

**Archive and Interface in Digital Textual Studies:  
From Cultural History to Critical Design**  
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Archives embody our preoccupation with traces of human presence in the artifacts that outlive us. For humanities scholars, their students, and the Canadian public, the artifact with the most metaphorical power remains the book, but digital textuality places new pressures on the idea of “the book” in the cultural imagination—particularly its archival function as a preserver of knowledge. Ten years prior to the rise of the Web, D.F. McKenzie declared in a British Library lecture that bibliography’s great virtue is that it can “show the human presence in any recorded text,” printed or otherwise (1999/1985: 29). Yet textual studies (comprising bibliography, book history, and scholarly editing) now faces a deepening separation of material form from idealized content in the design of digital tools, despite the turn in literary studies toward the materiality of texts as indispensable to interpretation (McGann 2001; Liu 2004; Hayles 2004). Digital textual scholars therefore find themselves caught between contrary trends in computational practice and literary theory. We can bridge this gap in two ways. First, we need to understand how the figure of the archive operates in the cultural imagination, and how perceptions of digital archives are partly coded in advance by historical fears and desires about the continuity of knowledge. Second, we must develop traditions of digital interface design native to the humanities, which reflect the humanities’ uniquely valuable understanding of the cultural histories and material complexities of texts. My project bridges between textual studies and the design of digital interface tools in the humanities. It does so first by investigating the cultural history of the humanities archive, and second by building an online library of interface components designed to be part of that cultural history.

*Phase 1: The Shakespearean Archive.* The first phase of the research plan is an account of the cultural history of the idea of the archive in the humanities. This research examines traditions of what we now call “critical design”—the practice of understanding the world by designing artifacts to inhabit it (Dunne 2005/1999)—within the long history of textual scholarship. As a way of focusing the inquiry, this phase will concentrate on Shakespeare as a locus for the editing, interpreting, and archiving of literature, performance, and research. Shakespeare is intensely connective. His works’ broad cultural history and public appeal ties together topics ranging from the professionalization of editing (Maguire 1996), to theatrical archives (Hodgdon 1998), to pre-digital experiments with information technology (Galey and Siemens 2008), to present debates over how to represent complex texts online (Carson 2006).

*Phase 2: Critical Design for Humanities Visualization.* The second phase involves consultation with ongoing digital humanities projects to create a free, open-source code library of interface components that reflect the humanities’ critical tradition. Drawing upon the historical research of the first phase, the interface library will focus on critical design strategies in four key areas: *textual variation* (when sources diverge in significant ways); *paratexts* (documents such as prefatory letters, often published with literary works in complex configurations); *materiality* (the relation of physical documents to digital versions); and *performance* (the relation of written texts to reading or enactment in physical spaces).

By studying archive and interface in digital textual studies together, in the same program of research, this project will provide a much-needed synthesis of literary studies, digital humanities, and interface design. In practical terms, the interface library embodies the premise that many small interface design efforts will yield more publishable components, respond more quickly to critical and theoretical developments, and involve less risk than a single, large project that requires continuing funding. This project will benefit multiple fields by sharing reusable interface components, and by situating their development within textual scholarship, literary studies, and theories of the archive.

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