



Interactive, live poetry performance @ TEDxLSU 2016

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How do you experience poetry? Why can't we listen, feel, and write poetry collaboratively? What would happen if you could experience not only the words of a poem but also the sounds and even add your own words to the mix? These are just some of the questions one group of 2016 TEDxLSU presenters hoped to explore in the interactive poetry experience during the event.

The poem "Diamonds in Dystopia" was a visual, musical, and imaginative journey in which the audience added to the poem during the live performance with an interactive live-streaming poetry web app. But as we ask *why* interactive poetry, we want to know how this poem and the interactive app were constructed.

Recently, I connected with performer and [CxC](#) Art + Design Coordinator [Vincent A. Cellucci](#), so that he could explain how this piece was created.

What audience members may not know is that this piece was created from a sampling of several of Vincent's favorite TED talks as well as transcripts from this year's TEDxLSU speakers. Vincent used an algorithm called Markov chains to cull words and themes from these TED and TEDxLSU talks to generate lines of text. Then, as a poet, Vincent arranged these lines into stanzas with clear structures. Vincent called this process "found text" since he used words from various TED and TEDx talks to get the language for the poem to create his own piece.

Normally, this is where the creative process would end, but "Diamonds in Dystopia" takes the writing process one step further, asking "readers" to become "writers." At TEDxLSU, attendees also added their own lines to Vincent's poem.

How did this work? [Jesse Allison](#), Professor of Experimental Music, and [Derick Ostrenko](#), Professor of Digital Art, with poetic input from Vincent, created an app that uses advanced coding techniques that pulls found text (just like Vincent's poem) from transcripts of TED Talks to accomplish a process they refer to as "creative data mining." Attendees connected to the web app to access the poem on their phone. When they saw a word they liked during the performance, they clicked it. When they did this, a voice repeated the word with a unique pitch from each phone. Each word they clicked on was run through the Markov chains against approximately 2,500 TED Talks to create four lines which Vincent added seamlessly into the poem he was delivering on stage—talk about instant gratification! These lines, built from the combination of the audience selecting words and their relationships to former TED talks, project on the screen during the performance and essentially write a new poem particular to the TEDxLSU individual performance.

During this performance, the audience experienced the poem visually on their phones, physically as each person clicked on the words, and musically as each click emitted a certain pitch unique to their user connection. And, by interacting with the poem, the audience engaged more fully their imaginations. In this performance, Vincent hoped to show the audience that poetry is still thriving today and more than that we can use everyday technology, like our phones, to be creative.

Vincent says, "Poetry is an experience of sound, and it's a visual experience in the imagination." And for Vincent, this poetry experience is "about how you feel in the moment, the associations that it brings up in your mind. It's an imaginative activity. I hope that it is a revolution for what people think contemporary poetry really is."

There was a little bit of something for everyone in this performance. Whether you enjoy poetry, music, digital media, or simply stretching your imagination muscles, you would enjoy "Diamonds in Dystopia." Want to continue the experiment? Check out [tedxlsu.emdm.io](#) and join Vincent, Jesse and Derick as we dive into the questions of why poetry, why digital media, and why not now together.

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