

# **CREATING A FRAMEWORK FOR LOW-BARRIER MEDIA ARTS ACCESS: DCN**

**Report Sept 7, 2023**

For Digital Creator North

Written by Rebecca Watson

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# **I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report focuses on Phase 2 (2021-2022) of the Near North Mobile Media Lab (N2M2L) Digital Strategy Fund grant 'Public Access to the Arts and Citizen Engagement.'

COVID forced us to look at how we deliver our goals of supporting digital media arts in Northern Ontario. When COVID hit, our Digital Creator North (DCN) spaces closed, and phase 2 had to be reimaged. We hired an outside researcher, to lead us through this process. After months of desk research, interviews, participatory action research, and engaging with our partners we created our own online DCN space, called DGTL Creator Online. The following outlines activities and lessons learned through prototyping, testing, and evaluating the project.

### **Goal**

Our goal for phase 2 was to design an inclusive and resilient online space that met the requirements of placemaking partners and digital creators living in Northern Ontario.

### **Assumptions**

1. Our design for the digital space was based on our assumptions about the value of interacting with digital media art in a physical space. We prioritized making this possible in a safe place for youth to Hang Out, Mess Around, and Geek Out (HOMAGO) within a community library or gallery.
2. The partners wanted/ needed a continuation of the opportunities that DCN was providing in situ.
3. Youth wanted/ needed a continuation of the opportunities that DCN was providing in situ.

### **What We Did**

To help us reach our goals of creating an online space that had the same ethos as our physical spaces, we hired a lead researcher with ethnography, business innovation, strategic foresight, interactive media, and design experience. We hired two emerging artists as programming research facilitators for twelve-month engagements. We also spent months working with youth to co-design activities in the virtual space. This research team employed participatory action research, strategic foresight methods, interviews, surveys, desk research, and other design thinking tools for collecting and synthesizing data from participants, placemaking partners, and community-based arts organizations. This looked like focus groups with youth, members of the emerging arts community, and stakeholders representing

organizations that we would like to partner with. As a result of our research, we created an innovative online platform that aligned with the vision and values of DCN.

As part of the innovation journey, we investigated the feasibility and desirability of many web platforms, social media, and metaverse interfaces (Mozilla, Clubhouse Network, Minecraft Education, Gather.town, and Habbo Hotel). We wanted a space where youth could have that sense of ownership, a high level of comfort, to be relating to each other, create at their speed, and retain that casualness in our DCN physical spaces. We scanned for tools to try to replicate the spirit and interaction of the space and gathered a suite of free, easy-to-use web-based software that often focussed on collaborative digital creation. We chose to build the project in a virtual space called Gather.town, an emerging metaverse platform, because it had many of the features we needed, and the flexibility that we desired, including security protocols.



Images - events by DGTG Creator Online and Instagram posts for collaborations with partners

Gather.town is a metaverse with a pixel art aesthetic that allows people to build their own online 3D space and decorate their environment. Visitors can hang out in common areas, play games and attend hosted events.

- We offered online programming to the youth in Northern Ontario from September 17th, 2021 to the end of April 2022 in the form of 71 events, including digital media art workshops, one-on-one tutorial sessions, hang-out sessions, game nights and escape rooms
- Our sessions focussed on digital media art creation including creating music, drawing, emerging tech, book creating, animation, and interactive storytelling
- 47 digital media art events were offered directly to Northern Ontario youth
- 24 digital media art events were offered to youth in collaboration with regional partners
- We promoted events through our website and social media (Facebook, Instagram), our partners' social media, monthly calendars, emails to participants, and posters on location in those communities.
- We reached out to 50+ different organizations for knowledge sharing and partnership activities. This resulted in 44 attendees, 35 of which came through our collaboration with 10 different partners.

### **What We Collected**

At the end of this research phase, we have generated a database of diverse interactions that contextualize this innovative platform for digital media arts in Northern Ontario.

- We collected case studies of positive online interactions and informal learning from the work we did (Callander Public Library, OutLoud North Bay, Sault Ste Marie Public Library, The Northern Outlet, Timmins Public Library, Temiskaming Shores Public Library, Sioux Lookout Public Library, and Student Links)
- We did interviews and collected case studies of arts organizations affected by the pandemic (Listo America, SKETCH, Our World Language, YOUmedia, Thinking Rock)
- We documented ways that online programming encourages or discourages peer-to-peer collaboration and mentorship.
- We documented and compared adult (non-professional) digital media arts programs provided by community-based organizations, libraries, museums, and others across Northern Ontario, and internationally.
- We documented regional data on internet coverage, online accessibility (availability and barriers), access to computers, programs, and other tools and note how this impacts youth interaction with DGTL Creator Online.

### **What We Learned - Communities in the North**

The COVID era is greatly impacting the communities where we work within Northern Ontario. Their community gathering places and how people relate to each other have been severely disrupted. The pandemic is devastating arts organizations in Northern Ontario that do not have the resources or expertise to support their clients/members in a new way. As a result, many partner organizations lost connection with their communities, as did DCN. We thought that we could fulfill that gap in providing digital media arts programs for youth in these communities. Our partners liked our initiative and the opportunities we provided, but it didn't translate into the thriving community that we once had. When we launched the online space we had to find a different audience.

### **What We Learned - Youth in the North**

Our hypothesis was the DCN brand and pre-established relationships within communities would make an easy transition to a thriving online space, as a continuation of the vibe in the physical spaces. We found through desk research, interviews, and participatory action research that:

- Youth are hard to reach because they are in a world of constructed realities online, with many options on popular social media platforms.
- Youth are hard to build an ongoing relationship with for the same reason
- Youth have been in virtual schooling for months at a time and we sensed that they were burned out from learning online
- Youth being on screens can be a challenge in the home environment when devices are shared, or there is a value placed on time away from screens
- Youth prefer to be introduced to something new via a trusted source.

In the 18 months after our doors closed, the youth had lost touch with the bonds they created to the DCN physical spaces.

### **What We Learned - Online Participation**

Physical space does not easily translate to an online space. Some factors that encourage participation in a dedicated public space include the low/no-barrier access locations in a familiar place such as a community library. When the DGTL Creator Online site wasn't being staffed, people were not able to watch others having fun and learning. There was no "foot traffic" meaning that the online space didn't have a prominent position on a busy website where it would get lots of exposure. Some of the major barriers to participation in the online world also come from their living environment, such as: access to the Internet; needing to share devices with other members of the family; not having a space where they can be alone and enjoy some creative time. As a result, participation was below what we expected for reasons that are hard to overcome in comparison to the physical DCN spaces.

### **What We Learned - Resources**

What we realized after several months is that DGTL Creator Online needed a very different set of resources for running an online space. We documented barriers to emerging digital media artists in Northern Ontario that require a multi-stakeholder approach to support emerging artists. Many of the resources that we needed to be an asset to the community were already provided by partners before the COVID shutdowns. For example, the physical locations did not need an outreach personnel or significant exposure to events. We came to the realization that we needed to hire our own Community Liaison to increase our number of participants.

### **What We Learned - Security/ Trust**

Our greatest engagement with youth came through community organizations that the parents already had a relationship with. Our research uncovered that youth want safe spaces online and many have had negative experiences that make them unsure about trying new things. We invested a lot of effort in making sure both youth and parents were aware of the safety mechanisms we put in place (registration forms, parental consent for youth under 13, and an incident report form).

### **Conclusion**

In 2014, when this project began we had a clear foundation of what emerging artists need in Northern Ontario for digital media arts, based on research and community consultation. Fast forward eight years, and many of our learnings about tech, internet accessibility, and the ways people engage with digital media arts need to be revisited.

Our journey into the online world, because of the COVID pandemic, expanded our understanding of our value as an organization. We came to the conclusion that our institutional knowledge and experience is best suited to supporting organizations that would like to pilot their own in-person spaces based on the DCN model. In phase 3 we will develop a model for a regional network that supports media arts access in Northern Ontario by supporting organizations that want to open their own Digital Creator spaces.

We also came to understand that our Gather.town space is best suited to supporting and expanding the scope of in-person digital media arts programming. The beauty of what we created is that it can be used anywhere there is the internet, so future in-person DCN spaces can also benefit from our DGTL space, as well as the free, web-based apps, and low-barrier digital tools that we used within it.

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

### **PURPOSE STATEMENT**

The following outlines activities and lessons learned through prototyping, testing, and evaluating the project while also contributing to the larger body of research on experiences within Northern Ontario



and rural communities. Additionally, this document can also serve as a toolkit for other organizations who may seek to replicate the use of platforms or specific online events, workshops, and hangouts.

## TEAM BIOS

**Executive Director – Holly Cunningham** is an arts administrator and musician based in North Bay, Ontario who is currently the Executive Director of Creative Industries North Bay. She was formerly the Executive Director of the Near North Mobile Media Lab for 12 years. She is a graduate of Sheridan College's Media Arts program and holds a BA in Fine Arts from Nipissing University. Her former professional work focuses on bridging gaps in media arts access for artists in northern Ontario, specifically through her work on the Digital Creator North program. She has extensive experience working within the Arts Service Organization community within Ontario and Canada including seats on the board of the Independent Media Arts Alliance (IMAA), Film Advisory Committee of Cultural Industries North, the Media Arts Network of Ontario and as chair of Creative Industries North Bay from 2016-2021. In 2015, Holly was awarded the Emerging Cultural Leader award from Artist Run Centres and Collectives of Ontario.

**Program Coordinator – Sharon Switzer** is an artist, curator, arts educator, and producer. She has, since the early 1990s, exhibited her digital and video art widely across Canada and in the U.S, as well as at international art fairs with Corkin Gallery. Her curating focuses on bringing contemporary art to public spaces. She founded the not-for-profit curatorial organization Art for Commuters, and produced the Art in Transit program as well as the Toronto Urban Film Festival with Pattison Outdoor Media, offering artists an opportunity to show their work in the public spaces frequented by urban commuters. Switzer has an MFA from the University of Western Ontario, is a Graduate of the CFC Media Lab at the Canadian Film Centre. She is represented by Corkin Gallery, Toronto. In 2019 Switzer relocated to North Bay, Ontario and is currently the Executive Director of the Near North Mobile Media Lab.

**Lead Researcher – Maggie Greyson** MDes is an award-winning professional futurist and the CEO of Futures Present. This boutique agency helps people make decisions in times of

extreme uncertainty using design and futures thinking practices. Her first profession was in the theatre, where she spent a decade in the US, UK, and Canada winning awards for her set, lighting, and costume designs on stages like the Shakespeare's International Globe in London. She learned that creating a relationship with the audience is fundamental if a story is to have meaning. She continues to use design, scenarios, and fiction to transform lives. Experience with Fortune 100 companies in tech innovation and digital media helps her to understand what future-thinking mavericks need to be leaders in the 21st century. In addition, she supports the people who want to make a social impact through their work in the cultural sector, governments, universities, healthcare, tech, and non-profit organizations. Maggie is recognized as a leading futurist, on the Board of the Association of Professional Futurists, and a Fellow of the School of International Futures. In addition, she leads workshops on How to Think Like a Futurist.



**Programming Research Facilitator – Rebecca Watson** is an artist and academic using a feminist and Queer perspective to explore the intersection of themes such as sexuality, surveillance, religion, and digital realities. Her work — both written and within her arts practice — aims to challenge oppressive systems through education and awareness. She has run numerous public-facing lectures, including as an instructor for the Digital Arts Resource Centre’s Night School series in Ottawa. Rebecca is a PhD student in Communication and Culture at Toronto Metropolitan University where one of her research focuses is on the impact of the digital divide in Northern Ontario, and the role of small media arts centres in resilience-building. She has also continued her work as a freelance researcher, most recently building the virtual exhibition and social space for the 2023 Media Architecture Biennale – the world’s premier event on media architecture, urban interaction design, and urban informatics.

**Programming Research Facilitator – Tyler Cunningham** (he/they) is a Toronto-based percussionist, researcher, and new media artist. He has performed across the US and abroad in Europe and Asia premiering over fifty solo and chamber works, and he has performed at the Lucerne Festival (Lucerne, Switzerland), Musikfest Berlin (Berlin, Germany), the Composer’s Conference (Wellesley, MA), Atlantic Music Festival (Waterville, ME), the Fluxus Fest (NYC), Continuum’s HATCH (Toronto, ON), the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity (Banff, AB). He has also performed with the International Contemporary Ensemble (NYC), Contemporaneous (NYC), OS Ensemble (NYC), AXIOM (NYC), Distinguished Concerts International (NYC), the Tilikum Trio (Toronto, ON), Soundstreams (Toronto, ON), PROMPTUS (NYC), and NEL2R (Toronto, ON). Tyler is the co-founder of the PROMPTUS Collective, a NYC-based performance collective that focuses on researching and cultivating a trans-disciplinary practice, and Nothing Else Left to Read (NEL2R), a Toronto-based collective that focuses on devising durational, improvised work. He also is an active new-media artist, and he has shown his work at Fluxus Fest (NYC), Arts on Site (NYC), Flatpack Festival (Birmingham, UK), 7MPR Themed Dance Theatre (NYC), MISE-EN PLACE’s Open Bushwick Studios (NYC), and Ensemble Studio Theatre (NYC). He has worked as an Intern at the Learning and Engagement Programs at Carnegie Hall’s Weill Music Institute and as a Programming Research Facilitator at the Near North Mobile Media Lab. Tyler received his Bachelor of Music at the Juilliard School, studying with Markus Rhoten & Greg Zuber and receiving the John Erskine Prize in Scholastic and Artistic Achievement, and his Master of Music from the University of Toronto, studying with Aiyun Huang and Beverley Johnston.

**Intern and Artist in Residence – Heran Genene** (@UrDaughter.XYZ) is a visionary conceptual artist and community mobilizer based in Toronto. With a deep passion for exploring the integration of emerging technology as new artistic mediums, she creates thought-provoking works that touch on themes of anthropology, existentialism, and the concept of “play.” With over a decade of experience in Toronto’s underground and emerging arts sectors, Heran is an artist-enabler by nature, inspiring fellow creatives to embrace innovative tools in their practice. Her consultancy and “Playshop” trainings aim to empower artists, organizations, and entrepreneurs to adopt new tools to introduce new possibilities to their existing work flows and practices. Through her immersive-tech art, she creates, documents and reflects on the intricate interplay between space, time, and evolving social and technological constructs. Heran

Genene's artistic journey serves as a testament to the boundless possibilities of art and technology intertwining in the modern world.

## **SPECIAL THANKS**

Jameson Toye, Alex Rondeau, the Near North Mobile Media Lab board, Seth Compton, Meghan Davis, Mitchell Ellam, Tyler Levesque, Anne Heubi, Mason Charbonneau, Nikki St Clair, Ani Ramos, Kayleigh Rideout, Elise Schofield, Zac Carmody, Crystal Alcock, Rebecca Hunt, Cole McNaughton, Janet Charlebois, Jill Davies, Emily McIntyre, Matthew MacDonald, Canada Council for the Arts, Cheryl May, Dokis First Nation, Robin, Julie, Jen, You Media, Eric Reyes, Martin Seal, SKETCH, Mimi Ito, Connected Learning Summit, Carole-Ann, Erin, Vanessa at Billings Public Library, Natasha Eberhardt, Annika Gans, Heidi, Laine, Hannah, Dominic, Anthony, Sarah, The Clubhouse Network, Lindsay Sullivan, Jaymie Lathem, Robin McDonald, Nathan Snider, Miranda Bouchard, The Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation, Toryn, Katrina and WINKS, Jordan Fiddler. We would also especially like to thank the youth who took part in this project who were valued collaborators and made every event memorable.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Why we did it: goals and assumptions**

Digital Creator North (DCN) had existed, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the form of physical spaces and mentors within local libraries (as well as one museum, and one community civic centre) in six communities across rural and Northern Ontario. The goal of DCN, then and now, is to help youth see the possibilities and opportunities in digital art in the region. In early 2020, all six Digital Creator locations closed their doors and Program Leads began to make an effort to engage with youth on social media, occasional Zoom meet-ups, and the creation of tutorial videos which were made available on the Digital Creator website and Youtube channel. Eventually, Digital Creator made the decision to pause operations and in early 2021 had re-allocated funds to reimagining Phase 2 and researching the development of the new online initiative explored in this report. Rather than simply operating on Zoom, DCN wanted to put the same thought, effort, and intention into the creation of this online project – to hopefully take the very best portions of the physical Digital Creator and translate that to facilitating genuine connections and digital art explorations in the virtual.

The project began based on some key assumptions:

- Our design for the digital space was based on our assumptions about the value of interacting with digital media art in a physical space. We prioritized making this possible through the creation of an online “home base” acting as a safe place for youth to Hang Out, Mess Around,

and Geek Out (HOMAGO)<sup>1</sup> much like they would prior to COVID in a community library or gallery.

- The partners wanted/ needed a continuation of the opportunities that DCN was providing in situ.
- Youth wanted/ needed a continuation of the opportunities that DCN was providing in situ.

One of the larger assumptions was that we could translate the brick and mortar space into an online iteration – this was not the case. There are a few variables which contributed to that, many of which are explored further within this report. Our original intention was not where we ended up – the team had to consistently pivot, and attendance numbers were not generally high. The research team did learn that Digital Creator North works best in real life, in communities, but gained some worthwhile insights on the value of flexibility, creativity, and needs-based outreach.<sup>2</sup>

## **What we did**

To help us reach our goals of creating an online space that had the same ethos as our physical spaces, we hired lead researcher Maggie Greyson with ethnography, business innovation, strategic foresight, interactive media, and design experience. She brought in evaluation expert Cheryl May in the planning phases. We hired two emerging artists, Rebecca Watson and Tyler Cunningham, as programming research facilitators for twelve-month engagements. We also spent months working with youth to co-design activities in the virtual space. This research team employed participatory action research, strategic foresight methods, interviews, surveys, desk research, and other design thinking tools for collecting and synthesizing data from participants, placemaking partners, and community-based arts organizations. This looked like focus groups with youth, members of the emerging arts community, and stakeholders representing organizations that we would like to partner with. As a result of our research, we created an innovative online platform that aligned with the vision and values of DCN.

As part of the innovation journey, we investigated the feasibility and desirability of many web platforms, social media, and metaverse interfaces (Mozilla, Clubhouse Network, Minecraft Education, Gather.town, and Habbo Hotel). We wanted a space where youth could have that sense of ownership, a high level of comfort, to relate to each other, create at their speed, and retain that casualness that existed in our DCN physical spaces. We scanned for tools to try to replicate the spirit and interaction of the space and gathered a suite of free, easy-to-use web-based software that often focussed on collaborative digital creation. We chose to build the project in a virtual space called Gather.town, an emerging metaverse platform, because it had many of the features we needed, and the flexibility that we desired, including security protocols.

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<sup>1</sup> Ito, M. (2013). *Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*. MIT Press Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> The original Phase 2 plan was to expand locations to include Dokis First Nation and North Bay, along with expanding age ranges to include youth as young as age 11 and a plan to work more with adults and seniors.

The COVID-19 pandemic was not the only circumstance in which remote instructing or viewing had the potential to be beneficial. The added possibilities brought by remote instruction with Digital Creator North were exciting and special: this was an opportunity to create a network and connect youth and emerging artists from the farthest points of the region with a shared interest. This felt especially meaningful due to the geographic nature of rural communities in Northern Ontario being often small and spread out, which can result in feelings of isolation. The team at Digital Creator North responded to the pandemic through a thoughtful and innovative project informed by youth needs and imagination.

## **DESIGN APPROACH AND RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Goal**

Our original goal for phase 2 was to design an inclusive and resilient online space that met the requirements of the six placemaking partners and digital creators living in rural and remote communities that DCN was already serving. This goal ended up evolving to us collaborating with some of the past placemaking partners, and expanding the Digital Creator network to include new collaborators across northern Ontario on a larger scale. The intention of the online space was to approximate the same opportunities as the Digital Creator North in the physical spaces.

### **Approach**

As researchers, the series of research activities we undertook required open-minded inquiry, sensemaking, and validating recommendations. This looked like employing tools and frameworks to facilitate engaging workshops – these activities generated new insights that informed the innovation strategy we deployed which prioritized alternating cycles of research and design activities. Instead of having a fixed idea about the final product, we created constant learning and feedback loops. This iterative approach was guided by the Design Double Diamond framework – a visual model that helps designers structure their creative process into four distinct phases: discover, define, develop, and deliver.<sup>3</sup> This design approach, and a diversity of design research methods helped us to understand the needs of the community, and what a useful online space could provide. You will read about this evolution and benefits of the design research methods throughout this report. This is a list of applied research techniques from a broad spectrum of disciplines that we used in the program:

**Futures Studies** - using the imagination and tools from strategic foresight to define a preferable future.

**Strategic Foresight** - a robust research methodology that uses scenarios, three horizons, backcasting, futures wheels, and scanning for drivers of change to define potential future situations that are influenced by things that have happened in the past or in the present. The research and analysis provides context for an evaluation about proposed strategies. Simply put, strategic foresight is a practice of asking and trying to anticipate answers to these questions: “What if? So What? Now what? What if we didn’t?” with a diversity of qualitative and quantitative research.

**Design Thinking** - using techniques to understand the experience of the physical space to inform the design parameters of the online environment. Also, design thinking techniques help people working on a project to understand each other, specifically looking for ways to make something better.

**Ethnography** - using structured surveys, semi-structured interviews, and making sense out of general observations to understand the lived experience of the youth and the organizations that support them

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-work/skills-learning/tools-frameworks/framework-for-innovation-design-councils-evolved-double-diamond/>

**Participatory Action Research** - creating opportunities where we can assist the participants to 'show' us how they interact online, which is more robust than having them 'tell' us what they do in an interview

**Human-Computer Interaction, UX, and UI** - studying the software platforms, analyzing how people interact with them, and understanding how the look and feel change their behaviour

**Systems thinking** - creating a map of people and processes that influence the context. When we have a better understanding of the people, organizations, and incentives that impact in this case youth digital media art, we can start to make suggestions on where we can help.

**Social innovation** - co-creating solutions with others to discover and evaluate win-win situations for all participants

**Desk research** - review existing platforms and free art tools, comparable organizations, and the status of internet accessibility in Northern Ontario

## STAKEHOLDERS

To be added

Youth, parents, teachers, locations, DCN, CCA, Researchers at DCN, internet providers, access to technology, other arts organizations and culture sector supporters

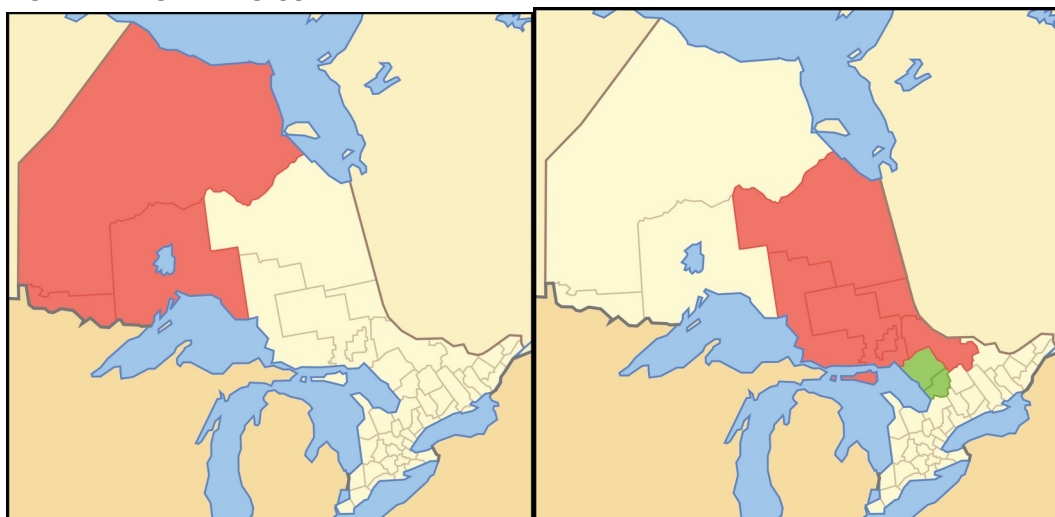
## 3. CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

### a. Northern Ontario

- i. **Quantitative** – Census data: race, language, % of population identified as youth, employment
- ii. **Qualitative** – economic sector, key sociological concerns (youth mental health, Indigenous youth mental health, infrastructural concerns/Internet access)

### b. COVID-19 and its impact on youth and artists

## NORTHERN ONTARIO CONTEXT



Left: Map of Northwestern Ontario, Public Domain

Right: Map of Northeastern Ontario, Public Domain

There is a sentiment perpetuated that media art and innovation does not occur in Northern Ontario, and in order to find opportunities within the media arts one needs to leave in search of greener (or, more southern) pastures. Northern Ontario has been the victim of neglect on many accounts, including a general afterthought toward residents who occupy a region larger than the size of a European country.<sup>4</sup> The region “makes up nearly 90 per cent of the province’s land mass yet it has just 7 per cent of the provinces population”<sup>5</sup> which translates to many small and rural communities scattered throughout. A major issue within the arts here is retention. Youth in Northern Ontario are seldom exposed to nor provided opportunities to engage with media/digital art in the same way youth in Southern Ontario or other major cities are; as a consequence, they may never consider media/digital art as an option or will leave the north altogether in pursuit of these opportunities. Digital Creator North emerged as a way to fill that gap in a small number of engaged communities.

Key concerns and considerations in the broader context:

- **Unemployment**

- “Workforce recruitment and retention is one of the greatest challenges facing rural and northern Ontario. Unemployment and low income rates are high in rural and northern communities. These communities also report higher proportions of individuals who have less than a secondary school level education.”<sup>6</sup>

- **Isolation**

- A sense of “alienation” from what has been considered popular or prioritized Ontario cities in Southern Ontario: “Politically, northern Ontario doesn't have any clout at all,” says Robert Woito, a resident of Marathon, a small town east of Thunder Bay, who ran for town mayor in last fall's municipal election. “Any decisions that are made out of Queen's Park are made to support southern Ontario.”<sup>7</sup>

- **Mental health and access to resources particularly among youth**

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<sup>4</sup> Northern Ontario has a land mass of 806,708 km<sup>2</sup>, while France, for example, is 543,940 km<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> “The Political Wilderness; Northern Ontario has a long history of alienation. Now, a growing chorus is calling on the North to take control of its economic and political future”. *Ottawa Citizen*, October 6, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Do note that this is from 2009 - <https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/rural-and-northern-community-issues-in-mental-health/#:~:text=Workforce%20recruitment%20and%20retention%20is,in%20rural%20and%20northern%20communities.&text=These%20communities%20also%20report%20higher,a%20secondary%20school%20level%20education.>

<sup>7</sup> “The Political Wilderness; Northern Ontario has a long history of alienation. Now, a growing chorus is calling on the North to take control of its economic and political future”. *Ottawa Citizen*, October 6, 2007.

- A report from 2015 called *Mental Health of Children and Youth in Ontario: A Baseline Scorecard* “suggests that children and youth in northern Ontario have worse mental health outcomes than in the rest of the province ... The report also found rates of suicide to be six times higher in Ontario’s north and that most suicides by young people happen between the ages of 20 and 24.”<sup>8</sup>
- “Compared to the provincial average, residents of Northern Ontario also have higher self-reported rates of “fair or poor” mental health. Northern Ontarians also self-report higher rates of depression.”<sup>9</sup>
- “In Ontario, the basket of services in rural and northern communities is less comprehensive, available and accessible. Individuals living in rural and northern communities face multiple mental health disparities, which are differences in mental health status that are avoidable, unjust and systemically related to social inequality. Residents of rural and northern communities also face geographic disparities in access to mental health services due to multiple barriers created by their geographic location of residence.”<sup>10</sup>
- **Infrastructure and reliable Internet access**
  - Rural and remote communities in Northern Ontario still face significant barriers to accessing reliable and affordable Internet services. One possible option for such communities with limited telecommunications infrastructure reinforces the separation between the haves and have nots. The new Starlink satellite network, as of 2023 has a one-time set-up cost of \$759 and a monthly cost of around \$150.<sup>11</sup> This may not be feasible for many families given financial or geographic constraints.
  - A map visualizing broadband access across Northern Ontario can be viewed at: <https://bsn.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=27c55b431b91419f9e0cd9015b3c6e4f>
- **Emerging connectivity:** In 2016 the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission declared widespread broadband availability a universal service objective, stating that “many Canadians, particularly in rural and remote areas, do not have access to broadband Internet access services that are comparable to those offered to the vast majority of Canadians in terms of speed, capacity, quality, and price.” Through the Accelerated High-Speed Internet Program “the Government of Ontario has committed nearly \$4 billion to connect every region in Ontario to reliable, high-speed internet by the end of 2025.”<sup>12</sup> In terms of progress, contracts have been awarded in August of 2022 with very few updates since then and no definitive timeline.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <https://ontario.cmha.ca/news/children-and-youth-have-worse-mental-health-outcomes-in-northern-ontario-report/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/rural-and-northern-community-issues-in-mental-health/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.starlink.com/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.infrastructureontario.ca/Ontario-Connects/#:~:text=About%20Accelerated%20High%2DSpeed%20Internet%20Program%3A,any%20government%20in%20Canadian%20history.>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/21b02>



- **General societal expectations**

Anecdotally, in smaller communities especially, it is expected that youth take up hobbies / engage in interests that are recognized as being more socially acceptable – such as sports, including hockey, for example – and that they train for one of the larger, natural resource based industries.

- **First Nations youth**

“For many First Nations kids, high school means separation from loved ones. That's because some remote northern communities don't have high schools. Teens have to fly hundreds of kilometres and be away from their families to attend grade nine.”<sup>14</sup> Many of the Digital Creator North youth in Sioux Lookout, and some in Timmins were in this situation.

## **Demographics**

The 2021 Canadian Census found that the population of Northern Ontario was 789,519.<sup>15</sup>

### **Race**

- **Northeastern Ontario**
  - 95.9% white
  - Total Visible Minority population: 4%, with the highest self-identified visible minorities being South Asian, Black, and Chinese
- **Northwestern Ontario**
  - 95.3% white
  - Total Visible Minority population: 4.6%, with the highest self-identified visible minorities being South Asian, Black, and Chinese

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<sup>14</sup><https://www.cbc.ca/radio/docproject/out-there-first-nations-kids-are-travelling-hundreds-of-kilometres-to-attend-high-school-1.3519538>

<sup>15</sup> Census data for Northern Ontario is divided into two regions: Northeast and Northwest.

Northeastern population, 2021: 557,220

Northwestern population, 2021: 232,299

Statistics Canada. 2022. (table). Census Profile. 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. Ottawa. Released December 15, 2022.

<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E> (accessed December 21, 2022).

## **Indigenous Population**

- Northeastern Ontario
  - Total population identifying as Indigenous: 13.9%
- Northwestern Ontario
  - Total population identifying as Indigenous: 26.8%

## **Language**

- Northeastern Ontario
  - Much of Northeastern Ontario is designated as a French language service area. Based on census data, 28% of the Northeastern population have knowledge of both English and French, with 1% knowing French only and 69% knowing English only. Because of the high percentage of French speakers in the region it was on the Digital Creator team's radar to provide French programming, but unfortunately due to capacity we were unable to do so with Digital Creator Online.
  - Additional top languages spoken most often at home are: Italian, Algonquian languages, Punjabi, and German
- Northwestern Ontario
  - Based on census data, 6.9% of the Northwestern population have knowledge of both English and French, with 0.1% knowing French only and 92.5% knowing English only.
  - Additional top languages spoken most often at home are: Oji-Cree, Ojibway (not otherwise specified), and Italian

## **% of population identified as youth, below the age of 25**

- Northeastern Ontario
  - 25% of the population are identified as youth, 24 and below
- Northwestern Ontario
  - 28.3% of the population are identified as youth, 24 and below

## **Labor force status**

- Northeastern Ontario
  - Employment rate: 50.4%
  - Unemployment rate: 10.7%
- Northwestern Ontario
  - Employment rate: 51.9%
  - Unemployment rate: 10.1%

### Economic sector

The region's economy is primarily resource-based but they do have significant tourist industries and are making an effort to diversify their economy.<sup>16</sup>

### COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUTH

The COVID-19 pandemic understandably had a significant impact on Canadian youth.

Statistics Canada's research suggests that "about 36% of young people were very or extremely concerned about family stress from confinement and 34% were very or extremely concerned about maintaining social ties with their loved ones. Similarly, a study conducted by the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH) reported that youth are experiencing mental health challenges during the pandemic, including depression and anxiety"

Additionally, "marginalized youth are at particular risk of COVID-19 and its impacts. This category includes young refugees, **youth living in rural areas, Indigenous**, racialized people and ethnic minority youth, young persons with disabilities, and young people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities."

As in every sector of society, the arts had been shaken amidst lockdowns and the closing or delay of exhibitions as arts institutions made efforts to adapt to public health guidelines. The Canada Council for the Arts released a report in May of 2020 summarizing their findings on the impact on the arts, and in that they remarked that "No fields of practice supported by the Canada Council will be untouched by the crisis."<sup>17</sup> That statement had proven to be accurate across the country. With that being said, arts organizations across Ontario had differing experiences of provincial support – only 7 of the 140 arts organizations receiving support were in northern Ontario.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "The Political Wilderness; Northern Ontario has a long history of alienation. Now, a growing chorus is calling on the North to take control of its economic and political future". Ottawa Citizen, October 6, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> <https://canadacouncil.ca/research/research-library/2020/04/april-2020-covid19-client-survey>

<sup>18</sup> <https://news.ontario.ca/en/backgrounder/60514/ontario-provides-significant-financial-support-to-the-arts-sector-during-covid-19>

#### 4. UNDERSTANDING YOUTH MEDIA HABITS: MEETING YOUTH WHERE THEY ARE

We employed methods from Participatory Action Research. It was very important for us to have placed a lot of value on the research we conducted with youth – treating them as experts in their own right. It is for this reason that we paid each for the work they did and for the expertise they provided in addition to reminding them throughout the process that their insight was of immense value. We found it crucial to engage youth as **partners** in research, knowing that with that “research becomes more feasible and relevant, and the validity and richness of findings are enhanced.”<sup>19</sup> Additionally, it is fitting with the Digital Creator approach of meeting youth where they were at – the very first step of this approach is to **listen** to them as they describe their own needs and curiosities. Understanding youth, and making a genuine effort to do so, was the most valuable research and investment in Digital Creator Online. Going into the design process with assumptions as to what would be appreciated by youth in the region is not enough without genuine consultation in the preliminary period and on an ongoing basis. The Digital Creator Team found this incredibly important, and sought to hire a [Youth Researcher](#) for more extended and direct collaboration.

In a research report published by the Mental Health Commission of Canada on the impact of COVID on youth, “Many respondents reported feeling distressed despite using many different online platforms to stay engaged. As new virtual platforms become available, many people assume that anyone who wants to use them can easily do so, but this is not always the case.”<sup>20</sup> They go on to outline the digital divide present in the lives of more privileged youth and those in more marginalized communities. Their recommendation is that special attention “should be paid to youth living in remote communities and to providing visible minority groups with culturally sensitive programming ... Privacy is also a matter of concern for youths using online platforms to keep in touch with loved ones, especially those under 18 years of age.”<sup>21</sup> This supported our assumptions and drive to provide youth in Northern Ontario with intentional, safe, and fun virtual programming.

#### The Dream Jam – Youth

As mentioned previously, we knew it was important for the final product to be the result of a collaboration with youth. With that in mind, we engaged in a Participatory Action Research event that we called a DreamJam. There, youth were invited to join us in Gather.town to participate in a series of

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<sup>19</sup> Hawke, L. D., Darnay, K., Relihan, J., Khaleghi-Moghaddam, M., Barbic, S., Lachance, L., Ben-David, S., Brown, M., Iyer, S., Chaim, G., Soklaridis, S., Kidd, S. A., Halsall, T., Mathias, S., & Henderson, J. (2020). Enhancing researcher capacity to engage youth in research: Researchers' engagement experiences, barriers and capacity development priorities. *Health expectations : an international journal of public participation in health care and health policy*, 23(3), 584–592. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13032>

<sup>20</sup> *LOCKDOWN LIFE Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19 on Youth in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

guided activities. This was the first moment we had witnessed youth in Gather.town, and seeing those first impressions (which were overwhelmingly positive) was incredibly helpful in informing whether we were headed in the right direction in terms of which hosting platform we intended to use.

Some examples of research activities were:

Following being introduced to Gather.town and the controls, the very first activity our participants were presented with was to collaboratively establish guidelines and “rules” for the experience and for online behavior. Some guidelines, among others, established by youth for the session were: do not speak over your peers! Be respectful and kind to each other! We were surprised to find that youth as young as 11 actively prioritized online safety. A couple of participants took it upon themselves to give us tips on how to be safer: “Don’t accept message/friend requests from strangers!” “Don’t open links you don’t recognize! Look at the thumbnail of the video and the title and stuff before you click on it” and outlined concerns about interacting with people in online spaces over the age of 16.

**INSIGHT: We found that giving youth the opportunity to establish their own community guidelines instills a sense of ownership, pride, and agency in the creation of a space.**

We presented participants with a variety of activity examples (including drawing, listening to music, skateboarding, and more) which were represented by 8-bit style icons. Youth were then prompted to drag and drop the icons somewhere on the spectrum of “Nah, not interested in this activity”, “I love this activity!”, “I’d like to try or get better at this!” and “I want to show others how to do this.” They were encouraged to share and walk the group through their board, and explain the *why* of their placements. Here, we were able to get a sense of what programming youth were potentially interested in and why certain activities appeal to them or do not.

**INSIGHT: We found that this tactile and engaging activity allowed for a lot of nuance! Participants were able to place the objects in a category or *between*, and they seemed genuinely excited to share.**

\*Tip! We found it was important for our participants to feel comfortable and empowered, so we were conscious of how many members of the research team were present in each session. If only one participant registered, we would ensure only 2 out of 3 researchers were present. We found that even 2 guests and 3 researchers was a comfortable ratio.



## **The Dream Jam – Stakeholders**

The second Dream Jam conducted was gathering invested community members into dialogue regarding their dreams for creatives in Northern Ontario. The following insights were gathered:

### **1. The Economic Feasibility of Being an Artist**

**Aspiration:** Guaranteed income, or an increase in funding and social programs to allow digital creators and artists in Northern Ontario feel financially stable and secure.

**What we know now:** The main push for guaranteed income from the group can be observed to be because a guaranteed income makes life more affordable, and thus more comfortable to devote time to being an artist/digital creator. Guaranteed income is unlikely in the next 10 years, and arts funding is currently not at a level where many people can make a living from their art. There is likely to be a continued gap between emerging and established artists.

#### **Recommendations:**

- **Provide youth with an entry point into the mindset of being an artist.** This means exposing youth to what it means to be a creator, showcase tools of the trade, and allowing “artist” to be seen as a potential career path rather than just a hobby or leisure activity. This also means creating a wider spectrum of thinking about what being an artist is and how to turn current artistic skills into professional credentials.
- **Create a wider spectrum of economic opportunities.** A change in mindset about what is valuable and what is not in an economy can open up new opportunities. As the professional market changes in Northern Ontario, there will be many opportunities (and needs) to diversify the ways people can make a living. This means not cherry picking one economic opportunity over the other (ie. forestry over digital media professionals), but rather allowing for a smaller but greater number of vocational opportunities to develop. This will also assist with overall community economic resilience.
- **Focus on solving basic infrastructure needs.** A big part of creating security and opportunity means making sure basic needs are met. Many Northern communities still struggle with unsafe drinking water and toxic housing. Once these issues are solved, communities will be in a better place to create opportunities for careers in the arts.



## 2. Multiculturalism and Growing Northern Communities

**Aspiration:** More multiculturalism, an increase of diverse voices in the Northern Ontario arts community.

**What we know now:** An influx of people from urban communities expected to grow the Northern population in the next 10 years, possibly leading to a disruption in the current social fabric. As diversity increases, tensions may flare about how to re-define “community” in Northern Ontario, and what “Northern Ontario” even means anymore.

### Recommendations:

- **Increase and create innovative ways art can be shared and experienced.** As communities change, groups risk losing a sense of community as the dominant culture overtakes the smaller. By coming up with new ways to experience art and engage with creators, smaller communities can better hold on to their identity and amplify their voices. This also means that creators' work will be more likely to be actively engaged with and find an audience.
- **Develop and foster a “give and take” mentality between the arts community and the larger community.** This means establishing ways creators and the wider community can give back to each other in meaningful ways. The greater the value of different communities can be shared between each other, the less likely tensions are to arise surrounding the perceived usefulness or otherness of different groups.
- **Create and encourage mentorship opportunities.** As the Northern Ontario population grows and diversifies over the next 10 years, there will be many opportunities for people with different skill sets to provide valuable mentorship and guidance to younger populations looking to enter the arts. This approach bridges the gap between more established creators and youth, building a network and community that is more supportive and self-sustaining.

## 3. Technology in Northern Communities

**Aspiration:** A desire for an increase in high-speed, reliable communications connections (Internet, telephone) and advanced technology that matches the global industry standard.

**What we know now:** Communications infrastructure developments are urban centric and often take a while to trickle out to more rural and remote areas. While digital technology looks to be equally available across communities due to its digital distribution, there are often knowledge gaps in rural communities that prevent these technologies being easily discoverable or usable due to their complexity.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Increase “on-demand” access to technology.** In Northern communities with smaller populations, it may not be feasible to provide large-scale, permanent access to technological resources for artists. By creating a network of “on-demand” access to digital creative tools and technology, artists and creators will be better served without having to travel or rely on expensive, permanent, full-time institutions to access the tools they need. This solution also allows the industry to better adapt to the rapidly changing technological landscape.
- **Increase awareness about what and where technology is available.** Artists and creators need to be more aware of what is available where. Creating a cross-community index of available resources will provide creators with a better picture of what is available and how to access it. This is especially important for emerging creators and artists looking for ways to access technology they aren’t able to afford to own.
- **Encourage private industry investment.** As Northern Ontario communities grow and change, so will the economic landscape. Private industry stands to gain a large number of qualified professionals in the arts and creative industries by investing in access to learn about the tools of the trade. This can create more diverse and sustainable economies and encourage a broader spectrum of thinking about the economic future of Northern Ontario.

### **Gamified Surveys**

Another effort in understanding youth (and adult) media habits involved the creation of a gamified, interactive survey. We went in with the assumption and knowledge that the process of going through a lengthy and dry questionnaire would be a tough sell. We designed the questions to be short, and made an effort to make the experience humorous and fun through a “choose your own adventure” format oriented around your media habits throughout the day. In order to further incentivize participation, we offered entry to a raffle for residents of Northern Ontario upon completion of the survey.

**INSIGHT: Tailoring the research to be youth focused was helpful when it came to connecting with them. A phrase commonly used by the team was to “meet youth where they were.” This extended to the research! We also aimed to embody the slogan “nothing about us without us” and engage them every step of the way.**

\*Tip! Make sure your survey is thoroughly protected from bots, especially if there is financial incentive. Despite the addition of CAPTCHA, we were inundated with bot responses! Looking at whether email addresses seem randomly generated, and including some open-ended questions rather than all multiple choice questions is helpful in catching suspicious submissions.

Summary of recommendations for doing research with youth:

**1. Treat/value youth as partners in research, not as subjects**

- a. Make sure they know this, and remind them throughout the process!
- b. They are experts, and validating their experience in the field of digital life can go a long way in building confidence and gathering insight. “That seems really cool! I don’t know much about Discord. Can you tell me about it?”

**2. Try to make research events collaborative and engaging** – prompting youth to storytell through asking open questions can be helpful in gathering rich information, and can lead to unexpected realizations!

- a. It can be intimidating to talk openly with someone you’ve just met. Try to humanize yourself as much as possible through connecting with topics that arise. “What is it that you like about Minecraft? I haven’t played much, but I love the music and exploring. So relaxing!”
- b. A little fun goes a long way. If there is a way to gamify research, go for it!

**3. Listen, listen, listen**

- a. Assumptions can lead you to ask questions, but do not get too tied to them and be okay with being proven wrong – it’s alright! The ability to **pivot and adapt** when you feel you got it wrong is paramount. For example, our team assumed that teens especially would want to hang out in the space after dinner and later in the evening. What we discovered through talking to youth and engaging in knowledge-sharing with organizations working with teens was that after school may actually work better! Having a flexible start-up period resulted in us being able to pivot and try multiple hours of operation to find what seemed to work best for our community.

## 5. BUILDING THE PLATFORM

### **Design process**

Considerations which went into the process of designing the space were informed by our robust consultation and research process. Some key themes addressed in this section concern: affordability, collaboration/connection, engagement, adaptability and safety.

#### **Software:**

When building the physical space, thinking of what activities and options we wanted participants to have access to, we had some major considerations which fit in with Digital Creator's consistent ethos surrounding access. Due to the remote nature of the program, we were unable to offer access through our own computers in the way the physical program could. This meant that we had to be very thoughtful about various problems participants could run into, including:

- What if they only have access to a mobile phone?
- What if they have access to a computer, but limited storage space?
- How much independence and effort is required to get started on the site or app?

The goal of Digital Creator is to be low-barrier – because of this we always prioritized free, web-based software. An added bonus was if the site was collaborative – while we were connected through audio and video on Gather.town, the collaborative nature of some software made the feeling of making something together that much more present and possible. Each piece of software used by participants had to either be free by nature, or provided through Digital Creator paying for it. Ultimately, Digital Creator did not end up using any websites requiring payment – it just so happened that the best-fitting sites were already free to use at their base level. An additional consideration was the equipment youth had access to – if they only had access to a mobile phone, we wanted to ensure that we had ample workshops which utilized sites that were mobile compatible online or with apps. If the exact site mentioned in the workshop was not mobile compatible and did not have an app, then we sought to provide alternative apps. The program was created to be adaptable and personalized – while our attendance numbers were lower than we initially expected or hoped, this enabled us to design workshops in an individualized capacity depending on what they did have access to. We aimed for our chosen software to be web-based in order to make the experience more seamless – rather than downloading anything and potentially running into the issue of limited storage space. It was within our design considerations and proactive assumptions that this could be a problem. The more barriers we could avoid, the better!

#### **The space:**

We interviewed several stakeholders in the previous DCN before COVID shut everything down. These include the partner organizations where the hangout spaces were hosted, as well as the mentors who interacted with youth on a daily basis. A positive facet of these spaces was that they saw youth dropping in without commitment or expectations – it was evident that this was a priority to maintain. In some spaces the culture amongst youth was stronger, and in other spaces there was very little interaction. We looked in-depth at the experiences within the physical spaces in order to make assumptions and design parameters – we wanted a foundation, based on the success of the previous program, from which to build the online experience from. The Digital Creator Online team and experience was set up in an effort to mimic this.

Several variables in the physical space created different outcomes:

- 1) The partner organization and the bandwidth of the staff as well as the physical proximity to schools
- 2) The facilitator in the DGTL space and their interests for programming
- 3) The desire for youth to connect with each other and how
  - a) For example: When Rebecca ran workshops at OutLoud, she found that youth were very driven to connect and went out of their way to greet new people in the space. Typically she saw teens hanging out with other teens, and younger youth hanging out with each other, but there was still intermingling amongst each other with teens taking on mentorship roles as well as with the adult volunteers.
- 4) finding a gap that was not being addressed otherwise
  - a) For example: OutLoud was one of very few organizations which served as a safe space for LGBTQIA2S+ youth in Northern Ontario – we were told a family drove from over an hour away so their child could attend programming – and it was the only space of its type in the city of North Bay specifically.

We came up with some guiding design principles for DGTL online DO's and DON'Ts:

1. We wanted a youth-friendly vibe – we evaluated several 3D environment platforms and vetted them for "business" "casual" formal/ informal interactions, and ability to personalize your avatar – **see our evaluation and comparison of these platforms below!**

2. We wanted a playful and flexible platform which allowed for customization and creativity.
3. We wanted somewhere safe and welcoming, with no trolls, and where you would not be interacting with strangers.
  - a. We looked at spaces like Discord, for example, and noted the reputation for some sub-communities' negative behavior.

<p><b>Kumospace</b></p>  <p>"Kumospace makes connecting online feel as natural as connecting offline. Guests in Kumospace move across virtual rooms to chat with friends. Just like in the physical world, the environment suggests behavior, whether it's casual chatter in a cozy lounge, a professional discussion in a boardroom, or a presentation given from a stage."</p> <p><b>Pros:</b> Allows for certain control over the room (the Broadcast feature), and it is nice to look at faces rather than avatars that represent people. Also nice that there are interactive parts to the environment ("pour a drink").</p> <p><b>Cons:</b> However, since one can simply roll over the parts of the environment (the couch, piano, etc.), it loses the illusion of being in a "space." Since it is priced, it would be nice if the environments were a bit more dynamic and/or customizable. In this regard, I think Gather.town is actually nicer.</p> <p><b>Pricing:</b> FREE!</p> <p><b>Compatibility:</b> Usable on web browser, but is not compatible with phones and tablets.</p>	<p><b>Gather.town</b></p>  <p>"Make virtual spaces to bring people together and connect authentically. Gather combines video calling with fun features in a custom 2-D world, making it more spontaneous and enjoyable to get together for work, life, or play."</p> <p><b>Pros:</b> What is great about this platform is the interaction with the environment: you can play games, sit down, watch videos or movies, and watch presentations through engagement with virtual objects. You can also stitch different rooms together for a more dynamic environment. I REALLY like this one!</p> <p><b>Cons:</b> No remote control options, and it could be a bit confusing at first (particularly for adults, I actually think kids might catch on rather quickly. Limited avatar availability (although on their docks), and limited functionality on tablets and phones (in beta testing).</p> <p><b>Pricing:</b> Free up to 25 users in one room, then there is a tiered pricing plan by user and time.</p> <p><b>Compatibility:</b> Software download or web browsers functionality, beta testing on phones and tablets.</p>	<p><b>Hubs by Mozilla</b></p>  <p>"Mozilla Hubs is a place where you can get together with friends online in a virtual-social space. With a single click, you can create a virtual 3D space and invite others to join you using a URL. It's designed to work with any web browser (like Firefox) on your computer, phone or tablet, or in any VR headset if you have one."</p> <p><b>Pros:</b> This is a versatile 3D world with the option of an easily accessible platform through a web browser, which can be personalized on a dime just by adding photos to the walls with a click, as well as an option to literally create our own worlds from scratch. This has the potential for a very dynamic setting (based on the demo alone, too, I like that one can climb up stairs in a space!)</p> <p><b>Cons:</b> This is very, very difficult to use. Also very difficult to create a space -- you really need to know something about 3D modelling. Also, they recommend ~24 people a room; more than that, and the performance gets sluggish.</p> <p><b>Pricing:</b> FREE! Unless you want the more sophisticated Hubs Cloud, but not necessary.</p> <p><b>Compatibility:</b> Works with computers, iPhones, Tablets, and VR sets. (Unknown if 3d rendering is hard on older technology).</p>
<p><b>Discord</b></p>  <p>"Discord is a VoIP, instant messaging and digital distribution platform designed for creating communities. Users communicate with voice calls, video calls, text messaging, media and files in private chats or as part of communities called "servers".</p> <p><b>Pros:</b> Free. Specific channels for text and voice chat. Discord video chat is also available on voice channels. Server heads can assign custom titles to users. You can share pictures, video, and your desktop screen on Discord.</p> <p><b>Cons:</b> Limits on users and channels per server. The Discord video chat function is fairly basic. Discord takes up a fair amount of RAM. Trolls and unethical users. Also, might be difficult to navigate at first (not so intuitive).</p> <p><b>Pricing:</b> FREE!</p> <p><b>Compatibility:</b> Usable with computers, tablets, phones. Since there is no 3D rendering, might not be difficult for older technology.</p>	<p><b>Minecraft Education</b></p>  <p>"Minecraft: Education Edition is a game-based learning platform that promotes creativity, collaboration and problem-solving in an immersive digital environment. With hundreds of standards-aligned lessons and STEM curricula, classroom-friendly features, tutorials and challenges, educators can access everything they need to get started with no experience required."</p> <p><b>Pros:</b> Classroom settings give you a lot of control, you can turn off "violence" and control the weather. There are lessons options and you can code in-game. Learning and exploration focused. Very collaborative, and allows for an open, non-structured experience.</p> <p><b>Cons:</b> No functionality for video or audio (just text features), and there's no external integration with the game. Limited avatar functionality, and a learning curve if one is not used to Minecraft prior.</p> <p><b>Pricing:</b> \$6 per user per year.</p> <p><b>Compatibility:</b> Usable with computers, tablets, and phones, but could be troubling because of the 3D rendering.</p>	<p><b>Twitch</b></p>  <p>"Twitch is an American video live streaming service that focuses on video game live streaming, including broadcasts of esports competitions. In addition, it offers music broadcasts, creative content, and more recently, "in real life" streams. It is operated by Twitch Interactive, a subsidiary of Amazon.com, Inc."</p> <p><b>Pros:</b> Access to a vast community, might be easier to gain attention more quickly. Easy interaction with a real-time chat with lots of moderation ability. Livestream capabilities likely the best on this list.</p> <p><b>Cons:</b> No functionality for moderating who follows a channel, and a policy that allows anyone to comment/chat before being timed-out or banned. Potentially an unsafe, online space. No way to garner community on its own -- most twitch channels have accompanying Discords.</p> <p><b>Pricing:</b> Free, but subscriptions to certain channels (which get you perks) is \$\$.</p> <p><b>Compatibility:</b> Usable on computers, tablets, and phones -- can also be used in an Internet browser.</p>



### **Pricing**

Except for Minecraft, all of these digital platforms have free versions. While Kumospace, Discord, and Twitch are completely free without limitation, gather.town Hubs by Mozilla, and Minecraft Education do have different priced licenses.

- Gather.town is free up to 25 users. It has a three-tiered system by user and amount of time (i.e. \$1/per user paper hour). Each tier comes with increasingly more functionality.
- Hubs by Mozilla is free unless you want a priced plan that allows you to use the Hubs Cloud, an organizational system that is functional with Hubs by Mozilla. For more information, click [here](#).
- The license for Minecraft Education is quite inexpensive and comes out to ~\$6 a year. You will need an institutional email in order to access the license.

### **Compatibility**

The majority of the digital platforms we surveyed do have limited compatibility across devices. Kumospace and gather.town do have functionality on tablets and phones, for instance, but it is quite limited. They are both in beta testing. While Minecraft Education and Hubs by Mozilla both claim to be functional across devices, the 3D rendering of the environment is likely to cause issues across devices. Discord and Twitch are functional across all devices and seems to be the sole platform that is cross-platform friendly.

### **Collaboration**

The functionality for collaboration for gather.town, Hubs by Mozilla, and Discord is quite good. All give you access to video and audio, and have many integrations in the

platform to communicate with others in the space. Gather.town is particularly of note here -- it allows you to have private conversations even within a space. Discord is quite good as well, although since there are multiple channels that require specific security options, it is hard to promptly host a private conversation (this is true of Hubs by Mozilla too). Kumospace is limited with these interactions -- it just consists of spatialized audio, video, and text, and Minecraft only communicates with text and audio, with no external integration to facilitate collaboration (it seems like the collaborative building is the sole source of collaboration in Minecraft). Twitch has little collaborative ability, only because it is focused on the content creator itself (who is interacting through their community through a live chat). This means that between participants, the possibility is quite limited -- most use Discord for other communication when paired with Twitch.

### **Customizable Environment**

Gather.town, Hubs by Mozilla, and Minecraft each have very customizable environments. Although you are limited to the blocks in Minecraft (hence is the aesthetic of the entire game), many have created extremely personalized worlds. The same is true of gather.town and Hubs by Mozilla - there is a treasure trove of premade environments that showcase their customizability. While Kumospace has worked on customizing space, it is still limited to a couple of objects one can place in the space -- still giving the sense of walking on a 2D environment. Discord is very flexible in terms of what it can do with its own infrastructure, but the problem is that the infrastructure (text-based space through the navigation of different channels) is limited itself.

Twitch is more of a streaming channel, so it does not really allow for customizable "environments."

### **Customizable Avatar**

Kumospace, Twitch, and Discord do not use avatar-based interaction. While Hubs by Mozilla does allow you to customize your avatar (if you know something about 3D modelling), gather.town and Minecraft are limited. Minecraft uses its block-based aesthetic so that the selection of different avatars in Minecraft is pretty limited for the most part. Gather.town is beta-testing the customization of different avatars, but for now the selection is quite gendered and limited.

### **External Integration**

Gather.town and Discord have pretty good external integration. The nature of Discord allows one to embed different softwares inside of it (such as Hubs by Mozilla) for pretty easy navigation. Discord also works with Twitch quite easily -- it can detect if one subscribes to a particular channel on Twitch, allowing for certain privileges in Discord. Gather.town allows one to integrate different websites and Zoom rooms into URLs, making it easy to work with other websites. The same cannot really be said Kumospace and Hubs by Mozilla. Although Kumospace does now allow you to watch Youtube videos on certain objects, the integration with other sites other than YouTube and Spotify are limited. Hubs by Mozilla has the same issue. Minecraft Education does not have any external integration functionality.

### **Usability**

Through our walkthroughs, Kumospace was the easiest digital platform to use. One can either

use a mouse or the arrows on a keyboard. The next was gather.town -- it is easily navigable through arrows keys, and the only trouble one might run into is interacting with objects (text appears on the screen that prompts how to interact, but it still might pose a barrier). Twitch is quite self-explanatory as a streaming website, where the community uses chat to communicate to a particular user. Discord might be confusing at first provided the layout of channels and servers, and Minecraft is difficult because the controls might not be immediately known if one does not go through the tutorial (even after, adults might have trouble using minecraft). Hubs by Mozilla was very difficult to use -- it is clunky to navigate around, and it is very difficult to figure out how to position and post 3D objects in the space.

### **Security**

In general, security and privacy is good for most of the platforms we tried. They have security measures built into the architecture of the space, and so each requires at least a password or a private link to access a private space. Discord has had issues of inappropriate users online, and Hubs by Mozilla does have limited moderation control, so that would be two things to consider. Twitch is really the big issue, because one cannot moderate who follows a particular account and can therefore not control who comments and chats in a particular channel. There is functionality to block messages with specific words from appearing in chat, and there is also a high-functionality related to chat moderation, but these are usually for damage control after a potentially harmful message was sent.

## **Collaboration:**

Collaboration was built into our program structure -- our greatest engagement with youth came through community organizations that the parents already had a relationship with. When the research team realized that rebuilding our community was not feasible -- due to time and capacity constraints -- we then began to look outward and lean into building/connecting to our network and relationships across the region, becoming a part of the core structure of Digital Creator Online. Many of these partnerships are listed in our "special thanks" section, but the recurring virtual collaborations we had were with:



Timmins Public Library, Callander Public Library, Sioux Lookout Public Library, Sault Ste Marie Public Library, OUTloud, Timmins Youth Wellness Hub, and Northern Outlet. Examples of these collaborations can be found below in our outlines of case studies.

## **Safety**

Our research uncovered that youth want safe spaces online and many have had negative experiences that make them unsure about trying new things. We invested a lot of effort in making sure both youth and parents were aware of the safety mechanisms we put in place (registration forms, parental consent for youth under 13, and an incident report form). Our process involved reviewing the safety guides of other youth-oriented online platforms (like [HABBO Hotel](#)) and surveying best practices in online safety – below are some of the sources we gathered to inform our internal policy development.

- Data security:
  - [Policy guide on children and digital connectivity](#): “Digital technology and connectivity are fundamentally changing children’s lives. As connectivity spreads to all parts of the globe and the use and application of technology widens, the impact on children and their lives grows. Children who are connected can benefit from numerous opportunities, but may also be exposed to a myriad of risks. Those who are not connected risk exclusion and disadvantage as most of the modern world remains out of their reach. The advance of new technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI), which powers critical, automated decisions, will affect children’s digital lives in new ways: not only by influencing what they see online (see discussion on ‘fake news’), but also by enabling access to education opportunities, jobs, health insurance and other benefits. This transition toward a digital (and offline) landscape increasingly governed by AI-enabled decisions will have a tremendous impact on children.”
  - [Data governance for young people in the commercialized digital environment](#): “As young people eagerly embrace a growing number of social media, gaming platforms and mobile apps, they have become the focus of continuous scrutiny as global marketers closely follow their interests and behaviours. Underlying this scrutiny is a complex, far-reaching, global media, marketing and sales apparatus, capable of gathering and using unprecedented amounts of data. The authors explain how these marketing systems are being incorporated into the digital platforms and services popular with young people, and argue for a comprehensive approach to data governance to ensure their protection.”
- General:
  - [The Child Online Safety Index](#): “The Child Online Safety Index (COSI) measures nations’ level of online safety for children across six stakeholders: Children, Families, Schools, Companies, and soft and hard infrastructures of the government. Each of these stakeholders is represented by a number of topics and indicators.”

- Mental health:
  - [Social Media and Youth Wellbeing](#): This report studies youth vulnerabilities online, assets gained from youth online interactions, and opportunities for mitigating vulnerabilities and leveraging assets to support youth wellbeing.

### **Comparables**

At the beginning of our imagination and design process the research team gathered a database of 25 comparable organizations. There were none which fit into the specific criteria of virtual, for Northern Ontario, youth-oriented, and arts-oriented but we gathered many which had combinations of any of the listed criteria.

Our database contained the following information arranged in a [spreadsheet](#):

Name of Organization

What? (Description)

Who do they serve?

Relevance to DCN/N2M2L

META

MESO

MICRO

("micro, meso, and macro refer to the levels of analysis used in research. Micro-level research examines individuals and individual-level interactions of various kinds, including, for example, people's intentions, feelings, and beliefs. Meso-level research examines the study of groups, including teams, units, and organizations. Macro-level research examines the political-administrative environment, including national systems, regulation, and cultures.")

Notes

Contact info (primary person, website, email, phone)

Contact first name

Contact last name

Website

Email

Telephone

### **Complete prototype**

Below you will find a virtual tour of Digital Creator Online. The space was highly customizable, and was often decorated in conjunction with various holidays – as you will see in the video! The space was able to change based on needs as Programming Research Facilitators came up with new workshop ideas. With that being said, the space had changed since the recording of the tour, and you can see the updated space in the photo below.

<https://youtu.be/41lzQ4iJl5A?si=SCZrugABmoCYFjqK>



## 6. CASE STUDIES

Digital Creator Online was created to address a gap present within Northern Ontario in terms of programming focusing on digital/media art, and safe online spaces for youth to hangout and engage with each other and mentors. From the beginning, our goal was for the **quality** of interactions rather than the **quantity** of attendees – this mindset impacted the way success was perceived on an organizational level! The case studies mentioned below were chosen based on the quality of interactions, and where we felt we left the interaction with youth having gotten something positive out of it – not based on “successful” completion of the activity, but rather: did they seem happy? Did they enjoy themselves? Did they connect with the mentor or each other?

The following case studies occurred in three different formats: completely virtual, hybrid (events mixed between online and offline engagement), and in person. The purpose of this section is also to identify challenges and lessons learned with the format of engagement, and how we pivoted or would pivot in the future.

### Virtual

## Case study 1: Student Links

In the midst of operating Digital Creator Online, the Programming Coordinator received an email from Student Links, a program run by Community Living in North Bay. The program is “an opportunity for students (ages 14 to 21) who have an intellectual disability to explore ideas for their future after high school. It matches students and mentors who share a common passion or interest.” This email was inquiring about whether or not someone at the organization would be interested in mentoring a student, Joshua (a pseudonym), who was interested in music and content creation. The eventual mentorship structure involved the presence of Student Links mentorship coordinator, Meghan Davis, with Tyler and Rebecca as mentors – Tyler took the lead, leveraging their skills in music creation and past workshops developed on the topic!

Our interactions throughout the duration of the mentorship went as follows:

1. Video introductions: Prior to meeting with the student, Rebecca and Tyler each sent a video introduction of themselves and some of their own artistic interests! This was to help familiarize the student with the team before the first live video meeting.
  - a. Feedback from partner: “Joshua enjoyed the video you sent and I think that was a great idea to get him introduced before being introduced 😊”
2. Learning wishlist: We had an online form sent to the student where he could indicate his interest in a variety of subjects that Rebecca and Tyler were already creating workshops for, as well as the option to add some topics not included in the list. This gave us a head start in thinking about some potential activities we could do together.
3. Preliminary meeting: The first meeting involved Meghan introducing the student to Tyler and Rebecca in a casual online meeting so that they could begin building a relationship, and chat further with the student about some things he may want to learn!
  - a. Highlights from meeting notes: “This was the first time we (Rebecca and Tyler) met with Joshua and we learned a lot about his interests! ... We talked at the end about some things he may want to try: he said EDM music making, and also video games/content creation. We all decided that we'll probably focus on music first ... He is incredibly knowledgeable on the topics above, so we **took notes and will learn about them for the next time** (Tyler on a more technical level) so we can try to create music similar to the stuff he is into!”
  - b. Feedback from partner: “Meghan said he is usually very shy, and this is the most she's seen him talk.” “I just wanted to update that I got an e-mail from Joshua's teacher today saying how thrilled she was to see Joshua so excited about something (your meeting

yesterday). She said he really enjoyed meeting you and has been in great spirits as a result of his connection with you both 😊"

4. Subsequent meetings: Upon choosing a topic to focus on, creating EDM music, Tyler created a plan broken up into small, digestible pieces of just 30 minutes each. This was at the request of the mentorship coordinator and worked to avoid overwhelming the student. It may seem like a quick session, but it was consistently enough time to chat and learn together. Each subsequent meeting built on the week prior, until the student created his very own song.
  - a. Highlights from meeting notes: "Joshua was smiling ear-to-ear this session. It was super clear that we hit a topic he was stoked about!"
  - b. Feedback from teacher: "We have all noticed a decline in Joshua's demeanor this year and it completely changes during these sessions. You are bringing a lot of joy to his day. So I thank you all very much! :) "
5. Guest speaker: This student asked many questions about logistics in the music industry – when Tyler and Rebecca did not know the answer, they invited someone who did! This resulted in a fruitful Q&A session and further connections being built.

**Challenges and learning opportunities:** One challenge which arose was when it came to the technology used in the music-creation activity. The most suitable software for the task was an app which could be used on iPhone, Android, or iPad – this complicated our approach to the workshop (which took place on computers using Zoom) due to the additional device required. Our process of pivoting came in two parts. It began with Tyler sharing their iPad screen to Zoom using a third party mirroring application, and then allowing Joshua to direct him in the choices being made while creating the song together. This worked well, but the Programming Researchers wanted to give Joshua more agency and hands-on experience which he could carry on to future projects. Our solution was to lend Joshua's teacher an iPad from the Near North Mobile Media Lab's equipment. This led to another challenge, which was that we could not see Joshua's screen as he was creating, which made remotely teaching a bit challenging! Our solution in this scenario was to simply ask the student to show us the iPad screen by turning it around to his webcam when questions arose. While it may seem rudimentary, it worked! Joshua was able to create his own song which he seemed to be extremely proud of. Some key learnings which we gleaned from this experience was that app-based activities are easier for in-person instruction as problem-solving becomes difficult while unable to see what the participant is seeing. We learned that for completely remote instruction, computer (and ideally browser-based) software is much easier, as even younger children know how to share their screens!

**Insights:** These one-on-one style meetings enabled program facilitators to take their time in building both skills and relationships. The mentor was able to tailor the experience to individual interests and learning styles – in a classroom setting or busy after school setting, this is not always possible! Learning as a group can be fun for some, but others may become overwhelmed or feel rushed. Offering

individuals the option of signing up for one-on-one learning sessions where they were able to outline their interests gave us the opportunity to build fun lesson plans and take our time in learning with the student, building upon sessions. While this success story was based on 30 minute meetings, we also learned that we could offer one-hour sessions as well depending on participant wants/needs.

## **Hybrid**

### **Case study 2: Library collaborations – Timmins Public Library**

As mentioned earlier in this report, Digital Creator North has always had a very close partnership with libraries in the region, having operated with and within the physical library spaces. It was important for us to maintain and grow our relationships with them as we all collectively navigated the pandemic environment. A library is central to many communities – it is one space where affordability is fully prioritized and services are free. With that being said, many libraries are underfunded and staff are spread thin! When approaching libraries with the idea of virtual collaboration, we ensured that we would be offering programming for their community, providing all materials necessary in addition to running the events, and not making more work for them. Our collaborations with libraries across Northern Ontario were some of our most consistent and successful, but below we outline a specific event run with the Timmins Public Library.

Our interactions throughout the duration of the collaboration went as follows:

1. Initial brainstorm meeting and logistics: Prior to this initial meeting, we had prepared and sent our library partners a list of workshops we had already developed and allowed them to pick some from there, or to offer alternative suggestions. In the case of this collaboration, they were interested in the “Design your own Discord Emoji” event but with their own fun addition: the Timmins Public Library had a button machine, and suggested that when youth created their emoji they could then pick it up from the library printed on a pin. Within this preliminary meeting, we discussed logistics including their target age range, 11-19, and some prospective dates. We also offer to handle registration on our end, or theirs – whichever is easier or more comfortable!
2. Advertising package: For every partner collaboration we prepared and sent out both social media visuals and associated captions outlining the event. We aimed to get our partner these at least 3 weeks in advance! In the case of this workshop, TPL’s programming team *wanted* to create the poster so we sent all supplemental text and assets their way. The description of the virtual event was as follows:



“Join us Wednesday, January 19th at 6:00pm for a virtual workshop with DGTl Creator North! Learn how to create a custom emoji to use on Discord servers with friends. DGTl Creator North will provide a safe, welcoming online environment.

You'll have the freedom to explore digital skills, collaborate with others and learn from experienced mentors. Kick back, relax and explore the world of media art in your own backyard.

After the workshop, visit the library between Jan. 26 - Feb. 2 to pick up your customized emoji button / magnet! We'll also include two themed library books and a resources guide.

To register, email \_\_\_\_\_ or call \_\_\_\_\_.

Visit the DGTl Creator North website to discover more online opportunities:

<https://digitalcreator.ca/>"

3. The event itself: We had three participants register to attend this event. Two were siblings ages 9 and 11, and one was 20. The event took place in our Gather.town space supervised by Rebecca and Tyler, and was very well-received! An outline of the event, including a breakdown of the software used (Magma), can be found in our Toolkit section!
  - a. Highlights from meeting notes: “The event was great! Tyler and Rebecca were able to check in on everyone's work as they went, so using Magma was a GREAT call especially for remote things. Problem-solving went pretty well and everyone made something in the end! The participant in his 20s was the only one with a camera on, and using audio, so he definitely was the most visibly into it and seemed genuinely excited by the workshop. Both of the younger participants had video and audio off so that was tricky for communication. Rebecca was able to check in on them by asking them to respond using Gather.town reaction emojis (“thumbs up if you finished this step, hand raise if you need more time”) and asked them to either ask for help out loud or use the chat box. They usually used the chat box. Everyone stuck around until 7:30!”
  - b. Feedback from participants: “Hello Tyler, Thanks so much to you and Rebecca for hosting this amazing event yesterday. I have learnt a lot from both of you. :)”
4. The wrap-up: Following the successful creation of their emojis, Rebecca and Tyler emailed the final images to the Timmins Public Library for printing. Each participant showed up in person and picked up their buttons!

**Challenges and learning opportunities:** As mentioned in the meeting notes above, a challenge we encountered during this event was that two out of the three participants had their microphones and cameras turned off. We wanted participants to approach our activities in whichever ways they felt comfortable – if that meant solely communicating through chat, then that was okay with us. Our role in that scenario was to **adapt**, and provide instruction in a way that worked for our participants! In this specific scenario, when just checking in on comfort and progress before moving onto the next step, Rebecca prompted the participants to use the reaction emojis (“thumbs up if you finished this step, hand raise if you need more time”) as that took less time and put less strain on the participants to type a response in the chat. When it came to questions from the participants, Rebecca frequently asked if they had any and paused in case they had to type in the chat. This method required more time, but when planning workshops Digital Creator Online always ensured they had allocated enough for scenarios such as this. We learned that this method of communication worked, and that continuing to slightly overestimate time would be beneficial.

Another factor that the team was initially unsure about was how the event would feel with a mixed age group. Two participants were siblings ages 9 and 11, and one was unrelated and 20. The library had reached out prior to the event and asked whether it was okay if the 20-year-old attended, having notified him of Digital Creator North’s typical age range. He did not mind, and we were also okay with the two age groups being present especially given the fact that our events are always supervised. What we found was that the two age groups did not interact at all, but both interacted with the mentors and seemed to separately enjoy themselves. Given our conversations with the older attendee during the event, we can make assumptions as to his reasoning for joining in on the workshop – he did not self-identify as an artist, nor did he use Discord. He did mention that he was looking forward to trying something new, and we inferred that had limited access to things to do (presumably due to COVID). This was a dynamic we assumed could pose a challenge (either age group being uncomfortable) but we did not get the sense of that at all! This reflects anecdotal experiences of past mentors in the physical Digital Creator spaces – age groups have tended to stick to their own.

**Insights:** Our collaborations with libraries enabled us to reach communities and audiences we had lost since shutting down while also providing programming support to libraries who were experiencing significant burnout. Additionally, some libraries felt comfortable running Zoom events, but some were not – we were able to step in and provide this online option. Often the success of the program in terms of registration numbers was dependent on whether partners shared the advertisement materials and championed the event to their greater community.

## **In person/hybrid**

### **Case study 3: Collaborations with community organizations – OUTloud**

How to Digitally Draw Yourself” one of our most-watched [recorded workshops](#)!

[OUTloud](#) was an organization that came up during our preliminary survey of regional youth organizations. The space was “created to build a strong and supportive community in which individuals can support, learn, collaborate, and inspire each other. Seth [Compton, the founder] identified a need for support services and a safe hangout space for 2SLGBTQ+ young people in the area, and opened the first location in downtown North Bay in 2019 to address these needs.” Their mission and mandate aligned with our own, and we were eager to reach out and see about possible collaboration!

OUTloud was an essential service during the pandemic, and as such they remained open for in-person activities. In conversations with Seth Compton, he mentioned that the space was always looking for organizations to run events with them and many youth in the space were interested in digital art. Despite being open in person, Seth also was interested in providing youth with an online option for safely hanging out much like they would in the physical space. While we were a virtual program, one of our Programming Research Facilitators was living and working from home in North Bay. This opened the opportunity for a hybridized approach!

Our interactions throughout the duration of the collaboration went as follows:

1. Initial brainstorm meetings: Prior to this brainstorm meeting, we had prepared and sent Seth a list of workshops we had already developed and allowed him to pick some from there, or to offer alternative suggestions. He ended up suggesting “How to Digitally Draw Yourself as a Superhero” – we ended up running this as “How to Digitally Draw Yourself” which was popular live and became one of our most-watched recorded workshops.
2. Advertising package: For every partner collaboration we prepared and sent out both social media visuals and associated captions outlining the event.
3. The workshops: We ran a few different workshops in OUTloud which were in person taught by Rebecca, but we did run a couple of hybrid workshops where Rebecca was in the space and Tyler was in the Digital Creator Online Gather.town being projected into OUTloud. This involved Rebecca setting up the projector with sound so that Tyler was visible and able to instruct remotely. One such program was “Making Music on Smartphones” which was described on social media as: “Join us this Friday, December 3rd at 6pm EST at OutLoud North Bay for a workshop on making your own music and beats: all on your smartphone! You'll learn how to make your own sampler, how to add sound effects, and how to share your masterpiece.” The structure for this event can be found in the Toolkit section.

- a. Highlights from meeting notes: “Rebecca's perspective: I was in the space so I got to see a little more of the reception! One specific youth showed up and had mentioned that they were here specifically for this! She had even asked her mom to download Bandlab beforehand. She was there with her friend. Once the workshop began, they were the only two really focused on the workshop, so I disconnected the audio (which had been playing in the whole space) and just used my laptop speakers so the two participants could hear. That helped!

Both participants were uncomfortable with being caught on webcam, so I turned it off and let them sit in front of my laptop and I stood ~6ft away. Tyler couldn't see, but they were SUPER into the app. They did get distracted a lot, and so they weren't always listening to the steps the whole time, but when they got distracted it was by creating music! Which was the task at hand, so I consider that super successful. They were both SUPER excited that they were making music, and were smiling pretty ear to ear the whole time.”

- b. Challenges: “Tyler’s perspective: Somewhat difficult, especially at the get-go! As the person leading the workshop, it's difficult to understand the pace of things when they're not all immediately in front of you (there's a bit of feedback that was happening on my end, so I also needed to mute Rebecca some of the time which mean that I did not know when someone had a question unless Rebecca gave me a visual cue). I guess what I learned is that Hybrid programs are a bit more difficult than we thought, because it might mean that the instructor is on autopilot and feels a bit distanced from everyone. It also was just a challenge for OutLoud perhaps because since it is a bit louder, I can't really hear questions or know if they are waiting for me to keep going or if they need some time to figure something out. However, They really, really loved BandLab, and seemed incredibly excited about the program :)”

**Challenges and learning opportunities:** As mentioned above, a major challenge was the feeling of disconnect between the virtual instructor and the activities happening in the physical space. This was perhaps amplified by the fact that there was an instructor in the physical space who was able to receive and respond to cues from the participants, thus resulting in them not communicating directly with the instructor on the computer. A solution was that Rebecca, who was in the physical space, periodically notified Tyler of what was happening with the participants. What we learned from this experience is that if one instructor is online, the physical instructor should be consistently communicating with them.

Unlike the completely virtual workshops, this was a scenario where using software by means of smartphone/iPad apps was a great option due to the fact that one physical instructor could help troubleshoot. This requires the instructor in the physical space to be slightly comfortable with the

device, but with some preparation prior to the event, it would be a good format and solution to issues such as:

- An organization wanting access to more programming not available in their community
- Youth without access to a computer – only the organization requires one!

**Insights:** Our collaborations with OUTloud were always very well attended and received when they took place in their space. It did not seem to translate online, which was a large learning opportunity for us. We were able to reach many youth who were interested in digital art through this collaboration, and we were able to engage them as a mutually supportive collective – while this did not translate into more Digital Creator members per se, we consider the entire experience to have been successful.

## 7. OUTREACH

We very quickly realized that reconnecting with the previous Digital Creator community following the pandemic-related shutdowns would be far more difficult than expected. Simply rebooting our old social media channels and reaching out to our mailing list of past registrants was not bearing much engagement – it was as though we were starting over and rebuilding from the ground up. While this was initially a source of panic – “what were we doing wrong?!” – we realized that one strength of the program from the past, the close connection we had with our library partners, could be replicated here once more. We were in the unique position where we had the opportunity to grow our network and connect with incredible organizations across the region who had the same mission as we did: to support youth and mitigate isolation. Additionally, we had already built Digital Creator Online and had begun running workshops on our own and with library partners. This made it easy to begin building relationships with others as we could show and offer a developed system from which to virtually collaborate within!

Our process of outreach went as follows:

1. Desk research: We dedicated time at the beginning of our development process to researching and discovering what community organizations were operating in Northern Ontario – particularly organizations with a focus on youth support – and what their personal missions/mandates were.
2. Initial email and meeting invitation: Upon finding an organization who may be a good fit, we crafted a personalized email reaching out and seeing whether they had the capacity and inclination to meet with us. We typically hosted our first meeting in Google Meet, and offered to tour our Gather.town space from there.

3. Initial meeting: The purpose of this meeting was to begin building a relationship with the organization, and to hear about their experience throughout the pandemic. We were curious about how they were connecting with youth, where they found their stride, as well as their challenges. We wanted to know whether we could support them in any way, particularly when it came to programming staff burnout, and “not knowing where to start” with virtual programming.

\*Tip: A great way to expand your ecosystem is to ask organizations whether there are other organizations they think you should be reaching out to. This is a great way to get a feel for the systems already in place, and to build even more relationships!

4. Collaboration: As mentioned in “Success Stories”, when collaborating with organizations we always scheduled a brainstorm session to set up a collaboration where they could be as involved as they’d like!
5. Follow up and report: Following each event we would create a report outlining how the event went along with any feedback we received, an outline of skills attendees learned, and our suggestion for our next workshop.



## DGTL Online Event Report

Friday, January 21, 2022

<b>Date and time of event</b>	Jan 19, 6PM
<b>Workshop/game night/event title</b>	Custom Discord Emoji Workshop
<b>Was this event in collaboration with anyone?</b>	Timmins Public Library
<b>How many participants showed up?</b>	3
<b>How many were new to the space?</b>	3
<b>Number of participants aged 9-13</b>	2
<b>Number of participants aged 14-19</b>	0
<b>Number of participants over 19</b>	1
<b>How did it go?</b>	★★★★☆

### Summary

This collaboration was an absolute success! The evening began with a tour of the Digital Creator Online space, and once everyone felt comfortable we began the actual workshop using Magma Studio. There were very few technical difficulties, but when they did arise, Rebecca and Tyler were able to remotely problem solve with attendees by looking at the participants' canvases on Magma Studio. The younger participants did not seem to want to use their camera or microphone, so Tyler and Rebecca prompted them to use the chat function and were able to communicate that way! All in all, everyone was able to complete the workshop and the end products were awesome. Everyone definitely wanted to have them made into buttons afterward!

### What skills did they learn?

This workshop taught:

- How to use a digital drawing software, specifically tools like: the selection tool, the transform tool, the shape tool, etc
- The importance of layers and how to label/move around your layers
- What a transparent background is
- How to find "png"s to use with their projects
- How to create fun text using fontmeme
- How to upload their emoji to a Discord server

1

All of this info can be applied to future digital art projects, and using other software like Photoshop!

### Suggestion for next workshop!

Based on what folks liked about this workshop, they may like our "How to Digitally Draw Yourself" workshop where we teach participants how to make a cute self-portrait using a software like Magma Studio!

6. Repeat step 3 and onward!

## 8. LESSONS LEARNED

Throughout the Digital Creator team's yearlong journey in building and executing Digital Creator Online – from research, prototype, trial and error, pivoting, and finding flow – there are many lessons we learned which may be beneficial to those considering replicating any facet of this virtual experience.

### 1. Internet access and platform choice

While we put an extensive amount of thought into our platform choice, and Gather.town held the capabilities and atmosphere we valued, it was not always the best choice for every circumstance. The primary issue with Gather.town which arose was that it was not consistently and reliably accessible for participants in low-Internet communities. The platform would oftentimes not fully load, leaving them standing in a blank screen as the space populated. There were also functions which became unusable due to loading time.

One positive facet of Gather.town was that it was so full of features. Due to the associated required bandwidth, this also ended up being a source of frustration. It was not acceptable for us to have a program which was not fully functional to those in low-internet communities, and so we pivoted to providing options. Some of these options involved offering to move over to a video chat platform, or even offering to give directions over the phone! We did use the video chat only option on a few occasions when participants mentioned a difficulty loading the space.

### 2. The half-truth of “build it and they will come”

When creating a community or beginning a new venture, the phrase “build it and they will come” has a tendency to emerge. We felt it was important to create this online space in order to reconnect with the Digital Creator North communities which had gone dormant due to covid. Our initial assumption was that due to the fact that there were so few programs safely connecting youth online that ours would steadily gain participants. We also assumed that we *would* reconnect with the community from our physical spaces. The reality of our experience was that we had only a couple of participants from the former Digital Creator spaces, and we had only a few participants return multiple times. Our attendance numbers were quite low in general. But ultimately we realized that we could make the most out of the situation through pivoting our approach. The space could still act as a larger clubhouse, prioritizing hanging out as a group when youth did come, but in this lower attendance we had the opportunity to focus more in a one-on-one capacity. The programming research facilitators could get to know individuals even better, and then create workshops for them based on their expressed interests!

One participant who came back multiple times came from a larger family, with eager younger siblings who popped in and out of the video frame during meetings, and took part in a couple of one-on-one digital art workshops. The assumption in this case could be that individualized attention was valued.



### 3. Youth's online social habits

As mentioned previously, we came into the project with the specific assumption that youth would be wanting online community. This was due to general associations with youth media habits being increasingly online, combined with the widespread isolation felt due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. What we learned, though, was that Digital Creator Online was not a direct replacement for the experience of being together in real life — being able to gather in space turned out to be important. This can be seen when we observe the experience of OUTloud whose space stayed open for in-person hangouts and activities throughout the pandemic. Their space was consistently active with youth attending both for planned workshops and activities, but also had youth consistently coming into the space in order to just hangout. We had hosted both online and in-person collaborations with OUTloud — youth chose to attend the in-person workshop, and our online collaboration had no attendees. The experience of hosting Digital Creator Online with very low attendance overall and our observations of in-person hangout spaces such as OUTloud, taught us that gathering in community was not something an online space can replicate. This was combined with other possible factors including screen fatigue from online school and general feelings of missing meeting up in person — something the pandemic highlighted was that there is nothing quite like spending time with friends and loved ones in real life.

## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the vast number of learning opportunities throughout our time building and conducting Digital Creator Online have come a number of recommendations we would offer to those hoping to replicate any portion of the project.

### Design approach

- Begin with SMART goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound.
- Consider the cost of the tools and software. Digital Creator North has consistently prioritized low-barrier programming — going online meant that we could not physically provide as much software, and as such it needed to be free and accessible for the youth we were reaching virtually.
- Consider the comfort levels of your audience — we had youth indicate to us early on (and in the physical spaces) that they did prefer separate programming for different age groups. With that being said, other organizations (such as Outloud) have run mixed-age hangouts and workshops where youth naturally fall into their own groups. It may depend on your specific space and audience — we recommend consulting with your own youth!
- The variable of timing is another factor which we recommend seeking youth input. Our assumption of youth preferring a later event was proven wrong when multiple youth indicated they actually preferred coming right after school!

- Scale your program and expectations to the resources that you have. We were incredibly excited to embark on this project. Something we found was that organizations often told us they would love to be running online programming but they did not have the capacity – this is completely understandable. We were able to work with this as we did have the capacity, but did not have the audience. In that way we were able to reciprocally support organizations hoping to do some connection online. With that being said – operating online is no easy task! We were able to do so because we had a team working full time on the project – it would not have functioned without that and we would warn against underestimating the time and resources necessary for building and operation.
- Showcase the tools as a way to learn about the future. Futures thinking is a critical skill for all ages, even more so for youth that are disconnected. There are many ways to think about the future that can be structured, imagined and reflected on while learning to use digital media tools.

### **Stakeholders**

- Build a network of like minded organizations. There is a gap in how community based digital media organizations connect and learn from each other. In each interview we found people struggling to connect to their communities in a role that was outside of their previous experience. A more connected community of program administrators would help to speed up the generation of mutual support systems and knowledge transfer.
- Experiment with new partnerships outside of the cultural sector. The organizations that were hosting this during COVID were working out of their scope when DCN offered it as a platform to the libraries and galleries to maintain connection to their visitors. Other organizations that need to connect with youth may be seeking tools like these to enhance communication and need someone to facilitate the relationship through digital media.

### **Contextual Factors**

- Engage hyperlocal research as much as possible. In particular when it is place-specific, consulting people who know the area and making it a very personalized model will make a difference to the community. It will have the additional benefit of making the experience collaborative, with community buy-in!

### **Understanding Youth Media Habits**

- Engage a "nothing about us without us" approach. Community consultation should be built into your development process. While this does involve consulting like-minded organizations and trusted adults, youth should be central and active participants in the creation process. We recommend this also involve crediting and compensating them as co-creators or researchers!

### **Building the platform**

- Try to use collaborative software whenever possible. Not only is it helpful in promoting a sense of togetherness that may be lacking in remote setups, but it makes it much easier for instructors to troubleshoot issues which may arise in a workshop scenario!
- Test run software/websites with teammates, having them act in place of the person you are onboarding and directing. It was one thing knowing the software yourself and another thing entirely being able to instruct someone on its use completely remotely.
- Instructing on a smartphone or iPad app is not entirely impossible (we recommend getting a screen mirroring app so everyone can see when you share your computer screen!) but if there is an alternative able to be used on a computer then that may be simpler if they are meeting on a computer. In general, the fewer added devices, the better!

### **Quantifying “Success”**

- Build in the potential for pivoting into your new program model when possible. You may need to try a few iterations before you find a model that works for you and your community. Be open to having your own assumptions challenged.

The goal of writing this report was in part to provide insight and resources to organizations hoping to run any variation of online programming. Select workshops had been chosen by facilitators, and event overviews were created as guides. They can be accessed [here](#).