Digital Livings
how new media writers do, could and will make their way in the world

a report for De Montfort University
by Chris Meade
if:book
Introduction

The groundbreaking Master’s Degree in Creative Writing & New Media at De Montfort University was launched in 2006 at a time of intense debate about the future of literature in the digital age and an explosion of activity in the book and media industries. As publishers prepare to sell downloadable e-books, games companies seek to widen their audience, and blogs, wikis and social networking sites give authors new ways to communicate with an ever more active readership, one question is unanswered: how will writers of the future earn any money? The MA is so innovative that there is no obvious career path for its graduates nor an established group of successful role models for students to look to for inspiration, so I was commissioned by Course Director Professor Sue Thomas to gather some hard data on how others earn their digital livings.

For this report I surveyed seventeen writers already working in digital media in the UK. For some of them, new media work already contributes to all or part of their income, whilst for others it still means sticking to the day job, but all are proud of the set of skills they have acquired and passionate about their creative potential.

So what is a new media writer and what skills do you need to be one? To create fiction and non fiction designed to be read on screen you need to be an excellent storyteller, but also a transliterate one, in other words able to ‘read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks.’

You may be mixing words with sounds and pictures, telling tales via emails, snippets of film and sound, or using applications on blogs and social networking sites; you may code your piece so that it happens in a different sequence for each reader; you can incorporate databases and links to other sites, turn your story into a computer game, your article into a conversation with an evolving community. Instead of deciding when the reader should turn the page, the new media writer chooses at what speed their reader should scroll down a webpage, when they click through to the next section, how long to hold them in any part of the work before moving on, and when to give them space to respond to what they read and participate themselves in writing more. New media writers don’t need to have technical skills, but it helps, and most have come to writing for the web through a fascination with the ‘affordances’ of the digital world. Most of the survey respondents I spoke to mix different kinds of freelance work or day job and hobby to earn their keep and pursue their art. They exist at various points on a continuum and their approaches and motivations are more evident in the language they use to talk about their art than the ways that they earn a living doing it:
‘I work with the unconscious, using methodologies of chance and process to make performances both in real time and in the online environment’
– Michael Atavar

‘I’m a literal artist, a poet, a writer of and in digital media, a writer of and in programmable media, a writer of and in networked media’ – John Cayley

“Web artist” is the term I use most... but then often the response is “so what do you do?””. If I can’t be bothered, I fall back on “web designer” and then there’s an “ah, right” and a vague nod
– Andy Campbell

‘I had a wonderful three years on an AHRC Creative Fellowship, thanks in good part to my connections with the trAce Online Writing Centre. I got to play again’
– Catherine Byron

‘I don’t think something’s inherently interesting, novel or subversive just because it’s interactive... and I’ve never bought into the whole utopian/neo-Gnostic, body-hating culture of the internet’ – Alistair Gentry

‘[I want my work] to endure as critical, visually sophisticated and inclusive for the participant’ – Donna Leishman

‘Randomly combining texts, yet constraining the combinations to tend towards order, is my “one trick”, and having learnt it I’ve used it a number of times in other contexts’
– Pauline Masurel

‘I describe myself as a writer/critic of hyperliterature, but “new media dabbler” would probably be more accurate... I do quite a lot of drawing/animation, and quite a lot of funny voices and manipulation of audio files. Photography and image-manipulation too. You end up doing a bit of everything’
– Edward Picot

‘In Berlin they called us Dada poets. When we argued they said, “Yes you are”. Elsewhere we were called anarchists. Elsewhere still surrealists. We were none of those’
– Lawrence Upton

‘I don’t know what to call myself. At the moment I’m describing myself as a new media writer/artist but sometimes it’s new media artist/writer... I’ve even tried new media arter/writist’
– Christine Wilks

I also contacted a number of people in publishing, broadcasting, web design and games to ask them whether they perceived a need for people with skills in new media writing and to gauge their level of interest in digital literature; their responses are illuminating and not un promising for the future of new media writers and writing. Thanks to all who participated.
Living for today

One of the first graduates from the Creative Writing & New Media MA was Alison Norrington, a published author who came to the course looking for a new direction, creatively and commercially. She has since presented at the hugely influential ‘O’Reilly Tools for Change Conference’ in New York, and although she’s back in a day job for now, is intent on making a new kind of living in a changing world for writers.

‘In terms of new media writing I have had to change the way I look at the entire process of creating a storyworld. It’s a much more 3-dimensional affair, because by creating online I have the facility to show more of the background story – to add visuals and interactivity to make the entire story more immersive. I am pitching some ideas to both Penguin and Harlequin which involve a traditional print-based story with the intention of including URLs and links within the text which will bring readers to the online element. Here they can see videos on YouTube that characters send to each other and will even become involved in a secret, but exciting new product launch. They will get to know the characters through social networking sites and rather than simply READ about what is happening, they will be able to actually SEE.

‘The old adage of ‘show don’t tell’ will truly come into play.

‘I love writing new media because it brings elements of many writing styles that I like – playwriting, film/video making, documentary and journalism. I can use my marketing head to filter out the demographics of audience/readership and try to deliver in the form that I feel will connect directly with them. I suppose as a new media writer, I feel I am more of a storyworld creator, rather than a “writer”.’

Norrington is talented, enterprising and, thanks to her MA, bang up to speed with what’s going on in digital publishing. So what chance does she have of making a digital living?

On giving up the day job or not

‘Get a paper round. It pays better’ – Pauline Masurel

Not surprisingly the first to dip their toes into the digital pond back in the seventies were writers of the avant garde. Energetic, visionary, delighting in subversion, they were not the most likely to thrive financially.

Lawrence Upton has been doing amazing things with sound and words since 1972 when he went to a presentation by artists from Føreningen Fylkingen at The Poetry Society in London. He’s still going strong.

When I meet Upton for a coffee in the Piccadilly Waterstone’s, he’s clearly delighted to have found so much interest in his work recently from a younger generation who have found him through the web. He claims that patience and persistence are
skills that have been useful in his work and earning a living has clearly been a struggle.

‘Nowadays I am working a lot with the musician John Drever. We use prepared and live visual and sound outputs. Take everything on stage and just do it. It’s going fairly well. I am happy with it and others seem happy – we went to San Expo in Plymouth and e-poetry in Paris. In particular it seems to appeal to young music fans! We started in 2004. Still going.

‘Back in 1972 I was interested in expanding what I was doing and here was an expansion I had not imagined – that day I heard a wide range (it was a long presentation) of text-sound composition, words/voices stretched, treated, bounced around the room, shattered around the room!, moving half way across the room and hanging there.’

In 1976 he formed jigsaw, ‘not using new media as such, but it was cross-disciplinary, experimental and so on. We tended to use live voice and improvisation. To take “multivoice poetry” and hit it with “sound poetry” as we’d met it.’

For many years Upton worked as a school teacher. ‘I’d been doing poets-in-schools already. I made sure that I was pulling my weight in a suddenly acquired family – a missus, two youngish children and a cat.’

How does he earn a living currently? ‘Ha! I earn it with great difficulty, a bit here and a bit there, but it is becoming very difficult and worrying... There is an asymmetrical relationship between what I do and what I earn – maybe 40 or 50 per cent of what I do is new media.’

He works freelance ‘with combinations’ and his biggest problem has been ‘trying to get together the means to stay alive while I make new work’, so it’s excellent news that since our interview Upton has been awarded a three-year AHRC fellowship at Goldsmiths College. His words ring out through the entrepreneurial hype of the web:

‘If possible don’t allow the desire to earn a living to corrupt what you are doing. For me, creative writing and new media are just other ways of naming poetry in the broadest sense; and it is my belief that one cannot be a worthwhile poet whilstbullshitting’ – Lawrence Upton

Two longstanding and highly regarded creators have decided to stick to more conventional day jobs to pay the bills, giving them a different kind of freedom to work as they please on their digital projects.
Peter Howard has been writing and building high quality hypertext poetry since 2000 when he decided on a whim to buy Macromedia Flash 4, but he also has a day job as an electronics and software engineer. His ambition is, ‘that web art will be recognised as a genuinely new form and my works will be acknowledged as some of the innovators in the field. (Well, one can dream)’.

And he’s under no external pressure. ‘If I feel like creating something and I have an idea, then I set to work.’

Edward Picot works as practice manager for a GP’s surgery; it hasn’t stopped him developing an impressive body of his own new media work and curating the Hyperliterature Exchange, an important showcase of electronic writing, as well as using his skills for other uses. ‘I designed the website for my surgery for example... knowing something about computers and digital media is enormously helpful in all walks of life these days.’

The most obvious benefit of the web is that it now costs nothing (and takes less time) to do all kinds of things that used to cost a fortune. If you have the means to survive in other ways, you can fill your free time with digital creativity, potentially develop a serious reputation for it and make lots of friends, without the need to mortgage your house to buy kit or fund print runs of publications.

Computers can also allow us to work in ways that suit us. Andrew Oldham is a dynamic and highly successful writer for TV, film and radio, a performer, lecturer – and the only

Poet Laureate for Bolton Town Centre ever. His website provides ample evidence of Oldham’s successes on the page and all kinds of screens. In 2003 he became disabled. When I asked him for a photo of himself at work he replied: ‘I work in bed, so it wouldn’t be a pretty sight!’

As for me, I’m writing this report on my laptop in the garden at ten o’clock at night, I have been collaborating with another writer via Skype as he travels across the USA, and am not a pretty sight myself, but enjoying the flexible working practices of the web.
On deciding when to charge for what

For those who earn an income from their art, the issue is what exactly they get paid for. What is worth doing for free to promote your work and what is the work itself?

Digital artworks by Michael Atavar have been shown at the Hayward Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum and through Artsadmin, the producers and promoters of arts projects based at Toynbee Hall in London. This year, 2008, he’s been to Brazil as part of the Artists Links programme, funded by the British Council. When I contacted Michael concerning our research, this was his reply:

‘The way I make a living in writing – your essential question here – is by being reimbursed for my ideas and contributions. But are you paying artists to answer the questions in this document? You see – it’s an interesting dilemma. I think this highlights the central issue of how we support art practice and our ability as individuals to survive within the art market. I’m playing here – of course I could easily answer your questions, but I’d be very curious how other practitioners have responded to your call.’

Atavar was the only person to raise this, but it’s a very fair point. All in this field face the thorny issue of when to charge and what to do for free, and so many requests for advice and time are couched in terms of good causes that artists and writers are supposed to feel they ought to support.

How does Atavar earn? ‘I work as a consultant, particularly addressing issues around creativity. Also as a mentor and workshop leader. Plus I continue to develop my art practice. I work out of Oval House, in London. Plus I have a freelance practice. The different elements run in parallel – new media work developing into performances, essay writing, visual art. It’s all part of the same process. I sell ideas.’

For more of his advice you’ll have to buy the book: see www.how-to-be-an-artist.com

New Media Writers make their way as part of the ‘mesh economy’ of independent freelancers working in clusters in a medium where it is notoriously hard to be sure which activities and skills will earn money.

There are no easy answers to the vexed question of monetisation, but whereas some well delineated and rewarded career paths are vanishing before our eyes, those writers who never expected to make a living from their work now have many new digital ways to publish and market themselves for free.

‘Know your rights. Dedicate yourself to establishing the principle that everyone who works or provides service in any way deserves a fair wage, equal to the wage paid to any other person doing the same work at their level of experience...
Don’t be paranoid – it’s unlikely anybody really wants to plagiarise your idea for a short story to become a millionaire – but keep sight of the principle that everyone’s mental and physical labour, and everyone’s good inventions and ideas, have value*
– Alistair Gentry
The Academe Team

Perhaps the only secure(ish) full time jobs in new media writing are in higher education, and there are very few of those. John Cayley, a major figure of the British new media avant garde, is now Visiting Professor of Literary Arts at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Cayley has been in the UK recently, showing examples of his prizewinning electronic poetry at an event at Tate Modern and announcing plans for a Digital Writing network involving Brown, The Slade, Tate and University College London.

Donna Leishman is Course Director for the BA (Hons) in Illustration at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee. She dates the start of her interest in writing to 1999, when she was working commercially in new media design where she says, ‘a gulf appeared in my artistic personal development and the paid client driven work’.

In 2000/2001 she completed a Masters in Design, which generated her piece Red Riding Hood, and set her upon a research field and practical path quite distinct from commercial work. As a junior designer at a Scottish New Media agency Leishman had begun to experiment with Macromedia Flash and this started independent experiments on top of her new media ‘day job’, which eventually led her to return to education to provide space to experiment, direct, produce, reflect and focus her artwork.

During her Masters study (2000–1) and as part of summer recess she approached a Flash Animation studio in New York City where she worked full-time for four months in a frenetic creative and technical environment.
On her return she produced Red Riding Hood and started a PhD. Leishman earns her whole living as a full-time academic; all her new mediawork is produced as research projects with a variety of funding.

‘Get published early – which is not normally when you feel confident to do so’  
– Donna Leishman

Academe doesn’t suit everyone and has its frustrations. Catherine Byron has been a poet, a Literature Development Worker and until recently was teaching part time at Nottingham Trent University. Now she’s off to Donegal where she’s not assuming she’ll write at all.

‘The “creative research” path that I was able to take as a poet working within the university system did foster the two new media pieces that I am still pleased with: Renderers and Gloryhole. But outside that sheltered (creatively as well as financially) space, any writing that I do in Donegal will be the sort I started out doing: pen on paper, and purely(!) for itself. No business model at all. And broke, but not exploited.’

Andy Campbell is concerned that digital writing may be over-studied and under-enjoyed. ‘Trying to find good examples of similar work [to mine] on the web can be depressing; the ratio of research/theory documents to actual quality work in the field is embarrassing.’

But what about life in what’s known as ‘The Real World’? With the publishing and broadcasting sectors desperate to find ways to exploit the digital, and aware that their industries could die if they don’t, surely the time has come for new media writing to reach a wider audience and attract some commercial funding. Or has it?

A Brave New World – coming soon?

Tim Wright is out there in the real world, with his own company XPT, and undertaking consultancy work for major organisations as well as building an impressive CV as a writer. If anyone looks set to take a career in new media writing to new heights, it would be him. But in the real world you have to be realistic.

‘Currently I do a lot of what you might call corporate or professional media work, writing and consulting for the BBC and Channel 4 on “multiplatform” projects. I also do fair amount of teaching/training/lecturing. So in terms of delivering my own original “new media” work I’ve not been very successful lately. However, the BBC/C4 projects do have new media elements to them that require me to continue to flex my muscles, as it were, and I do have two or three personal projects on the go at any one time. In terms of revenue, roughly 60 per cent of it comes from broadcaster consulting and development, a further 20 per cent comes from teaching/speaking and 20 per cent comes from development/arts funding for personal projects.
‘Obviously every other year or so this ratio changes when I find supporters and funders for one of my own works. The key is not to let the consultancy/development work to completely take over.’

Wright had been working as journalist writing about computers and technology since 1989 and started to see how personal computers equipped with CD-ROM drives could deliver really interesting multimedia experiences, not just in the workplace but also in the home. As a magazine editor he was excited by the potential for doing away with paper and ink and developing episodic digital publications without incurring massive print and distribution costs.

He quit his job as a print journalist to join NoHo Digital full time as editorial director in 1995 and met Rob Bevan with whom he formed a company. On a Performing Arts Lab multimedia lab in 1998 he met contacts at the Banff New Media Arts Centre in Canada. Later he was appointed Digital Writer-in-Residence for the trAce Online Writing Centre’s Writers for the Future project, funded by NESTA.

‘Performance and presentation skills can be really useful in the development of work and bringing audiences to it. I try to never miss an opportunity to re-present my work in different contexts and locations so that I’m always rehearsing and reversioning what I’m saying and the order in which things get said or shown. This is a really good way of testing your work, stretching it and making it “new”. It’s always too a great way to talk yourself into actually delivering the next step, daring yourself to take on the next technical challenge’ – Tim Wright

Wright describes himself as a digital writer and new media producer, he works a day or two a week with XPT, usually with co-founder Rob Bevan and sometime two or three collaborators scattered around the globe. ‘I then work a day or two for the BBC at the moment as a freelancer working at White City usually with a quite large programme team. I’ve started writing radio plays so I suppose slowly I’m being considered as a writer rather than a geek who can help you make your printer work. To be honest I have no ambitions in other fields. In fact I sense that I was drawn into new media because I really didn’t want to go into conventional publishing or broadcasting as a career.’

Online it is possible to present yourself exactly as you wish, without mediation, but there can be consequences to this especially if you are keen to pursue a specific career path. You need to be very clear about what you want; if you need acceptance and status in a specific field then you must focus us that and present yourself within its rules and traditions.

Keep an eye on your ‘Google footprint’. What can people find out about you by googling your name, and is it the portrait you currently wish to paint of yourself?
**Digitaliterati**

Kate Pullinger, who worked with Sue Thomas to design the MA in Creative Writing and New Media and now teaches on it, is one of very few literary novelists who has also built a strong reputation for her new media works such as _Inanimate Alice_ and _Flight Paths_, made with Chris Joseph. She’s managed to keep a foot in both camps and is a powerful ambassador for new media writing and authors’ rights in the digital age.

In 2002 Pullinger began a year-long research fellowship with the trAce Online Writing Centre, funded by the AHRC, ‘Mapping the Transition from Page to Screen’. This year was crucial to her development as a new media writer as she was given the tools and resources to learn what she needed and meet people she needed to meet. In 2004, at a TextLab workshop organised as part of Writers for the Future, she met fellow participant Chris Joseph and found the collaborator she needed. The rest is digital history.

‘I learned a lot during that fellowship, including basic html, etc, but for me it is more about ideas and stories, and these are skills I’ve been developing since I was a child, when I first became interested in writing stories. Having spent time learning how to write for film has been very useful in terms of understanding how to write for a screen, or for a medium that uses image and sound as well as text. My digital writing has definitely helped me get other work relating to new media, for instance, the work I’ve done in the games industry has largely come about because of ‘Inanimate Alice’.

Pullinger monetises her work through a combination of Arts Council funding, private backers, and work for the games industry, supported by a 0.5 Readership in New Media Writing at De Montfort University. She is currently involved in trying to get a commission off the ground from a traditional book publisher for a fiction for mobile phones.

She says that ‘finding enough time for everything’ is her largest problem of all, but she finds none of it dull. ‘To be able to continue working is the most important thing – publishing books and working in new media and being open to whatever the future brings.’

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The question seems to be when and what exactly the future will bring? Publishers we spoke to had very different opinions about the speed of change. Some are confident that the future is now.

‘In 2008 pretty much every publisher will be focusing much of their efforts in the digital space on eBooks; this is the most readily monetisable and the UK scene is currently going through a transitional moment where eBooks are entering the mainstream (in publishing circles at least)’

– Michael Bhaskar, Digital team, Pan Macmillan
Publishers are impressed by the massive market in Japan for mobile novels. *Keitai bunko* has exploded in popularity over the the past five years and the business was worth 60 million euros in 2007 according to *Monocle* magazine (April 2007). In China there are massive sites dealing in episodic fiction available for a fee to download. What next? Could [www.reallybadpoetry.com](http://www.reallybadpoetry.com) become the next global user-generated phenomenon?

On the whole, publishers assume they will take existing content and adapt it for new settings. The problem is that editorial and digital departments are not connected, so thinking about platforms and content doesn’t happen in a joined-up way. But there’s beginning to be a real interest in writers and programmers coming up with ideas for multi-platform fictions and work in which the new media element is central to the authors’ creative vision. In 2006 students on the course joined forces with Penguin Books to produce the notorious *A Million Penguins* wikinovel, a work by 1,500 authors produced amid the chaos of a wiki open to the world. No revenue, but lots of positive reputation-building.

Another major publisher, of children’s books, magazines and much more, is uncertain about when the market for digital literature will grow. Memories linger of the CD-ROM explosion that failed to take place in the 1990s – but there are other markets which could be immense.

‘Already we at Scholastic are delivering interactive digital teachers’ resources for whiteboard use online as part of a magazine subscription where before we would have provided print-based and static resources. However, the “false dawn” of consumer CD-ROM publishing is an issue here: then origination costs were simply too high for the nascent market for these, and it was easy to lose your shirt’

– Kate Wilson, CEO Scholastic UK

Emma Barnes, CEO of the independent publisher Snowbooks, a young, print-based publishing house with a web-savvy marketing strategy, certainly has her eye on the market for certain kinds of new media writing in a changing scene for traditional books.

‘Yes, I think I would be interested in looking at such work – but although the delivery method might be innovative, I’m looking for the same sort of writing. So: linear text, no pictures, definitely no flash (can’t search, only liked by web designers not people, or at least not me), not experimental fiction. Will still be interested in good, well written stories – but if they’re delivered in an interesting way, great. For instance our zombie trilogy was originally written for serialisation on the iPod, so short, catchy, pacey chapters. Works great as an A-format paperback too!

‘Bear in mind that the Kindle etc is black and white and will be for some time, so whilst I think the ebook revolution is just round the corner, I’m less convinced about full colour multimedia stuff. Great for promoting current writing; less likely to be something I could make money out of on its own.’
Beyond publishing, literature organisations funded by Arts Council England are very aware of how much their art form is being transformed in the digital age, and keen to respond to this. Some organisations are ahead of the game, others desperate to come up to speed, all want to know about new developments.

‘It seems to me that the media world is divided at the moment – those who know masses about technology, but on the whole don’t get their message across to the other half who are living in some version of the Stone Age regarding technology’ – Ursula Owen, founder of Virago Books and chair of the Free Word centre for literature, literacy and free expression, due to open in London in 2009

‘Spread the Word’ is very interested in working with new media writers and digital artists. It would help us if there was an agency through which we could find them. We would be interested in exploring the idea of some kind of residency with a new media writer and also offering them teaching work on our programme. I think there’s huge potential in the class room and schools for artists working in these ways’ – Emma Hewett, Director, Spread the Word, Literature Development agency

if:book has just completed read:write, a research project commissioned by the Literature Department of Arts Council England on the digital possibilities for literature, and, funding constraints notwithstanding, it’s clear that ACE is expanding its horizons to incorporate digital culture into its view of the literary world.
Blogs, e-books, web, ARGS and whatnots

But what are the born digital markets for writers thinking about media platforms and possibilities?

Along with his wife, Andy Campbell is co-director of arts/media One to One Productions. They are the only employees of the company, although sometimes he hires freelancers for some jobs. He earns his money developing websites, web applications, multimedia interfaces, editing films/doing film effects and producing print design work.

‘All of my income is related to working with new media. I have recently earned money by doing a talk and virtual lecture at De Montfort, selling an article about “digital writing” to a magazine, and producing a new Dreaming Methods piece for an online exhibition of “video/net.art”.’

Although he’s convinced his work with fiction complements his commercial activities, he’s also downbeat about the potential to make money from his digital fictions. ‘I would say that it’s probably not realistic at the moment to consider it a career option in itself. It isn’t even regarded as an “artform”, more of an “emerging artform”, which means the “boundaries” of it, as it were, haven’t yet been defined – or so the general populous of the internet seems to believe. There are also some forthcoming major moves in the publishing industry that I think are yet to come – new e-book formats, screen-reading software and so on, which I think may have to happen before “new media writers” (or “new types of authors” as I’ve heard on telly and radio recently) can seriously consider the possibility of a career.’

Christine Wilks is a second-year student on the MA in Creative Writing and New Media but has extensive experience in the field. She works freelance developing e-learning content, designing/co-designing online courses and teaching creative media workshops. ‘It fluctuates from year to year, but I would say that over the past two years all of my income has been related to my work in new media in one way or another. Mind you, I don’t have fantastic levels of income, partly because my income-generating work is on a part time basis. Recently I’ve been approached to run workshops specifically in new media and online social networking.’

The blogosphere booms and those who know how to write pithy pieces and set up blogrolls will be in demand as companies feel they need a blog to give energy to their
static web 1.0 website. These kinds of skills are a very useful accomplishment to add to any CV. But for those who make a living writing copy, things aren’t so promising.

**William Shaw** has written feature articles for many national papers and magazines. His first book, *Travellers*, was an oral history of Britain’s New Age Travellers, that was followed in 1994 by *Spying in Guru Land*, an account of a year spent as a member of several British religious cults.

Recently he has been setting up online story sites and projects like [www.217babel.com](http://www.217babel.com) and 41 Places [www.41places.org](http://www.41places.org) which embedded 41 stories into the fabric of the streets of Brighton, each one in the place where the story occurred. Shaw says the web has knocked a huge hole in journalism: ‘The model of how writers get paid has suddenly changed, but nobody knows what the new one is or what they think they're doing – nobody yet knows how they’ll get paid.’

He's optimistic that there will be a model found though – eventually. ‘The web delivers to advertisers all sorts of things that hard print can’t: more information, the ability to reach exactly who you want to and provide so much information. I realised that when it dawned on me that American Apparel had lodged its brand in my mind entirely through banner ads online.’

In the non-fiction side of educational publishing there seems to be a recognition of the growing need for new media writers:

‘I shared your email with various colleagues here. I've had a couple of responses. First of all our Commercial Director wrote: “It makes a lot of sense to me. It also makes considerably more sense for journalistic/non-fiction rather than fiction (from a demand side, it is certainly where consumers are in the online space) but the creative element lies in the development of digital specific enhancements.”

‘Secondly, the Director of Chambers Harrap wrote: “Possibly of interest as writing for online use at least certainly requires different skills, but he seems to be talking mostly about fiction. Of less relevance for traditional reference material but what I do think is interesting is to come at the problem from a fresh perspective of writing expressly for the digital medium, rather than shoehorning print product into digital footwear. Writers who think in this way and exploit the opportunities for doing things differently would be an asset, even for “light” reference titles like some of ours.”

‘So pretty positive response here, but, probably because of the balance of our publishing, much more concerned that non-fiction is covered than fiction. I hope this is helpful’

– **Philip Walters**, Chief Executive, Hodder Education Group
Dan Hon is CEO of SixtoStart, the Alternate Reality Game company responsible for PerplexCity, a game written by a team including Orange prize-winning novelist Naomi Alderman and Penguin’s www.wetellstories.co.uk, an impressive set of experiments in digital literary hybrids run over six weeks in April 2008. He was one of the last people I contacted about this research and the first to sound positively desperate for the right kind of digital writers.

“We’re a young, expanding company with a number of projects in development and production, one with Channel 4, one with the BBC. We’ve found with all of these that good writers that understand the medium are hard to find.

“We had a small team of writers who worked on PerplexCity. Getting a team for the next project we were encouraged to look at TV writers, used to working with existing brands, but it’s difficult talking to the agents at traditional agencies; they don’t necessarily understand the new medium, some don’t see its potential and access to top talent is hard because there’s still a stigma attached to writing for the online world.

“It’s been hard for us that there isn’t an agency with experience of that medium. And we are certainly interested in individual writers coming to us with ideas. We’re also aware of the issues that led to the Writers’ Strike in the US. We don’t go for a buy-out fee – we’re open to profit shares.’

It’s clear that there is a growing demand for the kind of transliterate skills the MA in Creative Writing and New Media is teaching – the question is how fast is it growing?

Naomi Alderman says, ‘I earn my living from a mix of novel-writing, journalism, writing online Alternate Reality Games and a bit of editing/corporate writing. The new media stuff accounts for 20 per cent of my income in 2008/09, but in previous years has been up to 80 per cent of my income.’ She can see an immediate market opening up for digital enhancements for ‘conventional’ literature being sold in e-book formal, but ‘stories written to be read on the networked screen will take longer – or the demand for them will... I think we’re talking about a decade or longer from now, but I think it’ll happen.’

David Varela is a playwright and author who worked on PerplexCity. He says, ‘There’s certainly an increasing demand for fiction writers with digital experience. More and more projects are cropping up, though there doesn’t seem to be a coordinated marketplace just yet – jobs tend to be stumbled upon or stumbled into. Maybe this is because so many projects are initiated by start-ups or small teams that necessarily come from under the radar.

‘So yes, it’s a burgeoning area, but finding interesting projects can still be a struggle. The periods between projects are shrinking, at least, but I think most digital writers need to have an additional revenue stream to pay the bills.’
Living Together

Transliterate writers come in all shapes, some with lots of technical expertise, others with none. Rapid changes in technology and the business models in which they are utilised make it hard for isolated individuals to keep up. So writers need a means to showcase their work, to find a range of potential partners for full on creative collaboration, but also for writing and technical support, production and marketing skills. There are many online communities of writers on the web. The trAce Online Writing Centre provided a key point of contact from 1995 until its closure and archiving in 2005, and the Electronic Literature Organisation still performs a similar service in the USA. Perhaps UK writers would benefit from a more formalised cluster where they could work together to:

- share contacts, skills and knowledge
- create a portfolio of good quality new media work
- showcase that work online and in live performances

To do this involves establishing some protocols about how members of the group agree to work together, to cost projects, credit each other’s input and provide a reliable service to their clients, be they funders, sponsors, publishers or commercial companies. But then collaboration is an essential element of the new media toolbox.

A writers’ exchange could help its members swap tips on marketing and distribution mechanisms on the basis that together they are better placed to become the ‘amplified individuals’ of the meshed, problem solving work force described by future forecasters like Andrea Saveri of the Institute for the Future. In a more distributed professional world there will be many opportunities for multi-skilled writers to market their creative skills, promoting themselves and each other in a tomorrow of togetherness.

And they could also help each other establish more direct means to make money online. Web watcher Kevin Kelly, a founder of Wired magazine, has recently proposed that in the age of the Long Tail, a creator needs to acquire only 1,000 True Fans to
collaboration
make a living (see www.kk.org). Many thousands of people may be able to access your work for free, but if that attracts a small proportion of those to become devotees prepared to pay proper money for personalised work like signed, limited editions, and with fewer middlemen to feed between maker and consumer, it may not be long before there’s a living wage growing in your PayPal account.

**William Shaw** has experimented with that approach, producing one-off books via *Lulu.com*, with limited financial success so far but high hopes for the future. Kelly defines a true fan as ‘someone who will purchase anything and everything you produce... They bookmark the eBay page where your out-of-print editions show up. They come to your openings. They have you sign their copies. They buy the t-shirt, and the mug, and the hat. They can’t wait till you issue your next work.’ It’s not hard to find such people if you’re J.K. Rowling, Banksy or Radiohead, not so easy if you’re... you.

But no group will work if it tries to hammer square pegs into round holes. Those who don’t want to tangle with the agendas of corporate clients, arts or educational funding need to be clear with themselves and their colleagues about that. Whatever decisions we each take about our route to earning a living, all can enjoy the amazing affordances of digital culture which puts into our hands the means to create freely, how and what we want.
Make it New!

At the beginning of this research we sent questionnaires to 21 people who have been engaged in new media writing or connected activities. Of those only four failed to reply. We wanted to ascertain the level of income they were generating from their writing and to what extent their experience in new media writing had affected their careers.

Of our sample of 17:

- 12 are employed in work that to some extent relates to their new media writing skills
- 10 are earning all or a sizeable part of their income from new media writing
- ALL 17 expressed the opinion that their skills had been of benefit to their lives and/or careers

but still 7 gave advice to those contemplating a career in this sector to ‘stick to the day job’.

And yet those involved in publishing, broadcasting and commissioning new media seem more optimistic than the makers of it, if still cautious about the growing need for transliterate creators to help transform our culture and existing media industries in the age of the web.

A big question is whether those who have been drawn to the web as a personal space where their own individual creative voice can be expressed without mediation, intervention or much monetisation will be interested in jumping through the hoops of potential employers in the circus of the professional world.
For those wishing to build their own digital living, some messages are coming through loud and clear.

‘Be prepared to create your own opportunities. You may find your source/s of income are around the edges of your main area of creative interest. It’s an experimental field, so be flexible and inventive, and be prepared to learn, learn, learn – never stop learning!’
– Christine Wilks

‘Ambitions: publication, distribution and networking. I am passionate about writing and providing opportunities for others committed to writing’
– Andrew Oldham

‘Make stuff. Doesn’t matter how messy it is in the making, just do it. If it’s rubbish, delete it and start again. Don’t make excuses or simply talk about it. Make stuff. Demo or die’
– Tim Wright

‘Get yourself out there, online and in person. It is almost as important to meet people and be involved in new media networks as it is to stay at home and do the work. However, staying at home and doing the work and making it as good as possible is by far and away the most important thing, whether you work on your own or collaborate’
– Kate Pullinger

‘Keep aware of developments in software and hardware platforms for new opportunities; collaborate whenever necessary to complement your own skills; learn as much as possible about non-digital writing and arts’
– Chris Joseph
About Us

The Online MA in Creative Writing and New Media is designed for writers interested in experimenting with new formats and exploring the potential of new technologies in their writing. The course is designed by Professor Sue Thomas, writer and former Artistic Director of the trAce Online Writing Centre, and Kate Pullinger, acclaimed novelist and new media writer. It has extensive links with important initiatives including DMU’s Institute of Creative Technologies, research into digital narratives and new media writing, and the creative, digital and publishing industries. The degree is informed by contemporary thinking on transliteracy, meaning the ability to read, write and interpret across a range of media from orality through print and film to networked environments. Creative writing, indeed the very nature of text itself, is changing. No longer bound by print, there are many opportunities for writers to experiment with new kinds of media, different voices and experimental platforms, both independently and in collaboration with other writers or other fields and disciplines. Not only is writing evolving, but writers themselves are developing broader expectations and aspirations, and the course sets out to address their needs.

if:book is a think and do tank exploring the potential of new media for creative readers and writers and investigating the evolution of cultural discourse as it moves from printed page to networked screen.
www.futureofthebook.org.uk

if:book undertakes research and consultancy into the potential of the digital for literature organisation, and devises and runs literature, new media and education projects in schools and the community, experimenting with new forms of digital publishing.

If:book works closely with the Institute for the Future of the Book, founded in the USA by Bob Stein.

Chris Meade is a writer, cartoonist and Director of if:book. He was previously CEO of Booktrust and the Poetry Society.
www.chrismeadeoverleaf.com
Special thanks to the writers who gave up their time to take part in our survey.

More information about their interviews can be found at http://nlabnetworks.typepad.com/digital_livings/

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Download more copies at
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For information about some of
DMU’s related digital initiatives visit:

MA in Creative Writing and New Media
www.creativewritingandnewmedia.com

NLab for Creative Businesses
www.nlabnetworks.com

Production and Research in Transliteracy
www.transliteracy.com

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