

**Vahri McKenzie**

## **The Unfulfilled Promise of Digital Technologies for Collaborative Writing**

### Abstract:

Beyond the uncertainty of reception that accompanies all writing other than the strictly personal, an added uncertainty attends working with others to produce writing in collaboration. The digital age appears to be a boon to collaborative writers, with its myriad tools for overcoming geographic distance. It seems clear to me, however, that these tools cannot replace the primacy of physical presence, only supplement it. The connection fostered by a physical meeting of bodies is a necessary precursor, if not an ongoing requirement, of a successful collaboration. It is easy to take this for granted in the era of on-line collaborative writing projects and the increasing use of wiki tools in education. More complex technologies move towards increasingly clever ways to mimic physical presence, tacitly acknowledging the value of the real thing, and yet, as digital technologies saturate our lives with our increasing complicity, there seems insufficient value placed on the real thing.

My paper will examine the architectures of a variety of collaborative novels and aims to demonstrate the significance of the writers' physical presences in their successful construction. Success here, or the lack of it, is partly a question of scale where the larger the number of contributors, the more challenging it is to produce a cohesive work. But scale is a function of everybody's ability to connect with other bodies; it is more difficult (and less productive) to work a room in cyberspace than in physical space because the constraints governing physical interaction and dialogue are so well understood whilst digital collaboration is limited, at the very least, by its dependence upon the delivery of electricity. Awareness of the significance of this insight supports my argument regarding the primacy of the physical body in the collaborative writing act. Digital technologies on the other hand are tools sometimes misused as ends in themselves, presenting a process as a product. Intentionally collaborative stories, to succeed as such, need to be seeded or ignited with human touch.

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One of the members of the collaborative novel-writing ‘band’ Wu Ming, known here as Wu Ming 1, presented a paper in 2001 on his group’s writing practices. In this paper, called ‘Stories belong to everyone’, he says of his vocation:

I work with other people, we write fiction by using words, images, colors and sounds that we pick up from everyday life, history and the media landscape. A whole, open community writes along with us, albeit unconsciously or semi-consciously. This has always been true for *every* author and cultural artifact, not only nowadays (WuMingFoundation 2001).

Despite the strength of Wu Ming 1’s version of the debunked singular-author-genius myth, he articulates something that is increasingly apparent: all writing tends towards collaboration, especially writing in the public realm that has undergone a publishing process. If this is true of writing in the public domain, it is more so for writing in a public digital environment. The systems that determine publishing on-line ensure that collaboration becomes more evident, ‘if only,’ writes Scott Rettberg, ‘because there is effectively no electronic literature publishing industry’ (Rettburg 2005). Indeed, there seems to be a natural affinity between collaboration and digital formats, because collaboration demands an explicit structure; the ease, convenience and speed of digital collaborative writing technologies are unsurpassed. One of the Wu Mings has claimed: ‘The digital is as revolutionary as the alphabet. ... Our way of working, and, indeed, not only ours, would be impossible in a pre-digital context’ (WuMingFoundation 2004).

In the discourses of the digital environment, promises abound. Rettberg writes at the beginning of his afore-quoted paper:

Beyond its initial promise as a widely accessible, inexpensive, and global publishing platform ... the web has also retained the initial promise of hypertext to change the nature of the reader’s interaction with the writing and reading of texts. The web is not simply a global library of individual texts, but offers the potential for new types of collective authorship.

He ends the paper with more of the same:

One can imagine a writing community with [the] robustness of Wikipedia, dedicated to a collective vision of writing a novel that is in effect many novels with interchangeable

parts, written according to sets of specific constraints to ensure a degree of formal unity, and tagged with metadata that would make it possible to easily remix novels in thousands of structured configurations (2005).

One may wish to imagine something more to one's taste, but the spirit of endless possibility remains. At the end of her review of Helen DeWitt's new digitally published collaborative novel *Your Name Here*, Jenny Turner exhorts:

One day fiction might be as elegant and responsive, with maybe audial maybe visual maybe verbal branches, lovely sweeps of information waving and pulsing with the movement of the author's mind, so close, so direct, so touching, you feel them brush against your cheek (Turner 2008:25).

Whatever metaphorical notions you employ to describe the potentials of digital writings, nothing comes close to accounting for the immanence of flesh. Yet many writers dream of ditching the 'meat', to use the term made famous by William Gibson, and replacing it with a collaborative architecture of fluid design. Marcos Novak's utopian essay of 1991, 'Liquid architectures in cyberspace', describes a poetics of the digital environment where the human body is replaced with 'an invented world, an embodied fiction, one built on a fundamental representation of our own devising'. In this world, 'selves become multiple, physics become variable, cognition becomes extensible', and the details of *how* to 'plac[e] the human within the information space ... is an architectural problem' (Novak 1991:226).

More complex technologies move towards increasingly clever ways to mimic physical presence, tacitly acknowledging the value of the real thing, and yet, as digital technologies saturate our lives with our increasing complicity, there seems insufficient value placed on the real thing. My paper will examine the architectures of a variety of collaborative novels and aims to demonstrate the significance of the writers' physical presences in their successful construction. Digital technologies, on the other hand, are tools sometimes misused as ends in themselves, presenting a process as a product.

Using Brien and Brady's anatomy of collaborative practice, my study will be limited to novels that can be described as Joint Collaborations, typified by 'two or more writers work[ing] together on a single product producing a seamless text unrecognisable as belonging in part to any individual collaborator' (Brien and Brady 2003); and will sometimes stray into Sequential Collaboration, which is much the same but with writers taking turns and/or demarcating roles. When we consider collaborative writing in an on-line environment, different categories arise. Rettberg (2005) provides definitions for three types of participation in digital collaborative narrative projects: Conscious Participation occurs when contributors are aware of the nature of the project, its constraints, and how their contributions are to be used; Contributory Participation occurs when writers consciously contribute to a project without awareness of how it will fit into the overall project; Unwitting Participation occurs when, according to Rettberg, the textual materials used in the project are 'gathered by the text-machine itself', but it seems just as useful

to me to include human acts of random and/or unacknowledged gathering of textual materials in a definition of Unwitting Participation. Given the new modes of collaboration suggested by this anatomy, it is clear that Joint Collaboration might slide into Sequential Collaboration, just as there are degrees of participation between Conscious and Contributory. This is not simply movement between forms, which may also occur during the course of a collaborative project, but modes of collaboration that fall between categories.

The hypertext novel, *The Unknown*, which Rettberg collaborated on, was published over the period 1998 to 2002. It was considered a good example of its type and won the first trAce – Alt X New Media Award in 1998. The judge described the work as:

entirely text-based with no special effects or multimedia enhancements, a ‘traditional’ (if ten years or so of activity can constitute a tradition) hyperfiction, genuinely multisequential and massively rich in story material, following the imagined adventures of three supposedly rich and famous collaborative writers on a mock book tour all over the world (Coover 1998).

I’d like to note a couple of things that seem to form part of a larger pattern in digitally mediated collaborative novels: the preoccupation with self-reflexivity (three eponymous collaborative writers), and the interest in geography and covering space (travels all over the world). Because it’s the nature of a hypertext to provide variable access to different narrative strands, chronology in *The Unknown* is not understood in a conventional sense, and therefore characters don’t develop in the traditional manner of progressive change over time. Rettberg writes:

We structured the story in terms of geographical space more than in terms of chronology; the character of the place where a thing happened was given more importance than when it happened. The scenes are linked by recurring motifs and tropes rather than by sequence (2005).

In other words, the story is in part determined by its architecture. There is a pattern of preference in these modes for space and geography over personality and character; in this sense there is continuity between collaborative writing, which favours external public spaces over internal psychological spaces, and digital environments, which replace the writing body with a collective architectural system. Further, collaboration in a digital environment is not only with other contributors but with the systems and processes hosting the participants, and the resulting novel represents ‘both the work itself and the series of negotiations between subjects that govern the work’s creation’ (Rettberg 2005). The success of the product, then, will be largely determined by the type of and extent of the digital and personal constraints that manage the writing process.

Approaches to the process of writing of *The Unknown* varied but relied heavily on companionship. The three authors and occasional guests were physically together for all but a few scenes, which were written individually. The success of the experiment, Rettberg tells us, ‘was dependent on the fellowship of its authors’ (2005). ‘Fellowship’ is an interesting word

choice, suggesting physical warmth and intimacy, as well as a college of fellows who meet with a shared purpose. Of course, Rettberg acknowledges the role of the authors' pre-existing relationships in permitting a successful collaboration. He doesn't need to add, though this is what I wish to draw attention to, that these relationships were real, embodied ones and not web-based in email or via on-line special interest groups.

The pioneering 1983 work, *Map of Invisible Seattle: The novel of Seattle by Seattle*, attempted to integrate a digital environment with a physical environment in a detective story. The core group of creators (around thirty people contributing to an electronic collaborative writing group known as IN.S.OMNIA) gathered information from the inhabitants of Seattle through a variety of channels: questionnaires conducted on the streets, talk-back radio, the daily paper and live arts festival events. The completed product named above is one of several printed versions of the project, but much of the material was never committed to an electronic archive. Other accounts and versions exist under the title *Invisible Seattle*, which refers, Scott Rettberg points out, not just to the published versions but to the potential versions that could have been derived from the story material as well as all the events through which that material was gathered. 'Any type of collective narrative must be understood not only [in] terms of end results, but also as a performance' he writes. Despite this insight, he goes on to dream of 'enhancements' to the novel, where:

one could conceive of the project as a ... hypertext, which would include both the end product, the finished versions of the novel, and all of the texts that preceded the finished versions. ...every reader could remix their own version of the collective narrative (2005).

I think this atomisation misses the point of *Invisible Seattle* and Rettberg is mesmerised by digital promises. Paul Harris reviews IN.S.OMNIA's account of the project in *Invisible Rendezvous* and reaches the more accurate interpretation, in my view. He writes: 'Unlike some discourse about the computer as [the] scene of writing and hypertext in particular, ... IN.S.OMNIA does not hypostatize the virtual domain into a playground disconnected from public places' (Harris 1995). Twenty-five years ago, IN.S.OMNIA did not presume to replace physical space with digital architecture but sought to interact with it. The city of Seattle became the site of and the means by which to involve a large group of people in a collaborative fiction.

*Invisible Seattle*, which is still discussed in the literature and whose success is suggested by its relevance over time, had around thirty core contributors and thousands of others. Digital technologies are now misused to overreach their capacity to structure large collaborative writing projects. Last year the Penguin publishing group, in collaboration with De Montfort University, launched *A Million Penguins*, an entirely on-line collaborative writing project and novel. The publisher intended to produce 'the first wiki novel' but it is the process that garners praise while the product is overlooked or declared terrible. *A Million Penguins* had over a thousand equally authorised contributors overseen by a student/academic editing team from DMU. While *Invisible Seattle* had digital and physical access to its contributors, *A Million Penguins* was limited to the

digital tools of the wiki. In the absence of real meeting and discussion, the negotiation of constraints in *A Million Penguins* flowed into the space of the novel itself:

‘So a community *can* write a novel?’ Jim looked up with a skeptical expression.

‘Yes, but only a humorous one.’

‘And only if they put all the new stuff at the start and the old at the rear.’

...

‘This will ONLY work if we move it into satire and humor,’ George insisted with great emphasis (AMillionPenguins 2007).

I think a successful literary collaboration is not so much a matter of scale but is dependent upon something intrinsic to the architectures of participation. Rettberg points out: ‘the larger the scale of the collaboration, the more important it is that contributors’ roles in the writing of the project are clearly defined, as are the constraints under which individual contributions should be written’ (2005).

Perhaps there was never any intention to produce a readable novel. The project’s own hosts seem sceptical about their idea, scattering their ‘About’ page with doubtful rhetorical questions. One of the project’s early reviewers declares: ‘I suspect the folks at Penguin and De Montfort hope that this collaborative novel will prove a pile of steaming garbage’ (Pressley 2007), and certainly the ‘About’ site’s links to the university’s MA in creative writing and the publisher’s paperback list would encourage one to think so. Another reviewer points out that the wiki novel is, technically speaking, a kind of computer game, and while she prevaricates on whether or not such games might produce successful novels, she is clear that successful works need a unifying factor: ‘A unified final work has the potential to be a marketable *product* rather than a research project’ (Daly 2008). This project had some unifying potential built into its constraints: editorial guidance, a limited composition time frame, ethical and technical guidelines. But successful novels must be assessed, in the broadest sense, as ones that get read, and Penguin’s own CEO declared *A Million Penguins* ‘Not the most read, but possibly the most written novel in history’ (Ettinghausen 2007).

Compare that to a successful collaborative writing system that manages thousands of contributors, with some hierarchy of contribution: this is *Wikipedia*. It is not a novel but the example is instructive in other ways. Built with open source software, anyone can contribute to *Wikipedia* at any time, and it is therefore a process that involves constant improvement and is not a completed product. Rettberg writes:

While *Wikipedia* is in fact susceptible to vandalism, and is in fact mostly written by amateurs, it turns out that a large enough group of amateurs, passionate about the topics they know and care about, tends to trump both inaccuracy and vandalism over time (2005).

The project's 'preference for consensus over credentials' has produced a free resource that is excellent for a certain type of research: a quick-reference guide to uncontroversial topics. The architecture of open source technologies allows collaborative writing to occur in a structurally successful manner not, necessarily, out of the goodness of people's hearts, but as a serendipitous result of massed personal interests. Tim O'Reilly identifies this effect at work in *Wikipedia* and other open-source projects:

This architectural insight may actually be more central to the success of open source than the more frequently cited appeal to volunteerism. The architecture of Linux, the Internet, and the World Wide Web are such that users pursuing their own 'selfish' interests build collective value as an automatic byproduct (O'Reilly 2004).

We must remember, however, that as an encyclopedia, *Wikipedia* can appeal to consensus reality where other writing forms may not. As digital collaborative texts move towards fiction, the power of consensus reality to structure massed personal interests wanes. In collaborative novels the arrangements that replace the consensus reality of non-fiction texts, and the psychological integrity of single-authored novels, are the preoccupations with geography and self-reflexivity. These concerns structure collaboration because they externalise, and therefore organise, the product.

Single-authored novels tend to cohere around the internal reality of a limited number of characters, while collaborative novels tend to externalise interests into mutually accessible ones such as geography and the wink back at the writing self. *Your Name Here* is a collaboratively written novel recently published on Helen DeWitt's website; she is seeking a print publisher and is comfortable with the idea that the book may undergo new versions. The previously-quoted article by Jenny Turner writing for the *London Review of Books* is sympathetic to the project but has reservations regarding some aspects of the book that to my mind are intrinsically technological. She writes:

The idea of the text as open to endless revision, never finished but only abandoned, as Auden put it, is not new. What is new is that with web publication, it becomes as easy as a couple of keystrokes to put into practice, opening ... unexpected dimensions to the familiar questions of privacy and publicity, concerning intimacy and vulnerability, self awareness and self-defence (Turner 2008:25).

The novel 'is the heartwarming story of two writers who wanted to save the world' (DeWitt 2008), written by DeWitt and Ilya Gridneff, who appear as themselves and several other versions of themselves. The novel is constructed around their friendship, fictional and real, we are encouraged to believe, and the novel's synopsis gives the story of the story's inception told through emails and heavily speckled with name-droppings of other self-reflexive texts: those of Calvino and Pamut; the films *Being John Malkovich* and *A Cock and Bull Story*. The novel itself would appear to be more of the same, and the synopsis offers a fair warning: 'Yep. This is a book that gives new meaning to the word "gratuitous"' (2008). Turner writes: 'In a way, *Your*

*Name Here* is simply a scrapbook, attesting to an odd, tense friendship, told through emails, avatars, fictional fragments, with the lack of conventional coherence compensated for by beautiful images, grabbed from the internet' (Turner 2008:24). So the 'heartwarming' part is ironic, given the absence of the conventional narrative comforts of linearity and closure. But without these, asks Turner, 'How will you know if the incoherence you are rendering is real, valid, accurate, necessary or a mere artefact of your own ignorance or self-absorption? ...you can stick in an aesthetic-ethical quagmire'(2008). Digital works, I contend, are especially prone to this predicament because the technologies of digital publishing such as pastiche and hypertext are intrinsically dismembered.

This dilemma is the major concern of Turner's review and one she doesn't resolve. The areas of difficulty, however, are clear: 'I've read it three times now, and some of the patterns are clear to me, and there are others I sense but don't quite get – partly because bits of it don't work. Gridneff's emails, for example, cause problems' (2008). Here are two sections of the four that make up the last part of the synopsis:

dewitt, all good here despite the on going ridiculous. read the end and like it, and i don't need to have the final (s)word. though with all these other characters does it take away some of my limelight, i mean it was or is about me, and despite a 50 50 kontrakt i was under the impression i was the star so – what exactly brings these other people into the ending, this is the serious question, this in no ego but serious narrative critique. ilya.

dewitt great. maybe even if you write some of 'my' writings this adds another layer of intrigue or mist-ery. perhaps its all a sham and I never existed ilya. dewitt well on other thoughts was thinking again, this is flittery, perhaps i could finish your name here. also anais, henry will need you to pop into western union at some point of your violition. das vedanya ilya (DeWitt 2008).

They're free-wheeling, associative and humorous, but unstructured and unsustained. They might be considered the raw material for a character by another writer, but here they appear apparently unedited. A digital collaborative writing process is presented as a finished product. To consider the problem in general terms we can think of the qualities of email: in their immediacy and frequency they are more like segments of phone conversations than other forms of writing; however, they are more prone to misconstruction than phone conversations. The missing element is tone; useful in the way it mimics the voice, email is, nevertheless, the voice disembodied, without inflection and expression. So here, and perhaps with other aspects of the novel's self-reflexive preoccupation, digital technologies offer playful processes that come to stand in for, and then to eclipse, the warmth of a coherent body of work.

The novel's other interest is universal human rights, and to be fair, with this concern the digital format is used in an interesting and necessary way. *Your Name Here* only-half-jokingly proposes a theory for improving human society if only people would pick up the languages of the Middle East with the same energy devoted to learning Tolkein's imaginary languages of Middle Earth.

Using coloured, large font text, the authors interrupt the story to illustrate the construction of various words in Arabic. After several textual interruptions of this sort, we are told that of 12,000 FBI agents, only thirty-three have any knowledge of Arabic. ‘In the world as we know it, the fact that you can now read more Arabic than 11,967 FBI agents is worrying’ (DeWitt 2008).

Although Jenny Turner’s review comes, ultimately, to a positive position on *Your Name Here* and such novels that a reader has to work to enjoy, she resorts, as I quoted at the opening of this paper, to promises of fiction that one day might be ‘so touching you feel them brush against your cheek’. The problem with the unfulfilled promise of digital technologies for writing, and especially collaborative writing given its propensity to succumb to digital processes, is the implication of Turner’s next sentence: ‘once you really take that to heart, it’s difficult to see much point in continuing with novels at all, or not as we know them’ (2008:25). In my view, this would be rash.

My last example is Wu Ming, the collective from whom I drew my opening quote, whose members embody a more feasible attitude to the use of digital technologies in their writing processes. I use the word ‘embody’ advisedly, for although they acknowledge their debt to digital technologies, they maintain theoretical boundaries between the digital and physical realms. This is reflected in the way digital technologies are employed in their writing and publishing practices; technologies are used extensively, but systematically. Thus:

The computer made recursive writing possible, you can modify what you’ve just written without altering or destroying the support. ... As to email, it allows us to share materials in real time and correct the book’s proof as many times as we wish ... As a tool of research the Net is invaluable, like lowering a bucket into a bottomless well (WuMingFoundation 2004).

But at the same time, the writing process depends upon physical interaction and they meet every three days:

...we improvise chunks of plot all together; then homework is assigned. At the next meeting we read stuff aloud. Everybody can intervene and suggest changes ... This all starts after the historical research, during which we write down plenty of notes, which we’ll use for the brainstorming phase (WuMingFoundation 2005).

In their interviews and newsletter writings, the Wu Mings repeat their commitment to storytelling as a social activity, which is a reflection of an explicitly communal and activist political stance. Community activity is necessarily an embodied practice; it is social first and foremost and digital afterwards, if only because Wu Ming recognise that the digital interface they embrace ‘entirely depends on the delivery of electricity. If there’s a blackout you’re stalled’ (WuMingFoundation 2004). In this recognition of physical constraints there is a relationship with Wu Ming’s philosophical position on collaboration and writing: because writers soak up all their experience in the world, all writing is to some extent collective, and the product is also,

therefore, the property of the collective. Wu Ming 1 laments that ‘it has become trivial to state that all legislation on intellectual property is obsolete and inadequate, that culture and creation are always collective products and processes’ (WuMingFoundation 2001).

Their novels are conventionally published (in English translation by Shaun Whiteside) but they are also available to freely download from their website. The copyright notice in the front of the print books reads: ‘Partial or total reproduction of this book, in electronic form or otherwise, is consented to for non-commercial purposes, provided that the original copyright notice and this notice are included and the publisher and source are clearly acknowledged’ (Wu Ming 2005). This attitude intends to find ‘a synthesis between the authors’ remuneration for the work done and the right of the public to access knowledge and cultural artefacts’ and by Wu Ming’s account it is working: paperback sales remain healthy despite free downloading. I’d like to draw attention to the clear division between the digital and physical worlds insisted upon here; digital technologies are used throughout writing and publishing but the digital never eclipses the physical. Wu Ming suggests that companies threatened by digital piracy should improve the quality of their over-the-counter products.

At the time their first novel, *Q*, was published (2000 in the original Italian, 2003 in English translation), the group was writing as Luther Blissett, a multiple-user name that was open to general use as well as being shared by the four individuals who authored the work. *Q* is a spy-versus-the-heretic mystery set in Reformation Europe, which includes many historical characters but returns repeatedly to two fictional people: the unknown spy, *Q*, of the novel’s title, and the first-person protagonist whose name changes with his many geographical locations.

Sabrina Ovan, writing for *Cultural Studies Review*, argues that the novel’s loose treatment of names is reflected in its collaborative authorship, and that both of these facts reflect the group’s commitment to collective creative processes, or as she terms it, after Marx, the general intellect.

Proper names are the tools through which the general intellect is set in motion in the novel. Since the indeterminate characteristics of names in I [the first-person protagonist] cannot be separated from the ‘multiple name’ that has been the banner of the Luther Blissett Project (the collective’s signature has now changed into Wu Ming, ‘no name’ in Chinese), my treatment of proper names may be attributed rather interchangeably to the characters in the novel and the multiplicity that hides behind the names of Luther Blissett and Wu Ming (Ovan 2005).

The movement between the authors and their characters in Ovan’s theory mirrors the novel’s self-reflexivity, while reflexivity in a general sense is reflected in the novel’s tendency to be read as a contemporary political allegory. She writes: ‘An allegorical reading of *Q* is necessarily rooted in the de-signification of proper names’ (2005). Further, Ovan explicitly posits a relationship between multiple naming and multiple locating: ‘a multiple name allows its bearer(s) to live multiple lives, and necessarily speaks of perpetual motion’ (Ovan 2005). Ovan’s argument, therefore, illustrates the connection between multiple authorship and geographic

expansiveness, and with self-reflexivity, that I've observed in other collaborative projects. Collective naming and collaborative fiction, then, might be said to encourage a reflexive practice of identifying the self in the many. This is reflected in Marx's original observation that the general intellect is composed of individuals, and it is this indeterminacy that *Q* intends to bridge, in Ovan's analysis.

Similar observations are made about *54*, the Wu Ming group's second novel. It too employs a broad geography and large range of historical characters, implying a degree of reflexivity. The product is a reflection of the process of its composition, one of the members reports: 'This kind of literature that has a wide scope, that uses lots of characters and moves around a lot in the world is not a very individualist literature. It's choral' (Eve 2005). The Wu Ming collective illustrates that understood in a broad sense, writing tends towards collaboration, and that collaboration gravitates towards digital technologies. Despite the logic of the trajectory, Wu Ming maintains collective concerns over those of digital promises. Their products take advantage of what technology has to offer collaborative writers (composition in electronic files; digital publication) but this doesn't inhibit the sale of real books. Similarly, the novel writing process depends upon them living in the same city and meeting regularly while the novel itself is geographically expansive.

The Wu Ming collaboration writes widely-read and extensively-reviewed novels that are successful by any measure. At the same time Wu Ming is integrated within the digital environment without allowing that environment to dictate the collaborative product. This is reflected in a final particularity of the group's social practice that I'll bring to attention: although Wu Ming travel extensively in Europe and make many public appearances, they will not allow their photographs to be taken. Their writings, names and pseudonyms are available on-line and in print, but their images are not. This represents a rigorous maintenance of a fundamental distinction between digitally mediated representations and embodiment in the world.

Beyond the uncertainty of reception that accompanies all writing other than the strictly personal, an added uncertainty attends working with others to produce writing in collaboration. The digital age appears to be a boon to collaborative writers, with its myriad tools for overcoming geographic distance. It seems clear to me, however, that these tools cannot replace the primacy of physical presence, only supplement it. The connection fostered by a physical meeting of bodies is a necessary precursor, if not an ongoing requirement, of a successful collaboration. It is easy to take this for granted in the era of on-line collaborative writing projects and the increasing use of wiki tools in education.

I have examined a number of collaborative novels and their processes of construction. Success here, or the lack of it, is partly a question of scale, where the larger the number of contributors, the more challenging it is to produce a cohesive work. But scale is a function of everybody's ability to connect with other bodies; it is more difficult (and less productive) to work a room in cyberspace than in physical space because the constraints governing physical interaction and dialogue are so well understood whilst digital collaboration is limited, at the very least, by its

dependence upon the delivery of electricity. Awareness of the significance of this insight supports my argument regarding the primacy of the physical body in the collaborative writing act and suggests that intentionally collaborative stories, to succeed as such, need to be seeded, or ignited, with human touch.

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