

A Womxn Destroyed

Amanda Stojanov

Abstract: *A Womxn Destroyed* is a performance that delves into the anger felt by femme or femme-identified individuals who have traversed the spectrum of femme experiences, embracing, transforming, or relinquishing this identity while frequently concealing these emotions. Through this virtual performance, I create a space for the expression and exploration of anger. The first performance is a response to “The Monologue,” part 2 of Simone de Beauvoir’s 1969 novel, *The Woman Destroyed*. After the first iteration of this performance, other artists will be invited to perform a monologue in their personalized virtual ‘skin’ as a Metahuman. They will create a digital performance as a response to either “The Monologue,” a piece of literature of their choice, or another inspiring text or body of work. Using a set of digital tools, I create a virtual production method using Unreal Engine, Metahumans, biometric data capture from the app Live Link, a microphone, and using Twitch as the distribution platform, as a form of creative expression.

Keywords: *Performance of Literature, Digital Performance, Feminist HCI, Glitch Feminism*

Introduction

A Womxn Destroyed¹ is my response to “The Monologue” in feminist writer and activist Simone de Beauvoir’s novel *The Woman Destroyed* (1969). I first performed

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¹ This project was conceptualized and created for this special issue of *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*.

this work in July 2023, in my virtual skin made using Metahuman Creator. In *The Woman Destroyed*, “The Monologue” is a long, rambling rant by the main character, who describes in great detail the desperation of her life. A defining element of this rant is her anger and vitriol in rejecting the state of her life: alone, outcast, and rejected. By rejecting her situation, she rejects societal norms. This is one of the critical basic truths for feminist thought to grow.

The rejection of norms is seen in all future phases of feminism. In Third Wave Feminism, and the early years of cyberfeminism we have “The Cyborg Manifesto” (1985) by Donna Haraway and *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* (1991) by VNS Matrix. Since then, digital feminism has been adopted more widely in the Fourth Wave. Feminism’s Fourth Wave has been defined by terms including but not limited to “...popular feminism, cyberfeminism, feminist cyberactivism, discursive feminism or activism, online feminist activism, feminist digilantism, social media activism, and Facebook feminism” (Biana, 2023). In *Glitch Feminism* (2020), Legacy Russell opens with E. Jane’s “NOPE (a manifesto),” which begins with the phrase, “I am not an identity artist just because I am a black artist with multiple selves.” This manifesto is also built on E Jane’s refusal to be confined to expectations imposed on them because of their race, gender, and sexuality. Russell further extrapolates on the meaning of this sentence, stating, “E. Jane’s naming and claiming of ‘multiple selves’ pushes back against a flattened reading of historically othered bodies” (Russel, 2020). Announcing emphatically that an individual can have multiple parts of themselves online/virtual and in-person, speaks to the nature of digital feminism.

A Womxn Destroyed is a digital performance that expresses resistance to the persistence of societal norms and the flattening of identity in virtual spaces that is imposed on womxn. Physical space—or as Legacy Russell calls these in *Glitch Feminism*, “AFK or away from keyboard,”—is brought into virtual space through my performed and digitally archived response to Beauvoir’s “The Monologue” (1969). This performance, which is both virtual and AFK, is intertwined with the complexity of living in a world where ourselves and our bodies are increasingly being asked to participate in virtual environments.



Fig. 1: The performer's Metahuman in the Unreal environment.



Fig. 2: Background art for Unreal environment/performance backdrop.

Background

A Womxn Destroyed was made using the framework of Feminist HCI and Glitch Feminism. In *Feminist HCI: Taking Stock and Outlining an Agenda for Design*, Shaowen Bardzell focuses on “to the relationship between feminism and interaction design (as opposed to computing or technology more generally [HCI proper])” (2010). When defining glitch feminism Legacy Russell calls back to Beauvoir’s famous quote about gender performativity: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” Russell uses the structure of Beauvoir’s quote to define glitch feminism: “One is not born, but rather becomes a body.” Feminism as a practice and discipline is also in a constant state of flux. It is a practice of remembering and imagining what could be. Since Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), for instance, we’ve moved through a third, fourth, and arguably an emerging fifth wave of feminism. Both Feminist HCI and Glitch Feminism, meanwhile, draw from and expand upon key concepts of cyberfeminism—a term coined by the artists group VNS Matrix in their foundational text, *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century* (1991). In *Cyberfeminism Index* (2022), Mindy Seu describes VNS Matrix’s manifesto as “an early declaration of the concept, idea, and rupture that was cyberfeminism” (p. 7)

In *Feminist HCI: Taking Stock and Outlining an Agenda for Design*, Bardzell identifies seven central commitments of feminism, including agency, fulfillment, identity and the self, equity, empowerment, diversity, and social justice. She expands upon these commitments by identifying the qualities of Feminist HCI as “pluralism, participation, advocacy, ecology, embodiment, and self-disclosure” (2010). My digital performance of A Womxn Destroyed meets all of these principles, and it can also be used as a tool for multiple additional digital performances to be created and shared beyond the first stream. As Gratch and Gratch define digital performance in their book *Digital Performance of Everyday Life* (2022),

Performance is also an everyday phenomenon that allows acts of communication and communicative behaviors to leave traces of themselves behind—traces that are found, picked up, and used again by the same person or others. When these communicative acts/actions happen through the use of digital technology, we call it *digital performance* (i.e., everyday performances that rely on digital technologies). (p. 3)

The digital medium of my performance is deliberate and thoughtful, a point which I expand upon below. The performance engages with the tools I used to author it

such as the Metahumans application, which I used to create a digital representation of my physical body. The work also reaches beyond the technology I used to create it to engage with social issues that exist beyond the immediate virtual environment where it was performed and is archived.



Fig. 3: The Metahuman Creator interface. “Vivian,” the performer’s unique adaptation of the Metahuman called Vivian.

Metahuman Creation and Process

I used Unreal Engine and Metahumans to create the avatar and virtual environment for the performance of *A Womxn Destroyed*. The Metahuman also uses biometric data capture from the app Live Link. Additionally, I used a microphone during the performance to capture high-quality sound, along with ring lights to increase the quality of my video capture. All future iterations of the text can be developed and performed either in my studio or online.

I performed the piece on Twitch because this is a platform where it is customary to use game aesthetics to interact with a viewing audience. *A Womxn Destroyed* uses game development software and shares a visual style with other games built with Metahuman Creator or Unreal Engine—but with a critical lens toward such software and styles. In *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (2009) Mary Flanagan defines critical play as

a means to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life.... Criticality in play can be fostered in order to question an aspect of a game's content, or an aspect of a play scenario's function that might otherwise be considered a given or necessary.

Stereotypical depictions of feminized bodies exist on the Twitch streaming platform in digital games—which have a long history of misrepresenting (or leaving out) a diverse range of bodies, genders, races, and cultures aside from the stereotypical “feminine” images derived from popular digital gaming culture. As a digital performance, *A Womxn Destroyed* subverts such stereotypes by including texts and visuals outside of Twitch’s norm.

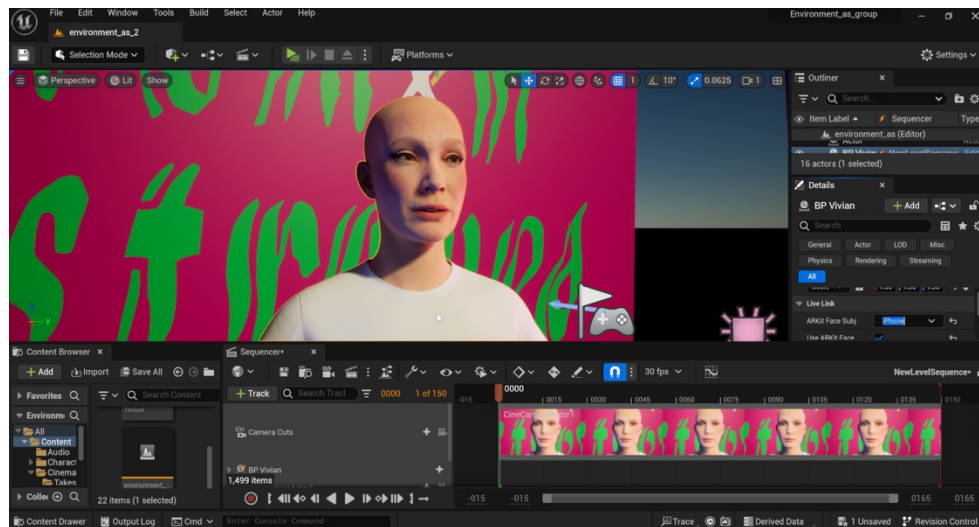


Fig. 4: Unreal Interface/Performance environment with the Metahuman and timeline synchronized with the performer’s live biometric data.

Future Performances and Participation

Future adaptations of *A Womxn Destroyed* will occur through invitation (for now), with the goal of finding a more equitable way to take volunteers and select candidates. Participants will receive detailed instructions and support in terms of how to create their unique Metahuman, use the Unreal Engine environment, and use the Live Link connection as I did. The performers will then be asked to choose

a text and write a monologic response to it in a format similar to the original performance.

Future artists and creators will expand *A Womxn Destroyed* by performing unique monologues in their Metahumans' personalized, virtual skin. They may choose to create a digital performance that responds to Beauvoir's "The Monologue," another piece of literature, or a text or body of work they find inspiring. "The Monologue" from *The Woman Destroyed* warrants additional performances due to its universal expression of Anger. Further, statements such as, "I don't intend to oblige them, thank you very much indeed. I want to live. I want to come to life again" (Beauvoir, 1969, p.101) could easily relate to a multitude of human experiences. In *A Womxn Destroyed*, I responded to this statement with the following action and words: [Breathe and close my eyes] "Why don't you tell me who you are? What do you want? What makes you sick? And if you want anything else from me, it's going to be a no, sickos." Another performer could use words from Beauvoir's text and respond in a similar way, yet still create a unique performance that includes fragments of literature woven into their own words. Finally, the option to include performances of other literary texts by other creators honors the multitude of experiences that I want this work to be a conduit for. I hope that the future creators who join this project will honor the authenticity and lived experiences of individual people by performing responses to a text and expressing their unique emotions, their anger, or their frustration. The digital performance *A Womxn Destroyed* is both a release of these emotions and a declaration of living on one's own terms in both virtual space and AFK.

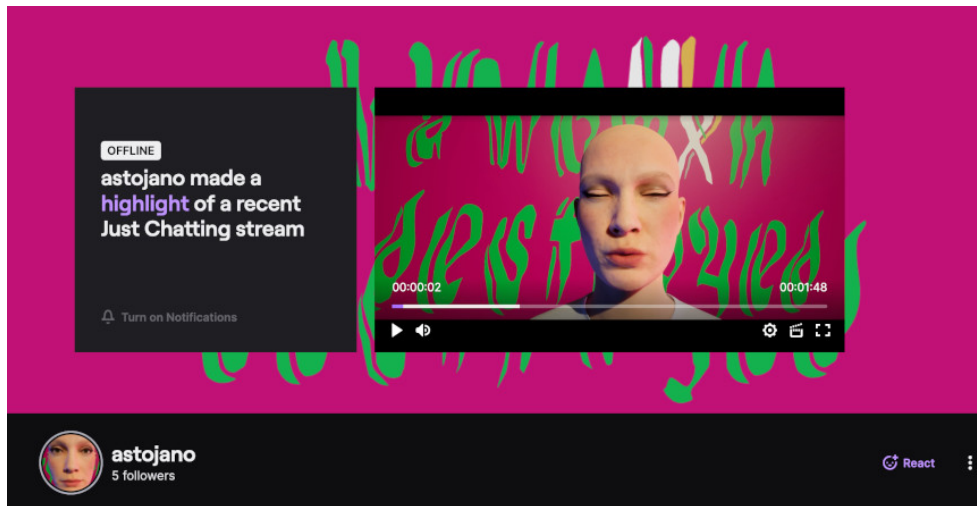


Fig. 5: Opening of *A Womxn Destroyed*, performed by Amanda Stojanov on Twitch, Sunday, July 30th, 2023, 5pm EST.

For further information

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