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Breathe: An Artist Interview with Kate Pullinger

Jon Dovey and Kate Pullinger

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Breathe by Kate Pullinger

Breathe tells the story of Flo, a young woman who has the ability to hear ghosts. The research question specifically addressed by *Breathe* asked “How can the affordances of smartphone technology be used to create works that are situated in time and space in relation to the presence of a reader?”

This interview between Jon Dovey and Kate Pullinger took place in October 2018.

Dovey: Could you say something about the inception of this project – where it came from and your starting point for writing it?

Pullinger: For me there were two agendas: the Ambient Literature project, and the opportunities that afforded, and my own writing practice and the way its been going, in terms of digitally mediated forms, over the last 15 years or so. In addition, over the last couple of years I’ve become very interested in the smartphone as a delivery platform for fiction.

The projects that I’ve been involved with in the past, before say 2014, were all meant for desktop or laptop computers. In 2014-15 I embarked on a collaboration with a German start-up called Oolipo; they were trying to create a commercial platform for stories for the smartphone. That resulted in a novel-length work called *Jellybone*, which came out in autumn 2017 after almost 3

years of development. So, during that period I'd done a lot of thinking about the affordances of the smartphone, in the idea of creating a form native to the smartphone.

Then the Ambient Literature project allowed me the opportunity to take that thinking further, with a different set of creative partners. It also enabled me to develop that character who I'd already been thinking about, and working on, during the whole *Jellybone* project: Flo Evans, a young woman who can communicate with the dead through her phone. When I first started working on *Jellybone* I decided I'd like to try to create a character and a storyworld that could be explored across multiple platforms. So when it came to work on *Breathe*, Flo had been living in my head, by that stage, for several years already.

Dovey: Can you describe the trajectory of the project? What did you do? Who got involved when? Where did it finish? What was the narrative of the production process?

Pullinger: Two things happened at the same time. One was the Ambient Literature project production process, which started with a discussion with Calvium who'd already worked on the first two ambient literature projects, with Emma Whittaker as project producer. But at the same time, I was having conversations with Tea Uglow from Google Creative Labs Sydney. Tea and I spoke at an event together in Brisbane, where we were talking about the future of the book. In that discussion, and subsequent conversations, I described to Tea what I wanted to do, which, at that time, was really around thinking about how to use the smartphone to interact with the room, to

find ways to bring ghosts into a reader's room through the smartphone. Tea's response was, "Oh Google can do that. We can do that." So we continued the conversation, bringing in Anna Gerber and Britt Iversen from Visual Editions, the London-based publisher who work with Google Creative Labs on their joint project, Editions at Play. Together they publish somewhere between two and four books for the smartphone every year. They've been doing that for three years now.

Dovey: So you decided to work with Editions at Play instead of Calvium?

Pullinger: Yes. The process was very different than anything I'd ever been involved with, partly because there were four teams involved. There was Visual Editions in London, there was Google Creative Labs in Sydney, there was Grumpy Sailor, the Sydney-based design agency that Google Creative Labs work with, there was the Ambient Literature project, and there was me. So, there was a lot of navigating to be done in those relationships.

Dovey: You've got this story, and this storyworld, and this idea about ghosts and Flo. How much of the eventual narrative arc for *Breathe* did you have at that point, where you started off in terms of thinking about the stories about reconnecting with lost mothers in different kinds of ways, and diaspora and the refugee crisis and those issues?

Pullinger: Yes. I had all of those ideas in my head from the beginning, or very early on, because that was the story I wanted to tell. The first Flo story, *Jellybone*, had a storyline woven into it about

human trafficking. I was interested in the idea of a young woman who not only communicates with the dead, but she communicates with specific types of dead people, people who are trying to be heard, or trying to be noticed. I think that many of us were preoccupied with that migration, across the Mediterranean, in those years. That's continued to preoccupy me.

Dovey: In some ways the ghosts represent what's repressed in public consciousness?

Pullinger: Absolutely, yes. I quite often go to the Mediterranean and, for me, there's a real tension there about swimming in that sea, and thinking about those stories, those people.

Dovey: Can you talk a bit about the process? I'm thinking about your role, as a writer, about the relationship between design coding and authorship, because an enormous amount of the affect in this work comes from the way that the words and the design function together, at the surface of the screen, because it's brilliant, at that level, and it's very affecting. I wondered if you could say something about how it was to be a writer, working with those affordances and constraints.

Pullinger: Well that aspect of it was a huge amount of fun partly because of the ideas that were presented through the collaborative process, from Grumpy Sailor, Google Creative Labs, and Visual Editions; the visual ideas were always really amazing, really interesting, and very exciting. For me, that was also a new experience, working with designers who were accustomed to a certain type of aesthetic on the smartphone. That felt very new, and different, to me and that was a very

enjoyable part of the process but, also, we had lengthy discussions about what we could actually achieve.

We very much started out with blue-sky thinking about, for example, how can we bring a ghost into the room? Then we went through an iterative process while we figured out what could actually be made to work within both the timeframe, the budget, and restrictions imposed by everybody's working conditions etc.

Dovey: Part of that constraint was also to do with the fact that the design work, in *Breathe*, became much more focused around the page rather than the wider affordances of the phone, or, as it were, the wider sensorium of the phone in a room. I remember at one point you wanted to work with the torch in the phone.

Pullinger: The torch was the very first thing that came up in my conversations with Tea Uglow. That's still some way off, but for me, that was a very thrilling idea, that you could use the phone to project in a room without having to have any additional kit. But we weren't able to make that work.

Dovey: How did you write the text within the constraints of the collaboration?

Pullinger: The story was developed collaboratively from the very beginning. Not the text and not the ideas behind the text, but the way the story would work on the screen was developed collaboratively, from the very beginning, in a Google doc. There was an ongoing process of everybody involved saying, “We can do this. We can’t do that. We want to try this. That didn’t work. We’re going to try this,” etc.

Dovey: Did you feel in control of your storyworld or did you feel compromised?

Pullinger: I think most collaborations involve a degree of compromise. At some point a decision was taken to pull all our design ideas into a template that used pages, to move closer to the idea of “the book in a room”. I think the pages work very well in this text, but prior to going through the process of making this work, if you’d asked me I would have said, “Why would you use pages? Why are you going to use pages in a digital form? Why are you making it so bookish when it’s not a book?” However, the page structure works really well in *Breathe*.

Dovey: We also talked about using audio at some point as well. We had an assumption that you’d use sound because many of the other works of ambient literature use audio in some way shape or form. Then that wasn’t possible for all kinds of reasons, to do with the constraints that you talked about earlier on, but this turned out to be a really great decision for the project, for the research.

Pullinger: Yes. It's absolutely true that, for *Breathe*, those two decisions – to use pages, to not use sound – are part of what makes it what it is in the best possible way. I think that's a very interesting thing that emerges from collaborations. I think the willingness to collaborate in that way – to give over to other people's ideas and judgements – might be something that not many writers, of fiction, have. Not to boast but, I think the fact that, if you're a novelist, you have complete control over the world you're creating; to give up that control is quite difficult for some writers.

Dovey: I think if you write for theatre, you have to understand that your world is a collaborative world.

Pullinger: And film.

Dovey: I wonder if you feel as though when you're working with code and designers and interfaces, it's a narrower field of possibility, in a way, or the wiggle room around the moment of implementation and interpretation is much narrower than it would be if you were working in film or theatre.

Pullinger: That was very true of this, absolutely, but I think I'm still prone to technological positivism and think that, "Oh you can do anything," when, in reality, you can't.

Dovey: I think this is very important because I think in our attempt to try to share the idea of writing in this formula, as authors, the idea of collaboration is really important to be open about. What would you say to other writers who might be considering working in this form, with these kinds of teams of designers or coders, musicians, labs? What would your advice be?

Pullinger: I think if you're not excited by the idea of collaboration then don't do it. I think you have to find it exciting otherwise you're not going to be able to do it.

Dovey: I want to talk about location in the story, the way that location and other forms of sensing work in the story. But before we talk about location in the contextual sense of human-computer interaction, I want to talk about the specific location that you imagined for the work because, certainly, this research project positions itself, in some ways, at the end of a history of thinking about locative media.

We've argued for the idea of ambience as a distinct from the general history of locative based projects. Many of those are designed for outdoor locations, for walking, or for heritage sites, or for stories that evolve in the outside world in some way. You took a very different starting position to that. Can you say something about what your starting position was and why?

Pullinger: I wanted to create a piece to be read in your bedroom at night. That was very much part of my idea from the very beginning. Part of that was because of this interest in the smartphone as

a reading platform. What kind of fiction reading is native to the smartphone? For me that was also, partly, in reaction against pieces that require you to navigate the city, because of the tension I felt around the assumptions these works make about how comfortable people are navigating the city. The idea of a piece that you read alone, in your bedroom, at night was also because *Breathe* is a ghost story and I know most people, women in particular, would rather read a scary story in their bedroom at night where they, actually, feel quite secure as opposed to out on the street.

Dovey: So did you understand that as a distinct move of a feminist aesthetic, to reposition the work in that site?

Pullinger: Yes, absolutely.

Dovey: In terms of thinking about the ubiquitous sensing potential of a phone, a bedroom provides a fairly limited pallet of input to play with. Can you say something about how location changes the story, and how location changes in the story? What are the moments where the situation of the phone and the situation of the space affects the story?

Pullinger: The story pulls in location data from the world around you, via the location API. I wanted to locate the story in the reader's world, where they actually are, at the same time as playing with the idea that the phone knows where you are, and is a surveillance tool.

One of the things that we had a long discussion about, in the collaboration, was what affordances of the phone to use. During my initial discussions with Emma and Calvium, before I became involved with Editions at Play, we had talked about all kinds of things that the phone can do, all kinds of things that the sensors in the phone can do, from making the phone ring and vibrate and notifications to requiring the reader to move the phone in certain ways to access certain parts of the story.

What we ended up with, through the use of the three APIs that are in *Breathe*, is much more subtle than that. I think, again, that was a very useful and interesting outcome of the collaboration.

Dovey: What are the APIs that are used? What data are they pulling into the story?

Pullinger: Location, weather and time, but in a very broad way with all three applications. For instance, with time and weather, the story changes according to the season, as well as according to the temperature. So instead of the story telling the reader that it's 13°C in March, the text might mention that it's a cool spring day, depending on these conditions. That's extremely subtle. You would not notice it unless you read the story more than once, at different times of the year.

Dovey: So there are certain moments in the text, if I saw it all laid out, where there would be a number of alternatives depending on what the weather API is telling me.

Pullinger: Yes, and the same with time. So time could be morning, evening, night, as well as specific time.

Dovey: The phone also makes use of its camera in an interesting way. How does that work?

Pullinger: For me, that's the most tantalising bit of *Breathe*. The camera is only used once but I think it could, potentially, be interesting to develop its use further. When you open the URL on your phone it asks you to enable use of your camera, as well as your location. Then, suddenly, you see the initial text of the story through the lens of your camera, the text is superimposed on your room. That image comes back into the story repeatedly but the camera doesn't take anymore images. The ability to bring in your actual surroundings into the story in that way, to me, seems very interesting.

I think the fact that it's only used in that tiny way in the story is also quite effective because it's like a ghostly moment, when you see your room.

Dovey: So as well as the text becoming ambient and responsive, through those three APIs and through the camera, there's something else that goes on which are design elements – when you realise that you're being asked to rub the text out, or the way the clouds obscure the text and also, without spoiling the text for people that haven't read it, the way that certain kinds of interruptions, from other presences in the story, try to butt into the actual page world of the story. There are things that are going on at the level of the surface of the page that also enrich the experience immensely, just as much as the APIs. I think they're almost equally effective, in terms of what they make you feel about the storyworld. I wonder if you could say a bit about those elements.

Pullinger: Those are the five interrupting ghosts, as we called them, the five different behaviours of the interrupting ghosts. Again, that arose through the collaboration. At one stage I thought that there would be a multitude of additional voices in the story. Once we'd settled on the overall length of the work, it became apparent that would be too confusing and that it would be better to narrow it down. So we came up with this idea of the five interrupting voices, and their specific behaviours, that are interspersed in the story.

One of the discussions was around how much to do with all of that, how often to use those interrupting voices and, indeed, how often to use the conditional text that interacts with the APIs. The developers were keen for there to be a lot of variable text in the story. I kept reigning back in on that because I wanted it to be subtle, and I wanted it to have a narrative purpose.

I found making the conditional text subtle challenging; it's not easy. It's easy to say it's 4pm or 5pm and 13° outside and you might be feeling a bit chilly. It's much more difficult to create a text where that chilliness isn't stated but a variable part of the narrative itself.

Dovey: Very interesting. That is the grammar of ambience, in its technical sense – serving the meaning-making experience of the story. That actually you have to foreground the latter and control the former, in order for it to not become a game-like demonstration of possibility.

Pullinger: Absolutely.

Dovey: That's really useful. That, in terms of advice for writers, might actually be even more useful than, "You've got to want to collaborate," because it's more fine-grained isn't it?

Pullinger: Yes.

Dovey: Let's move onto thinking a bit about the idea of ambience. I want to start this part of the conversation by asking you to reflect upon how this was different to writing digitally-mediated fiction, because you're very experienced in thinking about interactivity in fiction and what that's meant to you, over a long period of time of practice. Could you say something about how you might understand those two fields as different, now, from having worked on this project?

Pullinger: For me, it's more about what's similar about the two modes. One of the things that I have kept doing, unashamedly, is writing linear texts. By that I mean I'm not interested in branching narratives, and I'm not interested in computer-generated narratives either. So, for me, all of the work that I've done in digitally-mediated fiction has that as a uniting, abiding, force.

The main difference with this piece is that, ironically, it resembles a book more than any of the previous work I've done, which has tended to use visual media in a way that's more integral, more obviously integral, than it is in *Breathe*. But that's partly an illusion, because the things that are going on in *Breathe* are as complex as anything going on in a work that combines media, or a multimedia interactive work.

Dovey: I think there's something quite interesting in that distinction, but it's also to do with the way in which the affordances that *Breathe* depends upon, and is delivered through, are also affordances that draw attention to the form and the meaning of the device itself, in the modern world, as opposed to interactive fiction which uses images etc. in a way more like the graphic novel or the computer game. They are, in a funny kind of way, more familiar and slightly less startling.

Pullinger: Yes.

Dovey: Tell me how you feel about the idea of ambience, then and whether or not it's changed as your idea of what we might call this field of practice, from digitally-mediated fiction, or locative media. How has making the work changed your understanding of what ambience might mean, in this context?

Pullinger: It has demonstrated to me the potential power of situatedness, in terms of drawing the reader's world into the work itself, in a way that good old-fashioned locative media hadn't done to me before.

Dovey: Something that really interested me in the work was the way that time works in *Breathe* and its relationship to what one might think of as a more general sense of the ambient moment, of the reading experience. Can you say a bit about the different sorts of timescales that are in operation, in *Breathe*?

Pullinger: I think one of the reasons why it works as well as it does is because you can read it all in one go. You know from the outset that that's achievable. With a 15 to 20-minute duration readers aren't intimidated and that notion, from gaming, of the 'session promise' – 'This is what I'm in for' – really helps with *Breathe*. But at the same time, I think that within the narrative itself, just like with a short story for instance, you can move back and forth across big stretches of time, fluidly, through narrative. That's what you can do with prose.

Dovey: There's the session promise, and there's the narrative construction which goes back; at least two of the characters, who are in the story, do a lot of memory work, a lot of remembering the past and, particularly remembering lost mothers. But in terms of the experience design, one feels as though one is in a very present moment. Not in the way that one does when one reads a short story, from a book, but more in the way that one does when one is in a theatre, where everything is actually happening, now, in the room. It has a lot of that sense of immediacy. I wondered if you could talk a bit about that from a writer's point of view.

Pullinger: That was something I was trying to achieve through the narrative. That is another way in which the constraints that were imposed on the narrative were helpful, in that there was not a lot of space to tell what is, hopefully, a compelling but at the same time multi-layered story. For me, that's the key writing challenge. That idea of how words can compel people to keep reading is something that I'm very interested in.

Dovey: As well as some of those features and languages there are a lot of very short sentences, and a lot of different voices cutting across one another and memories. It's also written in the present tense: "They're right here. They're watching me. They're watching you. I'm close by."

Pullinger: They drive you forward.

Dovey: They drive you forward. They're very punchy and immediate and create this sense of an unfolding moment, that is both your moment in your bedroom right now, and these are the voices that are present with you here and now, as well as that here and now being, then, connected through the technology of the machine, and through the memory of the characters, to these other time zones.

Pullinger: I also think it's partly to do with the specificity of the smartphone, and the way in which so many of us have very intimate relationships with the phone, and how you are used to being compelled by what the phone has to say to you, either because someone has sent you a message, or someone is trying to get hold of you.

Dovey: It has an urgency.

Pullinger: Also, there's a way in which we find our phones addictive. *Breathe* plays with that, and uses that, as part of what makes you want to keep swiping.

Dovey: So it has to be urgent. It has to be immediate. It has to be present tense. It couldn't be Tolstoy?

Pullinger: It couldn't be Tolstoy, definitely not, but I also think there's other ways of telling compelling stories. I don't think it always has to be present tense but this particular story had to be present tense.

Dovey: In one of the chapters that I've been co-authoring for this book is about the idea of critical ambience. I'm interested in the idea of forms that draw attention to their own construction, in the experience of their consumption, so that you're made aware of the way that things are being made, in your pleasure and enjoyment of them. It seems to me that *Breathe* does a lot of that.

Pullinger: For me it feels unavoidable. It's part of our history of thinking that technology, itself, is haunted. The idea of haunted technology draws our attention to the technology itself, like the poltergeist in the TV, etc.

Dovey: Could you say something about what you'd like to see happen, in this field of writing, in the future?

Pullinger: I think that the whole notion of situatedness is very interesting; I think we're onto something there. That is very compelling.

Dovey: What do you think about the question that we've debated, within the research team, about how you would conceptualise what a more standardised platform would be, for these kinds of experiences? One of our learnings has been that all the most interesting experiences of this kind have bespoke platforms. People have handcrafted a unique set of codes and designs and so on, which makes it quite difficult for publishers and writers to understand. Should we be arguing for something which is a platform? Or is it the case this is an avant-garde practice in which everything is always handmade and handcrafted and bespoke and it's interesting in its own right for that, as a practice that lives in that margin.

Pullinger: That's what Oolipo tried to do and failed after three years – create a platform for writers. It's also what Wattpad is trying to do, currently, through Tap. Wattpad has 63m active users and a 12-year history of user-generated content. If they can't make a platform work then it's hard to imagine who could. I feel like I've seen too many start-ups who've tried to create tools for creators go to the wall.

Dovey: Well on that happy note we'll finish!

Credits for *Breathe*

Story, Narrative and Text

Kate Pullinger

Visual Design, Development, and Programming

Editions at Play, a collaboration between Visual Editions and Google Creative Labs Sydney, with additional design from Grumpy Sailor