Paper 64 – submission for proceedings
Speculative Archives and World Building: *The Decameron 2.0*
[Contact monique.tschofen@ryerson.ca]

This panel of lightning talks introduces the *Decameron 2.0*, a multi-modal WebVR project that is the product of the work of the Decameron Collective–a group of nine research creators from Canada. The project is a 3D virtual world designed for web browsers using the Unity game engine that takes cues from Giovanni Boccaccio's plague narrative *The Decameron* (1348-1353)—a medieval frame narrative about a group of ten who flee a plague-torn Florence to a retreat to the country where they pass the time telling stories. The virtual world is modeled on and incorporates design elements from medieval illuminated manuscripts as well as contemporary 3D modeling aesthetics. It is populated with 100 audio, video, image series, and folio pages that include digital archival assets from collections of medieval illuminated texts as well as original collaboratively-designed audio, text, films, photographs, music, visual art, algorithmic poetry, and games.

We discuss the methods and techniques we used to create these works, their epistemological foundations in feminist media practices, critical frameworks to contextualize and understand the project and extensions. We also discuss what it means to document this vast and sprawling world and co-authored works. All talks underline the importance of the philosophy of care that drives the work, informing both its form and content.

Epistemologies of Layering Monique Tschofen (Ryerson University)

How can a work of electronic literature's *form* connect it to a much longer literary and cultural history, and how can form produce not only a way of knowing but also a way of being? I explore the project's relationship to the palimpsest. If the relationships inscribed through centuries of marginalia—commentaries upon commentaries—are dialogical, the stratified relationships inscribed in the palimpsest represent a different kind of intimacy.

Giovanni Boccaccio was an author and a scribe and illustrator of his and other peoples' texts. His parchments bear the traces of previous authors' works (fig.1). For contemporary scholars, these palimpsests are treasure troves, for they let us see how material culture passes between hands, how ideas build from each other, and how the past lives on in the present.



Figure 1 Beatrice Arduini, “Boccaccio and His Desk.” In The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio, ed. by Armstrong, Daniels, and Milner. Cambridge University Press, 2015, pg 32.

Electronic media’s affordances and our own workshop methods have allowed us to use the palimpsest’s layering as a design principle, aesthetic, and ethic at different scales.
At the architectural scale, Hendrick de Haan and Angela Joosse, our designers, constructed the world to evoke Boccaccio’s courtyards and gardens, and then filled it with textures and transparencies taken from illuminated manuscripts. In the central courtyard, ancient book pages hang like tapestries. Users begin their exploration of the world by looking down this passageway, one manuscript page visible through the next through the next. Importantly, users are able to pass right through the transparencies; our digital archaeology of knowledge is invitational rather than obstructive. Passing from paper to pixels through a medium of light, we seek other pathways to illumination.

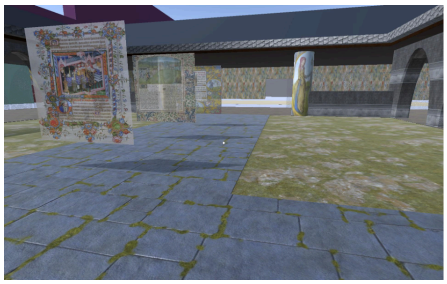


Fig 2. *The Decameron 2.0*

The medieval palimpsest provided the design principle for many of the creative works users encounter in the gallery spaces. Playing with opacities in Premiere Pro, we layer ancient

manuscripts, still and moving images taken by members of the group, and voice-overs of the poets and storytellers reading their work.

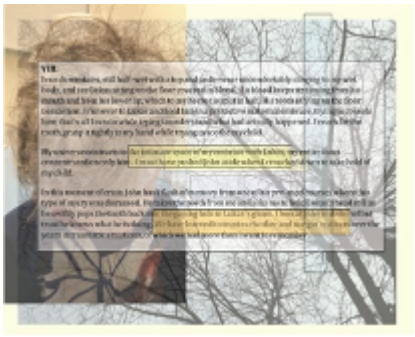


Fig. 3. *Covid Stories, Maternal Worries*.



Fig. 4. *A Form, a Privation, and an Underlying Thing.*

The electronic palimpsest is a space of encounter. It is dialogical in that one text engages with its predecessor's text to create what Pierre Nora would call a *lieu de mémoire*: a space of memory commemorating what in pandemics has been lost and found, bringing together scholarly knowledge with the experiences of everyday life.

Layering makes possible a seeing into and seeing through, illuminating passing time through the material of light, however, what we discovered through making the work was that our aesthetic of the palimpsest is part of an ethical praxis that mirrors our vision of feminist ethics and communities of care. Each layer, a moment of a pandemic world seen through our eyes and articulated through language, is a gift from one of us to another, and as they are stacked over each other, no one obstructing another, they materialize the kinds of intimacies that traditional, sedimented epistemology has been unable to imagine or engage. Articulations of experience and thoughts in times of crisis can never be fully scraped away, nor should they. Instead, as the *Decameron 2.0* shows, they can conjoin such that new modes of knowing can shine through.

Composing the Pandemic

Kari Maaren (Ryerson University)

In Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the storytelling is orderly, a ten-by-ten grid of curated tales on a series of prompts, with each storytelling session ending with a song. However, the stories themselves are less orderly than the structure that delimits them.

Decameron 2.0, on the other hand, emerged out of disorder. Our sessions sometimes began with prompts, but they would frequently be ignored or altered by participants. Often, there were no prompts at all. Rather than falling into a ten-by-ten grid of stories, our works were born chaotically, and they took on many forms. Yet the same themes echoed through them, and we were able to organize them into a series of rooms, finding order in the apparent chaos.

One of my contributions to the project is the *Pandemic Suite*, a ten-part series of improvised piano pieces representing the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. I have been interested in musical storytelling and am particularly intrigued by the idea of storytelling via improvisation. Oral storytelling combines order with disorder, marrying formulae and motifs with the unpredictability of a live session. Every iteration of a given story will be at least slightly different, affected by memory, the mood of the audience, and the emotions of the storyteller. Improvisational musical storytelling has similar potential. While it loses the deliberate nature of a more carefully constructed composition, its unpredictability—its messiness—gives it an edge a careful composition does not have.

Each of the ten movements of the *Pandemic Suite* was recorded on my phone in a single take. The accompanying videos show a portion of my messy apartment, in particular a bookcase on the verge of collapse. The music is as messy as the apartment, capturing mostly feelings: feelings of anxiety, of loneliness, of anger against careless upstairs neighbours. Yet together, the movements come together to represent a year, an orderly structure sewn together out of chaotic emotions.

Like Boccaccio, we will be anchoring the separate portions of our *Decameron* with music. Unlike him, we will not always put the music in the same place or use it in the same way. Every curator will employ the music as she chooses: as background to her own storytelling, as a piece of a larger story, as its own little chaotic island in the middle of a carefully curated "room." Our treatment of the music of *Decameron 2.0* will be an acknowledgement of the imperfection of our response to the pandemic, as well as of the fact that that imperfection is necessary. The temptation to sculpt the perfect response, to make that ten-by-ten grid, is, in a way, the temptation to control something that cannot be controlled. Just as a musical improvisation will contain imperfections—fumbles, hesitations, slips of the fingers that accidentally lead the player off in an unexpected direction—so too can we accept that we need to deal with the pandemic messily, more like storytellers reacting in the moment than like careful authors polishing our feelings down into overly orderly forms.

Virtual Intimacies, Virtual Death

Siobhan O'Flynn (University of Toronto)

My talk considers the attenuations of video streaming connectivity and stories told in a pandemic, *Decameron 2.0*, as a medium affording the simulacra of intimacy in the visual and audio immediacy of those held dear, yet held apart by geographic distance, the frustrations of signal impermanence, and the [im]materiality of embodiment. I will contextualize my navigation of dying and death as shared/not shared within Adriana Cavarero's notion of 'narratable selves.' This insight, drawn from Homer's Odyssey clarifies the integral role of storytelling in subjectivity, not as the story I tell, but the story of myself told by another.

How do we care when we are sundered by distance? In this time, the Decameron 2.0 exists as one of a number of telepresent flows, attenuated intimacy, in which I have been an intermittent visitor. Each of us seamlessly transitioning from room to room, zoom, unmute.

You are muted.

You are muted still.

The schema of a room, a series of rooms, Boccaccio infused, in dialogue with the Decameron 1.0, narrative of the plague years, feels to be an act of resistance against mourning. Holding space for meeting IRL. A container. A Chôra. Aspirational. A deflection. A reflection. A place to gather spoons, so that tomorrow and tomorrow we may have enough spoons for what lies ahead.

My daughter taught me that.

Are there ironies in creating an archive… archives, of a time in which so many are losing memory? Archives to counter the fogs of exhaustion, of lost brain function? Form given to the day, thought, emotion, accretion of the day's residue and residence into virtual form? Metadata to organize the chaos of networked global activities undertaken without moving from this kitchen. this table. Decipher the metadata of domesticity negotiating spaces with others.

Trompe l'oeil of composure. Professionalism. Chaos [and cats] at my feet.

Telepresence as attenuation of intimacy. Death at a distance. And yet…

How do we navigate without rituals? The tweet that notes the loss, the transition from the embodied to the ephemeral. A photo of a time before. My parents' origins. I screen cap my mother's face in her last hours. A last talisman to anchor the (un)reality of a death bed I cannot attend. She would not be pleased.

Simultaneously, I search archives for traces of my parents. I read between the lines, the erasures of common and particular histories and see the outlines of a woman who was almost 30. A man almost 33.

I have a photo of my dad. 43? Smiling. Holding Foucault's History of Sexuality. How have I never noticed that? The internal architecture of my thoughts, my perceptions, retraces earlier explorations not mine. Mine now perhaps a remediation of an unrecoverable archive

I have a photo of my dad in the last hour of his life. Pixels arranged in composure. Quiet as a monk laid to rest. Medication easing turmoil of heart and breath. The last claiming of space and place in the urgency for breath. Rapid as Covid.

Body's assertion of spirit. Still present.

He chose to go unembalmed, a green parting.

The most important dimension of the *Decameron 2.0* is perhaps the one not captured in the archive. An epistemological question of figure / ground. The archive as a figure for the ground of companionship and care

We create stories to share to be shared aired in silence.

WebVR and Medieval Archives as Places of Co-Creation

Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof (Ryerson University)

What does it mean to create with others, to co-create? In what ways might ethics of care enter the creative process? In my talk, I focus on creative practice of co-creation as a means of retrieving forgotten women and their contributions to arts and sciences. The *Decameron 2.0*

project reactivates a spirit present in mediaeval cultures when authorship and fixed creations conserved in a physical medium or archives was as nonsensical as fluidity, impermanence and foregoing of authorship are to many today.

Co-creation involves an element of self-abnegation. By self-abnegation I do not mean self-annihilation. In the co-creative process, the self steps back and exposes itself to the risk of sharing with the other something that is not fully complete, is still in its rough formation, thereby making oneself vulnerable to the other. Self-abnegation also serves another purpose; it permits one to become more attuned to the other, be this a human co-creator or the project itself. Co-creation exists on several levels in *Decameron 2.0* webVR project: as "found" archival materials and stock images created by other people (some anonymous) and me; between members of the collective, as each piece we create is further developed to be situated in one of the 10 rooms in webVR space, e.g., texts become videos, sounds, or graphic compositions; use of AI to produce short videos using found COVID19 imagery; and co-creation is also present beyond individual projects, in sets of projects that comprise each room, hence each room can also be also considered as individual co-created projects.

The nine female members of the collective have multiplied authorship and reclaimed a text written by a male author but also brought it into another medium which like other arts in this project such as photography, cinema, 3D design has been dominated by men. Unlike many popular VR projects, *Decameron 2.0* focuses on ethics of care, love, loss and other deeply binding emotions in order to come to terms with the present (COVID19 pandemic-related isolation, illness, death, the manifestations of hyper-individualism and indifference towards others, including vulnerable others). Therefore, *Decameron 2.0* is not based on verisimilitude but mimicry, strategic mimicry to be more precise, of Bocaccio's *Decameron*.

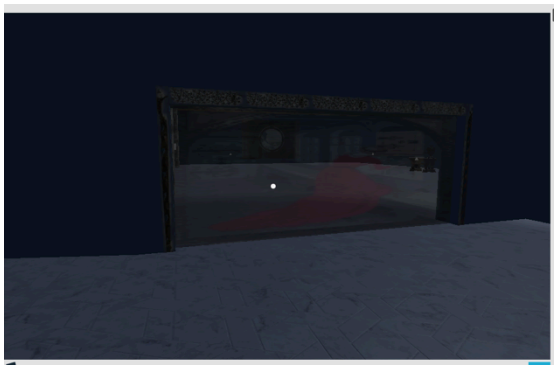
For Catherine Malabou, "[s]trategic mimicry involves making visible the exclusion of the feminine from discourse…inventing a type of reading able to render the exclusion manifest….[I]t is possible to create an arena for speech where that which is ignored appears as negative" (Malabou 124). Negative is not to be confused with negation but with the concept of *différance*, which disrupts stable categories and reveals their blindspots. This negative is situated in the impossible-to-define genre of *Decameron 2.0*. It cannot be situated neatly in any one genre; instead it spills over and defies boundaries. It includes aspects of documentary, fiction, animation, poetic, experimental, lyrical, etc. The best way to think about *Decameron 2.0*, its contents, form, and co-creation processes is through Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity, which "refers to a dual ability to receive form (clay is plastic) and to give form (as in the plastic arts or plastic surgery" (Malabou, p. 63).

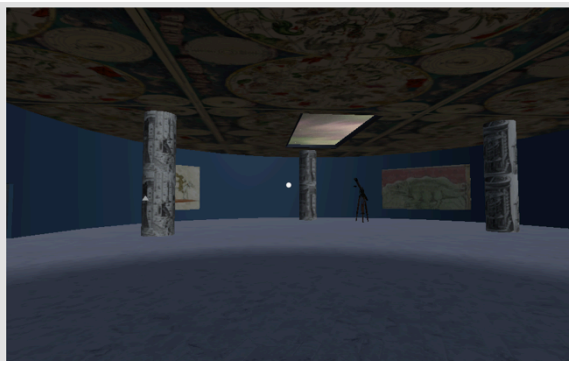
In the co-creation process, time is plastic and elastic, and continues when the finished work is reworked again in the future. In oral cultures, perception of time was polychronic, non-linear, and in some sense timeless. The story of the past was adjusted to the present time, e.g., by changing names of the heroes, location, etc. More importantly, stories, songs and visual creations were not considered as properties of individual creators, but were living, co-created and evolving. So too, in *Decameron 2.0* are fragments of archival texts and images are juxtaposed with present day images, movies, sounds and texts, and considered through the present, the experience of living during a pandemic.

Marginalia and Bodily Attunement

Jolene Armstrong (Athabasca University)

My talk focuses on marginalia, not just as notation, but as a critical and creative commentary to the experience of not just living through, but also creating from, a crisis, of living on the edge of an event. Camille stated that he was "more interested in how [marginalia] pretend to avoid meaning, how they seem to celebrate the flux of 'becoming' rather than 'being'." As part of the act of becoming; it is a corporeal act. How does this look in *Decameron 2.0*? We have physically lifted, de and re-contextualized, the medieval world, created an embodied space within which an infinite number of worlds and experiences can collide and interact. Plate refers to marginalia making as reflecting "somatic strivings;" medieval monks and scribes, while disciplining their bodies from worldly experience, sometimes noted their physical, embodied experience at the moment of writing. Somatic literally refers to the body as distinct from the mind. The medieval marginalia that fills the books of medieval Europe is a testimony to the split between mind and body—parallel activities of the intellectual exercise of scripture copying coupled with the physical distraction of of the secular world. The significance of marginalia has more to do with what we are feeling than what we are thinking. Plate theorizes that "Marginalia is a mournful expression of the loss of a body;" I argue that it is the body's way of reasserting its embodied experience of text, rejoined with the mind; it is an attempt to heal that age-old, enforced Cartesian rift.





These annotations become part of what I interpret as the haptic experience of interactive reading. The haptic, according to Rizvana Bradley, is "a visceral register of experience and vital zone of experimentation, [which directs] us to somatic forms of knowledge attuned not only to contemporary bodies and spaces, but also to the worlds and imaginations that have both conditioned and surpassed the body in and of performance" (Bradley). It signifies a moment of rupture, maybe even a touchpoint of recognition or profound significance. As Bradley explains, "The haptic can be understood as the viscera that ruptures the apparent surface of any work, or the material surplus that remains the condition of possibility for performance" (Bradley). Harney and Moten add to this understanding of hapticality by explaining that it is "the touch of the undercommons, the interiority of sentiment […] the feel that what is to come is here" (Harney and Moten). These are sites of opportunity and potential creativity.

This attunement to bodies and spaces, to the visceral register of intellectual experience, suggests that the notion of marginalia as a haptic act is a useful method for affecting the sort of empathy and feminist ethics of care that the collaborative experience sought to achieve—the "capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you" as described by Harney and Moten. The empathy that this sort of close participation with text results in is ideal for collaborative, haptic work.

Documenting and Archiving the *Decameron 2.0*

Angela Joosse (University of Toronto)

This lightning talk explores critical issues related to documenting and archiving the work of the *Decameron 2.0* Collective. This includes challenges of documenting intangible processes of using zoom as oral storytelling and collaborative writing space. As a collection of electronic literature pieces presented in multimodal forms, the current *Decameron 2.0* 3D online exhibition also offers challenges to archiving its collective and individual works. Grounded in a feminist ethics of care, this talk describes how choices made in the documentation and archival processes impact future sustainability and accessibility to the cultural records generated by the Decameron 2.0 Collective.

Following Jason Scott's provocative statement that "Metadata is a love note to the future," in this brief paper I consider how the production of metadata to describe our collaborative Decameron 2.0 project might help preserve, hold, and share our work (Jason Scott [@textfiles] 2011). I have been part of other creative collaborative projects in the past, but this is the first time I am attempting to work in more deliberate considerations of documentation from in the midst of the project rather than after the fact. Specifically, working with Wikidata, an open linked data platform, I am considering how artists can contribute to the production of better data. Wikidata is the largest free, structured data platform and infrastructure of the Internet. It is multilingual, readable by both machines and humans, and is maintained collaboratively by a global community of editors ("Wikidata:Introduction - Wikidata" n.d.). Anyone can make an account and start editing, and the data is free for anyone to use. It can be tempting to think of metadata - data about data - as neutral, a mere collection of objective facts. However our knowledge organization systems, including structured data, tend to replicate the same biases we encounter in our societies more generally, including racist, sexist, colonialist structures (Olson 2001).

The question of how we can produce better metadata, then, becomes an ethical question in addition to a technical question. Following Caswell & Cifor's call for an archival practice based on a feminist ethics of care, I approach the process of making metadata from within a web of relationships bound by responsibility and radical empathy (2016). As Dene Grigar has described, archiving electronic literature comes with particular challenges related to continually changing technologies and file formats, but producing metadata to catalogue electronic literature is also challenging since controlled vocabularies tend to be biased towards print-based work and do not always aptly describe electronic literature (Grigar 2018). As a community-driven platform, Wikidata provides controlled metadata that can integrate with other platforms while also offering exceptional descriptive flexibility. This can allow artists to

expand descriptive language to respect their self-determined representations (Allison-Cassin et al. 2019). I am taking the opportunity that Wikidata provides to present ourselves and our work in metadata as responsibly and carefully as possible, rather than waiting for others to produce such data. I see this as a love note to the future by helping to make our work findable in ways that responsively represent the work we are doing, while also preserving a basic description of our collective projects. By working through the challenges faced trying to represent our work in a highly structured, controlled vocabulary, I am also hoping, at least in a small way, to contribute to better descriptive practices for these kinds of multimodal, collaborative works.

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