The Twitternovel
Collaborative Writing with Web 2.0

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Collaborative storytelling is nothing new. As soon as hunter-gatherers began sharing accounts of events, retellers probably began adding a few 'improvements:' larger mammoths, further pursuit, deeper tar pits.

Stories in which writers add on to the previous writer's text—round robins or 'exquisite corpses'—may be of a more recent vintage, but still a venerable one. Some, for instance, developed as Victorian parlor games. Others derived from correspondence in which each recipient added news to a letter and passed it on. Still more developed from the work of nineteenth-century serial novelists paid by the word, ála Charles Dickens. So why are these projects still popular today?

Round robin writing rarely, if ever, results in great literature, but that has never been its goal. Sequential writing is more about playing with writing, connecting with other writers, building or belonging to a writing community, and having fun. Shifting such projects to the Web did not change these goals; however, the flexibility of Web 2.0 applications has exponentially expanded the possibilities of and opportunities for collaborative writing, and the teacher or librarian interested in pursuing similar goals with students would do well to take notice.

COLLABORATIVE WRITING ON THE WEB

One such noteworthy project is the Twitternovel.

In August of 2009, the relatively small company BBC Audiobooks America (BBCAA) was looking for a way to create some buzz about audiobooks. Inspired, as editorial/marketing manager Tara Gelsomino states, by the "spontaneity and creativity" of a **Twitter** opera performed at the UK's Royal Opera House, they decided to create a **Twitter** audiobook. To build maximum excitement, they sought a big name in both literature and the Twitterverse to write the first line. Enter audiobook lover and avid tweeter, Neil Gaiman, who generously contributed: *"Sam was brushing her hair when the girl in the mirror put down the hairbrush, smiled, and said, "We don't love you anymore."*

Thus began **Hearts, Keys, and Puppetry**.

Although a group of BBCAA executives hammered out the plans for the Twitternovel, Ms. Gelsomino "handled the bulk of the project." That included moderating the real-time tweeting for eight weekdays during east coast business hours, and choosing which line would continue the story. She selected "each new line with an eye to what would be most interesting and move the story forward in a coherent fashion" from the ten to fifteen submitted (with the hashtag #bbcawdio). She tried to allow no more than a few minutes between adding each line. Although Gelsomino did little editing on the fly, she did occasionally add her own lines: "At times it felt like the story was going around in circles and we needed to move it to a new point plot, so I'd tweet a line." She also added lines to plug logic holes, or just for fun. Updating the related blog, polls, and contests were additional tasks.

When the story finally came to a close, it included lines from 123 tweeters. More had submitted, but not all made the cut. Although the company did not keep official statistics, participants came from "Sweden, Brazil, Africa, England, Italy, and many more countries." Many more followed the project on **Twitter**; BBCAA gained over a thousand more followers the week it launched. Media also took interest, both in the form of bloggers and more traditional publications like **The Wall Street Journal** and *USA* **Today**. Web site traffic rose to 10,000 visitors in the starting month, October 2009, and traffic also increased on the company's **Facebook** page.

At the end of the project, company executives took a final editing pass over the novella, cast a narrator, supervised the recording, and made it available streaming and as a podcast through the BBCAA site and iTunes. As of April, 2010, BBCAA had recorded 36,500 downloads of the 15,000 word novella, whose plot—which holds together surprisingly well—is a combination of **Alice in Wonderland** and more traditional quest fantasies.

The project was such a success that BBCAA decided to repeat the experiment, this time recruiting a female author to write the first line. Having connections to Meg Cabot and seeing her as an author with "wonderful crossover appeal" who would offer "a great
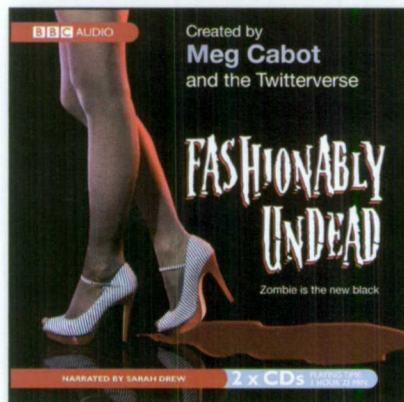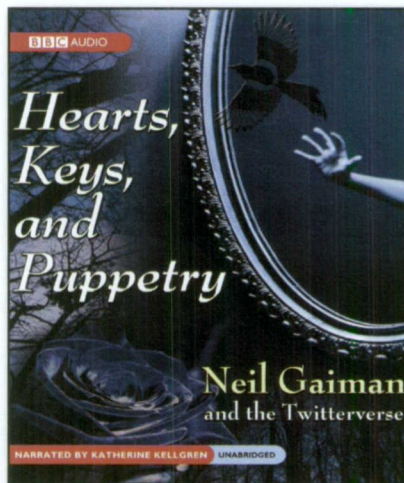
way to reach out to a younger generation and introduce them to audiobook listening," BBCAA approached her. Not only did Cabot contribute the first lines—"*Every girl at Guru Fashion Agency had an eye on the hot new guy, Jake. So Carly was shocked when he texted HER with his odd S.O.S.*"—she edited the final manuscript.

Gelsomino again moderated and participated in the multi-day writing extravaganza, which attracted about 75 writers, including many return tweeters from the first novel. As a participant (the line about the SpongeBob SquarePants underwear? Yep. Mine. Sorry!) and as a writer, I found it fascinating to watch the story unfold.

In original novels, authors create their own worlds and their own characters. In fanfiction, writers base their stories on the 'canon' world and characters of the original book, movie, or television show. In the Twitternovel, however, with so many writers and no 'canon,' participants had to fall back on widely-understood contexts, concepts, and stereotypes. Rushing along at a breakneck pace, the action-driven story substituted cliffhanger lines and humorous banter for thoughtful description and character building (which is not always a bad thing—ask reluctant readers!).

The final novella, a farcical romp through the zombie underworld of the fashion industry, is now available for free download at **iTunes** and the BBCAA site. Comparing the raw, tweeted version to the polished, audiobook shows surprisingly few changes. Cabot did change the anonymous "CEO of Chanel" to the well-know Karl Lagerfeld, "for a more obvious parody," and a gun became a bedazzler "to add more humor/fun." In addition, a character who had originally not survived was saved in the end. Overall, Cabot "didn't change the tweets very much, just edited for grammar and consistency, plus plugged some loose plot holes that were too big to ignore." Due to some mature content, **Fashionably Undead** is best suited to YA and adult readers.

COLLABORATIVE WRITING IN THE LIBRARY

Librarians and teachers interested in adapting the concept of the Twitternovel for their own programs could approach it in several different ways. Within a class block or an available evening, facilitators could run a short-story version, though more structure might be necessary to ensure ending up with an actual plot. Participants could use **Twitter** if they all have accounts, though it would probably work better with something like texting or emails, which are not tied to a specific service. Although another possibility would be using a centralized service, like a chat room, the synchronous nature of chat might further complicate the moderator's job. Either way, a dry run with a smaller number of students would be advisable so the moderator—whether adult or teen—knows what to expect and how best to proceed. First lines could come either from an adult or a teen.

Because I did not have a large chunk of time, I ran my 'Twitter story' through email with my writing club members. Over the course of a few weeks, as we figured out how to adapt the project for our group, we hammered out a few guidelines:

❯ **Use as many lines as possible**, if they will work together, to avoid disappointing writers whose lines are not chosen.

❯ **Bank unused lines** and use them later if they will fit in.

❯ **Be judicious in cutting up lines**; i.e., using only a phrase or a word from someone's submission. I played with this a lot to see how the students would react, and they were split around fifty-fifty about whether I should cut lines at all. All agreed, however, that I should not take just one word of a line, and in the end, we decided I could only cut up lines if I used a whole

phrase or idea. I found it helpful, when trying to build a story, to add in this flexibility.

❯ **From time to time, add in your own lines** to keep the story moving, plug logic holes, etc. Let the students know beforehand that you will be doing this. You might also want to go back and add some lines after the story is finished, for the same reasons, but try to add as little as possible.

❯ **Set a time limit for submitting lines**. We found that two days worked best for us, but I would suggest that one day would work better in light of guideline six.

❯ **Set a time limit for the project**, perhaps two weeks. Because I did not do this, the students eventually grew bored, and I had to ask one student to write us a brief ending, so that we could do something with the story.

❯ **Find ways to keep the students' interest up**. Create some buzz by announcing the project at assembly and soliciting more participants, declaring that it will be available for download on a certain date, or seeking cast members to record it, etc. Advertise the project through flyers, the library blog, the parent bulletin, the library **Facebook** page, etc. Offer participants prizes for the most lines submitted or for the best lines submitted (to be chosen by student vote either in a meeting or on an online, anonymous voting site).

❯ **Publish and/or podcast the final product** once you have edited it, and give full credit to the writers.

❯ **Have fun!**

You can check out the (roughly edited!) podcast of our story, **The Lemon Portal**, on the Overlake Library Web site (see link in bibliography).

[**Author's Note**: In July, 2010, BBC AudioBooks and BBC Audiobooks America were sold to AudioGo Limited, and the company name has changed to AudioGo.] ■

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Rebecca C. Moore has been an independent school librarian for almost twenty years, and currently works at the Overlake School in Redmond, Washington. She loves working with middle school writers, and is constantly surprised by the scope (and randomness!) of their imaginations. Never before has she read so much about sentient food and spontaneous combustion.

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