or explicitly.

The last and most important inference we can make on the basis of these examples is that contrary to modernist art and literature, in digital literature collaboration is not necessarily marginal. It is rather institutional and canonical even at the moment of conception. The intention does not seem to be an avant-gardist break of the symbolic frame that separates art from non-art. On the contrary, the institutional frame seems to be confirmed. This means that the “anarchy” that *Collaborative Futures* speaks of is hard to find. Indirectly, all the cases here are made possible by government or academic funding. Parallel to the absence of anarchy we do not see an explicit desire to shed the artist personality. Only in the case of *Palavrador* there is anonymity of the contributors, who have merged into a group-authorship. Generally, the avant-garde framework that is used to analyse collaboration in visual arts in the 20th century does not seem to apply. On the basis of an analysis of *Collaborative Futures*, “Poetry on the Screen” and *Palavrador* we can conclude that further research needs to be done into the specific, self-reflexive and institutionalized nature of collaborative authorship in digital literature.

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Fussnoten

1. A similar paradox is to be found in print literature, where media-hypes concentrate on authors rather than on texts. (cf. Moran 58). [zurück](#)
2. "For who is to say where packaging begins and ends in a medium in which everything is composed of the same streams of data-regardless of whether the information is textual, visual, aural, static or dynamic?" (Lunenfeld 14). Bouchardon also mentions a case of merging of text and paratext in a conference paper presented at the University of Bergen, Norway in September 2010, see his paper in *Dichtung Digital* 41. He mentioned posts by an author on an internet-discussion list as a new form of paratext that needs consideration. In the case he examines, primary works came into being as posts on the list. This information was adopted from the book itself: [here zurück](#)
3. This information was adopted from the book itself: see [here zurück](#)
4. The Zebra Poetry Film Festival in Berlin selected two of the works: [Gentleman Fight Night](#), by Nick J. Swarth en Jeroen de Leijer and in an earlier festival [You're Lying and You Filter](#)... by Paul Bogaert.