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# Pandemic Genres: Processing the COVID-19 Pandemic through Electronic Literature

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**Abstract:** This essay surveys works of electronic literature and digital art initiated in the earliest months of the pandemic that are reflective of the specific conditions and anxieties of the period. Here, we offer critical readings of these works to provide a better understanding of how electronic literature and digital art were used to process the experience and communicate the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an analysis of 18 works, certain traits and commonalities are identified as characteristic of a period-specific genre of COVID E-Lit. These include:

- an impulse towards the post-digital with crossovers both to analog artistic practice and forms such as net art more common to the early web;
- a focus during the periods of lockdown on domestic, local, and interior environments;
- digital takes on a chronicle mode of storytelling familiar from prior pandemic periods;
- meditation on the loss and substitution of shared public space;
- use of text generation to represent repetitive and interminable experiences of the pandemic;
- consideration of the virus itself as a language and on language as a manifestation of power and control;
- the influence of ubiquitous visualizations and statistical representations of the pandemic; and
- a desire to wrestle with the implications of the massive cultural shift to digital platforms that took place during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** pandemic, lockdown, electronic literature, digital art, platform culture, collective narrative.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a distinctive period in world history that has made its mark on the lives of the majority of the human population. The first year of the COVID-19 pandemic was uncanny. For some artists and writers, this period offered an opportunity to step back and reflect on the experience of the pandemic as it was unfolding. For those of us working in digital genres that are normally seen as outside of the mainstream, it was strange to watch as virtually all cultural life moved online. Perhaps electronic literature (e-lit)—works of language art that make use of computation and the network context—suddenly did not seem so obscure during a time when musicians, dramatists, and artists of all stripes were grappling with how to create and connect with audiences exclusively online.

The main question we explore in this article is how digital authors and artists reflected on and processed the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic through their work. During this period of platformization, how could electronic literature express the pandemic experience of living in digital media through genres of expression that are themselves composed of digital media? What could the specific affordances of digital media offer to our collective experience of processing the pandemic? As Rettberg argues in *Electronic Literature* we can describe genres of electronic literature on the basis of their historical contexts, cultural contexts, and technological contexts (Rettberg 201). We are to consider COVID E-Lit from the perspective of genre, what would its characteristics be?

## RESEARCH METHODS

Our research is based on the COVID E-Lit project, which we conducted with authors and artists who developed works specifically reflective of experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. We began the DARIAH-EU-funded project shortly after the onset of the pandemic. During the summer of 2020 we organized panel discussions with e-lit authors about the impacts of pandemic on their practice and daily lives, and in 2021 curated the COVID E-Lit exhibition featured in the "Platform (Post?) Pandemic"-themed Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) conference and festival ([eliterature.org/elo2021/covid/](http://eliterature.org/elo2021/covid/)). The 24 works selected for the COVID E-Lit exhibition were submitted via an open call: "works that respond thematically to the pandemic and/or are produced within the specific context of platform culture during the pandemic." It's important to note that they circulated primarily within the electronic literature community and was disseminated by the board and membership of the Electronic Literature Organization. This limited the demographic reach of the submissions themselves, which were mostly produced by North American and European authors writing in English, the dominant demographic of the ELO community. A different exhibition that included more representation of for example Chinese artists, or a greater representation of BIPOC artists, or indigenous people, would have no doubt documented other pandemic experiences and perspectives that were not as well-represented in this exhibition.

In reviewing the submissions, we assessed three main considerations:

1. Did the work respond in a reflective way either to the conditions of everyday life during the pandemic or the cultural shift in public and private life to network-based platforms?
2. Was the work suitable for the (primarily online) exhibition environment we were producing for the 2021 ELO conference?
3. Did the work make a significant artistic contribution to our understanding of life during the pandemic within the cultural context of electronic literature, broadly conceived?

Although the 2021 ELO exhibitions were primarily produced for an online audience, we did produce small in-person exhibitions at the University of Bergen art school and humanities library, including the Posthuman exhibition, the Platforming Utopias (and Platformed Dystopias) exhibition and the COVID E-Lit exhibition, which included talks with selected works and a preview of COVID E-Lit documentary. Because of pandemic restrictions, the audience was limited to University of Bergen students and staff. The conditions were particularly suitable for the Posthuman exhibition, as very few humans were able to access it in person. Although audiences for these physical exhibitions were limited by pandemic conditions, as Arts program chair, Scott Rettberg felt it was important to include physical components of these exhibitions for two reasons:

1. The University of Bergen made significant financial contributions to the ELO 2021 festival with the understanding that these exhibitions could provide a significant person cultural experience in a local context for its students during a time when there were few other opportunities for this. In contrast to many exhibitions organized by the ELO, in exhibitions of electronic literature and digital art organized at the University of Bergen during the past decade, we have prioritized reaching not only conference visitors from abroad but also local audiences and thus contributing to the cultural life of the University and city of Bergen.

2. A well-produced physical exhibition honors the work of the artists and provides documentation in a different way than an online exhibition. In some cases, works cannot be displayed in the intended format online. In addition, we hosted virtual openings for the exhibitions. In the case of the Posthuman exhibition only a small group of people were physically on-hand, but we were able to walk through a professionally produced exhibition at the University of Bergen art school and to give the artists and the online audience an experience of the exhibition that extended beyond the limitations of a web browser.

During March–April 2021, we interviewed 18 authors and artists behind 13 works through Zoom video conferences. Selections from these interviews form the basis of the documentary *COVID E-Lit: Digital Art During the Pandemic* that we coproduced with Ashleigh Steele (Nacher et al. 2022) in addition to several research publications<sup>[1]</sup>.

The works of e-lit that we survey here were generally initiated in the earliest months of the pandemic and reflect the specific conditions and anxieties of 2020 and early 2021. Within the body of work, we have found certain traits and commonalities that we could understand as a period-specific genre of COVID E-Lit. These include:

- an impulse towards the post-digital with crossovers both to analog artistic practice and forms such as net art more common to the early web;
- a focus during the periods of lockdown on domestic, local, and interior environments;
- digital takes on a chronicle mode of storytelling familiar from prior pandemic periods;
- meditation on the loss and substitution of shared public space;
- use of text generation to represent repetitive and interminable experiences of the pandemic;
- consideration of the virus itself as a language and on language as a manifestation of power and control;
- the influence of ubiquitous visualizations and statistical representations of the pandemic; and
- a desire to wrestle with the implications of the massive cultural shift to digital platforms that took place during the pandemic.

In the following, we will consider these generic traits while offering critical readings of works that exemplify them to gain a better understanding of how electronic literature and digital art reflected many facets of life during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A first observation to make about the works submitted for the COVID E-Lit exhibition is that the forms of the works were remarkably diverse—some ventured quite far afield from the genres typically described as electronic literature. In the call for works, we did not specify any specific forms, modalities, or formats, though the circumstances of producing an exhibition that would mainly need to be online rather than in a physical venue of course came with certain constraints—for example performances, normally a significant component of Electronic Literature Organization festivals, would need to take place online rather than in physical spaces, and installations would likewise be limited by the fact that few would be able to physically visit them. While some of the practices represented a specific use of familiar genres of e-lit, submissions also included visualizations, sound art, performance work, and even a series of online comic books. The great range of work in the exhibition evinced an expansive vision of what can be read as electronic literature to include a wide range of networked art practices.

#### A DISTINCTLY POST-DIGITAL CULTURAL CONTEXT

When we were conducting the interviews in Spring 2021, it seemed as if the first wave of the pandemic might be winding down. Vaccines were just beginning to be distributed in the US and Europe and a return to normal life seemed to beckon from just around the corner (this would ultimately prove only to be a brief pause; and in some parts of the world, just a beginning to the worst stages of the pandemic as the Delta variant delivered its wrath). At this point in North America and Europe we were at least exactly a full year since the first pandemic-related restrictions and lockdowns had begun. Everyday life changed profoundly across the world during this time. Beyond the horror and dread of the sickness and deaths caused by the pandemic, the lockdowns of the pandemic also served as a global sociological experiment that will have impacts that extend long after the pandemic has become endemic. While doctors and nurses, delivery drivers and waste-haulers, grocery store checkers and others continued to show up at their workplaces under dangerous conditions, many others were told, forced, or privileged to stay home—some nations, states, and municipalities barred people from leaving their living quarters for any but essential tasks. Social distancing and masking became normal aspects of everyday life and isolation *de rigueur*. A generation of students from preschoolers to graduate students suddenly had to “pivot” to online learning and were denied the opportunity to interact in-person with their peers during key stages of their social and intellectual development.

Many aspects of the global economy shifted as well. For some sectors, such as restaurants, concert venues, and virtually every other enterprise that involved gathering groups of people indoors, the early pandemic was devastating, while for others such as the video conferencing company Zoom, the network exercise equipment company Peloton, social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, streaming entertainment companies such as Netflix, and the juggernaut ecommerce retailer Amazon saw unprecedented boom times. It was a great time to be a tech billionaire and an awful time to be a nurse, police officer, waiter, bartender, or flight attendant. Online platforms took the place of the public sphere and became virtually the only venues for social connection. The domestic sphere took on greater importance in daily life. For those lucky enough to live with families, family time became all the time. Bread making, gardening, pickling, house painting and other slow pursuits became possible for people who had previously spent hours commuting to the office. Time seemed, in a way, to decelerate.

At the same time as culture in general shifted online, in many of the works we note a post-digital impulse to integrate “analog” practices into the digital, and an insistence on the personal, the particular, the local, and the materially lived experience. The post-digital turn is not unique to the pandemic: from the enthusiasm for vinyl records to the renaissance of Kodak photography, the past decade or so has seen a nostalgic embrace of cultural forms that predated their digital successors. Florian Cramer refers to the post-digital state as “post-apocalyptic one: the state of affairs after the initial upheaval caused by the computerisation and global digital networking of communication, technical infrastructures, markets and geopolitics” (Cramer 2014, 13). During the pandemic, we marked another sort of post-apocalyptic state as the plots of catastrophe films such as *Pandemic* came to life and the unthinkable became the banal. The fact that so much of cultural life by necessity shifted online may have also exacerbated a nostalgia for offline and a focus on the homely.

Many of the works in the COVID E-Lit exhibition are formally quite simple and harken back to the early online hypertexts and the net art practices of the 1990s and 2000s. These are not complex machine-learning-driven story generation systems or elaborately produced interactive multimedia productions, but instead works that were made with a sense of immediacy and urgency, responding to the specificities of the moment, that were quickly distributed online.

Perhaps the COVID E-Lit genre should be described as Lockdown Lit. The works of digital art in the COVID E-Lit exhibition highlight the fact that the experiences of the pandemic were complex and contradictory: both intense and characterized by boredom and restlessness, both global and local, both isolated and connected. The works demonstrate these contradictions and represent a significant and sustained historical period that will mark a before and an after in most people's lives.

#### LOCKDOWN LIT: RECONFIGURING DOMESTIC SPACE AND TIME

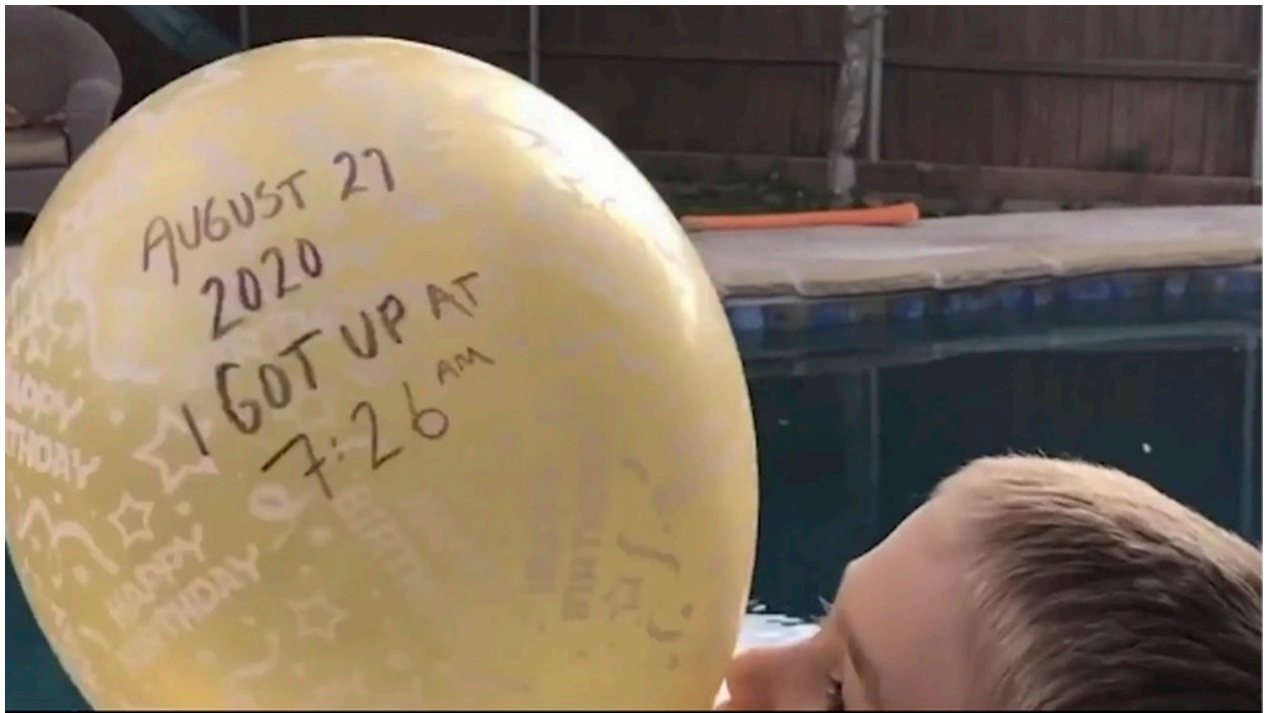
Most nations in the world at some point during the pandemic put sustained restrictions on normal embodied social contact into place. Lockdowns with various degrees of extremity were enforced around the world, and many people spent a great deal of time at home (alone or with immediate family). Restaurants, bars, theaters, sporting events, schools and all varieties of public gathering were shut down or transitioned online. Social distancing (later re-coined “physical distancing”) protocols encouraged us to protect each other by staying apart from each other. As non-essential workers were encouraged or required to work from home, normal established routines fell away. Some of the

changes were novel for a time (You could go to work in your pajamas! Zero commute! Every weekday a weekend and every weekend another day of work! Build a firepit in your front yard, pull up a folding chair and drink with your neighbors across the street! Play *Animal Crossing* transcontinentally with your cousins online!) but as the day weeks of pandemic experience stretched into months and years, the most common experience of the pandemic was one of social isolation and its attendant boredom: connected online but removed from pre-pandemic community.

In xtine burrough's *I Got Up 2020, Pandemic Edition*, burrough reinstatiates On Kawara's conceptual artwork *I Got Up* by producing a daily still or moving image that documents the time she got up and publishing it on Instagram. Kawara's original work was a long durational performance continuously produced between 1968 and 1979. Every day Kawara sent two postcards to friends. The postcards themselves were typical horizontal tourist images, from New York and other cities the artist visited. On the back Kawara stamped the words with "I Got Up At" and the time he "got up" along with his current address—which changed frequently as the artist traveled—and the address of the recipient. Kawara's work is focused on a minimalist approach to marking time. On one hand the work gestures towards uniformity and predictability: the fact that the cards are stamped and always marked with the same phrase emphasizes banality and normalcy and the images on the front of the cards are generic city landscape images selected but not photographed by the artist. On the other hand, the minimization of Kawara's experience to this single register heightens the impact of minor variations—when Kawara's location changes or the location of the touristic image changes, or when Kawara notes waking at mid-day or the wee hours of the morning, there is an interesting narrative in the gaps between the information provided and all of the experiences that are not narrated. As a work of mail art, connection is also essential to the impact of the work. It narrates the most minimal life story every day: "I'm still here, today. Thought you'd like to know." In this sense it resembles one of Ben Grosser's pandemic-era networked works: *amialive.today*—which always answers that simple question in the affirmative.

The images in xtine burrough's *I Got Up 2020, Pandemic Edition* are less uniform than those of Kawara's work. While burrough adheres to one of the same constraints of Kawara's work—producing and distributing an image marked with the phrase "I Got Up" and the time at which she rose that day—she does not use postcards or the USPS medium but instead photos and videos posted to her Instagram account. The inscriptions in burrough's images are not stamped in a uniform way but created with a variety of materials at hand. burrough documents her reality as a locked down academic, artist, and mother, and how she had to balance these roles during the pandemic. burrough explores and exploits the artistic and material constraints of the pandemic. Her versions of the daily timestamp for example include a video of her dog eating the text "I Got Up" text shaped by nuggets of dry dog food on the floor or another formed from her child's hair on the kitchen floor being swept away after a lockdown home haircut.





Figures 1-2. Images from *I Got Up 2020, Pandemic Edition*.

burrough presents us with the daily grind of keeping up "regular" routines inside the home during the pandemic. In our interview with her, burrough noted that the pandemic represented a collapsing of different roles and different spaces into the domestic sphere:

I kind of had this sensation that the floor had been swept out from beneath my feet with this sudden change of having to collapse all of my kind of worlds and spaces into the domestic space. So before the pandemic, I could be a mother and a housekeeper to some extent, and a cook and an artist and an educator, a faculty member, a friend, a citizen. I could hold all of these roles and I had space in different spaces where I could sort of perform or play out these various roles. And it was one year ago today that my boys came home with their iPads from school and I knew what that meant, I knew it meant we were going to be doing the school at home, and I knew that that meant that all of the spaces would be collapsing into the home space, and that's pretty challenging. (burrough et al. 2021)

As was the case with several other of the works in the COVID E-Lit exhibition, *I Got Up 2020, Pandemic Edition* presents the frustrations of forced domesticity, but also the opportunities for intimacy and reflection the lockdown presented for some. burrough's young son features prominently in the set of images, and participates in construct of the work. The work is about marking time, but it is also about *making* time one's own again. It is about boredom but also the sort of freedom that boredom enables—no freedom of movement but the freedom to reconceive of one's own relationship to structured time, to break routines while inventing new ones.

#### PERSONAL CHRONICLES OF THE PANDEMIC

The chronicle is an archetypal pandemic genre. From medieval chronicles of the Black Death to Daniel Defoe's 18th century *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a common literary response to a pandemic is to simply witness, to take note of what occurred and how people reacted and tried to go on living as a lethal contagion spread through their societies. In Defoe's case, the *Journal* was a fictional reconstruction of events written a more than half-century after the outbreak of the 1665 Great Plague of London, intended to serve as a warning of what to do and what to avoid if the plague revisited London. The digital chronicles of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic included in the COVID E-Lit exhibition are by contrast spontaneous attempts to both record and process experiences of the pandemic in real time.

Imagine the narrator of *A Journal of the Plague Year* as a prolific Southern California dad joke enthusiast and his kids. The Marino family's webcomic project *Coronation* chronicle intentionally focused on highlighting the potentially positive aspects of circumstantially necessitated familial captivity. The project is based on an effort to produce a panel of a serial webcomic almost every day of the pandemic. As Mark Marino described the situation in our interview with the family, the family of four were all Zoom simultaneously, either taking classes or teaching them, negotiating who would get to use the "garage office." Marino describes the process of making the family chronicle kind of family art therapy: "*Coronation* kind of gave us something to, a creative project, another creative project, to work on together that makes snapshots from this time less like, it's less like looking back on moments dreadfully and more like more occasions to celebrate as a family." (Marino et al. 2021)

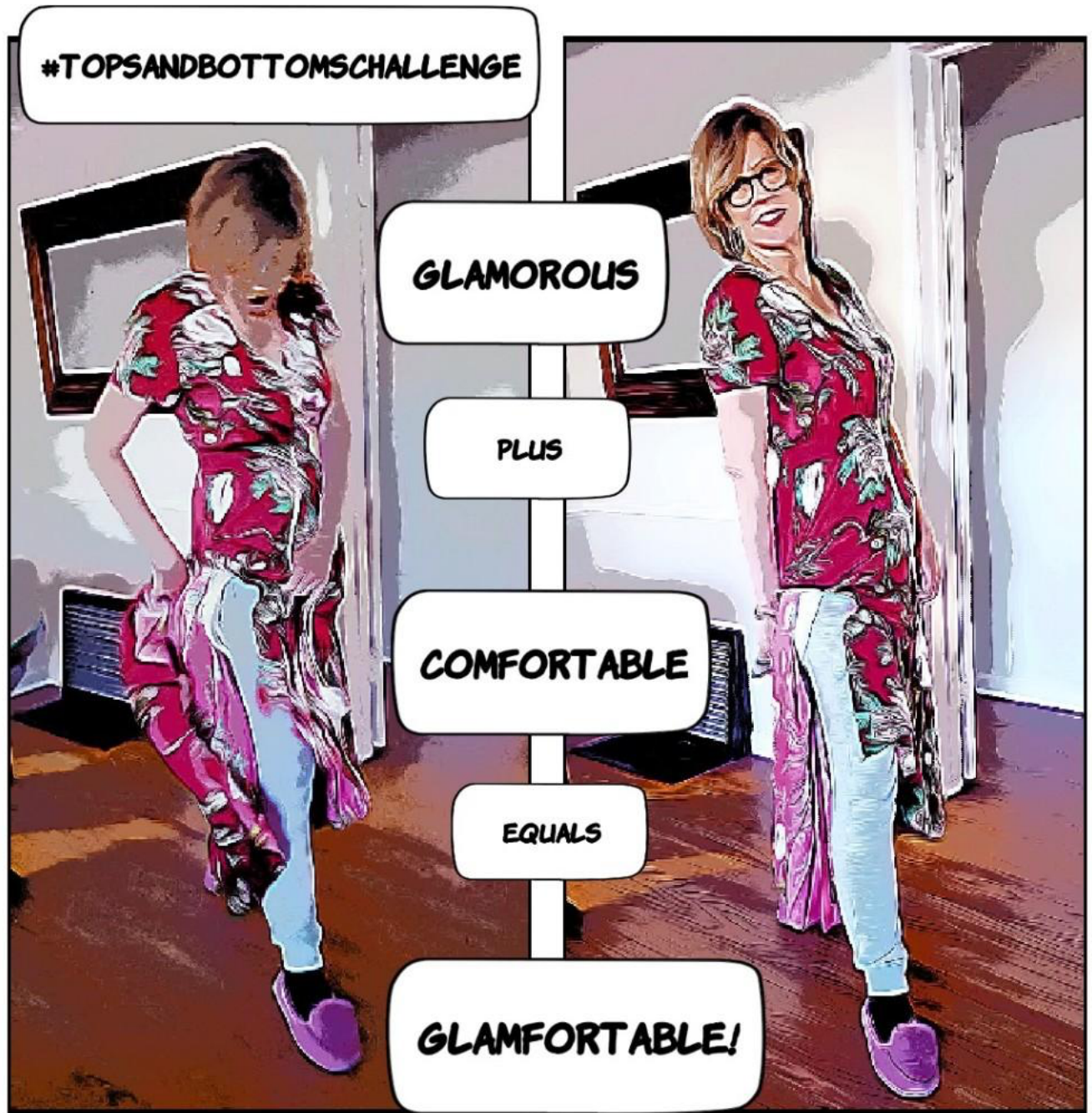


Figure 3. A page of Coronation featuring the #topsandbottom challenge of Zoomwear.

There is a clear "when life gives you lemons, make lemonade" impulse at work behind *Coronation* webcomic, but there is also an aspect of the chronicle to it, just as with *Up*. *Coronation* plays on some of the comic aspects of life in quarantine such as the phenomenon of people working in pajama bottoms and professional tops (the #topsandbottoms challenge), but over time the webcomic also mediates some of darker aspects of life in the pandemic, from the tragicomic spread of disinformation about the pandemic promulgated by the Trump administration during the pandemic to the reckoning with systemic racism that came after the murder of George Floyd.

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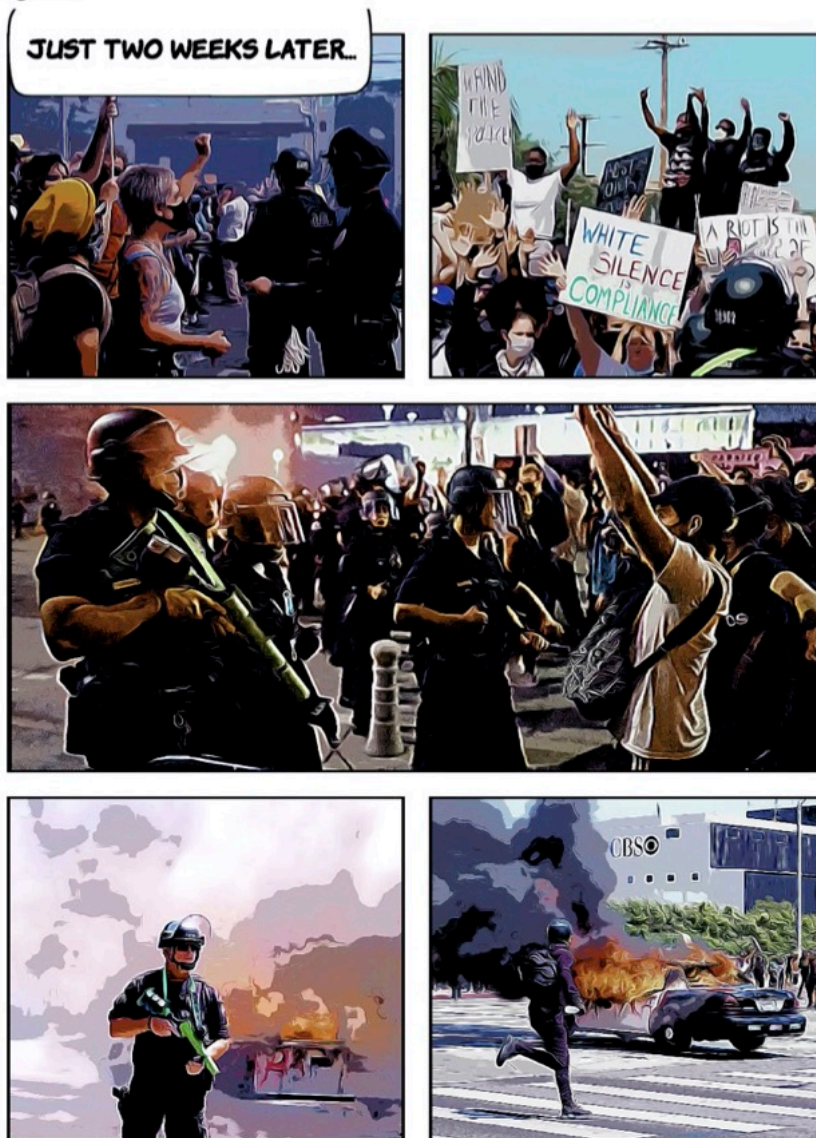


Figure 4. Frames from *Coronation* with representations of Black Lives Matter protests in Los Angeles.

Using a web comic app to create a durational collaborative work, the Marino family uses the frames of the comic to literally *reframe* their experience of the pandemic, by sharing the intimate experience of their home and creating a chronicle of an experience shared by millions around the globe.

The urge to chronicle and reflect on changes in relationships to public and private space are also concerns of Bilal Mohammed's *Lost Inside: A Digital Inquiry* and Jody Zellen's *Avenue S*. Mohammed, a young author (a 20 year-old) who studied electronic literature in San Diego, spent much of his time in quarantine creating a digital journal that manifests, as Mohammed describes it, as "hypertext, intimate entries, and personal and visual perspectives that highlight a state of stasis due to the quietude and uncertainty of the outer world. The purpose of this work is to create an intimate space for rumination on the experience of life under quarantine and a pandemic." Mohammed continues that it "mainly highlights the states/stages, metaphorically and emotionally speaking, which we as individuals tend to undergo due to the circumstances COVID has provided us. These stages, such as hopelessness, concern, distraction, connection, fantasy, reflection, and questioning, are expressed in the journal through images, text, drawings, audio, and video accumulated during the period itself" (Mohammed et al. 2021).



Figure 5. Screenshot from *Lost Inside*.

Many of the texts of *Lost Inside* reflect the same sorts of concerns common to many young writers—love lost and found, the search for purpose and identity, doubts, hope, fears for the future. But these themes are filtered in an interesting way through multimedia and by the circumstances of the pandemic. Several of the sections are sparked or inspired by images of Mohammed's neighborhood, emptied of its normal signs of life. *Lost Inside* captures the sense of meditative interiority that was in a way forced by the circumstances of the pandemic. People's experiences of everyday life were *taken out of context* as the rhythms of life changed and the available modes of interaction with others were winnowed down.

In their form as handcrafted hypertexts, *Lost Inside* and *Coronation* present an alternative to the default approach to time in social media platforms like Facebook and TV. The timeline approach of those platforms emphasizes a continuous now, an endless reverse chronological scroll—with the majority of content slipping into a past that is easily accessed only by the algorithm. Facebook presents us with our memories, but it does not make it easy for us to locate them of our own accord. The chronicle approach of these works, on the other hand, presents us with a more enclosed and reflective linear narrative distinct from the endless and scattered scroll of contemporary platform culture.

YEARNING FOR THE CROWD (AND THE EARLY WEB)

Some of the works featured in the COVID E-Lit exhibition highlight the fact that the experience of the pandemic was in some sense beyond words. Jody Zellen's *Ghost City: Avenue S* is a visual diary of the pandemic that reinforces the idea that earlier forms of digital narrative and net art could be better suited, or at least present alternatives, for chronicling the experience of the pandemic than corporate social media platforms. *Ghost City* itself is a net art work that Zellen initiated in 1997, during an earlier era of the Web — *Ghost City* was a featured work in the Electronic Literature Organization's first exhibition at the State of the Arts symposium in 2002. In the catalog for that exhibit Zellen described the work as using "the space of the web as a sculptural space, allowing viewers to interact with animated graphics to delve deeper and deeper into an imaginary city." It is "a labyrinthine environment through which viewers can navigate, either following the linear narrative that unfolds by moving from page to page, or can delve into the non-linear chaos of random links" (ELMCIP 2002). The project uses language minimally, primarily relying on images and animations to get its narrative across. At the onset of the pandemic in 2020, Zellen felt drawn to return to the work: "this was a really good opportunity to try to return to making what I call net art [...] It really developed and is developing as a kind of pandemic journal. It's like my response to what's around me or what I see in the news or how I'm feeling as a series of photographs or web pages with rollovers and animations and snippets of text that either I wrote or somebody else wrote and just trying to make a really in-depth project touches on everything that that we're feeling" (Zellen et al. 2021).







Figures 6-8. Screenshots from *Ghost City, Avenue S*.

*Ghost City, Avenue S* merges Zellen's localized first-person perspective with animations that reflect the larger global impacts of the pandemic, for example with fields of stick figures that represent the thousands of people who perished from COVID-19, or visualizations of comparative unemployment statistics from different countries around the world. As in the pages of *Ghost City* she produced 25 years earlier, much of the material in the work is found art. Zellen's animations are interspersed with photographs Zellen took on her walks through the emptied cityscape of Los Angeles that communicate both the eerie silences of cities during the early pandemic and gestures of hope such as the ubiquitous sidewalk drawings and handmade signs that people used to express hope for the future or to thank nurses and other frontline workers. Zellen integrated these materials with animations that captured feelings of isolation and frustration common during the pandemic: "I just animate this, what I see as a kind of anonymous figure, that moves through different situations. And in some ways, I think maybe that's a kind of kind of self-portrait. It's like there's this silhouetted figure kicking its head against the wall and then plopping down. And it's just like, you know, again and again and again." (Zellen et al. 2021)

During a period when she had very little contact with other people, Zellen took advantage of the fact that she was able to go for long walks in the sunshine of Los Angeles as the basis for a kind of Situationist *dérive*—walking with a reflective artistic intention as she documented a city changed by the pandemic. The work becomes both an eyewitness account of the locked down and lonely city and a project of personal catharsis. The fact that the piece uses language so minimally suggests that some aspect of the experience of the pandemic are beyond language, or leave us incapable of utterance. The narrativization here is one that uses images to produce affect in a way that language alone could not.

Patrick Lichty's *Confinement Spaces* is another visual artwork featured in the COVID E-Lit exhibition that affectively captures the eerie sense of isolation in locked down during the first year of pandemic. At the time, Lichty was working in the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi. As in Zellen's work, Lichty's practice involved walking through mostly deserted city and recording aspects of what he saw there. In Lichty's case, the artist used a 3D scanning app to capture the landscapes around him and then collated these captures in a 3D modeling program, compounding the fracturing of the landscapes. He then rendered 360-degree panoramas, from which he constructed the virtual tours of different environments in the city. The scans are warped and incomplete, and the viewer moves through links represented as arrows overlaid on the image from broken and fragmented environment to another. In a purely visual way, *Confinement Spaces* reiterates the pandemic sense of the uncanny, of always being not quite at home in familiar environments that were suddenly made strange. The environments also capture a sense of loss—or the sense that the world was precipitously close to falling apart. The landscapes of these spaces are largely free of humans, but in one image, the artist's wife, who he was physically separated from for much of the pandemic due to border closures, makes a brief appearance in fractured form. This is a resonant moment in the art work. It is as if a memory of a loved one suddenly manifests during a walk through a broken world. Many of us who were facing the anxieties of the pandemic apart from loved ones could identify with this moment—a pang of longing felt when walking alone in a fractured world.

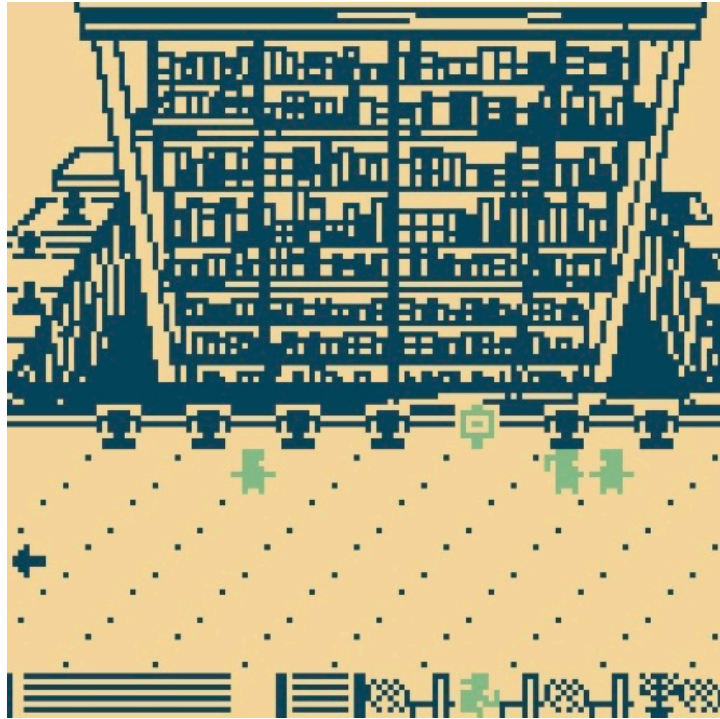


Figure 9. An image from Patrick Lichty's *Confinement Spaces* in which the artist's spouse briefly appears.

#### NOSTALGIA FOR PUBLIC SPACE

The nostalgia for public space was a clear theme that echoed across many of the works in COVID E-Lit exhibition and in our interviews with the artists. The pandemic lockdowns changed our relationships to the spaces that define everyday life. Jody Zellen remarked in our interview with her that "I want to interact with people, even the you know, maybe on a normal day, I don't see that many people. I definitely miss being in like a bustling crowd." Annie Abrahams remarked "I miss going to places. I miss talking and getting drunk and drinking coffee and all those moments that are a little bit out of control." Jörg Piringer reflected that "what I miss, definitely miss, is going to exhibitions, concerts, readings, meeting people, just talking with more than one or two people at the same time without any work agenda or anything, just meeting people somewhere." Although we found our substitute forms of socialization on Zoom and social networks and various other arenas of platform culture, the pandemic also highlighted how important public spaces and the embodied experience of interacting with others and interacting with culture were. Scheduled meetings on a two-dimensional screen are not the same as a serendipitous exchange of ideas at an art opening or a coffee shop. There is a felt sense of presence—whether it be through bodily language, touch, perhaps simply breathing in the same air, that cannot come with telepresence alone. It seems the desire to gather with others—both with friends but also strangers—is human nature.

Several of the exhibited works represented this yearning for the lost experience of public space with online virtualizations of real-world environments that were not accessible during the pandemic. Guilia Carla Rossi's *The British Library Simulator* is a fascinating case in point. Rossi, a specialist in digital collections at the British Library, created a short browser-based 8-bit style game in the online platform Bitsy. The player can navigate through some of the most iconic spaces of the British Library with a person avatar, and encounter characters who describe some of the interesting historical facts about the British Library. Of course, encountering the towering stacks of King George III's library in an 8-bit environment is radically different from the awe-striking experience the actual physical library presents bibliophiles, but that is also the point.



Figures 10-11. The 8-bit version of the King's Library vs. a photograph of the actual space (source: Wikipedia photo by Nic McPhee).

The game reflects whimsically on the comparative paucity of screen-based substitutes for cultural life as it can be experienced in real life, when a pandemic is not restrictive access to public environments. The pandemic was in some sense a nostalgia engine: overnight we were given reason to realize all that we had taken for granted, whether a pint at a neighborhood pub or the opportunity to wander the stacks of one of the great temples of human knowledge.

#### REGENERATION AND REPETITION

During the early days of the pandemic, a kind of Heideggerian sense of dread—a not-being-at-home in the world in which one dwells—settled in. The virus did not present the terror of immediacy. Death from COVID-19 was not like a gunshot, but a creeping thing, a disease that attacks the lungs and immune systems of its sufferers and ultimately suffocates its victims. It further seemed to be an unknowable entity—the pathways to suppressing it were largely unclear. Even as scientists were shifting in their gear in developing vaccines to combat the virus in the beginning it was unclear that they would necessarily succeed. And meanwhile, governments and public health authorities began to issue rapidly and radically changing restrictions and measures to contain the spread. The dread of the pandemic was that of the great unknown. One could obey rules, and wear masks, and social distance, and use hand sanitizer, and wash hands 15 times a day, but there was little confidence that any of the measures would provide anyone with immunity from infection.

A population already accustomed to scrolling through Facebook and Twitter feeds to fill time with ambient information in interfaces designed to demand attention and engagement picked up the habit of “doomscrolling” during the pandemic: scrolling through story after story of facts, statistics, guidelines, restrictions, outrages, speculative infections, hospitalizations, and deaths. The pandemic seemed to be the only story worth caring about and many could spend hours a day doing nothing but drowning in an ocean of information and disinformation.

Ben Grosser's *The Endless Doomscroller* illustrates the mechanics of pandemic-era engagement in a stripped-down minimalist fashion. The work pulls upon a corpus of short, ambiguous bad news headlines that don't in themselves have any real information value. The work promises “an endless stream of doom, without all the specifics; delivers exactly that, with headlines such as “Worst Is Yet to Come / Experts Say Spread Can't Be Contained / We're In A Crisis Now / Kindness Elusive / Alarms Continue Borders Close Today.” The headlines aren't linked to any actual stories and the work illustrates that the stories are not ultimately necessary to the user's behavior. The work simply shuffles the lines in the corpus and keeps on delivering them at random as the reader scrolls down a page that has no end, demonstrating both the mechanic of engagement and the seeming interminability of the pandemic itself. Doom becomes its own attraction and dread its own end. *The Endless Doomscroller* also demonstrates the futility of pandemic FOMO. No matter how much time the average reader spent doomscrolling, and perhaps becoming a Facebook pundit on the virtues of masking or wonders of hydroxychloroquine, the acquired knowledge (or lack thereof) from doomscrolling would do nothing to alter the course of the pandemic. During the pandemic workers were sorted into two categories: essential and non-essential. Doomscrolling is the ultimate non-essential activity for the non-essential worker, scrolling the feed while feeding their own depression<sup>[2]</sup>.

A number of works of electronic literature responding to the pandemic did so through poetry or text generators, which are arguably the oldest genre of electronic literature. Poetry generators and text generation systems have two different characteristics that may have made them particularly well suited to the early pandemic moment. On the one hand, these systems are generative in the sense that once the poet/programmer sets up the system, it can produce factorial variations: even a simple poetry generator system can produce results that can surprise both the writer and the reader of its texts. The human writer provides vocabulary and structure and can then stand back and watch as the system outputs scrolling variations that exceed any single arrangement the poet may have consciously conjured (in volume if not necessarily in quality). Generators are rewarding in this sense: the author plants the seeds, and the system yields the text.

Gardening was a common pastime for many during the early stage of the pandemic, fulfilling a post-digital impulse to momentarily escape from platform culture by literally getting one's fingers in the dirt of the organic world. In our interview with the Marino family, for example, Jenna Marino told the story of reclaiming garden space in a lot that had previously housed a condemned building (Marino et al. 2021). Perhaps because so much of our media consumption was focused on sickness and death, or because we suddenly became so conscious of the fragility of the supply chains and infrastructures that our food supplies depend on that self-sufficiency or because working from home simply afforded the time for many to do so, gardens enabled the people who tended them to watch something grow, to see life regenerate and spring from the earth. Poetry generators can offer a similar sense of renewal<sup>[3]</sup>. Once planted, they grow texts and do not cease until the program has run its course or the browser window is shut. The systems are also well suited to variation within repetitive structures. And repetition with slight variation was essentially a default mode of living during the pandemic—particularly when it came to information consumption.<sup>[4]</sup>

Nick Montfort's *Sonnet Corona*, composed very early in the pandemic on March 27-28<sup>th</sup>, 2020, is a program that produces very small sonnets in monometer, with each line composed of just one foot of two syllables. The poems it produces are elegiac in tone and fulfill a kind of minimal ontological status as sonnets. Montfort pulls some of the terms that were in circulation during the first months of the pandemic (for example “postpone”, “the curve”, “outbreak”) into the poetry generator and includes in a reference hand washing in line 3 and 4 of each output version of the poem. During the first wave of the pandemic, certain advice was given over, and over, and over again, including an edict to wash hands thoroughly and often. Hand washing took on the importance of a key ritual. Just as doomscrolling represented a desire for new information so strong that the quality of the information itself seemed to matter little, hand washing represented a minimal condition of adapting to the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic was a virtually unknowable hyperobject (Morton 2013), a disaster of sublime magnitude. The non-essential workers of the world were desperate to know what to do. And what had been done? Well, at minimum, people could wash their hands. *Sonnet Corona* captures the sense of enclosure, of minimization, inherent in the first weeks of lockdown.



Figure 12. Screenshot from Sonnet Corona.

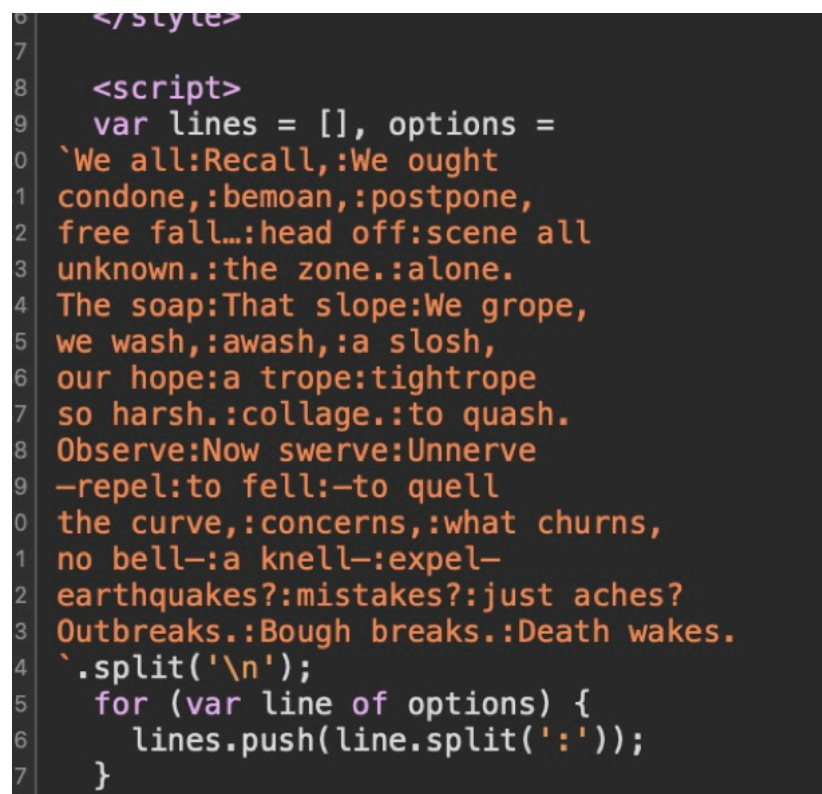


Figure 13. Javascript array of possible lines in Sonnet Corona.

In her remix of *Sonnet Corona*, *Curt Curtal Sonnet Corona*, Amaranth Borsuk mutates both the form and the tone of Montfort's work. Borsuk's modification turns the monometer sonnet generator into a program that produces curtal sonnets: "a 3/4 abbreviation of the Petrarchan sonnet in which each section of the form is proportionately shortened: the octave becomes a sestet, the sestet a quatrain with an extra tail."

In her headnote (in comments to the code of the piece), Borsuk situates her effort in comparison to Montfort's: "The abbreviated form felt appropriate to both the 8-page book of the Quarantine Public Library and to my feelings about this moment at the end of a very difficult year, but one illuminated by hope, as my son, due in January 2021, decided he couldn't wait and joined our family in the final weeks of December" (Borsuk 2020). While Montfort's piece embeds within it the shock of sudden confinement and the desperation felt in the first wave of the pandemic, Borsuk's work is also representative of a particular moment in time, almost a year into the pandemic, expressing both the weariness of the long first year of life with COVID-19 and the hope for something better. At that point, it was both clear that vaccines were on the way soon and frustratingly that they were not yet getting into people's arms.



Figure 14. An instantiation of Curt Curtail Sonnet.

Borsuk's generated poems have a tonal shift, capturing in the first sestet the frustrations of waiting for the vaccines and other measures to take positive effect and in the second a kind of muted hopefulness. There is something very personal about the expression of the poem borne of a year spent mostly at home. The "we" of Borsuk's poem suggests not the "we" of multitudes so much as the intimate "we" of the people at home with whom we share an extended period of quarantine. Borsuk's work was one of short works published in the journal *Taper* in its Fall 2020 "pent up" issue<sup>[6]</sup> (Booten et al. 2020).

EVERYTHING (AND WE MEAN EVERYTHING) CANCELED FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE

Mark Sample's text generator *The Infinite Catalog of Crushed Dreams* responded to the sudden changes in everyday life that occurred during the first wave of the pandemic. The initial novelty of lockdown gave way to waves of cancellations and the realization that the pandemic would not be a short blip but a durational experience that would affect everyone's life profoundly, whether or not they ever got sick with the virus. There was a deeply repetitive and seemingly endless cycle of disappointment. As Sample explained in our interview: "I was seeing it in my own kids and seeing it in my students, like, prom was being canceled. That concert they trained, rehearsed for months: the play was canceled, all those trips that were canceled. So I just trying to capture that sense of loss. And you just keep scrolling and scrolling and there's, I haven't figure the mathematics behind it, but the chances of things repeating themselves, it's like it's in the billions, one in billions of things repeating." (Sample et al. 2021)

*The Infinite Catalog of Crushed Dreams* produces a never-ending tragicomic litany of losses. The work is a text generator that pulls upon an extensive grammar to produce 4 sentence micronarratives of lives interrupted in ways trivial and profound, from a high school missing the senior prom to an EMT breaking down on a video conference with his wife and family after long days of tending to the afflicted. By pulling on large vocabularies of names, locations, occupations, and situations, the work highlights the fact that though the pandemic has been a global experience that affected lives in every corner of the world, that collective experience was also very particular, local, and individuated.

# *The Infinite Catalog of Crushed Dreams*

## *The pandemic hit and then...*

1. A play in La Mirada, California, was cancelled on Thursday. Everyone was devastated. It was just another superspreader deathtrap. Nobody could say if things would ever be the same.
2. All the bars are shuttered in Kendale Lakes, Florida. The streets are deserted. A herd of goats pass by.
3. Tristen near Goodyear, Arizona, is an only child. Tristen misses playing tag with friends. Nobody shouts at school.
4. Sariah's degree in Chemistry means a lifetime of debt. Commencement is cancelled. What's on Netflix?
5. A concert in Ontario, California, was called off on Wednesday. The organizers were gutted. It was just another superspreader deathtrap. Nothing like this had ever happened before.
6. Levi is only 7 years old from Brentwood, California. Levi barely remembers Math class, of all things. Nobody shouts at school.
7. Prom was only a month away. But time means nothing anymore. Ariadne's date was sick and she hadn't seen him in a month.
8. Messiah from Fairfield, California is crushed that graduation was postponed. Being a sophomore could have been better.
9. Bridger is an only child from Pontiac, Michigan. Bridger barely remembers their friends.

Figure 15. Screenshot from *The Infinite Catalog of Crushed Dreams*.

*The Infinite Catalog* produces micronarratives of microtragedies and draws upon the combinatory power of text generation to represent the sensation of *overwhelming* that accompanied the start of the pandemic. Sample chose to have the program produce numbered instances, which enhances the sense that although the pandemic was happening *everywhere* at the same time it was also affecting everyone differently at the same time. And as the reader scrolls down, more and more iterations of disappointments are generated. It is endless. The fact that these micronarratives are numbered also points the numeracy of the pandemic itself. Every morning we woke new statistics, new charts. The numbered lines in *The Infinite Catalog* remind readers that each of those statistics of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths were tied to individual lives.

*The Infinite Catalog* is a melancholic work but also a comic one because the anxieties it captures are so familiar and it surfaces the absurdity of the pandemic situation so plainly. There is also an uncomfortable recognition of the mostly white, mostly middle-class privilege position of those who were locked down but not forced into danger during the pandemic. There's a profound disparity between the experience of a nurse working in an understaffed COVID ward without adequate personal protective equipment, watching patient after patient die of the infection day after day, and that of the high school student missing commencement or the accountant missing happy hour at the local pub. But some of the humor of this piece is that of recognition of the fact that these experiences are all (unequally) tragic. It was a situation of great privilege to live in a wealthy society that could pivot (however imperfectly) to online schooling and to have a job that could be conducted online and to be able to have groceries delivered and first-run movies and concerts streamed into living rooms—a situation of remarkable historical privilege. Nevertheless, explaining to an 8- or 10-year-old that they could not have a birthday party or see their grandparents for a year or two was tragic in its own way. The pandemic was not one small disappointment or one great it was mountains of them, piling up on top of each by the hundreds to thousands to millions and billions.

Perhaps there is something to be gained from this period of universal loss. Astrid Erll points out that especially for the young generation in their formative years, the lockdowns mean both extended and fundamental changes: "school, university, socializing and, yes, dating, as well as rites of passage (from graduation parties to stays at are not what they used to be. At the same time, this generation is witness to both acute global risk and an unprecedented degree of planetary connectedness. This is an incisive experience." [...] "[G]enerational memory might retain a sense of being existentially entangled in a global dynamic of climate change, species extinction, and pandemics – and the need for collective action," however she continues to call this a "hopeful scenario" (Erll 2020, 50).

### THE LANGUAGES OF THE VIRUS

The nature of information and disinformation online during the pandemic were addressed thematically in several of the works in the COVID E-LIT exhibition. In the case Jörg Piringer's *Complete COVID-19 Genome as a Sound Poem*, which is exactly what it says it is, the poet reflects on the experience of the pandemic by processing the virus pure information. The work is a sound file that features a computerized voice quickly reading the complete RNA sequence of the virus itself represented by the chemical pairs (A, T, C, G) in the genome. The piece represents a radical stripping-down of the pandemic to a letteristic recitation of its genetic sequence. The piece reflects on the sublime unknowability of the pandemic from a human perspective: we can read the virus out loud (literally), but we can't actually make sense of the language it speaks. (

course, at the same time, the sequencing of the virus, and the subsequent development of vaccines to fight it, were the most essential work and the greatest scientific achievements of the pandemic. Piringer's work reflects on the fact that the virus itself is a kind of language—perhaps inverting William S. Burroughs's proposition that language is a virus from outer space. In this case, virus is a language that inhabits us. In our interview with him, Piringer reflected on a connection between the work of poets and the work of geneticists:

...those algorithms that the scientists used to analyze genomes in general, they are text algorithms, in fact. So there's a kind of small section of computer science that is called... I have this book—I don't know if the subject is really called like that, but this book is called Stringology—which is about strings, character strings. And what they do is find patterns in strings and analyzing it. And that's actually what we as artists do. And especially when you work with data and transform it into literature, that's the thing you do when you work with computers and they do it as well. So it is kind of very closely related. They don't see it as literature, but you could see it as literature I think. (Piringer et al. 2021)

In this sense, both digital poets and geneticists are working with language and transcoding (Manovich 2000). The piece might also be read as representing the limits of language during a pandemic. Whatever poems could be written in human language about the experience of the pandemic pale in importance to the scientific analysis of character strings through which we understand its genetic code. The virus doesn't care if you wrote a sonnet about it. Its purpose is to survive, to spread and to mutate, substituting character strings to become more transmissible and perhaps more virulent. It adheres to its own deadly poetics.

During the pandemic language both served as a social act of contact, for example in video meetings and on social media, but simultaneously as ways of uttering loneliness, obsession, control and despair as explored in doomscrolling and the political, platformed control of language (see e.g. the works by Grosser above and Grosser and Beigue in "A Pandemic Crisis Seen from Home" (Pold et al. 2022)). However, several of the works featured in the COVID E-Lit exhibition considered the fact that the experience of the pandemic was also somehow beyond language: the sound work *Pandemic Encounter* by Annie Abrahams consists simply of the sound of the artist's breathing, interlaced with that of a heartbeat. Nothing is said in the recording, but the sound of Abraham's breathing—and the silences between breaths—says a great deal about the affective experience of the pandemic. As Abrahams describes it:

"Pandemic Encounter" is a sound file where there is my own breathing, an evolution in this breathing for five minutes, mixed with heartbeats that have been a little bit manipulated by the computer to give it a certain quality in the sound environment. And there's also in the background a five minute long recording of silences [...] And it's a beautiful sound recording in the end, these silences, because silence is never silence. (Abrahams et al. 2021)

Abrahams goes on to describe the work as "about her own situation somehow, at a certain point, because I'm afraid of COVID." Abrahams has only 60% of her lung capacity "in the beginning I thought I would immediately die." Her piece captures the very real embodied fear of this virus, which destroyed so many people's lungs. There is an intimacy in listening to Abrahams's aspirations, the silences, and the heartbeat. It represents a kind of internal communication born of self-monitoring.<sup>[6]</sup> We are left to wonder whom the *Pandemic Encounter* is an encounter with? The body, the mind, or the intruding virus that threatens to sever the connection between them?

The very act of breathing has become a symbol of our endangered living bodies, whether we simply miss physical human contact as we are isolated behind our screens or fear serious lung complications and suffocation from Covid-19. However, breathing also has a political dimension relating to the strangulation of George Floyd, Eric Garner and others before them by the police. "I can't breathe" became a slogan at Black Lives Matter demonstrations with reference to these police killings, but also reflecting "a long history of Black asphyxiation, dating from the period of the transatlantic slave trade" (Silva). As Achille Mbembe argues, our living bodies are at stake in what he sees as a general suffocation of the planet related to colonialism, climate crisis, technological domination and the world views that accompany these—a theory he articulated in *Necropolitics* (2019). Mbembe concludes this COVID-era essay, "The Universal Right to Breathe" declaring that:

All these wars on life begin by taking away breath. Likewise, as it impedes breathing and blocks the resuscitation of human bodies and tissues, COVID-19 shares this same tendency. After all, what is the purpose of breathing if not the absorption of oxygen and release of carbon dioxide in a dynamic exchange between blood and tissues? But at the rate that life on Earth is going, and given what remains of the wealth of the planet, how far away are we really from the time when there will be more carbon dioxide than oxygen to breathe?" (Mbembe 2020, 61).

Our bodies have become political by virtue of their vulnerability. This is of course immediately felt for the most vulnerable, the diseased, the minority body at the 'wrong' time, but during the pandemic it seems that we have all felt this vulnerability and potentially empathized with the ones suffering. Breathing signifies the minimal condition for being, for being critical, political and personal. Abrahams' piece, thus, besides being about her personal vulnerability becomes a piece about everybody's vulnerability: the political dimensions of this. It is a piece about isolation and about sound. Abrahams also conceives of the sound environment as a primordial way of connecting non-linguistically, demonstrated by her network sound performance *Breathing* with the group Andanconnerdercu Utterings (Annie Abrahams, Daniel Pinheiro, Constança Carvalho Homem, Curt Cloninger, Nerina Cocchi and Derek Piotr).

Milton Läufer's *Virus is a Word* is another work that engages directly with the operations of the virus and its relationship to language. Based on an implementation of mathematician John Horton Conway's *Game of Life* (1970), the piece demonstrates processes of viral mutation and inheritance through cellular automata. Like *Game of Life* the piece is a "zero move game" – the user sets parameters such as rates of mutability and reproduction that seed a process of mutation that modifies cells that begin with the word "virus", replicating and modeling nearby cells as they evolve. The piece in this way reflects on the process of mutation that has defined our changing experience of the COVID-19 pandemic as we have confronted ongoing mutations of the original virus, resulting in strains that are more (or less) transmissible and virulent than those that precede them. The piece is a tribute to Conway, who died of complications from COVID-19 in April 2020.



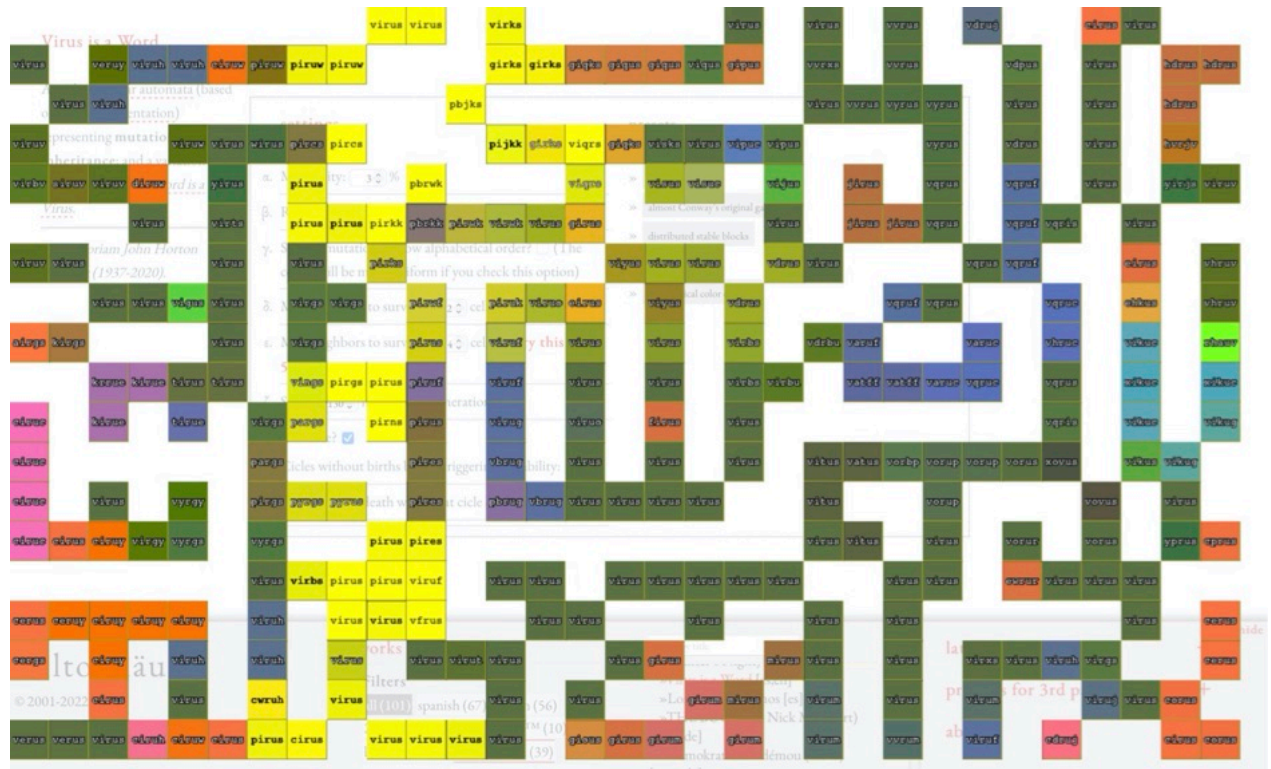


Figure 16. Screenshot from *Virus is a Word*.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE IN A POST-TRUTH PANDEMIC

A good deal of *trust* would be required for a global public health campaign of the scale required to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic: trust in science, trust in governments to keep the basic systems of society running and to effectuate strategies for combatting the virus, trust in fellow citizens to follow guidelines and to try to keep everyone safe with and from each other. Sadly, the pandemic arrived during a time in which trust was already in short supply. In many parts of the world – the United States, Europe, Brazil and elsewhere – political discourse had become more polarized than it had been in generations. During the 2010s we arguably saw the rise of a “post-truth society intimately related to the rise of social media. In his book *Post-Truth*, Lee McIntyre observes that what is unique about the contemporary period is not that truth is challenged, but that “never before have such challenges been openly embraced as a strategy for the political subordination of reality” (McIntyre 2018, xiv).

The age of broadcast media lent itself to a sense of shared identities and values – whether they be national identities or simply the sense of a shared reality. For example everyone in the United States may have agreed with the Edward R. Murrow’s perspective on the Red Scare on his news program during the 1950s, but few would question his analysis was based on actual events. And radio listeners may or may not have liked a song by the Beatles or Aretha Franklin that topped the charts, but most of them would recognize the tune. Common exposure to a limited number of shared media channels provided a shared baseline on which opinions and reactions could be based, common reality. The filter bubbles that began with the fragmentation of broadcast media in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century only close tighter and tighter with the rise of social media to the extent that each social media user is essentially treated by the platforms as an assemblage of data points. Users may choose their friends and the social networks in which they operate, but even within those circles, algorithms analyze our individual behaviors and patterns of engagement, giving us what they deduce we want, from targeted advertisements they direct to us through the screeds and fragments of facts and misinformation they expose us to. We are not listening to a trusted newscaster. We are really even listening to our friends. We are listening to those of our friends that Facebook’s algorithm selects for us based on our prior behaviors and their marketing goal without any responsible editorial principle.

Several of the works in the COVID-19 exhibition deal with the power of language and the impacts of disinformation within the contemporary media ecology. Giselle Bieguelman and collaborators’ *Corona/Coranario* is a data visualization in the form of a language heat map. The piece visualizes a lexicon of 25 pandemic-related words in Portuguese and English, respectively, that were used frequently in Google searches (according to Google Trends) during March and April 2020 – the beginning of the quarantine period in Brazil. The heatmap indicates which words were given most attention by visitors to the project site, with “hot” words indicating those clicked by the users. A definition / explanation of each term is linked to the term in the map. The work reflects the fact that the pandemic very quickly “created a whole spectrum of new languages and representations.” People were suddenly using terms that they many had not uttered before (PPE, hydroxychloroquine, etc.) with great frequency, while other terms (mask, Zoom, lockdown) were resituated and took on new meanings and greater urgency. *Corona/Coranario* reflects on the power of resituating language to shape opinions and behaviors.

Just as Donald Trump often referred to COVID-19 as the “China virus,” Jair Bolsonaro, the President of Brazil, took to referring to it as the “Communavirus.” Both leaders sought to use language to create an ideological wedge and service their own political power, often with devastating consequences for some citizens of their countries. By spreading disinformation, for example touting the scientifically unproven powers of hydroxychloroquine to treat the virus, they simultaneously exacerbated distrust of actual scientific knowledge that should have been driving policy decisions. In our interview, Bieguelman reflected on how right-wing leaders in Brazil used language to minimize concern about the virus and recast the crisis the nation confronted:

Something that happened one year ago in the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic was when our ambassador, the minister of foreign affairs, stated that there was no coronavirus. What we have on the world is a pandemic of communa-virus, that the virus came from China and it was inoculating spies. So we see something that it's not serious, it seems, from the point of view of the national security, but it was not a problem at all. And after days, the President stated that while this is just like a flu, a baby flu, you don't.... "I am an athlete; I am an Olympic profile and I will not have to care about this. And everybody dies. So don't talk to me about how many people will die. There are more people dying on the traffic than from coronavirus." This was just the beginning (Bieguelman et al. 2020).

In a post-truth pandemic, disinformation is employed in the service of a populism based on collective denial. *Corona/Coranario* reflects this weaponization of language. / also discussed in (Pold et al. 2022), language is used for populism and societal control, e.g. when the Bolsonaro-regime renames coronavirus as "comunavirus" arguing that it is communist. The piece also demonstrates cultural differences in how the virus was being processed in English and Portuguese. While in English the terms "Coronavirus", "Zoom", and "24/7" were the most clicked terms, in Portuguese terms such as "Confinamento", "Comunavirus", and "Auxílio Emergencial" were also dominant.

# Coronário

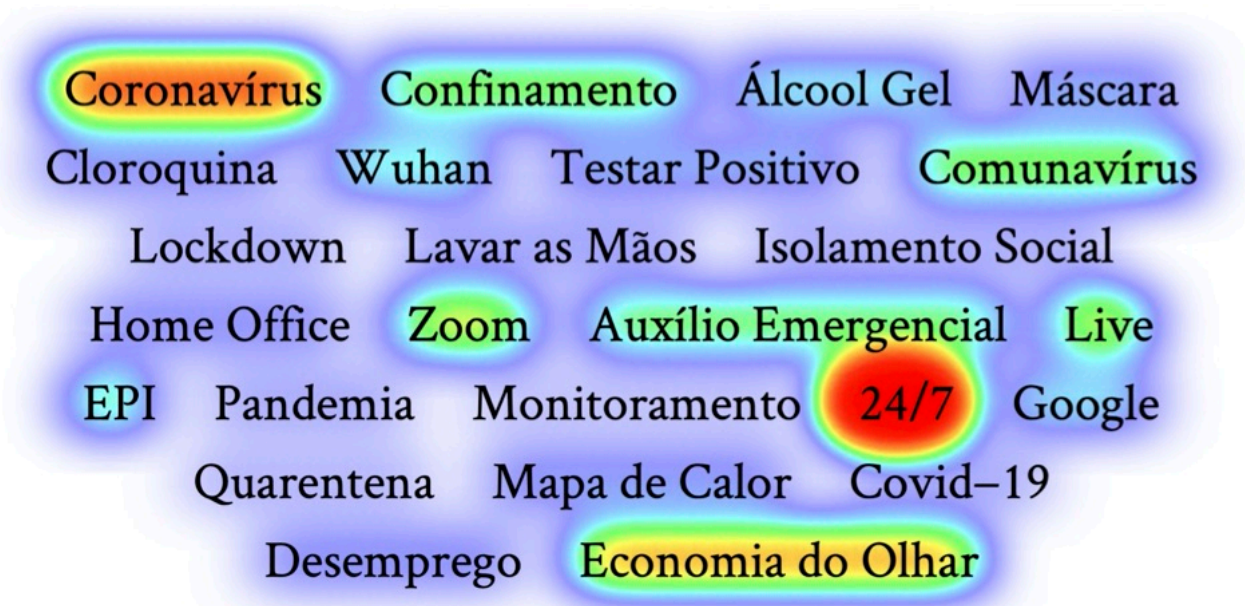


Figure 17. Screenshot from *Coronário*.

The mechanism of the artwork itself reflects one of its main concerns—the economy of attention. The words on the page are visualized as "hotter" on the basis of prior attention, and the hot terms in turn draw more attention disproportionately and grow still hotter. This is very closely related to the phenomenon of tweets or memes "going viral" on the internet. More and more attention is paid to things that have drawn attention already, while those on the periphery fade. Disinformation can effectively become dominant, not because of its relation to factual reality, but because of its simple reiteration and distribution within a particular community.

Sharon Daniel and Erik Loyer's documentary project *Exposed* is a work of critical digital media (Coover and Rettberg 2019) that attempts to surface and draw attention to profound injustices taking place in the American carceral system during the pandemic, in which prisoners were exposed to the virus in confined conditions, enabling the accelerated community spread of COVID-19. Authored in the Stepworks platform developed by Loyer, the work is simple in presentation while addressing a complex problem. The situation of the spread of COVID-19 in American prisons is one that foregrounded already-unjust conditions of overcrowding. Prisons are environments in which large groups of people are kept indoors, often in unavoidably close contact with each other and in America often in spaces that were designed for smaller numbers of people than they are actually used to confine. The American justice system further disproportionately impacts communities of color and can be understood as a manifestation of institutionalized racism. During the early months of the pandemic many prisons across the country went into lockdown, and prisoners with symptoms of COVID were placed in quarantine in solitary confinement cells more typically used as means of punishment within the prison. Despite some efforts to relieve overcrowding in state and federal prison systems through temporary release of non-violent offenders, prisons remained petri dishes for the spread of the virus. During the period from April 2020 to April 2021 the ratio of COVID-19 infections for American prisoners infected in prison vs. in the general US population was more than double, and the rate of mortality was 2.5 times higher for prisoners than the general population (Marquez et al. 2021).

ANONYMOUS PRISONER  
MULE CREEK STATE PRISON, CA

THE DAVIS VANGUARD  
3/8/2021

# WE ARE INMATES

JANUARY	6		FOR JAMES AND OTHERS WHO WERE CONSIDERED 'IMMUNE' TO THE VIRUS, THEY WERE CLASSIFIED AS
FEBRUARY	7	2020	[FOR JAMES AND OTHERS WHO WERE CONSIDERED 'IMMUNE' TO THE VIRUS THEY WERE CLASSIFIED AS
<b>MARCH</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>WE ARE INMATES AND IN THEIR EYES LESS THAN SLAVES FORCED IN LABOR EVEN WHEN RECOVERING. IF SICK</b>
APRIL	9		INMATES WERE MADE TO BE UNREDEEMABLE SEEKING FAULTS IN ALL WE DO. IF WE COMPLAIN WE ARE NOT

ANONYMOUS PRISONER  
MULE CREEK STATE PRISON, CA

THE DAVIS VANGUARD  
3/8/2021

# AND IN THEIR EYES

JANUARY	6		FOR JAMES AND OTHERS WHO WERE CONSIDERED 'IMMUNE' TO THE VIRUS, THEY WERE CLASSIFIED AS
FEBRUARY	7	2020	[FOR JAMES AND OTHERS WHO WERE CONSIDERED 'IMMUNE' TO THE VIRUS THEY WERE CLASSIFIED AS
<b>MARCH</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>WE ARE INMATES AND IN THEIR EYES LESS THAN SLAVES FORCED IN LABOR EVEN WHEN RECOVERING. IF SICK</b>
APRIL	9		INMATES WERE MADE TO BE UNREDEEMABLE SEEKING FAULTS IN ALL WE DO. IF WE COMPLAIN WE ARE NOT



Figures 18-20. Successive screenshots from *Exposed*.

*Exposed* is a text-based work with simple animation and a driving soundtrack. The material elements of the work are typography, sound, and rhythm. During a period from March 2020 until December 2021, Daniels and her research assistants every day scanned newspaper and other media sources for headlines and articles that concerned COVID-19 in prisons, and selected fragments from these media accounts. Readers of the work can either select a particular date or autoplay from the beginning of the pandemic to the present. The fragments are marked with the source, date, and location. They range from quotations from prisoners, jailers, lawyers and other involved in criminal justice system to statistics as the COVID-19 deaths mount. Accounts range from life in prison with a lack of PPE early in the pandemic, to testimonies of prisoners infected with the virus and ostracized and mistreated by guards and fellow prisoners, to stories of how some state prisons withheld vaccines from prisoners while distributing them first to others at lower risk of infections. The cumulative effect of the fragments is that the reader feels immersed in a panoramic and panoptic narrative of the American pandemic prison experience. It is a damning mountain of evidence that to be imprisoned during the pandemic was for many a death sentence. Through this simple, steady, and relentless presentation of texts (accompanied by a tense and strained soundtrack), the piece highlights not only the effects of COVID-19 in prison but also generally the dehumanization and injustices involved in mass incarceration.

Ultimately (and explicitly in a statement accompanying the work) *Exposed* argues for the abolition of the contemporary American prison system. The piece includes a “we can do” section with concrete actions that readers could take to engage politically with reform of the criminal justice system, arguing that: “We can change the way our society addresses violence; rather than simply reacting to violence after it occurs, we can work to change the social, behavioral, and environmental factors that cause violence. If we look at violence through the lens of public health, rather than policing and punishment, we can create systems that reduce violence and save the lives of both victims and offenders” (Daniel et al. 2020).

Where *Corona/Coronario* highlights the way that the economy of attention was manipulated through the language of the pandemic, *Exposed* attempts to make an intervention in the economy of attention. Where the accounts of COVID-19 in American prisons were a small fraction of the flow of doomscrolling in the pandemic, draw little attention when surfaced at all, through the simple act of aggregation and re-presentation of language *Exposed* makes it impossible to ignore a set of problems that most of American society would prefer to remain oblivious to. Electronic literature during the pandemic consequently points to how language can both document and reflect societal control, including the control measures that are violent and non-linguistic such as incarceration. Electronic literature takes advantage of its multimodal dimensions to simultaneously bear witness through language and gesture to the non-linguistic embodied dimensions of imprisonment and disease.

LIVING IN PLATFORMS

There was nothing slick about the early days of the pandemic. The smooth surfaces and seamless interfaces of 21<sup>st</sup> century momentarily broke apart and exposed their fissures. Yet quickly after the shock had settled in and the runs on toilet paper, bags of flour, and canned goods had settled down, and the lockdowns began, we turned to platforms as the social sphere and work environment of last resort. Although the world seemed to be coming apart, the internet kept working—or kept on not working, depending on one’s perspective.

A common thread of many works of pandemic e-lit is the extent to which contemporary cultural life has moved into platforms. In fact, the critical exploration of living in platforms can be seen as a genre trait. While to a certain extent this was already the case – before the pandemic Twitter, Facebook, and other social networks had already redefined such essential human activities as socialization, friendship, and political discourse. Commerce had already been massively transformed by e-commerce, and the five tech companies (Alphabet, Meta, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft) were already the dominant drivers of the global economy. But by necessitating widespread quarantine and the attendant social isolation, the pandemic provided the opportunity for these metainterfaces (Andersen and Pøld 2018) to pervade our lives to a greater extent than had ever before. For many, these platforms went from being an *aspect* of the social sphere to being essentially the *only* locus of social activity and, for the vast segment of population lucky enough to be deemed “non-essential” workers (unlike doctors, waste haulers, and delivery drivers) but essential enough to avoid being fired (unlike chef waiters, and actors), the *only* site of remunerated labor.

A comparatively small enterprise before the pandemic, the videoconferencing company Zoom saw astronomical growth during the pandemic. Likely because of its ease of installation, comparatively user-friendly interface, and free basic accounts, Zoom became a default online meeting environment (although Microsoft Teams, Webex, and Google Meet also saw significant increases in usage).

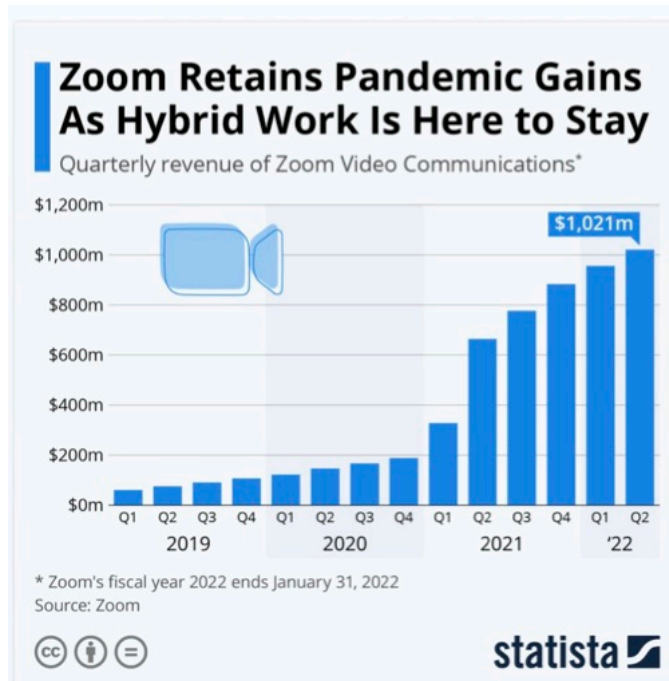


Figure 21. Statista chart illustrating revenue growth of Zoom during the pandemic (Richter 2022).

For those of us working in education, the number of platforms involved in our everyday work multiplied. It was not uncommon to have meetings in one platform, to teach classes in another, and in the evening to meet friends for a much-needed virtual cocktail hour in a third. And in between, of course, there were interactions with various course management systems (separate ones for the adults teaching and the kids who were homeschooling), accounting systems, online shopping sites, and so on. These platforms were already in our lives, but our time spent interacting with them doubled, tripled, quadrupled during the pandemic.

Alex Saum-Pascual's *Room #3*, a short video performance work, reflects on this situation, in particular the uneasy sense of intrusion involved in opening a new room in life. The work features a Zoom conversation between four online replicas of Saum-Pascual, having a conversation with each other. It represents many of the common issues that people encounter using the platform ("Alex, you're muted – unmute yourself," etc.) comically while also highlighting the sense in which Zoom "rooms" became an in-between space where domestic life and work life are no longer separated but continuously intruding upon each other. Saum-Pascual also demonstrates how the Zoom experience is also always one of performance – the tired, harried-looking Alex breaks into a wide smile and a warm greeting as she enters the meeting room. Text cards between the video segments reflect on the situation "See? No need to feel alone / you can always hang out with them, in a never-ending loop / no need to even call anyone just turn your computer on; this room is always open." In another segment, Alex sits silently before the screen, sipping coffee, perhaps reading email, while the text beneath the video box reads "you were never alone." Finally, Alex clicks on the link "never alone" and grids of people's heads appear in the Zoom and multiply. After Alex clicks the button to "end meeting for all," a final text reads "They are always watching."



Figure 22. Screenshot from Room #3.

Saum-Pascual's piece addresses the devil's bargain involved in the proliferation of videoconferencing—and perhaps in our interactions with most metainterfaces—and the system of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2020) that our engagement with them represents. On the one hand, simply imagine what everyday life might have been like if the COVID-19 pandemic had taken place a decade, or twenty years, or fifty years ago. No Facetime sessions with family living halfway across the globe. No pivot to online schooling. No virtual office work. No same-day delivery. No binge-watching streaming video. No spontaneous online concerts from your favorite bands. No attending the online funerals of your relatives who died from complications of COVID-19. Technological platforms did a great deal to ease the pain of the pandemic and make life (not of normal life) manageable. But their widespread use represented in some ways an even greater intrusion on the domestic sphere than, say, Google or Amazon or Apple's smart speakers, always listening in. We welcomed not only our bosses and colleagues into our bedroom / home offices, but also our corporate overlords. As Saum-Pascual noted in our interview with her, the experience of moving to digital platforms as a main mode of social communication involved "letting digital spies in" and letting them use our data in ways we were beyond our control: "I don't know where Zoom is storing this information. I don't know what they're going to do with the data. I don't know what analytics are applying onto it. I have no idea. And I'm going to engage with it, it's fine, but there's this sense of—we do this all the time, right?—we let go." (Saum et al. 2021)

At a time when many were ordered to give up basic freedoms previously taken for granted—most notably the freedom of movement—the sorts of rights that we regularly give up to platforms, such as the right to privacy, may have seemed trivial in comparison. When you have not seen a lover stranded in another country for weeks, or an ailing parent in another country, you are unlikely to quibble over clicking a button to accept the terms of service to see them on your remote screen. After all, could Zoom's limited surveillance be any worse than the COVID-19 contact tracing app that you just downloaded and gave access to your every physical move? But Saum-Pascual's work highlights the fact that there is no longer anything extraordinary about our acquiescence to the platforms that track and monitor us. They give us much of what we desire, and in return they get most of our personal data to monetize as they choose. We let go.

Mark Sample's *Content Moderator Sim* is a Twine game that tackles another aspect of how platforms shaped our lives during the pandemic. Social media was a lifeline during the pandemic. While many of the problems inherent in the attention economies of social media, from feeding young people's anxieties about their bodies and themselves to distorting our democracy, had already been brought to light before the pandemic, the pandemic enhanced our desire to connect through social media. Usage of platforms such as TikTok, Pinterest and Reddit, as well as our bad old friends Facebook and Twitter, increased in 2020 and 2021. The pandemic brought out many of the complexities of the place of social media in society. At the same time as these platforms were hotspots for the dissemination of dangerous false information about the pandemic, they were also the sites of important and potentially transformative activism. The #BlackLivesMatter movement was galvanized when George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis Deron Chauvin on May 25, 2020. The long-overdue reckoning with police brutality, including massive street protests demanding systemic change, would likely not have taken place were it not for the fact that Darnella Fraizer, a 17-year-old bystander, recorded the murder on her cell phone and immediately uploaded the video onto Facebook, where it spread virally across that and other online platforms.

Sample's work puts the player character in an uncomfortable position – that of a content moderation subcontractor for a major social network. Most social networks now offer a mechanism for users to mark content as objectionable or in violation of the platform's policies. The task of reviewing and adjudicating these reports sometimes falls to algorithms, but more often to individuals—typically lower-level employees or freelancers to whom the individual cases are delivered in an assembly-line fashion.



It's a livestream. A young man in front of a bathroom mirror. He is crying and holding a straight razor, occasionally bringing it up to his neck. The **policy is clear** on cases like this.

Figure 23. Screenshot from Content Moderator Sim including suicidal ideation.

Sample based the work in part on Sarah T. Roberts ethnographic study of the content moderation industry in *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media* (Roberts 2021). The player character in Sample's game needs to make rapid moderation decisions. Like many other workers in the contemporary digital economy (of the Amazon delivery drivers who are said to keep two-liter bottles in the van to function as portable urinals so that they won't need to stop for a bathroom break and meet their quota), the content moderator's work is itself carefully monitored and timed: rewarded for efficiency and punished for inefficiency. In the game, the player is confronted with a series of increasingly awful situations and charged with approving or blocking the posts described. A timer represented by a progress bar forces quick decisions on what are sometimes impossibly difficult judgment calls. Meanwhile notifications from a supervisor are constantly popping up, alternatively cajoling and threatening the player to work more efficiently, more like a machine. The supervisor attempts to incentivize the player through promises of perks such as the "Free stress balls" available in the game. Sample based many of the situations in the game on guidelines from the actual Facebook moderation handbook.

The pandemic is not necessarily the "main character" of *Content Moderator Sim* but many of the situations in the work reflect some of its darker aspects, both in terms of pandemic-era domestic traumas described in some segments and in some specific vignettes, such as one describing a scene of hate where a white woman snarls at a dark-haired woman to "Take your China virus back."



**Another kid video, aged 4 or 5 maybe. There's an adult screaming and kicking. A lit cigarette. A sobbing child. There are several dozen or so videos like this every day. An easy call.**



**Some sort of videoed altercation in a grocery store. A frothing white woman spits on a masked woman with dark hair, terrified dark eyes. The white woman snarls, "Take your Chinese virus back" and a stream of slurs. You hear the person recording the video laughing.**

Figures 24-25. Screenshots from Content Moderator Sim including domestic violence and anti-Asian racism.

In his author's description of the work for the exhibition, Sample described the work as "quite simply about what it means to be online in the third decade of the 21st century. Beyond the virtual cocktail hours and Peloton workout sessions, the online experience described in this work is one of unremitting horror. At the end of the piece, the text on screen shakes and explodes as the content moderator suffers from a panic attack at the end of the shift. In our interview with him, Sample described the experience of the content moderators as "just utterly horrific, the kind of things that they have to see, you know, child abuse, animal abuse, beheadings, all sorts of things, and that's like a good day, that these content moderators see. And it's just relentless. It's like one after another. So there's a lot of kind of post-traumatic stress that comes into play with this content moderation" (Sample et al. 2021).

If platforms were functionally *the* social sphere during the early stage of the pandemic, they were also a space of collective trauma. The horrific and dehumanizing experiences of these mechanical Turks charged with keeping social media "safe" for the rest of us – what Sample described as "paid doomscrolling" is synecdochally related to the experiences of everyone else living in the platform during the pandemic. Everyone on the platform is an element in a system of human computation, engaging with and feeding, entertained and traumatized by an overwhelming stream of content that is actually controlled by neither human nor algorithm: these platforms are both the car crash we can't turn away from and the mess we are all living in.

#### THE DIGITAL NARRATIVE OF THE PANDEMIC

The works discussed above are reflective of what is retrospectively actually a quite short, quite compressed period of time – a year that perhaps seems longer than it was. All of the works were produced in 2020, and all within the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. They were produced within a specific moment. While the majority of the world's population now is having a different (and to some degree better) experience of the pandemic than we did during the terrifying first wave, the COVID-19 virus is still with us, continuing to mutate and evolve even as we learn to live with it. If we were to curate a COVID E-Lit exhibition today, the themes and preoccupations of the works would likely have changed. All of these works should be understood as "early COVID E-Lit". "Long COVID E-Lit" will likely manifest differently, as it will reflect not only the specific circumstances of the early pandemic but the longer-term effects on a human society indelibly changed by it.

Among other things, the examples of electronic literature and digital art discussed in this essay provide evidence of the fact that born-digital work has, in this troubled third decade of the 21st century, moved beyond a focus on technological novelty and formal innovation. Instead, these works are focused on processing the challenges of life in the present. The digital environment is no longer novel, but constituent of everyday life. During the pandemic, what was already the case became more apparent to us: computer networks, and platforms are now as much a part of our experience as the physical world we inhabit. The specific affordances of digital media allow us to process and critique our subjectivity within that hybrid space in ways that are specific to it and that reveal its qualities and limitations. The works themselves perform the mediated nature of our experience inside of the platforms in which that mediation occurs.

Many of the works discussed are short-form and constitute responses to specific aspects of the pandemic experience. None of them attempt to narrativize the pandemic holistic basis, in the way that, for example, an encyclopædic systems novel might. But read together, these digital works provide us with a powerful and panoramic digital narrative of something we have all experienced, and supply us with a basis, a set of tools, for processing a pandemic that will mark the lives of an entire generation.

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## NOTES

1. In another publication, "A Pandemic Crisis Seen from the Screen" we focus on several works that responded to the circumstances of pandemic through different types of artistic information visualization—Grosser's *USA COVID-19 deaths visualized by footprint of the 9/11 Memorial in NYC*, Jody Zellen's sprawling *Avenue S* narrative animation project, and Giselle Bieguelman's *Coronário / Coronary*. In that essay we focus more specifically on platforms: how several of the works, most notably Be Grosser's *Endless Doomscroller* and Mark Sample's *Content Moderator Sim*, function as a reflection and critique of the platformization of contemporary life that accelerated and expanded during the pandemic.
2. For further discussion of *The Endless Doomscroller*, see our full interview with Grosser (Grosser et al. 2021) and Grosser's essay "On Reading and Being Read in the Pandemic: Software, Interface, and *The Endless Doomscroller*" (Grosser 2022), both published in *electronic book review*.
3. For further consideration of metaphoric relationships between gardening and electronic literature, see Anna Nacher's "Gardening E-literature (or, how to effectively plant the seeds for future investigations on electronic literature)" (Nacher 2020) published in *electronic book review*.
4. In "A Pandemic Crisis Seen from Home" (Pold et al. 2022), we discuss how generative algorithms simulate the effect of a virus that we have no control and how the this sense qualify as relentless narrators of the pandemic. Expanding on Jörg Piringer's *Covid-19 genome* sound poem, in which a computer voice reads out the entire original virus genetic sequence in a fast pace as repeating letters, one could even compare the mutating Covid-19 virus to a kind of (biological) text generator that repeatedly generates new versions of the Covid-19 genome. In this speculative sense, we were all subject to the heavy biopolitical control of the virus and the restrictions, which is illustrated and mimicked by text generators such as those in the exhibition.
5. For a detailed consideration of these works in the context of their formal and thematic engagement with the pandemic, see "Digital Literary Creative Practice And COVID-19" by David Thomas Henry Wright (Wright 2022)
6. See Jill Walker Rettberg's *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology* for reflections on the ever-increasing impulse towards self-improvement through self-monitoring during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century – these impulses perhaps reached a high water mark during the pandemic as people became more aware than ever of the need to self regulate, test, and monitor their own health.

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## ABOUT

### ANNA NACHER

**Anna Nacher** is Associate Professor at the Jagiellonian University, 2020 Fulbright alumna, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Electronic Literature Organization. Her research interests are located mostly in digital aesthetics, including new media art, electronic literature and sound art. Occasionally she ventures into ecological humanities. Her recent publications include articles in journals (*European Journal of Women's Studies*, *Hyperrhiz*, *Electronic Book Review*, *Acoustic Space*, *Communicati +I*) and chapters in edited volumes. Nacher is co-curator of an online exhibition of electronic literature and digital art produced during the COVID19 pandemic: [eliterature.org/elo2021/covid/](http://eliterature.org/elo2021/covid/). She is also a musician and sound artist focusing on voice and field recordings; since 2021 she has been collaborating with Victoria Vesna (, Star Dust Online Meditation, Noise Aquarium Meditation, Breath Library). Since 2014 she has been building a community of permaculture practitioners in the Carpathian mountains. More info and a full list of publications are available at: [annanacher.wordpress.com](http://annanacher.wordpress.com).

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**Søren Bro Pold** is PhD and Associate Professor at Aarhus University, Denmark. He has worked on the arts of the interface in its various forms, e.g. on electronic literature, art, software art, creative software, urban interfaces and digital culture. In relation to these fields, he has been active in establishing interface criticism as a research perspective, which discusses and explores the role and the development of the interface for art, aesthetics, culture and IT. Pold's latest book is *The Metainterface – The Aesthetics of Platforms, Cities and Clouds* with Christian Ulrik Andersen. Søren Pold's interests cover digital aesthetics broadly, including electronic literature, net art, software art, urban art and activism, and he has participated in founding several of these fields since the mid-1990s. Simultaneously, he is interested in establishing digital aesthetics as a perspective in other IT research fields such as design, HCI, informatics and Internet research.

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**SCOTT RETTBERG**

**Scott Rettberg** is the author or coauthor of novel-length works of electronic literature including *The Unknown*, *Kind of Blue*, *Implementation*, *Frequency* and others, an author and co-producer, with Roderick Coover and other collaborators, of a number of films including *The Catastrophe Trilogy*, *Three Rails Live*, *Toxi-City: A Climate Change Narrative*, *Hearts and Minds: The Interrogations Project* and *Penelope*. His work has been exhibited both online and at art venues such as the Venice Biennale, International Society for Electronic Arts, the Bergen International Film Festival, the Human Rights and Human Wrongs Festival, and others. Rettberg frequently publishes critical and theoretical work related to electronic literature, digital culture, and digital art, including *Electronic Literature* (Polity 2019), described by N. Katherine Hayles as a "significant and important book by the field's founder that will be the definitive work on electronic literature now and for many years to come." Rettberg was the co-founder of the Electronic Literature Organization, and led the ELMCIP (Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice) collaborative research project that ran from 2010-2013. Rettberg is professor of digital culture in the department of linguistic, literary, and aesthetic studies at the University of Bergen, Norway and in 2023 was appointed as Director of the Center for Digital Narrative, a Norwegian Center of Research Excellence.

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