**Breathe\_2**

Transcript of semi-structured interview with participant following their experience of Breathe by Kate Pullinger. Part of the Ambient Literature Project, Breathe (breathe-story.com) is a short story length piece of interactive writing meant to be read in a smartphone’s web browser, and features a text which changes based on the time and location of its reading. Participants were recruited through an open call that was circulated and recruited through other convenient means. Instructed to read the piece at home, participants were interviewed in person, over the telephone, or via Skype following their experience of the work in March, April, and May 2018.

After their initial agreement to participate, participants were sent instructions on how to access Breathe, how to schedule a time to be interviewed, and a few short questions to be completed immediately following their experience of the piece to serve as a memory aid for the interview. They were asked to read Breathe in a quiet place, preferably their own bedroom and that it works take about 15-20 minutes to complete. Before the interview, in addition to being provided information regarding the project and consent in writing, participants were briefed on the independence of the interviewer from the makers of the piece and assured of the anonymity of their responses.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then edited to ensure participant anonymity. Deleted sections of the interview are marked by either X’s or bracketed summaries.

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Interviewer: If you had to describe ‘Breathe’ to a friend, how would you describe it?

Respondent 2: Meditative. I would say that you kind of drift into it. You’re not quite sure what’s going on. The character is a little unclear. I felt like it saying it was a ghost story, ahead of time, was interesting. I felt like there was a certain framing to it ahead of time. You knew it was going to be ambient literature, whatever that is. You knew that it had the subtitle of ‘A Ghost Story’. The girl…

I would say that the experience was pretty smooth, it just kind of drifted. Each segment drifted in and out. It was interesting how there was no scrolling, of course.

I did have a question about it. I wasn’t sure. I was just on iPhone 5C, as I said. When it went sideways, it said, “Oops, this may not be compatible with your machine.” I was wondering if I had missed anything in the story, I don’t believe so. There were two, width and height. I went through it with height, and whenever I was doing width it didn’t really work or it said, “Oops.” Then I would go back to vertical and it would start working again. So that’s a little bit interesting. That’s always an issue with this type of project. So I’m wondering if I missed any content or not.

Interviewer: I don’t think so. I think it just gives you the warning and then it puts you right back to where you were.

Respondent 2: Right. What else would I say? I thought it was pretty… It almost felt a little out-of-body with the locational content. It made you drift a little bit. It made you more… So that was interesting, not so much that it was like, “Oh, they know where I am.” It, more, reminded you where you are in the universe, if that makes sense. That was interesting.

Then they had that little bit at the end, where you touch the wall. Touching the wall, I felt, was effective. It might have been effective, partly, coming out of that whole experience of being located. Being located, and then having someone be located. Then you touch the wall behind you. That brings in a new media, in a way, physical feeling.

Interviewer: When you were starting off the work, what did you expect from it?

Respondent 2: I think I expected it to be more dynamic. Maybe a little bit more multimedia. Expectations, I expected it to be a little bit precious. I mean that in the pejorative way. I didn’t feel like it was. I don’t tend to read a lot of fiction at the moment. I don’t know if you’ve ever read Roger Zelazny?

Interviewer: No.

Respondent 2: Anyway, he’s a new wave science fiction writer from back in the ‘70s. He plays around with a lot of poetry and weird stuff, a good writer. Anyway, the point is I was a little bit prepped – from that – to be able to get into this.

Being focused for, I don’t know, 25 minutes on the story, it’s a different experience than- As you know, when you’re online you’re reading non-fiction, you’re reading London Review of Books, you’re just reading an article. So you are focused, but it’s a different kind of focus. You’re not forced to enter anyone else’s world. Entering a world… It was a little bit like reading a Neil Gaiman novel, or graphic novel, right? You understand that.

Interviewer: What was the particular thing about the piece that made you enter that different world?

Respondent 2: The lack of introduction helped. The fact that it just, kind of, drifted into her voice was good. One thing I didn’t quite understand, I didn’t quite understand the switching to the room. I think it was a bed in a bathroom, it looked kind of like a hotel room space. That didn’t necessarily add anything to the story for me, but maybe I was missing something or it was intended to displace you. You know what I’m talking about, when it switches over and you see the room space and the other voice comes in and says negative thoughts. That was pretty interesting.

I’d say the thing I was, certainly, most surprised by was the tilting of the screen to read the two texts. I thought that was pretty cool.

Interviewer: What else came to your mind when you were reading it?

Respondent 2: Well I wrote about it in that thing, and asked you to send that to me. I would say that it felt current, so that’s good or it could be good. Relevant for today, that’s nice because sometimes you’re just like, “Why the hell am I reading this?” It felt like, kind of… You wouldn’t know this. Brooklyn Academy of Music, you ever heard of them?

Interviewer: Yes, I lived in Brooklyn for quite some time.

Respondent 2: Oh, so you’ve been to those? Did you ever get to go to those?

Interviewer: No, I actually never went there, but I lived fairly close to it.

Respondent 2: You know who Robert Wilson is?

Interviewer: No, no.

Respondent 2: Okay. He collaborated with Glass on Einstein on the Beach, that’s one of their things. He kind of does weird dance theatre bits that work about, I don’t know, 25% of the time. It was a little bit similar… Going to BAM, they had a… You would get four shows a year, or something. I did it back in the ‘90s, with my wife who was into theatre. It was new for me. So experimental.

The whole idea of figuring out what works, obviously the Ambient Literature project is playing with that concept. How is ambient literature different than multimedia? How is it different from- I’ve done some stuff, I’ll send you a link to some of the things I’ve been up to, which is kind of history based - looking at narratives. It’s kind of digital humanities type stuff. So there are old narratives that can be put into a new form. So there is that thing, which is kind of multimedia.

I did a thing on the Isle of Wight, it was like a tour guide, I stuck it into a modern interface with pictures and the wacky 19th century writing. So that was kind of fun. That’s the more graphic-oriented approach. Of course, it wasn’t original, it was somebody else’s work that I adapted. The point is that it was really visually based.

This seemed like the visual was understated. I didn’t feel like it- It was very, very, part of the story. I liked it, but it wasn’t over- It wasn’t throwing images at you.

I don’t know if you remember, you’re a little younger than me. I remember, when I first started working as an editorial assistant, I learned the Publisher program and was using 3D text and stuff until you realise, “Oh, this looks terrible. You want to use a normal font, and have it make sense.” You learn that understated design is a good idea. I feel like you guys didn’t, or the author, go overboard. That’s good. Could they have used sound? Sure, but I don’t know if it would have added anything. It probably would’ve been ambient in some way. It’s ambient literature so- But I don’t have the context of the other two stories yet.

Interviewer: Yes, yes. Did you find it straightforward to interact with, and figure out the mechanics of it and how to read it?

Respondent 2: Yes and no. It was distracting that, when I went horizontal, it crashed. That was annoying. It would’ve been better if it was able to respond to the shifting of… What do they call it? I’m thinking of the word for it. ‘Transposition’, I wish that it transposed. That might have been a little bit better. I understand that maybe that would’ve been technologically difficult. Maybe there is a barrier to that. I don’t know if that was something that they just did not… I don’t know if it was an error in relationship to my phone, or if it was just that they didn’t develop that.

The fact that it said, “Oops, you’re browser seems to be broken.” I actually installed Chrome because it asked for Chrome. That was distracting. It would’ve been better if the text had been changed to, “Please view vertically.” If that was possible. That took me out of the story a little bit.

It stuck with me. I think, like I said, there was a lot of resonance for various things for me, that I already wrote about in my questionnaire. That was cool. I liked it. I like the direction things are going. Like I said, I don’t read a lot of fiction right now, so that was different.

Of course, you look at something like Medium, which you’re probably familiar with. The different ways that people are approaching scrolling, and different ways of going through a story – that the New York Times is doing – that’s all interesting. I like the fact that it didn’t scroll, I thought that was cool.

Interviewer: Yes. Would you want to experience a work like this again?

Respondent 2: Yes.

Interviewer: Why would you?

Respondent 2: A few reasons, one is that it’s different from what I normally experience. Number two, I hate to say it, it doesn’t require a huge investment. I don’t read Neal Stephenson novels anymore, because they’re 1000 pages and I just can’t be bothered. So there is an element of, “Does it fit into my life?” Certainly the Breathe story fit into my life.

So there is that question of… If you think of a period- I don’t know if you meditate. Many of us would, but end up not doing it. It’s that bitesize period of five to ten minutes that you take out of your day. That’s doable. That’s an interesting thing for literature. Usually you think of literature as long form. This was decidedly short form.

One thing is, with the different pages, it kind of controlled- And with the way of moving from one page to the next, it kind of forced you to go at a certain speed. I kind of like that. Like I mentioned, I have a 10-year-old. She’ll read too fast. She’ll read too fast, and everything will mould together. That’s problematic. We all do that a little bit, so being forced to follow someone else’s pace is good.

Interviewer: If this kind of app, or content or piece, was available commercially, how much would you be prepared to pay for it?

Respondent 2: It’s a good question. Not a lot, unfortunately. One thing, I’m unemployed at the moment. In general, I would say, it would depend on how many were coming out or how much per piece. I guess you’d be paying per piece.

This might be a good answer to it. You know 80 Days, the app? Are you familiar with that?

Interviewer: No, no.

Respondent 2: It’s an app on iPad and other things. It’s basically a steampunk adaptation of ‘Around the World in 80 Days’, that’s dynamic. I paid for that, and I paid for… It’s pretty neat, you’d probably enjoy it. I paid for another one they did, that wasn’t quite so good. That was just a choose your own adventure, if you’re familiar with those? A choose your own adventure pirate story, by the same company. It wasn’t nearly as interesting a project. So maybe the best answer is that I do pay for narrative entertainment, and I enjoy that. I would say that it would be based on each piece.

For instance, I’m intrigued- I like maps, so I’m intrigued by the Cartographer Project. I can imagine myself paying $3 on an app store for that. I think that there are a lot of people doing this kind of thing, that are succeeding commercially. I don’t know how profitable it is. I think apps is probably a good way to go, that’s my guess.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you find the work to be immersive?

Respondent 2: Yes, I would say so. I would say that it certainly wasn’t… It didn’t overwhelm you with its immersiveness. It was really more like it came into your space, rather than you going into its space or playing a fantasy game or something.

I would say that it utilised… The thing that, maybe, makes it ambient storytelling is that it utilised your universe – what’s surrounding you – differently than stories that absolutely ignore who you are and where you’re going. That seemed to me, it didn’t impose an identity on you – which sometimes happens in games. So that’s kind of an interesting thought. It didn’t tell you who you were. I think that it was immersive, but it’s strange to be immersive but also be in the place where you are.

Interviewer: How did it make you think differently about your surrounding?

Respondent 2: Well it had one point where it failed. At one point it said something about [Generic Train Station Name], I mentioned that, and of course that wasn’t realistic language. I think that was the time when it failed. It correctly identified that I was in a Starbucks. It correctly identified the avenue I was on, which is better than if it had selected the street – it’s at a corner. That’s kind of interesting, if it made any prioritisation of… Obviously, if you’re in New York you could be on… I don’t know. It depends, but you emphasise avenue over street. Something like that would be interesting.

So I felt like it worked pretty well. I think it could have been far more effective. How exactly? I feel like it was nice, but it didn’t utilise it. For instance, there was no relationship between the other characters and [MY CITY].

For instance, it could have – theoretically – looked for the Museum of Fine Art XXXXXX and grabbed a particular exhibit and said, “Just like this object in this exhibit.” That might have been artificial, but it might have also been effective. Something like that. There are things that it could have used with a web crawling trick. That’s difficult, technically, but at the same time I can imagine ways in which the next generation of this will deal with things like the fact that there is a supermarket around the corner.

Interviewer: So you were saying you thought it was kind of strange that the other characters were somewhere else. Where did you think that the narrator was?

Respondent 2: Britain. The room didn’t do anything for me at all, the room didn’t do anything for me at all. I was more curious about the girl’s location. I don’t quite remember if it was specific as to what town in Britain the girl – and the guy from Syria – were working- It might have been stated, I don’t remember. They effectively created an understanding of that.

One of the things that it did well was it dealt with relationships that we all share. You know what I mean? We’re all really alert to the Syrian business. We’re all really alert to our families, without being too specific. If you think of a fortune teller running a scam, what they do is they imply things. If you’re gullible, you say, “Oh wow.” In a way, it’s utilising your ability to make connections. That’s what it’s doing, that’s the game. This did that too, and it could do it even more and manipulate you in other ways.

There is another story that… What’s it called? There is another game on the iPad that played around with narrative. It was like ‘Person Six’ or something like that, on iPad. It was kind of like that narrative where it was taking over your iPad, that was part of the concept. You could make a very disturbing version. Breathe tries not to be disturbing, it’s more connecting with you. You could also use all these things to be rather disturbing.

You think of things like the Me Too movement. There was an article in the New York Times, what it did was… The Me Too movement, it was talking about all these classic narratives that we’re all familiar with from movies. For instance. The idea that if a guy follows you around, even though you’re ignoring him, he must like you. No, he’s [bothering 00:21:16] you. So there are different ways of interpreting this. Stalking is not…

You see a movie like- I don’t know if you’re familiar with ‘Valley Girl’ or something. The guy is following the girl around. This is such a trope in movies. Now we look at that, and we’re like, “Well no, he’s a problem, he’s a problem.” You could actually pull that off, you could pull that off. You could make people uncomfortable in a way that’s not offensive, threatened for instance, if that makes sense.

Interviewer: Yes, yes. Did the piece make you think differently about your phone?

Respondent 2: About my phone?

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent 2: No sure, that’s a good question. I think I’m already moving in that direction with a lot of things. For instance, do you know what Lumosity is?

Interviewer: I’ve heard of them, I think they sponsor things on NPR.

Respondent 2: It’s a brain games app. For instance, they’ve been experimenting with a meditation thing where you press the button for your breathing. The button expands. Then, when you breathe out, you take your hand off – or vice versa, whatever. The point is interacting- Once again, that’s invading your space isn't it? The app is actually interacting with your physical experience. Thinking differently about your phone, things are starting to move in that direction anyway.

I think one thing that’s good is not overdoing the multimedia. A lot of this 3D stuff… There is a virtual reality club here in Houston, it’s cool but it’s not really immersive. There are still far better ways to be immersive without doing that. If you go to a movie where they just slap on the 3D glasses, and you’re like, “They didn’t need 3D.” Or it even makes it worse, because it’s not really that realistic. I saw the Ragnarok movie with the Hulk, the Thor movie. Of course, it was all CGI so there was no real 3D.

I think if it had been a movie where someone is walking around your house or around this coffee shop, the 3D would work because it was real. All they did was… It was like layers, like, “Okay, so Thor is in the front. Then Hulk is in the back. Then, in the back, is the crowd yelling. It’s artificial, it’s not really 3D at all, it’s three layers. I think that minimal media additions is a great idea.

Interviewer: In thinking about the level of technology that was used in making the piece, what kinds of conditional text do you think were used in the story?

Respondent 2: Conditional text? So you mean, for instance, when you tilted the screen and it responded to what you were doing? Is that what you meant by conditional?

Interviewer: More like it had the street name that you were on.

Respondent 2: Okay. So there was the place where you were, there was the street name, there was the town. I felt like that was it. Then it made a juxtaposition between the space where I was and the space where someone else is. That’s, kind of, an added space isn't it? So there was the space of the conditional text, saying where you are. Then, in a way, there was a conditional text, that wasn’t really conditional, that supplemented that.

It didn’t feel like where she was was predetermined, which is good. It felt like that was part of the ambience. Just like it wasn’t predetermined that I was sitting in a Starbucks in Houston, I was waiting to see where she was. So there was a currency to it that you don’t get in a lot of short stories that are written on paper, because it has no consciousness of you at all. Also, tapping through the story adds to that. So these simple things can be more immersive than the fancy stuff, which fails, if it fails. Sometimes it succeeds. But in the case of, like I was saying, some of these blockbuster movies - that use CGI – it’s not what it claims to be. It’s not 3D at all, it’s utilising 3D.

Interviewer: I have a set of demographic questions to ask you. The last question before you, that I have, is just about tilting your phone to reveal the text. Do you feel you were able to figure that out easily? Were you able to use that?

Respondent 2: I thought it was good because it didn’t give it to you. For instance, I think the first time I saw the phase – the phasing of the screen – I didn’t realise that you turned it and you saw a text. I think I realised that on the second or third screen like that. That led me to go back and look at what the earlier text was.

There was a certain flatness to the story. For instance, the negative thoughts ghost or creature – whatever – was not… It wasn’t like the creature in ‘Exorcist’, harassing the priest. It was more like, “Oh, here are the negative thoughts you already have in your head.” It didn’t really break down who you were. It gave you thoughts that you would normally have in your life anyway, as opposed to saying, “Fuck you.” Which would be like, “Oh.”

It didn’t do that, but I think that’s part of the reason why it’s called Breathe. She was trying to do a different thing, she was trying to keep- Almost like a poem. A poem keeps its mood, usually, on some level throughout the piece. This did that. In a way it was more poetry than it was… I would say it’s equally poetry as prose. There’s definitely a metre to it on some level.

Interviewer: Yes. Alright, terrific. I have some demographic questions. If you don’t want to answer any of them, of course, feel free not to. What is your age and gender?

Respondent 2: Sure. I am 47, and I am male.

Interviewer: What’s your highest level of education?

Respondent 2: I have a Master’s in library science.

Interviewer: Where would you describe where you’re from?

Respondent 2: I’m from Connecticut. I was born in Scotland, and moved there when I was a baby. I’m from Connecticut.

Interviewer: Do you regularly read for pleasure?

Respondent 2: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you listen to audiobooks?

Respondent 2: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you read on a phone, tablet, or e-reader?

Respondent 2: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you take part in street games, pervasive games, re-enactments, or LARPs?

Respondent 2: No. I do participate in hackathons, that might be of interest to you. So some participatory area activities sometimes. I don’t know how effective they are, but I do participate.

Interviewer: When you visit a museum, do you use their applications or games?

Respondent 2: Absolutely not. I’m not adverse to it, but I don’t. I don’t even consider it.

Interviewer: Do you use any other locative narrative smartphone apps?

Respondent 2: I’m really interested in them. I’m really interested in geolocation. I’ll send you a link to my little blog, and you can see some of the stuff like that. I think that I am intrigued by it. I think it’s a little bit like the poorly-used 3D, it has to be right.

I did do- This is very similar to ambient literature. There was an artist in New York City. I don’t remember her name. My wife might remember it, in which case I’ll email it to you. What she did is she did-

[Aside conversation 00:30:47 - 00:31:05]

So anyway. What it was, you wore… It was in Central Park, and it was location-based. You put on headphones and you travelled a prearranged path with the headphones they gave you. This was about ’95, maybe, that it was done. I enjoy all those types of experiences.

Plays that are more like happenings, where they interact with the audience and they make you move around the space. Or a house, for instance. There was a thing in New York, called ‘Sleep No More’, which was kind of hip for a while. It became too popular, then it was just a cash cow. It dealt with space as well. I think it was kind of like, I don’t know, one of the Shakespeare plays. It was like Lear but spread out over an entire building. People dressed up as ‘20s people, that kind of garbage.

I don’t remember the original question, because I got distracted. There are different forms of ambient literature. Another person who does a lot of this kind of thing might be someone like Laurie Anderson, if you’re familiar with her? You know, just really clever people do this stuff. It’s just going to grow.

Interviewer: Alright. I don’t have any more questions. Is there anything else you want to make sure that we know about it, about your experience with it?

Respondent 2: No. I’ll send you a link to what I’m up to, because it might be interesting to your group, just because it’s similar. It’s more like, “Oh, you know…” The way I’ve been thinking about a lot of these things is this… Running into something that could really benefit from new media, you know? It’s not just about inventing a new story. I’m not a fiction writer or anything. But thinking, “Oh, well you know what, this old content can benefit from new approaches.” That’s, kind of, the way I’ve been thinking about stuff. That’s similar to the ambient literature sense.

You think of digital journalism, right? Digital journalism is doing a lot of the same things that this project is doing, but for different reasons. It’s just the direction things are going. I think the one thing I would say is, “I like the fact that Breathe didn’t overkill the media.” It knew it was a story, it didn’t try to be everything. That’s a big- That’s what digital journalism does, they throw in the kitchen sink. That’s actually really useful to comment on.

Sometimes it works, and sometimes you’re just like, “This is so…” There is a concept of using a technique that doesn’t- I guess it’s like the 3D in the Thor movie. You’re utilising a technique that doesn’t add to the story.

I remember I was reading… Shoot, remember the guy who wrote ‘Native Son’? What’s his name?

Interviewer: James Baldwin, no.

Respondent 2: No, no, no, the other guy. \_\_\_[00:34:50].

Interviewer: His name is also escaping me.

Respondent 2: He also wrote the other one. ‘Black Boy’ was his own personal biography. It was a memoir, it wasn’t really biography. Anyway, the point is when he got older it turned out that he started just writing Haikus. He’s this guy who wrote, at least, two or three novels. He was capable of a lot. Of course, after that, he had a job as a professor probably. For his own creative output, he just wrote Haikus for the rest of his life. There is a lot to be said for minimalism, that’s all.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent 2: Yes.

Interviewer: Alright

Respondent 2: So where are you located?

Interviewer: I’m in Brit-

END AUDIO