

# In Real Life

Mapping digital cultural engagement in the first decades of the 21st century



## Acknowledgements

The Australia Council for the Arts proudly acknowledges all First Nations peoples and their rich culture of the country we now call Australia. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge First Nations peoples as Australia's First Peoples and as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the lands and waters on which we live.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of First Nations peoples and communities to Australian life, and how this continuation of 75,000 years of unbroken storytelling enriches us. We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards ensuring an equal voice and the equality of outcomes in all aspects of our society.

*In Real Life: Mapping digital cultural engagement in the first decades of the 21st century* is published under Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Non-Derivative Works 2.5 Licence.

Attribution: Australia Council for the Arts 2021, *In Real Life: Mapping digital cultural engagement in the first decades of the 21st century*.

Given the theme of this report, links have been provided to web material. All links were working at the time of the report's publication. Please note however that many of these links will become outdated over time.

# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>2</b>
Key themes and insights	4
A dual economy	5
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
Methodology	8
Access and inclusion	9
<b>1. Charting digital engagement</b>	<b>10</b>
What is engagement?	12
Real/virtual; digital/analog; online/offline	16
<b>2. Engagement, digital technology and the visual arts</b>	<b>18</b>
Attitudes towards digital engagement	20
Participatory media and changing audience expectations	26
<b>3. Immersion, interactivity and live performance</b>	<b>32</b>
Reconsidering ‘the real’ in live performance	34
Livestreaming and livestreamed performance	40
<b>4. The hybrid world of books and reading</b>	<b>48</b>
The hybrid and post-digital world	50
Social/shared reading	52
<b>5. Participatory media: playing and games in the digital age</b>	<b>58</b>
The art and influence of games and play	60
Prosumers and remix	61
Playing with categories	64
<b>6. A dual economy: commercial versus common</b>	<b>72</b>
21st century models: open, common, shared	74
Art versus commerce in the digital age	81
Negotiating a dual economy	84
<b>7. Final thoughts: art or not art?</b>	<b>88</b>



# Executive summary

Digital technology has profoundly altered our world and daily lives, including the ways we engage with arts and culture. Internet-connected devices have put at our fingertips opportunities for participation and interactivity that open infinite possibilities for creativity – opportunities for us to experience, explore, play, make, share, co-create and connect. They have also disrupted business models in the cultural and creative industries, creating new challenges and uncharted terrain. With this disruption and immense potential comes an imperative to adapt pre-digital understandings of arts and cultural engagement.

*In Real Life: Mapping digital cultural engagement in the first decades of the 21st century* explores ways to conceptualise arts and cultural participation in an environment increasingly influenced by digital technology. The research examines these new technologies, how they are used, and what they mean for arts and cultural engagement now and into the future.

Conducted through a partnership between the Australia Council for the Arts and the National Arts Council, Singapore, this work will inform both councils' research and strategies. It also provides insights and guidance for the cultural and creative industries, highlighting changing audience expectations, and both new opportunities and perils for digital cultural engagement.

This report charts digital engagement, how it interacts with the live experience and how we understand and measure

it, and explores key themes and insights across a range of art forms. Many of the digital trends highlighted by COVID-19 adaptation were already occurring and have simply been accelerated by the pandemic.

The report also highlights the significant policy and commercial implications of the shift to digital cultural engagement – or what is described here as a 'dual economy'.

The digital environment is a rapidly evolving site of innovation and practice, with new developments appearing all the time – each one outmoding the last. The purpose of this research is not to report on the most recent digital cultural phenomenon. Rather, this research maps the significant changes that have occurred in this sphere in the last two decades, and identifies the key themes and issues that will continue to shape our digital cultural engagement in the coming years.

## Key themes and insights

**The digital and analog worlds are intermeshed.** It is not useful to talk about them as separate spheres. We live in a hybrid world where increasing use of mobile technology means that digital elements are embedded in everyday life and cultural participation.

**Digital technology does not necessarily replace analog versions.** Digital and analog interactions often intertwine in productive and creative ways.

**Audience expectations are changing** and now often include:

- **the ability to insert oneself into the story,** an artwork or an art experience as a form of creative interpretation
- **access to multiple lines of communication** – with performers, audience members and other participants
- **an understanding of ‘liveness’ that is not dependent on ‘in-person’ attendance.** For contemporary audiences, liveness involves a sense of ‘simultaneity’ (or a feeling of experiencing art simultaneously with others) and the experience of watching events unfold in real time.

Each of these expectations can be met by ‘in-person’ experiences but also by digital platforms, and sometimes more effectively by the latter.

**Audience expectations now also include significant access to arts and culture for minimal cost.** Digital technology has made it harder for copyright holders to exert control over artworks, but has also led to an expansion of options for sharing and remixing artistic content. Many galleries now acknowledge that the practices of taking photos of works and sharing them online are useful for engaging visitors and getting wider interest. More institutions are embracing the idea of open access and allowing reuse of digitised collection items that are out of copyright and are now in the ‘public domain’.

**More people are creatively participating** and it is increasingly difficult to distinguish ‘artist’ and ‘audience’. This is because of the rise of participatory digital technologies over the past two decades and, more recently, a small number of integrated digital platforms that permeate every aspect of daily life via mobile technologies.

**Whole ecosystems of arts engagement exist in the digital world in the spaces between corporate or critical models of arts and cultural production.** Such liminal spaces have always existed. However, the opportunities and participatory nature of the digital arena have expanded them like never before, and enabled them to influence more mainstream forms of consumption.

**Digital disruption has reorganised the cultural value chain,** disrupting linear relationships between creation, production and distribution, and encouraging peer-to-peer systems of evaluation, reward and artistic development.

**Digital access is unevenly distributed** and does not automatically mean increased participation for everybody. These issues will be addressed more fully by the Australia Council in work currently underway on access and inclusion in the digital sphere.

## A dual economy

**Today, online engagement can be understood as operating within a ‘dual economy’.** In this dual economy, established models of intellectual property rights and revenue creation sit uneasily alongside ‘new media’ concepts of easy access and sharing for common good.

**Negotiating this ‘dual economy’ requires understanding the new-found power of audiences but also the influence of commercial platforms that trade on user data.** The internet has provided new opportunities to circumvent traditional and commercial models of culture through sharing and accessibility. But it has also created new intermediaries in the form of dominant platforms. These platforms have sprung up to ‘capture and commodify’ the participatory impulses of digital cultural engagement (for example, gifting, sharing and collaboration).

**We should be wary of merely replacing traditional gatekeepers with new, digital ones.** Platforms claim to be impartial, a position bolstered by their successful use of the term ‘platform’ as opposed to ‘publisher’ or ‘broadcaster’. But platforms shape the content that is produced by determining what kind of participation is allowed or encouraged. And, they privilege some content over others through the sorting mechanisms of algorithms.

**The internet as a global marketplace presents challenges to regulatory attempts to ensure Australian-specific content remains discoverable** (especially within Australia). A rethink of such mechanisms may be required to adapt to new models and enable Australian content to compete with overseas offerings (particularly in an environment heavily dominated by North American companies, in the English-language market at least). Avoiding external control of creative content and associated data is expensive. Changes to regulation and support may provide better opportunities for Australian content to succeed in this evolving environment.

**To avoid community backlash, it is also important to work with existing models and to understand existing online ecologies and economies of sharing.** If a digital community feels that their values have been compromised, they are likely to look and regroup elsewhere.

Successfully inhabiting a hybrid world inevitably requires giving over some control to platforms. The challenge is to find a balance between visibility, collaboration and channels for remuneration. Many are addressing this by adopting multi-faceted approaches to online and offline engagement.



## Introduction

In the first two decades of the 21st century, the emergence of internet-connected devices has profoundly altered the way we engage with the world. Mobile technology in particular has enabled participation and interactivity that has opened up countless new ways for us to experience art and creative activities. As a result, pre-digital models for understanding arts and cultural engagement are no longer adequate.

**How can we better conceptualise the changing nature of cultural participation in an environment increasingly influenced by digital technology?** This paper reports on a project seeking to answer this question. We examine these new technologies, how they are used, and what they mean for arts engagement now and into the future.

**This project is a partnership between the Australia Council for the Arts and Singapore's National Arts Council.** Both arts councils have identified a need to better understand the ever-expanding zone of digital engagement that exists between conventional categories of cultural participation, such as artist and audience, and 'professional' and 'amateur' artists.





**For both councils, this research will inform understanding, discussion, future research and strategies related to the changing landscape of arts and cultural engagement in the digital era.** For the Australia Council, this research is designed to address the gap between existing research that focuses on ‘professional and practising artists’ (*Making Art Work: An economic study of artists in Australia*) and audiences (*Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*). The National Arts Council, Singapore, will use this research to complement its understanding of arts and cultural engagement, preferences and audience profiles (as informed by the *Population Survey on the Arts* and *Digital Engagement of Arts and Culture*).<sup>1</sup>

**This project was proposed before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic** and resulting shutdown of many in-person arts and cultural activities. However, the observations became especially pertinent when, in many cases, digital technology became the only option for accessing artistic content.

**For this reason, the project also incorporates more recent research findings about audience engagement.** This includes data from the *Audience Outlook Monitor* which tracks changes in behaviours and sentiments of arts-goers in Australia in the context of COVID-19.<sup>2</sup>

**Many of the digital trends highlighted by COVID-19 were already occurring and have simply been accelerated by the pandemic.**

The digital environment is a rapidly evolving site of innovation and practice, with new developments appearing all the time – each one outmoding the last. The purpose of this research is not to report on the most recent digital cultural phenomenon. Rather, this research maps the significant changes that have occurred in this sphere in the last two decades, and identifies the key themes and issues that will continue to shape our digital cultural engagement in the coming years.

<sup>1</sup> See also the National Arts Council, Singapore, *COVID-19 Arts Consumption Study* and *Emerging from the Pandemic*.

<sup>2</sup> Patternmakers & WolfBrown 2020-21, *COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/audience-outlook-monitor>.

## Methodology

The project consisted of:

- a wide-ranging **literature review** including scholarly articles, books, industry reports and media articles. This has fed into all sections of the report, including:
  - *1. Charting digital engagement* (p.10)
- **development of four themes** that illustrate new forms of cultural engagements across different artistic media. See:
  - *2. Engagement, digital technology and the visual arts* (p.18)
  - *3. Immersion, interactivity and live performance* (p.32)
  - *4. The hybrid world of books and reading* (p.48)
  - *5. Participatory media: playing and games in the digital age* (p.58)

The themes were developed to address questions of changing notions of consumption, value, career/skills development, ownership and authorship in the digital environment. They each address a different category of art: visual art, performing arts, literature and video games. Live music is addressed in the performing arts section.

The particular issues confronting the recorded music industry – which has always been subject to evolving technology and audience behaviour – are discussed in a section that brings together the themes while **discussing changing business models**. It considers competing economic ideologies in the arts and cultural sector and introduces the idea of a ‘dual economy’. See:

- *6. A dual economy: commercial versus common* (p.72)

## Access and inclusion

Internet-enabled digital technology provides potential for a much wider range of people to participate in a greater variety of creative activities. However, a prevalent assumption is that, by being made available online, cultural collections and creative experiences are accessible and ‘unlocked’.<sup>3</sup> There are number of further considerations, such as:

- **Over 2.5 million Australians are not online**, and connectivity is unevenly distributed across socioeconomic groups, ages and geographic locations.<sup>4</sup>
- **Digital connection gives the illusion of direct communication** between artist and audience and obscures intermediaries. In reality, the connection might not be two-way or represent an even balance of power.<sup>5</sup>
- **Simply having access to an internet connection does not automatically equal participation.** Low digital literacy also needs to be addressed.<sup>6</sup>
- **Different access requirements need to be catered for**, such as those of people with a disability.<sup>7</sup>
- **The level and quality of participation online is determined by existing cultural capital.** One study found that those accessing online art platforms tend to be the same groups of people who attend in person.<sup>8</sup>
- **Entrenched biases can be replicated or even worsened online** if no action is taken to address them. For example, minority groups tend to be underrepresented in the art world.
- **Unregulated online spaces can encourage bullying and hate-speech**, which disproportionately affects marginalised groups and is another barrier to access.

These issues will be addressed more fully in work currently underway on access and inclusion in the digital sphere. The question of ‘who’ is participating in digital arts activities is important, and we must not lose sight of this. The 2020 Digital Inclusion Index report states that ‘In general, urban, wealthier, younger, more educated, and employed Australians enjoy much greater digital inclusion’.<sup>9</sup> It is easy to assume that these groups are overrepresented in the types of activities discussed in this report. However, to assess these assumptions and address unequal access, it is vital to have a thorough understanding of the nature of existing digital engagement. This includes the need for a broad definition of what these activities are or can be.

3 Holcombe-James I 2019, ‘Barriers to digital participation within the Australian cultural sector: Mediating distance, unlocking collections’, PhD thesis, RMIT University, p.4.

4 Thomas J et al 2020, *Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020* (RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology), <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/the-index-report/report/>, p.6.

5 Holcombe-James I 2019, ‘Barriers to digital participation within the Australian cultural sector: Mediating distance, unlocking collections’, PhD thesis, RMIT University.

6 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (UK) 2018, *Culture is Digital*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital/culture-is-digital>, p.21.

7 Dobranskya K & de Hargittab E 2016, ‘Unrealized potential: Exploring the digital disability divide’, *Poetics* 58.

8 Mihelj S, Leguina A & Downey J 2019, ‘Culture is digital: Cultural participation, diversity and the digital divide’, *New Media & Society* 21:7, pp.1465–85.

9 Thomas J et al 2020, *Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020* (RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology), <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/the-index-report/report/>, p.12.

# Charting digital engagement

## Key insights

- It is increasingly difficult to separate online and offline activities. Many arts and cultural activities include elements of both.
- A binary distinction between creation and reception (or ‘artists’ and ‘audiences’) is inappropriate for understanding cultural engagement in the age of participatory media.
- Online activities are often presented as secondary to ‘the real thing’. But an audience’s degree of engagement with an artwork does not depend on the proximity or physicality of the medium.
- Ranging from passive consumption to active co-creation, arts engagement exists on a spectrum that resists simple categorisation.

Big Red Bash, Birdsville Qld.  
Credit: Matt Williams.



## What is engagement?

From the perspective of marketing departments, the ultimate form of arts engagement might be audiences **attending an event in person** (for example, an exhibition, concert or performance). For those wanting to sell tickets or entice repeat customers, **success is measured by attendance**.

From other angles, engagement can refer to the **personal connection** made by an audience member with a piece of art, and perhaps even their **contribution to it** (ranging from interpretation to interaction). For those wanting people to develop closer relationships with art – and maybe even play some role in creating it – **success is more difficult to measure and engagement takes multiple forms**. For most arts and cultural organisations, the goal is usually a mixture of the two.

Much of the **literature around online audience engagement** deals with the first option, considering the topic largely from a marketing perspective.<sup>10</sup> This has, in the past, been reflected in the ways that arts and cultural organisations measure online engagement.

For national arts councils, **national arts engagement** surveys have needed to adapt with changing patterns of engagement and will continue to need to. The *Beyond Attendance* report, published by the USA's National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 2011, considered the NEA's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts from its inception in 1982. The report argued that the NEA's framework for measuring cultural activity in 2011 focused too heavily on 'in-person'

attendance and therefore inadequately accounted for 'the myriad pathways through which Americans now engage in artistic and creative expression'.<sup>11</sup>

**Much arts engagement now takes place within a broader context of participatory media culture.** The current circumstances result from the influence of **Web 2.0** practices over the past two decades. These circumstances have been accelerated by the meteoric rise of **mobile technologies** and enabled by an interconnected **platform ecosystem** that permeates every aspect of daily life.<sup>12</sup>

**Web 2.0 describes web practices involving networked user-generated content**, as opposed to the 'read-only' websites that were a feature of the early internet.<sup>13</sup> These changes have greatly increased opportunities to actively engage in arts and cultural activities. They have also made more visible community-based practices that might previously have been hidden offline or in closed forums.

**Australian arts engagement surveys** have historically categorised arts activities as either 'creative' or 'receptive'. This distinction was overtly made in the Australia Council's 2010 National Arts Participation Survey report *More than Bums on Seats* and continued in the 2014 report *Arts in Daily Life*. 'Receptive participation' was defined as 'attendance at live events/art galleries, plus reading literature'.<sup>14</sup> **However, a binary distinction between creation and reception is less appropriate for the age of participatory media.**

<sup>10</sup> Ben Walmsley noted in 2016 that scholarly literature relating to broader issues of digital engagement in the arts was significantly lacking. Walmsley 2016, 'From arts marketing to audience enrichment: How digital engagement can deepen and democratize artistic exchange with audiences', *Poetics* 58, pp.66–78. An example is Nairn A & Guinibert M 2020, 'A dance of excellence, accessibility, money and national identity: A discourse analysis of the Royal New Zealand Ballet's website', *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* 25:3, e1671.

<sup>11</sup> Novak-Leonard J, Brown A, WolfBrown 2011, *Beyond Attendance: A multi-modal understanding of arts participation* (National Endowment for the Arts), <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/beyond-attendance-multi-modal-understanding-arts-participation>, p.15.

<sup>12</sup> van Dijk J, Poell T & de Waal M 2018, *The Platform Society: Public values in a connective world* (Oxford University Press).

<sup>13</sup> For further info, see O'Reilly T 2005, 'What is Web 2.0?', archived 8 Dec 2020, <https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Australia Council for the Arts 2010, *More than Bums on Seats: Australian participation in the arts*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/more-than-bums-on-seats>; Australia Council for the Arts 2014, *Arts in Daily Life: Australian participation in the arts*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/arts-in-daily-life-arts-participation-survey-2014>, p.8.

The [2016](#) and [2019](#) National Arts Participation Surveys and resulting reports moved away from this distinction and terminology. While discussing ‘creative participation’ as distinct from activities such as ‘attendance’, ‘listening and reading’ and ‘online engagement’, the reports also discuss overlaps between the categories. They acknowledge that creative participation, listening and reading can happen online and that online engagement and attendance can be creative.<sup>15</sup>

**Ranging from passive consumption to active co-creation, arts engagement exists on a spectrum that resists simple categorisation.** Alan Brown’s *The Values Study* (2004) outlined five modes of art participation that go beyond the binary categories of passive consumer and active creator: inventive, interpretive, curatorial, observational and ambient participation.<sup>16</sup> This categorisation usefully illustrates the spectrum of engagement in that it shows that creativity can arise from engaging with a work as well as originating an art piece.

In the 17 years since *The Values Study* was published, the nature of cultural participation has continued to rapidly evolve due to the ever-increasing popularity of mobile devices and continuing dominance of networked digital platforms. A decade ago, electronic media use was seen to be a category of participation that could not be ignored. Now, however, digital technologies are integrated into more and more aspects of our daily lives affecting the way we consume and interact with arts and culture,

to the extent that these effects are felt whether we are online or offline.

While arts participation surveys now include sections on digital arts engagement, such activities are generally treated as a separate category. In reality, **it is increasingly difficult to separate online and offline activities and many engagement activities include elements of both.** For example, we might go to the theatre in person but share our impressions online during the interval on our mobile phones and join a virtual conversation via a Twitter hashtag.

Also, **an audience’s degree of engagement with an artwork does not depend on the proximity or physicality of the medium** (for example, whether the encounter is with a ‘real’ or ‘virtual’ object). Physical attendance at a theatre performance or classical concert is a form of ‘in-person’ engagement but can require little or no interaction between the performers and the audience. On the other hand, watching a livestream of a play on Facebook where audience members are encouraged to comment and ‘direct’ the action on the stage is a form of active participation or even (co-)creation.

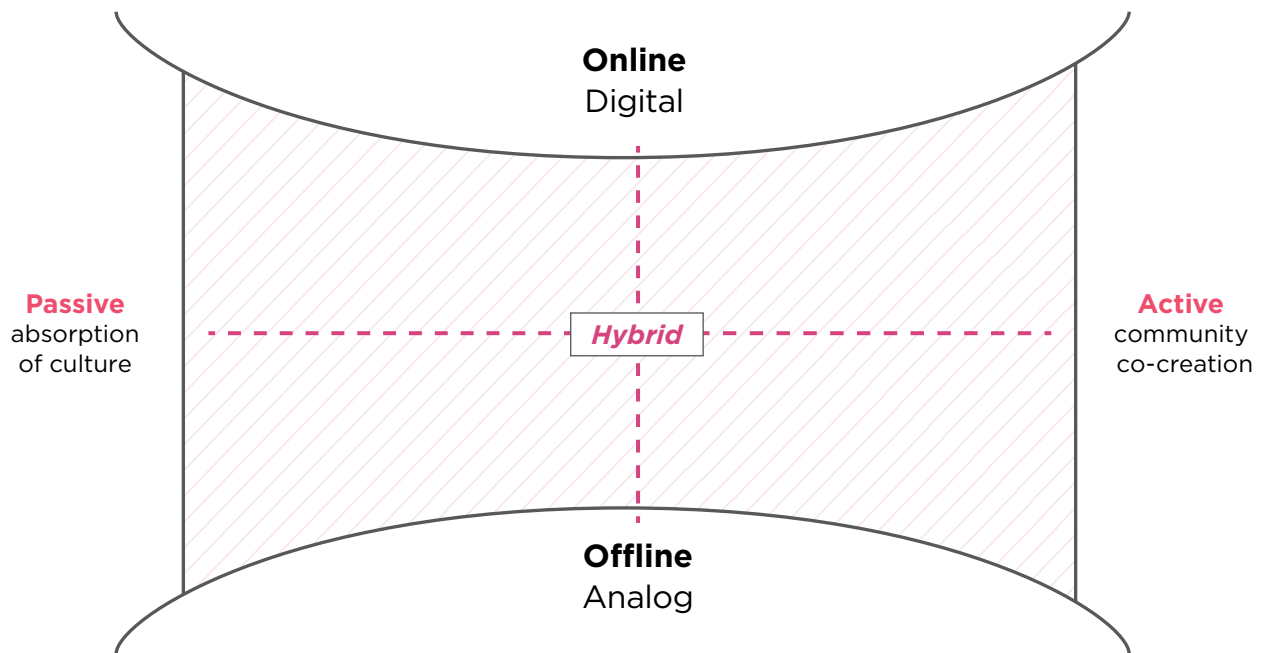
15 Australia Council for the Arts 2017, *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/connecting-australians>; Australia Council for the Arts 2020, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>.

16 Brown A 2004, *The Values Study: Rediscovering the meaning and value of arts participation* (Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism), in Novak-Leonard J, Brown A, WolfBrown 2011, *Beyond Attendance: A multi-modal understanding of arts participation* (National Endowment for the Arts), <https://www.giarts.org/article/beyond-attendance-multi-modal-understanding-arts-participation>, p.32.

## 1. Charting digital engagement

While there is little consensus about what constitutes ‘engagement’, it is useful to think of it as a spectrum which ranges from passive to active forms of participation. The ‘digitalness’ or ‘analogness’ of arts activities and media consumption more generally can also be conceptualised as a progression from entirely analog/offline to entirely virtual.<sup>17</sup> These two spectra intersect but are not dependent on one another, as demonstrated by the following diagram:

### The Engagement Compass



**Figure 1:** Two-dimensional spectrum diagram, adapted from the idea of the ‘political compass’.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Koh J et al 2012, ‘Uncovering analogness and digitalness in interactive media’, *Proceedings of the 30th ACM International Conference on Design of Communication*, p.233.

<sup>18</sup> The political compass was first drawn by Hans Eysenck in 1956 to describe economic liberalism and conservatism juxtaposed with social factors. The compass has been adapted more recently for political analysis in the lead-up to elections (such as the ABC Vote Compass in Australia’s 2019 Federal election). Eysenck HJ 1956, *Sense and Nonsense in Psychology* (Penguin Books); <https://votecompass.abc.net.au/>.



**Few, if any, arts activities are entirely passive or entirely active.** Passive activities tend to be more hierarchical, with stronger divisions between artist and audience, professional and amateur. However, experiencing art is never entirely passive, because audiences are automatically involved in a process of meaning-making and interpretation.

**At the active end of the spectrum,** the audience/community is entirely responsible for collective meaning-making and creation and there is little distinction between 'artist' and the 'audience'. However, in practice, hierarchies and commercial interests tend to intervene and truly shared and democratic co-creation is rare, if not impossible.

Similarly, it is possible to argue that **no contemporary arts activities are entirely analog or entirely digital** either. Even Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems must initially be programmed and run on a piece of hardware that exists somewhere in the world. Although activities can be conducted entirely offline, some argue that in the 'post-internet' world, the **influence of digital culture permeates everything** – even the seemingly analog.

The art installation *The Artist Is Present* by Marina Abramovic at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010, for example, took place entirely offline but was a comment on internet culture.<sup>19</sup> According to the curators of a 2014 post-internet art exhibition, 'post-internet refers not to a time "after" the internet, but rather to an internet state of mind – to think in the fashion of the network'.<sup>20</sup> Digital technology also predates the internet, and **it is possible for something to be digital but not online**, although the two terms are often used interchangeably.

**This tension between digital and offline worlds has also inspired artistic experiment,** such as in exhibitions like *Otherworlds: non/digital realities*. Held in Singapore in January 2021, *Otherworlds* was a mixed-reality exhibition that opened a variety of experiences and perceptions made possible by technology. Eight artists developed an artistic vision that could be encountered in both physical and virtual reality (VR) settings, combining their art practices with aspects of VR immersion and interactivity.



19 Literat I 2019, 'Make, share, review, remix: Unpacking the impact of the internet on contemporary creativity', *Convergence* 25:5-6, p.1172.

20 Archey K & Peckham R 2014, *Art Post-Internet* (Exhibition Catalogue), Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, cited in Literat, 'Make, share, review, remix', p.1172.

## Real/virtual; digital/analog; online/offline

The manifesto of French collective 'Obvious Art' described the process of using AI to create a family of portraits (the 'Belamys') based on Renaissance paintings. At the end of the process they made a physical object:

We believe that an artwork is more than a mere file on a computer. By making the artwork physical, we allow a new level of connection between the artwork and the viewer. Each subject must be treated on a dedicated medium, once again with the goal of serving our message. For example, we chose to print the Belamys on canvas, and to display them in a golden wooden frame, in order to strike the collective imagery, and allow ... everyone to relate to the type of artworks that we refer to.<sup>21</sup>

According to the collective, 'a mere file on a computer' cannot be art and must be rendered material in order to be 'real' and therefore accessible. **Assumptions about the superiority of 'real' objects and physical, 'in-person' encounters are common to discussions about arts engagement. But this can be a false dichotomy.** A musical recording, a photograph or a film are all, in the digital age, 'mere files on a computer'. They all require interpretative software and hardware outputs in order to be experienced. There are gradations of 'realness' rather than an easy division between 'real' and 'virtual'.

**Augmented reality (AR) is a good example of a hybrid technology that incorporates elements of both the analog and digital worlds.** In AR works, digital sensory elements are laid over real-world objects, visible when viewed through the screen of a device. For example, the dance performance OAR, put together by UK-based choreographers Aoi Nakamura and Esteban Lecoq (known as AΦE), enabled audiences to watch performers overlaid in their surroundings via an iPad. The audiences were able to explore the space and interact with the dancers – and alter the experience of other audience members – via interconnected digital devices.

<sup>21</sup> Obvious: AI and Art, <http://obvious-art.com>, mentioned in Kulesz O 2020, *Supporting Culture in the Digital Age* (International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies), <https://ifacca.org/en/news/2020/04/23/supporting-culture-digital-age>, p.12. Response to the collective's work was mixed, with some other AI artists saying their approach was not original and that it really represented a triumph of marketing rather than artistic innovation. Schneider T & Rea N 2018, 'Has artificial intelligence given us the next great art movement? Experts say slow down, the field is in its infancy', *artnetnews*, 25 Sept, viewed 2 March 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ai-art-comes-to-market-is-it-worth-the-hype-1352011>.

Online activities are often presented as secondary to the ‘real thing’. **The collaborative, sharing nature of the online world does not correspond easily with more conventional markers of artistic success**, such as critical acclaim, publishing deals, financial gain, or having a work hung in a famous gallery.

**By contrast, online artistic activities are frequently seen as a means to an end.** For example, collaborative writing platforms such as Wattpad and fan fiction sites are seen as places where people practise their craft and receive feedback before breaking into the big time. Artists who start out by exhibiting their art on Instagram or sharing work on other social media platforms are assumed to be doing it to gain a following and hopefully eventually to sell their real art in the ‘real world’.

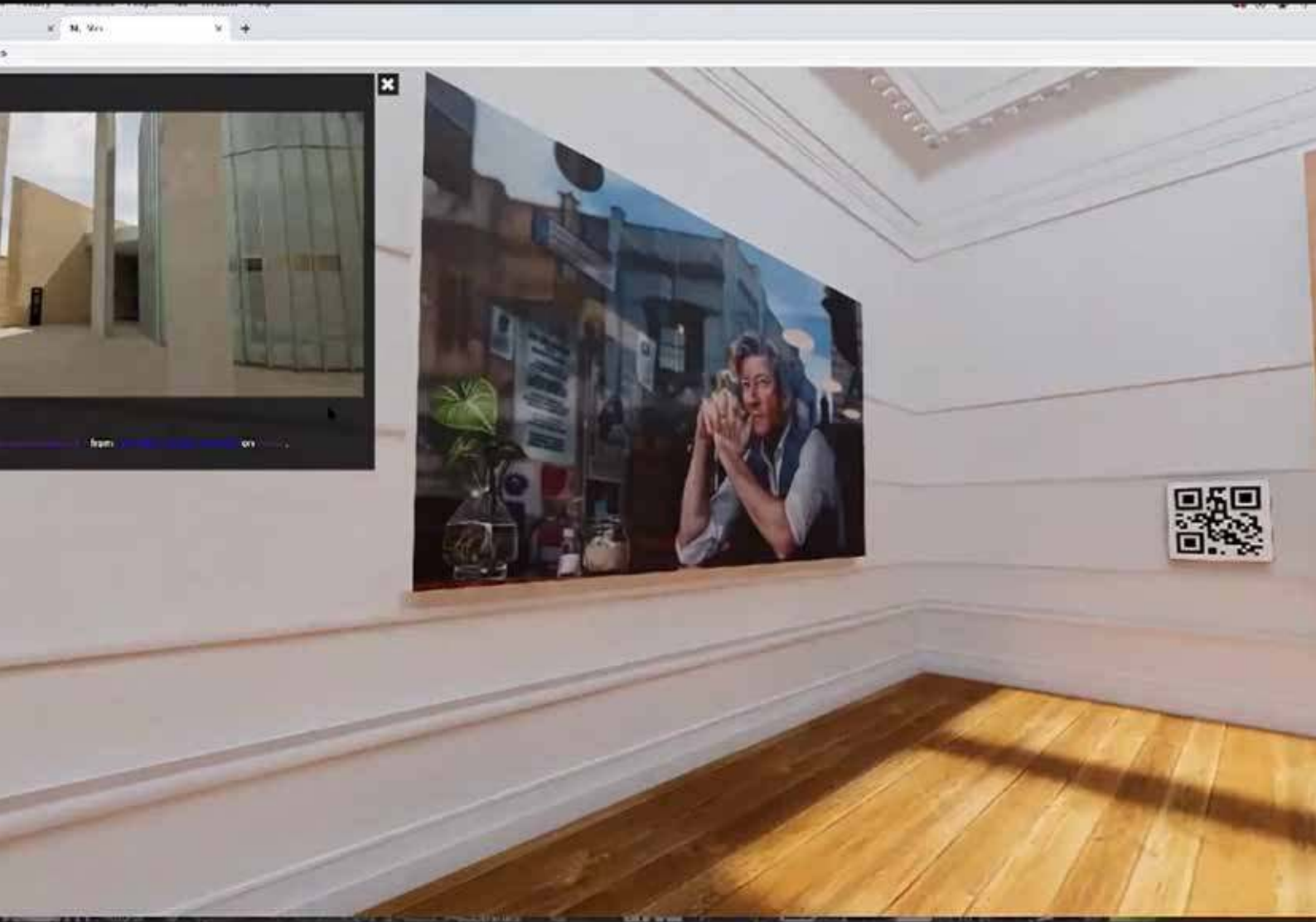
Certainly, people engage in these activities for these reasons, and such breakout successes do happen (the most famous example of online amateur writing becoming commercially successful is EL James’s *50 Shades of Grey* which began as *Twilight* fan fiction). But **there are also whole communities of artists and people consuming and/or co-creating art without reference to commercial markers of success, and with their own systems of reward and evaluation.**

For example, the social media platform Reddit has community-created and moderated sections called subreddits focusing on a particular topic. The r/art subreddit is a place for people to share art pictures, comment and express their approval by voting for a particular post. The rules of the r/art subreddit specifically prohibit any self-promotion beyond posting of artworks with strict instructions for attribution.<sup>22</sup>

**Whole ecosystems of arts engagement exist in the digital world in the spaces in-between corporate or critical models of arts and cultural production.** Such liminal spaces have always existed. However, the opportunities and participatory nature of the digital arena have expanded them like never before, and enabled them to influence more mainstream forms of consumption.

22 Reddit has been around since 2005 but remains steadfastly popular and is growing – it is the fourth most popular website in the US and the 18th most visited worldwide (Kemp S 2020, ‘Digital 2020: Global digital overview’, *Datareportal*, 30 Jan, archived 31 May 2021, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-global-digital-overview>). In 2019 it eclipsed Twitter and Pinterest in terms of number of monthly users. Murphy N 2019, ‘Reddit’s 2019 year in review’, *Reddit Blog*, 4 Dec, archived 1 June 2021, <https://redditblog.com/2019/12/04/reddits-2019-year-in-review>.

'Virtual galleries, online experiences and new technology',  
episode 4 of *Think Inside The Square* - an Australia Council  
web series.





# Engagement, digital technology and the visual arts

## Key insights

- As mobile phone technology has become ubiquitous, the way that many visitors interact with galleries and public spaces has fundamentally changed.
- Audience expectations now include:
  - the ability to insert oneself into an artwork or an art experience as a form of creative interpretation
  - expectations of significant access for minimal cost.
- Digital technology has made it harder for copyright holders to exert control over artworks, but has also led to an expansion of options for sharing and remixing artistic content.
- Many galleries now acknowledge that the practices of taking photos of works and sharing them online are useful for engaging visitors and getting wider interest.
- More institutions are embracing the idea of open access and allowing reuse of digitised collection items that are out of copyright and are now in the 'public domain'.

## Attitudes towards digital engagement

Art museums and galleries invariably have websites through which audiences can access information about facilities, collections and exhibitions. Over the past decade, however, **art museums and galleries have increasingly offered the chance to interact with artworks online in ways that go beyond merely advertising their collections.** For example, you can view the [National Gallery of Australia's online gallery](#) or learn about artworks through apps like [Artfinder](#) and [Artsy](#) (both of which are selling platforms that include a browsing/education aspect).

**Recent national arts engagement surveys have reflected this trend by expanding their definitions to include consumption of art online.** Back in 2011, the NEA's *Beyond Attendance* report noted that in-person attendance was the only kind of engagement that was counted by the NEA's 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts. The report compared looking at a painting in a gallery with looking at a reproduction of the same artwork on the wall at home. 'Both are acts of viewing art, and surely both have meaning to the viewer, but only visiting museums is covered [in the survey].'<sup>23</sup> This attendance-based definition of participation also excluded consumption of art through digital means.

By 2017, the [Survey of Public Participation in the Arts](#) had been iteratively expanded to measure participation in a greater variety of art forms and modes of engaging, including both digital consumption of art and live attendance at arts events. The report acknowledged that expanded definitions captured the arts participation of a wider, more diverse group of Americans.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the Australia Council's [2019 National Arts Participation Survey](#) built on its 2016 iteration to expand the categories dealing with digital engagement, including: 'additional questions [that] explored the digital platforms used, digital creation and perceptions of digital creations as art'.<sup>25</sup>

The situation has become even more complex in the decade since the *Beyond Attendance* report was published, with **more and more interactive online activities bringing art collections out beyond galleries' walls.**

Tech giants such as Google have also extended into the visual arts space. For example, it is now possible to use the [Google Arts and Culture](#) app's augmented reality feature to 'hang' a famous artwork on your wall at home.

23 Novak-Leonard J, Brown A, WolfBrown 2011, *Beyond Attendance: A multi-modal understanding of arts participation* (National Endowment for the Arts), <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/beyond-attendance-multi-modal-understanding-arts-participation>, p.30.

24 National Endowment for the Arts 2019, *US Patterns of Arts Participation: A full report from the 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/us-patterns-arts-participation-full-report-2017-survey-public-participation-arts>, p.14.

25 Australia Council for the Arts 2020, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participations Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>, p.36.

The common act of sharing photographs of art on social media could also be said to blur the line between attendance and online consumption. **Sharing a picture captures what is a fleeting moment in the real world and transports it to a more permanent space in the digital world.** In doing so, it ‘repositions the museum in society so that it is clear that it is not detached from, but very embedded in the broader world as a public space’.<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, even the Australia Council’s most recent [2019 National Arts Participation Survey](#) draws a distinction between ‘in-person’ attendance and engaging with art online, although the survey questions have expanded and include ways Australians share and create art online and use digital platforms.

**Looking more broadly, the discussion of audience engagement with visual arts online still tends to revolve around engagement as marketing.** For art gallery and museum professionals, the goal is often to generate awareness of the collections and ultimately increase the number of people coming in the door, no doubt because many funding models and revenue sources depend on numbers of visitors.

**Alongside this is a prevailing assumption that viewing physical visual artworks online is a lesser experience,** that ‘looking at art on our backlit screens is not the same as encountering it in person’.<sup>27</sup> Many believe that there is something irreplaceable in the kind of engagement one gets from being physically present with an artwork. For example, an art collector was recently quoted asserting that buying work online is not an adequate substitute for the offline version, saying that ‘One needs physical contact with an artwork to grasp it’.<sup>28</sup> An art adviser for the Museum of Modern Art was quoted in a 2014 *Vogue* article as saying that she would ‘caution collectors who are thinking about buying any work of art without seeing it – and its “emotional” value, color, scale, texture, and three-dimensionality – in person first’.<sup>29</sup>

26 Budge K 2018, ‘Visitors in immersive museum spaces and Instagram: Self, place-making, and play’, *The Journal of Public Space* 3:3, p.136.

27 Quito A 2018, ‘Instagram is killing the way we experience art’, *Quartz*, 24 Feb, viewed 22 Dec 2020, <https://qz.com/quartz/1212385/instagram-is-killing-the-way-we-experience-art>.

28 Reyburn S 2020, ‘As the art world goes online, a generation gap opens’, *New York Times*, 8 June, viewed 22 Dec 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/arts/design/buying-art-online.html>.

29 Fleming O 2014, ‘Why the world’s most talked-about new art dealer is Instagram’, *Vogue*, 13 May, viewed 22 Dec 2020, <https://www.vogue.com/article/buying-and-selling-art-on-instagram>.



**At the same time, there is an argument that digital technology can provide a better viewing experience, or at least different elements not available to an average gallery attendee.** One of the aims of the Google Arts and Culture project was to acquire high definition scans of artworks, ‘giving the viewer the access to detail one would not be able to see in a gallery’.<sup>30</sup> Anyone who has peered over crowds to catch a glimpse of a famous painting in a popular European gallery will attest that in-person environments do not necessarily provide the ultimate viewing experience. Virtual exhibitions can allow visitors to get closer and see art from angles that would not be available on an in-person visit.<sup>31</sup>

And, of course, visual art can be entirely digital. As technology has evolved, artists have experimented with different media, including computer or AI-generated imagery, digital tools for 2D or 3D graphics, animation, and a host of other genres and methods. Australia’s first permanent digital gallery is set to open in Melbourne in August 2021.

Digital artists have faced difficulties when it comes to selling their work – this is due to the lack of an ‘easily digestible commercial delivery system’ for digital products.<sup>32</sup> However, digital advancements are presenting solutions, and developments in blockchain technology have provided a way to record ownership of a digital artwork using non-fungible tokens (NFTs).<sup>33</sup> Recently, there has been significant media attention to a supposed NFT ‘bubble’ and artworks selling for

30 Udell U 2019, ‘The museum of the infinite scroll: Assessing the effectiveness of Google Arts and Culture as a virtual tool for museum accessibility’, Master’s thesis, University of San Francisco, p.18.

31 As seen in the Arts Unit of the NSW Department of Education’s ARTEXPRESS Virtual exhibit: <https://artexpress.vr.artsunit.nsw.edu.au>.

32 Schacter K 2021, ‘Kenny Schachter gets sucked into the surreal NFT vortex ... and makes a fortune overnight in the new virtual art market’, *artnetnews*, 24 Feb, viewed 14 May 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/kenny-schachter-tk-1946256>.

33 Rennie A et al 2019, *Blockchain and the Creative Industries: Provocation paper*, RMIT University, <https://apo.org.au/node/267131>, p.16. The Australia Council is currently engaged in further research on blockchain and NFTs.





huge sums. The associated hype has also prompted criticism of the motivations of NFT traders. Some feel that the appeal of NFTs is less to do with the artworks themselves but and more to do with their value as a type of cryptocurrency.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of the reasons for their current popularity, however, NFTs provide a new way for digital artists to monetise their work.

**The COVID-19 shutdown disrupted the standard model of ‘in-person’ engagement** with visual arts, with art galleries temporarily closing to the public. This has forced more artists and arts institutions to explore online options, and the results are not necessarily a poor imitation. Australian artist David Collins recently commented that he was inspired by the visual art world’s rapid move online and the effectiveness of Instagram in particular: ‘I thought people really needed to see art in the flesh to experience it and to feel excited about it, but now I can see how engaging it can be online’.<sup>35</sup>

**Online experiences also have the potential to make artworks much more accessible to a more diverse cross-section of the population.** Only some people have the opportunity to physically experience art, and limiting art experiences to in-person encounters can have the effect of making the audience more homogenous. Many people will not get the opportunity to visit iconic works of art overseas, or even in a different part of the country. But making an artwork available online makes it significantly more accessible to a wider range of people.<sup>36</sup>

34 Boland M 2021, ‘Quick sales, \$69m “tokens”: What it takes to get into the digital art world’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 March, <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/quick-sales-69m-tokens-what-it-takes-to-get-into-the-digital-art-wworld-20210319-p57ca7.html>. Other criticism has been aimed at NFTs’ significant environmental impact: Boscovic D 2021, ‘How nonfungible tokens work and where they get their value – A cryptocurrency expert explains NFTs’, *The Conversation*, 31 March, <https://theconversation.com/how-nonfungible-tokens-work-and-where-they-get-their-value-a-cryptocurrency-expert-explains-nfts-157489>.

35 Cited in Blake E 2020, “‘It’s like our future has gone”: Visual artists facing existential threat post Covid-19’, *The Guardian*, 2 July, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jul/02/its-like-our-future-has-gone-visual-artists-facing-existential-threat-post-covid-19>.

36 Patternmakers & WolfBrown 2021, *COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor Digital Factsheet*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/audience-outlook-monitor>.

In 2020 the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair was forced online due to concerns about visitors to remote art centres and vulnerable communities during the pandemic. The online event far exceeded expectations and generated over \$2.6 million in sales, which went directly to art centres and communities.

By moving online, the fair was able to reach a far bigger audience – ‘the website had almost 45,000 unique visitors (compared to over 17,000 in-person attendees in 2019) and almost three-quarters were first-time visitors’.<sup>37</sup> It also enabled people from all around the world to gain a ‘rare and intimate glimpse’ into artists’ lives and work. The implementation of the digital platform has opened up major business opportunities for the future, and enabled the fair’s organisers to engage more fully in export markets to promote First Nations art around the world.

The Singapore Art Week (SAW), which took place as COVID-19 concerns were escalating in January 2021, also pivoted quickly to leverage digital engagement. For the first time, SAW created a digital platform – [SAW Digital](#) – to provide easy access to 83 digital programs and virtual exhibitions, as well as 23 hybrid programs within SAW. That year, six out of ten SAW attendees participated in digital shows, commissions and talks. The festival’s digital audience outnumbered physical audiences by 150%.



37 Loewenthal C 2020, ‘Innovation takes Indigenous art to the world’, *Dynamic Business*, 14 Dec, viewed 17 May 2021, <https://dynamicbusiness.com.au/topics/news/innovation-takes-indigenous-art-to-the-world.html>.



## Participatory media and changing audience expectations

In the present day, it is seen as ever more important for public art institutions to reach out to audiences through social media to maintain an online presence, and to provide interactive ways of experiencing artworks in their collections. That these developments are happening at the same time is not a coincidence. Over the past decade and a half, cultural consumption has increasingly included a participatory element fuelled by the rise of mobile-enabled network media and **a new kind of audience has evolved: one with 'expectations of great access for minimal (or no) cost; shifting notions of ownership and collection; and greater interaction, intervention and collaboration between audiences and creators'**.<sup>38</sup> This change affects all genres from music to television to literature.

In the digital age, sharing and repurposing content online has become a commonplace engagement practice. At the same time, **more institutions are embracing the idea of open access and allowing reuse of digitised collection items that are out of copyright and are now in the 'public domain'**. There is some debate about whether creating a digital version of an item results in a new copyright, and some institutions choose to impose restrictions on their use (including charging licensing fees).<sup>39</sup> Others have taken an approach that gestures towards the collective cultural ownership envisaged by early promoters of Web 2.0. Rather than reverentially preserving art (although, of course, they still do this with the originals), **influential art institutions have opened up their public domain image collections and also joined up with linked mega-repositories such as Europeana.**



Friends having fun with the BALLpit light projection on Cadmans Cottage, The Rocks, during Vivid Sydney 2018. Credit: Destination NSW.

For example, the [Smithsonian Open Access portal](#) allows public domain images from the collection to be downloaded and used for any purpose – ‘remixes’ are encouraged (such as making a ‘collagasaurus’ from spliced bits of images). [The New York Public Library](#) offers the opportunity to create 3D moving gifs from stereograph images in their collection. Both examples include suggestions that these

38 Kulesz O 2020, *Supporting Culture in the Digital Age* (International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies), <https://ifacca.org/en/news/2020/04/23/supporting-culture-digital-age>, p.5.

39 McCarthy D & Wallace A 2020, 'Open access to collections is a no-brainer - It's a clear-cut extension of any museum's mission', *Apollo*, 1 June, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/open-access-images-museum-mission-open-glam>.



creations should be shared (for example, the Smithsonian page clearly displays #SmithsonianOpenAccess), presumably in the hope that more people will visit the website as a result.

**Interactive artworks are increasingly popular** and do not always have a digital component. Lara Merrett was commissioned by Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art to present *Paint Me In* in 2018. The installation featured brightly

coloured, moveable canvasses suspended from the ceiling. Visitors were encouraged to interact with the artwork – even to climb inside it – as well as to make their own versions from lengths of painted canvas.

Sometimes, extra digital aspects happen organically or unintentionally. This is the case in the immersive design exhibit by the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, which used their collection of decorative wallpaper designs projected on

the walls of a room. Once it became apparent that people were sharing the images online, a hashtag was devised to take advantage of this behaviour.<sup>40</sup>

Some of these types of artworks have been dismissed as mere gimmicks, clearly designed to get publicity and/or increase visitor numbers. And, indeed, there are examples of art being designed with social media in mind, which might seem to go against more intellectual approaches to art appreciation. A 2017 exhibition at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, *One Gray Hair* by artist Alison Marks, included elements the artist hoped would inspire selfies, such as a large set of holographic vinyl wings.<sup>41</sup>

**As mobile phone technology has become ubiquitous, the way that many visitors interact with art in galleries and public spaces has fundamentally changed.** Although taking photographs for later viewing or displaying is not new, art institutions are now more likely to allow photography. **Engaging visitors and getting wider interest has come to outweigh concerns about copyright, at least in permanent collections.** The practice of sharing photos of art on social media blurs the boundaries of the offline gallery space and its digital representations (such as the gallery's website). When a visitor shares a picture of an artwork, it is transported into the digital realm, viewed by others and perhaps 'liked', shared further or commented on.

40 Budge K 2018, 'Visitors in immersive museum spaces and Instagram: Self, place-making, and play', *The Journal of Public Space* 3:3.

41 Sokolowsky J 2017, 'Art in the Instagram age: How social media is shaping art and how you experience it', *Seattle Times*, 16 Nov, <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/visual-arts/art-in-the-instagram-age-how-social-media-is-shaping-art-and-how-you-experience-it>.

This reflects an acceptance, in many circles, that visual art audiences are less and less likely to be content with viewing a piece of art and being told what to think about it. **There is an increasing desire to insert oneself into the narrative.** Art gallery attendees take pictures of art and, more often than not, add something of themselves before sharing on platforms like Instagram and Facebook. At the lower level this could mean including a caption or a hashtag that indicates what the image means to them personally (and the hashtag could lead to distribution to a wider audience). Most commonly, this means taking a 'selfie' with a piece of art – and less subtly including themselves in the story.

The art of the selfie is often dismissed as part of an unpleasant trend towards narcissism and thus not taken seriously.<sup>42</sup> In reality, it is not that different from other long-held practices of self-portraiture such as getting one's picture taken in front of a tourist attraction (or artwork). However, along with the addition of reverse cameras on smartphones and the widespread uptake of social media, it has become more acceptable for people to take pictures of themselves and share.

**It is also possible that the 'art selfie' is just a more visible manifestation of a long tradition of art appreciation as an act of performance and self-expression.**

Art appreciation, Bourdieu argued, is an indicator of social class – thus expressing one's like or dislike of a particular piece of art is part of expressing one's membership of a particular social grouping.<sup>43</sup> In the digital age, online cultures arise around the sharing of certain types of images as currency, and curating a certain image via likes, dislikes and what you share or display on social media profiles.

As Kylie Budge argues, taking and sharing selfies in art galleries (or anywhere) is about participating in a community: sharing emotion, 'placemaking' (saying 'I am here') and self-expression.<sup>44</sup> It is also a type of interpretative response to the art, contributing to a wider conversation by saying 'this is what it means to me'.

**This type of interaction is now a significant part of the way people consume art and could, potentially, constitute an act of co-creation.**

42 See Budge, 'Visitors in immersive museum spaces', and Budge K & Burgess A 2017, 'Museum objects and Instagram: Agency and communication in digital engagement', *Continuum*, 32:2.

43 Paßmann J & Schubert C 2020, 'Liking as taste making: Social media practices as generators of aesthetic valuation and distinction', *SSRN*, 25 April, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3585112](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3585112).

44 Budge K 2018, 'Visitors in immersive museum spaces and Instagram: Self, place-making, and play', *The Journal of Public Space* 3:3, p.132.

#NewSelfWales



#NewSelfWales exhibition 2018, DXLab.  
Image courtesy of State Library of New South Wales.



The #NewSelfWales exhibition at the State Library of New South Wales in 2018 harnessed audiences' drive to participate and create new content in a way that goes beyond marketing. **Inviting an audience to creatively participate in an exhibition can produce unexpected results and give participants a sense of personal connection to an arts institution.**

The #NewSelfWales exhibition included an invitation to the public to upload selfies which then appeared on a large wall projection alongside items from the library's art collection showing portraits of people. While this blurred the definition of a 'selfie' somewhat (a selfie is generally defined as a photo you take of yourself, not just a photo of you), it allowed library patrons to contribute to and reflect on historical and contemporary self-representation. It also enabled the library to demonstrate the relevance of their physical art collections in a digital world to the participants and wider public, and to update their collection practices.

### Selfie by the Sea

The 'art selfie' form of arts engagement is prominently on display at the annual sculpture exhibition Sculpture by the Sea that takes place along Sydney's Bondi to Tamarama beach-side walk. The sculptures are created and positioned to take full advantage of their stunning sea cliff backdrops and are innately tempting as photography subjects.

Here the practice of the 'art selfie' is evident everywhere: in every direction people are lining up for a moment with the sculpture that will be captured and shared. It is hard to take a photo of the art, particularly the most picturesque or interesting examples, without a stranger in the frame because of the frequent selfie-taking.

Sculpture by the Sea organisers actively encourage visitors to take and share photographs. Invitations to use their hashtag (for example, #sculpturebythesea2019) are ubiquitous at the event and in promotional material. Sculpture by the Sea is sponsored by Google Pixel and features Google Pixel-sponsored selfie platforms and selfie tours where guides advise on the best vantage points (as explained in the Google-sponsored media coverage).<sup>45</sup>

Although taking pictures/selfies is such a big part of visitors' experience at Sculpture by the Sea – either in terms of trying to do it or trying to see the sculptures around other people taking pictures – selfie-taking does not feature much in official material or later collections. The promotional hashtag and selfie platforms generate a 'buzz' around the event and, after the fact, the pictures are still findable under the 'top posts' on Instagram for the hashtag. However, review materials and official photos mostly exclude visitors from the frame, which is almost never how they actually appear.

<sup>45</sup> Cooper A 2018, 'Expand your horizons to get more in the smartphone frame', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 Oct, <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/expand-your-horizons-to-get-more-in-the-smartphone-frame-20181025-p50by8.html>.



# Immersion, interactivity and live performance

## Key insights

- The rise of mobile digital technology has brought the digital into the physical world as opposed to taking the world and users online.
- Audience expectations of both in person and digital events are changing, and now include:
  - access to multiple lines of communication
    - with performers, audience members, and other participants
  - a sense of ‘simultaneity’, that is, a feeling of experiencing art simultaneously with others.
- Watching events unfold in real time is an important aspect of ‘liveness’ that can be facilitated online as well as through ‘in-person’ experiences. ‘Liveness’ is important but does not require in-person audiences.

Julia Hales, Joshua Bott and Lauren Marchbank in *You Know We Belong Together*, Perth Festival / BSSTC / DADAA.  
Credit: Toni Wilkinson/Perth Festival.

## Reconsidering ‘the real’ in live performance

Similar to gallery attendance, attendance at a live performance has historically been seen as superior to the experience of a broadcast or recorded performance. In the present day, **increasingly interactive options for live broadcast make it difficult to categorise different kinds of audience engagement, as discussed in more detail in this section.** Nonetheless, there is still general agreement that there is something special and irreplaceable about live, in-person performance.

Daniel Kok & Miho Shimizu, *xhe*, 2018. Credit: Bernie Ng.





A UK report on digital developments in theatre begins by saying:

The liveness of theatre, music and dance is an inalienable element of human life. For centuries these performing arts have been experienced by people in the same space and at the same time as the creative process happens, and the desire by audiences for this sort of immediate connection with artists in the act of performance continues unchanged.<sup>46</sup>

While recorded options have been available for a while in the case of music, the report continues, 'there remains a demand by music-lovers to hear music of all types in the actual presence of the musicians – an experience that can never be replaced, no matter how perfect the reproduced sound might be'.

Because of this prevalent attitude, **attempts to capture live theatre or music performances for broadcast on screen are often driven by the desire to replicate the audience experience as closely as possible.** They are therefore open to criticism for their failure to do so. In an article about productions of *King Lear* filmed by Robin Lough, Pascale Aebischer described the impact of the filming process on the blinding of Gloucester scene in the play: 'Lough's filming prevents the screen audience from participating in this aesthetic appreciation, and, because they are physically distant from the stage with no hope of intervening, it detracts from their complicity in the act.'<sup>47</sup> In a review of the production, increased access was said to have come at the cost of open interpretations, as fixed camera angles limited the perspective of the audience.

In a theatrical setting, elements that are external to the actual performance (the stage and surroundings and general atmosphere) are important parts of the artistic production. In a broadcast medium, 'paratextual' elements (the things inside the field of vision that are not adequately shut out by a small screen) can be seen as undesirable distractions from the performance.

This view is evident in music scholar Simon Firth's assessment of the history of live music and the influence of televised performance. For Firth, the visual aspects of the real version enhance the live experience, but detract from the televised version. He believes that radio provides an adequate replication of the 'immersive' experience of the concert, but television does not.<sup>48</sup>

**While it is assumed that in-person performance provides a superior experience, the changing nature of consumption might be cause for rethinking this.** For digital natives, aspects of the *real* world may actually intrude negatively on their experience as they are perhaps more accustomed to viewing content on a screen. The NEA's *Beyond Attendance* report suggests that

46 Arts Council England 2016, *From Live-to-Digital: Understanding the impact of digital developments in theatre on audiences, production and distribution*, <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/live-digital>, p.5.

47 'Shakespeare's violated bodies', in Nicholas R 2019, 'New ways of looking at Lear: Changing relationships between theatre, screen and audience in live broadcasts of *King Lear* (2011-2016)', *Shakespeare on Screen: King Lear* (Cambridge University Press), p.81.

48 Firth S 2002, 'Look! Hear! The uneasy relationship of music and television', *Popular Music*, 21:3, pp.277-90.





Image credit: Daniel Kok & Miho Shimizu, *xhe* (online), 2020, video still.

traditional settings like theatres, museums and concert halls might negatively impact younger people's enthusiasm to participate because they 'evoke their parents' and grandparents' culture, which they often reject'.<sup>49</sup>

And, with the addition of technology, in-person performances can end up being just as 'mediated' as online ones: perhaps the performance is only visible via a large screen, or audience members are encouraged to engage via social media in real time. In some cases, recorded versions of performances may offer superior audio quality. The sound is optimised, background noise is minimised and listeners are not limited to one position in the room.

**Immersive technologies have not, so far, rendered live performance obsolete.**

Hype surrounding the concept of 'virtuality' reached its peak in the early 2000s with the rapid rise in popularity of virtual worlds such as Second Life (with a million users at its high point in 2007).<sup>50</sup> As a mode for living in an alternate reality, including creating and engaging with art, Second Life was emblematic of visions of the future.<sup>51</sup> The SIMS is another popular example of a virtual world simulation game. Recently, Reconnect 2, a virtual exhibition featuring close to 100 works by members of the Modern Art Society (Singapore), was created and held on the SIMS 4 gaming platform.

49 Novak-Leonard J, Brown A, WolfBrown 2011, *Beyond Attendance: A multi-modal understanding of arts participation* (National Endowment for the Arts), <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/beyond-attendance-multi-modal-understanding-arts-participation>, p.30.

50 Martineau P 2019, 'Second Life is plagued by security flaws, ex-employee says', *Wired*, 16 Aug, viewed 22 Dec 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/second-life-plagued-security-flaws-ex-employee-says/>.

51 Minsky R 2007, 'The art world market of Second Life', originally presented at the second Life Community Conference, Chicago, IL, 25 Aug, viewed 1 June 2021, [https://www.minsky.com/minskyreport/ArtWorld\\_Market.pdf](https://www.minsky.com/minskyreport/ArtWorld_Market.pdf).



Adelaide Symphony Orchestra,  
Virtual Reality Project 2018.

In 2021, VR technology is becoming ever more sophisticated as well as affordable, and has been adopted in a number of performing arts contexts to reach wider audiences. For example, Perth-based contemporary dance company Co3 is developing a virtual touring model, to be launched in 2022, which will use VR technology to make the company's work accessible to remote and regional audiences. The VR equipment will tour, rather than the company itself, and will provide remotely located audiences with a virtual experience of Co3 performances. VR also provides different ways to experience art in a gallery setting.

VR is proving useful in a number of other contexts as well, including the space industry, health and aged care, and often requires the contributions of creatives. For example, a group of Australian designers teamed up with NASA to simulate spacewalks at the International Space Station for astronaut training.<sup>52</sup> And, in the UK, VR has been used to provide therapeutic environments for dementia patients.<sup>53</sup>

As COVID-19 restrictions remain on large gatherings in many places, event planners

have experimented with hybrid models. For example, the 2021 Splendour in the Grass festival in Byron Bay, NSW – renamed SplendourXR – combines 'real life' attendees with the option to attend virtually. Virtual guests can join using a variety of devices, and are able to socialise with other virtual attendees and performers using an avatar. 'XR' is an umbrella term that refers to different combinations of mixed reality, augmented reality and virtual reality.<sup>54</sup>

**The meteoric rise of mobile digital technology over the past decade has significantly influenced consumer behaviour.**<sup>55</sup> An article from digital marketing and technology experts Smart Insights highlights the increasing popularity of mobile technologies embedded in the world (for example, the Internet of Things) as opposed to people living their lives online.<sup>56</sup> **Mobile technologies bring the digital out into the real world as opposed to taking the world and users online.** In this hybrid world, people like the convenience of having one digital device that does everything while retaining the benefits of the analog world.

52 Mannix L 2018, "'Holy crap": Aussie team to work with NASA on virtual space station', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 Aug, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/holy-crap-aussie-team-to-work-with-nasa-on-virtual-space-station-20180807-p4zvzl.html>.

53 Glatter R 2019, 'How virtual reality can improve the quality of life for people with dementia', *Forbes*, 9 May, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertglatter/2019/05/09/how-virtual-reality-can-improve-the-quality-of-life-for-people-with-dementia>.

54 Irvine K 2017, 'XR: VR, AR, MR—What's the difference?' *Viget*, archived 2 June 2021, <https://www.viget.com/articles/xr-vr-ar-mr-whats-the-difference>.

55 Deloitte 2017, *Global Mobile Consumer Trends, 2nd edition*, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/technology-media-and-telecommunications/articles/global-mobile-consumer-trends.html>.

56 Smart Insights 2020, 'Top mobile app development trends in 2020', archived 1 June 2021, <https://www.smartinsights.com/mobile-marketing/app-marketing/top-mobile-app-development-trends-in-2020-infographic>.



Although immersive VR technology continues to generate a lot of hype, it is still a way off becoming mainstream. Cultural consumers have not widely embraced the idea of wearable technology yet, and **the trajectory seems to be moving away from immersion towards augmented models.**

Cross-device virtual world games like Minecraft and Fortnite, which can be played on mobile, tablet, PC or console, have vastly eclipsed other virtual offerings that confine users to a PC or wired connection. Younger consumers have less of an issue with watching video and livestreamed content on small screens, preferring the convenience of portability over an immersive experience. A study found that 61% of 15–24-year-olds think that watching videos on their phone is just as good as watching on television.<sup>57</sup>

While the technology has become increasingly sophisticated, the conversation has not changed all that much in a decade. In 2011, the NEA's *Beyond Attendance* report claimed:

Ever since the Metropolitan Opera began broadcasting into movie theaters worldwide, the arts industry has been consumed with debate over the relative merits of broadcast-based participation versus attendance at live programs. What is the added value of a live experience over a digital experience, especially when the digital experience occurs in a theatrical setting? This is a central debate facing today's arts sector. As the amount of high-quality digital content increases, will the public increasingly prefer such experiences? Ten years from now, will movie theaters supersede performing arts theaters as venues for classical music, opera, and theater participation? Or, will home viewing proliferate?<sup>58</sup>

This is not very different from questions that are currently being asked about the effects of digital alternatives on live performance. In 2020, articles about the long-term effects of the pivot to online during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown abounded. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article in May with the headline: 'Digital theater is all the rage, but could it destroy the live stage?'<sup>59</sup>

57 Whistle 2019, *Mobile motives*, archived 1 June 2021, <https://teamwhistle.com/insights/2019/11/mobile-motives>.

58 Novak-Leonard J, Brown A, WolfBrown 2011, *Beyond Attendance: A multi-modal understanding of arts participation* (National Endowment for the Arts), <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/beyond-attendance-multi-modal-understanding-arts-participation>, p.72.

59 McNulty C 2020, 'Digital theater is all the rage, but could it destroy the live stage?', *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-05-13/coronavirus-theater-digital-streaming-risks>.

## Livestreaming and livestreamed performance

You cannot download the thunderous beat and sweaty presence of thousands at a Lady Gaga concert, any more than you can make love on Facebook, much as some try. You have to go somewhere for it to happen.<sup>60</sup>

It might not be possible or indeed desirable to produce an equivalent digital version of a live performance, but digital versions can be better in other respects. **In terms of audience involvement and interactivity, a livestreamed performance can engage audiences in different and potentially better ways than passively attending a live theatre performance.** Increased accessibility is a huge plus.

For example, the 2016 livestreamed *King Lear* production from the 1623 Theatre and filmed by Robin Lough allowed 'more people to see the production', including a British Sign Language interpretation and extending 'access to audience members who might find the theatre or the cinema a stressful or impossible experience'.<sup>61</sup>

**Digital access can overcome financial, geographical, physical and cultural barriers, among others.**

Eilish Gilligan performing live on Twitch.  
Image courtesy of the artist.

60 Jenkins S 2011, 'Welcome to the post-digital world, an exhilarating return to civility – via Facebook and Lady Gaga', 2 Dec, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/01/post-digital-world-web>.

61 Nicholas R 2019, 'New ways of looking at Lear: Changing relationships between theatre, screen and audience in live broadcasts of King Lear (2011–2016)', *Shakespeare on Screen: King Lear* (Cambridge University Press), p.87.



### 3. Immersion, interactivity and live performance

Further to this, the 1623 Theatre livestream was ‘part of an active process of development’. The audience ‘were not only able to respond and react to the performance through Twitter using the hashtag #LearCordelia, but this response had real impact in shaping the story that the company continue to tell of *King Lear* and dementia’. From the audience’s perspective, this form of engagement provided increased awareness of the social and political issues explored in the production.<sup>62</sup>

Livestreaming is an increasingly popular form of entertainment, not just for consuming content that would otherwise be live. **An entire subculture exists around digital livestreams of certain art forms, from music to visual arts to gaming.** Watching livestreams of people playing games or performing ‘talents’ (such as singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, cooking, calligraphy, painting, handcraft) is a hugely popular pastime in China, particularly for young people: ‘Chinese streaming viewers reached 398 million in 2017 and increased to 456 million in 2018, accounting for 50% of the Internet

population in China’.<sup>63</sup> By June 2020, this number had risen to 562 million.<sup>64</sup>

Interactive livestreaming is not just popular in China – video game livestreaming platforms such as Twitch are popular worldwide to levels comparable to the games themselves. Twitch was acquired by Amazon in 2015 for almost US\$1 billion and is a social video platform for gamers where more than 100 million gather every month to broadcast, watch and talk about video games.<sup>65</sup> In 2015, ‘approximately two million people streamed regularly on average each month, producing over 450,000 years of video, and there were normally over half a million people watching channels at any one time’.<sup>66</sup> These numbers have risen considerably since then: in the second half of 2020 the average number of concurrent viewers was around 2.5 million.<sup>67</sup> According to an article about the lives and careers of video game live broadcasters, Twitch ‘has become emblematic of shifts within the digital media economy towards an increasingly central role for content creation’.<sup>68</sup>

62 Nicholas R 2019, ‘New ways of looking at Lear: Changing relationships between theatre, screen and audience in live broadcasts of *King Lear* (2011–2016)’, *Shakespeare on Screen: King Lear* (Cambridge University Press), p.87.

63 iiMedia Research 2019, ‘A report on China’s live streaming market 2018–2019’, in Li J et al 2019, ‘Live streaming as co-performance: Dynamics between center and periphery in theatrical engagement’, *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, November, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3359166>, p.2.

64 China Internet Network Information Center 2020, *The 46th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*, <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR>, p.2.

65 Crunchbase, ‘Twitch’, viewed 6 Oct 2020, <https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/twitch>.

66 Johnson M & Woodcock J 2019, ‘“It’s like the gold rush”: The lives and careers of professional video game streamers on Twitch.tv’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 22:3, p.337.

67 Twitch Tracker, ‘Twitch statistics and charts’, viewed 21 Dec 2020, <https://twitchtracker.com/statistics>.

68 Johnson M & Woodcock J 2019, ‘“It’s like the gold rush”: The lives and careers of professional video game streamers on Twitch.tv’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 22:3, p.337.

**Livestreaming sites provide a viewing experience that is profoundly interactive or even co-creative.** Participants comment on gameplay in real time, send 'likes' or digital gifts and influence the action. A study of livestreaming activities on popular Chinese sites (such as Huya and Bilibili) found that 'spectators desired two-way interaction with streamers and sought a sense of community in audience participation', and that spectators were 'empowered with options that allow them to shape the story, such as polls and other ways to produce user-generated content, which in turn engages spectators'.

Unlike traditional television broadcasting or video sharing services such as YouTube or Youku, the synchronicity and interactivity of live streaming services enable users to co-experience and immerse themselves through their participation in live streaming. Audience participation occurs in several ways, including chatting in text or special emoticons, gifting, clicking likes or hearts, polling, subscribing to streaming channels, moderating chatrooms, and playing games with the streamer in video game streaming. Audience participation is found to have substantive impact over live streaming content.<sup>69</sup>

**Participatory web practices are gradually becoming more and more mainstream, and have affected the way that networks present content and/or invite people to partake in that content.** As free-to-air television stations have had to compete with on-demand streaming platforms,

<sup>69</sup> in Li J et al 2019, 'Live streaming as co-performance: Dynamics between center and periphery in theatrical engagement', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, November, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3359166>, p.64.



### 3. Immersion, interactivity and live performance

executives have increasingly emphasised 'event television' such as reality show finales to encourage people to watch programs at their scheduled broadcast time. This taps into the desire to watch programs with other people, whether or not they are in the same room, and be part of a conversation. In the most basic terms, this can take the form of a Twitter hashtag

that people follow and contribute to while watching (for example, #MasterChefAU or #QandA). It can also explain the popularity of 'reaction videos' – a long-standing internet craze where people upload videos of themselves watching other videos.<sup>70</sup>

**There is a desire for 'simultaneity'** that television networks have started to provide, from suggesting hashtags to facilitate conversations, through to including interactive aspects or even creating whole shows which revolve around watching people watch television (*Gogglebox*). Producers of creative content such as live or recorded versions of performances must navigate this broader media environment where marketing is entangled with engagement.

Danielle Freakley, *Imaginary Friend*, presented as part of *KISS club 2020* at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA). Credit: Daniel James Grant.



Like simultaneity, **'liveness' is important but does not require in-person audiences.**

In 2010, a study of the National Theatre (UK)'s live broadcasts to cinemas concluded that 'liveness' was central to the theatre-going experience in terms of having a connection to 'the unique circumstances where [content] was produced in the first place'.<sup>71</sup> Along with experiencing art with others, **watching events unfold in real time is an important aspect of liveness that can be facilitated online as well as (if not better than) 'in-person' experiences.** In the context of physical distancing required by the COVID-19 pandemic, one respondent to the *Audience Outlook Monitor* commented that 'at some point, an online interaction becomes more interconnective than a distanced personal one'.<sup>72</sup>

**During the disruptions caused by COVID-19 pandemic restrictions,** many creative workers and arts institutions turned to livestreaming and digital broadcasts to allow them to continue to present artistic content without an

in-person audience (for example, the Sydney Opera House released their 'digital season'). **While this shift was accompanied by much discussion of 'transformation' and the 'pivot' to online, this trend was in fact already occurring, and was simply accelerated by recent events.**

Performance artists and companies have increasingly been moving towards digital broadcasts, such as South Australian company *NetGigs* that has been providing an ecommerce platform to cater for all aspects of livestreamed events for several years. While some have been concerned that this trend will eventually cause the death of live performance, pre-pandemic **evidence shows that live streaming a performance can increase ticket sales to live events rather than decreasing them.**<sup>73</sup>

The *Audience Outlook Monitor* snapshot report from May 2020 also suggested that the increased digital engagement during the lockdown 'could translate to attendance at live events after the pandemic'.<sup>74</sup> The March 2021 results show that digital engagement is lessening but in-person attendance is experiencing a resurgence (71% reported having attended a cultural venue or event recently, compared with 29% in September 2020).<sup>75</sup>

- 70 Bhatt, S 2021, 'How reaction videos took over the content universe amid the pandemic', *The Economic Times*, 25 Jan, viewed 1 June 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/technology/the-phenomenon-that-is-reaction-videos-on-youtube-and-in-india/articleshow/80144051.cms>.
- 71 Bakhshi H, Mateos-Garcia J & Throsby D 2010, *Beyond Live: Digital innovation in the performing arts* (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts), [https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/beyond\\_live.pdf](https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/beyond_live.pdf), p.2.
- 72 Patternmakers & WolfBrown 2021, *COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor Digital Factsheet*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/audience-outlook-monitor>, p.5.
- 73 Bajan A 2019, 'Festivals and apps', *Medium*, 14 March, <https://medium.com/wrknprgrss/festivals-and-apps-bd0f2d5aab58>. A recent National Endowment for the Arts report found that 'Adults who used [electronic or digital] media to consume visual art or music, dance, or theater performances were at least five times as likely as other adults to attend in-person arts events' (NEA 2020, *Paths to Participation: Understanding how art forms and activities intersect*, <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/paths-participation-understanding-how-art-forms-and-activities-intersect>, p.2).
- 74 Patternmakers & WolfBrown 2020, *COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor*, 'Australia snapshot report', May, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/covid-19-audience-outlook-monitor-2020/>, p.9.
- 75 Patternmakers & WolfBrown 2021, *COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor*, 'Australia snapshot report', March, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/covid-19-audience-outlook-monitor-2020/>.

**The sudden halt to live performance during COVID-19 highlighted the need to have flexible systems in place to enable resilience in times of crisis.** Artists were forced to turn to online distribution but struggled to do so in ways that maintained revenue streams. It is possible to produce content online and be paid for it, and some more established artists successfully transitioned to ticketed online events or via donations. For example, on 29 May US band The Dropkick Murphys performed live 'from an empty Fenway Park, with pal Bruce Springsteen joining them remotely' and raised \$424,283 for charity using a digital platform. The Melbourne Digital Concert Hall was created in March 2020 by Adele Schonhardt and Chris Howlett and



Melbourne Digital Concert Hall, Fidelio Quartet.  
Credit: Shinduk Kwoun.



presented 233 live concerts in its first nine months via ticketed livestreams. Its immense success has continued as it transitioned to a hybrid model with live studio audiences as well as livestreams. In a year, it raised \$1.25 million, close to all of which went directly to artists.<sup>76</sup>

For independent artists, this transition was more challenging and required adapting to new business models rather than simply trying to digitally replicate live performance. Australian artists such as Eilish Gilligan have successfully used Twitch channels alongside other digital options to generate multiple sources of income and stay connected to fans (or enhance connections).<sup>77</sup>

Explorations of systems that allow creative workers to monetise their work in digital formats are ongoing, such as innovations with blockchain technology.<sup>78</sup>

**Research into the effectiveness of technologies like blockchain for securing value for small players in the creative industries is important in an era of increasing platformisation and potential loss of control for individual creators.**<sup>79</sup>

Having a digital content component provides flexibility and resilience in the face of an uncertain short-term future for large gatherings of people. **In a hybrid digital/analog world, audiences can have the best of both worlds.**

First Nations dance organisation BlakDance has proposed the term ‘re-futuring’ rather than recovery as ‘In this recovery environment we are sure to see the decline of monolithic “cultural venues” and those that define the value of art and culture by ticket sales alone’.<sup>80</sup> In this environment, in-person participation is still possible. However, as Narangga and Kaurna artist Jacob Boehme has said, there is also a need to ‘redefine our practice, its relevancy to our people and broader society, build local economies where we value communities as primary stakeholders’.<sup>81</sup>

.... concerts did not die with the invention of records, but thrived on the difference. The screen relieves loneliness, as once did letters and phones, but it remains a window on the world, not a door.<sup>82</sup>

76 McPherson A 2021, ‘Melbourne Digital Concert Hall celebrates its first birthday’, *Limelight*, <https://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/features/melbourne-digital-concert-hall-celebrates-its-first-birthday>.

77 Gilligan E 2020, ‘I lost money, gigs and community in lockdown. Streaming on Twitch brought it back’, *The Guardian*, 23 Dec, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2020/dec/23/i-lost-money-gigs-and-community-in-lockdown-streaming-on-twitch-brought-it-back>.

78 For example, blockchain music platform *Emanate*.

79 Rennie A et al 2019, *Blockchain and the Creative Industries: Provocation paper*, RMIT University, <https://apo.org.au/node/267131>.

80 BlakDance 2020, ‘Re-futuring as recovery for the arts’, *ArtsHub*, 22 June, <https://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/opinions-and-analysis/covid-19/blakdance/re-futuring-as-recovery-for-the-arts-260593>.

81 Boehme J, cited in BlakDance 2020, ‘Re-futuring as recovery for the arts’, *ArtsHub*, 22 June, <https://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/opinions-and-analysis/covid-19/blakdance/re-futuring-as-recovery-for-the-arts-260593>.

82 Jenkins S 2011, ‘Welcome to the post-digital world, an exhilarating return to civility – via Facebook and Lady Gaga’, 2 Dec, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/01/post-digital-world-web>.

# 4

## The hybrid world of books and reading

### Key insights

- Digital reading cultures help to *increase* the popularity of physical books. They present the book as a desirable object and promote reading and displaying physical books online.
- Participatory media has expanded the opportunities for everyday people to engage with reading and writing activities. It has enabled the public to engage with literature as part of an interpretative community, potentially deepening the impact of the interactions.
- It is not inevitable that a new technology will completely replace what has gone before. Not only do old forms of technology often persist; in most cases the digital and the analog end up intertwining and overlapping in multiple ways.

Liane Moriarty's *Big Little Lies*, 2020.  
Credit: Andrew Ebrahim.



## The hybrid and post-digital world

Given that digital technology has permeated many parts of modern life, why are digital arts activities still seen by many people as a separate, fringe category? In some cases, this attitude results from seeing digital adaptation as a zero-sum game which sacrifices too much in the name of convenience. **To reap the benefits of a hybrid world, we need to understand the reasons for digital resistance and provide a better framework to describe digital arts engagement activities.**

**One reason for resistance or reluctance is the hyperbolic way that technological advances are sometimes talked about by tech industries and the media.** At different times, digital technology has been lauded as the solution to all the world's problems (for example, providing more equal access to information and resources) and, simultaneously, the end of the world as we know it. As the analog world was supposed to be gradually replaced by the digital we heard dire predictions that this trend would lead to a shallower populace unable to make real connections and that 'our love of things digital would inevitably trap us in socially-isolated cybercaves, bereft of real human interaction'.<sup>83</sup>

Fear of digital technology and its disruptive potential has manifested in an inevitable backlash and suspicion. **There has been a perceived need to defend beloved analog formats against the digital onslaught, or to refuse to engage with digital technologies or dismiss them as passing fads.** Over the past decade we have seen a reinvigoration

of enthusiasm for older technologies as people 'rediscover' the charms of analog or even retro technologies (for example, the steampunk phenomenon or the resurgence of vinyl records). Analog objects can offer things that digital surrogates cannot, such as tactile engagement or comforting simplicity, and different materialities can invoke differing interpretations (which is one explanation for the continued popularity of hardcopy zines in the digital age).<sup>84</sup>

Though considered part of the activities of arts practitioners, **there is scope for wider examination of the digital aspects of revenue, rights and professional development.** *Making Art Work: An economic study of artists in Australia* includes information about practitioners using the internet for administrative or creative purposes. Such analysis could be extended to include the impacts of digital technologies on all aspects of cultural creation and engagement.<sup>85</sup> Considering the digital world has big impacts for all stages of cultural progress, this is something that needs to be addressed in research and strategy discussions.

**It is certainly not inevitable that a new technology will completely replace what has gone before.** Similar predictions have been made throughout history – for example, there were concerns that the invention of print would obliterate handwriting skills, and that cars would spell the end of the bicycle. And yet, handwriting, print, cars and bicycles all continue to exist in the contemporary world.

83 Sable D 2012, 'A "post digital" world, really?' *Think with Google*, archived 2 March 2021, <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-resources/a-post-digital-world-really>.

84 Anna Poletti writes that, for autobiographical writing, 'the materiality of zines shapes their cultural perception as vehicles for self-life writing' and 'in the form of the zine, the act of self-life writing is extended beyond linguistic and narrative representation to reflect on the mediality of the social field', in Wurth K, Driscoll K & Pressman J (eds) 2017, *Book Presence in a Digital Age* (Bloomsbury Academic).

85 Throsby D & Petetskaya K 2017, *Making Art Work: An economic study of artists in Australia* (Australia Council for the Arts), p.20.

Similarly, **digital and analog technologies continue to exist alongside each other, and most people use a mixture of both in their everyday lives.** The term 'post-digital' has been used since at least 2011 to describe the world after it was discovered that the transformative powers of the internet only went so far.<sup>86</sup> The term is a bit misleading, as it is not so much 'after' digital as 'after the hype surrounding digital transformation wore off'. While digital technology, audiobooks and ebooks were supposed to replace physical books and run bookshops out of business, in reality they exist side-by-side:

the many components of books' production, circulation, and reception are dispersed across analogue, digital and live spaces and practices. Think MRA trolls attacking bookstores on Facebook (and inadvertently bolstering the popularity of the store and the events they're attacking). That's post-digital. Online streams of panel discussions about books? Post-digital. Twitter going bananas over plums? Also post-digital.<sup>87</sup>

The world is hybrid as the digital and analog worlds have been entangled all along.<sup>88</sup> Or, as a 2012 Google article put it: 'while digital is everything, everything is not digital. And, in fact, it never has been, nor will be'.<sup>89</sup>

Not only do the old forms of technology often persist, **in most cases the digital and the analog end up being intertwined and overlapping in multiple ways.** Even seemingly 'analog-only' artworks have digital connections. Books are bought and sold on Amazon and discussed on Goodreads, even if unavailable in digital formats. It is not as simple as offline phenomena moving online and replacing the offline version.

An example is the persistence of zines alongside blogging and social media platforms. Feminist zines and online feminism, one scholar argues, are not 'materially polarized outlets, but *practices* within the same repertoire of contemporary feminist media activism'. Zine making is thus digitally networked but protected from 'the harassment that tends to plague online spaces'.<sup>90</sup>

As demonstrated in the previous section on live performance, having multiple ways to reach audiences creates flexibility, and the hybrid digital/analog world is particularly able to facilitate this. At the same time, it is not necessary or necessarily desirable to abandon analog formats and the audiences who prefer them.

86 Jenkins S 2011, 'Welcome to the post-digital world, an exhilarating return to civility - via Facebook and Lady Gaga', 2 Dec, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/01/post-digital-world-web>.

87 Weber M 2019, 'On audiobooks and literature in the post-digital age', *Overland*, 3 Oct, <https://overland.org.au/2019/10/on-audiobooks-and-literature-in-the-post-digital-age>.

88 'Hybrid spaces' were defined by Adriana de Souza e Silva in 2006: 'a new type of space' that was the result of mobile technologies embedding the internet 'in outdoor, everyday activities' so that 'we can no longer address the disconnection between physical and digital spaces.' 2006, 'From cyber to hybrid: Mobile technologies as interfaces of hybrid spaces', *Space and Culture* 9:3, p.262. Hybrid spaces are/were not a 'new type of space' in that the digital and analog worlds have never been truly disconnected from one another, but it is true that mobile technologies have entangled them further.

89 Sable D 2012, 'A "post digital" world, really?' *Think with Google*, archived 2 March 2021, <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-resources/a-post-digital-world-really>.

90 Clark-Parsons R 2017, 'Feminist ephemera in a digital world: Theorizing zines as networked feminist practice', *Communication, Culture & Critique* 10.4, pp.558-9.

## Literary digital experiments

The digital realm has inspired experiments with literary forms and interactivity. For example, 'playable books' blur the boundaries between reading and digital games.<sup>91</sup>

As part of the Singapore Writers Festival 2020, Sara Y produced the experiential work *Play This Story: The book of red shadows*. This came from a piece of speculative fiction by author Victor Fernando R Ocampo. Players/participants found themselves enrolled into the government's secret Red Shadow Project, and could only emerge alive by completing tasks and engaging their creativity. This work was an interactive psychological horror game that took place entirely over email.

*Somewhere Else, Another You* by Tania De Rozario, writer and visual artist, is a literary gamebook inspired by theories of the multiverse. Each time the reader makes a choice, the universe of the narrative splits, creating a story in which all outcomes exist at the same time but cannot be experienced concurrently. The book invites readers to meander through its paths and towards their own conclusions, giving the reader a sense of authorship within the story.



Michelle Hart Crombie and Jennie Kadiki, Monash Public Library Service Auslan Online Storytime – *Sandcastle*, 2021. Videographer: Han Tran.

## Social/shared reading

The practice of reading has expanded with the advent of digital technologies but not at the expense of the physical book. In fact, **digital reading practices have further cemented the popularity of the book as a textual medium and material object.** Reading, of course, does not depend on digital technologies, and social reading happened long before the invention of digital technology.

**Book clubs**, for example, as in-person events where a group of people gathered to discuss a book, have existed since at least the 17th century and were further bolstered by the rise of a mass reading public in the 19th century.<sup>92</sup> Reading books is often

<sup>91</sup> Ensslin A 2014, *Literary Gaming* (MIT Press).

<sup>92</sup> Hunt K 2016, 'A history of radical thinking: How women created book clubs', *Vice*, 23 Sept, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/neibvk/a-history-of-radical-thinking-how-women-created-book-clubs](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/neibvk/a-history-of-radical-thinking-how-women-created-book-clubs).



thought of as a solitary activity, but **social reading practices are ever more popular.** Readers might join a book club to motivate themselves to finish a book or to get more out of it. A reading community provides readers with the opportunity to share a common interest, discuss ideas and socialise with others.

Facilitated by participatory technologies, reading took on a new wave of popularity in the first decade of the 21st century as new audiences were found: 'Suddenly, it seemed, reading was fun and sharing books with others was in vogue'.<sup>93</sup> Participatory media has enabled the public to engage with literature as part of an interpretative community, potentially deepening the impact of the interactions. Digital platforms are especially suited to facilitate these

actions as 'the meaning-making process becomes culturally significant when those meanings are shared by a larger group'.<sup>94</sup>

**Proponents of this new mass reading culture are less likely to be concerned with conventional forms of literary criticism and more in tune with 'new media tastemakers'** such as Oprah Winfrey (via Oprah's Book Club) or peer-to-peer recommendations from their friends via word of mouth or digital platforms such as Goodreads. In the case of Goodreads, this participatory media platform encourages readers to share their opinions and contribute to crowd-based criticism. It creates an environment where the popularity of a book can be based on measures other than sales, critical acclaim or prizes.

93 Fuller D & Sedo D 2013, *Reading Beyond the Book: The social practices of contemporary literary culture* (Routledge), p.13.

94 Jenkins H 2018, 'Fandom, negotiation and participatory culture', *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (Wiley Blackwell), p.42.



**Literary festivals have grown steadily in popularity over the past few decades,** including in Australia, in tandem with increasing opportunities for online engagement. In 2014, Lisa Dempster, director of the Melbourne Writers Festival, noted that the digital space created more opportunities to connect and in fact contributed to the ‘desire to come together for collective [in-person] experiences’. Author Myke Bartlett proposed that the rise of ‘certain niche festivals that might have previously seemed unprofitable’ can be tied to the internet’s influence on consuming as ‘a group activity’.<sup>95</sup>

Literary events that are adapted to virtual spaces can also provide enhanced sonic experiences. Sing Lit Sounds was a multidisciplinary program that paid homage to Singaporean literature in Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. It was held digitally on Discord and gave guests the chance to explore virtual rooms featuring different musical genres and music tracks produced exclusively for the event. The event also featured literary readings, an open-mic session for all languages, an all-night disco, and Ask-Me-Anything (AMAs) with the musicians.

The availability of online tools and platforms has only accelerated and made more quantifiable practices that were already there. ‘Mass reading events’ are a 21st century phenomenon but do not require digital technology (for example, the Canada Reads radio broadcasts or the One Book One Community programs, where everyone in a city or town is invited to read and talk about one book).<sup>96</sup> **Social reading communities both online and offline are an organic expression of people’s interest in literature** and desire to participate in various meaning-making activities that might not otherwise be available to them.

**These practices are amplified by the use of social media which can be more visible and much more far-reaching.** But in other respects they are not that different to any other grass-roots movement that has aimed to circumvent cultural gatekeepers. Book clubs in America, for example, were originally started by women who were otherwise excluded from intellectual gatherings and most colleges and universities.<sup>97</sup>

95 Nette A 2014, ‘Have festival, will travel: The growth of regional literary festivals in Australia’, The Wheeler Centre, 24 June, <https://www.wheelercentre.com/notes/2e884e271f56>.

96 Fuller D & Sedo D 2013, *Reading Beyond the Book: The social practices of contemporary literary culture* (Routledge), p.1.

97 Mumford T 2015, ‘The unstoppable tradition of the book club’, *MPR News*, 24 Jan, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/01/24/books-history-of-book-clubs>.



## #BookTube

Many readers combine online and offline reading activities.<sup>98</sup> Nonetheless, the physical book is still important and has managed to infiltrate the online and offline world in complex and entangled ways. **BookTube is an internet phenomenon that combines hybrid digital/analog engagement with the ‘simultaneity’ desired by modern audiences.** Mass reading events centre around reading the same book at the same time as other people.

BookTube is, according to ‘A beginners guide to BookTube’, ‘an incredibly vibrant community of people who vlog (that’s video blog for those of you who are unfamiliar with the lingo) about books on YouTube’.<sup>99</sup> It is findable via the #BookTube hashtag. It is also shorthand for a variety of book- and reading-related internet phenomena, from Bookstagram (again, a phenomenon that started with people creating and using a hashtag to denote book-related posts) to Book Twitter, where people find and share book-related content, such as reviews, pictures, discussions, recommendations and so on.

**The world of book-related social media contains strong proof of the continued influence of physical books despite so many other formats being available.**

Although it was feared the ebook would eventually kill off the physical version, ‘real’ book publishing has never

really been threatened by ebooks. Substantially more people still read physical books as opposed to ebooks,<sup>100</sup> and although ebook popularity was on the rise up until about 2012, ebook sales seem to have plateaued in recent years.<sup>101</sup> Although print books have levelled off as well, the number of people buying/reading physical books still vastly outweighs consumers of other formats. 69% of Australians read print books while 41% read ebooks. Audiobooks are increasing in popularity, but are still only read by 31% of Australians.<sup>102</sup>

**Digital reading cultures help to increase the popularity of physical books. They present the book as a desirable object and promote reading and displaying physical books online.** Book vlogs are book-related content and although they are posted online they revolve around readers and books situated in the real world or a carefully curated version of it. For example, 24 hour read-a-thon vlogs are about reading print books and there are certain aesthetic conventions that make up the genre.

**A 24 hour read-a-thon** is where a reader attempts to read as many books as possible during a 24 hour period and film themselves doing it ([in this example](#), produced by BookTuber BooksandLala, the finished product is a 24 minute video). Firstly, there

98 The 2016 Survey of Australian Book Readers found that 31% of Australians use social media and the internet in relation to books and reading. Macquarie University & Australia Council for the Arts 2017, *Reading the Reader: A survey of Australian reading habits*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/reading-the-reader>, p.20.

99 Scott K 2014, ‘A beginners guide to BookTube’, *BookRiot*, 2 April, [archived 24 Dec 2020, https://bookriot.com/beginners-guide-booktube](https://bookriot.com/beginners-guide-booktube).

100 Macquarie University & Australia Council for the Arts 2017, *Reading the Reader: A survey of Australian reading habits*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/reading-the-reader>, p.17.

101 Books + Publishing 2018, ‘The market down under’, 2 Oct, <https://www.booksandpublishing.com.au/articles/2018/10/02/116464/the-market-down-under-2>.

102 Australia Council for the Arts 2020, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participations Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>, p.159. Also, print versus ebook sales in 2016 are represented on a chart here: Perrin A 2016, ‘Book reading 2016’, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/09/01/book-reading-2016>.

is the act of performatively reading a physical book. Secondly, there is the presentation of the video, which is something of an art form in itself, observable from the carefully staged activities and from the comments. (From the same example: ‘Oh, I really love the creative way you presented the “contents” screen and then like “zoomed” into each “hour” rectangle. Your video design has really developed over the past few years, I love it!’)

The success of BookTubers is enabled by their use of mega-platform YouTube to ‘commoditise’ social capital and position themselves between publishers and readers. **In the age of social media, publishers are less able to reach audiences through traditional methods.**<sup>103</sup>

Further evidence of the power of platforms can be found in the influence of Instagram posters on the publishing world. **#Bookstagram**, ‘the corner of Instagram combining a love of books with stylized, eye-catching photos’, has 46.8 million posts of stylised images featuring books and book-related activities. It is a big enough part of how people consume literature to have ‘changed the way books are pitched, marketed and even the way book covers are made’.

Social media is definitely considered when choosing book covers like ‘Oh, will this look good on Instagram? Will the gloss make this hard to film?’ says Valerie Wong, a digital marketing associate for Little, Brown Books for Young Readers under Hachette Book Group, who see the majority of their engagement with young readers emerge from bookish social media platforms.<sup>104</sup>

The visual aspect of Bookstagram posts has led critics to assume the contents of the book are a secondary concern, but reading is important to the bookish online community. One Bookstagrammer responded angrily to a *Guardian* article about social media influencing cover design, saying that the community had been ‘unfairly attacked by a bunch of ... clueless people with too much time on their hands and literally no idea what Bookstagram is about.’<sup>105</sup> Others reacted similarly strongly to a *New York Post* Instagram

103 Tomasena J 2019, ‘Negotiating collaborations: BookTubers, the publishing industry, and YouTube’s ecosystem’, *Social Media + Society*, pp.1-3.

104 Dogget J 2019, ‘What is BookTube and why should you be watching (and reading)?’, *Huffington Post*, 25 April, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/what-is-booktube\\_1\\_5cc06c21e4b01b6b3efb45ec](https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/what-is-booktube_1_5cc06c21e4b01b6b3efb45ec).

105 Bibliotheque Blog 2018, ‘Bookstagram, we have been unfairly attacked and here’s my reply to each and every one of the comments’, 5 Sept, archived 23 Dec 2020, responding to Connolly H 2018, ‘Is social media influencing book cover design?’, *The Guardian*, 28 Aug, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/28/is-social-media-influencing-book-cover-design>.

Benjamin Law teaching Narrative Journalism online for Writing NSW. Credit: Writing NSW.



post which labelled books as ‘the hot new accessories’ for 2019 after they were photographed under the arms of Gigi and Bella Hadid.<sup>106</sup> These book-lovers resented the implication that their social media activities indicated that they valued books only as fashion accessories, as ‘Treating a book as a purely aesthetic object is often seen as an affront to intellectual credibility’.<sup>107</sup>

Yet, performative reading (being ‘seen’ reading a certain title) and book collecting have always been part of the way that people engage with literary culture. Rather than dying out as things moved online, the act of displaying one’s literary tastes now occurs in hybrid ways. Digital bookcases can become part of a projected personality either through ‘collecting’ titles on Goodreads or curated social media profiles.<sup>108</sup>

Real bookcases appear online as well: the recent increase in home video broadcasts has spawned a Twitter account called Bookcase Credibility. The account features commentary on the choice and arrangement of books appearing behind broadcasters and whether it adds to their message or detracts from it.

Physical books provide an aesthetic and material quality that cannot be quashed by the digital world. While the physical book appears not to be in danger of dying out any time soon, **participatory media has expanded the opportunities for everyday people to engage with reading and writing activities online.**

106 LeSavage H 2019, ‘A tabloid called the Hadids’ books “hot accessories” and people have thoughts’, *Glamour*, 21 March, <https://www.glamour.com/story/gigi-bella-hadid-books-hot-accessories>, in Steele G & Webster H 2019, ‘Volumes in Vogue’, paper presented at the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand conference, Melbourne, Dec.

107 Hess A 2020, “credibility bookcase” is the quarantine’s hottest accessory’, *New York Times*, 1 May, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/arts/quarantine-bookcase-coronavirus.html>.

108 Nakamura L 2020, ““Words with friends”: Socially networked reading on Goodreads’, *PMLA* 128:1. Also see Thomas B 2020, *Literature and Social Media* (Routledge).

# Participatory media: playing and games in the digital age

## Key insights

- Video games have a significant influence on cultural participation and everyday life due to the rise of mobile media and its 'gamified' content.
- 'Gamefulness' (also described as 'gamification' or 'ludification') has influenced contemporary life in many ways as expectations of interactivity and reward are embedded within everyday activities.
- As creative technology has become more and more accessible and easy to use, practices such as sharing and 'remix' are increasingly part of mainstream practices of cultural participation. The practice of taking an idea and repurposing it in different contexts has strongly influenced everyday cultural engagement, and has blurred distinctions between 'creative producer' and 'audience'.
- These participatory ways of engaging with content are simultaneously creative and derivative and therefore present new and difficult questions regarding authorship and copyright.



Bobbi Henry performing *Cracked*, Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company Production. Credit: Dana Weeks.



## The art and influence of games and play

Video games are a long-established feature of the digital era. Video game-making is cultural production and ‘primarily an act of creative expression’.<sup>109</sup> It is subject to the economic and social pressures of any cultural field, and its industry employs a wide range of creative professionals – for example, artists, designers, musicians and writers, alongside game developers themselves.

Yet video games are still often positioned within the art world as an ‘emerging’ category. **Whether or not a video game is ‘art’ is a question subject to myriad debates** in scholarship and popular media.<sup>110</sup> The 2019 Australia Council National Arts Participation Survey found that only 21% of survey respondents considered video games to be ‘art’.<sup>111</sup> And, while many participation surveys consider *creating* a video game as an artistic category, they do not necessarily include *playing* a video game as a category for audiences engaging with art.<sup>112</sup>

Through the concepts of games and play, this section argues that **digital games are far more influential on cultural participation than is recognised by existing measures** (whether counted as ‘art’ or not). Online communities, growing out of gaming and fan culture have, via mobile technology and networked platforms, introduced twin concepts of ‘playfulness’ and ‘gamefulness’ into the mainstream. Simultaneously, technical convergence and the development of multimedia content have highlighted the fact that **playing a game can be just one, particularly interactive, way of consuming audio-visual and narrative material.**

109 Keogh B 2021, ‘The cultural field of video game production in Australia’, *Games and Culture* 6:1, p.120.

110 Bourgonjon J, Vandermeersche G & Rutten K 2017, ‘Perspectives on video games as art’, *Comparative Literature and Culture* 19:4.

111 Australia Council for the Arts 2020, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participations Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>, p.167.

112 In Australia, this is partly because the Interactive Games and Entertainment Association (IGEA) already collects data on the number of game players – finding that two thirds of Australians play video games. Brand J et al 2019, *Digital Australia 2020* (IGEA), <https://igea.net/2019/07/digital-australia-2020-da20>, p.8.

## Prosumers and remix

The national artist survey for *Making Art Work: An economic study of artists in Australia* captures categories of online creation in its questions. The categories include whether or not the artist 'used the internet to create collaborative or interactive art with other artists' or 'used the internet to create collaborative or interactive art with non-artists'.<sup>113</sup>

**However, participatory media use can trouble these categories since, in online peer networks, there is often no clear distinction between 'artist' and 'non-artist' or 'professional' and 'amateur'.**

The nature of audience engagement has shifted as the internet has increasingly penetrated our daily lives: 'from a massified audience that was perceived as being composed of relatively passive receptors in the media production chain to a more active and engaged audience whose members produce media content of their own'.<sup>114</sup>

**The blurring of distinctions between creator and audience heightened by the rise of digital culture has been categorised by the idea of the 'prosumer', combining consumers and producers in the same participant.** Audiences produce content themselves and prosumer culture influences the content that is produced, all the while complicating questions of authorship, authority and intellectual property through concepts such as 'sharing' and 'remix'.<sup>115</sup>

In the present day, much engagement with more traditional art forms takes place within the context of digital participatory media. We have seen this in the previous examples of creating and sharing art selfies, vlogging about books on YouTube and watching livestreamed performances on Twitch. Many of the key features of participatory internet culture originated from what was once the cultural fringe. **Greater access to technology and widespread adoption of internet-enabled mobile devices have brought a set of engagement practices, previously limited to specialised fan and gaming communities, into everyday life.**

According to media scholar Henry Jenkins, 'fandom refers to the social structures and cultural practices created by the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties'.<sup>116</sup> **Expressions of fanly devotion take varied forms that have become large bodies of work in their own right,** including fan fiction, fan vids, artwork and illustration and the musical tradition of filking.<sup>117</sup> These practices are intrinsically linked to issues of labour and 'gifting': the original use of the term 'fan work' was used to describe something done for free to display love and devotion to a particular genre or work.

**'Fan fiction'** originally meant science fiction stories that were given away for free or appeared in low-budget publications, as

113 Throsby D & Petetskaya K 2017, *Making Art Work: An economic study of artists in Australia* (Australia Council for the Arts), <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/making-art-work>, p.120.

114 Massanari A 2015, *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit* (Peter Lang), p.7.

115 Useful discussion of the link between Web 2.0 and participatory media: Lastowka G 2011, 'Minecraft as Web 2.0: Amateur creativity & digital games', SSRN, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1939241> ('remix culture' coined by Lawrence Lessig 2008, *Remix: Making art and commerce thrive in the hybrid economy* (Penguin)).

116 Jenkins H 2019, 'Back to school special: Fandom, participatory culture and Web 2.0', *Confessions of an Aca-fan* (blog), 4 Sept, <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2019/8/28/back-to-school-special-fandom-participatory-culture-and-web-20-h66e3>.

117 Filking: 'a type of popular music, commonly performed at fan conventions, characterized by the use of familiar or traditional songs whose lyrics have been rewritten or parodied (usually on themes drawn from science fiction or fantasy writing), or sometimes original songs with similar content'. *Oxford Dictionary Online*, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/filk>.

distinct from 'professional' writing for which people were paid. From the 1960s fan culture more specifically described a set of practices encompassing works inspired by other works and characterised by reuse of content in imaginative ways.<sup>118</sup>

Fan culture predates digital culture, but participatory digital technology is particularly suited to the self-publishing and collaborative aspects of fan culture. Before the internet, however, people still found ways of creating and disseminating their work outside commercial channels (such as via the 'people's printing press': the photocopier).<sup>119</sup> **Now, through the widespread use of mobile technology and freely accessible networked applications, recreating and widely sharing content is easier than ever before.** Networked mega-platforms (those presided over by Google and Facebook, for example) are specifically designed to facilitate this behaviour and to profit from it.

Video gaming culture has strong parallels with fan practices because it 'enables ordinary consumers to actively participate in the construction and modification of media content' and 'is full of participatory potential, such as the production or use of wikis, tutorials, walkthroughs, fan fiction, cosplay, modding, and much more'.<sup>120</sup> Also once seen as a fringe activity, **video games have become common features of mainstream cultural engagement due to the rise of mobile technology,** where casual and flexible access to 'gamified' content 'becomes part of our embodied and everyday lived experience of being-in-the-world publicly'.<sup>121</sup>

**'Gamefulness' (also described as 'gamification' or 'ludification'<sup>122</sup>) has crept into modern life in myriad ways as**

**expectations of interactivity and reward are associated with everyday activities.**

For example, apps that count calories or record exercise also offer rewards for certain 'achievements' and invite you to share your success on social media.

**This trend has positive outcomes (for example, adding enhanced social connection, enjoyment or better educational results) but also troubling implications.**

From a psychological perspective, 'gamification' is an incredibly effective form of marketing and consumer manipulation. Outwardly fun and free activities are increasingly used to generate free labour and gather information (other terms for these phenomena include 'surveillance entertainment' and 'exploitationware').<sup>123</sup>

Video games themselves have even become 'gamified' because of participatory media and the logic of networked platforms. Some of this impetus has been driven by the potential for huge profits. Some popular social media-based games use the same manipulative tricks as gambling machines to get people hooked. The games are free to play, but encourage in-app-purchases to speed advancement, and make their money from a small number of heavily addicted 'whales' who spend large amounts.<sup>124</sup>

There has been demand, also, for the increased social interaction allowed by interwoven platforms. Without the seamless interconnection of modern-day internet technology, playing games with friends in the pre-internet and early-internet eras required complicated technology such as a LAN (local area network) and proximity to other players. Since then, it has become easier and easier to play games with other people online.

118 Coppa F 2017, *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk tales for the digital age* (University of Michigan Press), pp.2-3.

119 Jenkins H 2006, 'Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars?: Digital cinema, media convergence, and participatory culture', *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords* (Blackwell).

120 Muriel D & Crawford G 2018, *Video Games as Culture: Considering the role and importance of video games in contemporary society* (Routledge).

121 Keogh B 2017, 'Pokémon Go, the novelty of nostalgia, and the ubiquity of the smartphone', *Mobile Media & Communication* 5:1, p.40.

122 'This ludification of culture results in part from low-cost communication technologies that make dramatically engaging activities available non-stop to increasing sectors of the population.' Gergen KJ 2015, 'Playland: Technology, self, and cultural transformation', *Playful Identities* 55, p.70. The concept of 'ludification' was first described by Joost Raessens (2006, 'Playful identities, or the ludification of culture', *Games and Culture* 1:1, p.53).

123 Deterding S et al 2011, 'From game design elements to gamefulness', *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference*, p.1.

124 Gardner J 2014, 'Could Candy Crush Saga be a gateway to gambling?' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 April, <https://www.smh.com.au/technology/could-candy-crush-saga-be-a-gateway-to-gambling-20140424-zqyj7.html>.



**Now online games often include additional community/social media aspects and goals and rewards** that are shared externally on other platforms, or the games are embedded within social media applications themselves. 'Gamified' social interactions along with the growth of digital platforms and mobile technology have contributed to the participatory and interactive nature of cultural engagement.

**As creative technology has become more and more accessible and easy to use, practices such as sharing and remix are increasingly part of mainstream practices of cultural participation.** For an average person, there are fewer barriers to this kind of activity (such as being able to alter content and add your own take to the material). Altering an image to create a 'meme' previously required photo editing skills and software, but now popular apps such as SnapChat and Instagram Stories include text-addition and other editing features as a standard part of posting a photo or video.

Similarly, creating a video and adding a separate soundtrack and other features would, in the past, have required film editing skills and special software. Now with the advent of apps such as TikTok, it is easy and possible to make videos yourself, add text, cut, incorporate a soundtrack and share the results instantly. On TikTok, users create short videos set to music, often including lip-syncing, dancing or performing short skits.<sup>125</sup> Other users can then add their own take using the 'duet' feature, or trim and edit other video clips into their own.

This format for engaging with and creating content is hugely popular, especially with younger people (the TikTok app had 500 million users in 2018 and has only become more popular since).<sup>126</sup> **The ability to easily access creative technology has removed many of the barriers to amateur production such as cost, making clear distinctions between 'professional' and 'amateur' creators increasingly obsolete.**

These **participatory ways of engaging with content are simultaneously creative and derivative and therefore troublesome for authorship and copyright.** Mobile apps that encourage reuse and sharing have complicated and antagonistic relationships with rights organisations and music distributors, which are wary of the potential for unauthorised use of their content.<sup>127</sup>

**The ideals of Web 2.0 work on a principle of shared intellectual property as opposed to private ownership of intellectual property for income and profit.** The dominant platforms represent successful harnessing of these principles of sharing, ironically for unprecedented capital gain. TikTok is one of the many cultural phenomena that exist in this disputed space between shared and private intellectual property (see 'A dual economy' on p.72 for more on these tensions and contradictions of the contemporary internet).

125 Roose K 2018, 'TikTok, a Chinese video app, brings fun back to social media', *New York Times*, 3 Dec, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/03/technology/tiktok-a-chinese-video-app-brings-fun-back-to-social-media.html>.

126 Yang Y 2018, 'Tik Tok hits 500 million global monthly active users as China social media video craze continues', *South China Morning Post*, 17 July, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/article/2155580/tik-tok-hits-500-million-global-monthly-active-users-china-social-media-video>.

127 Nicolaou A 2020, 'Music companies threaten to sue TikTok over copyright', *Financial Times*, 4 April, <https://www.ft.com/content/1b3b78ea-32a3-4237-8b79-3595820eeb63>.

## Playing with categories

As well as expecting interactive engagement, **contemporary audiences expect to be able to access content in multiple ways, where and when they choose. This is due to the principles of convergence and content that can be repackaged in multiple formats.** Convergence, which refers to the ability to access different forms of communication media in a single device,<sup>128</sup> has simultaneously caused the blurring of distinctions between different kinds of platforms, genres and the online/offline worlds.

**The ‘platformisation’ of the internet in recent years also means that previously separate spheres are increasingly interconnected within an ecosystem controlled by a few large companies.**<sup>129</sup> Having access to all kinds of content via one hand-held device means that users are no longer required to be in a particular location to engage with creative products.

**A feature of the current age is the idea of multi-media or transmedia content.** The most popular and successful cultural products are the ones that manage to permeate multiple aspects of people’s lives. Large movie franchises, such as *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*, have been doing this for a long time (producing not only movies but also video games, books, TV series and merchandising). Video games are but one example of the ways

<sup>128</sup> Separate technologies for, for example, print, audio and video (for example, newspapers, radio and television) are gradually being replaced by a single device that does everything. See Reinhard C & Olson C 2019, *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory culture, transmedia storytelling, and intertextuality in the squared circle* (Routledge), pp.12–17.

<sup>129</sup> Duffy B, Poell T & Nieborg D 2019, ‘Platform practices in the cultural industries: Creativity, labor, and citizenship’, *Social Media + Society*, pp.1–8.

artistic works get carried across into different contexts, demonstrating that **it is the content that is important, not the way it is delivered.**

**Similarly influential on (or influenced by) convergent, multimedia and remix culture is what might be called ‘hacker’ culture.** The unregulated, ‘wild west’ nature of the internet combined with technical innovation has produced a broader cultural tendency towards experimentation and ‘disruption’.

**Early programmers and architects of the web were often also gamers,**<sup>130</sup> and thus digitally literate and accustomed to having an aspect of control over the technology they used. This influence has spilled over into digital culture more generally: if something does not suit you, in the digital age, with a few coding skills, it is possible to remake that thing in a way that does.

**‘Hacking’ is a term now also widely used in the analog world to mean solving problems by using things in ways that they were not necessarily intended to be used.** The omnipresent ‘life hack’ listicles (another common internet format where content is produced in the form of a list) include suggestions to improve your life from the banal to the ingenious.

**The notion of ‘play’ is also crucial for new media cultures.** An important aspect of hacker culture involves experimenting with things for no reason other than to find out what is possible or to create something unexpected and new. The reward for this behaviour might be derived from sharing the item with others and receiving their approval.

**Playfulness is here distinct from games or the notion of ‘gamefulness’.** The concept of ‘play’: ‘denotes a more freeform, expressive, improvisational, even “tumultuous” recombination of behaviors and meanings’, while ‘gaming’: ‘captures playing structured by rules and competitive strife toward goals’.<sup>131</sup>

**Fan culture encourages playfulness via aspects of individualisation or remaking a text to suit oneself. These are now features of cultural engagement more generally.** So, while a favourite series might eventually end, the practices associated with fan creation allows for it to be continued and in whichever direction you like, perhaps in a different format.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Levy S 2010, *Hackers: Heroes of the computer revolution* (O’Reilly Media).

<sup>131</sup> Deterding, S et al 2011, ‘From game design elements to gamefulness’, *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference*, p.3.

<sup>132</sup> McCormick C 2018, ‘Active fandom: Labor and love in the Whedonverse’, *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (John Wiley & Sons).

While someone's enthusiasm for a particular book series might be dulled by a lack of personal relevance, fan creation allows for the story to be remade to a person's own specific preferences.<sup>133</sup> **So, in fan culture, it is not only the rules of platforms that no longer have to be obeyed, but conventions around gender roles, sexuality, race, and so on.**

**Popular playful activities include creating 'mashups' that juxtapose content in novel ways across platform, genre and format divides.** Internet users derive amusement from taking things out of context or repurposing them in a novel way. Because the 'reward' of such activities comes from peer endorsement within a certain community, shared images and videos often refer to in-jokes and internal cultural references.

**Much of the humour associated with meme culture is self-referential and based on mixing contexts, genres and technologies.** For example, Tech Support Gandalf memes feature a picture of Sir Ian McKellen during the filming of *The Lord of the Rings*, in character but taking a break with a laptop. The image has been

repurposed and modified to include various jokes combining references to *The Lord of the Rings* and internet/computing culture.

The idea of **the 'meme'** refers to a 'unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation' as it was originally defined by Richard Dawkins.<sup>134</sup> **These notions of taking an idea and repurposing it in different contexts – 'memetic practices' as they might be termed in the broader sense – have strongly influenced everyday cultural engagement.**

**Remix and reappropriation extends across genre, platform and also across the digital/analog divide.** Creating real-world versions of imagined objects has been a part of fan culture for a long time. The practice of creating exact replicas of, for example, vessels from the Star Trek franchise has long been popular among devoted fans.<sup>135</sup>

**These activities are made easier to participate in with the advent of 3D printing, and sharing platforms** such as Thingiverse where users can upload their printing code along with images of their 3D creations. Users can then simply download

133 One of Henry Jenkins's influential texts on fan culture is called *Textual Poachers*, a term that refers to the practice of taking aspects that appeal to you from a favourite book or TV show and remaking them to suit your own needs or desires.

134 Dawkins R 2006, *The Selfish Gene*, p.192, in Milner R et al 2016, *The World Made Meme: Public conversations and participatory media* (MIT Press).

135 Rehak B 2017, 'From model building to 3D printing; Star Trek and build code across the analog/digital divide', *Routledge Companion to Media Fandom* (Routledge).

a set of instructions for their printer. The addition of 'maker spaces' with 3D printers to public libraries has made this technology more accessible.

**Mashups can also play with the digital/analog divide, as users derive amusement from mixing elements of the physical and virtual worlds.**

The [Brickboard](#) website is devoted to physical Lego model recreations of film or television scenes which are then filmed and uploaded, shared and consumed. Lego has even made a number of video games featuring Lego versions of popular movies such as Star Wars and Harry Potter, taking the physical version back into the digital realm.

**Video games are just one type of vehicle for these cultural transmissions.** And, as cultural engagement becomes more interactive, there is less and less distinction between what might be described as a 'game' or another kind of consumptive activity.

'E3 2010 - Video Games Live (VGL) Concert'  
by nixiepixel is licensed with CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

## Minecraft

**The popular game Minecraft, and the culture that has developed around it, is a useful example of playful interaction in the digital era.** Minecraft is an online game where worlds are created using Lego-like blocks representing different materials. The platform has very distinctive aesthetic qualities reminiscent of early computer games with large pixels.

**Minecraft has been around since 2009 but is enduringly popular.** Unlike other virtual world games, it has managed to successfully become multi-device and is therefore able to cater to the desires of modern audiences around accessibility. This is largely the result of Minecraft being bought by Microsoft in 2014 and thus becoming part of the ecosystem of large, monopolistic platforms, a move that alienated some of its original fanbase but also expanded it.

Minecraft is appealing in the age of participatory media because of its open-ended or 'sandbox' nature. **Unlike games where play is heavily prescribed, it allows for creativity and imaginative use within the available parameters.** A favourite pastime of users is therefore recreating real-life or cultural references within the game, and playing around to see what is possible.

Unlike scripted games where reward is derived from accomplishing tasks, in sandbox games **other 'online platforms for sharing user-generated creations become increasingly important and there is an extensive degree of community building'**.<sup>136</sup> The distinctive look of the results makes them ideal

for sharing and instantly recognisable as cultural references or in-jokes. Reward comes from achieving personal goals and community approval.

**Much Minecraft gameplay takes place on independently run servers which represent 'Minecraft worlds',** moving 'the role of governance and censorship from traditional power structures'.<sup>137</sup> Anyone can set up a server to play with friends, or join an existing one (the largest servers, such as Mineplex, host thousands of players simultaneously).<sup>138</sup> Collaborative and decentralised control mechanisms are a feature of community-led participatory principles – as discussed in '21st century models' on p.74.

Minecraft has no built-in content-sharing technologies and players use Minecraft's software 'as a locus for generating their own creative content both in the game and outside of it'.<sup>139</sup> **Minecraft material propagates far beyond the platform itself** as users share their finished objects as downloads and video captures on YouTube or Reddit. Examples range from 'a true to scale Starship Enterprise to a working computer that can be fed with algorithms'.<sup>140</sup> The sharing aspect is a big feature with people exchanging 'how-to' guides and tips and instructions as well as giving praise and criticism via comments.

**The distinctive aesthetic style of Minecraft creations has led to them permeating into traditional art spaces, blurring boundaries between 'professional' artists and the amateur creative ethos of online participatory culture.** Minecraft has featured in exhibitions at the Museum

136 Abend P & Beil B 2015, 'Editors of play: The scripts and practices of co-creativity in Minecraft and LittleBigPlanet', *Proceedings of DiGRA 2015 Conference: Diversity of play: Games - Cultures - Identities*, p.2.

137 Morgan J & Mungan R 2014, 'Fine arts, culture and creativity in Minecraft', *Understanding Minecraft: Essays on play, community and possibilities* (McFarland), p.177.

138 PCGamesN, 'The best Minecraft servers', viewed 24 Dec 2020, <https://www.pcgamesn.com/minecraft/15-best-minecraft-servers>.

139 Lastowka G 2011, 'Minecraft as Web 2.0: Amateur creativity & digital games', *SSRN*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1939241>.

140 Abend P & Beil B 2015, 'Editors of play: The scripts and practices of co-creativity in Minecraft and LittleBigPlanet', *Proceedings of DiGRA 2015 Conference: Diversity of play: Games - Cultures - Identities*, p.4.



'Minecraft' by hobbyymb, 2013, licensed with CC BY 2.0.

of Contemporary Art in Sydney, and Australian Minecraft players are part of an ambitious project to recreate the whole world within the game.<sup>141</sup> Minecraft culture featured in a 2016 Melbourne exhibition called *The Art of Play* which reflected on the way that online and offline 'games' are intertwined with daily lives.<sup>142</sup>

**Minecraft culture blurs the lines between creativity and consumption in ways that are characteristic of digital culture and participatory media more generally.**

It has appeared in conventional art spaces as both an art form in itself and a form of arts engagement. The principles of reimagining and reuse were on display when the Tate Modern initiated a collaborative project in 2014 entitled *Tate Worlds*: 'The project gathered together

some of the game's most accomplished mapmakers, and commissioned them to create 3D environments in Minecraft based on classic works of art'.<sup>143</sup>

**The playful aspects of participatory media culture are strongly highlighted in the Minecraft world.**

Users derive entertainment from recreating real-world items just to see if it is possible, or from deliberately trying to do things that are inappropriate or difficult to do within the confines of the platform.

For example, photographer Jason De Freitas took the unusual step of choosing Minecraft as the virtual world in which to stage his exhibition of work relating to the 2019–20 Australian bushfires after the pandemic lockdown closed down bricks-and-mortar options. To do this, he had to

141 Wilson C 2020, 'Inside the ambitious plan to build a Minecraft version of Australia', *ABC Science*, 15 June, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2020-06-13/minecraft-australia-build-the-earth/12344720>.

142 Centre for Contemporary Photography 2015, *The Art of Play*, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/563aab7be4b06b7c7c009f08/t/56679812a2bab88225a3142b/1449629714686/LarissaHjorth\\_ArtofPlay\\_catalogue.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/563aab7be4b06b7c7c009f08/t/56679812a2bab88225a3142b/1449629714686/LarissaHjorth_ArtofPlay_catalogue.pdf).

143 Haridy R 2017, 'Art in the age of ones and zeros: Minecraft art', *New Atlas*, 29 March, <https://newatlas.com/art-ones-and-zeros-minecraft/48658>.

trick the platform into displaying his full-resolution images of fire-affected areas on the NSW South Coast (because the whole point of Minecraft is that it is based on large, blocky pixels). When asked why he attempted something so unnecessarily difficult when other, more suitable, virtual spaces were available, he said his initial motivation was that it would be funny.<sup>144</sup> The exhibition was also innovative and experimental and, because it was unusual, it probably got a lot more attention than it would have otherwise:

It was a jokey response but now, several weeks later, people from all over the globe are exploring my exhibition, created for charity, which features different photographic series from four photographers, all in Minecraft and all from the safety of isolation!<sup>145</sup>

The amusement of out-of-context appearances and the distinctive platform aesthetics mean that **Minecraft-inspired objects turn up in other places as valuable ‘memetic currency’ and digital/analog/digital mashups.**<sup>146</sup>

Minecraft culture has developed far beyond the capacities of the platform itself and has become a memetic cultural phenomenon in its own right. It is a good example of the way that user communities develop their own participatory mechanisms for sharing their creations and achievements even when not explicitly built into a platform.<sup>147</sup> **Particularly suited for the ‘creative reworkings’ of participatory media, these organic manifestations of content engagement are ‘an increasingly central aspect of how contemporary popular culture operates’.**<sup>148</sup>

Alongside the endless potential of the Minecraft world, it is also possible to download ‘mods’ – user-created modifications to the game source code – or create them yourself. In this way Minecraft acts as a platform for digital development as well as a game.

Roblox is another game creation platform which has been around for a decade and a half, but it exploded in popularity

144 De Freitas J 2020, 'I'm using Minecraft to host a charitable photographic exhibition in a physically isolated world', *Emulsive*, 26 May, <https://emulsive.org/articles/projects/im-using-minecraft-to-host-a-charitable-photographic-exhibition-in-a-physically-isolated-world>.

145 Mason S 2020, 'An Australian photographer is hosting his charitable art exhibit inside Minecraft', *FStoppers*, 3 June, <https://fstoppers.com/fine-art/australian-photographer-hosting-his-charitable-art-exhibit-inside-minecraft-486656>.

146 For example, on the dedicated Reddit thread [r/Minecraft](https://www.reddit.com/r/Minecraft).

147 Another example of a 'platform vernacular' is the Twitter hashtag which was not an original part of the platform but devised by users as a way to group together topics, then integrated officially; Gibbs M et al 2015, '#Funeral and Instagram: Death, social media, and platform vernacular', *Journal of Information, Communication & Society*, 18:3, pp.255–68.

148 Jenkins H 2006, 'Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars?: Digital cinema, media convergence, and participatory culture', *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords* (Blackwell), p.3.



in 2020. Roblox is particularly popular with children between the ages of 9 and 15.<sup>149</sup> Like Minecraft, Roblox is a sandbox game which encourages self-directed learning, experimentation and co-creativity with peers. Both allow players to create private servers to play with friends.<sup>150</sup> Roblox recently gained a competitive edge, however, because it has more of an emphasis on the social side of gaming (and staying connected with friends became particularly important during pandemic restrictions). The game allows people to create and share their own games (using a simplified coding language specific to the platform) and play other people's games. For these reasons, Roblox surpassed Minecraft in terms of monthly active users in 2020.<sup>151</sup>

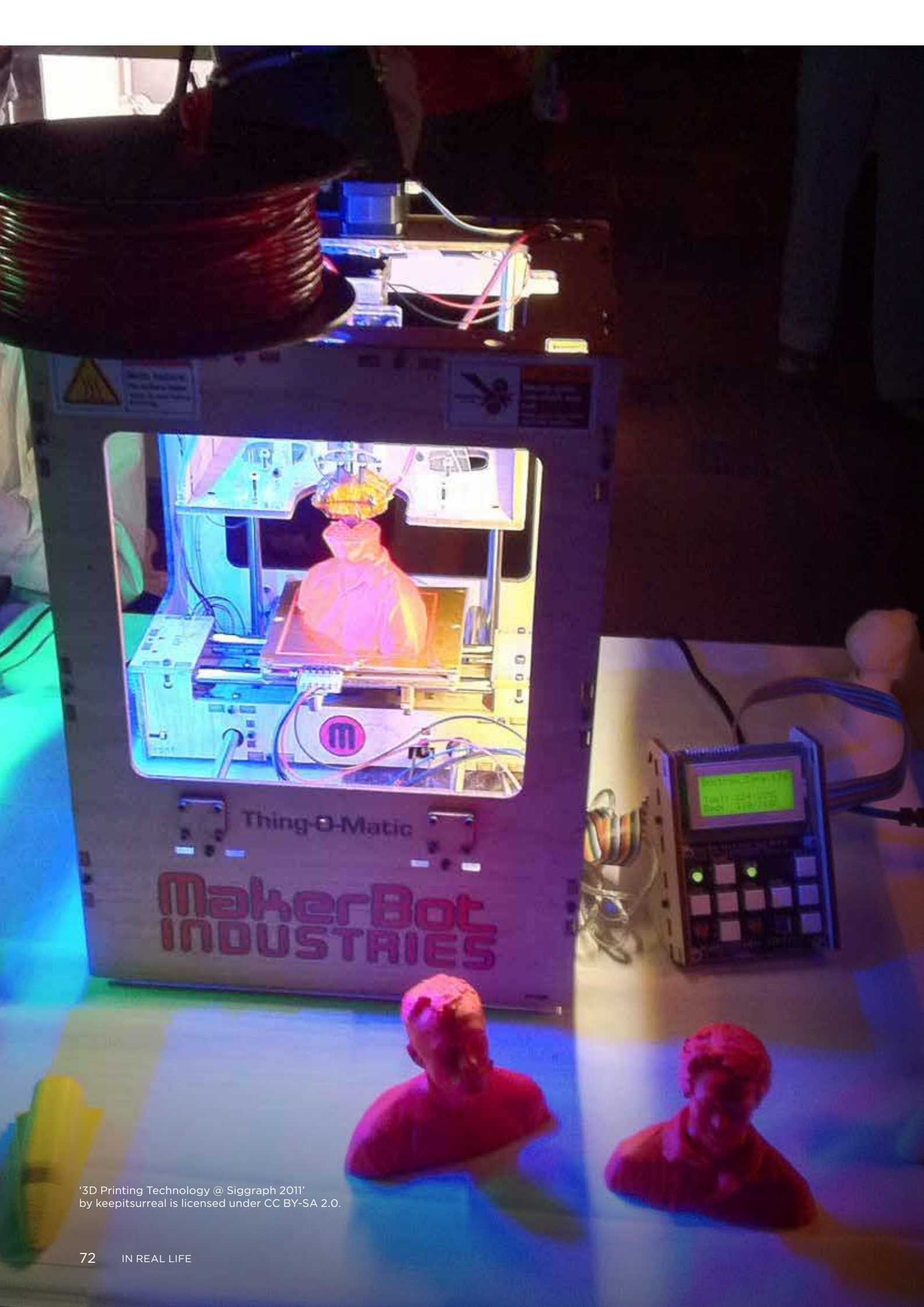
149 Perez S 2018, 'Roblox is now cash-flow positive', *TechCrunch*, 22 March, archived 1 June 2020, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/03/21/roblox-the-club-penguin-for-gen-z-is-now-cash-flow-positive>.

150 Code Advantage 2020, 'Should my kid learn Minecraft or Roblox?', 17 Oct, archived 1 June 2021, <https://www.codeadvantage.org/coding-for-kids-blog/minecraft-vs-roblox>. Like most open social platforms, Roblox has been the subject of criticism about online safety, particularly because children are its biggest userbase. The platform advises use of certain safety features: <https://corp.roblox.com/parents>.

151 Bailey D 2020, 'Roblox reaches 150 million monthly active users (that's more than Minecraft)', *PCGamesN*, 29 July, archived 1 June 2021, <https://www.pcgamesn.com/roblox/player-count>.

Jason De Freitas, *Still Burning*,  
Minecraft exhibition, 2020.





'3D Printing Technology @ Siggraph 2011'  
by keepitsurreal is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

# 6

## **A dual economy: commercial versus common**

### **Key insights**

- The internet has provided new opportunities to circumvent traditional and commercial models of culture through sharing and accessibility. But it has also created new intermediaries in the form of dominant platforms.
- These platforms ‘capture and commodify’ the participatory impulses of digital cultural engagement (for example, gifting, sharing and collaboration).
- Today, online engagement can be understood as operating within a ‘dual economy’. In this dual economy, older models of intellectual property rights and revenue creation sit uneasily alongside ‘new media’ concepts of easy access to information and sharing for common good.
- Negotiating this ‘dual economy’ requires understanding the new-found power of audiences but also the influence of commercial platforms that trade on user data.
- Avoiding external control of creative content and associated data is expensive. Changes to regulation and support may provide better opportunities for Australian content to succeed in this evolving environment.
- Creatives who are successful in the digital age are likely to have adapted their practices to take advantage of digital technology, but this does not mean they have turned to entirely digital art forms.

## 21st century models: open, common, shared

The original utopian ideals of the World Wide Web, as expressed by its creator Tim Berners-Lee, were that it would democratise access to information across the world and be 'a powerful force for social change and individual creativity'.<sup>152</sup>

An updated version, colloquially known as **Web 2.0, extended the original capabilities of the Web to include networked content creation.** It was based on the idea that **content should be democratic, universally accessible without the burden of cost or geographical constraints, and able to be freely shared on the basis of community ownership.** These influential principles have clear implications for all parts of the traditional 'cultural value chain' ('creation, production, distribution, access and participation'<sup>153</sup>).

Several movements have aimed at Berners-Lee's original goals and have contributed to the digital world as it exists today. Since the late 1990s, the **Open Source** movement has revolved around the idea that source code should be openly available and retrievable so people can see for themselves how software applications work and make their own version, alter it as they choose and share with others. The opposite of this, proprietary software, is a for-profit model (although open source software can also lead to revenue generation, for example via crowdfunding). The **Open or Linked Data** movement is based on similar principles to Open Source.

Another key movement is the **Creative Commons** organisation which is a rights licensing system designed to reflect and facilitate the increasingly collaborative nature of creation. Creative commons licences, at their most permissive, allow 'reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator',<sup>154</sup> including commercial uses. The Creative Commons organisation aims to make content easy to share and reuse while the conditions of that reuse are still in the hands of the creator. Creative commons licences respond to the blurring of distinctions between authors and users in the digital environment, now that 'users have the power and tools at their disposal to engage in creating their own content.'<sup>155</sup>

**These principles of sharing and collaboration have been influential in the software and game development industries.** For example, large, open source software (OSS) projects like Linux and Firefox were developed through successful collaborations carried out over the internet.<sup>156</sup> Platforms such as GitHub have, since 2008, allowed code to be made available and modified or worked on as a team.

152 Berners-Lee T 1999, *Weaving the Web* (Harper).

153 Kulesz O 2020, *Supporting Culture in the Digital Age* (International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies), <https://ifacca.org/en/news/2020/04/23/supporting-culture-digital-age>, p.9.

154 From <https://creativecommons.org>.

155 Scharf N 2017, 'Creative Commons-ense? An analysis of tensions between copyright law and Creative Commons', *Journal of Intellectual Property Law & Practice* 12:5, p.376.

156 Iaffaldano G 2018, 'Investigating collaboration within online communities: Software development vs. artistic creation', *Proceedings of the 2018 ACM Conference on Supporting Groupwork*, p.384.

**The ability to add to or modify an existing piece of software is a key feature of the 'platform ecosystem'** as it has developed in recent years. From Web 2.0 origins where developers were encouraged to build 'new applications by remixing data and functionality from existing sources using APIs', the open-ended nature of platforms like Facebook allows for new applications to be built on top of or within its infrastructure.<sup>157</sup> Games platforms such as Steam also function not just as sales outlets but as community hubs and platforms for creating and sharing games. The way platforms operate has allowed a few very successful companies to gain **increasingly comprehensive control of internet activity and data**.

Beyond software and games, **participatory applications have influenced creative practice more broadly and contributed to collaborative approaches becoming the norm**. Experiments in co-creation can be found in all artistic areas, and digital connectivity is often a core part of the process.

**An early development in collaborative co-creation was the idea of crowdsourcing**, which digital platforms can facilitate. In his 2004 book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki claimed that groups of people could, in fact, be smarter than the individuals contained in said groups: 'groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them'.<sup>158</sup>

**Crowdsourcing works on the principle that 'a crowd can more effectively aggregate information in order to arrive at solutions' and produce something more than the sum of its parts.** The 2007 *Million Penguins* project used a wiki platform to crowdsource a novel:

Seeded with a first line taken from a volume in the Penguin Classics series, the wiki invited contributions over a five week period. The result may not have been a novel as we know it, but it certainly produced a community of collaborators who created what John Mackinson, the Chief Executive of Penguin Books, called – not the most read, but possibly the most written novel in history.<sup>159</sup>

157 Helmond A 2015, 'The platformization of the web: Making web data platform ready', *Social Media + Society*, p.4.

158 Surowiecki J 2004, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (Doubleday).

159 Mason B & Thomas S 2008, *A Million Penguins Research Report* (Institute of Creative Technologies), <https://dora.dmu.ac.uk/handle/2086/5326>, p.1.

**Wikis work on the principles of collective authorship and collaboration.**

A wiki is, essentially, a website that users can edit as well as view. 'Wiki' is derived from the Hawaiian word for 'quick' and its inventor, Ward Cunningham, 'posited several design principles that should govern any wiki, all of which are grounded in the belief that if multiple people collaborate over time in an open system in which both the text and the organisation of the text can be freely changed then self-organising patterns would arise'.<sup>160</sup> The content of wikis is under constant scrutiny, and 'a wiki becomes exponentially more robust as its base of editors expands'.<sup>161</sup>

**Wikis are emblematic of creative consumption in the first decade of the 21st century because they are spaces that allow for 'unauthorized content, creative experimentation, and the blurring of boundaries between categories'.**<sup>162</sup>

The most famous example of a wiki is Wikipedia. It is one of the few internet phenomena that has managed to resist the pressures of commercialisation and not become a victim of its own success. Despite its reputation for unreliability, Wikipedia remains a bastion of true community creation. Wikipedia is now owned by the Wikimedia Foundation charitable trust, and relies on donations, but it remains free and community-run.

**Community-run and co-created digital spaces are natural homes for participatory practices where the line between engagement and creation is blurred.**

Since the early days of the internet, fans have used digital forums to discuss plot theories and speculate about outcomes or underlying character motivations, and it is an easy step from there to writing alternative versions or fan fiction.

**Fan fiction is a form of creative writing that features prominently on collaborative writing sites such as Wattpad and LiveJournal.**

In order to qualify as fan fiction, a reworking of a text must be derivative in some way: 'it must include enough elements of the underlying original work to place the fanfic within the fandom'.<sup>163</sup> But, fan fiction is often also 'transformative', for example a retelling of a story from a different point of view. A work can be 'transformative' in a legal sense (meaning that use of the original material counts as 'fair use' under copyright) but still derivative in a literary sense.<sup>164</sup> However, fan fiction is usually written for enjoyment rather than to try and sell the work, and published authors risk alienating their core fanbase if they pursue copyright infringements too strenuously.

160 Mason B & Thomas S 2008, *A Million Penguins Research Report* (Institute of Creative Technologies), <https://dora.dmu.ac.uk/handle/2086/5326>, p.3.

161 Mittell J 2009, 'Sites of participation: Wiki fandom and the case of Lostpedia', *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3, p.1.3.

162 Mittell J 2009, 'Sites of participation: Wiki fandom and the case of Lostpedia', *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3.

163 Schwabach A 2011, *Fan Fiction and Copyright: Outsider works and intellectual property protection* (Ashgate Publishing), p.68.

164 Schwabach A 2011, *Fan Fiction and Copyright: Outsider works and intellectual property protection* (Ashgate Publishing), p.67.

**Fan fiction and online fan creativity more broadly operate via alternative economic models based on sharing or 'gifting' rather than monetary reward.**

On collaborative platforms, content and feedback are shared as 'gifts', where giving does not mean one person giving to another, but one person giving to the world or the community. The receiver is then obliged to return the 'gift' with feedback or their own creation:

The worth of these gifts lies not simply in the content of the gift, nor in the social gesture of giving, but in the labor that went into their creation. Commercially purchased gifts, such as the virtual cupcakes and balloons that can be purchased in the LiveJournal shop, may be given and appreciated, but will generally be worth less, in the context of fandom, than gifts made by the giver.<sup>165</sup>

<sup>165</sup> Turk T 2014, 'Fan work: Labor, worth, and participation in fandom's gift economy', *Transformative Works* 15, p.21.



**In this system, value is assigned by the community by means of peer endorsement** – liking, upvoting, recommending, commenting and so on. In this environment, ‘contributions and commitment (forms of giving) are stronger measures of standing within the group than degrees and credentials (forms of earning)’.<sup>166</sup>

**The principles behind the ‘gift economy’ have spread to more and more parts of daily life (and influenced what has been termed the ‘sharing economy’) as more and more platforms have been set up to capitalise on this ethos.** For example, reviewers on the Goodreads site offer their opinions for free in return for social interaction with other users and peer endorsement (‘likes’). Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Reddit are free to join and use, with the rewards for contributing coming from reactions from other users.

**More recent trends have seen a move towards social platforms with a stronger emphasis on community control.** Discord was originally set up to provide a way for gamers to communicate with each other via online chat and voice calls. It has evolved into a more general platform with user-run servers presiding over different communities. Servers can be open or closed and are dedicated to particular topics.

**The process of developing one’s artistic craft can take place entirely within these platforms, without reference to formal measures of progress such as qualifications.** Creative work is shared and assessed by a crowd of other practitioners and/or consumers, and communities frequently have rules against self-promotion or commercialisation.

For example, Reddit threads for sharing work and advice often have strict rules about what can be posted (for example, r/writing which bans self-promotion, discussion of content and ‘low-effort posts’). Discord communities are even more strongly based on rewards of community interaction. This is opposed to the potential for fame or notoriety offered by platforms that confer visibility to posts based on cumulative algorithms – it’s ‘a place where you don’t need a massive follower count to be heard’.<sup>167</sup>

**It is possible to learn the necessary skills for an art form from within informal online communities.** A common practice is sharing ‘how-to’ blogs or short instructional videos featuring an artistic skill such as drawing or model-making. TikTok’s short format videos have been found to be particularly successful and popular in terms of knowledge-sharing.<sup>168</sup>

**In this world, creativity is a process rather than a product, and artworks might exist as perpetual beta versions.** The ‘grey zone’ of artistic production – ‘the “raw” state of becoming that previously was concealed and remained private’<sup>169</sup> – is on display in these environments and artworks may remain in this state without being ‘finished’ in the traditional sense.

166 Vadde A 2017, ‘Amateur creativity: Contemporary literature and the digital publishing scene’, *New Literary History* 48:1, p.35.

167 Lorenz T 2019, ‘How an app for gamers went mainstream’, *The Atlantic*, 13 March, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/03/how-discord-went-mainstream-influencers/584671>.

168 Zhou Q 2019, ‘Understanding user behaviors of creative practice on short video sharing platforms – A case study of TikTok and Bilibili’, Master’s thesis, University of Cincinnati, p.5.

169 Goriunova O 2016, ‘Participatory platforms and the emergence of art’, in Paul C (ed.), *A Companion to Digital Art* (John Wiley), p.303.



**This world also presents fewer barriers to participation than traditional pathways.** For example, fan fiction and collaborative writing sites are freely accessible in a world where the ‘decision and ability to write is often informed by socioeconomic boundaries’ due to requirements of expensive qualifications or entry fees.<sup>170</sup>

**It has become easier to collaborate artistically across previously constraining geographical or social barriers** because of the availability of online tools for collective project management (such as Trello and Basecamp) as well as the more social examples. Community-based apps such as Discord and Slack provide opportunities to connect and work with a broader range of people, unrestricted by geography.

**Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and the like can be used in highly profitable ways by creators to circumvent the usual barriers to becoming widely known and/or commercially successful.** Australian trio SketchShe, for example, have built media careers from a YouTube channel which currently has 1.08 million subscribers. They began by posting comedic lip-sync videos filmed on their phones, and their most popular videos have been viewed tens of millions of times. YouTube offers advertising revenue to successful creators based on the number of times

a video is viewed, which can add up to large sums.<sup>171</sup> Even if a content creator does not have this level of success, the bar for entry and earning money is relatively low. However, content has to be inexpensive to produce and generate many views to be commercially viable as a standalone release.<sup>172</sup>

**Digital connectivity transcends borders globally, but is dominated by US companies** (outside China). For example, US creative writing platform Wattpad reported 80 million monthly users globally in 2019. While the largest proportion of those users are in the USA, Australian surveys show the popularity of these platforms in Australia. The Australian Book Readers Survey revealed that 4.1% of Australians post writing on digital platforms (‘Wattpad, Tumblr, Archive of Our Own, fanfiction.net or similar websites’) including one in ten 30–39-year-olds.<sup>173</sup> Further, the Australia Council’s National Arts Participation Survey found that 14% of Australians produce creative writing,<sup>174</sup> suggesting that nearly a third of Australian creative writers post on these digital platforms. Online creative writing is also one of the less contested categories in terms of whether it counts as ‘art’ or not: almost half of Australians surveyed consider online creative writing such as blogs and fan fiction to be art (46%).<sup>175</sup>

170 Binks D 2018, ‘A defence of FanFiction’, *Overland*, 30 May, <https://overland.org.au/2018/05/a-defence-of-fanfiction>.

171 YouTubers make an average rate of \$4 per 1000 video views (Geyser W 2020, ‘How much do YouTubers make? – A YouTuber’s pocket guide’, *Influencer Marketing Hub*, updated 21 Aug, archived 1 June 2021, <https://influencermarketinghub.com/how-much-do-youtubers-make>). By this measure, SketchShe’s most popular video would have made them \$184,000 from 46 million views. This pales in comparison, however, to top Twitch streamers who can make \$20,000 per month from donations, subscriptions and ads (from a video by streamer Disguised Toast).

172 Screen Australia, 2015, *What’s the Deal with Video-on-demand*, <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/fact-finders/infographics/what-s-the-deal-with-video-on-demand>.

173 Throsby D, Jan Zwar J & Morgan C 2017, *Australian Book Readers: Survey method and results* (Macquarie University), p.22.

174 Australia Council for the Arts 2020, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participations Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>, p.140. In fact, the figure is 6% for the question ‘Have you personally created any of the following in the last 12 months, using a digital platform: Creative writing, e.g. poetry, blogs, fan-fiction?’ in the National Arts Participation Survey results.

175 Australia Council for the Arts 2020, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participations Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>, p.167.



The Last Great Hunt, *Bad Baby Jean* showing, 2021, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA). Credit: Daniel James Grant.

## Art versus commerce in the digital age

**In the digital dual economy, older models of intellectual property rights and revenue creation sit uneasily alongside 'new media' concepts of equal access to information and sharing for the common good.** It typically takes time for government regulation to catch up with disruptive technologies. Without clear regulatory structures, the 'sharing economy' is vulnerable to use by companies in the digital equivalent of greenwashing: 'as a marketing gimmick to disguise profit-motivation and exploitation under the pretence of making the society a better place'.<sup>176</sup>

**A pattern has emerged where a new technology arrives, has a boom in popularity and then slows down as commercial interests catch up** and start legal proceedings (often while another platform emerges to become the next 'big thing'). TikTok's initial meteoric rise has been tempered by the need to strike deals with music companies, such as Sony, to allow use of songs in videos. Like YouTube and Facebook before it, TikTok has gradually introduced tougher rules about content use, and will take down videos that violate copyright.<sup>177</sup> Mobile apps that encourage reuse and sharing have complicated and antagonistic relationships with rights organisations and music distributors.

**New intermediaries have sprung up to 'capture and commodify' the participatory impulses of digitally networked gifting, sharing and collaboration that are now part of**

**so many activities.** The underlying principles governing the internet have shifted from 'harnessing collective intelligence' to being about 'data shed unknowingly by users in the process of conducting their business and social lives online'.<sup>178</sup>

Additionally, **web server space is not free: all web content exists on a hard drive somewhere in the world which has to be kept active and connected via costly infrastructure and electricity.** There is also a **hidden environmental cost** associated with running these servers as well as constructing and disposing of digital technology. The cost of sharing and storing data is often obscured because the multinational tech companies offer their platforms for free or a small cost, but derive huge profits from the data and free labour generated by users.

**It is very unusual for a platform to be both successful and truly community-run.** Success in the age of platforms relies on networks, which requires the involvement of more and more end-users. Most webhosting costs increase in proportion to a site's popularity. Thus, in order to remain successful, platforms must eventually cut deals with advertisers and data-miners and venture capitalists, all designed to make their platforms more profitable. The appeal of Facebook as a development site relies on the fact that they already have access to 2.8 billion users and their data.<sup>179</sup>

176 'The sharing economy is an emerging economic model usually defined as a peer-to-peer based sharing of access to goods and services, which are facilitated by a community-based online platform. It focuses on the sharing of underutilised assets in ways which improve efficiency, sustainability and community', Mi Z & Coffman D 2019, 'The sharing economy promotes sustainable societies', *Nature Communications*, 10:1214.

177 Nicolaou A 2020, 'Music companies threaten to sue TikTok over copyright', *Financial Times*, 4 April, <https://www.ft.com/content/1b3b78ea-32a3-4237-8b79-3595820eeb63>.

178 Jenkins H, Itō M & Boyd D 2016, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A conversation on youth, learning, commerce, and politics* (Polity Press), p.133.

179 Statista 2021, 'Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 1st quarter 2021', viewed 1 June 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide>.

**The data generated by users accessing and creating online content is incredibly valuable in a world where profit-making runs on data like machines run on oil.**<sup>180</sup>

Machine learning systems, which allow for targeted advertising, are more effective if they are fed more data. The accessible nature of the digital world and opportunity to connect allows people to circumvent 'gatekeepers' and traditional ways of assigning value.

Although the means of cultural production and distribution are more easily accessible in the digital age, **the tools and infrastructure behind digital media are increasingly under the control of large multinational tech companies such as Google and Amazon.** With the concentration of many online functions under the control of a few large platform-based companies, **traditional ways of valuing creative content are in danger of being replaced by a system where content has no intrinsic value at all** beyond its ability to attract more users.

For example, Goodreads was originally set up in 2007 by Otis and Elizabeth Chandler to share literary recommendations with friends. After astonishing success, however, **Goodreads was acquired by Amazon in 2013** in what the US Authors Guild called a 'truly devastating act of vertical integration'.<sup>181</sup>

As a result of this move, **Amazon has unparalleled access to readers and their data**, in an industry where they also make and sell reading devices (the Kindle), and provide the content for them as well as making forays into the publishing business.

Goodreads users complain that the site has turned into little more than a 'book tracker that, for many people, barely works', rather than the diverse utopia of creative literary reviews and recommendations that was hoped for.<sup>182</sup> Despite this, Goodreads remains dominant because of its formidable userbase and place in Amazon's networked empire.

**In a system run by US-dominated companies (outside of China) there is also a risk of homogenising online content:** effectively 'a globalization of US cultural standards concerning what is and what is not permitted'.<sup>183</sup> **Avoiding external control of creative content and associated data is expensive. Changes to regulation and support may provide better opportunities for Australian content to succeed in this evolving environment.**<sup>184</sup>

**The commercialisation of the web means that communities' new-found visibility and voice is at the price of being 'at the mercy of third parties on platforms they do not control'.**<sup>185</sup> With the advent of digital technology, common-interest communities expanded like never before as barriers such as geography or lack of anonymity were removed.<sup>186</sup> However, such visibility and popularity attracts commercial interests.

**Interconnected web-based systems have the appearance of flexibility but really underpin the gig economy** – companies can now call on an on-demand virtual workforce, free of the obligation to provide stable working conditions or facilities.

180 See Astra Taylor's discussion of 'digital sharecropping' in 2014, *The People's Platform: Taking back power and culture in the digital age* (Metropolitan Books).

181 Flood A 2013, 'Amazon purchase of Goodreads stuns book industry', *The Guardian*, 3 April, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/02/amazon-purchase-goodreads-stuns-book-industry>.

182 Manavis S 2020, 'Why Goodreads is bad for books', *New Statesman*, 10 Sept, <https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/social-media/2020/08/better-goodreads-possible-bad-for-books-storygraph-amazon>.

183 Nieborg D & Poell T 2018, 'The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity', *new media & society*, 20:11, p.4285.

184 For more on this, see Australian Communications and Media Authority 2020, *Supporting Australian Stories on Our Screens: Options paper*.

185 Standfill M 2017, 'The fan fiction gold rush, generational turnover, and the battle for fandom's soul', *Routledge Companion to Media Fandom* (Routledge), p.79.

186 Vadde A 2017, 'Amateur creativity: Contemporary literature and the digital publishing scene', *New Literary History* 48:1, p.36.

In 'The fan fiction goldrush', Mel Stanfill describes the incursion of corporations such as Amazon into the fan fiction arena when they started to use fan fiction sites as source material for their next big hit publication. The popularity of sites such as Wattpad and Archive of Our Own meant that successful authors were already tested in the marketplace and came with a ready pool of fans. Amazon's incursion into this area is:

not recognition of fan labor, nor an expansion of older fan-driven entrepreneurial or professionalization practices. It is, rather, the result of capital ... seeing something that could have value extracted, but isn't being extracted currently, and extending extraction to it.

In 2013 Amazon created its own fan fiction platform called Kindle Worlds 'which would allow authors to sell fan fiction e-books for certain intellectual properties for which Amazon had negotiated licenses'.<sup>187</sup>

Participatory technologies foster contributions from a broader range of people. At the same time, unmoderated internet environments can simultaneously produce new barriers. **Without some kind of oversight, platforms can easily become host to hate speech, trolling, cyberbullying, false information and illegal activity.**

Even Wikipedia, which works on the principle of a high level of community oversight, has been accused of fostering gendered and racial bias. **People from marginalised groups are at greater risk of receiving online abuse and may be less likely to participate as a result.** In some cases, the result of a more diverse userbase has been to expose the exclusionary nature of online communities.<sup>188</sup>

**The result of some of these negative outcomes has been a trend towards platforms that allow more private, community-controlled activity,** in some ways a return to the chatrooms of the 1990s (just with more features).<sup>189</sup> Discord and Slack offer a place to hold private conversations but also share content. Neither platform is immune to privacy or security concerns, however.<sup>190</sup> **What remains is an emphasis on collaboration, which represents a fundamental shift in the way content is created.**

**The ease with which content is replicated, altered and shared in the digital age indicates the need for a re-evaluation of the principles behind intellectual property.** According to digital media expert Owen Gallagher, intellectual property is a myth that relies on the conflation of a work or idea with its physical manifestation (for example, a record): a concept that does not hold up in the digital age.<sup>191</sup>

**Rather than adapting to the new paradigm, huge resources are now devoted to the pursuit of copyright infringements** in ways that activist and copyright lawyer Lawrence Lessig believes are contrary to the original

187 Stanfill M 2017, 'The fan fiction gold rush, generational turnover, and the battle for fandom's soul', *Routledge Companion to Media Fandom* (Routledge), pp.77-81.

188 For example, GamerGate, where the increased visibility of female gamers in a male-dominated world triggered a nasty backlash.

189 Lorenz T 2019, 'How an app for gamers went mainstream', *The Atlantic*, 13 March, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/03/how-discord-went-mainstream-influencers/584671>.

190 Brewster T 2019, 'Discord: The \$2 billion gamer's paradise coming to terms with data thieves, child groomers and FBI investigators', *Forbes*, 29 Jan, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2019/01/29/discord-the-2-billion-gamers-paradise-coming-to-terms-with-data-thieves-child-groomers-and-fbi-investigators/?sh=2a0eb3443741>.

191 Gallagher O 2018, *Reclaiming Critical Remix Video: The role of sampling in transformative works* (Routledge), p.214.

purpose of copyright laws, which was 'protecting artists' creations while allowing them to build on previous creative works'.<sup>192</sup>

**Expanded licensing options such as creative commons (see p.74) do not yet provide alternative structures for artists to derive income for their work.**

In a commercialised web system, freely shared and 'gifted' work is at risk of being harvested by software 'middlemen' who intervene to channel the fruits of communal labour into the pockets of large tech companies. Without the widespread adoption of the creative commons model along with its own set of intermediaries, intellectual property law expert Nick Scharf believes that 'the movement may struggle to emerge beyond its relative self-established niche' and 'transition from an environment of sharing and re-use to one of commercial viability'.<sup>193</sup>

**In reality, many artists and art communities have long resisted commercial models.** Many have found that 'a capitalist market economy is not suitable for sustaining an enriched and productive artistic working life; rather, the commerce of art is better suited to the model of a gift economy'.<sup>194</sup>

**Participatory media has also democratised access to artistic circles that previously may have been limited to the well-connected or already-affluent.** We now live in a world increasingly organised by 'cognitive capitalism': a system where the main goods produced are immaterial. (This is opposed to industrial capitalism which mainly produced material goods and the 'immaterial' aspects – designs, etc – were incidental to the material). In theory, the cognitive capitalism system is more democratic because the means of (digital) production, distribution and revenue creation are easily accessible and there are fewer barriers to participation.

192 Lessig L 2008, *Remix: Making art and commerce thrive in the hybrid economy* (Penguin).

193 Scharf N 2017, 'Creative Commons-ense? An analysis of tensions between copyright law and Creative Commons', *Journal of Intellectual Property Law & Practice* 12:5, p.377.

194 Gallagher O 2018, *Reclaiming Critical Remix Video: The role of sampling in transformative works* (Routledge), p.252.

## Negotiating a dual economy

**The digital world provides new ways for people to interact with content and each other.** Adapting to this new environment means letting go of the desire to merely replicate offline activities in the online space and exploring these new options and opportunities.

**Successfully negotiating this dual economy requires understanding of the motivations and desires of audiences in the digital age.**

As discussed in the section on participatory media (see p.58), audiences are increasingly used to being able to adapt content to their specific needs. If a desired feature does not exist, users might create something to fill the gap.<sup>195</sup>

**One of the most successful forays into the digital world is the streaming platform Spotify,** which has devised a way to take something people were already doing (accessing content online) and make it a lot easier while still deriving revenue.<sup>196</sup> Subscription streaming services are the reason that the music recording industry was generating 'more revenue in 2018 than it was in 2008, despite the continued decline in physical sales'.<sup>197</sup>

195 Gibbs M et al 2015, '#Funeral and Instagram: Death, social media, and platform vernacular', *Journal of Information, Communication & Society*, 18:3.

196 Corporate players have shifted from 'containment to engagement' with regards to alternative business models: Bruns A 2008, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From production to produsage* (Peter Lang), p.4.

197 Deloitte 2020, *AIR Share: Australian independent music market report* (Australian Independent Record Labels Association), <https://www.air.org.au/assets/reports/Deloitte-Access-Economics-2017-AIR-Share-report.pdf>, p.19.

**We should be wary, however, of merely replacing traditional gatekeepers with new, digital ones.**

A study of music streaming platforms including Spotify found that they, ‘in their combination of proprietary, algorithmically driven, and human curation, represent the “new gatekeepers” of an industry previously dominated by human intermediaries such as radio programmers, journalists, and other experts’.<sup>198</sup> Though highly profitable, this success does not necessarily benefit the musicians themselves.

**Platforms claim to be impartial, a position bolstered by their successful use of the term ‘platform’ as opposed to ‘publisher’ or ‘broadcaster’. But platforms, including Spotify, shape the content that is produced and influence broader societal structures.** They do this by means of:

- the kind of participation they invite and encourage
- what gets displayed first or most prominently
- how the movement of users and content is directed by navigation tools
- how price mechanisms are imposed through revenue models
- how information is organised through curated playlists and ‘algorithmic sorting, privileging some content over others, in opaque ways’.<sup>199</sup>

In some ways, this is not so different to the old mixture of commercial success and expert curation of the pre-digital music industry. And, AI recommendation systems have not yet surpassed human experts in the presentation or recommendation of appropriate content.

The **internet as a global marketplace presents challenges to regulatory attempts to ensure Australian-specific content remains discoverable** (especially within Australia). A rethink of such mechanisms may be required to adapt to new models and enable Australian content to compete with overseas offerings (particularly in an environment heavily dominated by North American companies).

**To avoid community backlash, it is also important to work with existing models and to understand existing online ecologies and economies of sharing.**

If a digital community feels that their values have been compromised, they are likely to look elsewhere and regroup.

For example, the Thingiverse platform for sharing of 3D printing instructions and photos was taken over by a profit-based company called MakerBot in 2016. In a few short years, MakerBot had alienated their loyal userbase who were looking for alternatives. A comment under a 2019 article entitled ‘Let’s Kill Thingiverse?’ says:

You’ve just described the unsolved issue with YouTube, eBay and every other user content driven site that becomes too big to be ignored while alienating the backbone users who generate its content ... Perhaps a GitHub style solution for 3D files could be made to work?<sup>200</sup>

198 Bonini T & Gandini A 2019, “‘First week is editorial, second week is algorithmic’: Platform gatekeepers and the platformization of music curation”, *Social Media + Society*, p.2.

199 Gillespie T 2018, ‘Regulation by and for platforms’, *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media* (Sage Publications), p.257.

200 Peels J 2019, ‘Let’s kill Thingiverse?’ *3DPrint.com*, 5 Sept, <https://3dprint.com/252620/lets-kill-thingiverse>.

MakerBot's interventions that changed the democratic nature of the space led to community members looking around for another option.

**The power of the audience and/or consumer in the age of participatory media means that vernacular digital culture can stay one step ahead of the for-profit models.**

If the corporate media couldn't crush this vernacular culture during the age when mass media power went largely unchallenged, it is hard to believe that legal threats are going to be an adequate response to a moment when new digital tools and new networks of distribution have expanded the power of ordinary people to participate in their culture.<sup>201</sup>

**The seemingly insurmountable power of large platforms can be tempered by collective action.** An article on Instagram 'engagement pods' describes how influencers – a group of 'predominantly young and female cultural workers' – mounted an organised effort against precarious employment conditions.<sup>202</sup> They achieved this by agreeing to 'like' and comment on each other's work to trigger the platform's algorithm to promote it. Platforms can, in fact, be sites of 'profound political-economic authority' while simultaneously 'giving rise to forms of resistance, collective citizenship, and strategic maneuvering on the part of cultural workers'.<sup>203</sup>

At the same time, 'producer-orientated' platforms can take advantage of digital opportunities without succumbing to the 'problematic "culture of connectivity" and data-mining that underpin social media and other platforms with social-media features'.<sup>204</sup> **SoundCloud and Bandcamp are music platforms that provide a direct link between artists and fans and a relatively low bar for participation.**

**SoundCloud, however, has been less successful in negotiating the opportunities and pitfalls of a dual economy.** While it offers peer-to-peer content sharing, the platform has run up against problems with both quality control and copyright infringement.

**Bandcamp, on the other hand, offers a producer-controlled digital environment** which resists problematic 'platform characteristics' and thus appeals to its core userbase of indie and alternative musicians.<sup>205</sup> Bandcamp offers streaming and download services for music for an

201 Jenkins H 2006, *Convergence Culture: Where old and new media collide* (New York University Press), p.162.

202 O'Meara V 2019, 'Weapons of the chic: Instagram influencer engagement pods as practices of resistance to Instagram platform labor'. *Social Media + Society*.

203 Duffy B, Poell T & Nieborg D 2019, 'Platform practices in the cultural industries: Creativity, labor, and citizenship', *Social Media + Society*, p.5.

204 Hesmondhalgh D et al 2019, 'SoundCloud and Bandcamp as alternative music platforms', *Social Media + Society*, p.2.

205 Hesmondhalgh D et al 2019, 'SoundCloud and Bandcamp as alternative music platforms', *Social Media + Society*, pp.5-6.



artist-determined fee. Musician pages are relatively standalone but with some subtle functionality that allows fans to connect with artists and discover new music. Bandcamp takes 10–15% of revenue from sales, which is a reversal of traditional distribution deals where an artist would likely receive less than 10% themselves.<sup>206</sup>

**Digital platforms enable approaches such as collective patronage, self-publishing and hybrid economies.** Through digital platforms artists can ‘make some or all of their work available for free and generate income in other indirect ways, such as through paid performances, the sale of merchandise, or donations’.<sup>207</sup> Bandcamp, for example, makes it simple to sell merchandise along with content downloads, and digital technology has made it easier for creators to design and print their own branded products (for example, T-shirts, badges).

**Online crowdfunding, via websites such as Patreon, allows artists to accept donations and ongoing contributions directly from supporters.** In many ways, this is reminiscent of older forms of patronage, and enables creators to form closer relationships with fans. Patreon can provide very healthy incomes, and allows artists to pursue speculative projects rather than marketing existing products.<sup>208</sup>

The low barriers for entry, however, come with added burdens in other areas. **Removal of intermediaries such as distributors, publishers and promoters means that the artist must perform much of that labour themselves.** Sustaining a fanbase, therefore, requires an ‘abundance of ongoing and intensified interactions, adding affective labour to [an artist’s] existing responsibilities as a creative labourer’.<sup>209</sup>

As in the case of Bandcamp, **it is possible to operate within the current digital paradigms and still serve a community of artists and consumers.** The online art platform Bluethumb features Australian artists and artists’ work is promoted through a combination of ‘platform logic’ (through follower counts and interactions) and expert curation (for example, there is a section devoted to Archibald Prize finalists as well as blogs and other features).

Featured artist Amani Haydar offers work for sale on Bluethumb (the site takes 30% commission on each artwork sold) and maintains a strong social media presence through other channels such as Instagram. Successfully inhabiting this dual economy and the hybrid world inevitably requires giving over some control to platforms, but the challenge is to find a balance between visibility, collaboration and channels for remuneration. Many are addressing this by adopting multi-faceted approaches to online and offline engagement.

206 Kribs K 2017, ‘The artist-as-intermediary: Musician labour in the digitally networked era’, *eTopia*, p.6.

207 Gallagher O 2018, *Reclaiming Critical Remix Video: The role of sampling in transformative works* (Routledge), p.254.

208 de León R 2021, ‘Time to get paid: Patreon CEO says creators have “incredible leverage” they haven’t had in many years’, *CNBC*, 26 May, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/05/26/patreon-ceo-says-creators-have-leverage-they-havent-had-in-years.html>.

209 Kribs K 2017, ‘The artist-as-intermediary: Musician labour in the digitally networked era’, *eTopia*, p.8.

## Final thoughts: art or not art?

The Australia Council's 2019 National Arts Participation Survey introduced a new question about whether or not people use digital platforms to 'express themselves creatively'. The survey found that one third (32%) of Australians were creatively using a digital platform in 2019, from creating TikTok videos or memes to creating music, digital visual arts or poetry.<sup>210</sup> This broadening of definitions to include digital activities has opened up additional ways to understand creative participation – a trend that will no doubt continue in future surveys.

The National Arts Participation Survey asked respondents to indicate whether or not they considered digital creations such as TikTok videos, memes and podcasts to be 'art' or not. Although the report states that 82% of those surveyed considered 'at least one of the presented digital creations to be art', even

210 Australia Council for the Arts 2020, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participations Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>, p.132.

among the less controversial offerings the proportions are surprisingly low. Only 53% of respondents thought digitally created music was art, and only 19% thought ebooks counted in this way.<sup>211</sup>

*In Real Life* has not attempted to answer the question about whether digital creations constitute artworks in themselves. It does contend, however, that digital arts activities via participatory media platforms are highly creative and a way for Australians to express themselves and connect with each other. Two thirds of Australians use digital platforms to engage with the arts and many of those consider what they do to be ‘creative’.<sup>212</sup>

Younger Australians (aged 15–34), parents of children under 16 and people who identify as culturally and linguistically diverse are all more likely to engage with arts online.<sup>213</sup> These three groups are also more likely to see digital creations as art.<sup>214</sup>

Conversely, older Australians are less likely to see digital creations as art, and according to the Digital Inclusion Index, they are also less digitally connected than the Australian average. As might be expected, people who are already involved with digital activities are more likely to take them seriously.

Just as the Digital Inclusion Index shows a trend towards greater digital inclusion scores over time, we might expect a corresponding increase in perceptions about digital activities as ‘art’ in the future – another argument for taking digital cultural engagement activities seriously.

211 Australia Council for the Arts 2020, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participations Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>, p.167.

212 Australia Council for the Arts 2020, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participations Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>, pp.132, 166.

213 The Digital Inclusion Index shows little difference in terms of digital inclusion across people aged 14-49, but significantly lower rates of inclusion in older age groups. Thomas J et al 2020, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2020* (RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology). Engagement with the arts through digital platforms: Australia Council for the Arts 2020, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participations Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>, p.166.

214 Australia Council for the Arts 2020, *Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participations Survey*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/creating-our-future>, p.167.



Australian Government

Australia  
Council  
for the Arts 

The logo for the Australia Council for the Arts, depicting a stylized human figure with arms raised, holding a circular object.

[australiacouncil.gov.au](http://australiacouncil.gov.au)