

CREATING DIGITAL FICTION

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One to One Development Trust's digital fiction project *Dreaming Methods* ([www.dreamingmethods.com](http://www.dreamingmethods.com)) was established in 1999 by One to One's Director of Digital Media Andy Campbell, an artist and writer. What started out as an experimental and largely unfunded venture into what might happen when writing came into contact with animation, film, audio and interactivity has now become a showcase of internationally collaborative and award-winning digital narratives, from simple virtual diaries to full blown 3D worlds.

*Dreaming Methods* evolved from the basic principle that through a computer or electronic device, fiction could be written onto digital surfaces; that it could exist alongside (or even within) computer games, timelines, video footage and complex graphical interfaces – places that a word processor couldn't reach. This challenges the reader to experience a story in a unique and engaging way, rather than from the more traditionally presented written word.

It's not been a straight forward journey. Such work is time consuming and very hard to produce, and continuously set against the relentless undercurrent of rapidly evolving platforms and technologies. It requires extreme effort to put together – a burning curiosity and passion – and, ideally, a lead “enabler” or “director” who is sympathetic to different art forms, and willing to lead on a range of software programmes, not just as a digital creative (such as a programmer or graphic artist) used to being “told what to do” or follow the brief of a client.

Campbell's first collaboration with film maker and artist Judi Alston, *Inside: A Journal of Dreams* ([www.dreamingmethods.com/inside](http://www.dreamingmethods.com/inside)) was created in 2000 and takes the familiar appearance of a traditional diary interwoven with elements of new media, such as cinematic cut sequences, mouse responsive words and illustrative video clips. *Inside* emerged from a basic story framework about an elderly character

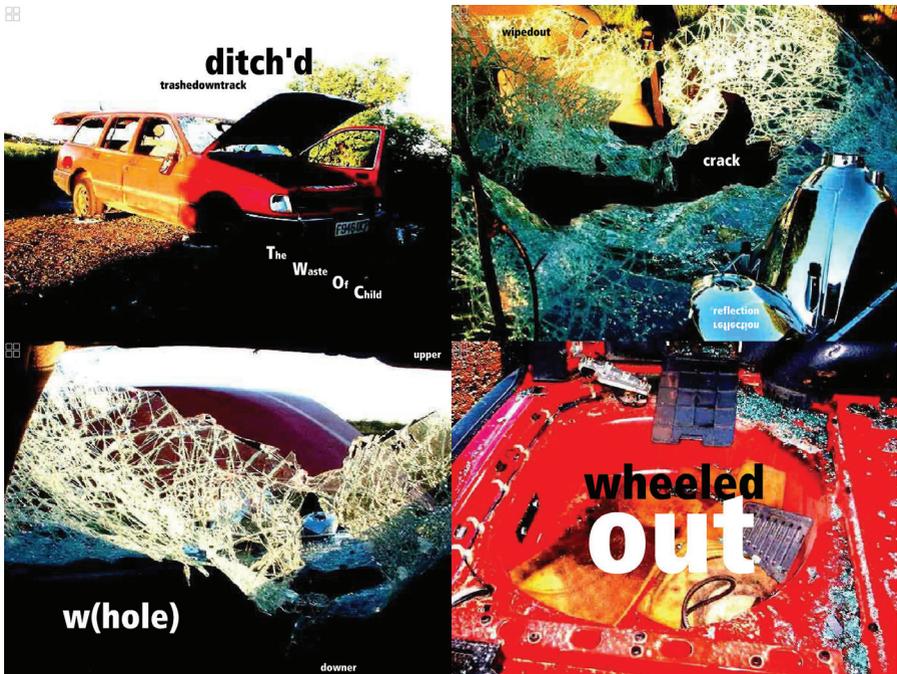


suffering carbon monoxide poisoning in his flat. The story was written non-linearly, with both artists working on short bursts of text and sourcing accompanying photographs, moving images and sounds before coming together to assemble the material on screen, rather like a jigsaw.

As collaborators, creating digital fiction has little to do with writing in the traditional sense; we're fascinated by the idea of "digitally born" narratives that carry little or no obvious baggage from the traditional writing world. Much of the work on *Dreaming Methods* was written spontaneously into software user interfaces and edited "live" as the work evolved. There were no scripts written beforehand or texts "copied and pasted" into placeholders. Textual narratives are approached as a key part of the multimedia mix rather than treated as the absolute central backbone. Text is also considered to be a powerful visual element: blurred, obscured, transient, animated, mouse or touch responsive; it has never felt static. We want to explore the transient nature of the human experience through text being at times accessible, and other

times more abstract, where the reader is challenged to understand the story, representing the complexity of the human psyche and how people explore relationships.

This approach to building digital fiction organically often results in the various media elements reacting to each other, and being tweaked and adjusted on the fly. Creating work in that sense feels, certainly at times, more like a live performance than a studios endeavour, with new possibilities discovered through discussion, spontaneous editing and on-screen experimentation. Campbell and Alston's 2003 collaboration *Joyride* ([www.dreamingmethods.com/joyride](http://www.dreamingmethods.com/joyride)) was inspired by finding a stolen car that had been crashed and written off by speed-hungry teenagers: the visual poem was created in an intense collaborative session by mixing photos with ambiguous words exploring the energy and head space of the young people who took the car.



Collaborative roles have a tendency to become blurred. The filmmaker becomes writer, the writer becomes visual editor, the musician becomes developer, the developer becomes writer – it’s a cyclical and creative process for all involved. Opportunities open for an artist used to working in one particular art form to explore their craft in a different way - film is no longer just film but a trigger for text; music is no longer just an accompaniment, but influences the direction of the narrative or triggers ideas for new visuals. Boundaries bleed. Campbell and Alston’s 2007 work *Clearance* ([www.dreamingmethods.com/clearance](http://www.dreamingmethods.com/clearance)) saw the narrative transform and change direction as the various media elements – spoken word audio, layers of video, animated texts – amalgamated, uncovering new ideas and possibilities around the work’s apocalyptic, conspiracy-fuelled theme. Despite having a complicated plot, the



production of the project was fun and playful, media being created and storylines developed in a very organic way inspired by environments and influences around us.

Digital fiction can be created to experience on mobile phones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers; for installations and exhibitions, outdoor projections and live events; for virtual and augmented reality headsets and experimental interactive devices. Platform restrictions and device capabilities have a strong effect on how a story is approached, developed and delivered; mobile phones for instance offer the potential



for location-based narratives, whereas full-blown computers open up scope for stories to be told through immersive game worlds involving intricate graphics and sound.

Following on from the 2010 work *Nightingale's Playground* ([www.nightingalesplayground.com](http://www.nightingalesplayground.com)), a new media drama set in the 1980s incorporating an atmospheric 3D environment, Campbell and Alston's most recent collaboration in 2015, *WALLPAPER* ([www.dreamingmethods.com/wallpaper](http://www.dreamingmethods.com/wallpaper)) funded by Arts Council England and Sheffield Hallam University goes a step further, harnessing the power of contemporary gaming technology to tell a story about a man exploring a hidden room in his childhood house. The reader can influence the pace of the story and how it ultimately unfolds.

*WALLPAPER* explores society's increasing interest in family heritage and satirises technology, advertising and social media. *WALLPAPER* allows us to explore the development of a digital story primarily for installation and projection, although the work will also be available for other technology. For installation there is more scope to explore and play with highly immersive sound, visuals and interactivity.

Although the fundamental truth about "a good story" remaining the most important core element of any work of fiction still ring true for us, *Dreaming Methods* carries a highly experimental strand in its blood, and isn't afraid to playfully toy around with narratives and new media. For us, digital fiction is a multi-layered medium which invites a curious but also haunting exploration, a drawing back of curtains behind curtains, lies inside truths inside lies. Stories don't just start at point A and end at point B, they ripple and twist and duplicate and rewrite and mutate and bend in on themselves, much like human memories and experiences. The results aren't always straight-forward, but then nothing really is.









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