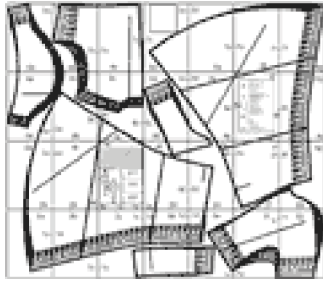


Being Creatively Autobiographical in New Media

by Christine Wilks



[▶ Fitting the Pattern](http://www.crisscross.net/elit/fitting_the_pattern.html)

http://www.crisscross.net/elit/fitting_the_pattern.html

Fitting the Pattern

or being a dressmaker's daughter: a memoir in pieces

ABSTRACT:

Cutting through memories, pinning down facts, stitching up fabrications, unpicking the past - an interactive, animated memoir, created in Flash, exploring aspects of my relationship with my dressmaking mother and her complicated influence on me.

Life's mysteries are rarely uncovered by a logical, linear process of deduction. You arrive at answers, ideas, suspicions, intuitions... haphazardly in fragments. Over time you build the picture, piece by piece, shuffling and rearranging, until you start to see a pattern emerging. The structure of 'Fitting the Pattern' attempts to replicate this experience, hence it is a memoir in pieces that the reader can explore, to some extent, in a non-linear fashion.

The visual design of the piece is based on the aesthetics of dressmaking patterns, specifically, imagery drawn from online open source sewing patterns (burdastyle.com). An affordance of such a design is that dressmaking patterns are instructional by nature so I was able to design an intuitive navigational system that provides signals and guidance to the user without breaking out of the narrative sphere and disrupting a potentially immersive experience.

There are certain parallels between my mother's creative craft process and my own in new media. These similarities, as well as our differences, are embedded in the digital media and text, literally drawn out through animation and dramatised through interactivity. Custom cursors designed as digital dressmaking tools fuse the interactive process into the narrative world, so the reader becomes actively involved in constructing and/or unpicking the narrative. Like most of the interactive elements in 'Fitting the Pattern' these dressmaking tool symbols have multiple functions - they are navigation bar buttons; they are custom cursors; and they are active narrative elements, like animated characters, literally playing their part in the story whilst simultaneously activating the reading/story experience.

Fitting the Pattern

The piece ends with a randomly generated sequence that functions as a metaphor for the intimate perplexity of the mother-daughter relationship and interconnected life patterns.

Beginnings...

In some ways Fitting the Pattern is a perverse kind of memoir - the memoir in bits and pieces, a kind of anti-story, irregular... But somehow that's always seemed closer to my experience. For me, it would feel more unnatural to fabricate a more conventional narrative flow out of my memories.

I remember an Arvon creative writing course I attended many years ago. One of the exercises we were given involved writing about our childhood memories of Sunday mornings. Mine came out in short bits, not a novel-like narrative flow. At the time I felt I was doing it wrong, especially when I heard other participants reading out their writing. But I also felt that mine had struck the truth of the thing like a hammer blow against an anvil - a short ringing blow - thump - it's there - a bit like poetry... (although being untrained in literary matters, I always hesitate to describe anything I write as poetry... but... well, the description seems to fit... so...)

I hunted down the writing exercise in one of my old notebooks. Here it is [Feb/Mar 1994]:

Sunday best dress and coat
Smart sisters, similar not same
Best behaviour, two girls alone, subdued
walking down quiet main road
Church bells calling mournfully
Dreading the boredom
Feeling out of place, on view, under some all
seeing eye - but it's not God's.

It's interesting to me that something similar to this cropped up in Fitting the Pattern, but I don't think I consciously drew on this earlier material.

How I started off writing this memoir of being a dressmaker's daughter...

Below are a couple of extracts of something I wrote for my 1st CWNM Creative Non-Fiction workshop [1]. Being contrary, I started out writing it self-consciously in a way that I knew would be wrong for me, as if to get it out of my system so that I could discard that approach:

Beginnings

I was born and brought up in Leeds and Morley in the industrial West Riding of Yorkshire, the heart of the English woollen textile industry. Morley, which is now part of Leeds, was a mill town. It's speciality was shoddy cloth - cloth woven from shredded, recycled woollen articles such as garments and blankets. Leeds had a mixed economy but textiles was a key industry. The city was the birthplace of ready-to-wear clothes manufacturing (e.g. Burton's) and it was also a centre of tailoring.

Ok, that's pretty dull, factual but dull. I'm tempted to go off on a tangent... but no, first I'd better lay down some more facts.

My maternal grandmother and great grandmother (her mother-in-law) worked in tailoring. In those days women in tailoring would normally only work on one part of the garment, e.g. collars, button-holes, sleeves, interfacings (I'm guessing those were the things they worked on), but my great grandmother was a resourceful soul and she kept asking to be put to work in different areas. Eventually she worked her way around all the tailoring processes and learnt how to make a full suit. I'm not sure what she did with that knowledge. She certainly didn't make a fortune out of it.

and later...

Trying to force my memories into a linear pattern becomes a tedious chore, and a senseless one too, because memory doesn't work like that. There's no linear progression from earliest memory A to memory B and on to memory Z. Recall is haphazard, fragmented, cyclical, unreliable, and laced with family stories, other people's memories. Why resist that? I'd rather go with the non-linear, random flow. This is truer to my experience. The result: a truer non-fiction? Let's hope so.

Drawing on autobiographical material...

Although I chose to draw on autobiographical material I didn't always feel comfortable doing so. Here's an extract from a discussion I had with Sue Thomas [2] online...

Sue:

I'm curious though that you say you don't want to do autobiography - can you say more about that? Seems to me that is the closest definition of the genre of this work - not that it needs to have a definition or genre at all...

My response:

I think it's to do with being fair. This is purely my personal approach to the idea of doing autobiography, but if I were to write one, I would feel it incumbent on me to try to give as fair an account of things as possible. I would try to view things impartially, look at things from all sides, I would feel the need to qualify my point of view with other points of view. This probably sounds ridiculous and is not what writing an autobiography is like at all... I don't know...

There's something about putting I/auto so consciously at the centre of things that disturbs me. I need to be displaced a little, slightly off-kilter, off-centre. I think that's why I need the subtitle: being a dressmaker's daughter - it turns me into a character - it nudges me the deal, whatever that is, out of the central role and turns me into a character. It might not have that effect on readers, such as yourself, but it has that effect for me. As soon as I'm off-centre I can write it, I can have fun with it, I can look deeper, be sharper... hence the sharp tools, not the thimble or tailor's chalk.*

* The last remark refers to the symbols I chose for my custom cursors in Fitting the Pattern - scissors, machine needle, pins, seam unpicker.

I reflected further on these matters in my accompanying Critical Commentary for Fitting the Pattern [3]...

Many people encouraged me to stretch the truth and push at the boundaries of creative non-fiction, which after all are very flexible, and this is why I added 'embroidered' to my title. I was very aware that I wasn't creating a true picture of my mother and I wanted the freedom to misrepresent her for my own creative ends. I felt that adding 'embroidered' gave me the creative license I needed, but in the end I find I haven't strayed too far from the facts anyway. Although whether anyone else would recognise my mother from 'Fitting the Pattern' is another matter. For example, here's a portion of text that didn't get into the final (first) draft:

'This is the dressmaker mother that I carry around with me. There are other mothers – other versions of her within me but this is the story I'm telling today – this is the embroidery I'm presenting ...'

Drawing on autobiographical material

The process of creating this new media memoir - not just the writing, also, in fact mainly, the creative work in Flash - made me appreciate certain similarities between my mother's creative craft process and my own. It was something I was vaguely aware of but reluctant to examine at first, but a comment from Sue Thomas in response to my first submission to the CNF workshop made me think. Here's my response, quoting Sue:

"I find it very interesting that you and your mother are both craftspeople, just working in different media, and I wonder whether you plan to draw out the similarities and differences between the ways you each approach your craft?"

"I'm more interested in the construction of identities and the emotional relationships, but the similarities and differences between our crafts will be embedded in the media - so to some extent it will be literally drawn out or animated out. I probably touch on it in the text too."

...and I went on to say:

"The term 'craft' to describe what I do is problematic for me. Obviously there's a craft in what I do - a collection of skills that have to be learnt to achieve what I create - but the craft side is only part of it. So I wouldn't call myself a craftsman."

The complex process of crafting this memoir about being a dressmaker's daughter in Flash has made me re-evaluate what I feel about being a craftsman. Before creating this piece, I think I took for granted my mother's craft. In coming to a fuller appreciation of her skills, I've come to embrace more the craft base of my own chosen media.

On creativity and technology...

Often, when I've had feedback from readers or audience members after a live reading of *Fitting the Pattern*, I've been struck by the number of people who have some personal connection with textile crafts through their own experience or memories of their mother's and grandmother's. Indeed, I wouldn't be surprised if there was a higher incidence amongst techy, new media, web 2.0 types. Here's part of a discussion that took place in CWNM Blackboard [4]...

Subject: RE:: Christine Wilks - **Fitting the Pattern**

Author: Christine WILKS

Posted date: 07 March 2008

Hi K

[Quote:] the constant (in my case!) breaking of the thread and having to re-thread the damned machine (very symbolic!)...the unpicking, the dread of ruining it all.

It came to me last night in the bath, I remembered, this was my common experience with my damned sewing machine, which I haven't used in donkey's years. And then I saw another connection with film-making (maybe why I had that dream)*... At the film workshop where I used to make my low/no-budget 16mm films, we had an old Steenbeck, a machine used for editing - you thread it with film - and the tension of the machine was always wrong and it kept breaking my precious cutting copy... that damned machine ruining my film!

Christine

[* the remembered dream that I mention in *Fitting the Pattern*.]

Subject: RE:: Christine Wilks - **Fitting the Pattern**

Author: K

Posted date: 08 March 2008

and I have that experience too - early sound work I did using Revox reel-to-reel tape decks, threading up the bloody thing with ampex tapes, splicing takes and failing miserably! razor blades instead of scissors too, much more fun.

K

Subject: RE:: Christine Wilks - **Fitting the Pattern**

Author: Christine WILKS

Posted date: 08 March 2008

Revox reel to reel... oh yeah! we had one in the 'sound room'... I did a bit of razor blading... not very much though. But Dane (my husband) has just reminded me how he used to stand in the sound room playing 20ft long loops held with a pencil... sweet memories... (kind of...)

Christine

Subject: RE:: Christine Wilks - **Fitting the Pattern**

Author: **K**

Posted date: 09 March 2008

my first ever electronic music piece was made from a long tape loop that went round the machine spools then out of the studio and round the handlebars of the studio technician's motorbikeah, those were the days.....let me find my false teeth and walking stick ;-)

though it sounded crap, unfortunately

Subject: RE:: Christine Wilks - **Fitting the Pattern**

Author: **Christine** WILKS

Posted date: 09 March 2008

But a wonderful sight! A motorbike, that's pretty kewl.

Subject: RE:: Christine Wilks - **Fitting the Pattern**

Author: **Sue** Thomas

Posted date: 17 March 2008

strands breaking - I used to be a machine knitter, both for family and for profit, selling my own designs (mostly hippy rainbow sweaters!). When a strand breaks as you're running the carriage across and you are going so fast you can't stop in time, you find yourself with hundreds of dropped stitches to pick up, and a choice about whether you will do that and finish the garment, or throw the whole thing out of the window. It was using a knitting machine that gave me access to a patience and determination I didn't know I had before, and enabled me to make many important changes in my life and career. Character-building, without a doubt.

Subject: RE:: Christine Wilks - **Fitting the Pattern**

Author: **Christine** WILKS

Posted date: 17 March 2008

How interesting - this insistence on and persistence with using the machine, despite the frustrations, the breakages, instead of handcrafting/hand-playing (music)/handwriting/drawing by hand... I wonder why the interface of a machine is so important to us? Mechanisation improves productivity, theoretically, but these are all examples of DIY.

Subject: RE:: Christine Wilks - **Fitting the Pattern**

Author: **Sue** Thomas

Posted date: 17 March 2008

I very much believe that the passion for, and discipline of, the knitting machine unlocked a part of me that I'd not had access to before (I was around 30 at the time). Without that experience I'm not sure I could have learned about computer or about writing, really. I just wish I'd unlocked it a couple of decades earlier so that I hadn't wasted so much time thrashing around in the dark.

My mother too has an affinity with her chosen machine, but doesn't feel as comfortable with other machines, other technology. Here she is in a brief clip from a three-screen video installation piece I made in 1992 called *The Family Suite** [5]:



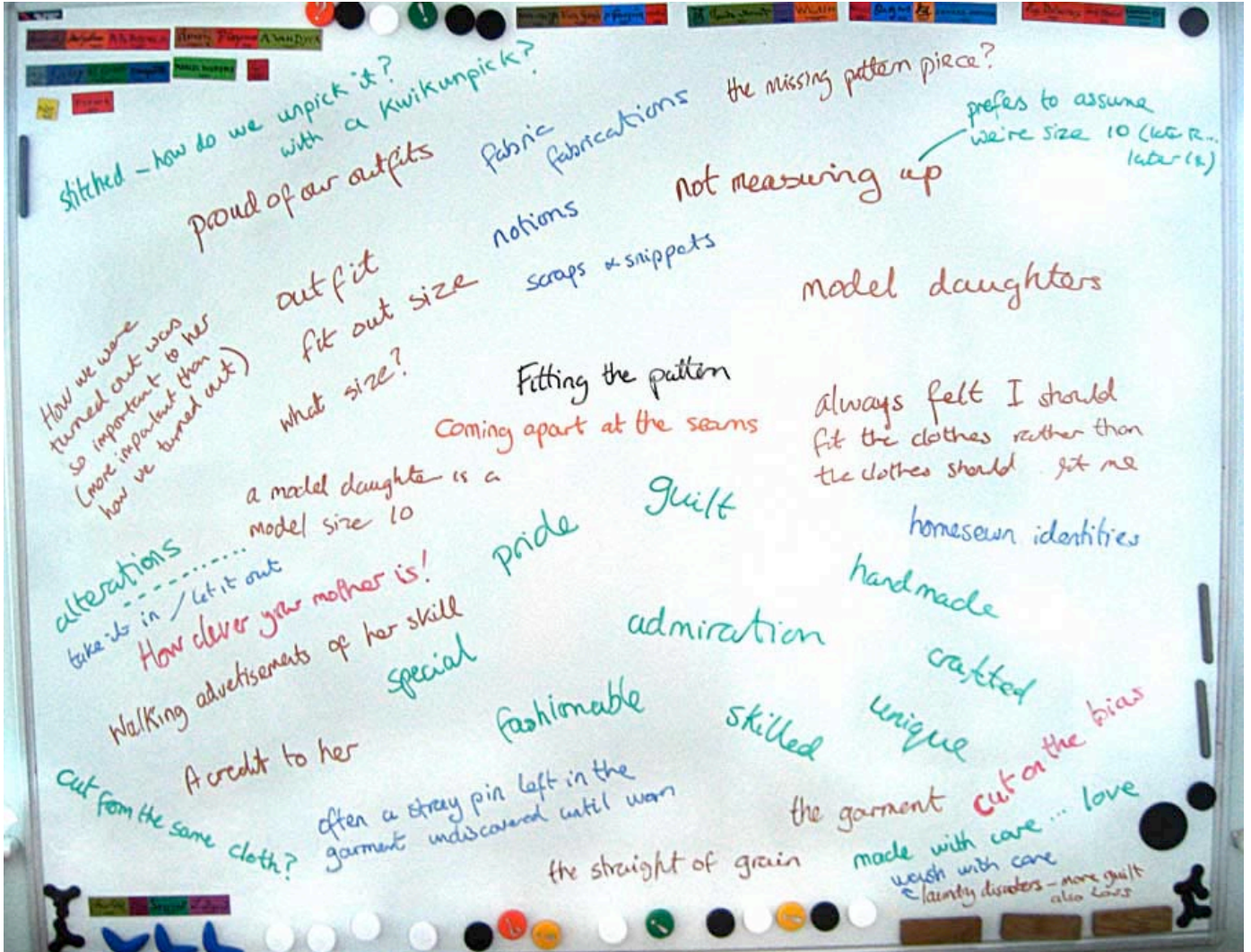
Double click VIDEO to play

*NOTE: apologies for the poor quality of the transfer from tape to digital. You may need to **turn the sound up high**, although my voice is quite low at the start of the clip anyway.*

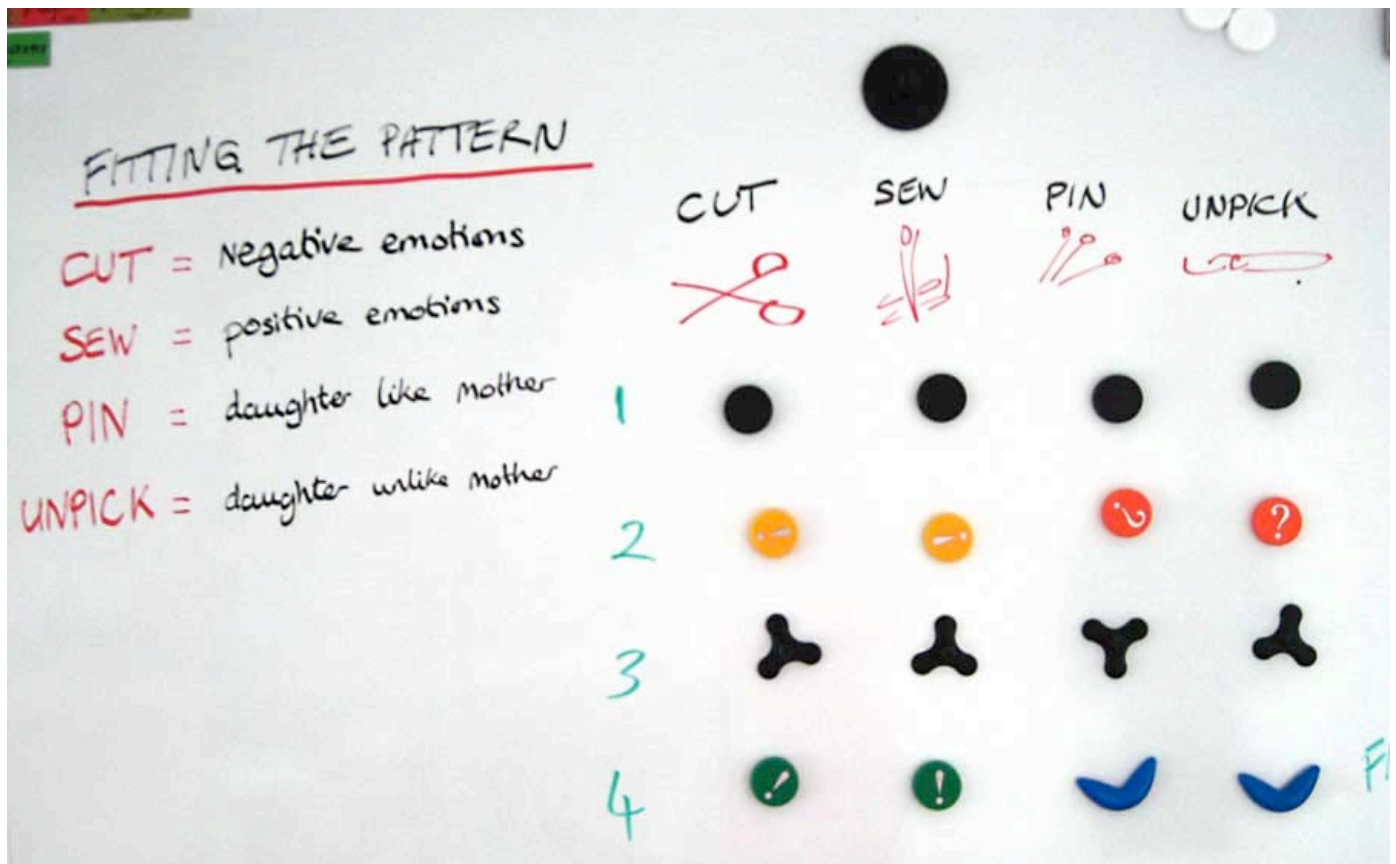
If you are the kind of writer, artist or craftsman whose creativity needs to be mediated by a machine, it would seem the key is to find the technology that is right for you - a good fit between you and your machine, whether digital or mechanical.

* *Family Suite*: 3 video monitors set up in a simulated domestic living room built inside a gallery space, each monitor 'contained' a member of my family - mother, sister, father. I remained the presence behind the camera.

Working on the script from start to finish



My whiteboard (150 x 120cm) at the very beginning of the process

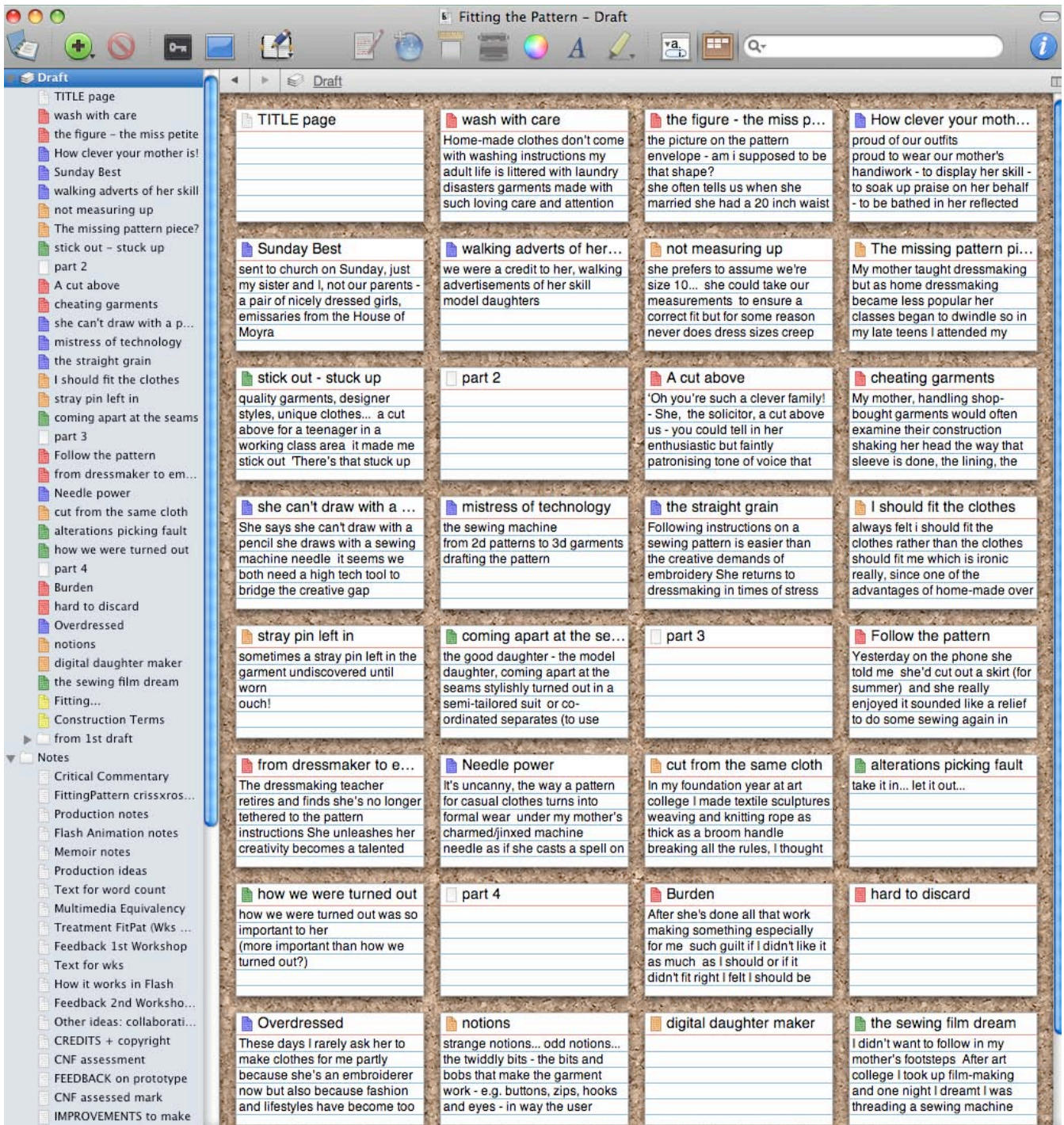


Each tool category tells a different aspect of the story

When it came to designing the interactivity in "Fitting the Pattern" a key research question was how far can I get the reader/user actively involved in constructing and/or unpicking the narrative? I decided to create custom cursors as digital dressmaking tools to fuse the interactive process into the narrative world. Almost every interactive element in "Fitting the Pattern" has at least two jobs to do - it has to tell the story, i.e. be part of the story, and it has to communicate to the reader what they need to do to navigate through the story.

Critical Commentary [6]

Writing process



Writing the memoir on virtual index cards in Scrivener

Watch my brief video on YouTube:

 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdCUiu-vVBk>

Scrivener  <http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.html>

- no label
- ✓  CUT
-  PIN
-  SEW
-  UNPICK
-  RANDOM

0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16

Fitting the Pattern

or, being a dressmaker's daughter

a memoir in pieces

...embroidered

'embroidered' should perhaps drift on the screen, animated in some way, while the rest of the title + sub title should stay relatively fixed... because also what's drifting on the front page is the body size of the figures in the pattern..

Home-made clothes don't come with washing instructions
my adult life is littered with laundry disasters
garments made with loving care
and such attention to detail
ruined by my negligence
with every loss I felt
I let her down

the picture on the pattern envelope
am I supposed to be that shape?

she often tells us when she married
she had a 20 inch waist

proud of our outfits
proud to wear our mother's handiwork
to display her skill
to soak up praise on her behalf
to be bathed in her reflected glory

How clever your mother is!
... etc... these phrases and exclamations could float across the screen - or, if this is in sewing section, be discovered all over the place to suggest we/I heard this kind of thing many, many times from lots of different sources.

Sent to church on Sunday
just my sister and I
not our parents
a pair of nicely dressed girls
emissaries from the House of Moyra

We were a credit to her
walking advertisements of her skill

model daughters

Other modes of writing in Scrivener

```
1
2  var str:String = "proud of our outfits\nproud
   to wear our mother's handiwork\nto display her
   skill\nto soak up praise on her behalf\nto be
   bathed in her reflected glory";
3
4  var sInt = setInterval(writeIt,1);
5  var count:Number = 0;
6  var s:Sound = new Sound();
7  s.attachSound("sew");
8
9  function writeIt() {
10     if(count == 0) {
11         s.start(0,1000);
12     }
13     theText.text = str.substring(0,count);
14     count += 1;
15     if(count > str.length) {
16         clearInterval(sInt);
17         s.stop();
18     }
19 }
```

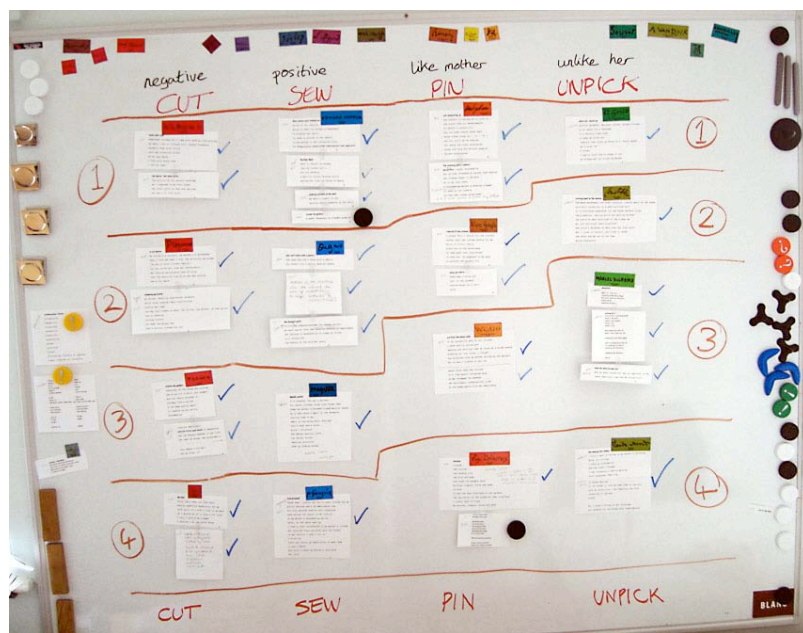
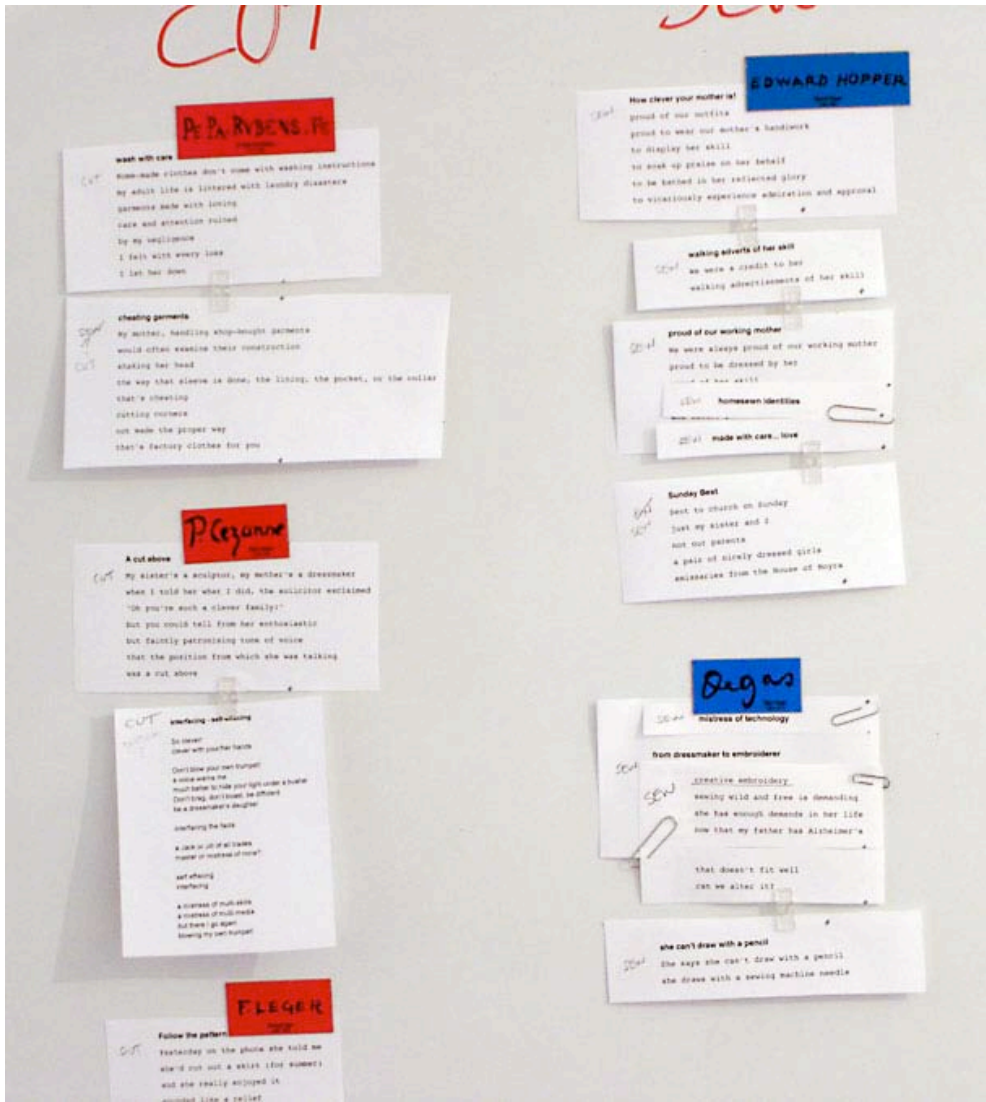
The writing in ActionScript code behind the scenes in Flash

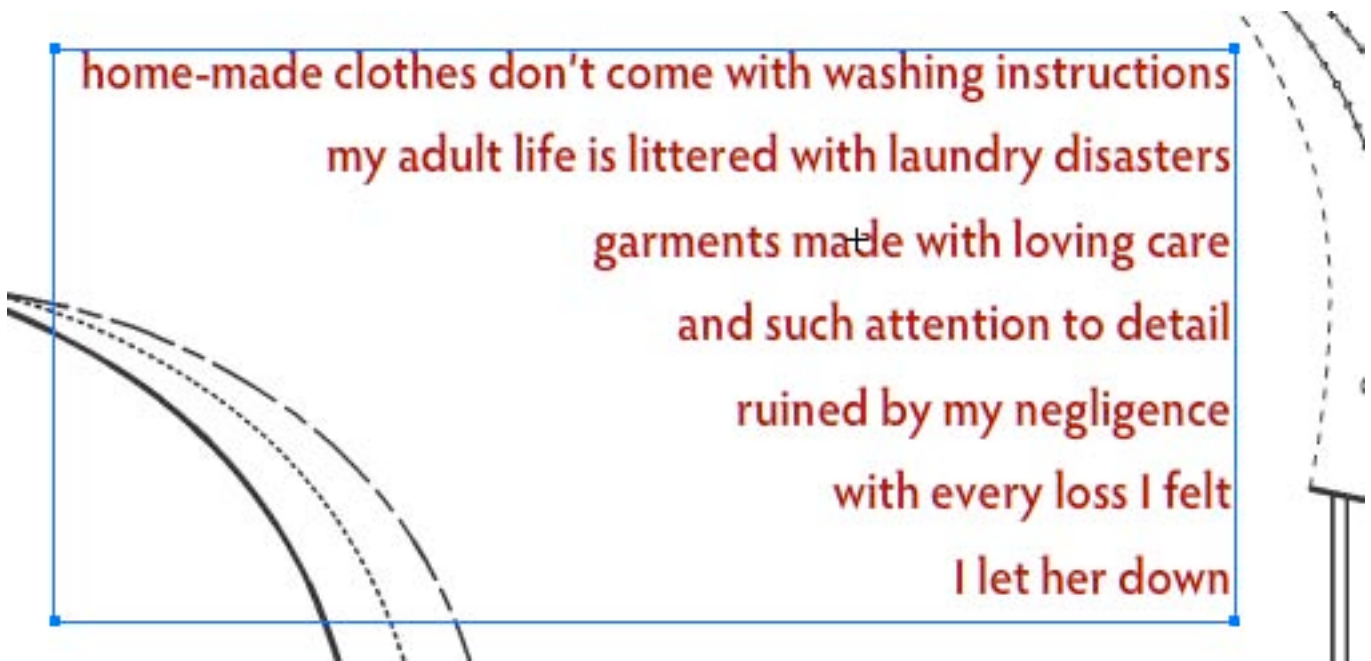


When I write for this medium, I'm writing for the digital, animated and interactive spaces I create, so the story text writing needs to proceed and develop alongside, and within, the Flash development process. For me, it doesn't work to write a full script first then patch the text into the digital spaces, it has to be written, edited and re-written inside the digital environment. I find it invaluable to do some of the writing work away from the computer - cutting up text on paper with real scissors and arranging, rearranging and editing the texts on my whiteboard.

Critical Commentary [7]

Writing process





Writing on the screen in Flash

Recent thoughts about this writing process...

Writing for Flash (or other forms of interactive/playable/animated media for the web) is a lot like writing poetry. Indeed one could consider it a form of poetry writing - it certainly requires the brevity and intensity of poetry, where every word and every element (e.g. visual, kinetic, audio, haptic) must be concentrated with meaning. You have to excise all superfluous words - or all words that can be made superfluous in this context.

When writing for Flash, it's not just the visible words I'm writing, it's the visual signs and other signifiers, it's the structure, the movement, the pace, and the underlying code that makes it all happen.

Editing is an important part of all writing, but in this medium, arguably, it plays an even greater role - at least for me, it does. It's a lot like film-making (which is how I started out in my twenties, as an artist/indie filmmaker). The making of the film is as much in the post-production editing as it is in the scriptwriting - even more so for documentary work, which written memoirs are in a sense, documenting memories. You have to edit the past, pick and choose the parts to tell. But in this transliterate or multimodal medium, there are more elements to juggle with, to mix and mashup. It's quite a puzzle to construct a meaningful story.

For example, I've recently re-coded Fitting the Pattern to improve its navigation. Listening to user feedback (direct and indirect), I realised that often people got stuck in the piece and sometimes abandoned reading onwards. This told me there were some serious flaws in the navigational system I'd designed. It has been tricky to solve (if, indeed, I have solved it. I'd be very grateful for your feedback too in this regard). It's been tricky because I didn't want any extraneous or intrusive user instructions in the piece. As far as possible, I wanted all text and visual elements to be in the service of the story, and by that I mean, narratively and aesthetically meaningful. I didn't want any element in the piece to be included solely for functional user interface (GUI) reasons. I haven't entirely succeeded, I've had to compromise in some areas - e.g. the 'pick another tool' message - but that was my aim and remains so.

The virtual scissors device in Fitting the Pattern - my custom cursor of animated scissors that cut the pattern piece to reveal the text - is another multimodal example of the kind of thing the digital writer-maker has to consider. To date I haven't yet had time to improve these sequences. At the moment, from a user interaction point of view, the way the reader is able to operate the virtual scissors feels quite awkward. It would be easy enough to create smooth animation of the scissors cutting the pattern, but to create smoothly animated interactive motion requires coding skills and knowledge that were beyond me at the original time of making the piece. I've since learned more and I think I know now how I might be able to achieve it (there are so many ways to skin a cat in Flash!), but it's quite time consuming to unpick the code I've already written, which is what I'd have to do. This reminds me of how my mother would often say it was more trouble to alter a garment already made than to make one anew from scratch. The main thing to weigh up is what

meanings and associations are conjured up by the awkwardness of the way the virtual scissors cut the pattern? Would a smoother, slicker interactive animation bring forth more pertinent or richer meanings and associations? Should the reader be given an illusion of skilfulness and control when using the virtual scissors to cut? In other words, should the reader feel as adept as my mother cutting out the pattern, or should their virtual experience be more akin to how it would be for me or any other non-dressmaker, i.e. rather clumsy? Which is richer in meaning? What do I, as author, want to say?

Just because we're used to experiencing slick interactive animation in digital commercial art doesn't mean it's always appropriate for a work of art. Slickness isn't always better, it has to be in the service of the meaning and the particular poetics of the creative piece. Having said that, in this case, with *Fitting the Pattern*, I think slicker interactive animation would be preferable because, for the most part, when using the interactive GUI elements, at those moments, the reader is probably identifying more with my mother than with me, the author. Whereas the words themselves, the visible text, is clearly from the author's perspective, the daughter's point of view. I'd be interested to know what you think. How does it work for you? When you read/use/work the piece, whom do you identify with more? Mother or daughter? Maybe neither? Is there a pull both ways? Is there some kind of tussle operating for your empathy? Who's in control of this story?

randomly does it...

The final sequence of *Fitting the Pattern*, with the randomly generated text, dramatises this question more bluntly. As author, I have chosen the array of words that may be displayed, but the computer code randomly selects which words to show, when and in what combination. I haven't done the maths (not my strong point) but I know there's a vast number of variations possible and no two readings will ever be the same (at least, not in any normal life/attention span).

This puts the reader in an interesting and novel position relative to the history of reading. As reader, you're also reading the randomness and all that that entails - the fact or act of the text being random, the action of the randomness and also the resulting random word combinations - the random poetry of what those particular word combinations may mean as they appear and disappear fleetingly. It's a way of reading - and writing - that I've learned to love.

Working with or writing dynamic random text is a relatively new phenomenon for the writer. I think there are lots of exciting possibilities. Most of what I've learnt, and am still learning, about ways of writing and coding dynamically and randomly, I've learnt from remixing and experimenting in R3/\1XV\0RX (www.remixworx.net)* the collaborative creative blog where digital writers and artists remix each others works. (BTW, new members are always welcome!) Before I got involved, I would never have imagined that randomness would lend itself to memoir-writing but, for me, it says something powerful about the complex and fluid nature of the relationship between a mother and daughter. There is no definitive statement I can make about my relationship with my mother, things change from day to day, moment to moment, I am both like her and not like her at one and the same time, often in very

Recent thoughts about writing process

contradictory and even paradoxical ways. This is a common experience, I think, the way most of us strive to be different from our parents and then catch ourselves, unaware, behaving just like them (don't you want to kick yourself when that happens?). I'm thankful for my mother's influence but I want to fight against it too - the subtle ways that she still influences my life. In art, as in life, you have to let the thing play out.

* R3/M1XV0RX:  http://www.runran.net/remix_runran/

```
3 w1=new Array();
4 w1=["dress","mother","maker","film","daughter","maker",
  "movie","digital","analogue","fitting","the","pattern",
  "interfacing","lining","fabric","thread","fit","outfit",
  "in","out","loose","tight","unfit","blindstitch",
  "easestitch","ease","slipstitch","staystitch",
  "topstitch","understitch","gather","reinforce","seam",
  "dart","notches","nap","selvedge","pile","cut","pin",
  "sew","unpick","tack","maker","mother","daughter","snip",
  "script","cutting copy","splice","edit","write","right",
  "wrong","side","draw","gather","seam allowance",
  "notions","ideas","maker","button","user interface",
  "hole","faults","code","up","focus","machine","zip",
  "frames per second","graphic"];
5
6 stop();
```

The text that generates randomly in the final sequence of Fitting the Pattern

Note: the random combination of words and random animation is generated by other bits of the code

Some of my other autobiographical digital works...

We Drank

 http://www.crisscross.net/MovingPix/We_Drank.html

Taster #2

 <http://www.crisscross.net/WorksinProgress/Bottles-4.html>

A test for a work-in-progress that I began 2 or 3 years ago. My aim is to turn it into a problematic drinking game.

crisscross remixes for R3/\1X\W0RX

I've made a small collection of remixes on the theme of drinking - you can find them here:

Tag Archives: **drinking**

 <http://crisscross.net/wilx/tag/drinking/>

Many of them are primarily visual pieces with sound, but here's one that specifically involves creative writing:

wine-dark amnesia

 <http://crisscross.net/wilx/2007/06/02/wine-dark-amnesia/>

A note on distance and identity...

The odd thing about presenting this drinking theme stuff is that it reveals to me how differently I view my life experience/ autobiographical material as an artist/writer and as a social or professional person. When I'm using this material creatively, I'm not really thinking about the ramifications or how much I'm revealing, how people might view me, or worse, judge me. I feel rather uncomfortable talking about it as ordinary, everyday me - although I can perform it, e.g. live readings. It's as if the performer, the writer, the artist is someone else, the other me, a much more fearless me - but it's also the real me too. She is me, I am her.

Christine Wilks, March 2009

Notes & References

- [1] Creative Non-Fiction module, Online MA in Creative Writing and New Media 2006-08 at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK.
- [2] Sue Thomas, Professor of New Media in the Institute of Creative Technologies and the Faculty of Humanities at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK.
- [3] 'Fitting the Pattern: or being a dressmaker's daughter' and its accompanying Critical Commentary essay constituted my assessment portfolio for the Creative Non-Fiction module, *ibid.* 1.
- [4] Online forum discussion in Blackboard, the virtual learning environment and course management system of the Online MA in Creative Writing and New Media, *ibid.*
- [5] 'The Family Suite' video installation was exhibited at Chapter Arts Centre Gallery, Cardiff, UK, as part of the 'Sounding Out' exhibition in 1992.
- [6] *Ibid.* 3.
- [7] *Ibid.* 3.