Collaboration and authority in electronic literature

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Abstract:

This paper explores collaborative processes in electronic literature. Specifically, it examines writer authority as it applies to text, code, and other media. By drawing from cinematic auteur theory, Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (1994), Said's *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975), Cayley's *Grammalepsy* (2018), and Flores's (2019) generational approach to digital literature, this paper highlights unique issues that arise in the creative collaborative production of digital literary works, and the influence these processes have on how these works are 'read'. The creative processes employed in Montfort, Rettberg, and Carpenter's respective *Taroko Gorge*, *Tokyo Garage*, and *Gorge* (2009), Jhave's *ReRites* (2017–2018), and Luers, Smith, and Dean's *novelling* (2016)), as well as reflections on the author's own collaborative creative experiences (*Paige and Powe* (2017) with Lowry and Lane, *Little Emperor Syndrome* (2018) with Arnold, and *V[R]erses* (2019–) with Breeze) are explored in detail. From these analyses, this paper concludes that in digital literary practices code should be regarded as a meta-authority that denotes authority to specific components of the work. A better understanding of these complexities as they apply to attribution is emphasised in the future development of digital literary creative practice and education.

Biographical note:

David Thomas Henry Wright won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards' Digital Literature Prize and 2019 Robert Coover Award for a work of Electronic Literature (2nd prize). He has been shortlisted for several other national and international awards, and has been published in various creative and academic publications. He has a PhD from Murdoch University, a master's degree from the University of Edinburgh, and taught Creative Writing at China's top university, Tsinghua. He has been an editor of Westerly and is co-editor of the forthcoming *The Digital Review*. He is currently Associate Professor (Comparative Literature) at Nagoya University.

Keywords:

Collaboration – authority – electronic literature – digital writing

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Introduction

This paper explores the impact of collaborative processes on authority in electronic literature. Specifically, it looks at how the text, code, and other media created by multiple practitioners relate to one another. Through the analysis of the creative processes of others (Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, and J.R. Carpenter's respective *Taroko Gorge*, *Tokyo Garage*, and *Gorge* (2009), David Jhave Johnston's *ReRites* (2017–2018) and Will Luers, Hazel Smith, and Roger Dean's *novelling* (2016)) and reflections on my own collaborative creative experiences (*Paige and Powe* (2017) with Karen Lowry and Julia Lane, *Little Emperor Syndrome* (2018) with Chris Arnold, and *V[R]erses* (2019–) with Mez Breeze), a number of issues regarding digital collaborative creative practice will be examined, including how creative processes influence one another and how such an understanding impacts how these digital works are ultimately 'read' or experienced. Finally, it addresses the unique relationship between code and textual elements, and how this impacts attribution, as well as hypothesising future issues that may arise in the field. To theorise these processes, comparisons to cinematic auteur theory, media theorist W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (1994) (particularly as it relates to the photographic essay), Edward Said's *Beginnings* (1975), and John Cayley's *Grammalepsy* (2018) will be used, as well as Leonardo Flores's (2019) generational approach to electronic literature.

(The problem of) definitions

Electronic literature refers to works that are 'native to the digital environment' (Rettberg 2019: 6). In 2004, the Electronic Literature Organisation formed a list of exemplary forms:

- Hypertext fiction and poetry, on and off the Web
- Kinetic poetry presented in Flash and using other platforms
- Computer art installations, which ask viewers to read them or otherwise have literary aspects
- Conversational characters, also known as chatterbots
- Interactive fiction
- Literary apps
- Novels that take the form of emails, SMS messages, or blogs
- Poems and stories that are generated by computers, either interactively or based on parameters given at the beginning
- Collaborative writing projects that allow readers to contribute to the text of a work
- Literary performances online that develop new ways of writing (in Rettberg 2019: 6).

This list, Rettberg emphasises, is not exhaustive. Rather, it identifies current threads of practice and in so doing encourages new ones to develop. This, in part, is why the term 'electronic literature' is somewhat ambiguous. It groups together various modes and approaches. As such, the concepts and theories proposed in this paper will inevitably have a number of exceptions. Electronic literature is perhaps, therefore, better defined by what it is not. Rettberg elaborates that 'electronic literature' does not include digital dissemination of literature that could be printed as a book (i.e. e-books). In this sense, electronic literature is defined by its

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'unprintability' and its reliance on computer code to exist. Additionally, Bell et al (2010) pose that electronic literature can be defined as a work that is 'written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium.'

This combination of code, text, and (potentially) other media requires a variety of skill sets. Electronic literature works, therefore, often require or benefit from collaboration. Collaborative works are regarded as works produced by more than one individual. Typically, one would define collaborative works as cooperative works between two or more *voluntary* individuals, but as will be discussed within this paper, the 'involuntary' collaboration that inevitably results from the use of computer code warrants analysis. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary collaborators. Similarly, it is also important to note that while electronic literature includes 'collaborative writing projects that allow readers to contribute to the text of a work', these specific types of works will not be analysed within this paper.

Regarding writer authority, literary theorist Edward Said (1978) defines it as follows:

> Every sort of writing establishes explicit and implicit rules of pertinence for itself: certain things are admissible, certain others not. I call these rules of pertinence *authority* – both in the sense of explicit law and guiding force (what we usually mean by the term) and in the sense of the implicit power to generate another word that will *belong to* the writing as a whole (Vico's etymology is *auctor: autos: suis ipsius: propsius: property*). (16)

The author *authorises*. In collaborative works, however, where multiple authors' unique input authorises in unique ways, such 'implicit power to generate another word that will *belong to* the writing as a whole' becomes harder to determine. This is especially true when we note the influence of coded language. Regarding code, it is important to note that while code is language, it is not *human* language. Digital artist and theorist John Cayley (2018) argues:

> code is not natural, human language at any level. Code is practiced entirely within the framework of formal, usually Turing-complete computer languages, but "language" in this phrase has a constrained and far different meaning to the one it has, even in everyday speech. The elements and formal structures of code can be easily introduced into language, but the elements and structures (even the formally expressible structures) of language cannot easily be introduced into code as such (other than as quoted strings) and, if they could be, then the code would no longer be code.(8)

Yet even if code is not human language, the authored code that determines nearly all works of electronic literature *authorises*. For the purposes of this essay, all authored material (text, film, code, sound design, image) will be regarded as 'language'. Though, it is important to keep in mind that not all of this language is 'human' language.

Given electronic literature's enormous diversity and emphasis on challenging established forms, the field is hard to categorise. Rettberg (2019) poses a genre approach, categorising the

field under banners such as 'combinatory poetics', 'hypertext fiction', 'interactive and game-like forms', 'kinetic poetry', etc. Flores (2019) proposes a different, chronological approach that splits the field into three generations. The first generation, Flores poses:

> Is characterized by a few pioneering works that emerged between 1952 and 1995. For most of this period, people had limited access to computers, resulting in a small number of practitioners, most of whom didn't have a clear concept that what they were creating was electronic literature. In the first few decades, only computer scientists and academics in universities and technical staff in the private industry, producers in film, television, radio studios that had access to expensive tools that could be used to create electronic literature.

With the arrival of personal computers and gaming consoles in the 1970s, this generation of electronic literature came to a close. The second generation of electronic literature begins in 1995 with the Web. This generation consists of 'innovative works created with custom interfaces and forms'. This generation continues into the present. The third generation, Flores proposes, starts around 2005. These digital works use 'established platforms with massive user bases, such as social media networks, apps, mobile and touchscreen devices, and Web API services'. This generation coexists with the second.

(The problem of) auteur theory

Cinematic auteur theory can be traced to 1954 with publications in *Cashiers du Cinéma* (in Staples 1967), in which film critics André Bazin and François Truffaut argue that the film director, as opposed to the screenwriter, is the author of the film (Bazin and Truffaut also coin and use the term *metteur-en-scène*, literally 'scene-setter', to describe the director who is not an auteur, but merely adds pictures to the screenwriter's scenario (in Nichols 1976: 232-3)). Filmmaking is an intensely collaborative process, sometimes involving the creative input of hundreds even thousands of individuals. Yet auteur theory posits that the film director who has authority over the script and filmmaking process will produce a better film, whereas a film director who simply realises the script as is – who allows the screenplay to authorise – will produce lesser work.

It is important to note, as Peter Wollen (1972) has, that auteur theory evolved haphazardly: 'it was never elaborated in programmatic terms, in a manifesto or collective statement' (77). As such, this theory, especially with respect to the business and criticism of cinema, has been left up to interpretation. Specifically, how the director as author actually authorises in relation to the collaborative processes can be difficult and perhaps even impossible to determine simply by viewing the end product. Nevertheless, critics will often attribute the authorisation of any element to the director. For example, a costume designer may design the costumes for the film, but the director will be seen as having approved or requested changes to these costumes. The director therefore is seen to authorise the costumes. This example in actual practice, however, may not be the case. Time, financial, and other conflicting issues may arise that the critic is unable to determine. Similarly, in practice the director may not have had the authority to approve or disprove these creative choices. Nevertheless, auteur theory works under the

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assumption that the director does, or at the very least, should. In this regard, the critic who embraces auteur theory assumes a utopic collaborative practice where the director has total authority.

In certain electronic literature projects I have worked on, I have assumed a role similar to that of a director as defined by auteur theory, i.e. a central force that 'authorises' the work in question. I did not create all input, but I did approve all input. In the case of the digital novella *Paige & Powe* (2017), this began as a 'traditional' epistolary novel. While this earlier iteration displayed the 'mark of the digital' that Hayles (2008: 186) argues characterises much of contemporary literature, it would not be classified as 'electronic literature' as defined above. Furthermore, while collaborative processes can occur in print text through working with editors, cover designers, proof-readers, and the workshopping of material, the circumstance is notably different from both film and electronic literature in that the typical book is not multimodal. In traditional literature, the text is the authority and the author can be the authority for the text. Where the auteur in film assumes a utopic collaborative process that is likely not reflective of actual practice, such authorial control is not hard to imagine or at all uncommon in print literature. In the case of developing the print iteration of *Paige & Powe*, I did not collaborate with anyone.

My electronic literature iteration of *Paige & Powe*, however, was a result of collaboration. This digital version centres the work on a graphic that allows the various texts that make up the epistolary novel to be accessed as 'found-objects'. One of these texts, accessed via an image of a laptop, allows the reader to chart changes by adding and removing layers of text in a palimpsestic style of writing. I consider this work a digital adaptation of the print text. The illustrations were created by Julia Lane, after consultations in which I provided preliminary sketches and proposed designs. Karen Lowry, who designed the digital interface and functionality, did likewise with the programming and web design. In both cases, Lane and Lowry contributed individual creative input that uniquely shaped the end result, but this was subject to my approval.

A similar working method produced my digital novella *Little Emperor Syndrome* (2018). This work began as a stream-of-consciousness novella (for a more detailed description of this creative process, refer to 'Sound, Fury, and Consistency: Writing Recombinant Fiction' (2019)). Working with Chris Arnold, who designed and programmed the work, the digital novella added functionality that allowed the stream-of-consciousness text to be grouped into coloured lexias. These can be added, removed, reordered chronologically, or presented in a random order. As with *Paige & Powe*, while Arnold contributed individual creative input that uniquely shaped the end result, this was subject to my approval.

In 2019, I was approached by digital artist Mez Breeze to be a contributing author for her collaborative project, *V[R]erses*. Breeze presented me with two 3D/VR models, and requested I write a short microstory or poem to accompany one of them. She recommended that I write a title and five or six sentences (poetic or otherwise) that provides some type of narration to accompany the model. *V[R]erses*, as a broader work, is an XR (extended reality) story series.

According to mezbreezedesign.com (2020), a *V[R]erse* is a microstory, which consists of a 'storybox that can be experienced in 3D via a WebVR enabled mobile device, desktop PC and in Virtual Reality.' Breeze continues: 'Each *V[R]erse* is created by different digital literature authors [text] and Mez Breeze [development + design, model + concept creation, audio].' At the time of writing this essay, nine *V[R]erses* have been created. The work I created is titled *The Inchoate Arts*, and was published online in 2019.

In this instance, while I wrote the text (note that code here is not included as text) for this *V[R]erse* and was responsible for all text involved in the work, the creative input of Mez Breeze was not subject to my approval. I therefore do not regard text as the authority in this work. In this sense, we could regard the instigator or overseer (in this case, Breeze) as the auteur of the work of electronic literature. What is intriguing in this case is that text in electronic literature is not necessarily central or authoritative. In fact, in this work (and many others), the text is supplementary to either code or other media.

(The problem of) instigation

As a matter of collaborative procedure, the instigator of the work could be regarded as the authority, as the instigator is the origin of the creative process. As Said (1978) argues, however, an origin is different to a beginning:

> A beginning suggests either (*a*) a time, (*b*) a place, (*c*) an object, (*d*) a principle, or (*e*) an act – in short, detachment of the sort that establishes distance and difference between either *a, b, c, d,* or *e* on the one hand and what came before it on the other. (42)

Due to these complications, a 'beginning' can be difficult to identify:

> To identify a beginning – particularly that of a historical movement or a realm of thought – with an individual is of course an act of historical understanding. More than that, however, it is what may be called an *intentional act* – that is, an act in which designating individual X as founder of continuity Y (a movement, say) implies that X has value in having *intended* Y. (32)

As an example, David Jhave Johnston's *ReRites* (2017–2018) uses neural nets to 'empower and nourish limited human creativity'. For a year, Jhave produced one book of poetry a month. The work began with human literature, which was fed into a 'neural network code … adapted from three corporate github-hosted machine-learning libraries'. These produced massive, incomprehensible blocks of A.I.-generated text, which were then human edited. Jhave writes that he regards these blocks of text as 'solid stone', and his cursor as a 'chisel'. His human-editing process, he considers 'carving'. The question then arises, who or what is the authority of the work? The original data fed into the machine, that is not currently retrievable or discernible from the final works? The code that was taken and adapted for his purposes? Or Jhave, the human editor? Of the work, Jhave writes that the poems are 'generated by a computer' and 'edited by a human'. Yet of these three inputs – human literature as data, computer generator, and human editor (Jhave) – only one performs an intentional act in the

production of the poetry. Therefore, according to Said, Jhave would be the authority of this work.

In the development of certain works of electronic literature, the concept of a 'beginning' and 'intentional act' is further complicated. For example, in 2009, American poet and professor of digital media Nick Montfort created *Taroko Gorge*. This work uses a poetry generator, programmed with terms, to create a nature poem that depicts the Taroko Gorge in Taiwan. Montfort wrote the code, which is programmed with the vocabulary, that generates the poem. In this sense, Montfort is the sole creator and authority of this work. *Taroko Gorge* would be regarded as a work of second-generation electronic literature.

Subsequent digital poets and artists have used Montfort's code to generate their own poems. For example, Scott Rettberg reprogrammed Montfort's code to create *Tokyo Garage*. Where Montfort's poem uses a minimalist vocabulary to generate a peaceful nature poem, Rettberg uses a maximalist vocabulary to generate a cacophonous urban poem. Dozens of subsequent poets have reprogrammed Montfort's code to generate their own poems. For example, J.R. Carpenter replaced Montfort's nature vocabulary with food-based vocabulary, transforming *Taroko Gorge* into *Gorge*. These subsequent works, Flores (2019) argues, 'were not inventing a form', but were instead 'adapting, appropriating, even erasing' the original work as a third generation move. (Flores also created his own variation of *Taroko Gorge*, titled *Taroko Gary*).

Montfort's work is the origin of all these works. His code was an 'intentional act'. As a collaborator, however, he was not voluntarily working with these subsequent poets who remixed his work. Nevertheless, Montfort's code is the 'beginning' of all of these subsequent creations. Indeed, a strong case could be made to claim that Montfort's code is the authority in all of these works. Without it, they do not exist. And yet, Montfort did not instigate these poems. If Montfort's code is the authority in such works, then it could be asserted that the code that determined Jhave's poems is the authority in *ReRites*, or that the publishing software is the authority in the production of a new book-bound print edition of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

(The problem of) media relations

Barthes' concept of the death of the author is not new. In reading literary works, contemporary readers are able to dismiss the processes or biographies of the work's creators. Yet, as a vocational need, the author must have (or at least have a modicum of faith in) some level of control over what the reader will feel and experience. Even the creators of image macro memes, which Flores (2019) includes as a kind of third generation electronic literature, have an intention of what the author is to feel. Nevertheless, the 'birth of the reader' (148) that Barthes concludes from his 1967 essay very much impacts authority in electronic literature, and should therefore be evaluated. The collaborative digital 'recombinant novel' *novelling* (2016) by Will Luers, Hazel Smith, and Roger Dean combines text, video, sound, and code (note that in discussing this work, video, sound and code are all regarded as 'language'). This web-based work presents the reader with various windows of video and text, which is accompanied by

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sound design. These media fragments are arranged in six-minute cycles. According to the paratext, every thirty seconds this interface changes, or the reader can voluntarily click to transform the interface. This work, the paratext continues, straddles the 'lines between literature, cinema and music' by evoking the 'history of the novel.' The code itself is labelled a 'variable and deterministic system of selection and arrangement' that produces a 'fluid, ever-novel and potential narrative.'

'Reading' the work, it is difficult to ascertain which media fragments hold the most authority. In describing the photographic essay, American media theorist W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) poses that the relation of photography and language is a principal site of struggle for value and power in contemporary representations of reality; it is the place where images and words find and lose their conscience, their aesthetic and ethical identity' (281). There is therefore a unique power dynamic between all the media elements in *novelling*: text, film, sound design, and code, and what they authorise for the reader.

The authority of *novelling's* form is the code, which recombines the various media fragments. *novelling* declares itself a 'recombinant digital novel'. Of recombinant fiction, Luers (2016) writes:

> If every reading is different and there is no "correct" path, then the "narrative" remains an untamed force within the text and may never be completed, extracted or fully mapped by any reader. Is such a text still a narrative? Perhaps not.

In 'Sound, Fury, and Consistency: Writing Recombinant Fiction' (2019), however, I argued that recombinant narratives are not *completely* untamed. Despite the code's power to restructure the narrative, there are still set fragments in place that form some sort of centre, even if this code actively decentres it. In this regard, the code is not the authority, merely the framework that determines the reader's access to the work itself. While the code determines the recombinant poetics and structure of the work, it is not central to the work. Of his process, Luers (2016) writes that the work's narrative emerges 'symbiotically'. The code therefore influences the production of text and other media. Hazel Smith's text, for example, presented in lexias, is restricted to 30-second reading windows. The code influences this text by introducing a temporal element. The code makes the text perform more like the video and sound elements, both of which are temporal. The looped video or 'cinemagraph' that *novelling* uses, Luers (2018) writes:

> are temporal abstractions rather than temporal representations. Something more than repetition, loops emphasize the cyclical and dissolve beginnings and endings into continuous flow.

This form, determined by the video form, is what determines *novelling*. The code, therefore, imposes the cinemagraph form on the other media. In this work, the cinemagraph is the authoritative media. The code, however, enables the video to be the authoritative media, by applying these qualities to the text. The code could just as easily be written to prioritise the text over the video. In digital, multimedia works, the code determines the level of authority of each media fragment.

(The problem of) code as authority

In electronic literature, the code is not the text (or the narrative), merely the structure for the work to exist. Cayley (2018) stresses that it is 'impossible to discount or exaggerate what code and coding can and will do for practices of language', but adds that we should 'tread carefully when we try to understand relationships between practices of coding and practices of language…' (8). Digital theorist Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) details just how big an impact algorithms already have as a power of oppressive reinforcement, which she describes as 'technological redlining' (1). What electronic literature offers is a chance to remake the form of the work and how it is received. 'Traditional' textual works (e.g. the novel, the short story, the poem, etc.) rely on established forms that are encoded into current software systems, but are generally not challenged with respect to their presentation or structures as media.
In a field still establishing genres, code has the power to radically remake form and structure. While these forms are often borrowed (as Flores argues of third generation electronic literature), they are not yet culturally established enough to be ubiquitous. The code itself is not the authority, but empowers authority to the work in question. Therefore, code should be regarded as a '*meta-authority*'.

(The problem of) attribution

The complexity of authority and attribution has led a number of collaborative practitioners to credit their works using a 'collective', as opposed to a series of individuals. Works such as *Karen* (2015) by Blast Theory and *Pry* (2014) by Tender Claws, involve the input of numerous individuals. Rather than crediting the work individually for individual parts, as a film does, the work is credited by the collective.

One could read this as the commercialisation of individuals, operating under a company name. On the other hand, one could see it as a necessary response to the difficult task of attributing authority and credit for the work in question. Rather than dissecting the work by attributing individual credits, which may or may not reflect true authority, the 'collective' credit acknowledges the complex (and potentially impossible) attempt to denote authority.

Such considerations have substantial impact on the field, particularly with respect to awards and education. As electronic literature has very few avenues to fund projects or reimburse artists, digital literature practitioners often rely on literary and media awards to build reputations. Given the issues raised in this paper, attributing credit for such awards is somewhat problematic, especially in professional cultures that often value the individual artist or auteur as an ideal. Similarly, in the teaching of digital literature, assigning credit to students for interdisciplinary group projects poses new challenges, given that most current education systems require individuals to receive individually assessed grades.

As the third generation of electronic literature as defined by Flores continues to flourish, utilising voluntary and involuntary collaborative processes and disseminated through avenues where attribution will be difficult to assign, one can expect the author's name(s) to further dissolve and authority to become even more arduous to determine. It also raises additional issues with regard to plagiarism and attribution for the use of code and 'remixed' material. As future works seek to utilise large data sets, artificial intelligence, neural nets, and other emerging technologies and possibilities, these issues will be further complicated. Indeed, the practitioners may not even have legal ownership over their creations.

These considerations do not slot easily into current systems as they apply to more traditional literary and creative writing programs and awards. In the designing of courses and recognition bodies, it is therefore vital that these issues be addressed. Given the constantly changing nature of the field, it is difficult to lay out any set of rules or principles. Therefore, directly addressing and emphasising the complexity of these problems in education and creative practice should be regarded as a priority.

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