

The New Media Writing Prize 2022 Winners: “Anonymous Animal”, “Future is Uncertain, Memory is Real”, and “Penrose Station”

Vencedores do New Media Writing Prize 2022: “Anonymous Animal”, “Future is Uncertain, Memory is Real” e “Penrose Station”

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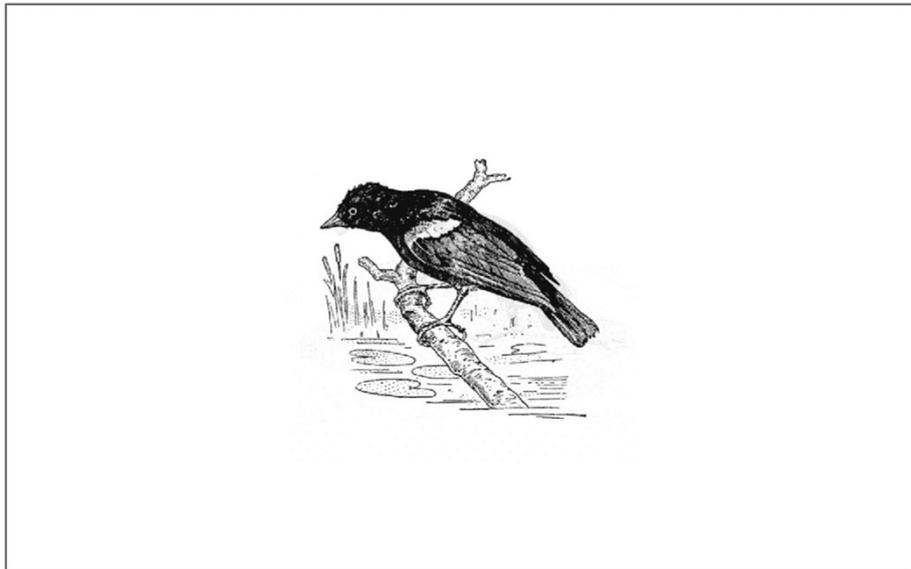
The New Media Writing Prize, an international award that “encourages and promotes the best in new-media writing” (New Media Writing Prize 2010), was founded in 2010 for the first (and only) Poole Literature Festival. Now in its 13th year, the prize has grown in size, with new awards established for digital journalism and student entries, and notoriety, following the creation of an archival collection with the British Library.

On January 18th 2023, this year’s winners were announced via a virtual ceremony. In this review, the winning entries of panel-voted categories—the Main Prize, the Digital Journalism Prize, and the Student Prize—will be discussed.

Chris Meade Memorial Main Prize — *Anonymous Animal*

Winner of the Main Prize category, *Anonymous Animal* is a hypermedia poem created by Everest Pipkin. Durational in nature, it runs every hour, on the hour, for a total of fifteen minutes. During this time, any visitor on the page will be taken on a narrated exploration of the web via an embedded iFrame, which displays a variety of pages, files, database entries, and livestreams.

anonymous animal
active every hour, on the hour, for fifteen minutes
ask a loved one to meet you here in 5 minutes and 51 seconds



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[animals.html](#)

Image 1

Anonymous Animal between sessions, displaying a countdown to the next session above an animated GIF in its iFrame. | © Everest Pipkin

Described by the author as an “elegy for the era of cross-origin browser requests and off-site embeddable media” (Pipkin 2022), *Anonymous Animal*’s exploration is one part introspection on the evolution of the internet and its user behaviour, one part lament on the loss of Web 1.0. This is established early within the text via a consideration of what it means to be online as an action—a behaviour mostly lost today, when device ubiquity has blurred the line between ‘online’ and ‘offline’—and how the current, more possessive attitude towards the web is leading to loss of content. Indeed, the text embraces this ephemerality not only in its format—the anachronistic iFrame—but directly in its prose: “did that video even still load?”—asks the narrator, at one point—“or was it lost since i wrote this? in not too many years, this conversation will be a series of 404s” (Pipkin 2022). An astute observation, given that several pages and files were unable to be displayed as early as February 2023.

The core themes of *Anonymous Animal*, however, are community and “copenessence at the end of the world” (Pipkin 2022). Pipkin weaves these thematic threads deftly through the textual mode, but it’s their use of the gestural that truly draws attention to the internet’s unique ability to simultaneously bring about connection while furthering individual isolation. Throughout the text the narrator asks the reader to interact with the iFrame content—whether this be by clicking various points on images, following the movement of an animal in recorded footage, or selecting a link—until the culmination of the piece, where the narrator attempts a protracted interaction with the reader(s): “if we both rest our hand on the statue, if we both rest our hand on the mouse on the cursor on the statue, can you feel me touching?” (Pipkin 2022) This moment lingers long after the poem ends, eliciting a wistfulness for a version on the internet that never was and may never be.

Anonymous Animal is a welcome addition to works of digital metaliterature—a self-conscious form of literature that comments on itself—with the piece’s approach to its topic and use of external assets similar to those of J. R. Carpenter’s *The Gathering Cloud* (2016), a hypermedia piece on the environmental impact of cloud computing. Unlike Carpenter’s piece, however, which uses animated collages to build multiple, boundary-breaking layers upon a central focal image, *Anonymous Animal* is characterised by author Everest Pipkin’s minimalist aesthetic. This sees its iFrame content framed by a stark white background, while the text above renders in a black serif font to match the early web homage of the piece.

Digital Journalism Award — *Future is Uncertain, Memory is Real: Virtual Museum of the Prison Camp Stalag 352 in Minsk, Belarus*

Future is Uncertain, Memory is Real, created by Media-Lab Glagol in conjunction with the Belarusian Touristic Union and the EVZ Foundation, is a non-fiction hypermedia memorial dedicated to Stalag 352, a Nazi-operated prisoner of war camp located in Minsk, Belarus. A work of two halves, *Future is Uncertain, Memory is Real* contains both a

loose, chronological multimedia narrative of the camp's time in operation and a repository of supporting information, which includes historical documents and photographs, artifacts recovered from and photographs of the camp, writing on notable inmates, and a searchable prisoner database.

The narrative landing page of *Future is Uncertain, Memory is Real* is what allows this work to stand apart from other digital holocaust memory projects, as it immediately thrusts readers into a recounting of historical events that takes full advantage of new media capabilities. This is best seen in the work's use of multimodal communication, particularly in the choice to have its first-hand witness accounts interwoven into the narrative by the aural and visual modes. Used in this way, the testimonies—a combination of clips from historical survivor interviews and actor recreations of written documents—create a greater emotional impact than the segregated, textual alternatives displayed in earlier memory projects like *Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory* (Byford 2008). This allows reader empathy to enter and lead the user experience.

Future is Uncertain, Memory is Real's narrative is split into four sections, one for each of the years Stalag 352 was in operation. Each one is introduced by a short video that combines the aural accounts with historical documentation, footage of the site as it currently stands, and hand-drawn, minimalistic animation. After each year is introduced, users may explore further into mentioned topics via a series of modal overlays. These topics cover a number of subjects, including prisoners' diets and escape attempts, and take a variety of formats, from videos and photographs of artifacts through to illustrations, all with accompanying text.

The menus for these modal windows are formed by photographs of a variety of cut tree branches, each bearing an inmate number. These are part of the distinct, visual identity of the piece, which draws inspiration from the “living and relatively young witnesses to the tragedy of Stalag” (Media-Lab Glagol 2022); the pine trees that remained on the site when it was constructed. Appearances of these trees in numerous ways—including recent video footage, illustrations of tree-rings, and the haunting melody of wooden wind chimes—tie together not only the narrative section of the text but the site as a whole, evoking a reverent and sombre atmosphere. This mood is heightened by Media-Lab Glagol's choice in colour palette; greyscale with subtle, earthen accents.

When compared to its spiritual predecessor, fellow hypermedia holocaust memorial *A Visit to Staro Sajmište* (Raedle 2012), *Future is Uncertain, Memory is Real* demonstrates the impact technological progression can make on new media writing. With multimedia now capable of being integrated from a foundational level, readers are provided with a more engaging piece and a clearer insight into the psychological impact the events of World War II had on those who survived them. As a result, survivor's stories can be more keenly remembered.

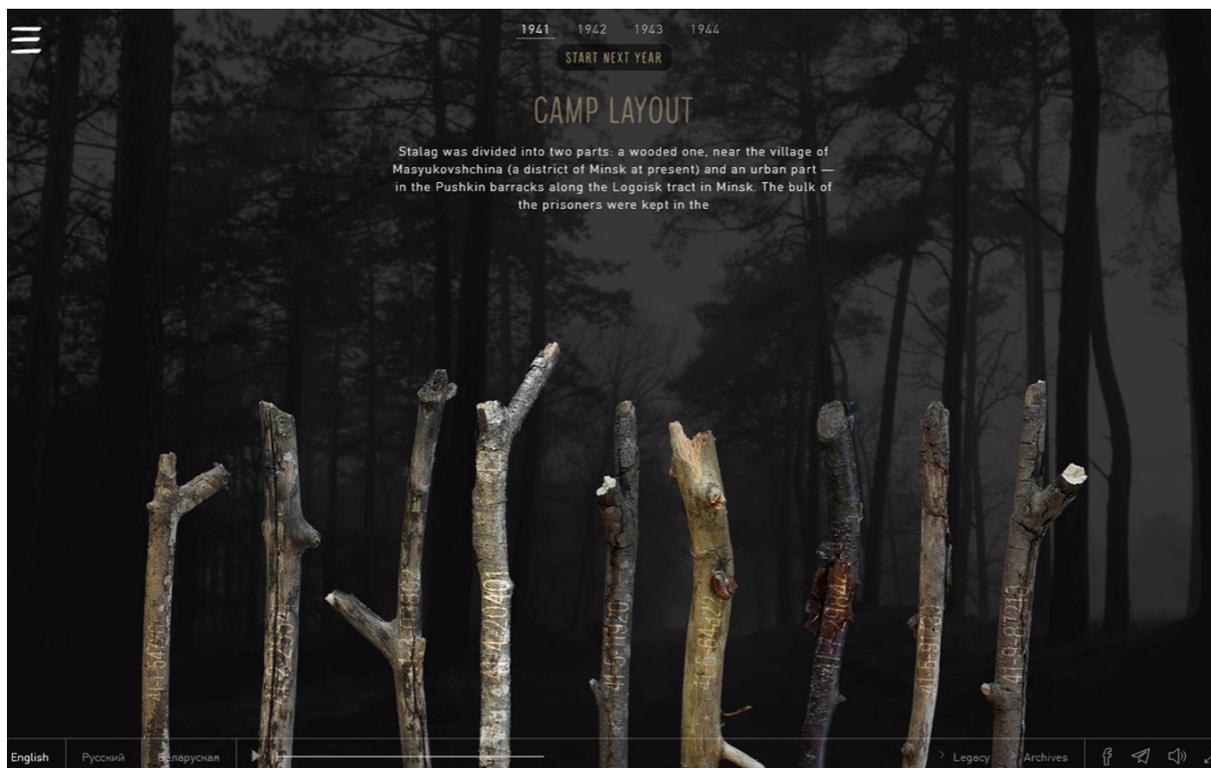


Image 2

Menu page for the 1941 section of *Future is Uncertain, Memory is Real*'s chronological narrative, showing the modal selection menu | © Media-lab Glagol

Student Award — *Penrose Station*

Winner of the Student Award, *Penrose Station* is a virtual reality (VR) narrative in the science-fiction mystery genre, developed by Kathryn Yu—whose prior work *Heirloom* (2002), a first-person exploration game co-authored by Abby Sherlock, was short-listed for the 2020 Main Prize.

In *Penrose Station*, the player takes on the role of Unit 702, a support technician working for an unnamed research operation in 2096 (Yu 2022) who is sent to the titular research facility after its artificial intelligence (AI) system begins sending multiple error reports. Once aboard, the player finds the station both unoccupied and inoperable, leaving them to complete a series of lightweight puzzle challenges to bring back full functionality and uncover the mystery behind its missing occupants.

A discussion within the narrative of the “pretty messy” (Penrose Station, 2022) love triangle in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* acts as a thematic anchor point for *Penrose Station* as its narrative explores the relationship between Parker, one of the station’s researchers, and DANNI, the “Deterministic Autonomous Neural Network Interface” or AI overlay responsible for maintaining station functionality. Key among these themes are the concepts of autonomy and consent, two topics that have become increasingly popular in mainstream debate following the integration of algorithms into justice systems late into the last decade:

“Parker. There is a high probability that you are in danger. According to the Brooks-Broad Algorithm, the chances of your situation escalating into violence are—’
‘Christ, DANNI, life doesn’t obey a fucking algorithm.’”¹

The text handles these issues with nuance, playing not only on the power imbalances between Parker and DANNI but between Parker and Cameron, Parker’s fellow researcher and lover, as their relationship deteriorates and becomes abusive. This culminates in a powerful narrative climax where the player—until now a passive audience to the events that have transpired—must make a final, ethically complex decision on DANNI’s fate against a countdown.



Image 3

In-game view of Penrose Station, facing the central display. The station’s systems, which make up the game’s puzzles, encircle it. | © Kathryn Yu.

The piece’s visuals are polished and clean, with a cohesive visual identity that ties its settings together. Particular attention has been paid to interactable objects throughout the station’s environment, with each one either elevating the narration given or furthering it, and the use of primary colours to highlight in-world textual artifacts and puzzles greatly aids navigation of the space.

¹ *Penrose Station* [game, digital file] Kathryn Yu, USA, 2022.

Penrose Station joins a growing number of virtual reality works released within the realm of new media writing. Where it differs from its predecessors and contemporaries, however, is in its more frequent use of audial communication over textual, which is only sparingly used on in-world objects and display devices. This sets *Penrose Station* apart from the majority of VR works currently well-known within the field, such as the Mez Breeze and BradField Narrative Designs collaboration *Inanimate Alice: Perpetual Nomads* (2018), which centre the textual mode within their environments. This choice works to *Penrose Station*'s benefit, as the voice actors convey distinct but subtle emotions that may have been lost if left to the player's interpretation of the text.

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Biographical note

Tegan Pyke is a PhD candidate in Digital Culture at the University of Bergen, Norway. Her research lies in the realm of digital literature, focusing on its design, archival, canonisation, and the differences between institutional versus community practice. In 2021, she worked with the British Library formulating a quality assurance process for the New Media Writing Prize archival collection.

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