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## THE CONVERSATION

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### Exquisite Cadaver: useful writing experiment or just a good game?

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What happens when a Surrealist parlour game turns into a writing exercise that's published? Can we truly call it a collaborative process? Wikimedia Commons

Recently, The Conversation published what was described as “an experiment in collaborative writing” (featuring, among others, Dallas J Baker and Nike Sulway of this present article). The question behind the experiment was an open one: What happens when you invite ten academics to write a story together?

The experiment was based on the Exquisite Cadaver game invented by Surrealist artists and poets in the 1930s. For those who do not already know, Exquisite Cadaver, also known as “rotating corpse”, is a game in which a collection of words are assembled into a piece of writing by each player in turn.

In the original game, each player added to the growing composition based on a rule. One rule commonly followed was “The adjective noun adverb verb adjective noun” rule, which dictated that each player must add a word that aligned with the syntactical element that came up during their turn. Another rule was that each player only saw the end of the previous player's contribution, so that they could not attempt to create a linear narrative.

This is a Surrealist's game, remember, linearity and realistic storytelling were not of any interest to them.

## Exquisite Cadaver rebooted

The contributors to The Conversation's Exquisite Cadaver experiment, mostly creative academics, some also published writers, were each asked to contribute 300 words to a story in progress. The contributors did not see the preceding contributions until just before their own pieces were due, which meant that each piece was written quickly and in direct response to what came before it.

None of the contributors knew who the other players were and had no contact to discuss or agree on elements such as point of view, tense, or theme, all crucial to narrative story-telling.

In this sense, there was no real collaboration, it was more an additive process, a kind of construction without a blueprint or predetermined end result. This is precisely what the Surrealists liked about the Exquisite Cadaver game – its ability to throw up unexpected results. It was never about producing a traditional story.

It is worth noting that in an experiment such as this there are two outcomes: the piece of writing itself, and the process. These are measured differently. It is readers who will measure the writing itself, and many of the commenters on The Conversation website have done so.

As for process, that will mostly be judged by the contributors. When judging process, more weight is placed on what was learnt, what skills were strengthened, what ideas were deepened than on what was produced. For writers, the process of an experiment or a game is just as important as the outcome.

This process was useful in that it took the contributors out of their comfort zone and acted as an exercise in spontaneity, creative thinking and writing with others, the last a skill many writers value.

## Writing solo, writing together

While the enduring stereotype of a writer is that of a solitary, isolated figure, many writers are highly collaborative. This is most visible in theatre and television, but even in prose fiction or poetry writers are frequent and often enthusiastic collaborators.

As the final instalments in *The Conversation's Exquisite Cadaver* make explicit, collaboration frequently occurs in a learning context, where students engage in collaborations with their teachers, and with fellow students. Writing workshops and groups are also a form of collaboration, in which many writers actively intervene in another's work.

Professional writers often collaborate with mentors and peers during the process of composition: with agents, editors and other advisors as the work progresses toward publication.

There is, too, the set of practices we might call literary *ekphrasis*: a process through which writers collaborate with pre-existing texts, often written by authors who have passed away. American poet Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010) is, in this sense, a collaboration between Anne Carson, Catullus, and Carson's brother, Michael.

A more familiar ekphrastic collaboration is Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (a literary collaboration/conversation with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*).

More traditional collaborations, in which two or more living writers work together, are less common, but notable. In Australia, Gary Crew and Philip Neilsen collaborated on *Edward Britton* (2000): Crew taking on one character and Neilsen another, after an initial planning and research period.

Stephen King has collaborated on a number of projects, including two novels written with Peter Straub. The two authors never met in person during the writing of these works, unlike Nicci Gerrard and Sean French (who co-write under the pseudonym *Nicci French*).

Gerrard and French spend months talking about their books before they put fingers to keyboard, at which point the collaboration becomes more separate and virtual: the authors have both claimed that they cannot imagine actually writing in each other's presence.

## Conclusions on collaborations

The *Exquisite Cadaver* game has been around for almost a century, played by artists, authors, and tipsy people on holiday afternoons. It is certainly a communal activity, since it requires more than one player; but in the form the game has taken here on *The Conversation*, is it collaborative?

Some of the experiment's readers thought not, as the comments on the piece demonstrated. One reader (*Jane Middlemist*) wrote that it seemed "more like a competition than a collaborative effort".

The presence of competition doesn't nullify collaboration, but the absence of communication – the act of making common – calls it into question. This project is labelled a collaborative writing experiment, and it has resulted in what, for us at least, was an interested reading experience; we enjoyed reading the fragments that came together to make a (sort of a) whole.

But it isn't really an experiment (what was being investigated?) or a collaborative writing task (given the absence of communication between the authors about the shape, context, logic, flow, voice (and et cetera) prior to publication).

It was certainly a creative jog to the practice of the writers involved, propelling them into an exploration of ways of making that achieve writerly goals within the confines of a Surrealist game.

But in the absence of frameworks (what was the principle behind the impulse to make this work? what were the selection criteria for writers? what did the initiator hope to achieve or find?) it is difficult to say more than: this was a good game.

**See also:**

An experiment in collaborative writing: ten authors, one story

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*Editor's note: Dallas will be answering questions between 11am and noon AEDT on Friday January 23. You can ask your questions about collaborative writing in the comments below.*