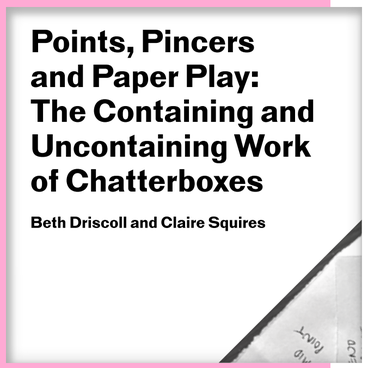
Points, Pincers
and Paper Play:
The Containing and
Uncontaining Work
of Chatterboxes
Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires

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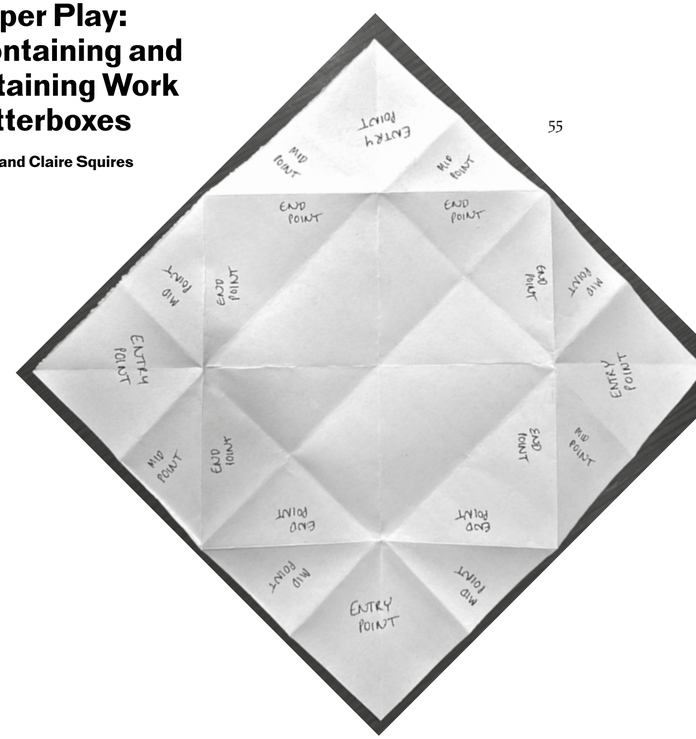
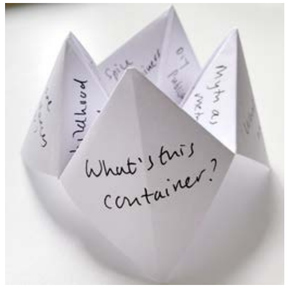


A User's Guide

What you will find contained within the next few pages is no ordinary article. Or, at least, no article constructed in the ordinary way in which academic communication is contained. Rather, drawing on our creative/critical school Ullapoolism – on which, see more, later – what ensues is a playful approach towards both a paper object and, more broadly, the way in which knowledge is communicated, conveyed, and contained. This article is a textual container which works in an unusual way. As such, 'Points, Pincers and Paper Play: The Containing and Uncontaining Work of Chatterboxes' needs something of a user's manual for reading.

The article is structured like the object of its focus, the 'chatterbox', or paper fortune teller whose provenance and purpose is explored within.

The chatterbox is a folded paper object, constructed from a square of paper that is doubly blintzed (that is, the corners are folded into the centre). Chatterboxes are frequently made by children, often from scrap paper, with a rapid, sometimes rough approach.



The chatterbox offers a hierarchical, mathematical structure: four expository entry points, followed by eight mid points, from which two separate choices are made, followed by eight potential end points. As we describe later, typically the twenty individual units thus created are travelled through by counting, or are accompanied with a song.

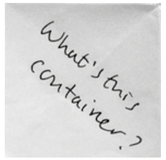
You can, therefore, choose to read 'Points, Pincers and Paper Play' by taking a playful approach – picking one item from the first set of four entry points, then two from the set of eight mid points, then settling on one of the final eight end points as your outcome. This will be your route through this article-as-chatterbox. After that, you could circle back to the beginning, and have another go. Or – if you must (or if you don't want to miss a single word) – you can read through in a linear fashion.

To enable the reading of this article using its chatterbox form, we provide an unfolded version which you can fold up yourself and play (alone, or with scholar-friends) to choose your reading pathway.

For your own generative approach, templates and instructions to make your own chatterbox article are included at the end of the linear version of this article, on page 57.

Chatterbox in hand? Let's get going …

Entry Points (Pick One)



The user's guide to this article articulates how to operate a chatterbox, but we thought it worth also describing in a little more detail the chatterbox itself, and the nature of its 'containing'. The physical attributes of the chatterbox mean that once constructed, with pictures or words added to each of the sub-sections of the folds from which it is made, it enables a form of play, fortune telling, story-making, or trickery (or all four).

The four entry points of the chatterbox are presented by the individual (let's call them the 'Author') who holds the chatterbox with – normally – their two thumbs and first fingers. The other individual (the 'Reader' – why not?), picks one of the four choices presented to them, and the Author then operates the chatterbox by opening and closing it this way and that – sometimes to a song, sometimes by counting the letters of the text, sometimes by counting the number of letters in the colour which decorates the chatterbox.

The Author then opens up the middle section of the chatterbox, presenting four choices (of a potential eight) to the Reader. The Reader picks one, and the chatterbox is once more mobilised by song, or counting.

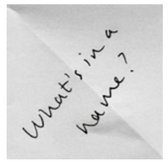
The new opening to the middle section is again presented to the Reader. Depending on whether the chatterbox was moved an even or odd number of times, the Reader might be presented with the same set of four, or a new set.

The Reader chooses one of the set offered to them (they can choose the same as last time, if they have the same set), and the Author then peels open the final layer, presenting the end point to the Reader: the telos to their journey.

The operational mechanics of the chatterbox, thus described, generate the basis for the ways in which the chatterbox works, moving through the three layers, to finally reveal an end point that is the Reader's destiny.

But who is really the Author, who the Reader, here? The Author creates the wording and colouring on the chatterbox. The Author mobilises the chatterbox, and reads out the options to the Reader, including their end point. But the Reader chooses their pathway through the object, instructing the Author on their choices. The Reader actively constructs their meaning, albeit through a delimited set – a contained set – of choices. Sometimes if the Author is particularly mischievous, these choices might be more coercive or tricksterish than they might initially seem (all eight end points, for example, being exactly the same).

The chatterbox as container throws up these questions of author- and readership. Just as the codex is a container of text, so is a chatterbox; although its form demands a non-linear form of writing and reading, which metaphorically opens up the possibilities of what text can do while the material object is literally opened up (and some routes partially closed off) through its structural mechanics. The chatterbox contains text – just like a codex – but continually creates new meanings through its physically indexical structure. This structure also inhibits certain reading pathways. In this way, the chatterbox contains but it also 'uncontains', by restricting access to story pathways through choices previously made. The chatterbox thus illustrates that mix of opening up, and of shutting down – of prospect, and of limitation – that is central to the container as form.



In the title to this article, we name this object the 'chatterbox'. It is also commonly referred to as a 'fortune teller' – and, at this early stage, we encourage you to seek within this container for fortune… As with any folkloric object that appears across the globe – with no clear origin other than the affordances of paper, a quick fold or two (well, let's say several), and some creative inscriptions – its names, and its associations are legion. The ubiquitous object, we learn from sources both secondary and primary, include: bada-bada, becco di gallina, chaarangul, chick chok, clapper, cocotte, comecoco, doo-dad, cootie catcher, 東南西北, happertje, Himmel und Hölle, inferno e paradiso, kağıttan tuzluk, ココット, King and the pawn, kysymyskirppu, Μ'αγαπα δε μ'αγαπα, paddabekkies, paku-paku, paperikirppu, pappersloppa, pouce-pouce, quackie, sacapiojo, salière, salt-and-pepper shaker, snapdragon, spå, tic tac, tippy-tippy-tap and whirlybird.[1]

This wealth of names is testament to the object's ubiquity and its versatility; the multiple local, regional and national traditions the object represents and contains.

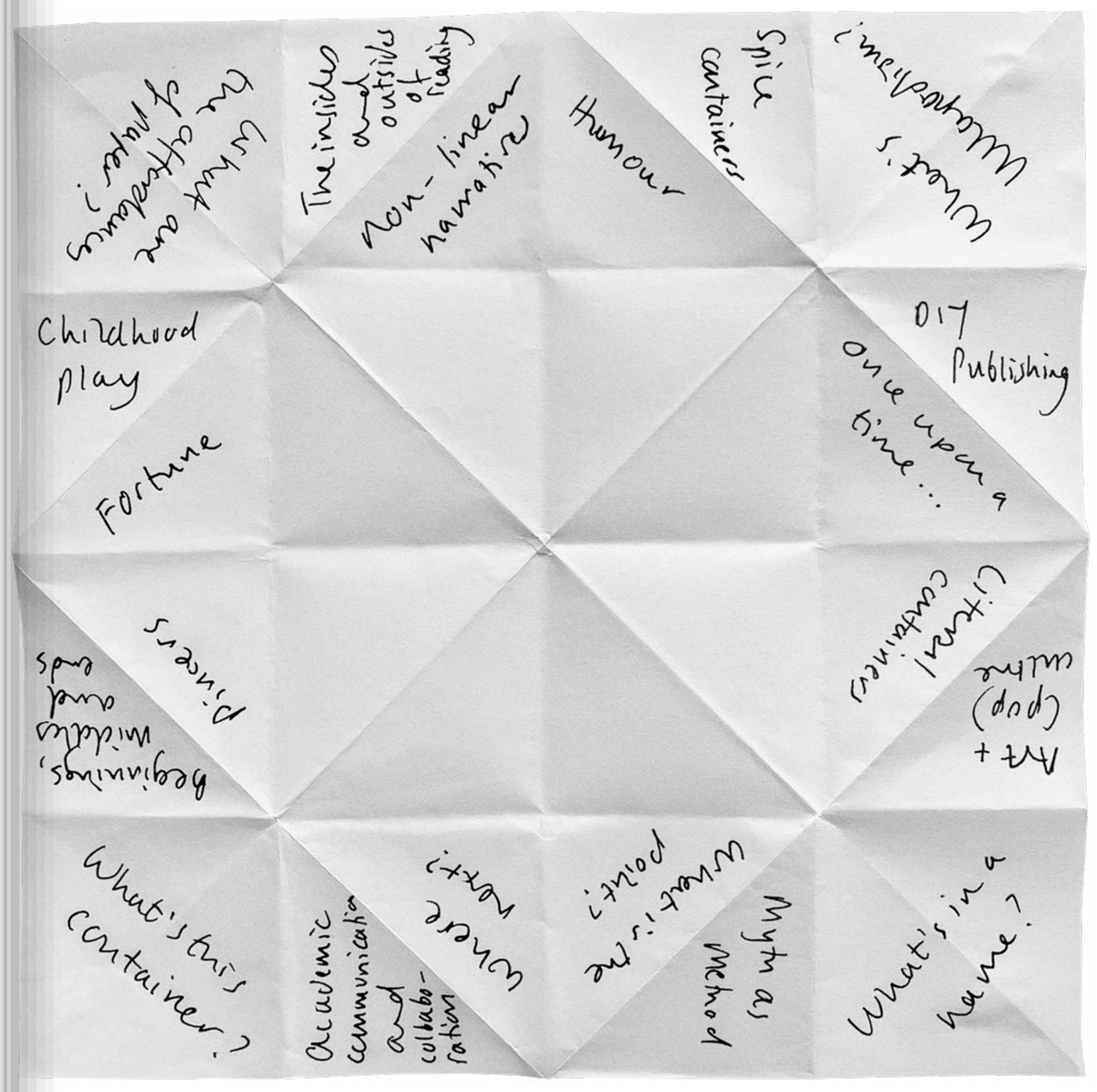
And yet it also presents a curious conundrum for some of our primary source informants across England and Scotland who – despite spending many hours making and playing with the objects in childhood and beyond – discover, on reflection, that they have no actual name for them. Other, perhaps, than some variation on the 'wee paper thing'. How odd!

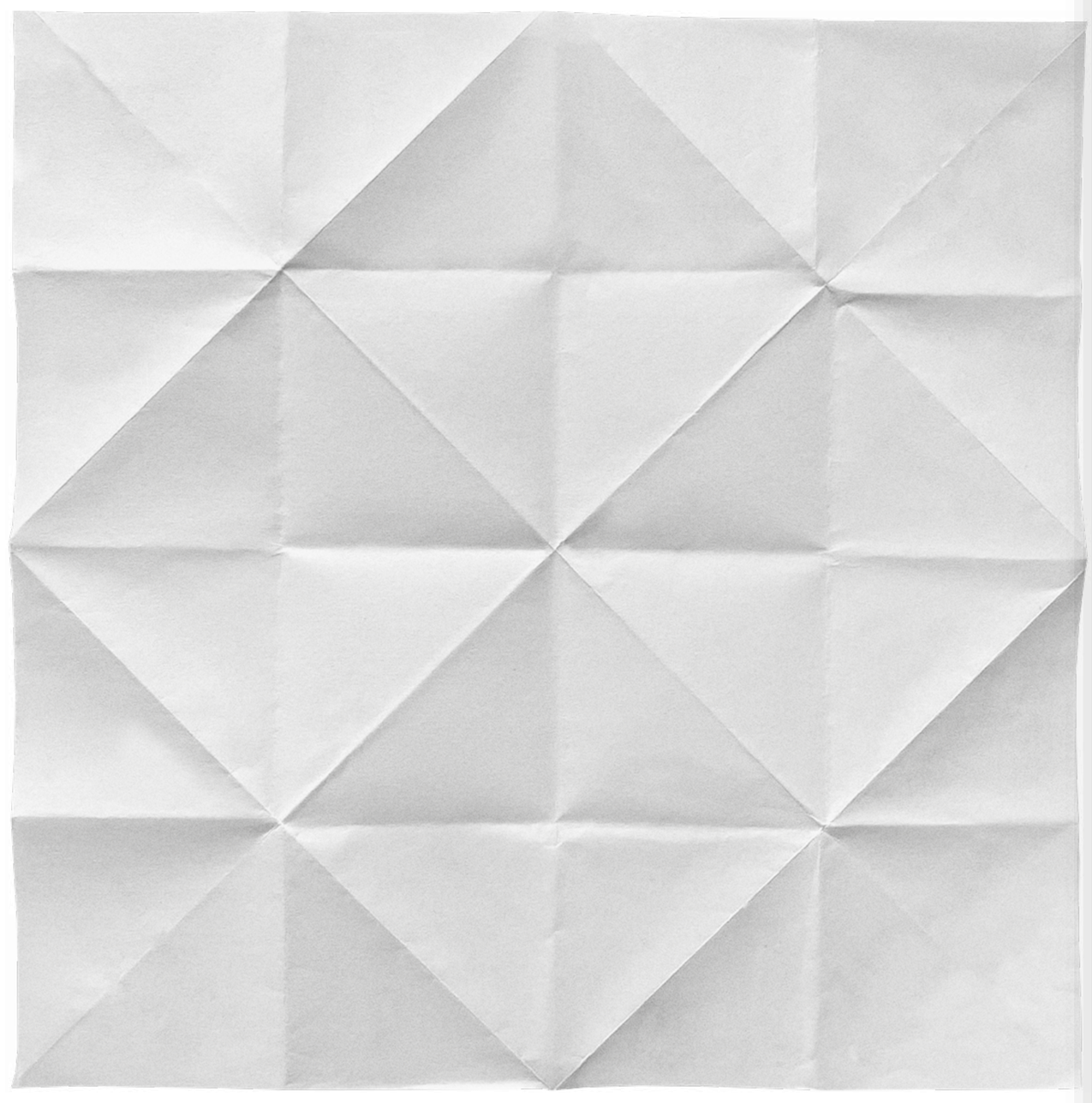
As David Astle muses in his article on the chatterbox's name, this namelessness reminds him of Surrealism. He quotes André Breton: "All my life, my heart has yearned for a thing I cannot name."[2] Breton may not have specifically been referring to the chatterbox in this statement, but we find that linking the generative processes of surrealism to the form of the chatterbox is productive in considering how meaning can be created playfully and collaboratively. The Surrealists' 'exquisite corpse' device, in which players make a story by writing a line of text, or drawing an image, on a piece of paper, folding it to hide their work, and passing it onto the next person, is a close sibling to the chatterbox in its alternative meaning-making process.[3]

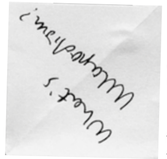
1. Names variously drawn from Wikipedia and a range of informants, including the SGSAH community and Facebook friends. See 'Paper Fortune Teller', *Wikipedia*, 2023 <en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Paper_fortune_teller&oldid=1189092145> [accessed 12 February 2024]. Particular thanks also to contributions derived from David Astle, 'Pick a Name, Any Name: This Playground Game Has Stood the Test of Time', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 April 2022 <www.smh.com.au/culture/books/whether-you-call-it-a-chatterbox-or-fortune-teller-this-playground-game-has-stood-the-test-of-time-20220425-p5afwc.html> [accessed 28 August 2024].

2. Astle.

3. For examples of the exquisite corpse, see MoMA, 'Exquisite Corpse' <www.moma.org/collection/terms/exquisite-corpse> [accessed 22 November 2024].



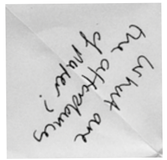




The creative-critical work before you emerges from the conceptual school of Ullapoolism. What is Ullapoolism?

Co-founded by us (Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires) following our first research fieldwork trip to Ullapool in Scotland, Ullapoolism is a way of doing research that makes deliberate use of playful, sideways thinking to produce new critical insights about contemporary culture and society.[4] Ullapoolism is guided by a manifesto (a kind of container: of ideas, of aspirations, of political statements) that consists of 11 principles – playfulism, amateurism rapidism, art, presentism, the predicament, forced sociality, materiality, oh look a ferry, satire, epistemologicalism and scholarly direct action.[5] Ullapoolist projects to date have included paper dolls, games, a comic erotic thriller, a song, a choose-your-own online revolutionary adventure, and now … a chatterbox.

Ullapoolism contains a number of tricks and puzzles, and this article is no different in its playful, perhaps sometimes even wayward approach. It is also curiously similar (sonically) to Oulipo (the Ouvoir de Littérature Potentielle, or Workshop of Potential Literature), the French literary movement of the 1960s which worked with constraint to generate literary artifacts.[6] This article, with its formal structure of 20 points determined by the structure of the chatterbox, is therefore Oulipolian as well as Ullapoolian in nature.



Paper might not seem like a container to everyone, but it certainly does to book historians. As scholars concerned with the material form of books, book historians are attuned to what paper can do – and how it is different to, say, papyrus (at one historical end) and html code (at another). Within the paper era, book historical scholarship is attentive to the significance of shifts from scrolls (one long piece of paper, rolled up) to quires (large pieces of paper folded into eighths) to incunabula (early printed books and pamphlets, often produced with blocks).[7] (A quick detour for a paper fact: did you know about the world's largest sheet of paper, dubbed the Mastodon Paper? It dates from 1859, was used to print a folded newspaper, and measures a whopping 70 × 100 inches.[8] Imagine making a chatterbox from that! (Although you'd have to chop a bit off to start with a square.))

Here in the 21st century, the flat rectangle of paper (whether encased in a book or an academic journal) has become common to the point of near-invisibility. As Ian Gadd writes, 'Most of us live in rectangular spaces … Yet, for all this, we do not see

5. Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, 'The Ullapoolism Manifesto', *ASAP/J*, 1 November 2021, <asapjournal.com/the-ullapoolism-manifesto-beth-driscoll-and-claire-squires/> [accessed 15 September 2024].

6. For more on this movement, see Dennis Duncan, *The Oulipo and Modern Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

4. Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, 'The Epistemology of Ullapoolism: Making Mischief from within Contemporary Book Cultures', *Angelaki* 25:5 (2020), 137–55.

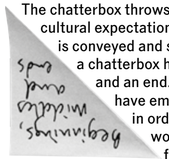
7. Lotte Hellinga, *Incunabula in Transit: People and Trade* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Ronny Vollandt, 'Making Quires Speak: An Analysis of Arabic Multi-Block Bibles and the Quest for a Canon', *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World*, 4:1–2 (2016), 170–209.

8. Beth Doyle, 'The "Largest Sheet of Paper Ever Made and Printed"', *Preservation Underground*, 2015 <blogs.library.duke.edu/preservation/2015/10/19/the-largest-sheet-of-paper-ever-made-and-printed/> [accessed 23 August 2024].

the rectangles. We have become so habituated to them that their rectangularity is largely invisible to us.' They disappear from view, and from appreciation: 'That rectangles frame so much of our visual art and multimedia suggests they are fundamentally non-aesthetic.'[9] The rectangularity of books (even when they are on laptops, phones or e-readers, which are notably also rectangles) helps us to trust in their immutability. But at the same time, as Gadd argues, rectangularity inhibits us: 'Rectangles delimit the human-made world. Linear, bounded and Cartesian, they contain us as much as they define us.'[10]

In a time of ubiquitously rectangular paper and screens, returning to the folds of paper via the creation of chatterboxes spotlights anew what paper can do, and how it can create alternate containers for meaning and communication. It's a back-to-the-future moment, restoring to conversation the affordances of paper – including how it is cut and folded – that historians know have long influenced publication and its possibilities.

Mid Points (Pick Two)



The chatterbox throws into relief some of our cultural expectations about how information is conveyed and stories are told. Like stories, a chatterbox has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Cultures around the world have employed this narrative shape in order to make sense of the world around them. From folk tales that begin with an orphan, to Aristotelian three-act Greek drama, to contemporary romance fiction (where the endings are always happy), it is the shape of narrative that provides some of its pleasure.[11] So, too, do academic essays and journal articles typically follow the conventions of introduction, body and conclusion. The beginning-middle-end narrative structure offers comfortable familiarity to both authors and readers, and effectively communicates information.

Within this structure, though, there are often twists as authors play with and against the possibilities of narrative form. What can be gained from pushing this play with structure further via a chatterbox? What lies outside the container of traditional narrative or argumentative discourse? Non-linearity, multiple endings, multiple start points, randomness and surprise. The chatterbox combines some order (three hierarchical levels in sequence) with some disorder (multiple options within hierarchical levels) to create additional meaning-making possibilities. It also both opens and closes following the mechanisms of its use; literally opening and closing options off, and at the same enabling and preventing certain narrative routes. It is an opening up, and a boxing in.

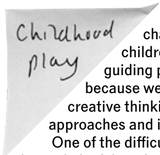
9. Ian Gadd, 'Rectangularity and The Frankfurt Kabuff', in *The Frankfurt Kabuff Critical Edition*, ed. by Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2023), pp. 107–12, p. 108.

10. Gadd, p. 110.

11. See for example Anna Michelsen, 'The Politics of Happily-Ever-After: Romance Genre Fiction as Aesthetic Public Sphere', in *The Cultural Sociology of Reading: The Meanings of Reading and Books Across the World*, ed. by Maria Angelica Thumala Olave (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2022), pp. 453–96.

13. Beth Driscoll, *What Readers Do: Aesthetic and Moral Practices of a Post-Digital Age* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024).

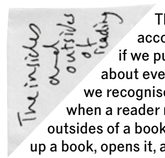
12. Margaret Marin, 'A Reflection on Using Play to Facilitate Learning', *International Practice Development Journal*, 6:1 (2016), 1–8.



The main use of the chatterbox is for play, by children. Playfulism is one of the guiding principles of Ullapoolism, because we believe that play can unlock creative thinking, laughter, and new approaches and insights in critical work.

One of the difficulties in making use of play and playfulism for work purposes, though, is the risk that play becomes overly instrumentalised and therefore not fun anymore. This aspect is the danger that attends gamification, a process where odious or dull activities are made to appear more fun through association with game-like elements such as earning badges or 'winning'. Other attempts to bring playfulism into formal environments, for example creative learning tasks with over-determined educational objectives, can also eradicate fun. This conundrum is addressed by Margaret Marin at the South Eastern Sydney Local Health District Nursing and Midwifery Practice and Workforce Unit, who uses the chatterbox as a tool for practice development but recognises the importance of keeping the element of 'fun' present.[12]

Playfulness need not (should not!) be sacrificed in the pursuit of rigor; as this article manifests, the two can co-exist.

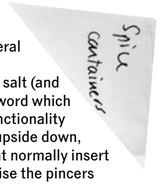


There is no outside the text, according to Jacques Derrida, but if we put high theory aside and think about everyday experiences of reading, we recognise a key threshold moment when a reader moves from the physical outsides of a book to inside it. A reader picks up a book, opens it, and falls into a new world. Part of the appeal of reading is that it is immersive, offering an alternative reality. The book is a container that a reader can enter, providing temporary escape and respite from the world outside the book. To return to theory, Gérard Genette conceptualises as 'paratexts' those threshold features of a work (like its cover, or its reputation) that cue the reader into the moment of leaving one environment and entering another.

These cues can also be environmental and linked to romantic ideas about the experience of reading. Conceptualising reading as immersive escape is a powerful framework for the value of reading, and while promulgated across digital media it often relies on a very pre-digital, idealised view of how reading takes place.[13] There is a cosy, domestic setting for immersive reading depicted, for example, across Bookstagram, with its pictures of steaming cups, blankets, candles and colourful bookshelves. In our creative-critical practice, we have previously created pyjamas with the Ullapool ferry on them as a way of thinking through this romantic ideal of curling up in bed with a book.[14] Despite the tug of the codex, other formats can be immersive and intimate too. Audiobooks speak words directly into a reader's ears, and e-readers with inbuilt lights can be read at night under the bed covers.

14. Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, '"Oh Look, a Ferry"; or The Smell of Paper Books', *TXT* 5 (2018), 'The Book Issue', 64–70.

One of the entry points to this article spoke about the affordances of paper and its capacity, and thence of books, to create containers; these are not just containers for ideas and words, but for experiences. The specificity of the chatterbox as container is that it intentionally generates narrative concealment and revelation through its flaps and folds.

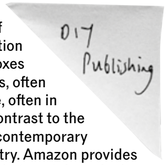


In asking our international contacts about their names for the 'wee paper thing', several terms were mentioned that figuratively referred to it as a salt (and sometimes pepper) cellar; a word which indicates the chatterbox's functionality as a literal container. Turn it upside down, and the folds where you might normally insert your fingers in order to mobilise the pincers are transformed into four discrete compartments. Place the chatterbox gently on the table, and it's a ready space for condiments: salt, pepper, cinnamon, cumin – take your pick.

We have had some reports that chatterboxes have been sighted in restaurants in Japan being used as such spice containers, though at the time of writing we have not yet been able to verify these reports.

Indeed, like the origins of the chatterbox itself, this use seems somewhat shrouded in mystery – is the upside-down chatterbox an origami object, deriving from Japan and its history of intricate paperfolding? Or an object that has organically arisen in multiple geographies, like similar styles of foodstuffs (noodles, let's say, or ice-cream. Mmm, a container with four ice-cream compartments…!)

But while we could leave origins shrouded in mystery, there are also clear pathways of travel, trade, capitalism, and often colonialism that any spice container has enfolded within. That a chatterbox in Scotland could be filled with a rich variety of spices opens out to multiple histories of labour, of botany, of cuisine, of extraction.[15] A little object contains potentially a multitude of stories, some of them merely piquant, some of them malign.



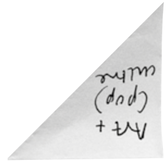
Even though both books and chatterboxes are made out of paper, their modes of production are quite different. Chatterboxes are made quickly by amateurs, often children, and on a small scale, often in editions of one. In this they contrast to the commoditised output of the contemporary mainstream publishing industry. Amazon provides the quintessential image of what containers look like for this globalised industry: giant warehouses filled with boxes that are loaded and unloaded into trucks and ships for distribution around the world.

And yet, as the endurance of the chatterbox signals, do-it-yourself versions of publishing persist on much less industrial scales. Digital technologies have enabled community groups and individuals to make print-on-demand books in small print runs, from anthologies of short stories to local histories and picture books in Indigenous languages. Thus continues a long history of DIY publishing, that also takes in such phenomena as zines and community cookbooks.[16]

16. Janice Radway, 'Zines, Half-Lives, and Afterlives: On the Temporalities of Social and Political Change', *PMLA*, 126:1 (2011), 140–50; *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*, ed. by Anne L. Bower (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

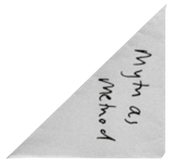
15. See multiple spice containers, and a short history of spice colonialism in Scotland, in Jilly MacLeod, 'The Spice of Life', *National Trust for Scotland* (2019) <www.nts.org.uk/stories/the-spice-of-life> [accessed 28 August 2024].

DIY publishing provides a form of creative expression for people, who gain the satisfaction that comes with making something. It also has critical possibilities. DIY publishing bypasses the gatekeepers of publishing conglomerates, literary agents, booksellers and so forth (though not always the gatekeepers of tech companies, depending on the kind of DIY publishing that is happening).[17] As a result, there are fewer voices dictating what can and can't be said in a publication; less smoothing of idiosyncratic language, fewer legal checks, less conformity to genre expectations. DIY publishing can be a pamphlet decrying discriminatory government interventions in the lives of Indigenous Australians, or a satirical children's toy that pokes fun at anything and everything.[18]



As well as on the playground and in academic articles, chatterboxes have made their way into art and popular culture. In an episode of the children's programme Bluey, a chatterbox points the way in a treasure hunt for Easter Eggs.[19] In the South Park episode 'Marjorine', a chatterbox becomes an object of obsession for the boys, who believe it is a dangerous, future-telling device for which they build a 'containment' centre.[20] The chatterbox has also become the paper muse for several artists, generating poems, drawings, sculptures and installations which variously depict frogs, astronomy, death, the Forgotten Australians, lava and a swarm of bees.[21]

The wee paper thing endures and transforms, inspiring art and creating laughter.



The chatterbox is an item of uncertain origin, a folkloric object with multiple names (and none) and several uses. Like many objects which are to be found in diverse geographies and chronologies, pinning down the chatterbox would – forcibly and literally – impede its mobility and ruin its multiplicity.[22] It is also the case that, as a folk toy particularly used by children, historical examples are even harder to find than other forms of ephemera. As Patricia M. Meley argues in her investigation of the use of paper toys by American children in the 1980s, 'they are most often thrown away, lost or destroyed by their maker […] Chatterboxes often contain messages that children do not want adults to read.'[23]

17. Claire Parnell, 'Mapping the Entertainment Ecosystem of Wattpad: Platforms, Publishing and Adaptation', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 27:2 (2021), 524–38.

18. Intervention Rollback Action Group, *The Truth about the NT Intervention* (2023).

19. Olivia Blaney TV, 'Bluey Season 2 Episode 52 Easter Egg', *Bluey Official Website*, 2022 <www.bluey.tv/easter-egg-season-2/> [accessed 19 August 2024].

20. 'Marjorine', *South Park*, Season 5, Episode 9, 2005 <www.southparkstudios.uk/episodes/9eb-marjorine-season-5> [accessed 19 August 2024].

21. For more details, please see our good friends at Wikipedia: 'Wikipedia:Perfect Fortune Teller', *Wikipedia*, 2023 <en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Perfect_Fortune_Teller&oldid=1189092145> [accessed 12 February 2024].

22. For an extended analysis on not pinning down, read and see Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, 'Pigeonmoon: Making of Ulipoolism from within', *The Conversation*, 2016 <theconversation.com/pigeonmoon-making-of-ulipoolism-from-within-68881> [accessed 12 February 2024].

23. Patricia M. Meley, 'The Newell Praise Book Chatterbox', *Ephemera Review*, 2.5 (2020), 137–55.

24. See 'Paper Fortune Teller', *Wikipedia*, 2023 <en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Paper_fortune_teller&oldid=1189092145> [accessed 12 February 2024].

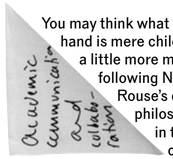
At the same time, though, you might perhaps perceive this article as a little vague, drawing on reports from an unnamed network of informants, some Googling, reliance on a very interesting Wikipedia article, and a small amount of 'proper' academic research (secondary reading; autoethnography, i.e. making and using chatterboxes). This article, as well as arguing for creativity and collaboration in scholarly communication, also plays with the idea of myth, and myth-making, as academic method. This exploration of the affordances of the chatterbox as container intentionally does not construct a full or proper history of the object (although we would love to see one), and yet finds some intriguing traces from across the globe in the 19th and 20th centuries, including in Hugard's Magic Monthly in the 1950s, in its 'Encyclopedia of Impromptu Magic'.[24] Rather than relying on these tantalising findings, this article embraces uncertainty and demands an active sense of our own creatively purposeful engagement and knowledge-making; a folk-method, so to speak, which is incorporated into our academic practice and embraced in our epistemologies.

25. Nassim Parvin and Rebecca Rouse, 'Feminist Philosophical Toys: Playful Companions and Live Theorization', *Hypatia*, 39:3 (2024), 465–91.

26. Parvin and Rouse, p. 1.

27. Parvin and Rouse, p. 1.

28. Parvin and Rouse, p. 3. See also Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, 'Serious Fun: Gaming the Book Festival', *Mémoires Du Livre / Studies in Book Culture*, 9:2 (2018), 1–37.



You may think what you're holding in your hand is mere child's play – or something a little more mystical – but it is also, following Nassim Parvin and Rebecca Rouse's definition, a 'feminist philosophical toy'.[25] We follow in their footsteps in using the chatterbox to interrogate the norms of scholarly communication. This wee paper thing might seem flimsy, but it is also a metaphor for collaboration, of at least two people. And, in its non-linear approach and multiple author/readership, it is both container and constrainer (in Oulipolian terms – see Ullapoolism? for more), while also being an enabling device. Parvin and Rouse state that 'The labor conditions of academia maintain the dominance of the written text by devaluing, dismissing, or otherwise disregarding other forms of knowledge making',[26] hence their turn, '[a]s women working in male-dominated technological disciplines', to 'paper'.[27] Their 'serious play' aligns with our own philosophy of 'serious fun'.[28] Play 'carve[s] out a space in but apart from everyday life, where we may open ourselves to very real experiences of joy, transgression, humor, and co-creation.'[29]

Throughout Ullapoolism, we have chosen to embrace humour, place, unconventional methods and outputs, and this current offering is no exception. As Parvin and Rouse note of their

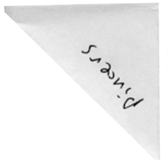
29. Parvin and Rouse, p. 3.

feminist philosophical toys, '[t]he flexibility and ubiquity of paper is a major affordance of the toys, and playful subversion of the academic paper.'[30] The gigantic fortune teller they discuss enables a conversation about collaboration, with its size meaning no single creator or user can exist: 'The oversized form of the toy hints at something that is greater than each of us and beyond our individual reach or control. At the same time the collaborative part helps emphasize how we may each participate in our individual and collective becoming.'[31]

The form of this article – with its 20 modular sections, its user's guide and templates – enables a rapid sense of non-linear creation. With a first draft completed in under three weeks, it adheres to our own belief in 'Rapidism', in other words that 'not everything has to take a long time'.[32] But perhaps the rapidist, alternative epistemology it contains and the ways in which it is attempting to communicate is not that legible to its readers and players?

We understand this risk, but think it is worth taking for its generative possibilities – noting that academic articles of the more conventional kind are also sometimes accused of being not very legible, due to their use of obfuscating jargon. We therefore argue for the occasional use of rapidist collaboration in scholarly thought.

Imagine if twenty different people wrote an article section each, following a short discussion of topics and approach. An academic article, and a playful experiment, completed in under an hour. What fun! What possibilities for collaboration and de-centring!



End Points (Pick One)

The chatterbox is a container: of stories, of spice, of options. But in its physical dimensions it also takes the form of pincers. These paper pincers can grab and hold and pull. Hence one of its less attractive alternate names, the 'cootie catcher'. The chatterbox is a childhood game, and a 'cootie catcher' one of its uses. While the 'cooties' might be an invention, caught from overly close contact with the opposite sex, particularly among children[33] (leading to the creation of numerous cootie board games), they are also a synonym for body – or headlice.[34]

Feel that lice pulling at your hair? How did it get there? Get it out, fast!! PINCERS PLEASE!

As we learned from our limited (thank goodness) research into headlice, in the First World War cooties were also called 'arithmetic bugs', which, for the poor trench-bound soldiers 'added to our troubles, subtracted from our pleasures, divided our attention, and multiplied like hell'.[35]

What a way to end this particular version of the narrative! But you can always return to the beginning… Take the arithmetical nature of this article as a positive, as a possibility for return and restart.

30. Parvin and Rouse, p. 5.

31. Parvin and Rouse, pp. 17–18.

32. Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, 'The Ulipoolism Manifesto', *ASAP/J*, 2021 <essaysonna.com/the-ulipoolism-manifesto-by-beth-driscoll-and-claire-squires/> [accessed 23 August 2024].

33. See Amy Collier, 'The New Normal: A Manifesto for Cooties', *Inverness Avenue*, 2016 <www.invernessave.com/2016/02/the-new-normal-a-manifesto-for-cooties.html> [accessed 9 August 2024] for a satirical approach to the medical phenomenon.

34. Tim Walsh, *Timeless Toys: Classic Toys and the Playmakers Who Created Them* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2005), cited in 'Cooties', *Wikipedia*, 2023 <en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cooties&oldid=1157191730> [accessed 9 August 2024].

35. Robert B. Asprey, *At Ballawa Wood* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1996), cited in 'Cootie', *Wikipedia*, 2023 <en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cootie&oldid=1157191730> [accessed 9 August 2024].

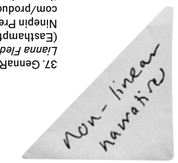
36. Thank you again to our good friend Wikipedia.

YOU WILL MEET A TALL, DARK STRANGER

Like flower petals plucked from a daisy, some chatterboxes foretell your romantic future; indeed, the Greek name for the wee paper thing translates into English as 'loves me, loves me not.' Play one with your crush, or with a friend as you try to interpret your crush's behaviour. And yet the malleable mercurial chatterbox can divine many more kinds of future than romantic. Chatterboxes can tell you your fortune; fortune teller is one of the names they go by in English. Can an academic article do the same?

The choices a user makes when interacting with a chatterbox determine the flap that gets opened, and the fortune that is read out. Chatterboxes are like horoscopes in this respect. There are horoscopes from the 12th century onwards that resemble unfolded chatterboxes, including a 16th-century horoscope of archbishop John Hamilton cast by Gerolamo Cardano.[36] Using the stars or paper or other material artefacts to gain insight into the future has been a human activity for thousands of years. The predictions can feel cosmic, but also comic, or obvious, or far-fetched. They also – and this is the source of their enduring appeal – feel at least slightly magical, determined by a power beyond an individual's intellect. Like the voice of fate.

Academic articles don't really work like that. They don't often feel cosmically directed. Perhaps the most we can divine through an academic article is the direction of a scholarly field – towards eco-humanities, say, or away from distant reading. And from that indication, we can divine our place in a scholarly field – at the forefront, or off to the side, or a bit behind. YOU WILL NEED TO DO SOME MORE READING, perhaps. Or YOU WILL CITE MORE DIVERSE SCHOLARS (you will). Ending articles with calls to action, phrased as fortunes, could dynamise academic work (an example of scholarly direct action!), make serious play a strength, and lead us towards a great fortune.



The story held in the container of the chatterbox is a non-linear one. Rather than progressing in an orderly fashion, paragraph by paragraph, the story swerves suddenly from one choice to another before the final surprising reveal. This is exciting. This holds experimental possibilities. What stories can be told through text that has shed one container (say, the codex) and embraced another (origami?)

Lianna Fled the Cranberry Bog is a creative work told via chatterboxes, described by author GennaRose Nethercott as a 'kaleidoscopic tale of cruel beasts, daring thieves, lost sweethearts, and a family on the run, told through twenty-six fold-up paper fortune tellers.'[37] Nethercott's blurb emphasises that the choices the reader makes

37. GennaRose Nethercott, *Lianna Fled the Cranberry Bog* (Eastampton, Massachusetts: Ninepin Press, 2019) <ninepinpress.com/products/lianna-fled-the-cranberry-bog> [accessed 28 August 2024]; see also GennaRose Nethercott, 'The Literature of Cootie Catchers', *Electric Literature*, 8 July 2019 <electricliterature.com/the-literature-of-cootie-catchers/> [accessed 14 August 2024].

determine Lianna's fate. The reader has power, thanks to the affordances of this container.

The non-linear, agentic spirit of the chatterbox story can hop into other containers; back to codices, even, or to digital formats. Think of the 'Choose Your Own Adventure' format of books, popular from the 1980s, particularly Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone's Fighting Fantasy series (1982–), 'in which YOU become the hero!'.[38] Printed as paperbacks, these invited readers to riffle forwards and backwards (enter the cave by going to page 102) before landing at one of several possible endings (most involving your demise). These work well online, too. We have made our own, Tante Fran's *May 68 Paris Book Club: Choose Your Own Revolution* (aka TTFM68BCCYOR), using the digital tool Twine and hosted on the games platform borogove.io.[39] That story was a way for us to stage moments that were significant in the development of contemporary book culture and publishing. It also satirises phenomena that work against progress, such as getting stuck in a loop of men explaining things to you. Become the heroine!

The thing about a non-linear story is that if you don't like its ending, you can play it again. What ending would you like to have? This one, or another?

38. Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone, *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (Puffin Books, 1982).

39. Elaine Squiscoll, *Tante Fran's May 68 Book Club: Choose Your Own Revolution* <xwvnw4q6.play.borogove.io/> [accessed 28 August 2024].

Humour

One of the funnest experiences when playing with a chatterbox is the moment when you unfold that final flap and are hit with an ending that is absurd, humorous, maybe even a little mean. 'YOU ARE SILLEE', as a child-made fortune teller inform- ed one of our Facebook correspondents. This moment is the catharsis or climax of a chatterbox, the slightly absurd, reductive endpoint to all those choices made.

In academic work, humour has risks. It is at odds with the dominant tone and epistemologic- alisms of the academy, which lean towards the more serious. Academia is generally credible rather than incredible. In both academic and popular work, humour can make readers uncomfortable, if they suspect they or their beliefs are the ones being ridiculed.

And yet humour and absurdity can be powerful tools for the rigorous illumination of aspects of human and social conduct, and for critique – as the history of satire shows us. Humour can also, as we have found, make academia a lot more fun, providing a creative, sociable bulwark against the tyranny of bureaucracies and the conservatism of institutions. Celebrate your SILLEE, absurd moments!

Once upon a time...

Much of the origin, historical development and contemporary use of chatterboxes remains shrouded in mystery – even their proper name. Even within an unusual and generative container such as the chatterbox-structure, academic writing can only reveal so much. Therefore, for this endpoint of the chatterbox journey, your outcome is: a myth. Read on.

Many moons ago when the world was young, a small creature went on a long voyage. With them, they took a smooth piece of white paper carefully tucked into a carrybag. After three days and nights, the creature arrived at the foot of a mountain. Four paths led up the mountain. Glancing into their carrybag, the creature noticed the four corners of the piece of paper glowing. Following an irresistible urge, the creature took each corner and brought it towards the centre of the paper, transforming flatness into a container for hopes, dreams, travels, emotions…

Literal Containers

We applaud the fine editors of *Inscription*, its peer reviewers, designers, and all those involved in aspects of its production, distribution and consumption: a communications circuit, no less, that great vehicle designed to contain the unruly history of the book.

After such flattery, we'd like, if we may, to venture some avenues for future research in the realm of the container (not all of which are codexical or papery, but all worth opening and investigating):

Butter dish
Cigar box
Container ship containing containers
Jam jar
Hip flask
Kabuff[40]
Map case
Jewellery box
Pannier
Swimming pool
Vol au vent

Please take your pick from this limited list of literal containers, or add your own… Let your imagination take flight!

What's the point?

What, indeed.

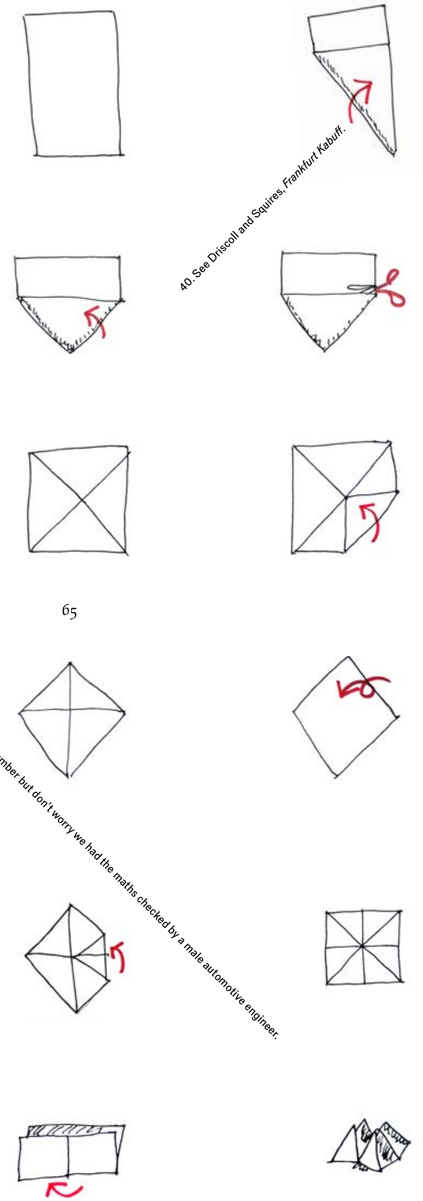
A chatterbox, while folded, consists of nine literal points. But also four entry points. Eight end points. Eight mid points, repeated. Two hundred and fifty six routes through.[41]

If you are feeling downcast (or itchy) by such mathematical trickery, or are still wondering what the point is, we have two suggestions. One: please accept our apologies.[42] Two: have a go yourself – you'll find instructions to the right and a blank template on page 58. Have fun! You surely won't be able to contain yourself! Experiment with form and language, and see where it takes you…

Where now?

This is an end point. But also a start point. Which article on Containers will you read next?

To choose, we encourage you to toss a coin, create a spinner, close your eyes and run a finger down the Table of Contents. Randomise your choices – or follow your nose!



40. See Driscoll and Squires, *Frankfurt Kabuff*.

41. Note to readers: you may doubt this number but don't worry we had the maths checked by a male automotive engineer.

42. Sorry, not sorry.