

INTERVIEW WITH

Kate Pullinger



by **Jeremy Hight**, online via email correspondence, February 2011

Re-Drawing Boundaries, Leonardo Electronic Almanac New Media Exhibition

Curator: Jeremy Hight

Senior Curators: Lanfranco Aceti and Christiane Paul

What are you working on now?

I am currently starting work on a new iteration of 'Flight Paths'. I'm going to continue to develop digital assets, and I'm going to write a novel based on the story. Our first digital asset will be a web app and iPad/iPhone app that repurposes the five Flash story fragments that are currently up on the (www.flightpaths.net) homepage. Chris Joseph and I are working with Andy Campbell of Dreaming Methods for the first time to create this app. It will be available online for free once it's finished; our idea is that we will develop further digital assets for the project once this is up and running.

Who and what are some of your influences that made you want to write and do digital narratives?

I'm interested in stories, and I'm interested in new ways to tell stories, and so my influences are broad, encompassing, film, TV, books, visual arts as well as digital narratives. Over the past five years I've been inspired by my students who are very keen to innovate and grapple with the new technologies. In particular, Christine Wilks has been producing

remarkable and very rich digital fiction work –she’s definitely one to watch: www.crissscross.net

What things outside of art and literature inspire you conceptually and aesthetically?

I love live performance and theatre, particularly work that pushes away from the conventional. Over the years I’ve been lucky enough to see a number of live performances by Pina Bausch’s dance troupe; her work is strange, gorgeous, upsetting, and thought-provoking and her premature death was a great loss to the performing arts. My partner works in the live arts and because of that I’ve seen lots of amazing international work over the years –London is fantastic for theatre, which is, after all, one of the world’s oldest art forms. I also love the opera, for its sheer ridiculous scale, and for the way it combines so many art forms all at the same time –oddly, I don’t listen to opera recordings often, but I absolutely love opera live, from the most avant-garde of contemporary opera to the old war-horses like ‘Cosi Fan Tutte’. I’m currently writing a libretto based on Wilde’s novel, ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’, commissioned by the Slovakian National Theatre, working with a young composer, Lubica Cekovska.

What spaces can text and writing occupy beyond the page and screen?

Text and writing can occupy many different territories and platforms as demonstrated by numerous art and writing projects. However, my own interests lie in text on screen and text on the page, and the tension between those two forms. For me there is something beguiling about text on the screen when combined with other media in works of digital fiction: text represents ‘voice’ on screen in a way that is, as yet, under-explored and has huge potential.

‘Flight Paths’ has a cinematic quality as well as of games and something of a place between the constraints of form(s); what can such a collision bring forth in terms of meaning as well as play and how we engage and interact with narrative?

Does the ‘Flights Path’ universe open up a collective text that moves beyond similar wiki experiments and yet opens up digital narrative into a possible new area of community and even space and shared experience as a cohesive piece of writing?

That is definitely what Chris Joseph and I hoped to achieve by the phrase of ‘Flight Paths’ that used the Netvibes Universe to collect and curate both community and contributions to the project. However, our experience showed us that many people who were interested in the project, as readers and also as potential contributors, found the platform an obstacle. This has been the case with many of the open collaboration projects I’ve been involved with over the years –the gap between our perception of the ease-of-use of almost all digital platforms, and contributors understanding of those platforms, has been large. For instance, with the Penguin/DMU wiki-novel ‘A Million Penguins’, most people who contributed to that project did not understand how to use a wiki. I think it is very easy to overestimate people’s confidence when it comes to using software, platforms and tools, and this will continue to pose obstacles to open collaboration projects.

What can digital narratives such as ‘Inanimate Alice’ bring to education and what is this showing is possible?

‘Inanimate Alice’ continues to be hugely popular with educators. This digital story has helped to show educators and students the potential for digital fiction and multimedia storytelling to engage kids who might think they are not interested in writing, reading, and telling stories. I’ve been so impressed and amazed by teachers and students around the world and their interest in this project; the ‘Inanimate Alice’ Facebook page is a very active hub for educators, with links to teacher-bloggers as well as digital literacy consultants, etc. It’s been fascinating to watch a pedagogical community grow up around this story, and I’ve certainly never witnessed anything like it with any of my other writing projects (including ones done expressly for educational purposes –which ‘Inanimate Alice’ was not).

Are books and digital readers such as kindle in opposition? Or is this an erroneous implied dichotomy like digital writing and traditional writing are to be separate?

I don't think books and e books are in opposition, they are part of a long evolution that is the history of publishing. Doubtless the trade publishing industry is going through huge changes currently, as is book selling. However, I do think that the realms of electronic literature and that of books (whether print or digital) remain almost entirely separate, and this puzzles me now as much as it did a decade ago. For me the two things are part and parcel of what I do as a writer and it seems natural that the two worlds would merge in some way, but this is not happening. Perhaps they will always remain separate, two different forms, like screen-writing and novel-writing, or writing a libretto and writing a poem.



Inanimate Alice, 2005, Kate Pullinger. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist

Inanimate Alice

'Inanimate Alice' is a digital fiction, designed from the outset as a story that unfolds over time and on multiple platforms; the episodes are available on all devices capable of running Adobe's Flash Player. 'Inanimate Alice' connects technologies, languages, cultures, generations and curricula within a sweeping narrative accessible by all. Through the existing four episodes, Alice's journey progresses. The international pedagogical community around Alice has become increasingly large and active: students are encouraged to co-create developing episodes of their own, either filling in the gaps or developing new strands.



Paths Crossing, 2009, Kate Pullinger. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist

Flight Paths

"I have finished my weekly supermarket shop, stocking up on provisions for my three kids, my husband, our dog and our cat. I push the loaded trolley across the car park, battling to keep its wonky wheels on track. I pop open the boot of my car and then for some reason, I have no idea why, I look up, into the clear blue autumnal sky. And I see him. It takes me a long moment to figure out what I am looking at. He is falling from the sky. A dark mass, growing larger quickly. I let go of the trolley and am dimly aware that it is getting away from me but I can't move, I am stuck there in the middle of the supermarket car park, watching, as he hurtles toward the earth. I have no idea how long it takes – a few seconds, an entire lifetime – but I stand there holding my breath as the city goes about its business around me until...

He crashes into the roof of my car."

(excerpt from project)

The car park of Sainsbury's supermarket in Richmond, southwest London, lies directly beneath

one of the main flight paths into Heathrow Airport. Over the last decade, on at least five separate occasions, the bodies of young men have fallen from the sky and landed on or near this car park. All these men were stowaways on flights from the Indian subcontinent who had believed that they could find a way into the cargo hold of an airplane by climbing up into the airplane wheel shaft. It is thought that none could have survived the journey, killed by either the tremendous heat generated by the airplane wheels on the runway, crushed when the landing gear retracts into the plane after take off, or frozen to death once the airplane reaches altitude.

'Flight Paths' seeks to explore what happens when lives collide – a fictional airplane stowaway and London woman whose car he lands on. The five existing fragments of the story are the seed from which Kate Pullinger is currently developing two new projects: 'Duel' a digital fiction collaboration with Andy Campbell, and 'Our Stuff and Our Things', a novel.

Artist's Statement

Kate Pullinger's work focuses on finding new ways to tell stories, whether she is working in traditional long-form prose narrative or in digital fictions that combine text with other forms of media. Her work in digital fiction is always collaborative, and she has worked with media artists and writers including Andy Campbell, Chris Joseph, and Talan Memmott. Her primary interest is in telling stories that use traditional story-telling methods, such as strong characters, narrative tension and suspense, whatever the platform or media, and she remains committed to the craft and art of writing compelling narrative text.

Bio

Kate Pullinger writes fiction for both print and digital media. Her most recent novel is *The Mistress of Nothing* which won the GG, Canada's Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, 2009. Other books include *A Little Stranger* (2006), *Weird Sister* (1999) and the short story collection *My Life as a Girl in a Men's Prison* (1997). Pullinger's many digital fiction projects include her multiple award-winning collaboration with Chris Joseph on 'Inanimate Alice', a multimedia episodic digital fiction (www.inanimatealice.com) and 'Flight Paths' (www.flightpaths.net) a networked novel. Kate Pullinger is Reader in Creative Writing and New Media at De Montfort University; she lives in London, England. ■
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