

Introduction: The Digital Performance of Literature

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In 2012, *Liminalities* co-founder and editor Michael LeVan posed a critical question for the future of Performance Studies, “of when, rather than if, will digital modes and methods of performance become common in the work of Performance Studies.” His query anticipated a seismic shift, as artists and scholars increasingly created performances that embrace the affordances of digital technologies over the last decade. The landscape of Performance Studies expanded as digital technologies became central to many forms of performance praxis. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, forcing planned in-person performances to be canceled, postponed, or adapted to digital formats. While performances largely returned to in-person settings by 2022, the digital innovations that emerged during the pandemic should not become relics of the past. Digital performance techniques kept the performance alive during a global crisis. Meanwhile, practitioners and theorists learned valuable lessons about accessibility, audience engagement, and creativity.

Engagement with literature, specifically, can become increasingly dynamic through digital performance praxis. Works that integrate audio, video, interactivity, extended reality, and other technologies can create unique, immersive, and participatory experiences for audiences and reshape the ways we interact with text, context, and meaning. Digital technologies also offer opportunities for distance collaboration, allowing performers and creators to engage across geographies and contexts. Additionally, digital performance allows creators to showcase unique skill sets beyond the physical limitations of live, in-person performance. The reliance on charisma, so often associated with live performance, is reimagined through digital adaptations that emphasize talents such as the creation of visual art, sound design, and technological mastery. Finally, the potential for digital work to reach broader and more diverse audiences—regardless of physical location—reminds us of the ethical considerations surrounding representation and access in performance.

This special issue of *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* showcases the diversity and complexity of what the digital performance of literature can do. Rather than focusing on debates about liveness, ephemerality, or ontological questions about the essence of digital work, we take a more expansive approach, defining the digital performance of literature broadly to include any performance work that engages with literature using digital technologies and/or virtual spaces. This definition allows us to showcase performances that offer immersive, interactive, and transformative experiences. Indeed, the works included in this issue use a variety of digital technologies and techniques, expanding notions of literary interpretation, adaptation, and performance beyond the traditional page-to-stage format. Further, the digital performances of literature showcased here explore emergent media technologies, imagine new performance methods, and invite the development of new analytical methodologies through short framing essays.

“Tertiary Orality: Developing a Digital Chautauqua Performance” by John Dennis Anderson, for example, frames two included videos that were recorded at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Performed in the traditional lecture-recital format associated with 19th-century Chautauqua, Anderson reanimates Marshall McLuhan’s 1969 interview for *Playboy*. In a second video, Anderson performs as McLuhan in a question-and-answer session that followed the Chautauqua performance. This type of Q&A captures an audience’s possible engagement with McLuhan’s ideas during the pandemic, as these ideas are filtered through a moment of global digital dependence. Enacting media theory within media practice, Anderson’s work explores presence, persona, and the persistence of intellectual tradition in virtual space.

Digital remix and polyvocal narrative, meanwhile, are a powerful combination for reinterpreting, recontextualizing, and reperforming texts. Laura Oliver’s “Nappy Queens, Performance, and Vlog-like Things: Combing Through Layers of #BlackJoy” uses remix in this way, combining and layering, and fragmenting home videos, musical performances, and performances of poetry by multiple creators and multiple performers. (see, for example, Angelou, Brooks, Hoffman,) The work explores themes of self-care and hair care to illuminate “the intimate joy experienced by Black women with natural hair” (see Hall and Bell). Further, the polyvocal performance offers a nuanced portrayal of personal experiences, drawing parallels between specific self-care practices and the moments of joy that can be found in beauty shops.

“Remix for Brianne,” by Lisa Flanagan, layers video, a performance of literature written by Kate Chopin, and additional audio to celebrate and memorialize Brianne Waychoff—a feminist scholar-performer whose work centers on feminine écriture and embodied pedagogy. Flanagan’s remix becomes an affective digital archive, one that enacts what Waychoff theorized: writing and performance as processes of becoming, refusal, and multiplicity (Waychoff 2012, 2015). In both form and spirit, the remix honors Brianne Waychoff as an artist, scholar, and friend, while also integrating Waychoff’s insistence on the ethical power of performative expression and relational feminist practice.

The rise of metahuman avatars—digital representations of humans created using advanced 3D modeling software—has also created exciting opportunities for the performance of literature in digital spaces. “A Womxn Destroyed” by Amanda Stojanov features a performed response to the “Monologue” in Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Woman Destroyed* (1969). The performance features a metahuman avatar that Stojanov designed and performed with in real time on the social media platform Twitch. The work anticipates similar future productions, where others are invited to create a metahuman and perform their response to the text. This metahuman performance opens a space to reflect on the ways that digital embodiment can reshape performance praxis, while also animating feminist discourse about gender and digital technologies. Finally, the work raises questions about the relationship between the metahuman performer, the human performer, and the audience and offers new ways to think about presence and identity.

“Making Mycorrhizal Noise: Hypermedia, Digitality, and Interpreting the Parafictional Universes of the Noisebringers” is an interactive website created by the Noisebringers (Dougal “Henry” McPherson, Maria Sappho and Brice Catherin) that invites users on a playful, philosophical journey through meaning-making, mycology, and their co-authored book, *Mycorrhizal Noise: A Historical-Critical Edition*. Audience members are asked to navigate non-linear pathways of videos and text, creating unique narrative experiences every visit. The digital performance of literature in this work is not an event, but rather an ecology—rhizomatic, porous, and dynamically co-authored. Mirroring the polycentric networks of fungi, the project exemplifies how authorship, performance, and meaning-making can be decentralized, interconnected, and alive with potential.

“Mystinteriors” by Elvis Bendana Rivas and Irina Kruchinina is a carefully crafted, immersive, augmented reality (AR) experience. Participants, ideally in darkened physical spaces where they feel comfortable, are invited into a world of literary performance, poetic fragmentation, striking visual art, dance, music, and

metaphor (see, for example, de Goya, Gonzalez, Castelnuevo-Tedesco). The ways in which body, space, text, and sound are interwoven—and responsive to each other—in “Mystinteriors” creates a kinetic experience for the audience, where meaning-making and textuality become embodied practices.

Finally, the digital performance of literature can create a space for reflection and mindfulness. Sarah Beach’s “Finally, I Noticed Enough” does just this, combining Beach’s vocal performance of Mary Oliver’s poem “The Moths” with meditation prompts. This audio-only digital performance guides the audience through a mindful, embodied experience, and invites them to connect with the poetry on a deeper, personal level.

Together, the works in this special issue demonstrate how the digital performance of literature can disrupt, expand, and reimagine the ways we read, experience, interpret, and perform such texts. The performances showcased here animate literature through visual, auditory, embodied, and interactive methods while also exemplifying the rich and expanded possibilities that the digital offers to performing literature, artistic practice, and scholarly inquiry. The performances (and their creators) mark unique avenues for creativity, engagement, and inclusivity. It is our hope that they will inspire future explorations into how digital technologies enrich our performances and understandings of literature, offer new forms of hybrid artistic expression, and engage audiences in emergent, innovative ways.

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