Solitude in Cyberspace

Piret Viires
professor, Tallinn University, Estonian Literary Museum

Virve Sarapik
professor, Estonian Academy of Arts, Estonian Literary Museum

Digital literature is usually described with the keywords of increasing collectivism: shared authorship, readers’ active participation in creating text etc. The current paper examines the opposite phenomenon, solitude, and does it from two aspects: a) the solitude of the creator and b) the solitude of a creative work.

When writers write their texts they are usually on their own. A text is born in the writer’s head and he needs some kind of form to present it. Until the form of literature was mostly what was recorded on paper, we could say that the author in most cases formalised his text in solitude. Only when handing in the manuscript were other participants in the completion process of the literary work added: editor, designer and printer.

But in addition to the author of the text, cybertexts and hypertexts need active co-authors - programmers, designers etc. Creating a cybertext is therefore basically a collective act (although there are of course exceptions). Electronic poet Jim Rosenberg has compared an author of a cybertext with a filmmaker. Just like a filmmaker, a cybertext author needs a team who realises his ideas. The author of a cybertext is no longer the only and unique creator.

Alan Kirby has launched the concept of digimodernism which marks the cultural stage connected with the spread of Web 2.0. The “digimodernist turn” in the form of blogs, Facebook and Twitter also brings about a change for authors of digital literature. The technological simplicity of the new software meant that the authors no longer needed any urgent technical assistance. This again brings forth the problem of the author’s solitude – he is once again formalising his work in his blog on his own, alone.

At the same time the solitude of a creative work in cyberspace disappears. After publishing a book in print, the text was left alone, it began living its own life. In cyberspace, on the contrary, connections in various forms between the author, the work and the reader are retained.

It might thus seem paradoxical that in the printed world both the author and his work are solitary, whereas in cyberworld the solitude of creative work vanishes, because it needs interaction between authors and readers. At the same
time the author’s solitude in cyberspace is twofold – creating cybertexts mostly requires assistance, whereas digimodernist blog literature can be produced in solitude, independently.

Very few cybertexts in Estonia have been produced as teamwork, with technical assistance. Estonian authors have been reluctant to try out computer-technological experiments, despite the general fascination with technology in Estonian society. However, the digimodernist change has altered the situation. Many Estonian writers are active bloggers and Facebook users.

Considering the described background, we could claim that Estonian writers want to be solitary in cyberspace and not to participate in teamwork. The reason might be the smallness of Estonian literature, which levels the experiments outside the mainstream, or the general conservative attitude towards all cultural manifestations in Estonian society.

In conclusion, we could say that an Estonian writer is essentially a solitary author.

* The paper was prepared with the support of Estonian Science Foundation grant no. ETF7679