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The Forensic Imagination: Co-Developing Interdisciplinary Approaches to Writers' Born-Digital Archives

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In 2013, Matthew Kirschenbaum advocated for increased collaboration between archivists and digital humanities specialists to make the most out of born-digital archives (Kirschenbaum, 2013). This call to arms has borne fruit, as researchers and archivists have experimented with innovative interfaces for access to writers' archives. Jensen (2015), for instance, describes a potential interface that would make writers' drafts available as a "transcription mash-up" that allows users to juxtapose the text, textual transcriptions and draft variants for the user to view on a single screen. Building on these interventions, we are also interested in the ways that work on born-digital archives can move beyond this "humanistic interface design" (Drucker, 2013), towards a model that also encompasses data-driven interventions into the interpretation of writers' drafts.

The British Archive for Contemporary Writing at UEA is beginning to collect the work of young and contemporary novelists who work in inventive digital ways. We are keen to grow these collections with a particular research focus on: 1. understanding how authors archive their own work digitally, and move from draft to draft; and 2. how the archivist might best safeguard, investigate and organise these digital archives to best facilitate future research approaches. This would involve co-designing archives (and even, potentially, archive software) with researchers at the point of archiving, and co-developing tools for digital forensic work that would allow multiple modes of interpretation and criticism. These tools would aim to combine the traditions associated with knowledge in the humanities with tools for digital forensics and innovative archival design, in order to illuminate questions of creativity, collaboration, failure, and development in writers' processes. In doing so, we aim to explore the implications for the professional practice of archivists, and the nature of the born-digital archive as a hybrid environment for models of use that are grounded in the intellectual push towards generous interfaces (Whitelaw, 2015).

References

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