

### **Plat(free)forms: accessible tools for new e-lit composers**

“In a participatory medium, immersion implies learning to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible.” -Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*

For new “digital swimmers,” or those just dipping their toes into the pool for a semester or two, complicated (and expensive) technology and skill sets can sometimes hinder creative expression. As Davin Heckman argues, professors should “work diligently to create places in the curriculum that can include electronic literature as a standalone subject or part of a dynamic portfolio of rhetorical, computational, and/or aesthetic practices that make sense within a broader educational setting” (277). In addition to introducing students to electronic literature and multimodal writing, my goal as a teacher of digital creative writing, is to get students to “listen to their broccoli” (follow their intuition), as Anne Lamott suggests (110), and express their unique voices through multiple modes. As Troy Hicks expresses in *Crafting Digital Writing: Composing Texts Across Media and Genres*:

I want to see our “digital generation” live up to their potential as conscientious citizens and creative producers of text in all forms. Sure, they can post status updates quicker than most of us adults can pull out our phones. Yet inviting them to be intentional about the craft of digital writing is perhaps the best way to help them realize their potential in academic, social, political, and community contexts. When we talk and teach thoughtfully about the elements of digital writing—words, images, sounds, videos, links, and other media elements—we are helping them be purposeful and, in turn, helping them be creative (19).

Many assume that digital writing is natural for “digital natives,” but this is often a new, and sometimes intimidating, way of writing for them. By utilizing software that is accessible on their own computers and easy to navigate, students are less intimidated—free to create and focus on writing/composing. Although all software has its limitations, I’m seeing some wonderfully creative and thoughtful projects from my students. Particularly during Covid, I find students are writing more about their identities, mental health, social justice issues, and human connection.

My digital creative writing courses are all “open education resource” (OER). “The Hewlett Foundation defines OER as ‘teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others’” (as quoted by Bliss and Smith 12). OER isn’t new, it’s been around for nearly 20 years, but it can be a challenge, even in a digital course, to find all the readings and materials available online or to post PDFs without copyright infringement. In addition, I have been working to find open-source software for students to compose with. In the past, I

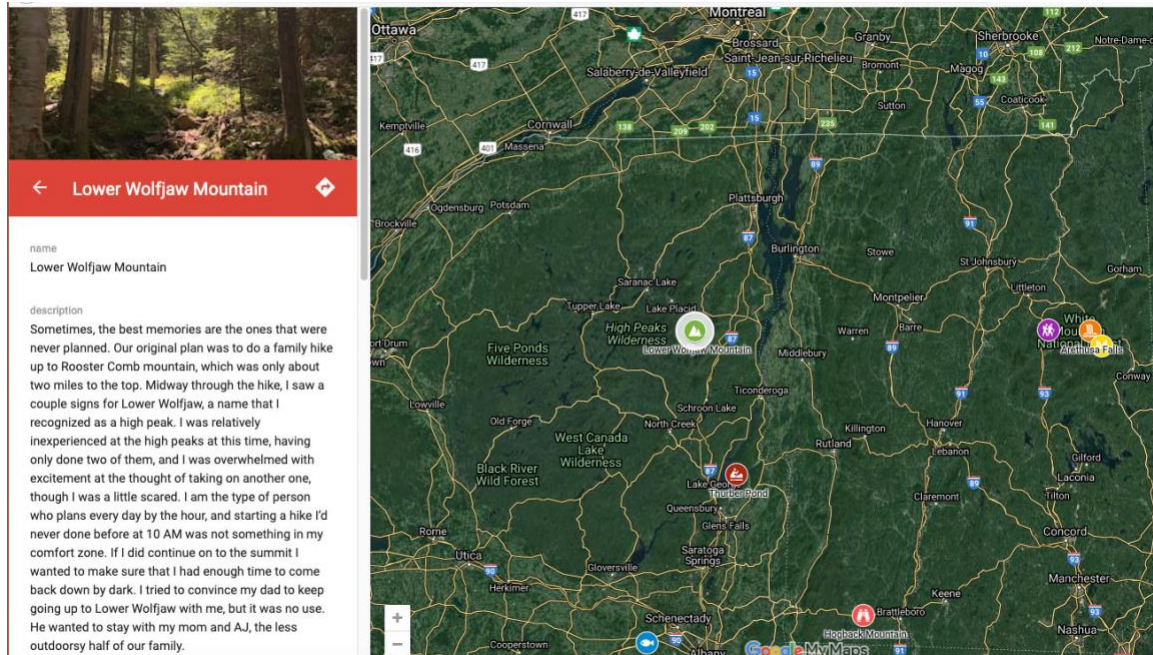
have relied heavily on the Adobe Creative Suite in my courses, which for my students is accessible and “free” on campus, so I let it slide for the OER course. Because it’s familiar to me, provides a blank canvas for design, and allows me to avoid teaching HTML coding, I have mainly taught Dreamweaver for hypertext projects. I have also always tried to incorporate free software options—Twine, Google Maps, and Knightlab storytelling tools—but found myself expanding these options even more this past year. With the spring 2020 pivot online, Adobe was not quite as easy to access (although the free subscriptions they offered were appreciated by several of my students) and students in the fall wanted to use their own computers and not those in the lab, understandably. Between my writing and e-lit courses, we explored Google Earth, Scene, and ThingLink for 360° work, and relied mostly on Twine and ThingLink for hypertext projects.

### **MAPS (introducing multimedia (& nonlinearity))**

I have always used map essays in my introductory courses as they are a simple way to introduce nonlinear narratives and fragmentation. The more straightforward interface allows students to open up to these concepts while still having control over the order of the narrative—a perfect medium for place and travel writing, with low-stakes technology. Both [Google MyMaps](#) and [Knightlab’s StoryMap](#) are easy-to-use platforms for new composers and useful in introducing multimodal writing. Students often gravitate toward writing about places or trips that were meaningful to them, from their childhood homes to how they move through the world.

Students are often drawn to writing about their homes, some literally write about their own backyards, and some explore mapping journeys or a collection of significant moments that are tied to place. Since in this essay, medium is also already chosen, the subject matter is influenced by the affordances of the visual of the map. They also put thought into the navigation, some visual design—whether or not to include pictures and/or video and, if so, of what. In Lily Pudlo’s essay, [“Backyard Adventure,”](#) she writes about her childhood neighborhood through the lens of her child self, adventure stories in a small landscape. Another student, Maya Horton, wrote about adventure trips a little farther off, capturing meaningful outdoor trips in “Adventures in the Northeast” (see Fig. 1), that displayed personal growth and reflection. In her introduction she states:

While I have grown and changed over the years, nature was a constant in my life. It was always there when I needed it. It has been an escape from reality, and a place where I could be my true self. It has given me a reason to keep going. It has literally given me a breath of fresh air when I was feeling stagnant and confined. It has been a place where I could simply just relax and have fun. It has put me in my place, held me accountable, helped me overcome my fears, and allowed me to realize things about myself and others.



**Figure 1: “Adventures in the Northeast” by Maya Horton**

These essays fit with our discussion of creative travel writing, which, according to Bradway and Hesse, “has a strong narrative voice and a writer deeply and directly involved in the events of the place. The narrator is usually going somewhere new; a sense of adventuring into the unknown is nearly always the dominant tone, often inflected by physical and/or emotional risk” (Bradway and Hesse 24). These essays all express something about their authors, whether it is through childhood play or a travel adventure. This semester, Marielle Webster’s StoryMap, “The Year Before the World Ended,” recounts her last year of travel before the pandemic, especially meaningful upon reflection (see Fig. 2).

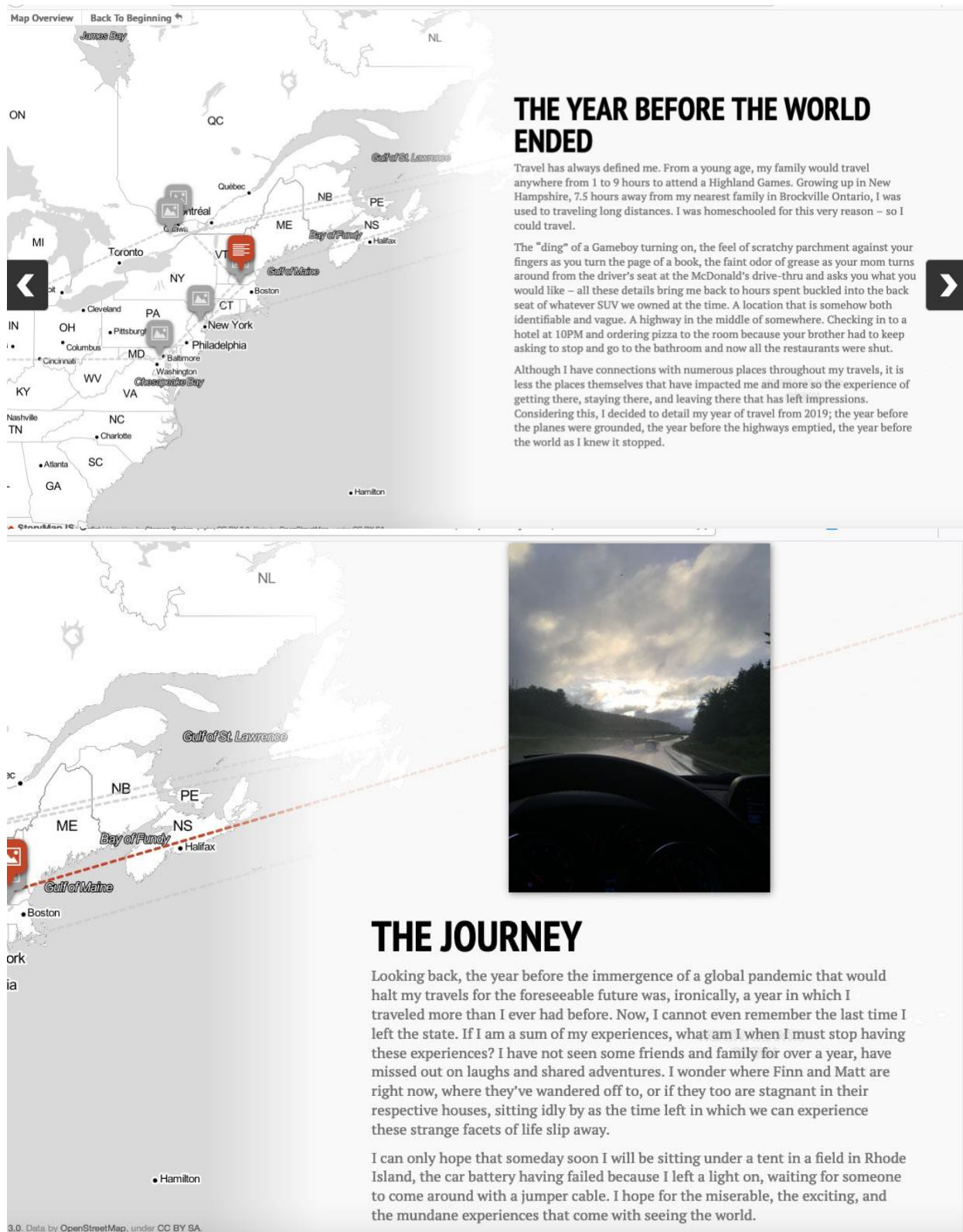
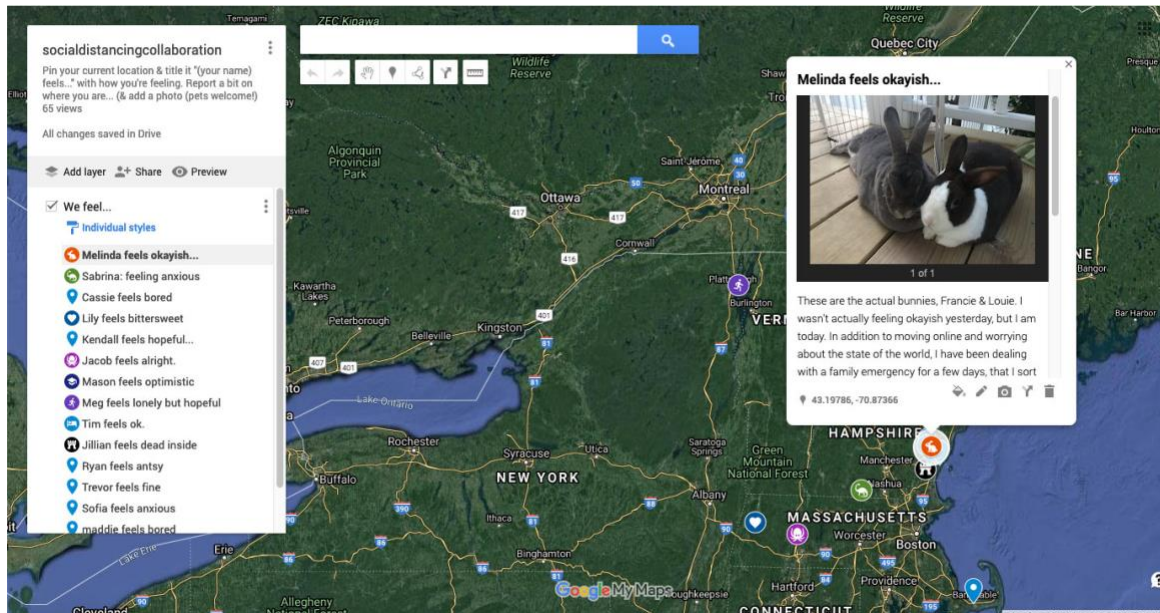


Figure 2: Screenshots from “The Year Before the World Ended” by Marielle Webster



Covid-19 has played a big role in the past year of creative projects. In my digital literature course in Spring 2020, the pivot to online classes in March happened to correspond to the collaboration section of my digital literature course (we read Scott Rettberg's *Electronic Literature*). Instead of doing collaborative projects together on campus, I had to adapt that assignment and we used a collaborative Google Map (see Fig. 3) to map our location and how we were feeling about our new stay-at-home circumstances. The creative writing students also wrote a collaborative map about what home means to them, which would have been our in-class free write.



**Figure 3: “Socialdistancingcollaboration”**

Both Map platforms have their limitations, of course. StoryMap is a very linear “slideshow”-esque experience, Google Maps is also fairly linear, with points listed down the side, and both are templated, with limited design options. Once students have completed a map project, they are often excited to expand their design autonomy and create something from the ground up. Twine has been a great option for final hypertext projects.

### **TWINE (for representation and social commentary)**

“As Twine author Porpentine puts it, ‘Twine simply exists and doesn’t belong to anyone except everyone’” (as quoted in Rettberg 104).

I began using [Twine](#) when I first made my introductory course OER. Although I had heard about Twine in the e-lit community and heard presentations on the representation it afforded for feminist, mental health narratives, and LGBTQ+ stories and games, I had not yet used it myself. The limited need for straight-up HTML coding is valuable for students who are only writing e-lit for a semester. In this way, it’s not unlike Dreamweaver, but with an interface that doesn’t fully disguise HTML and CSS from the user; by copying and pasting the code from the amazing Twine wiki, the students don’t think of it as coding. In 2012, the “Twine Revolution,” began:

It is a movement started by trans women, and then was expanded to other queer identities as well, arguably one of the most relevant resistance efforts in gaming. Kopas [20] makes, in her own words, a bold statement about the matter: ‘hypertext and digital games are totally trans genres’. Twine has presented itself as a platform that is very welcome to diverse narratives, which challenge the default premises of game design [16]. Even though Twine games are primarily based on text, there are plenty of ways in which Twine can explore visuality and sound within its narratives. The base HTML can be incremented with CSS and JavaScript elements, so as long as web technology keeps being pushed forward, Twine will not become outdated [26]. It is a very interesting tool with numerous possibilities for the development of not only diverse stories, but also new mechanics and logics to be incorporated within the textual narrative. (Bragança, Mota, & Fantini 938-9).

These factors have made Twine an optimal platform for marginalized voices, with games like Zoe Quinn’s “Depression Quest” working to promote empathy for mental health and Porpentine’s “With Those We Love Alive” working to further LGBTQ+ representation. As Scott Rettberg points out in chapter 4 of *Electronic Literature*:

The Twine community has also developed its own identity as a place of avant-garde experimentation with language, gender, and identity. Twine is particularly popular with young authors who are arguably the first generation of ‘digital natives.’ This is electronic literature that emerged first not in online magazines, academic gatherings, festivals, or online databases, but instead on Tumblr feeds. (105).

For students it’s proven an intuitive, easy-to-learn platform for branching multimodal narratives. I’ve had several students write about their LGBTQ+ identities or coming-out stories, often in video essays that have a more linear narrative, but Twine seems to be a natural platform for the expression of underrepresented identities and a medium in which students feel comfortable sharing their stories. Bridget Widrig, for instance, wrote about her first Pride experience with her girlfriend (see Fig. 4). With branching narratives, she gave the reader the choice of where to go (a cowgirl bar, Stonewall, etc.) and who to meet next, although each readthrough ended up in the same place with the first photo of the couple, wrapped in a pride flag and, as she says, “I felt so confident and content with who I am. Celebrating with the rest of the world how amazing it feels to be yourself, I felt so lucky to be there.”



After a quick walk down the block to the main road, we made it to the rails that lined the street as the parade passed by with huge floats and big groups walking in formation. Though the parade was eye catching, the people around me were so much more interesting. There were gay and lesbian couples all around us. They all looked so different, so unique. There are stereotypes that queer people are forced into, the butch lesbian or the flamboyant gay, and some of us do fit those, but most of us don't. Seeing all the different people gave me a feeling of representation I've never had before. There were older lesbian couples with short hair and Tevas, then teenaged girls holding hands. I hoped that Kerry and I could be a sort of representation for someone, showing them that they don't have to fit into any box to be accepted or happy. Just as I was observing a man in assless chaps approaching another man, wondering what the relationship between them was, a woman came up to Kerry and me, saying "You guys are so cute! Do you want me to take a picture of you?" Now both of us blushing, we said yes.



We stood with our backs facing the parade and I smiled at the camera, waiting for the picture to be taken until the woman said "Here" and handed Kerry her large pride flag. Kerry took the flag and stretched it out around the both of us. In this moment, I could not have been happier. I've been in relationships where the other person was not ready to be proud of themselves yet, and therefore it felt like they weren't proud of me. In this moment, standing in a huge crowd with my girlfriend next to me and a rainbow flag around us, I knew that I was loved and that I was something to be proud of too. I felt so confident and content with who I am. Celebrating with the rest of the world how amazing it feels to be yourself, I felt so lucky to be there.

**Figure 4: Screenshots from "Pride" by Bridget Widrig**

I'm also directing an honors thesis this semester and my student, Parker Ayotte, is writing a Twine story that includes social justice issues, such as racism and classism. There is also a nonbinary character dealing with injustice, and a second person "player" that is genderless (unlike some second person narratives, such as Calvino's that gender the "you" as male). As Rettberg says, "While the underlying principles of Twine are based on hypertext, many Twine games have also adopted conventions from interactive fiction, such as the second-person form of address to the player character, spatial navigation through the narrative, and a sparse, economical style of writing" (105). This player/character is also held accountable for their actions, but most significantly, their inaction or passivity when confronted with issues of racism and injustice. The entire fiction ends in somewhat of a futile entropy, where the reader/player doesn't really make a difference in the system, despite multiple possible endings. For example, in the "on the fence" ending:

It'll take a while, but slowly, you'll push for more and more change... but is that the right thing to do? Sitting and silence and indirectly supporting the people you can't stand? Plus, will your morals survive throughout the passing of decades? That's up to you. I have already made my decision on your fate. By straddling the delicate line between hero and villain, all you do is incriminate yourself.

Additionally, in the video for the "perfection incarnate" ending, the voice-over narration states: "Acting as a face of peace and change in the middle of oppression and social control, you will make a perfect member of Satan's regime. I now know who you are and you have been judged." Parker discusses in his analysis portion, the usefulness of Twine as a forum for representation and digital activism. He chose the platform over Dreamweaver, despite some limitations for what he wanted to accomplish, for the specific reason that it is more representational and embodies the social messages he's conveying in his story (see Fig. 5).



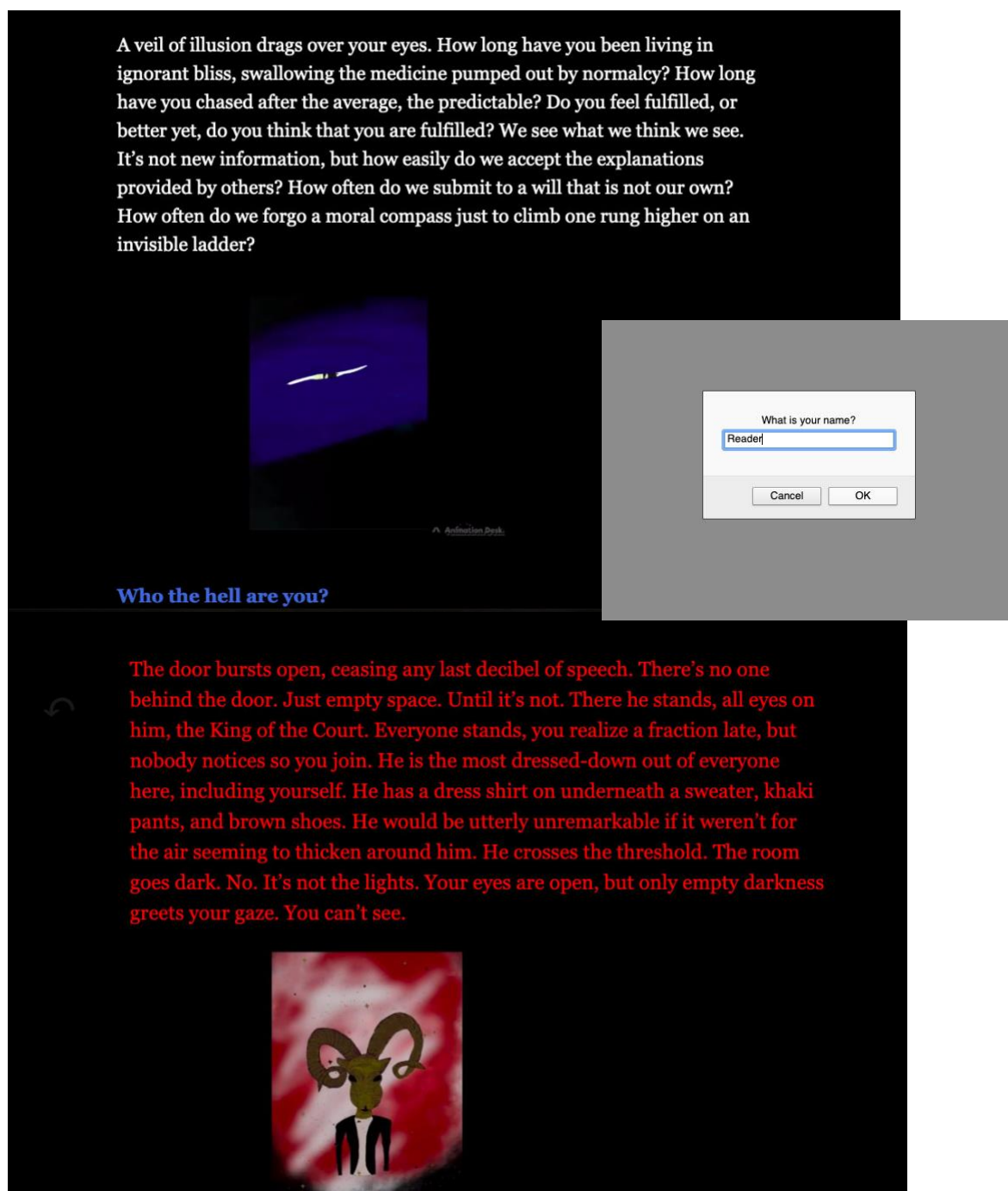
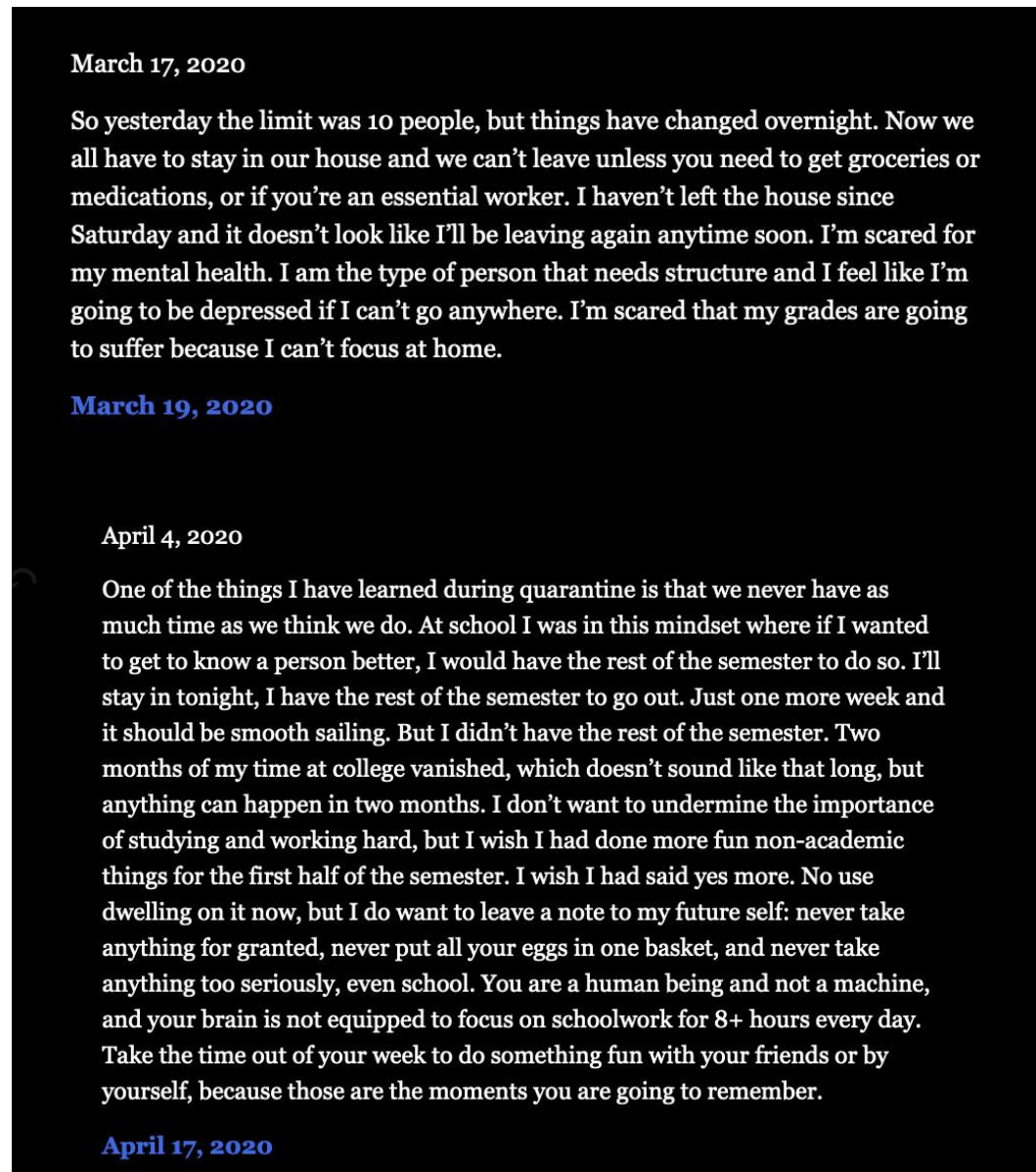


Figure 5: Screen shots from “Promise of Paradise” by Parker, with reader name entry

This is significant given current conversations in the ELO around ways to increase representation and diversity. Because of its accessibility and ease of distribution, Twine has been an essential tool for not only disseminating, but amplifying historically suppressed voices. Also turning up their collective volume through Twine, have been the neurotypical. Many students have been writing about mental health struggles in these platforms and I have found this ever-increasing during the Covid-19 pandemic. Maya’s Twine project, “A Mess of Emotions”

(see Fig. 6), for instance, documents her daily struggles in a “Covid journal,” that takes us through her inner dilemmas, struggles, and experiences, including contracting the virus along the way.



**Figure 6: Screenshots from “A Mess of Emotions” by Maya Horton**

And Stuart Moulthrop says of Twine in his article, “Hypertext Fiction Ever After”:

As we [hypertext authors] once did, Twine writers want to do unlikely things with stories, making the most of simple, easily accessible technologies. Whether they acknowledge it or not, they are agents of a vital digital literacy, asserting word-based text, both in terms of prose and underlying code, as the locus or seriously meaningful play. Beyond this, as their enemies will say, they have an

agenda, setting out to defend the interests of women, gay and transgender people, the neuro-atypical, and others marginalized and excluded by the military-infotainment complex. They are discontented with an arrogant, intolerant, casually violent society, and have set themselves against an entrenched culture industry. ... they think of what they do—as play, as storytelling, or as an occupation of gamespace—they are carrying on a struggle. Hypertext fiction may never get out of the cloister, but its younger cousins have found their way to the streets (160).

It will be interesting to see what the future of Twine looks like, what revolutionary texts will be rising from our “young cousins” in these tumultuous times. I find it interesting that among other scholarly work I’ve seen in Twine (including e-lit analyses) my student, Sabrina Brown, used this new platform to provide a historical overview of hypertext. Her scholarly project, “The World of Electronic Literature” (see Fig. 7), provides information on the form, including historical “characters” and genres (based on our textbook, Rettberg’s *Electronic Literature*).

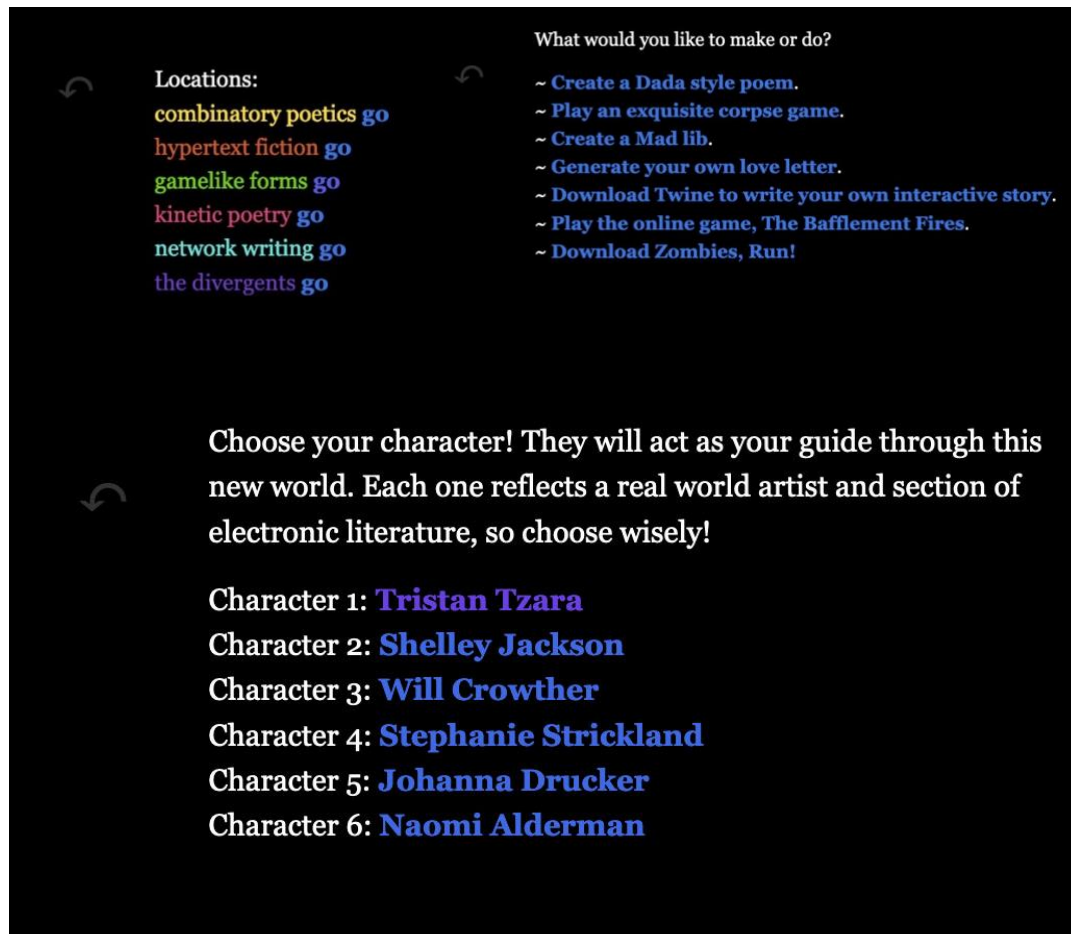


Figure 7: Screenshots from “World of Electronic Literature” by Sabrina Brown

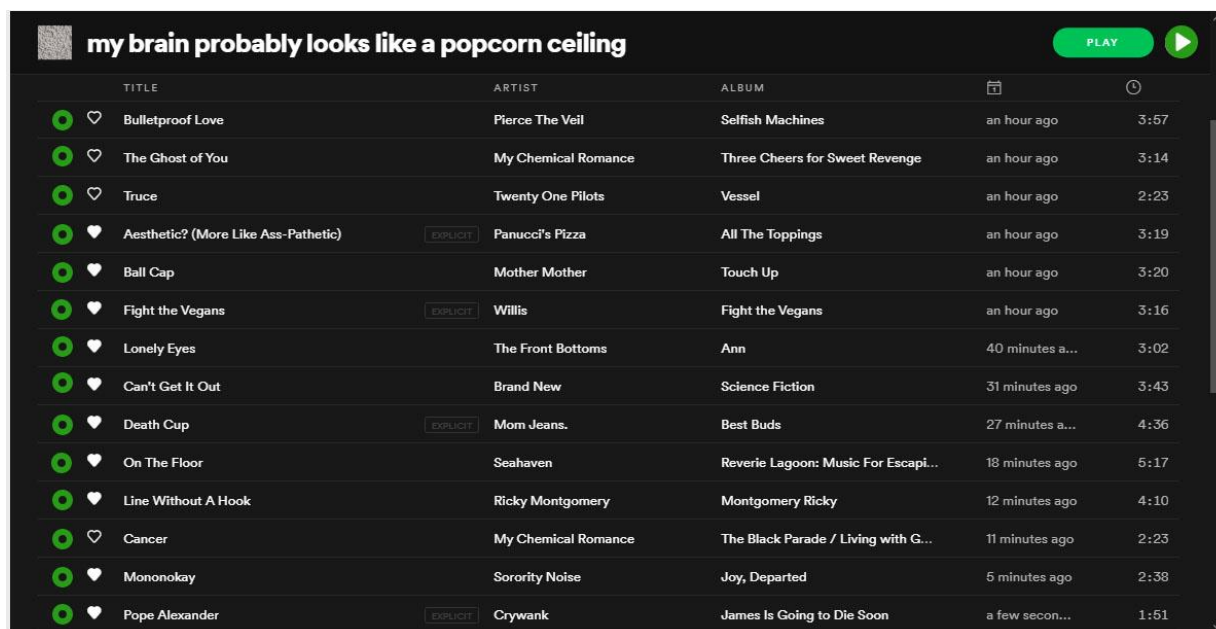
As mentioned earlier, the basics of Twine are straightforward, but more advanced things like audio, movement, image maps, etc. are not always as intuitive for students. My students have

managed video, audio, and some code-tweaking, but for things like image mapping, I suggest students consider ThingLink. This platform is extremely user-friendly and several of my students have used it to write about their identity and mental health.

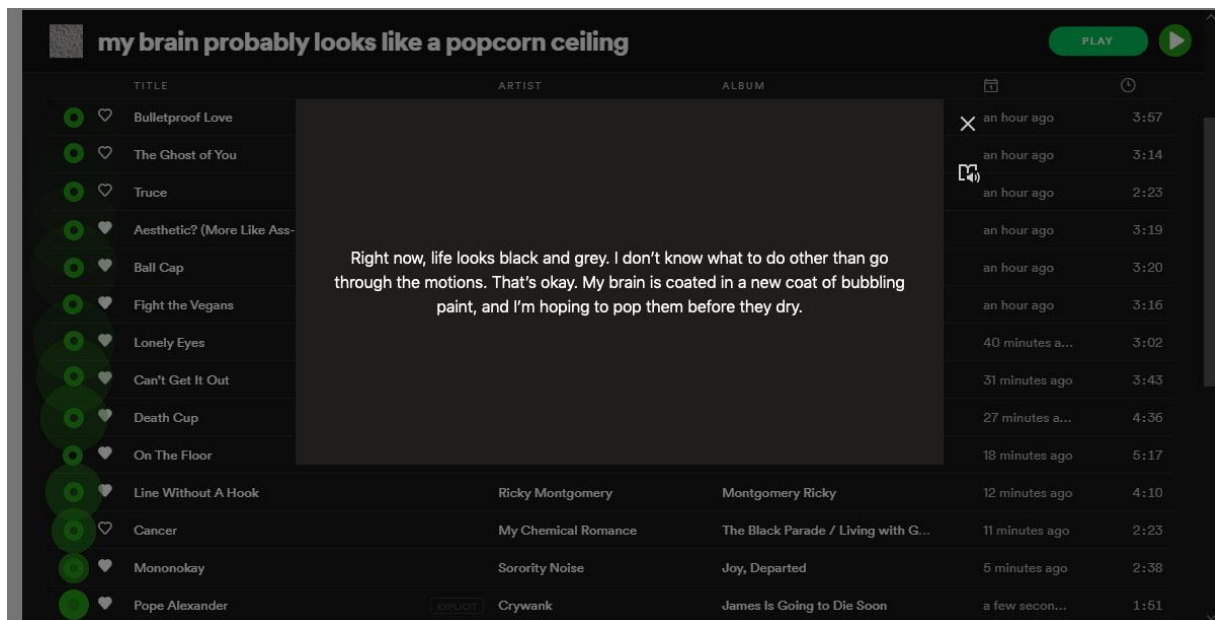
### THINGLINK (a multimodal surprise)

The simplicity of both Twine and ThingLink for hypertext essays has allowed these new digital swimmers to delve deeper into the platforms' potential and their subject matter. I have been impressed with the complex projects being made in [ThingLink](#), which at first glance seems like a very simple platform. I should add that for what we want to accomplish, it's not free. But for a small fee, a teacher can have an educational account with multiple seats and add more as needed. It provides for inclusion of multiple modes—you can embed or add links to video, 360° environments, add sound, videos, and link multiple “pages” (projects) together. My introductory level students have no trouble learning the interface and executing their ideas.

The ease of the platform interface allows students to focus on their creative expression. As these are nonfiction courses, often these projects are very personal, and many students write about their struggles and experience with mental health. Liberty Laarman, in her essay, “My Brain Probably Looks Like a Popcorn Ceiling,” for instance, created a simulacrum of her Spotify playlist, with stories behind each song, including experiences with her therapist and dealing with the loss of a friend (see Fig. 8).

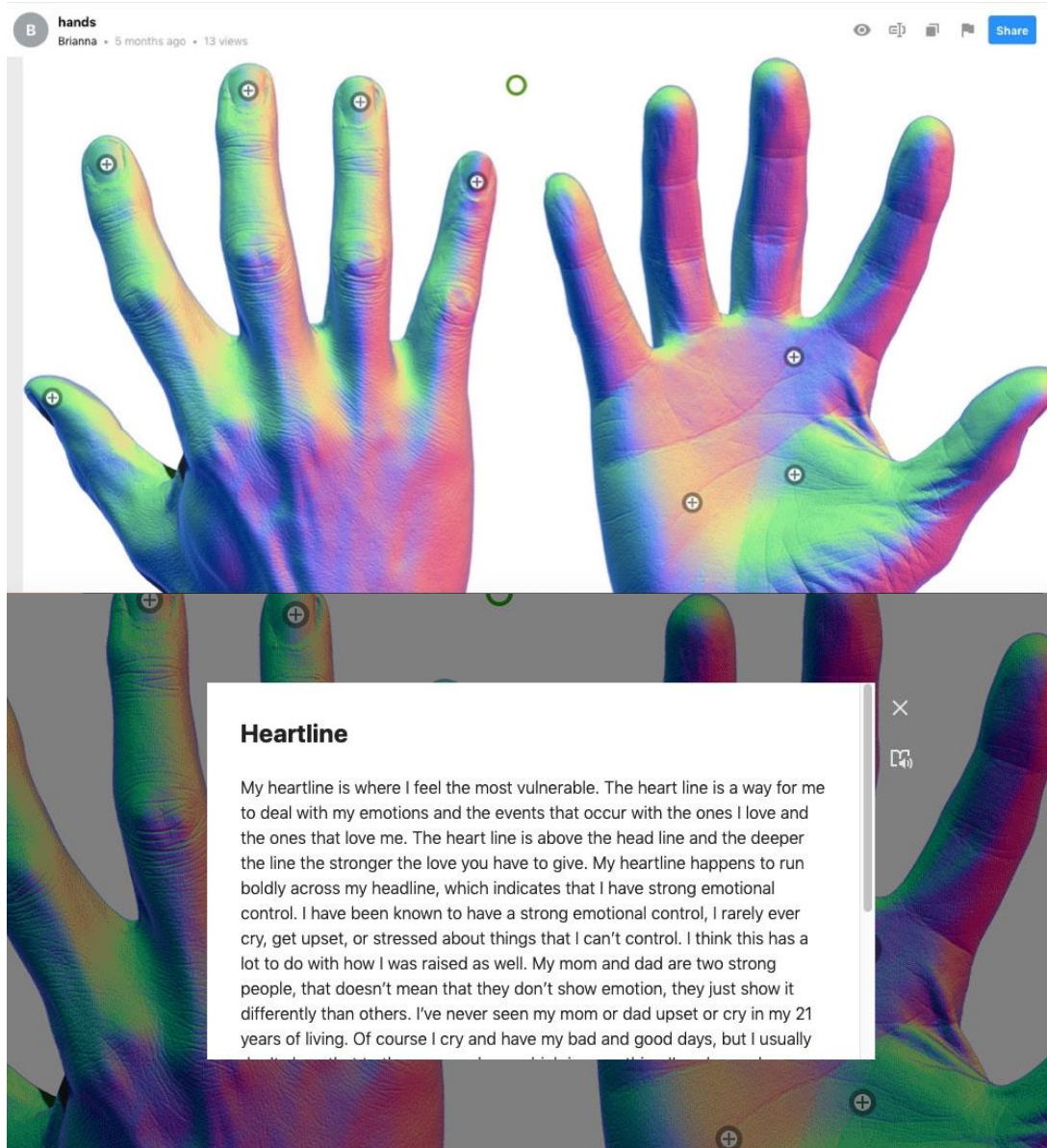






**Figure 8: Screenshots from “My Brain Probably Looks like a Popcorn Ceiling” by Liberty Laarman**

Since we read Shelley Jackson’s *My Body: A Wunderkammer*, I also see many hypertexts with body or mind maps, dealing with body image or mental health. Some examples include a map of someone’s “scatter brain,” showing her scattered nighttime thoughts and fears and this project, Brianna Jones’ “Hands” (see Fig. 9) that deals with self-expression, identity, and human vulnerability.



**Figure 9: Screenshots from “Hands” by Brianna Jones**

The theme of the final project in the introductory course is “connections,” which can mean many things. My student, Samantha Stewart, really captured the idea of human interconnectedness in her essay, “Sonder” (see Fig. 10). Sonder, according to John Koenig means: “the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own” (Koenig). Sam captured this with a 360°-interactive image of a bustling Time Square, where we can see people passing each other as strangers, with text that promotes connectedness in the common human experience, very relevant during the past pandemic year.



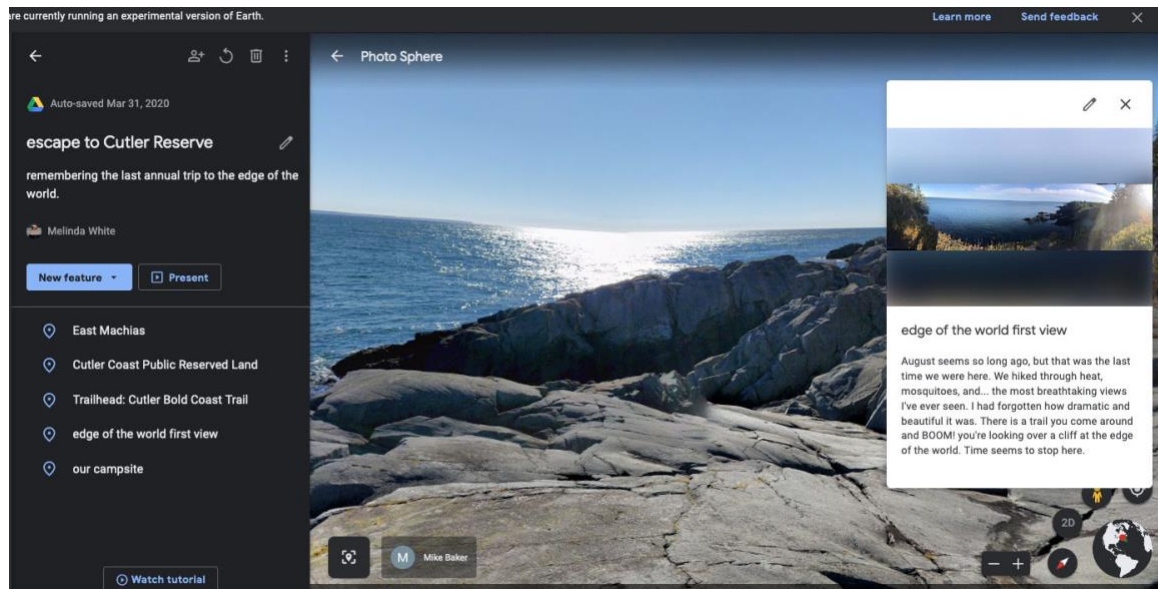
Figure 10: Screenshots from “Sonder” by Samantha Stewart

### VR and other things

ThingLink allows links on videos and also has 360° capabilities, seen in the “Sonder” piece. As students move toward more immersive storytelling, we have found accessible ways for them to compose “virtual” spaces, such as through [Google Earth](#) and [Knightlab’s Scene](#), with 360° capable projects that can be read in Google Cardboard, an affordable VR viewer we have in our lab. Google Earth provides a similar interface to Google MyMaps, with satellite views and the addition of 360° street-view capabilities. Utilizing the 3D option provides an immersive experience, where readers can feel like they are exploring a place (see Fig. 11). The Google

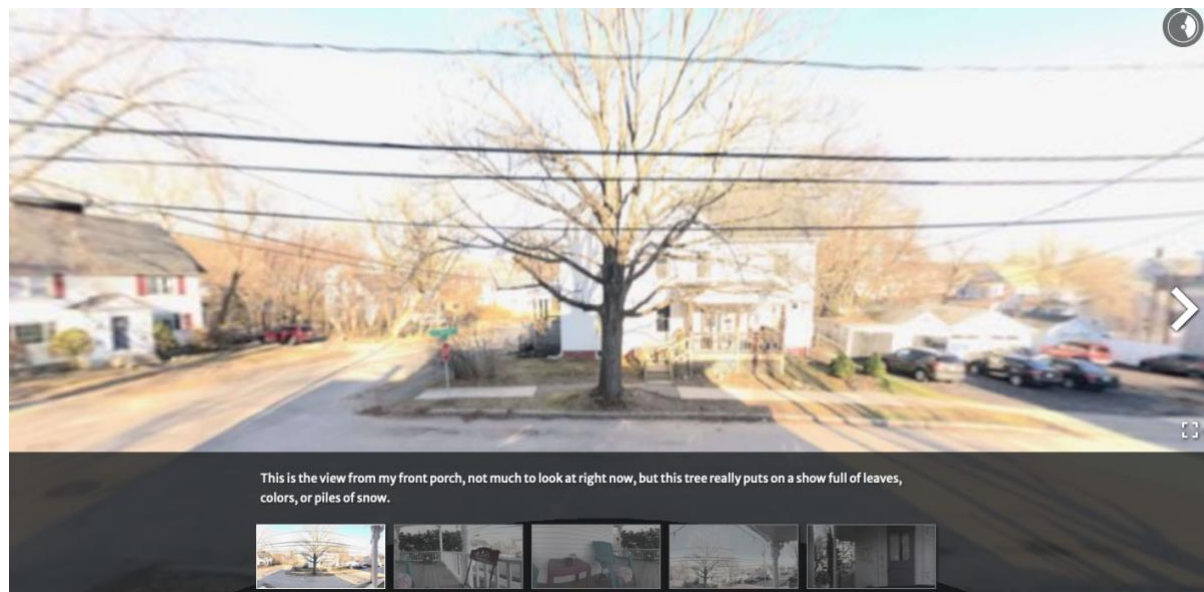


Earth platform is still user-friendly and students often use these projects to explore their homes or travels. In one project, a student explored multiple possible futures as they prepared to graduate in a pandemic to an uncertain future.



**Figure 11: Example map for Digital Literature, 360° view**

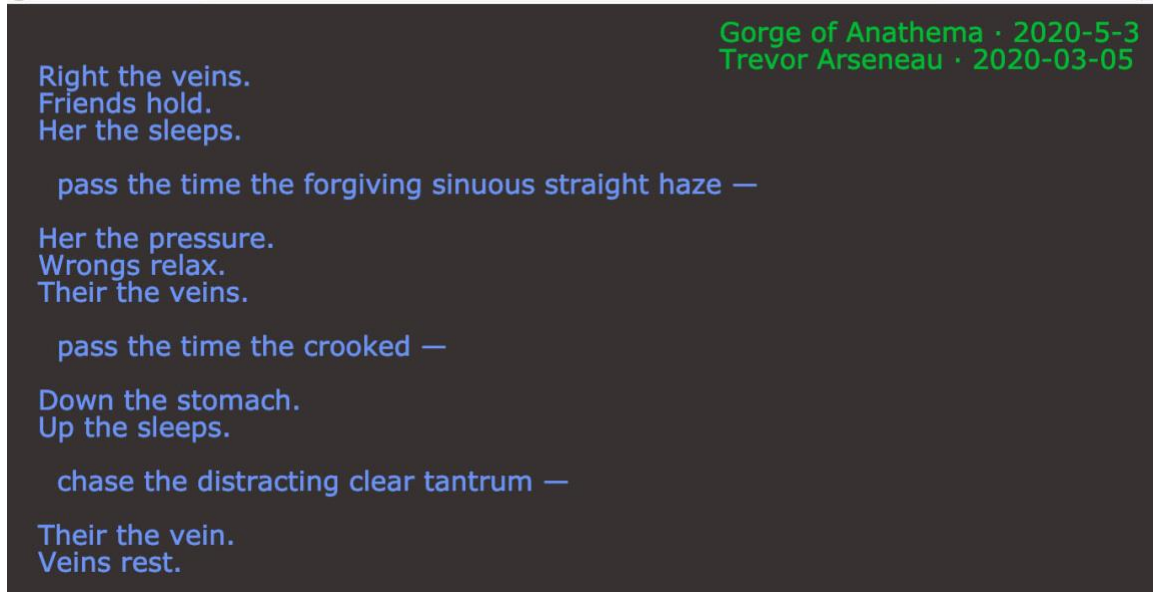
Scene provides easy upload of panoramic or full 360° images, with added text, for simple VR projects. When we left campus last spring, since we could no longer use the lab, I adapted the VR unit and we explored these platforms, mostly close to home, including my front porch (see Fig. 12). I look forward to VR technology becoming more accessible in the future, so students can explore more immersive creativity.



**Figure 12: Example Scene from my front porch**



Of course, there are other plat(form)forms out there, these are just a few that we have explored. In addition, I have offered students the opportunity to remediate Nick Montfort's work, "Taroko Gorge." Trevor Arseneau made "Gorge of Anathema," which conveyed some of the frustration at the beginning of our lockdown last spring (see Fig. 13).



**Figure 13: "Gorge of Anathema" by Trevor Arseneau**

This semester I'm teaching an intermediate course and tried out [Knightlab's Timeline](#), an elegant tool for chronological projects. Although Timeline was not as straightforward as the other Knightlab software we've used, once students got past the learning curve and the Excel spreadsheet interface, the projects turned out quite well. The spreadsheet makes it simple to add images, media, and text, change font and background color, etc. A short publishing process, consisting of copying the link to the Timeline website, provides a permanent URL. This is one of the great things about StoryMap and Scene as well, students do not have to worry about publishing to and maintaining their own domain space, the projects are already hosted. This project, Caroline Goodwin's "My Year of Covid: a 2020 Timeline" (see Fig. 14), documents her experience during Covid, similar to "A Mess of Emotions," with news clips and personal stories, including participation in a Black Lives Matter protest. Students in this class are currently busy with meaningful and imaginative final projects in multiple platforms (Twine, ThingLink, Google Earth, and Knightlab's StoryMap and Scene), as well as students in the introductory class composing the final "connections" projects in Twine and ThingLink.

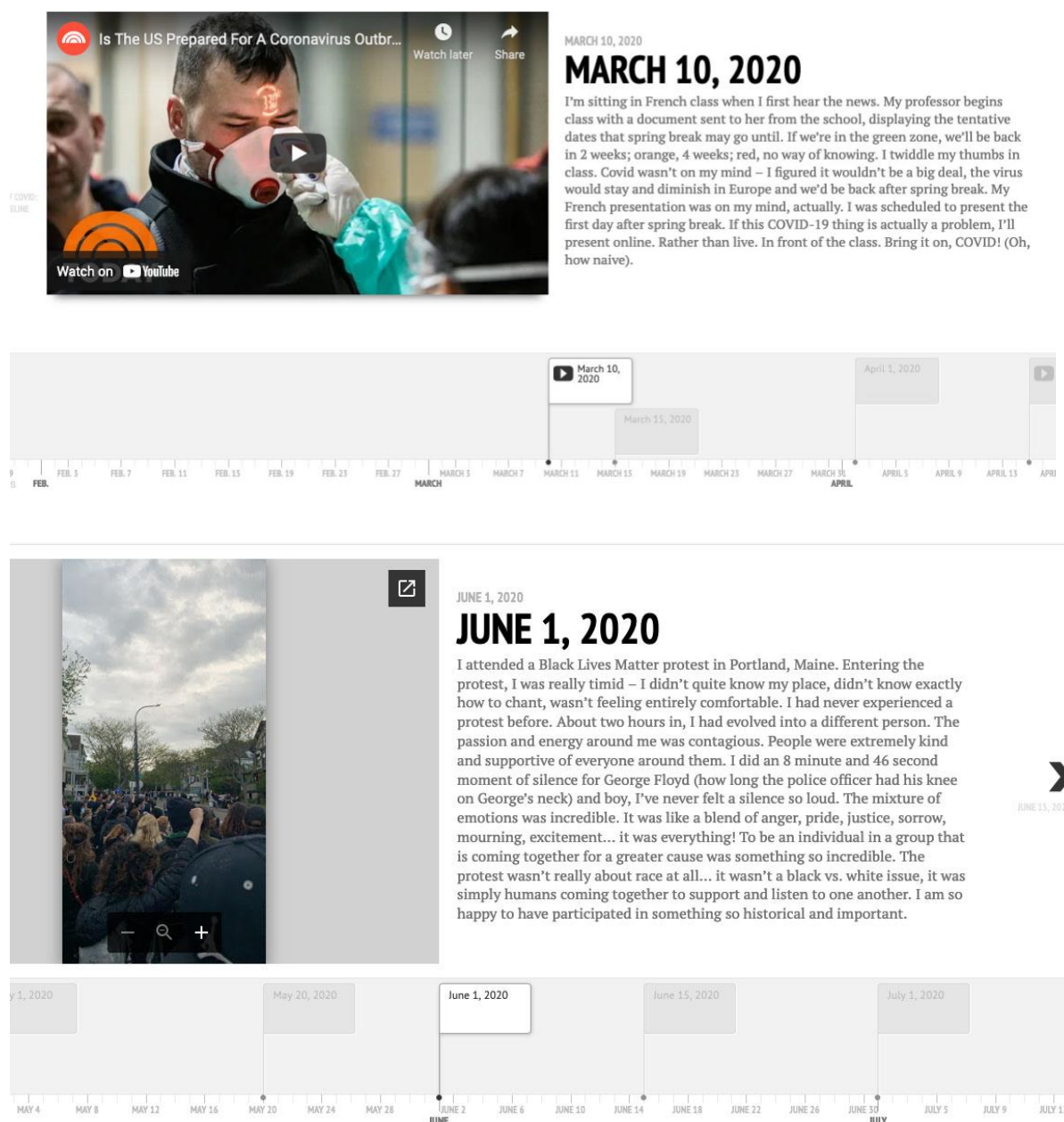


Figure 14: Screenshots from “My Year of Covid: a 2020 Timeline” by Caroline Goodwin

## Conclusion

The simplicity of the software has allowed these new digital swimmers to delve deeper into the platforms’ potential and their subject matter. Daniel Anderson discusses the benefits of introducing students to unfamiliar technologies in his article, “From a Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures”: “engaging technical things comes with a bigger

payoff. Experimenting with unfamiliar technologies can facilitate a sense of creativity that can lead to motivation” (363). This is particularly significant in creative writing, where exploring the creative affordances of the media seems to extend to the words, the topics, and the stories as themselves. Students learn technical skills as they compose, often from each other. Digital platforms, these “unfamiliar technologies,” often take them out of their comfort zone, which seems to spark more creativity, thinking outside the norms of a print essay, and a deeper and more thoughtful self-expression. They currently seem to be thinking and writing from a deeper social perspective too, shining through the cracks caused by this time of upheaval, intent on healing this broken society.

As Davin Heckman asks in his article, “Inventing Pedagogies for Electronic Literature”: “Can electronic literature open up a critical perspective on society during a period of radical historical upheaval?” (277). Let’s hope so. Seeing/playing/participating in new immersive and mobile works from the [National Film Board of Canada](#), like “Far Away from Far Away,” “Bubble,” and “Motto,” and work like “Yesterday Today and Tomorrow” and “Infinite Worries Bash” in the Fall issue of [The New River Journal](#) that are collaborative voices—political, social, and personal, my students are feeling connected and a part of the current zeitgeist. There is very much a feeling of we are all in this together. The projects the students are composing, what would be categorized as “Third Generation E-lit,” that “builds upon existing forms” and “adopts existing interfaces” (Flores 38), are still bursting with originality and creativity, perhaps the form even broadening the creative scope of their ideas. These accessible platforms enable expression, particularly of marginalized voices, as Twine has been used widely in the LGBTQ+ community, while also providing potential for exploring virtual spaces with minimal technology. As Anne Frances Wysocki says in *Writing New Media*, “When someone makes an object that is both separate from her but that shows how she can use the tools and materials of her time, then she can see a possible self—a self positioned and working within the wide material conditions of her world, even shaping that world—in that object” (21). These student projects show how less technical, more accessible plat(form)forms can be used to create political, diverse, and deeply personal narratives, allowing digital learners to shape their worlds and add their voices to the world of e-lit.

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