FULL STACK FABULATOR (OR THE PROMETHEAN CURATOR)

Denise Thwaites

A tech stack is the set of technologies used to develop an application, including programming languages, frameworks, databases, front-end and back-end tools, and APIs. Choices with your tech stack can have significant downstream effects... - Down the Funnel, 2024

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1. FRONT-FRONT-END

"We tell stories."[4]

⇓

"Let me tell you a story."[5]

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* ⇒ : ⇒ : ⇒ : ⇒ : ⇒ : ⇒ *

⇓

"I searched for a certain coherence in aesthetics to create a storyline."[6]

⇓

* ⇒ *

⇓

"I want online shows to have multiple pages, hidden links and a crafted story."[7]

⇓

"A museum is not only a repository for artworks, but also a place that tells stories."[8]

Stories unravel in lines. They can arc, twist, loop or split.

A broken line feathers its fibres. In Art Theory, stories are woven from the fabric of daily practices; their loose threads tucked into regulation knots.

> TBT [The Broken Timeline] burrows back in time to present a lineage of web-based curatorial projects that are too often unseen, neglected or ignored.[9]

I stitch my own quilt from TBT's patches, twisting history through "appropriation, copying and adapting."[10]

// [1982 – SMILEY EMOTICON] // -- // [1989 – SIMCITIES RELEASE] // -- // [1991 – THE THING] // -- // [1994 – DANCING IN CYBERSPACE] // -- // [1995 – NINTENDO'S VIRTUAL BOY + HELL.COM] -- // [1997 – DREAMWEAVER + STIR-FRY] // -- // [1998 – POP UP ADS + SPLASHBACK] // --// [1999 – NAPSTER + IMPAKT] // -- // [2000 – DOT.COM BUBBLE + JAVA MUSEUM] // -- // [2001 – WIKIPEDIA + ALT.INTERFACE] // -- // [2002 – WEBMUSEUM + DAY JOBS] // -- // [2003 – MYSPACE + LOW LEVEL ALL-STARS] // -- // [2004 – FLICKR + NO/COPY/RIGHT] // -- // [2005 – YOUTUBE + RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARTBASE] // -- // [2006 – 'SURF CLUBS'+ TIME SHARES] // -- // [2007 – TUMBLR + ESPACE VIRTUEL] // -- // [2008 – BITCOIN + PROBE] // -- // [2009 – KICKSTARTER + BEAM ME UP] // -- // [2010 – SIRI + STATE] // -- // [2011 – MINECRAFT + A CLOCK THAT RUNS ON MUD] // -- // [2012 – ZOOM + SLEEPING UPRIGHT] // -- // [2013 – SLACK + MON3Y AS AN 3RROR] // -- // [2014 – BITMOJI + GIFBITES] // -- // [2015 – DEEP DREAM GENERATOR + UNFOLD] // -- // [2016 – BRAVE BROWSER + IS THIS IT?] // -- // [2017 – TIKTOK + INTERNET FAME] // -- // [2018 – PARLER + JUST BROWSING] // -- // [2019 – USA'S DO NOT TRACK ACT + FOOTNOTES ON EQUALITY] // -- // ['COVID-19 CONTACT-TRACING APPS + FLOW OUT] // -- // [DARKMARKET HAS BEEN TAKEN OFFLINE + SYNTHETIC CORPO-REALITY] // -- // -- // --

I drop a few stitches.

I also notice that *Patchwork Girl* (Jackson, 1995, Fig 1) hasn't made this timeline.[11] A pre-web story of hyperlinked fragments, she was disseminated on floppy disk, rather than online. Cursor-clicks let users flick through her entangled textual fragments, rather than surf the web's infinite space. Now, I watch a video online of Shelley Jackson discussing *Patchwork Girl* to make sure I made all the right clicks. You can buy *Patchwork Girl* online (Fig 2.).

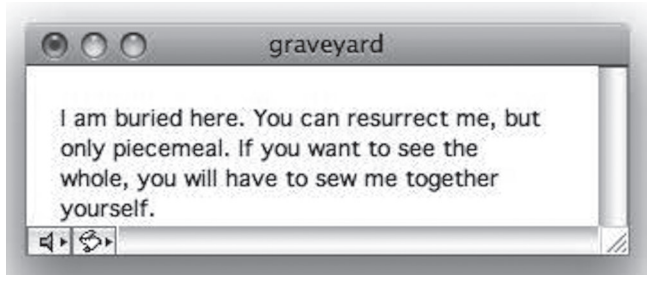

fig. 1 Screenshot details of Shelley Jackson, *Patchwork Girl* (1995)

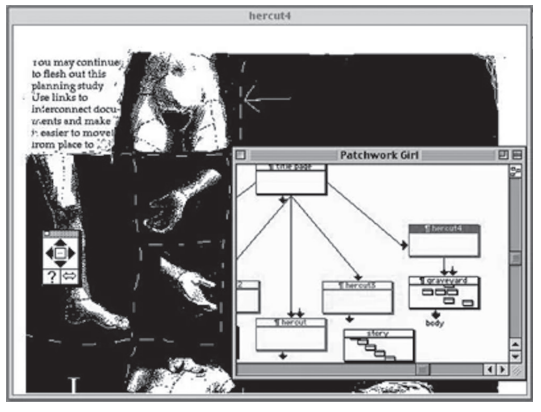

fig. 2. Screenshot details of Shelley Jackson, *Patchwork Girl* (1995)

Jackson's code sewed together devices (both aesthetic and technological). A body of work that spun ungovernable variables, its electric spine came alive across culturally networked devices. A year later, Susan Hiller, *Dream Screens* (1996), curated by Lynne Cooke and Sarah Tucker, unravelled on Dia's Artist Web Projects. A woman's voice, progressively layered and multilingual, recounted her experience in reference to an "encyclopedia of citations" that spanned ancient, contemporary, intellectual and everyday texts. Speaking through cyberspace, its fabric undulated with "useful and useless images and text... expand[ing] exponentially on the internet like the very boundaries of the universe."[12]

How are online stories woven today? Which threads do curators tug at to unravel their own universes?

2. FRONT-END

Hear my tale; it is long and strange - Frankenstein's Monster

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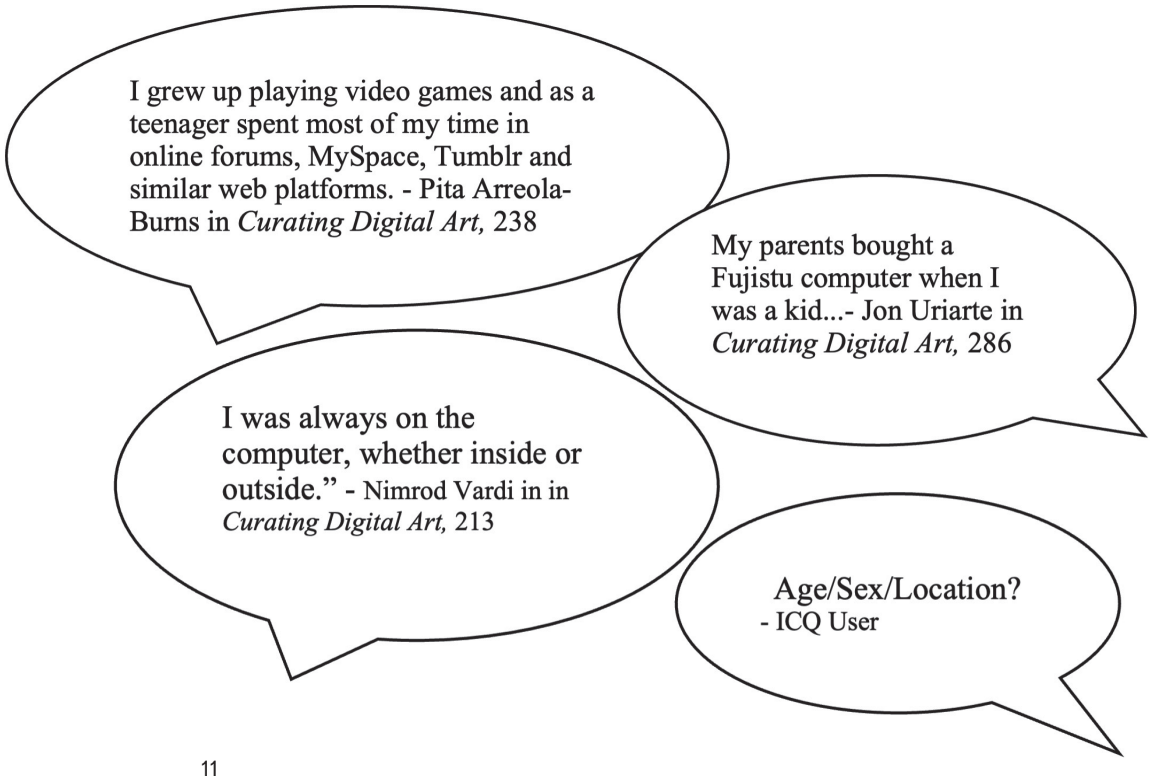
I am too "online."

The habit started in the 90s, when "digital artefacts shape[d] the people who consume[d] them."[14] I, like many others, played with these plastic materials, purchased but misunderstood by my parents.



Online curating provides a 30-year reunion for "that weird 89plus generation," who never quite got over their first online romance. I dream of building online places where new 'meet-cutes' between artists and audiences can occur. Is this highly intellectual catfishing? Luring lonely eyeballs back to my screen in the name of 'art', when they should probably be focused on the horizon of a half-marathon.

Today, the tyranny of distance is a blessing and a curse, as "curators have gained the [...] dubious privilege of being characters."[15]

- You need an online presence in the curated field of online curating.
- You need high-gloss cultural networks from "the history of digital arts, aka things that have been traditionally presented at Transmediale or Ars Electronica."[16]
- You need to be bald, or at least, faceless. Frictionless and minimal.

I live on the unceded Country of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, in a small city surrounded by mountains on the 'other side of the world.' We wake up to find out the transatlantic party has already finished, or we are embarrassingly early to the event. Online lurking comes naturally, when the messed-up colony you call home has been shaped by FOMO.

> Art is more and more created and presented on the web, free and accessible for everyone to enjoy, and the role of the digital curator is merely a node in a larger ecology of active agents.[17]

Our ecologies are different, where I am. Aboriginal connections to land, water and community stretch beyond books, through snow-gum mountains to cables that transmit signals through ancient stories and deep-space antennae. Who are the active agents? Lichen covered rocks and yellow grass are not without friction, as their minerals and fibres infuse my networked imaginary.

My online compost of projects decay, unmaintained. Impermanent, thankfully. My burn and churn "imitate[s] the speed of Instagram Stories," curating the very worst, or average, online.

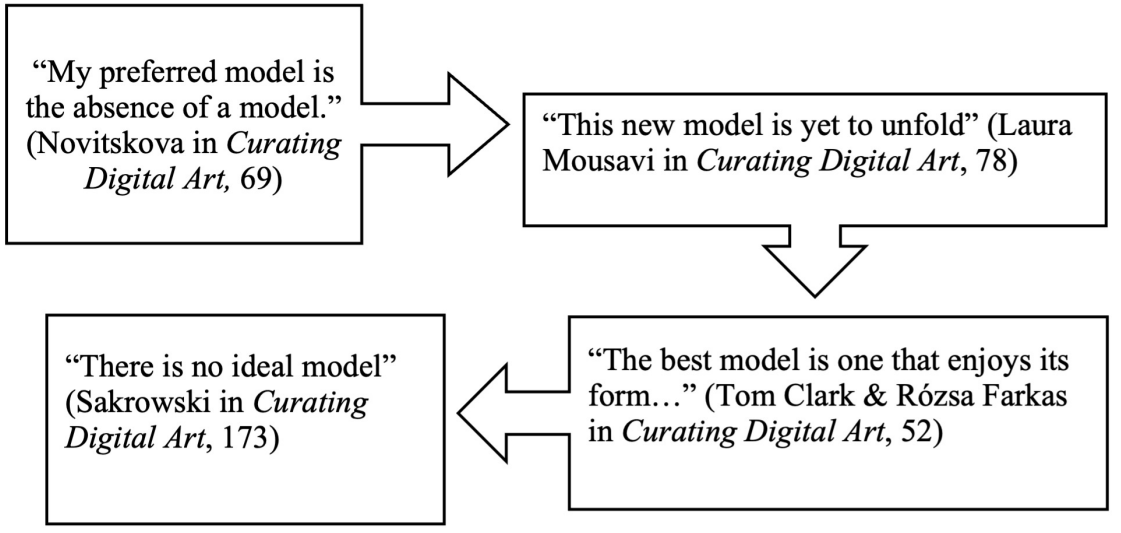
> I conserve nothing... it's like my art has its own life. Sometimes my videos disappear or an anonymous Youtuber reposts one of my old works. It's funny...[18]

I love funny: it propels the mundane into the viral, dealing dopamine rewards for ever increasing neural and social connections.

> [A]ll serious fiction, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on... how people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe...[19]

What kind of sack can contain a universe of viral lols? How do curators preserve web-based belly-laughs, when they rely on surprise and transgression? How might they develop, "a revised curatorial methodology within networked culture, which is not only concerned with what is visible or representable, but also with what has disappeared..."?[20]

Let's hear from the experts:



The 'negative space' of online curating is worth preserving. A vacuum, where curators "don't really know who [the] audience is," but hope they are forgiving.

Interacting with "art outside the given universal frameworks" has allowed curators to experiment with the free-floating fragments of online life. Sensations can be arranged, "until they seem to make some sense, if not clear and readable sense, then at least something that can hold [the audience's] imagination together like a vessel holds water."[21]

Building a container through DIY stories, can make a curator "a very bad front-ender."[22] I was never taught the rules of curating or design. Mary Shelley understood the excitement and insecurity of such an auto-didact life; where "the first fourteen years of my life, I [too] ran wild on a common," making endless mistakes, rebooting and restarting. The best way to hide mistakes online, is to make more. Eventually, people will assume they are part of your online aesthetic.

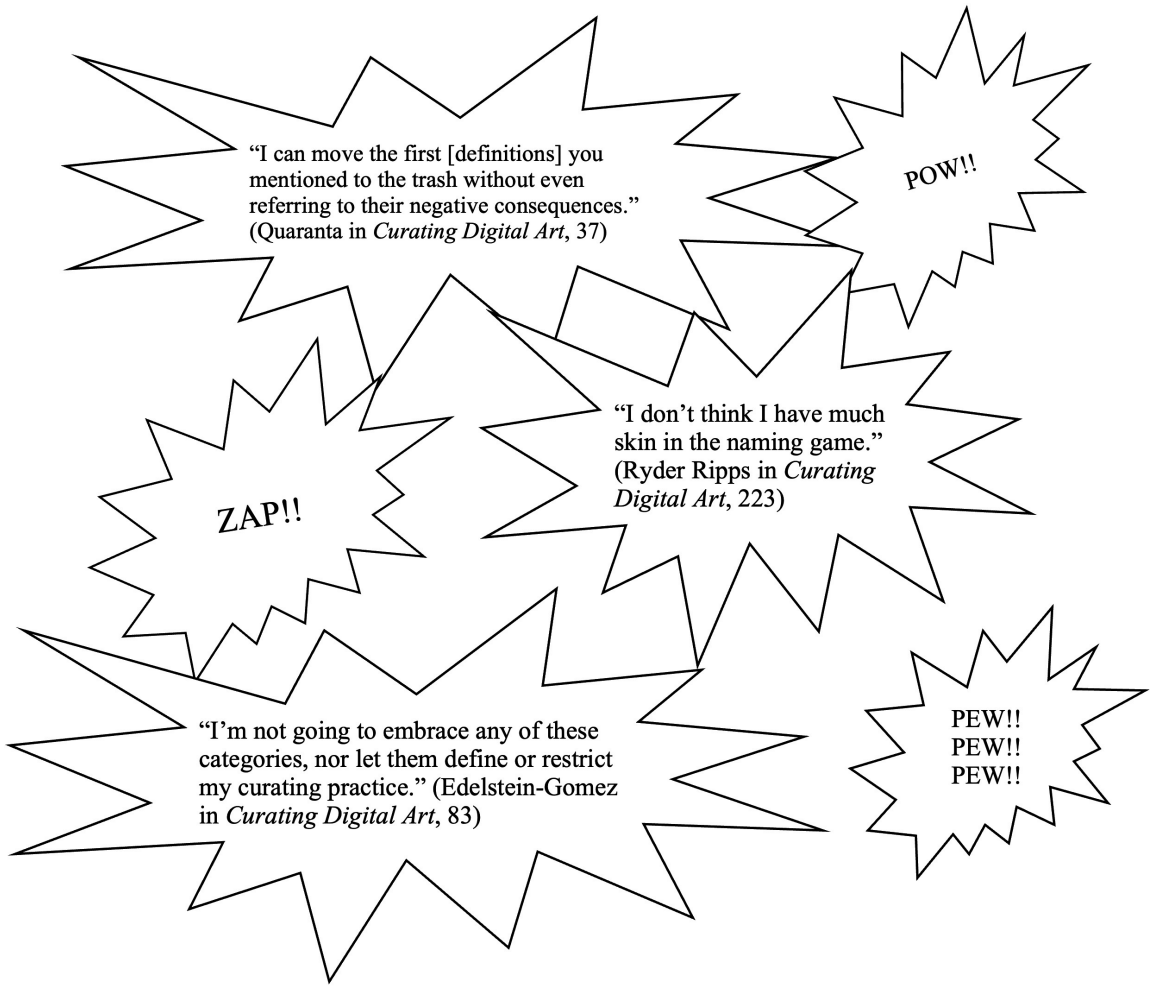
Shelley's character, Walton, finds his voice in retelling the story of Dr Frankenstein; acting as a 'magic interface' between the creator, his monster and audience. His words become the carrier bag; a curatorial essay for Dr Frankstein's work.

As a curator, I worry about my words.
Words on project webpages.
Words on Tumblr.
Words on Insta.
Words on Rhizome (not my words, smarter and cooler words).
Words in 100000000 emails.

The lexicon is precise: "[P]osition yourself within existing categories like digital art, new media, net art, contemporary art, or any of the post-arts."[23]

SILENCE

I am relieved to find that I'm not alone in avoiding this question, despite categories being "the DNA of the practice."[24]



Which words are left to re-weave the story of online curating?

> *I should have advanced far enough in the science not to derange their mechanism.*
> *- Dr Frankenstein*

Am I the only curator pretending to understand this hard- and soft-world?

Surrounded by cables and hard-drives, the right cord is faulty, so we must replace it with the wrong cord converted. Sometimes the bad option is a good solution, for example: "the computer chip that ran the emulator was much too powerful, so we tried to slow down everything to get a 'real' impression of the actual processing time of the web back then."[25] Clever move!

Am I suited to online curating, if systems tend to misbehave around me? One day, my desktop loads like this (Fig 3):

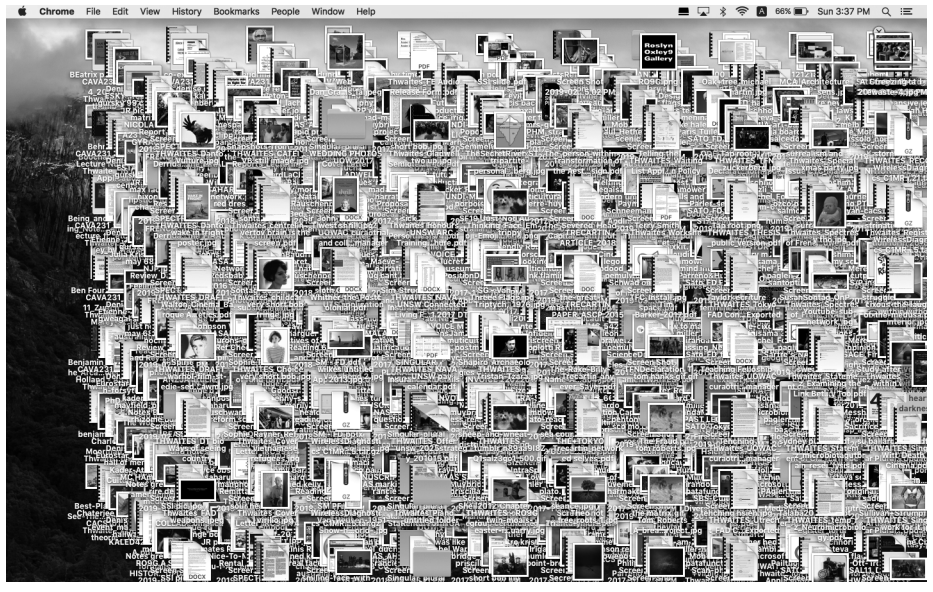


fig. 3 Screenshot of my desktop disaster, 2021

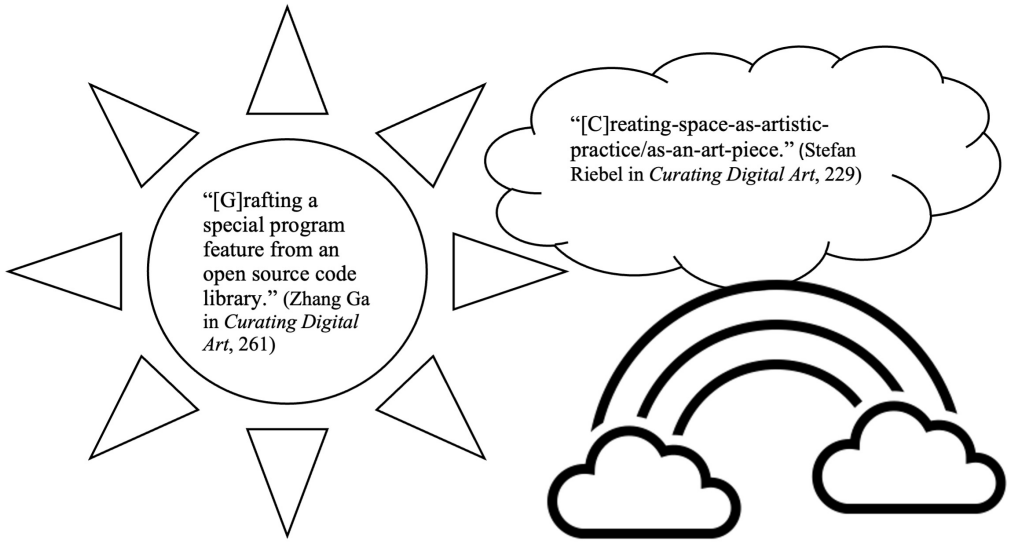
Everything I'd ever saved, mushrooms across my screen.

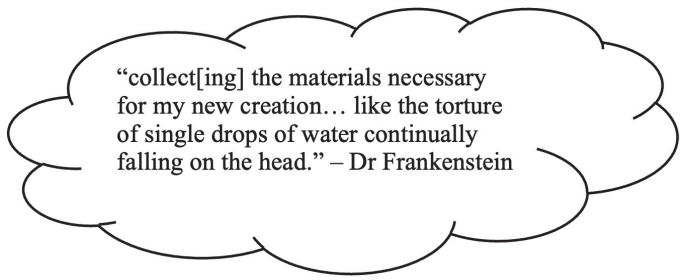
Indeed, "technological media are intrinsically and becoming ever more evidently autopoietic and autonomous."[26] I'm not entirely sure how to steward this autonomous mess, when it expands irresponsibly through undersea cables, or as ethereal signals between mobile towers.

Do you still trust me with works of art?

Don't worry, "I started digging through my own archive and found them... lacking the time to upload them elsewhere, they lay dormant in the dark corners of my hard drive."[27] Works of art are safe in 2TB of cool, dark hard drive. When it's time to curate work online, however, tightly controlled corporate webservers are "administered by expensive external web developers who are rarely sympathetic to the installation of unauthorized scripts."[28]

But artists have scripts to re-write! So, let's bypass these villains, altogether. Let's begin by:





Sounds easy, right?

Unfortunately, "working with open source programmes and platforms requires a type of knowledge that many curators often lack."[29] I am one such curator, but worse yet, curators like me might never learn, because despite our technical airs, "we don't code our projects; a friend of ours does."[30] Instead, we cook these coder-friends dinner, invite them to parties, have riveting conversations, and thank them in catalogues for managing our "unsorted pile," composed of irregular file formats, domain names and unrealistic expectations. Thankfully in this universe, "open source is more a state of mind and a value."[31] It is a blunt fringe and dark purple boots, a second-hand bike with a bumper sticker that says "Open-core, friends and improvisation."[32]

The spirit of online curating animates screens and devices, as electroluminescent keystrokes pulse through greasy screens. The artwork materialises in opposition to curatorial abstractions and "theoretical material, as [it] seem[s] to develop exponentially."[33] Curators write wall labels for online interfaces that say, "please interact,"crafting copy for open-source programs that rely on "mediation [that] always happens in parallel media, such as social media and the newsletter."[34] Back-end concepts are inverted, in desperate attempts to alchemize "online traffic into physical audiences," as curatorial assistant grant-writers are "left with the statistics we draw from Instagram."[35]

Curators construct a world in vowels and consonants to bind technologies and concepts. After all, "this is what makes it art."[36]

4. BACK-BACK-END

In front of a screen, you're in control of your existence for a moment - Edelstein-Gomez

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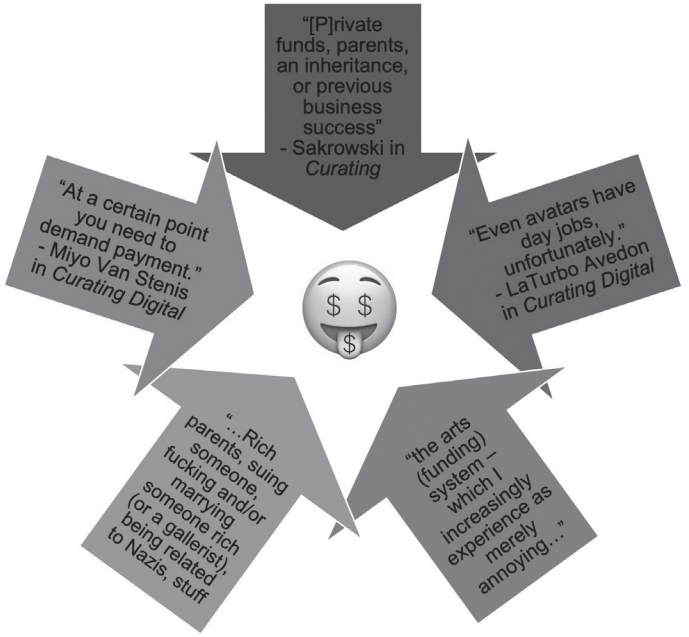
How far back does the back-end go? The origin stories of online curating proceed as many do: stories of survival against all odds, anti-heroic transformation and super-human endurance.

Slithering onto land, this aberration is a welcome one. We live in a time of sleek, smooth and seamless, where "legitimation has resulted in a denial of the bastardized, vernacular, ubiquitous messiness."[38] The back-back-end system of online curating is a network of late nights and early mornings, favours and missed parties. It turns out, "[m]aking and presenting (or reflecting on) art is a rather time-demanding, expensive 'hobby.'"[39]

Dr Frankenstein said, "During my first experiment, a kind of enthusiastic frenzy had blinded me to the horror of my employment."[40] There are no monsters made through online curating, only the terror of the work itself. What is behind the back-end?



A troubled system, where simple choices have significant impacts downstream.

If [grant success], then [curating].
If [no grant success], then [really tired curating].

For many curators, there is no choice, only lizard-brain impulse. When "it's all future landfill, [you] just do what you need to do to survive in the moment."[41]

The life we know, owes so much to *Tiktaalik roseae* (Fig 4.) As a curator, I think about this prehistoric fish too much. This hardworking aberration, whose impulses slithered downstream.

Did it hurt to take those first breaths of air? Did the fish know who was waiting for them here? That 375-million years later, their image would be curated online?

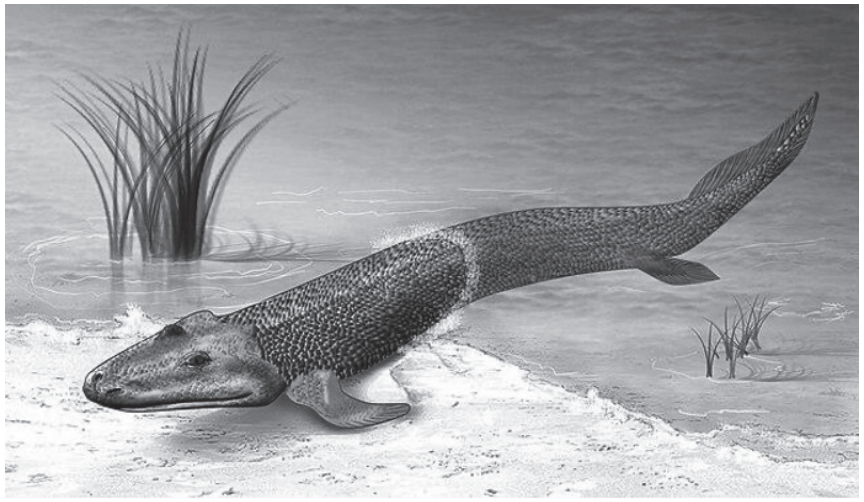


fig 4. Zina Deretsky, Life restoration of *Tiktaalik roseae*, a transitional fossil ("missing link") between sarcopterygian fishes and tetrapods from the late Devonian period of North America. The image has frequently been used in Internet meme templates. National Science Foundation Multimedia Gallery

Was it all worth it?

00. END-TO-END-TO-END-TO-END... TEST

> *We are getting to a point where history is irrelevant as it is overwhelming and will likely be pure fiction soon, rendered in posts. – Ryder Ripps*

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The curatorial stack has neither front nor back; no start, and no end. Curators weave a tale of online evolution, threading together back/parallel/future-stories that have survived the ephemeral, contemporary mediascape. It's inexhaustible and exhausting, but I still do it, because "[w]e play a lot."[43] We fabulate worlds with others through the depths of precarious systems; through cultural, technical and economic layers of production, all for the sake of a good story.

Denise Thwaites is a curator, writer and researcher specialising in contemporary cultural economies, who is currently a Senior Lecturer in Interdisciplinary Arts at the University of Canberra. Denise was awarded her PhD in Aesthetics through the University of New South Wales (Australia) and l'Université Paris 8, Vincennes – Saint-Denis (France), before joining UNSW iCinema Research Centre as a Postdoctoral Fellow. She has worked in the contemporary arts sector at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Australia Council for the Arts and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia and has curated independent projects for cultural organisations across Australia and internationally. Her research harnesses poetic, experimental and collaborative modes of working to destabilise political, cultural and economic imaginaries.

1
See Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012); and Jean-Paul Martinon, "Theses in the Philosophy of Curating" in: *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating,* Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

2
See Saidiya Hartman. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019).

3
Down the Funnel, 'What is a Tech Stack: Examples, Components, and Diagrams', *Heap* 2024, https://www.heap.io/topics/what-is-a-tech-stack.

4
Amber Van den Eeden & Kalle Mattsson, in: *Curating Digital Art.* Ed. Annet Dekker (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021), 59.

5
Domenico Quaranta, in *Curating Digital Art*, 39.

6
Manique Hendricks,in *Curating Digital Art*, 113.

7
Bob Bicknell-Knight in *Curating Digital Art,* 137.

8
Lillian Stolk, in *Curating Digital Art,* 156.

9
MariaLaura Ghidini, Gaia Tedone & Annet Dekker, in *Curating Digital Art,* 298.

10
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11
Shelley Jackson, *Patchwork Girl*. Published by Eastgate Systems, 1995, Watertown, MA. https://www.eastgate.com/catalog/PatchworkGirl.html.

12
Michael Govan, "Dream Screens" by Susan Hiller, July, 1996. Published by Dia Art, https://awp.diaart.org/hiller/dreamscreens.html.

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Mary Shelley. *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus*. (London: Penguin, 1818 [2003]).

14
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15
Madja Edelstein-Gomez in *Curating Digital Art,* 84.

16
Katja Novitskova in Curating Digital, 68.

17
Annet Dekker in *Curating Digital Art,* 30.

18
Systaime in *Curating Digital Art,* 192.

19
Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, 170.

20
Gaia Tedone in *Curating Digital Art,* 104.

21
Edelstein-Gomez in *Curating Digital Art*, 84.

22
Evelyn Auston in *Curating Digital Art*, 153.

23
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24
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25
Sakrowski in *Curating Digital Art*, 172.

26
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27
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28
Katrina Sluis in *Curating Digital Art*, 289.

29
MariaLaura Ghidini in *Curating Digital Art*, 125.

30
New Scenario (Paul Barsch & Tillman Hornig) in *Curating Digital Art*, 206.

31
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32
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33
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34
Livia Benedetti and Marcela Vieira in *Curating Digital Art*, 249.

35
Pita Arreola-Burns and Elliot Burns in *Curating Digital Art*, 239.

36
Mousavi in *Curating Digital Art*, 76.

37
Edelstein-Gomez in *Curating Digital Art*, 84.

38
Sluis in *Curating Digital Art*, 285.

39
Marie Meixnerova in *Curating Digital Art*, 184.

40
Dr Frankenstein in Shelley, *Frankenstein*, vol 3, chapter 2, 138.

41
Ripps in *Curating Digital Art*, 223.

42
Ryder Ripps in *Curating Digital Art*, 225.

43
Marco de Mutiis in *Curating Digital Art*, 291.