# All the web’s a stage

## In the leadup to BLEED 2020, Dr Robert Reid investigates how live performance transitions online and suggests that the performing arts could learn a lot from online games and YouTube.

Now, stop me if you’ve heard this one.

Q: Why did the professional late night TV talk show hosts struggle so badly with the transition to broadcasting from home during the lockdown? A: Because there’s no substitute for a live audience.

In the first weeks of the global COVID-19 lockdown, I was fascinated to watch as seasoned performers as Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon and Seth Myers clumsily rebooted their shows in a format that YouTubers have been successfully working for over a decade. The late night hosts seemed at first shell shocked and lost in their final broadcasts from their empty studios, broadcasting what seemed more like backstage footage from rehearsals than the slick productions of only a night before.

They followed this with several weeks of faltering attempts to carry on the talk show format, intended for performance in front of a live studio audience, that has been honed over decades of broadcast. The awkward, laugh-free pauses between jokes in opening monologues while they instinctively wait for an audience reaction that’s never going to come, the grindingly stilted inclusion of their families into sketches and the woeful production values (can somebody please send Jimmy Fallon a DSLR and a ring light) all point to a fundamental difference between making performance work designed for the internet and using the internet to just broadcast performance work designed for a present audience. That difference being the conceptualisation of the audience itself.

In the wake of the shutdown’s impact on the live performing arts community, a spate of articles and opinion pieces flooded the internet describing the suddenly urgent seeming need for live performance and cultural production to transition to online delivery. [Annie Armstrong writing for Artsy noted](https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-museums-curators-artists-find-innovative-solutions-showing-art-pandemic) that “as the bored and art-deprived masses are itching to get back into art spaces … online tours seem to be gaining in popularity. In fact, the hashtag #MuseumFromHome has been circulating on social media since local governments have been advising quarantine, with museums tweeting the different ways people at home can see their works.”

[Barbara Stcherbatcheff observed on weforum that](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/art-artists-creative-covid19-coronavirus-culture-community/) “American children's book illustrator and artist Carson Ellis started a quarantine art club on Instagram with daily assignments for people stuck at home. Musicians from the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra embraced technology to record a virtual rendition of Beethoven's Ode to Joy from their homes.” In the *New York Times,* Matt Wolf [argued for the shrinking of live performance even after the return from lockdown](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/theater/theater-after-lockdown.html): “Not only could social distancing be applied during rehearsals, but fewer performers means lower costs, and therefore somewhat less pressure to fill an auditorium… this might be just the moment to revisit Alan Bennett’s *Talking Heads*, the octogenarian writer’s wounding and funny monologues, originally written for TV, but also seen onstage on both sides of the Atlantic. This week, the BBC announced it would broadcast a new season of the 10 classic soliloquies…” Not exactly my idea of contemporary online performance.

In response to the lockdown the National Theatre, the Soho, the Globe and others in the UK began streaming recorded and archived versions of recent hit productions. Here in Melbourne, the Melbourne Theatre Company and Malthouse Theatre launched online initiatives (that should, realistically, have already been part of their artistic output), streaming a series of new monologues written and performed in response to and under the constraints of the lockdown. Of course, watching these at home is not the same thing as being in the room with the show itself and it’s commonplace to note how theatre doesn’t translate well to video (even with the high production values that the NT or MTC can bring to bear.)

Drs Ioannis Tsioulakis and Ali Fitzgibbon [are less sanguine about this rush to stream live performance during the pandemic](http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/performing-artists-in-the-age-of-covid-19/).

As various degrees of ‘lockdown’ measures are being introduced across Europe and internationally, online domains have seen a rise in freely available art and performances. This is nowhere more prolific and noticeable than through live social media streams, with artists all over the world seemingly eager to broadcast themselves in impromptu or recorded performances, usually for no compensation…This tendency to oversupply culture work as an antidote to crisis (let’s call it a creative generosity) is welcome insofar as it highlights the benefits of art and performance in times of distress and isolation. At the same time, this practice risks normalising the widespread idea that artists are performing a free service to which “consumers” are entitled.

[Nicholas Berger is even more pessimistic](https://medium.com/%40nicholasberger/the-forgotten-art-of-assembly-a94e164edf0f):

As my inbox floods with more emails of plays being read by housebound celebrities over social media, I wonder how much thought has gone into these ideas. Are we not just grabbing at the closest, easiest, most obvious solutions? “You know what we normally do? Yeah, just do that, but on Facebook Live.” I find there to be a great sadness to these kinds of endeavours. At their best these projects may serve as a momentary distraction from the mounting, unimaginable destruction outside our windows, but at their all too often worst, they serve as a constant reminder of the superiority and the irreplaceability of the very art form they are so desperately trying to recreate.

Beyond [the industrial concerns of how artists are paid for the digital reproduction of their work](https://witnessperformance.com/pause-and-think-before-you-rush-online/) and the impact its free distribution will have on the expectations of “consumers”, the real problem here is that live theatre as we have known it for thousands of years, has – like the late shows – been developed to serve a particular relationship with its viewers that is shaped by its environments. In short, the few speaking to the many in a space where the many can respond as one.

A stand-up comedian tells a joke and the audience laughs. A director shapes an astonishing moment for the actors to perform and the audience gasps. A footballer scores an impossible goal and the spectators cheer. This relationship between the watcher and the watched is crucial to live performance and simply cannot be recreated effectively in broadcast form. At best it can be simulated, with laugh tracks on sitcoms and studio audiences that are as much a part of the broadcasters ‘art form as the host.

Perhaps this is the reason that the traditional performing arts have been so reticent to explore the internet as a performance space for so long. Perhaps we’ve been suspicious of a medium that looks very close to our form but in reality is subtly different in important ways that undermine the very live relationship we rely on.

Live performance is structured like a ritual. It has its socially enforced rules and expectations that give shape to its meaning, its procedure and its reception. Only a few people can speak and act, many more can watch and react. The physical spaces in which it is enacted are constructed to amplify this transaction so that everyone can play their part. This is not the case with online spaces. Platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Tik Tok and so on are conceptually similar to public forums like the theatre or the town square, but they are also shaped by their own unique architectures and demands. They are accessed from private spaces, singular nodes in a network. To a limited extent, they also provide a more open space for discourse between the performance and the audience.

The connection between performance and audience is far more nebulous online than it is in a theatre. The attention span of an audience is not constrained by the strict dictates of performance. There’s no dimming of the lights to tell everyone to shush because the show is about to begin. There’s no expectation that an audience will all be watching at the same time. Instead, there are layers of participation and observation that cocoon the online performance, as viewers encounter a work in real time or at a remove of days, months or years. It’s still possible for instance to watch [Geriatric1927 (Peter Oakley, “the internet grandad”](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9pKXHIbEZXelvUgyNIStMw)) share his childhood memories even though he passed in 2014. It’s still possible to listen to the nefarious goings on in [*Night Vale*](http://www.welcometonightvale.com/) from the first episode, as if it were being broadcast for the first time. The traces of online performance linger with a greater solidity than the ephemeral experiences offered by live performance in the physical world. They echo far more loudly and can continue to remain active for years in comments sections and reaction videos.

All this is to say the live performance in digital spaces cannot simply remake live performance in the physical space. It’s a fundamentally different thing, offering its own affordances and challenges.

Online performance isn’t limited by the physical demands of live performance, it’s not constrained to location, duration or participation. Arguably its potential for collective participation in a performance and its ability to curate and coordinate communities is one of its greatest strengths, and the biggest difference from traditional live performance. The lockdown has highlighted some of these. Videos of the citizens of Italy singing together from their balconies or the musicians of Orchestre National de France coming together on Zoom to play the Bolero circulated on Facebook in the first days of the pandemic, but these are barely the tip of the iceberg in terms of what is possible.

For instance, in the early years of YouTube the [vlogger ZeFrank](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVpankR4HtoAVtYnFDUieYA) used his channel to experiment with collaborative performance generation with contributions from his audience He asked them to send in clips of themselves singing, or photos of themselves doing specific actions, which he edited together and shared back with them. These fairly rudimentary participatory tasks inspired the [Vlog Brothers (Hank and John Green)](https://www.youtube.com/vlogbrothers) to turn to their own community of subscribers – dubbed the nerdfighers – towards not only making performance projects together but to regularly raising money with the annual [Project for Awesome and Pizzamas](https://projectforawesome.tumblr.com/post/133242180967/happy-pizzamas).

Still more interesting – to me at least – is the potential for these online spaces and participatory performances to intersect with performance in the physical world. For decades now there have been online storytelling and puzzle solving communities drawn together by [Alternate Reality Games](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternate_reality_game) (or ARGs) such as those that can be found on [unfiction.com](https://www.unfiction.com/) and [ARGNet](https://www.argn.com/). These are online narrative experiences that are spread out over different purpose-built websites. They can often involve puzzles or events to be encountered in the physical world, in which participants take on roles according to the narrative of the game – investigators or self-generated characters – in variously limited role playing capacities. In online [Live Role Playing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Live_action_role-playing_game) communities, players perform for each other and themselves, and the stories can stretch on for years and out across the globe, shifting over time in response the changing makeup of the participants. These are liminal narrative spaces that are communally generated in which the actions of players can become legends and myth “in world”, in much the same way as the Ancient Greek epic poems and plays transformed a combination of history, politics and rumour into *The Iliad* and *The Oresteia*.

Finally, I want to make a bold assertion about the participation of amateurs in the creation of online verses traditional performance. This is a point I’ve made before, in my [platform paper Hello World](https://www.bookdepository.com/Platform-Papers-27-Hello-World-Robert-Reid/9780980798241?ref=grid-view&qid=1576252859161&sr=1-472), but it bears repeating now, nearly 10 years later. In that monograph I outlined the potential the internet has for archiving and promoting the performing arts as well as becoming a collaborative platform. In the intervening years a lot of work has been done to address the archiving and promotion aspects ([AusStage](https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/browse/) is still one of the world’s leading databases of performance history and TheatreAlive was an important platform for promoting local independent theatre before it was shut down) but the recognition of the internet as a potential stage for a new, communal approach to performance has, for the most part, lagged behind.

Amateur participation in the cultural practice of making live performance is vital to the continuing existence of professional live performance. In 1906, the American composer John Phillip Sousa made an [impassioned argument for copyright protection](https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/music-and-theater-arts/21m-380-music-and-technology-contemporary-history-and-aesthetics-fall-2009/readings-and-listening/MIT21M_380F09_read02_sousa.pdf), *The Menace of Mechanical Music.*

Right here is the menace in machine-made music! The first rift in the lute has appeared. The cheaper of these instruments of the home are no longer being purchased as formerly, and all because the automatic music devices are usurping their places. And what is the result? The child becomes indifferent to practice, for when music can be heard in the homes without the labour of study and close application, and without the slow process of acquiring a technique, it will simply be a question of time when the amateur disappears entirely…. Under such conditions the tide of amateurism cannot but recede, until there will be left only the mechanical device and the professional executant.

Beside concerns about his income, Sousa worried that, as amateur participation in the production of music declined, so too would a general literacy in music. In a similar vein, participation in local sporting clubs is a key element of the enduring popularity of professional sports in Australia. Before the lockdown, it was common to see amateur football, cricket and tennis matches on weekends or players training on week nights. By participating as an amateur, players have a lived experience of the game and develop a fluency in the form that enables closer identification and engagement with the professional levels of the sport. The same might be said about amateur pub bands and the professional Australian music industry. In contrast, participation in live theatre and dance is much more limited – often relegated to weekend activities for children – and there is a sharp disconnect between the amateur theatre community (such as it is) and the professional theatre.

I would argue that the industrial gap left by the devastation of the mid-range/independent performing arts, caused by the devastating funding cuts of 1987 and again in 2015, give professional performance makers a crucial opportunity to reach out and include their audiences in the creation and performance process. It’s not the same as having a fully operational and supported mid-range performing arts sector, but it might be an important bridging tool to start healing some of the divisions that keep the performing arts in this country siloed from each other, too easy to dismiss as an indulgence of elites and too vulnerable to the depredations of government funding cuts.

To make work that achieves all this will require more than simply filming performances and whacking them up on line. As the TV talk show hosts demonstrated under lockdown, they’re not the same thing. How we engage with our audience, how we imagine them and include them, has to change according to the relationship offered by the spaces we perform in. This digital space offers everyone in the room more freedom than a theatre or a concert hall, where the social enforcement of expected behaviour is as strict as any social distancing measure. If live performance is to succeed online, it needs to seize this moment to connect with its audiences and include them in the creative process.

We can be much more than just a laugh track.

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