UC Santa Cruz
Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

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Author
Editorial Board, Refract Journal

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Introduction

As a journal founded by graduate students in one of the few visual studies programs in the United States, *Refract* has always sought to consider its own role within its relatively new and often-contested disciplinary field. This focus on the possibilities and limitations of visual studies methodologies is exemplified by our Voices of Visual Studies section, an ongoing, cross-volume conversation between diverse practitioners. However, we have had fewer discussions about the implications of our open access digital publication method, despite the fact that such a format also represents a relatively novel approach to scholarly production. While *Refract*'s founding editors debated the merits and drawbacks of digital publication, the majority of our conversations in subsequent years have centered on the goal of increasing accessibility: our digital team has worked to ensure that *Refract*'s format is compatible with evolving screen reader technology and that we are producing effective alt text, for example.

Recent funding from The Humanities Institute (THI) at our home campus, the University of California, Santa Cruz, has given us an opportunity to extend these preliminary efforts and deepen our understanding of the stakes of digital publishing by producing a special supplement titled "Imagining the Future of Digital Publishing." We have invited a group of scholars and practitioners to share their perspectives on publishing scholarship digitally and the issues that might shape this endeavor in the near and distant future. The following questions served as initial lines of inquiry and provocation:

How do you view the relationship between digital publishing and peer review, or between self-publishing and peer review? Are there other ways to create and assess legitimacy and scholarly rigor in digital publication and self-publication spaces?

How can scholars measure the impact of their work in the digital realm as technologies evolve and transform? What are the potential impacts of shareability and virality on digital academic publishing?

How might digital publications include media beyond text? What opportunities or ways of reimagining the relationship between form and content are unique to digital publishing, and what risks or stigmas must those approaches contend with?

Although digital publications may seem less fragile than their analog counterparts, the infrastructure of computing and the cloud often results in shorter lifespans for born-digital content. How do digital publications interact with and alter the infrastructure of analog archives? How might digital publications be preserved into an indefinite future? What might the archives of digital publications look like ten, twenty, or fifty years from now?

Contributors were invited either to respond to these questions directly or to use them as a jumping-off point to explore related ideas, and we have received a wide range of thought-provoking responses. John Warren, director of the Master's in Publishing Program at the George Washington University, considers, among other things, the potential impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and publishers' use of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) to disrupt secondary markets for academic texts. In a reflection on her own experience publishing a digital monograph through an academic press, the Egyptologist and digital humanist Elaine Sullivan highlights the opportunities presented by multimedia scholarship, the preservation challenges that characterize such innovative work, and the potential for postpublication peer review to alleviate forms of academic gatekeeping. Katie Fortney, copyright policy and education officer at the California Digital Library (CDL), describes the challenges that writers face in obtaining permission to include copyrighted images in work published in digital and open access formats. She offers an overview of the impact of these hurdles on academic freedom and how a better understanding of fair use law may provide a way forward for researchers from a wide range of backgrounds. In a collaborative contribution, Justin Gonder, rachel lee, and Charlotte Roh—also of the California Digital Library—point out the increased accessibility and values-based publication decisions that open access publishing makes possible, while gesturing toward the important steps that eScholarship and the CDL are taking to archive and preserve digital materials and publications like *Refract* for the long-term future.

Daniel Story, digital scholarship librarian, and Martha Stuit, scholarly communication librarian—both of UC Santa Cruz—also share their insights collaboratively. With backgrounds encompassing self-, academic, and commercial publishing, Story and Stuit offer specific examples of innovative peer review practices while inviting us to reevaluate terms like *impact*, which are often assumed to be inherently positive. They note the limitations of metrics, an ambivalence toward virality, the question of authorial intent, and crucial issues of labor and access. Labor and access are recurrent themes in a contribution by Cosette Bruhns Alonso, contemporary publishing fellow at the Center for Research Data and Digital Scholarship and the University of Pennsylvania Press, who speaks to the multimodal capabilities of digital publishing and highlights the unequal distribution of access to resources for producing digital scholarship across academic networks. In so doing, she concludes that digital publishing is uniquely positioned to address issues of access and equity while transforming the boundaries of traditional scholarship. In a reflection on previous volumes of *Refract*, our founding managing editor Kate Korroch highlights the ways in which the journal's born-digital format has contributed to its mission of foregrounding methodologically innovative scholarship.

Taken together, the contributions to the "Imagining the Future of Digital Publishing" special supplement inspire continued experimentation and reflection on the intersection of form and content in the still-emerging digital publishing space. We invite the continuation of the conversation begun here and anticipate the addition of new ideas and perspectives in the years to come.