Collaboration in e-literature: From "The Unknown" to "Piksel Zdrój"

MARIUSZ PISARSKI

The main goal of the article is to reflect on the category of literary collaboration, which is receiving an increasing prominence in the context of new media and significantly redefines perspectives on creative processes.

Traditionally, co-authorship in literature involved collaborating couples and other teams comprised of mostly two persons (Stone – Thompson 2006). If the number of collaborators grows, a stronger division of labour in the creative process is emphasized, with several roles going beyond textual and narrative content into paratextual, material, publishing and distribution levels (special edition prints, artist's books etc.). Digital technologies supplant the established modes of literary collaboration with a range of new variants that were either rare or entirely unseen before the advent of digital tools. Internet as a platform for collaboration drastically multiplies the number of possible co-authors from a couple or a few to – literally – thousands. A more intimate collaboration involving two authors can now happen both remotely and in real time and be kept alive by an asynchronous email, which remediates traditional letter writing, into a much instantaneous ("cold" in McLuhan's terms) and more effective exchange. Set apart by continents two authors are able to overwrite each other's words within a distance of a single sentence that is being written at the same time on the Google Docs cloud server, Evernote or a document from Microsoft's Office 365 suite. As a result, new configurations of creative teams for poetry and fiction writing arise and demand to be reflected upon. The reflection, quite naturally, situates itself in a comparative context where traditional and newer, and analogue and digitally enhanced modes of collaborative writing are examined side by side. The comparative approach proposed here does not centre on juxtaposing literatures (Polish and American), artistic ideologies or even semiotic modes, although the latter are discussed. The main focus is on comparing the possible depth and scope of collaboration within creative teams encountered both in digital and pre-digital contexts where literary culture, material affordances of textual medium and means of communication form a unique set of regulating factors.

Distinct modes of collaboration that become visible through distinctions highlighted in the comparative table that is proposed in this paper are general enough to be applied to domains outside of literature. The main distinctions are dictated by the dynamics within co-authorial partnership and the depth of conjoint effort as

reflected in corresponding, deeper levels of resulting work, from paratextual framing to narrative content and style. The impact of new media on these findings is rather of a quantitative kind. They do not bring many new co-authorship variants but are able to greatly magnify the scope of existing ones. Yet their bigger contribution is perhaps the radical expansion of the very field of reflection that literary collaboration is the subject of. Problems of literary collaboration in digital contexts wait to be reflected upon, but new media art and e-literature offer so many examples that a systemized history and theory of the field is still ahead of us.

In the first part of this paper I reflect on an experiment in collaborative writing I myself took part in, as a moderator and author: *Piksel Zdrój* – a hypertext published by Ha!art in 2015. In the second part an overview of the theory and practice of collaboration, especially in digital environments, is presented. In the third part a comparative table about the depth and scope of collaboration and archetypes of co-authorship is explained. A common motive that reverberates through all parts is the problem of authorship in digital media in general and collaborative writing in particular. Although critical reflection on collaboration remains an important part of self-identification of electronic literature, equally important and perhaps even more central is the phenomena of redefined, redistributed authorship of new literary forms. Situated between text, code, reader and network, the contemporary author endures a critical test of integrity inside a collaborative team, while still functioning as an important determinant of traditionally conceived literariness. As I will try to prove, an intentional interplay of authorial signatures, their concealment or unveiling, becomes a pivotal characteristic of digital literary forms, as opposed to ludic or more traditionally inclined audiovisual works.
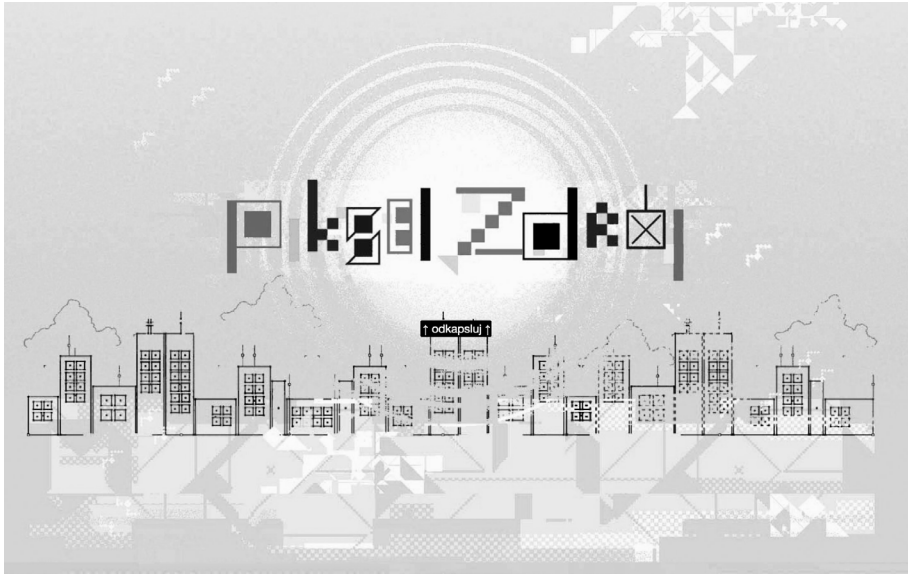
PIKSEL ZDRÓJ

Piksel Zdrój, an online hypertext fiction published by Ha!art in 2015 and co-authored by 8 participants (Cierniak – Jakusiewicz et al.), was an experiment in collaboration with an open and expanding set of goals and rules set for participants within a moderation framework. There was a minimal plan – to create a narrative using a process in which 8 people write stories based on the same thematic and temporal framework (summer in the city), read each other's work, find common motifs and bridge them together by links or hash tags.

The participants were familiar with some earlier examples of literary collaboration in hypertext, starting with *Noon Quilt*, a Trace Online Writing Centre initiative from 1999 aimed at writing a collective work composed of short individual entries on a specific subject ("a view from the window at noon"), and its follow-up *Eclipse Quilt*, which used the same formula but set on the day of the solar eclipse in 2000.

The authors were aware of *The Million Penguins*, a wiki platform writing experiment from 2006; *The Invisible Seattle*: *The Novel of Seattle* by Seattle by Rob Wittig and Philip Wohlstetter; and *The Unknown* – a vast hypertext narrative by William Gillespie, Scott Rettberg, Dirk Stratton and Frank Marquardt. The latter was a work which the authors of *Piksel Zdrój* were encouraged to read and draw inspiration from, although our initial goals were below the expectations set by *The Unknown*.

We aimed at creating something more engaging than *The Noon Quilt* and *The Eclipse Quilt*. Instead of one segment of text, authors were asked to write at least three and were advised to branch their own narratives, not to be afraid of digressions, and to link related themes, words and details to those found in the stories written by their colleagues.

Piksel Zdrój, introductory page

When the original goal was achieved and we still had some time before the publishing deadline, one of the authors asked: "And what about really writing something together?" This simple prompt significantly changed the pace and intensity of our collaborative effort. Earlier on, even some collaborative tools, for example a participatory mode within Prezi and shared maps of Tinderbox, would not spur enough excitement. Now the activity that was somewhat compulsory, like ticking off a list of school tasks, turned into "writing for fun, together", to paraphrase Nick Montfort (2013) or into a sort of participatory rendezvous, to paraphrase Rob Wittig (1994).

In the second phase of the work it was the formula from *The Unknown*, not from *The Noon Quilt*, that guided our work. The authors decided to fictionalize their status as collaborators and, in the form of their alter egos, set out for a trip to a Polish seaside town for a summer workshop on hypertext writing. There, during the post workshop beach party, a tragedy happens. The body of one of the participants is washed ashore in the morning and a police investigation starts.

During the several months of email exchanges that followed (6 people were based in different towns in Poland, two in the UK), the authors of *Piksel Zdrój* were able to co-create on the level of discourse, story and style. The discussion went as far as the details of the scenery and, in some cases, the wording of specific passages. At some point, democratically, we decided to reach out to our target audience and give it its own share of the novel. During a meeting with the authors of the soon-to-be pub-

lished *Piksel Zdrój* (Ha!wangarda festival, Krakow, autumn 2014), the readers had decided, by voting, who was going to die during the fictional beach party.

This additional input into the ongoing collaboration marked the crucial point of the whole project. It showed the social potential of collaboration as an open, participatory platform for anyone to contribute his/her own ideas and understanding of what *Piksel Zdrój* should be. The festival meeting demonstrated that outsiders are visibly more willing to cooperate, to vote, or to give their opinion about a literary work, when it is prepared by a group. The collaborative process is treated more as a spontaneous literary exercise and playground and thus seems far more accessible in comparison to the mysterious and entrenched process of the literary creation of the solitary author that is still imprinted in our romantic/modernist understanding of what literature is. The generous and positive feedback received by the audience encouraged some of *Piksel Zdrój*'s authors to expand their roles and be open to more ludic interactions with potential readers, which took centre stage during the promotional phase, just after the official release date. This involved distribution of fake news and interviews, colour leaflets and cover shots from non-existing magazines, all about the "famous" group of authors who decided to write a novel but one of them was killed – this kind of role-playing that mixed reality with fiction, real authors with their alter-egos, and real news from our publisher with informational noise, formed the last phase of collaboration, which took place on social media and was perhaps the most fascinating of all the phases.

CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

Before constructing any valid theses on the specificity of collaboration in e-literature, it is worth mentioning the most relevant findings from the existing literature on the subject, starting from the crucial distinction made by Paul Rabinow and Gaymon Bennet between collaboration and cooperation. They claim that cooperation is structurally organized from the outset and consists in demarcated tasking on defined problems and objects, "with occasional if regular exchange at the interfaces of those problems. It assumes specialization and a defined division of labor" (2012, 6). Collaboration, on the other hand, does not imply such clear divisions and often aims at an unknown outcome. It happens when the yet to be determined dynamics of a problem-space require the interactively coordinated skills and contributions of co-labourers of diverse capacities and dispositions without knowing in advance how such a work will be organized and what it will discover (6).

In the light of Rabinow and Bennet's distinctions, quite a few e-literature projects labelled as "collaborative" reveal their "cooperative" nature. *The Noon Quilt* and *The Eclipse Quilt*, being highly structured literary endeavours with clearly defined roles of authors and curators and having not much, if any, exchange between individual authors, might serve as an example.

Scott Rettberg's (2005) typology of conscious, contributory and unwitting participation further refines the intricacies of co-authored literary initiatives. In conscious participation contributors are fully aware of the explicit constraints, of the nature of the project, and of how their contribution to it might be utilized. The first

two conditions are not necessarily met in the case of contributory participation, but participants take conscious steps to make their contribution available. In unwitting participation, on the other hand, "texts utilized in the collective narrative are gathered by the text-machine itself, and contributors have no conscious involvement in the process of gathering the material". Interestingly, what Rettberg sees as contributory participation might still be considered cooperation from Rabinow/Bennet's more general, but at the same time more evaluative, perspective.

Of importance is also the notion of "selfish interest" that single participants have in a collaborative project, which was authored by Tim O'Reilly and further expanded on by Scott Rettberg. Last but not least, one of the factors that made successful collaboration possible is a "fellowship factor" (my term), the very fact that collaborators know and understand each other. The best example is *The Unknown* as seen by Rettberg:

The Unknown is an example of a type of collaboration directed by play, negotiation, confrontation and compromise. Its authors understood each other both as people and as writers. Without these pre-existing relationships and ongoing negotiations about the shape of the story, the project would neither have come to pass nor to completion.

From a psychological perspective, Brigitte Steinheider and George Legrady propose a whole set of conditions for a successful project. These are, among others, openness, personal trust and willingness to compromise, common interests and sympathy, spatial proximity and technical communication capabilities. As far as knowledge sharing is concerned, of importance – according to Steinheider and Legrady – are a shared understanding of objectives and problems, shared terminology, experience with interdisciplinary projects and motivation to work in such teams (2004, 319).

Finally, emerging from the world of computer game development is the collaboration model proposed by Brie Code. Successful collaboration, according to Code, relies on a balanced mix and coverage of 5 roles within a team: a visionary, doer, sceptic, client advocate and historian, where one role can be filled by several people or one person can take several roles (2015).

A last notion that might be helpful before further analysis is that of feedback (between poet and coder) as a factor of, or metaphor for, successful collaboration, which was proposed by one of my collaborators and programmers, Leszek Onak. The idea of feedback, related to the workings of computer code, can be in itself a powerful descriptive allegory of collaboration in e-literature in general. Without proper feedback between participants, understood as a free flow of ideas that takes shape and direction not anticipated by any of them individually, collaboration freezes and becomes cooperation; an exchange of ideas turns into moderation and a highly hierarchical participatory structure. As a result, a lack of proper feedback turns any collaboration into no more than a marketing label.

DEPTH AND SCOPE OF COLLABORATION

As a piece of literary technology *Piksel Zdrój* brings hardly anything new to the table and remains a younger brother to *The Unknown*. Apart from text it includes a small javascript for randomizing the start page, a browser mini-game in Java based on *Game of Life* by John Conway, some video and audio snippets, and a stretchtext poem. *Piksel Zdrój* was presented live several times. On these occasions it took the form of mini-performances made by individual contributors who dramatied chosen motifs.1 Although not very technically innovative, the work managed to ask some important questions about the collaborative experience and process, most notably how deep and how wide collaboration in e-lit could go and what did it mean to collaborate in a real sense.

To answer these questions I devised a transmedial table of collaborative engagement that would map the range at which any collaborative effort, in new media or outside of it, could be mapped. The table distinguishes 7 aspects of the collaborative process: communication, modality, scale, depth, archetype of collaboration, narrative metaphor and authorial signature. Each of these has its attributes or regulators that determine the quality of collaboration. Collaborative communication concerns the spatio-temporal determinant of a given co-authoring that can range from the unity of time and place to a complete tele-presence of collaborators who never meet. Modality points to the semiotic nature of the process. It may span over a single mode of expression (text only, for example), several modes (polymodal) or take place in a situation in which different semiotic codes correspond with each other in delivering the message. Attributes under "scale" and "depth" of collaboration refer to, respectively, a range of collaborative effort (whether it takes place on the level of moderation or goes further into negotiation and production) and the layers of work to which collaboration reaches (collegial decision-making and production can just reach the surface, namely the paratextual and discursive layer, or go deeper into the story, style and code).

Two important organizing factors that influence the outcome of collaboration are archetypes and narrative metaphors. An archetype of the collaborative process is a recurring, enumerable pattern underlying the collaborative situation. It helps in the distribution of roles among collaborators and creates a general cooperative framework. A narrative metaphor, on the other hand, is a pattern that determines the generic and formal association of the work. One could be tempted to call the former an archetype of the creative process and the latter that of its result, but I would stress that the number of archetypes is limited, whereas there can be many narrative metaphors.

The final attribute on the map of collaboration was given over to the notion of authorial signature, understood as a stamp of singular authorship that can be either erased from the final work or purposefully made visible for the audience to see which part of the work had been contributed by which author. Tracing the presence of authorial signature in any collaborative work, but perhaps especially in electronic work, means tracing the politics of authorship and can lead to some critical insights. For example, one can observe that authors abandon their authorial signature more easily in works that are informal and game-like but tend to preserve it in works that can be viewed as more "serious" poetry or fiction.

COMMUNICATION	MODALITY	SCALE	DEPTH	ARCHETYPE	ORGANIZING METAPHOR
Time/Place Unity	Monomodal	Integration	**Paratext**	Master-Student	Single voice
Correspondence	**Polymodal**	**Moderation**	Discourse	Partners	Dialogue
Tele-presence	Transmodal / intersemiotic	**Negotiation**	**Story**	Dialogue of Masters	Ritual
Asynchronous exchange		Production	Language	Master's workshop	**Trip**
			Code	Expert team	**Party**
				Group of friends	Mass Mobilization

Transmediality chart of *Piksel Zdrój*. The dominant mode of communication was an asynchronous communication via email, artistic production took a multimodal scope, with audio-visual additions; moderation and negotiation were the dominant collaboration forms and the depth of co-authorship reached the level of story, with only occasional forays into style and language; "group of friends" and a "trip" were collaborative archetypes and organizing metaphor.

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Asynchronious exchange		**Production**	Language	Master's workshop	Trip
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Transmediality chart of depth and scope of artistic collaboration. The active model discussed in the table relates to *Stones* – a collaborative collection of sketches and poems by Frank O'Hara and Larry Rivers – one of the most refined collaboration examples of the pre-digital era. Factors related to this work are marked in bold.

Two exemplary charts included in this paper, with active regulators highlighted and inactive dimmed, compare the digitally supported collaboration on *Piksel Zdrój* with the classical and highly integral collaboration from pre-digital times of Frank O'Hara and Larry Rivers's *Stones*. Created in 1960, *Stones* is an illustrated book with thirteen lithographs and one oil drawing, in which O'Hara's text and Rivers's illustrations form unified visual poems, or, as they called it, tabloscripts. Although the colla-

boration of the two is considered loose and experimental, both authors were close friends, living at the same time, and – on this project – sharing the same workspace (Hammond Helwig 2010, 63). Collaborative communication was happening within the comfort of temporal and spatial unity. The effect is highly transmodal: text and image assist each other in delivering the message. The scale of the process involves at least the negotiation of *Stones* content, if one assumes that O'Hara did not draw a single line and Rivers did not write a single word. The depth of collaboration reaches at least as far as the discourse – the way different elements of the lithograph are presented to the reader/viewer. The underlying archetype of the collaboration can be easily matched by a dialogue of masters, and the narrative metaphor as a dialogue or lovers' discourse. Finally, as a consequence of each of the authors' positions in the field of art and literature, the authorial signature is clearly marked by the roles of poet and painter, to a point that literal signatures are not needed. All of these assumptions, based on the proposed theoretical tool, could be easily undermined and their position on the map shifted, if a thorough biographical and historical study is undertaken. Due to the close relationship of both artists at the time of collaboration the established and expected roles might have been easily blurred and thus complicate any theoretical framework, for the better of both the artwork in question and the framework.

A FEW PROPOSALS

Although the presented method gives a unifying view on collaboration and the proposed mapping of the collaborative processes introduces new categories that further differentiate between possible variations, it is not able to answer some urgent questions related to literary practice in the evolving field of electronic literature and especially the specificity of collaboration in the field. What is the contribution of e-literature to the myriad collaborative configurations in contemporary storytelling? Has e-lit produced an original model of collaboration? Why do some collaboration frameworks work and some do not? To what extent are collaborative tools able to spur collaboration and enhance it? How do the notions of authorship and literariness affect the collaborative output?

It is not possible to fully answer these questions in such a short-format paper. But one could suggest a few assumptions based on the existing findings and my individual experience in e-literary collaborative projects.

1. Best collaboration happens when medium and genre specific qualities of the work form an allegory of the collaborative situation and individual expression of co-authors.

It happens when the fictional world aligns with, or allegorizes, the factual roles of collaborators: where collaborative frameworks correspond with a recognizable narrative archetype and develop around a collaborative compositional metaphor.

A group of friends reporting from a trip made together, with no clear distinctions as to which narrative strand is told by whom, and being opened for additional reports made by others (for example Joseph Tabbi's and Nick Montfort's contribution) tied together within a vast and densely interlinked hypertext marks one of the important elements that make *The Unknown* a successful hypertext.

2. In comparison to film or games, collaboration in e-literature relies on closer interchange and feedback between the co-operators and implies an active and unpredictable input of the algorithm. The code effectively becomes a participant in its own right. Some works also allow for conscious or unwitting collaboration of users.

The Deletionist by Amaranth Borsuk, Nick Montfort and Jesper Jull, a work in the form of a browser plug-in that changes (erases) the existing content of any webpage leaving only a few words, if any, in a single verse, might be one of the latest examples. In this case, collaboration on a digital work opened up the unwitting input of countless creators of websites that are rendered by the algorithm.

3. Because of its off-market position, electronic literature can freely engage (readers and authors alike) in a play of authorial signatures without clear marks of discrete authorship in which the user is encouraged to either treat the work as a truly co-authored piece or to trace the author by reaching for her intertextual arsenal and knowledge of a work.

In the film world, the distribution of tasks results in detailed payrolls and credits. The game industry is not much different. Even small independent teams of developers in a strongly collaborative environment prefer to have their names listed and main tasks distinguished. In a Facebook interview with my colleague and game developer Sonia Fizek from the Gamification Lab in Germany, who has worked on such titles as *Boat for Two* and *Bullying Cells*, it was confirmed that credits are a preferred option for young and upcoming developers, even though the roles on the team were often mixed and interchanged. In literature, where Pierre Bourdieu's law of reverse economy is at work (2001, 119), precise division of labour is not very necessary. What is more, blurring the clear distinctions as to who wrote (or programmed) what passage of code or text can be a part of artistic strategy and form the foundation of its poetic function.

AUTHORSHIPS IN E-LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF COLLABORATION

To elaborate on at least one of the above assumptions, let me illustrate the last one, referring to the problem of authorial signature, by looking at a traditional (and print-oriented) example of collaboration in poetry and comparing it to collaboration in a digital, generative environment.

> Dawn soft glow
> Playfully casting light
> on the ceremony of dance
> a song blessed peace Maracle
> Black We link hands
> round the rising sun

The poem above is a renga, an ancient Japanese collaborative poetry form (Shirane 1992), written by Lee Maracle and Ayana Black (York 2006, 303). What is interesting is that both authors decide to leave their authorial signatures in the poem, within the body of the text. Although this intervention introduces an intriguing visual disrup-

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tion and a possible additional semantic layer, it also – quite contrary to the spirit of renga – reflects the hierarchy of the co-authoring and solidifies, rather than dissolves, the notion of a solitary authorship.

In stark contrast to the quoted renga is a poetry generator *Sea and Spar Between* by Stephanie Strickland and Nick Montfort (2011). In this multi-levelled collaborative poem that fuses the vocabularies of Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville, it is not signalled which of the generator's seven possible poetic structures were proposed by Strickland and which by Montfort. Neither was the process of selection of Melville's and Dickinson's words. Even the authorial discussion in the comments accompanying the javascript file leaves no clues. Strickland and Montfort's conscious collaborative effort on the creation of the generator seems to echo the unwitting collaboration of Dickinson and Melville, whose individual phrases merge into a single voice on the screen. Would this be possible in games? In film? Or even in print literature? There is an intentional fusion of authorial signatures on many levels of *Sea and Spar Between*. The model reader, especially someone who knows the earlier works of Strickland and Montfort, is invited to take this game up and, if they really want, guess who has contributed what, in the same way as guessing whether it is Dickinson or Melville speaking at any single moment of the poem. This collaborative, anti-authorial effect belongs to the poetic arsenal of the work.

The Unknown is similar in this respect. We do not know which piece was written by which author. Do we find out by outlining the patterns of vocabulary and style? Or maybe by analysing meta-textual references in the orange (correspondence) or green (documentaries) threads of the narrative? One does not even know which passages from *The Unknown* were "really" written together, although one is assured there were a few. And that is fine. The blurred, unstable, ambiguous notion of authorship seems to be the trademark of collaboration in e-literature. Instead of clear demarcations of contribution, electronic literary forms propose a game of authorial signatures that becomes a valid part of the semantic axis of the work on which its multiplied layers (from code to pretext and beyond) serve as allegories of each other.

CONCLUSION

The processes highlighted here have the potential to set e-literature apart from collaboration in other media and platforms (games and films) and, at the same time, bring a much welcomed complexity into the cliché of the great digital quid pro quo, the oversimplified notion of replacement of the author by the reader. Collaboration in e-literature proves that the author is neither dead nor replaced by the reader. Instead, as the architect of a readerly experience, and collaborator, the author becomes both the subject and object of an authorial experiment with no precedence where human and artificial agents form an ever-changing flow of authorial entities. In other words, the author today is more self-conscious. As Nick Montfort concluded (Strickland – Montfort 2012, 6):

> By sharing the writing task from the initial concept for the project through to completing the details of the work's presentation, collaborators dissolve their individual claims and feelings of ownership while actually heightening their responsibility.

This responsibility, going as deep as the code and material layer, and as vast as networks and live performances, is, most likely, something literature has not seen before.

NOTES

[1] For example common and often-linked themes in the narrative were bottled water and fuchsia-coloured nails. During the reading of the work in Krakow in April 2015 female authors wore fuchsia scarves and displayed fuchsia-themed manicures, whereas in the bar readers could order a "Fuchsia Killer" drink.

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Collaboration. Electronic literature. Hypertext. "Piksel Zdrój".

Collaboration in e-literature, thanks to the interdisciplinary, intersemiotic and computational nature of the field, is a subject close to a vast majority of artists and critics. However, the particularities of the collaborative process are discussed mostly in interviews, panels and private conversations. The number of critical analyses and overviews is still relatively small. The aim of this article is to expand on the existing findings (especially Scott Rettberg's reflection on the collaborative aspects of *The Unknown* and Nick Montfort's arguments on collaborative programming), propose several new categories that may prove useful and introduce a Polish example of a collaborative creative work (the hypertext *Piksel Zdrój* authored by 8 writers, 2015). Of importance are also questions of identity of e-literature within a vast horizon of collaborative activities in game development, as well as the notion of authorship and authorial integrity, which literary collaboration in the digital realm puts to a heavy stress test.

In my reflection, e-lit collaboration is situated within two contexts, one of which has been gaining prominence in recent years. On the one hand it is traditional collaboration in literature and film, on the other, collaboration in games and software. Posing questions about the place of e-literary collaboration among creative participation in other media – as I will demonstrate – might bring insights not only about the specificity of participatory activities in the field but also about the identity of electronic literature within the general cultural landscape.

Mariusz Pisarski, PhD.
Research Associate
Intermedial and Intersemiotic Lab.
University of Warsaw
Poland
mariusz.pisarski@techsty.art.pl