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THE SPEAKING MACHINE

LIVE FROM
(12.05.20 – 30.06.20)

THE SPEAKING MACHINE is a special edition of BOOOK.LAND in collaboration with
FALMOUTH UNIVERSITY's School of Communication, which aims to bring students, staff and
industry together to write and illustrate a novel live and in real-time.

ENTER STORY

Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine.

Dr Robyn Cook, Senior Lecturer, Department of Graphic Design, School of Communication

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Abstract

The Speaking Machine is a practice-led research project conceived and developed by Falmouth University's School of Communication in collaboration with and industry practitioners [Harry Boyd](#) and design studio [TwoMuch](#). The project explores how communication design can structure digital participatory platforms for collaborative storytelling and distributed creative practice. It further explores how specific interface constraints—such as one-at-a-time contributions and limited narrative visibility—can generate new forms of narrative authorship. Initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project responds to the challenge of sustaining creative collaboration under conditions of spatial and social isolation.

By repositioning design as a 'structuring agent' in narrative systems, the research contributes to debates around digital authorship, speculative publishing, and networked co-creation within communication design.

Project overview

Subject Area: Communication Design

Description: This practice-led research project explores how communication design can structure participatory digital platforms that facilitate collaborative storytelling, with a particular focus on the dynamics of online creative co-authorship. **Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine** examines how deliberate constraints in interface design—such as one-at-a-time contributions and limited story visibility—can generate new forms of narrative production and foster emergent models of community engagement.

Developed in partnership between Falmouth University's School of Communication and industry practitioners Harry Boyd and the design studio TwoMuch, the project positions communication design not only as a tool for visual communication, but as an active structuring agent within collaborative systems of authorship and interaction.

Initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic, **The Speaking Machine,** both as a metaphor and method, responds to the broader challenge of sustaining creative practice under conditions of spatial and social isolation. It asks how digital platforms might support open-ended, speculative, and distributed modes of creative authorship, offering a model for design-led engagement in remote and asynchronous environments.

Funding: The project was supported by Falmouth University's internal research funding for digital practice initiatives.

Research Outputs:
1.   **Digital platform: Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine** (https://speakingmachine.boook.land/)—a live, collaborative novel-writing interface.
2.   **Online publication:** An open-access digital novel comprising over 15,000 words and 986 contributions, publicly accessible from July 2020.

Research question(s)

1. How can communication design facilitate collaborative authorship and creative participation within online storytelling environments?
2. What are the creative and conceptual effects of imposed constraints—such as sequential access and limited narrative visibility—on collaborative writing practices?
3. How can communication design contribute to a sustained sense of shared authorship and community among geographically dispersed contributors?
4. In what ways can modular identity systems support both continuity and differentiation across evolving editions of a participatory storytelling platform?
5. What role can communication design play in shaping digital environments that support open-ended, creative, multi-author narrative forms?

Aims and objectives

Research aims:

1. To explore how communication design can shape collaborative digital platforms that support participatory storytelling.
2. To investigate how constraints within digital interface design influence creative process, authorship, and user engagement in remote collaborative environments.
3. To examine how responsive identity systems and interaction design can contribute to more personalised and dynamic user experiences within collective creative platforms.

Research objectives:

1. To analyse existing digital storytelling and co-creation platforms in order to inform the design of **Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine**.
2. To iteratively design and develop a communication design-led digital platform that enables real-time collaborative storytelling through interface, interaction, and identity design.
3. To implement and evaluate specific constraints—such as limited narrative visibility and turn-taking participation—and assess their impact on user experience and narrative coherence.
4. To explore approaches to responsive and adaptive branding that reflect the collective nature of participation and enhance user engagement.
5. To produce a final digital artefact: a collaboratively authored and illustrated novel that embodies the project's investigation into distributed storytelling and remote co-creation.

Research design

Research methodology:
This project adopts a practice-led research methodology, in which the design process itself serves as a site of inquiry and a means of generating knowledge. As Candy notes, practice-led research is "concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice" (Candy, cited in Muratovski, 2022, p. 244).

The investigation is embedded in the act of making: the interactive platform, visual identity system, and collaborative novel all function as research outputs that explore new ways of facilitating co-authorship in digital environments. This aligns with research-through-design, which Muratovski defines as advancing knowledge "through the process of making and evaluating design artefacts in context" (2022, p. 244).

Rather than observing creative collaboration from an external perspective, the project positions communication design as both the subject and method of inquiry. The evolving platform serves as a testbed for examining how constraints, identity systems, and interactive structures shape the experience of collective storytelling.

Research methods:
The project employed the following research methods to support its practice-led inquiry:

1. Case Study Analysis:
Existing digital storytelling platforms and collaborative writing tools were analysed to identify design patterns, technical frameworks, and participation models relevant to the development of **Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine.** → *Supports Objective 1*

2. Iterative Prototyping:
A cycle of prototyping, user testing, and refinement was used to evolve the platform's interaction model and visual identity. Each iteration responded to both technical limitations and participant feedback on the creative experience. → *Supports Objective 2*

Communication and Interaction Design:
Design techniques including interface sketching, typographic experimentation, and colour system development were employed to construct an adaptable identity system capable of supporting multiple narrative editions.
→ *Supports Objective 4*

Observational Reflection:
The design team observed how participants engaged with the live platform in real time—particularly in relation to imposed constraints such as turn-taking and limited story visibility.

Research design

These reflections informed ongoing refinements to the user experience and narrative flow.
→ *Supports Objective 3*

Participatory Design:
The final novel was developed through an open, collaborative process involving students, staff, and industry collaborators affiliated with Falmouth University. These participants acted as co-creators, and their active involvement directly shaped the direction, structure, and expressive qualities of the output. As Muratovski notes, participatory design, or co-design, enables contributors to be "actively involved in the design process," resulting in more responsive and meaningful outcomes (2022, p. 247). → *Supports Objective 5.*

Prototyping process

Image above Experimental identity design exploring how the visual system dynamically responds to voice input. This iteration investigated the potential of adaptive, user-responsive identity design to reflect individual contributions within a collective, participatory narrative. (Design by Harry Boyd)
→ *Supports Objective 4: To explore approaches to responsive and adaptive identity systems that enhance user engagement and reflect the collective nature of participation.*
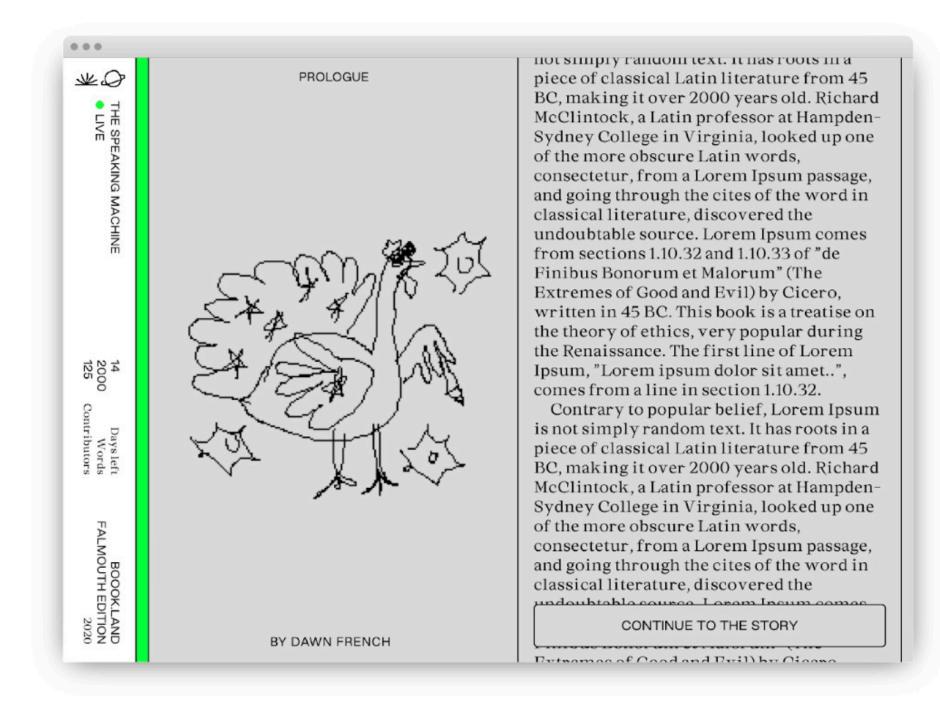
Image above: Early prototype of the Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine interface, designed to support turn-based, real-time storytelling. The layout reflects principles of usability and minimal interactional friction, enabling sustained collaborative authorship within a participatory digital platform. (Design by Harry Boyd)
→ *Supports Objective 2: Iterative design and development of a communication design-led platform for collaborative storytelling.*

Research context

This literature and theoretical review positions **Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine** within scholarly debates surrounding authorship, participation, and interface design. Drawing from communication design, media studies, and digital humanities, it frames the project's contribution through five key themes: collaborative authorship; constraint as design method; digital pedagogy; participatory design; and post-digital publishing. This interdisciplinary framing establishes the project's relevance within current discourse and supports its claim to originality.

1. Collaborative Authorship and Networked Creativity: A growing body of research in media and communication studies has examined how digital environments facilitate shared authorship and distributed creativity. Jenkins (2006) conceptualises this through the framework of participatory culture, where collective

intelligence reshapes the role of the author in favour of networked forms of contribution. Fitzpatrick (2011) likewise foregrounds collaboration in academic publishing, advocating for structures that decentralise individual authority and embrace openness, iteration, and peer interaction.

Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine contributes to this discourse by developing a platform that embeds co-authorship not only in its content but in its interface logic—participants can write or draw only one at a time, with access to only the most recent narrative fragment. This challenges assumptions of fluid or mass collaboration by introducing seriality and constraint as structural elements of authorship.

2. Constraint as Method in Design and Narrative: Constraint has long been recognised

as a generative force in both literary and design contexts. Murray (1997) argues that digital environments derive their expressive potential from the constraints they impose: limited perspectives, branching paths, or temporal limits. Within communication design, constrained methods—such as modular grids or systems-based typography—structure creativity by shaping the parameters of expression.

The project draws on this conceptual lineage by using interface limitations (e.g. turn-taking, reduced narrative visibility) as productive mechanisms for narrative generation. This aligns with traditions of constrained writing from the Oulipo group, as well as with Drucker's (2009) argument that digital textuality is performative and processual, not static.

3. Digital Pedagogy and Remote Collaboration: Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine was

Research context

developed during the COVID-19 pandemic as an experimental pedagogical platform, responding to the disruption of traditional studio-based design education. As physical classrooms were replaced by remote interaction, design educators were challenged to find new ways to sustain creativity, participation, and community in dispersed environments.

Schiavio, Biasutti, and Antonini Philippe (2021) argue that online learning during the pandemic prompted significant pedagogical transformations across the arts, creating both limitations and new opportunities. Their qualitative study of music conservatory students highlights how remote settings required students to adopt more autonomous learning strategies, engage in creative reinterpretations of their routines, and reimagine peer collaboration in the absence of physical presence.

In a similar way, **The Speaking Machine** enabled students and staff to engage in collaborative storytelling and illustration through a platform structured around creative constraints. The project functioned not simply as a substitute for in-person teaching but as a designed space for co-creation and reflection. It offered an alternative model for digital pedagogy in communication design—one where platform structure, participation, and authorship were intertwined. In doing so, it contributed to emerging discourse on how creative practice can be reshaped through participatory digital environments under conditions of isolation and disruption.

4. Participatory Design and Co-Creation: The project is also situated within a broader conversation around participatory design, which reframes users as co-creators. Bjögvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren (2012) describe participatory

design as "infrastructuring"—designing conditions for ongoing collaboration rather than fixed outcomes. Manzini (2015) likewise emphasises the social and ethical dimensions of co-creation, especially in contexts of uncertainty. Here, communication design serves not only as interface design but as the structuring of shared authorship.

5. Post-Digital Publishing and Speculative Practice: The project is informed by critical debates in post-digital publishing, which explore how digital and print technologies coexist, overlap, and recombine within contemporary design practice. Cramer (2014) defines the post-digital not as a move beyond the digital, but as the "messy state of media, arts and design after their digitisation"—a condition in which digital tools are no longer novel, but fully embedded in cultural production and subject to creative repurposing.

Research context

In this space, designers reject the techno-positivist logics of "new media" and instead work with the hybrid aesthetics and infrastructures of digital–analogue convergence. Cramer describes this as a "post-digital hybridity" that values materiality, imperfection, and process, situating media as sites of interrogation rather than neutral containers. This approach is particularly evident in publishing, where the boundaries between author, interface, and reader are increasingly blurred.

By combining participatory authorship, interface constraint, and responsive identity systems, **Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine** extends contemporary discourse on digital publishing, communication design, and collaborative narrative practice. It contributes to the field by foregrounding the role of interface not simply as medium, but as structure of collaboration, and by proposing a model for design-led research into co-authorship in the post-digital age.

Research context: practice review

Practice review: This project emerges from a growing body of experimental communication and interaction design practices that explore new ways of engaging with text, authorship, and collaboration in online environments.

These practices often challenge dominant web formats—such as scroll-based, top-down, single-authored content—by introducing constraints, co-authorship, and alternative temporalities of reading. These concerns are central to the development of **Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine**, which foregrounds participatory storytelling and constrained, time-based authorship.

The following examples form part of a broader practice-research context within which **Boook. Land: The Speaking Machine** is situated. Together, they reflect current approaches to interface, authorship, and digital reading that this project engages with and contributes to.

1. [Making as Thinking](#) **(Tessa Modi and Jon Lucas)**
This speculative website investigates the digital reading experience through constraint, minimalism, and iterative collaboration. The designers imposed self-limitations (e.g. no aesthetic styling), allowing the structure to emerge through a process of back-and-forth making. Like **The Speaking Machine**, the work treats authorship and interaction as open-ended and evolving, using design constraints—such as limited formatting—to foreground process over resolution. Both projects exemplify design-as-process rather than fixed outcome..

2. [Schemas of Uncertainty](#) **(Callum Copley, Danae Io, Ben West)**
Designed around the themes of prediction and ambiguity, this digital work incorporates flickering text and dispersed layouts to reflect indeterminacy. The interface functions as both form and content, with structural instability reinforcing conceptual concerns. Similarly, **The Speaking Machine** uses interface constraints to embed uncertainty into the narrative process itself, suggesting new roles for interaction design in shaping speculative storytelling.

3. [Developments](#) **(Antoine Roux and Bildung)**
Developments replaces infinite scroll with a tap-through interface that prioritises rhythm, pacing, and embodied interaction. Designed for clarity and attentiveness on mobile devices, it challenges habitual digital reading patterns. Like **The Speaking Machine**, it experiments

Research context: practice review

with time-based structuring of content, and reconsiders how users move through narrative space in constrained, sequential ways.

5. [On Publishing](#) (Will Ruby, Chris Hamamoto, Jon Sueda)
A digital reimagining of a cancelled Riso-printed book, this project translates material publishing conventions—such as gutters, folios, and page transitions—into a web-native environment. It foregrounds hybridity between print and screen, temporary and archival. **The Speaking Machine** shares this dual commitment, offering a platform for ephemeral, processual participation that is ultimately preserved as a permanent digital artefact.

6. [Secret Story Network](#)
This WhatsApp-based collaborative fiction project adopts a low-tech, high-engagement

model for real-time co-authorship. Its conversational, familiar interface supports informal storytelling in a format that is both immediate and distributed. Like **The Speaking Machine**, it privileges simplicity, accessibility, and live contribution, demonstrating how collective authorship can be fostered through minimal infrastructure and direct interaction.
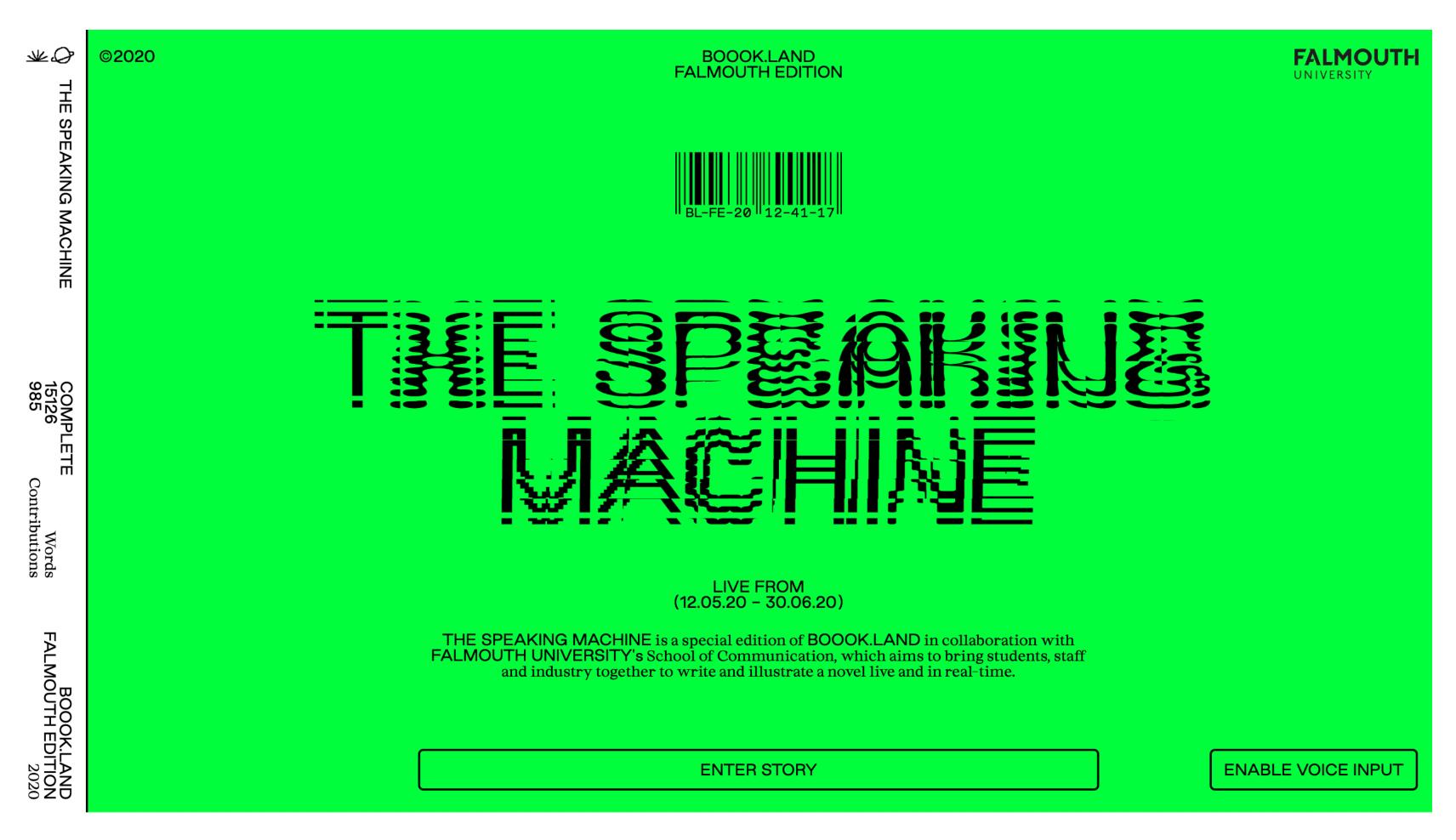
7. [Breaking Bad as a Novel](#) (Brock Kenzler)
This Tumblr-based project reinterprets a complex television narrative through a traditional literary lens. By using serif fonts, drop caps, and asterisks as chapter breaks, Kenzler evokes the aesthetics of paperback novels within a digital context. "Standard web fonts like Times New Roman and Baskerville really nailed that classic novel vibe for me," he notes (Bennet, 2020). Like **The Speaking Machine**, the project treats interface and typography as storytelling

tools, not just decoration.
These projects collectively point to a growing field of design-led experimentation with reading, authorship, and interaction. **Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine** contributes to this field by foregrounding constraint, co-authorship, and identity in a live, time-based collaborative format—pushing the boundaries of what digital reading and storytelling can be.
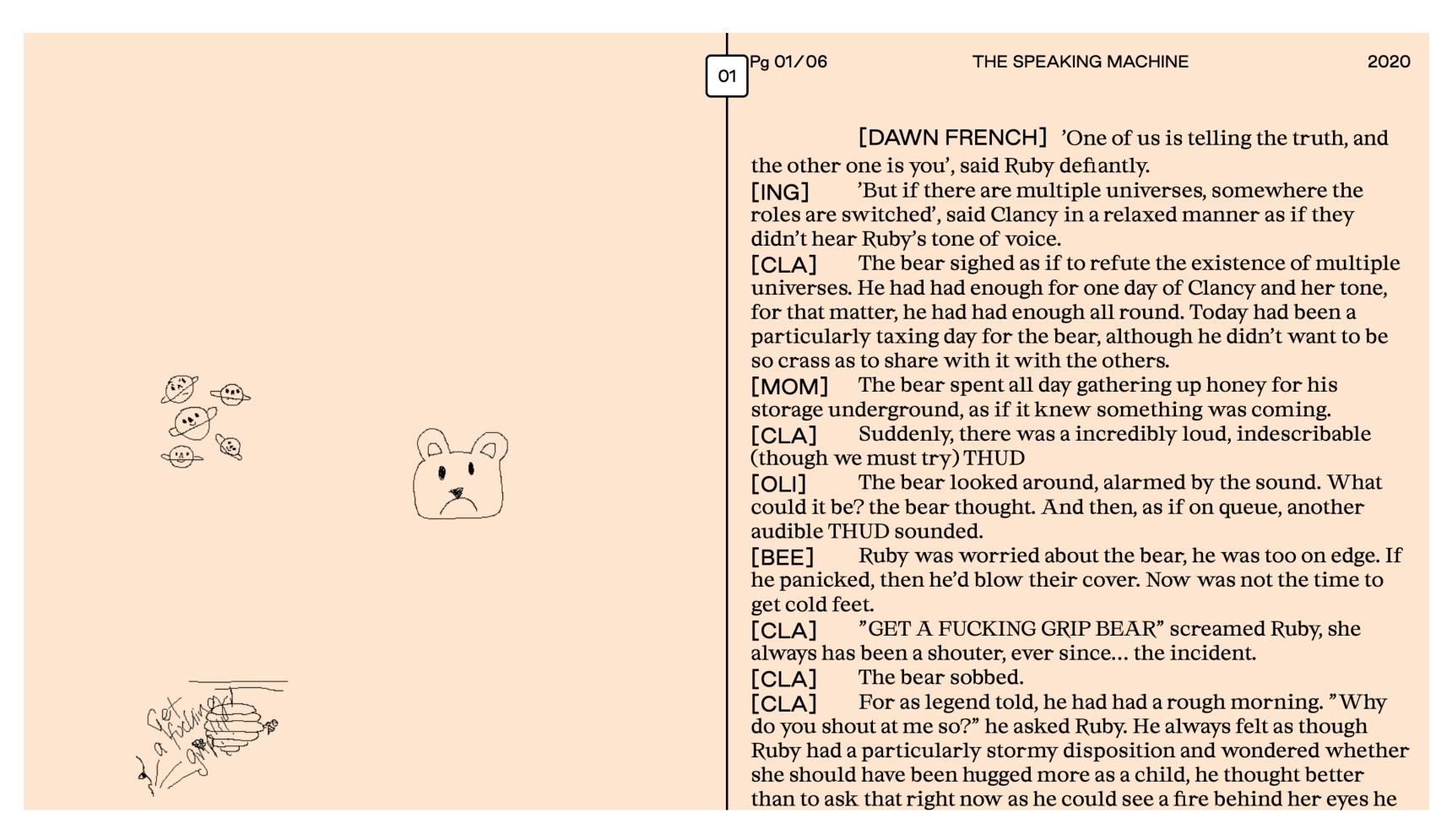
Output 1: digital platform [Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine](#) — a live, collaborative novel-writing interface

Left: Screenshot of the Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine interface, a custom-built platform for collaborative storytelling through writing or drawing. Interaction is turn-based, and the experience is amplified by a voice-responsive identity system that dynamically reflects user activity.

Output 2: online publication An open–access digital novel

[DAWN FRENCH] 'One of us is telling the truth, and the other one is you', said Ruby defiantly.

[ING] 'But if there are multiple universes, somewhere the roles are switched', said Clancy in a relaxed manner as if they didn't hear Ruby's tone of voice.

[CLA] The bear sighed as if to refute the existence of multiple universes. He had had enough for one day of Clancy and her tone, for that matter, he had had enough all round. Today had been a particularly taxing day for the bear, although he didn't want to be so crass as to share with it with the others.

[MOM] The bear spent all day gathering up honey for his storage underground, as if it knew something was coming.

[CLA] Suddenly, there was a incredibly loud, indescribable (though we must try) THUD

[OLI] The bear looked around, alarmed by the sound. What could it be? the bear thought. And then, as if on queue, another audible THUD sounded.

[BEE] Ruby was worried about the bear, he was too on edge. If he panicked, then he'd blow their cover. Now was not the time to get cold feet.

[CLA] "GET A FUCKING GRIP BEAR" screamed Ruby, she always has been a shouter, ever since... the incident.

[CLA] The bear sobbed.

[CLA] For as legend told, he had had a rough morning. "Why do you shout at me so?" he asked Ruby. He always felt as though Ruby had a particularly stormy disposition and wondered whether she should have been hugged more as a child, he thought better than to ask that right now as he could see a fire behind her eyes he

Left: Page from the final collaborative The Speaking Machine novel. Comprising 986 contributions, the illustrated narrative was created collectively over one month. The completed work is openly accessible online as a digital publication.

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Take part in Boook.Land's collaborative digital novel designed by Harry Boyd and TwoMuch Studio

THE SPEAKING MACHINE
a special edition of BOOOK.LAN
in collaboration with
...LMOUTH UNIVERSITY's Schoo
...ommunication, which aims to brin...

BIRTHLAND
A New World
THE END

LIVE FROM 01.11.2018 – 30.11.2018
2640 Contributions
56527 Words

BOOOK.LAND, FALMOUTH EDITION, is a space for collaborative storytelling(1), bringing the online world together(2) to write a novel(3). Participants continue the story using only the last few paragraphs for reference, as well as illustrating the book as it's written.

(1) SPECULATION
What if writing followed a process similar to design? Can play and collaboration be used to write a book? Can a novel be produced by hundreds of authors and illustrators all working together on the same story?

(2) PROCESS
The digital platform allows participants to take part in a live novel anywhere, anytime. By continuing the story where it was left off and illustrating it as it's being written, participants are able to collaborate with the rest of the world.

(3) OUTPUT
The final novels are unconventional, unexpected pieces born from a clash of digital and print worlds. Previous editions can be read on BOOOK.LAND.

(?) COLOPHON
BOOOK.LAND is a experiment from Harry Boyd and Twomuch Studio. This edition is a collaboration with Falmouth University and uses Good Sans and Chapter by Good Type Foundry, and GlyphWorld by Leah Maldonado.

If only you knew the tainted depths I have plundered... My journey has led me to page 11 of Google's search results.

Contribution to knowledge

This research contributes to the field of communication design by examining how platform and interface structures can support collaborative authorship in digital environments. Realised as **Boook.Land: The Speaking Machine,** the research also investigates how specific constraints—such as turn-taking and limited narrative visibility—can facilitate shared storytelling across remote and asynchronous contexts.

Through the development of a live, co-authored novel-writing platform, the project offers a practice-based case study in how interaction and identity systems can enable open-ended, multi-author participation. Rather than focusing solely on content generation, the research foregrounds the design of the conditions through which collaboration takes place. It adds to emerging discussions around post-digital publishing and co-creative pedagogy, offering a situated example of how digital tools can be shaped to support collective creative processes.

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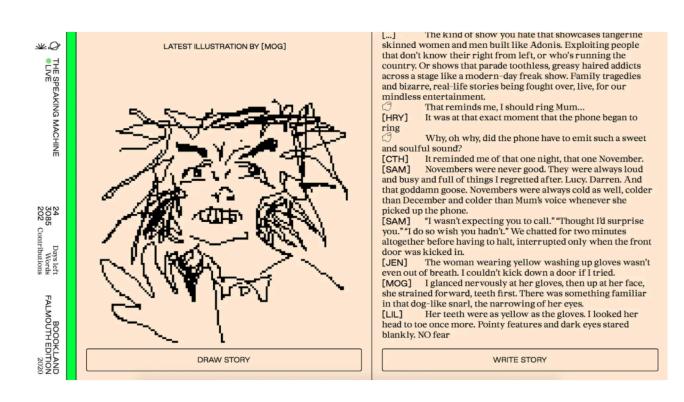Scholz, T., ed., 2013. *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*. New York: Routledge.

Appendix A: It's Nice That

The completed novel is a collaboratively written and illustrated digital artefact generated through live contributions to the **Boook.Land** platform. Launched on 12 May 2020 to all Falmouth University students, it opened with an inaugural line written by Vice Chancellor Dawn French. Over a one-month period, 986 participants contributed to the unfolding narrative, producing over 15,000 words and accompanying illustrations. The final output represents the culmination of the project's practice-led research into digital authorship, speculative publishing, and participatory storytelling. The project received national press attention and remains publicly accessible online.