# The Digital Author? Authorship in the Digital Era

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*Since the birth of the World Wide Web as the most successful application of the Internet there have been hopes of literary theorists (Landow, Bolter) that the new digital media would finally allow for the "death of the author" and the birth of the "writing reader". The hypertext as new genre of text seemed to be powerful enough to fulfill the older hopes of the poststructuralists (Barthes, Foucault).*
*Although these euphoric hopes have been abandoned by literary theory for the most part, the Internet in the actual literary production still seems to have the power to be an "author- less" media in principle: In the oft-discussed encyclopaedia "Wikipedia" the collaborative written text supposedly is more important than the authors. Literary experiments in the digital media are exploring how text can be written just by text-algorithms. These projects finally do not need writers anymore; they are using data taken from search engines. But this somewhat naïve idea of an "authorless" digital media clearly can be refuted. First, the author has been revived by the new media and continues to thrive within it. Second, in contrast to the prediction of huge "authorless" collaborative text-production in online journalism, it is hard to find any collaborative works of literature. Third, even with collaborative projects or "codeworks" the function of an author does not disappear but is spread over different persons, which can even lead to a "dissociated" authorship. The author cannot disappear or "die" in the Internet, because its char- acteristics will not allow this to happen. Therefore the Internet does not stand for the "death" of the author; it actually appears to be a fountain of youth for literary author- ship instead. These findings are discussed using recent experiments with authorship in digital literature.*

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## Introduction: Specifics of Internet authors. A Historical Perspective

Net Literature seems to stand for the redemption of old hopes from the perspective of literary history. Hypertext pioneers such as Jay David Bolter, George P. Landow or Benjamin Woolley were of the opinion in

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the early 1990s that digital media would allow for completely new, collaborative literary text production.

The author would now completely disappear in the New Media, giving birth to the writing reader, the so called "wreader": "In cyberspace, everyone is an author, which means that no one is an author: the distinction upon which it rests, the author distinct from the reader disappears. Exit author …" (Woolley 165)

The internet therefore seems to stand for the redemption of certain utopian promises from post-structuralism that was expressed, for example, by Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault under the slogan "the death of the author" (Barthes, Foucault).

As is known, author criticism, particularly that criticism characterized by post-structuralism, has dominated the debate about authors for a few decades. However, there has been a strong "return of the author" (Bein et al., Detering, Jannidis et al.) since the 1990s. Connected with that was always the question of whether this supposed "return" was not rather a "recurrence" or "rediscovery," because the concept of the author itself was never really shelved.

These fairly naïve beliefs have in the meantime also been dismissed in the relatively recent discourse about the internet author. Newer positions are absolutely more differentiated and permit the author to be part of the internet (again). But, research still tends basically to marginalize the author in Net Literature.

However, this primary thesis can be refuted if one looks at the actual literary production on the internet that is still characterized by strong authors with a very traditional understanding of authorship. The most popular genre, "ingenious Net Literature", works with multimedia-based and interactive stylistic devices that are very much worked through and controlled by the individual artist. Collaborative projects also seem to have only met with success when they were produced by a small team of co-authors or when they were significantly pre-structured by a primary author. Finally, code-based and performative Net Literature show that the concept behind literature is becoming more and more important the more author representatives are involved in a project. But, in turn, it is primarily individual authors that are responsible for these concepts.

Furthermore, humans as biological beings cannot help but associate a text with an originator, even on the internet. Readers only accept literary texts on the internet as such when they can assume that they can be comprehended or accepted as "literature". However, this principal comprehension is ensured by the real or staged author instance. This only means: the author concept in the internet cannot disappear due to human socialization. It is recreated where it does not exit.

But what is Net Literature? In the following, the term "Net Literature" is used as a comprehensive term for internet-typical literature. "Net Literature" is literature that "structurally reflects the specific characteristics of the Internet" (Föllmer 1). The use of the internet medium can be viewed as self-referential within Net Literature. The internet is not only used for generation, propagation and reception of literature, but it also enters literature and shapes it.

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## Specifics of Internet Authors. Current Tendencies

After the refutation of "the death of the author" on the internet it is interesting to observe what the actual changes in internet authorship concepts are. Concepts that are very different from one another coexist

just like in traditional print literature. This is activated depending on the artistic program. There are certain "modes", the preference for stronger individualistic or stronger collaborative models. But the extremes are greater than in traditional literature: on the one hand the personality cult surrounding authors can be even more exaggerated, because more extensive and more complex self-dramatizations are possible here. With this authors are meant who portray themselves on their websites almost without limits. But it is also referring to many collaborative projects: here the texts are often authored and portrayed fairly traditionally. The result is a downright "name obsession". This can be characterized by the term "strong" authorship.

On the other hand the marginalization of the author can also be much more pronounced: machine-based conceptions are possible where the authors can reduce their role or rather stage their disappearance. This is also much easier on the web and can be called "weak" authorship. However, this marginalization does not manifest itself in complete dismissal of the author, because, as mentioned before, this is not possible on the internet. Instead it manifests itself in the diversification of the author functions to many different instances.

At this point, it is useful to refer to Michel Foucault's model of author functions, because he had already pointed out the basic possibility of separation in his analysis of author functions. Based on this model it has been demanded that one differentiate online between the author as text originator, as creator of the concept and even as publisher (Weimar, Wirth). The internet medium and digital literature therefore particularly have the separation of author functions in common. In the following this coexistence of different authorship conceptions will be discussed with the aforementioned four central genres of Net Literature and the corresponding author types.

## Author Typology

### Ingenious Net Literature

The genres of Net Literature that can be described as "classical" continued the nonlinear, hypermedial and interactive experiments of modern print literature. But this in no way means old wine in new skins. While there was always the possibility in traditional literature to violate the norms of serial reading this infraction becomes the rule on the dispositif internet. The basis of the literature is the reader's interactive intervention. New qualities

of text develop detached from the word as the sole conveyor of meaning and supplemented by multimedial and interactive elements. However, some classical literary characteristics are continued. These works represent a strong concept of authorship that manifests itself, for example, in the production by the authors, guaranteeing artistic quality of the work. With all interactivity, the reader can also only take the paths provided by the author (the "author genius"). There are certainly no weak authorship models here.

A good example of this is the elaborately and detailed programmed project The Bubble Bath by Susanne Berkenheger. The author particularly implements a directorial story-telling principle: texts, images and browser elements make an "appearance", the keywords are supplied by the program and the recipient. Furthermore, the dominance of text and the focusing on animations are noticeable.

However, the recipient barely has the opportunity to really interfere in the story interactively. He or she only performs the default programming. But this does away with the idea of the "free" reader in hypertext and represents an ironic turn of the production principle in Berkenheger's project. It becomes apparent this way that the author concept in Berkenheger's work is very strong. She exercises absolute control and the recipient is seemingly downright at the author's and the project's "mercy".

**Collaborative Net Literature**

As mentioned above, Net Literature, however, also allows for collaborative works. This fulfills the model of collaborative authors. The authorship functions are no longer assumed by one single author here. It is characteristic for this type of literature that it consistently appears to reverse, obliterate and in the end even sever the traditional relationship between author and reader. However, a closer look shows that collaborative projects do not seem to stand precisely for "the death of the author".

A first observation to the contrary: most collaborative projects work particularly with traditional text that could also be published in form of a book without breaking with the media. But this is very untypical for the dispositif internet. Furthermore, the contributions make strong and traditional reference to the author which, however, is not in line with the expectations of a collaborative project.

Second observation: collaborative projects seem to become aesthetically interesting and artistically successful only when the reader's freedom is repressed and limited. Good works are commonly produced by a few co-authors and feature a strong author concept. This is rather a classical cooperation of authors who publish a common work. A convincing example for this is the award winning crossmedial project The Famous Sound of Absolute Wreaders that was produced and devised in cooperation by six established German internet authors.

A third observation makes "the death of the author" in the internet seem questionable. If one takes a closer look at the extent of collaborative text production on the internet it becomes clear that it currently takes place in non-artistic, particularly informative contexts. Platforms such as "Wikipedia" are very prominent examples of a number of other Wikis or weblogs. By contrast, collaborative literary works that implement weak author concepts have become relatively rare since their boom in the 1990s. It is noteworthy that the most popular collaborative tools like Wikis or weblogs are barely used to perform literary projects, which is particularly the case in the German-speaking countries. This seems to be associated with the artistic and economical gratification systems. They are still tied to the author's name and the traditional dispositif book.

**Codeworks**

With this the discussion has arrived at so-called codeworks and the marginalized author who almost tries to do away with itself in the literature. This genre implements particularly weak authorship conceptions. It

reflects and emphasizes that digital literature is always based on software. The conceptual "behind the scenes" of Net Literature therefore moves to the center of attention.

In "codeworks", elements of programming languages and network protocols are combined poetically with natural and artificial languages. They question the meaning of code and the computer's role in artistic production. The various processes "in the computer" are made visible on the screen.

Florian Cramer's work "plaintext.cc" made in 2005 vividly shows what code-oriented "story-telling" can achieve. In his online installation new and amazing texts are generated from a heterogeneous pool of all sorts of texts. They remind the user of concrete and visual poetry, but represent "code art". The three links at the top trigger the generation of new texts. The texts themselves are almost illegible or rich in innuendos. For example: "I Still, Father"s it / lamy not evolver." The reader creates the meaning.

But what do "code-based" and "code-reflecting" works mean for authorship? Apparently, this form of art is the bulkiest and the least accessible of the forms of art discussed up to now. The programmer only takes responsibility in the background for a program algorithm that is often not even visible. The computer seems to "let off steam" on the screen. The final product on the screen is no longer at the center of this form of art, as the concept behind it – namely the "code" – is the focal point. It is obvious here that the programmer no longer carries out full authorship. The code and reader assume a large part of this task, the author functions are therefore separates. Still, the author remains present: if the concept is so important for the project the programmer has to do good work for pre-structuring.

Codeworks therefore particularly stand for weak authorship, as mentioned above. But there are also forms within this genre that feature strong authorship. The so-called "broken codes" are inoperative codes that only evoke programs in fragments and otherwise also use movable pieces of many languages. "Broken code" authors such as **mez** (Mary-Anne Breeze) mostly represent classical original geniuses who practice strong authorship and exercise complete control of their work.

**Performative Projects**

The separation of author functions can be so severe that authorship formally "dissociates". This happens in the fourth genre of Net Literature, namely internet literary concept and performance art similar to its precur-

sors from the offline world. It combines stylistic elements of the genres discussed above, but goes beyond that. It is particularly noteworthy that strong authorship is no longer possible here, but that there are only weak forms. A good example of this is the project Search Lutz! by Johannes Auer.

The world premiere of the project took place at the radio festival in Halle (Germany) in September 2006 and it is particularly interesting because of its virtuosic play with author functions. Auer himself effectively only created the framework for the text generation as initiator and programmer. The actual "text" was generated from a complex interaction of different partial authors. They produced a common work without having consulted with each other too much.

The underlying algorithm referred to a historical precursor from the early times of computer-generated literature, the work "Stochastische Texte" by Theo Lutz (1959). He used terms by Franz Kafka as text material for the first time. Secondly, he allowed an arbitrary number of collaborators to contribute terms by typing them into an online form. Thirdly he took additional words from the World Wide Web and then created stochastic texts from all of this material. The meaning of algorithms – therefore codes – was emphatically reflected, since the text-generating web server seemed to work primarily autonomously.

Fourthly: the integration to a performance or live situation is new and different in this genre of Net Literature. The text generated during "Search Lutz!" was loudly recited to the audience by a professional speaker. The listeners were encouraged to collaborate with the project.

The "Search Lutz!" recitation was simultaneously broadcast by a radio station, also with the invitation to send in material over the internet. The performance itself only lasted about 30 minutes; it was therefore completed and non-recurring (although it has been staged again later). The authorship of this performance was apparently much wider and different than in collaborative projects. The author functions were assumed by very heterogeneous persons and dispositifs. But it was also the programmer here who had to develop an aesthetically interesting plan and the manifold partial authors had to be conceptually considered from the outset.

## Conclusion

The last example makes clear that the consequences of this "dissociated" authorship for literature in the dispositif internet are fairly manifold: it seems as though more extreme implementations of the author are possible.

But it also becomes clear that with all the dissociation of the author function the importance and relevance of the author does not disappear in any way, no matter how foreign the concept and distributed the function seems to be. This perspectivization to a maximally distributed authorship leads to a final affirmation of the thesis stated at the outset: the author is still present on the internet and there is still evidence of his function even if authorship is significantly dissociated. This is recreated over and over again due to the conditions of the internet.
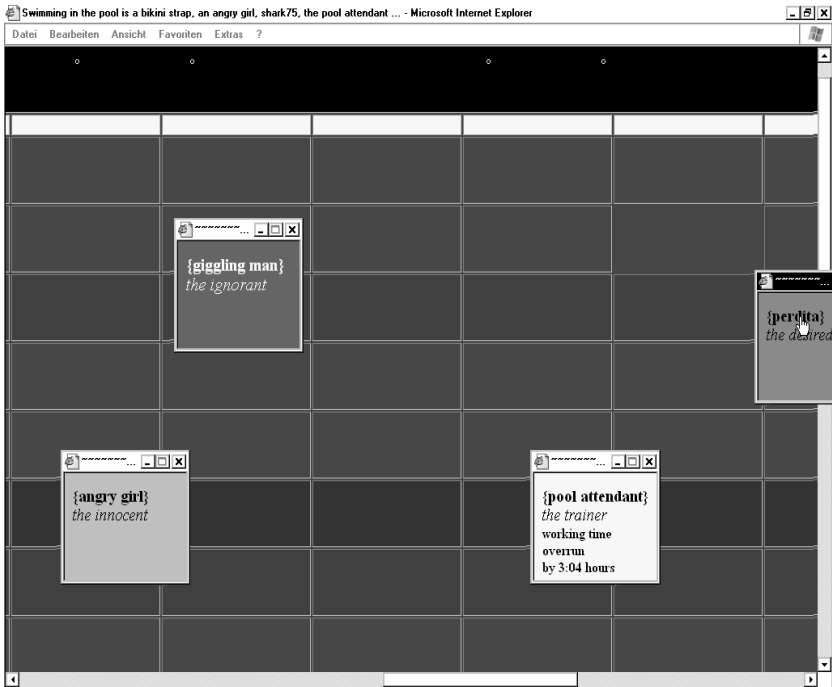


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