



TOWARDS
A NATIONAL
COLLECTION



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council

INTERIM REPORT

FOUNDATION PROJECTS

PRESERVING AND SHARING BORN-DIGITAL AND HYBRID OBJECTS

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Victoria & Albert Museum | Birkbeck, University of London |
British Film Institute | Tate | British Library

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Executive Summary

This report outlines progress on the AHRC Toward a National Collection Foundation Project, *Preserving and Sharing Born Digital and Hybrid Objects*, led by Principal Investigator Natalie Kane at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in collaboration with the British Film Institute (BFI) and Birkbeck, University of London and in partnership with Tate and the British Library. The report offers a comprehensive update in three key areas: 1. project progress to date; 2. impacts of COVID-19 on the project; and 3. next steps.

The impact of the pandemic on *Preserving and Sharing Born Digital and Hybrid Objects* has been significant and has led to an 8-month delay to the project delivery. The report focuses on the consequences of this delay for the project, its staffing and research findings, and outlines the new project timeline to ensure timely completion of the research set out in the funding application. While the delay to the project has been significant, work is now underway to delivery all project aims and objectives, with an extensive programme of events planned for 2021.

Abstract

Contemporary culture is increasingly digital. However, this prevalence of digital culture poses a significant challenge to collecting organisations which are responsible for acquiring, preserving and making culture available to the public, now and in the future. In considering how to make our national collections accessible, we must consider born-digital and hybrid material as an increasingly important and uniquely challenging part of those collections.

This project focuses on three challenges:

- 1. collections management** - the policies, governance, systems and standards needed to support born-digital collections;
- 2. digital preservation and conservation** - the skills, software and hardware needed to preserve them for the future;
- 3. meaningful access and experience** - the development of modes of access that do not merely represent digital culture as static, but facilitate 'live' engagement with it, evocative of the complex and multivalent experiences it entails.

The project brings together an interdisciplinary team of academic and collections-based researchers including representatives from the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), British Film Institute (BFI), Tate, British Library (BL), and Birkbeck, University of London. By harnessing the collective skills, knowledge and challenges of individuals and institutions involved with different types of born-digital and hybrid cultural heritage, the project works to ensure that born-digital culture becomes an integral part of the UK's national collections, able to be made accessible meaningfully just as analogue objects are. One of its key aims is to respond to the need for the development of digital skills and literacy across the cultural sector to facilitate the development of an inclusive and open born-digital national collection.

Aims and Objectives

1. To review and produce a report on current practices of collecting born-digital cultural heritage,
2. To organise a series of workshops bringing together IROs, academics and industry professionals to interrogate three key aspects of this challenge: collections management, digital conservation and preservation, and meaningful access and experience
3. To produce a set of recommendations for the skills and resources required to develop digital preservation or conservation skills across the 'national collection'
4. To produce a set of recommendations on how to adapt governance and acquisition policies to support the management of digital objects
5. To develop two small-scale technical pilots: 1. a data model based on linked open data to describe born-digital objects and related "digital preservation" conservation documentation, and 2. an enhancement of existing digital preservation software to provide a new mode of online access to a set of born-digital objects in the national collection
6. To engage in knowledge-sharing across the cultural and industrial sectors, helping to build digital literacy and understanding
7. To lay the foundations for and propose a future discovery project to take these recommendations and pilots forward on a larger scale, in order to increase access to born-digital and hybrid culture within and across the National Collection.

Partnership Structure

This project is led by the Victoria and Albert Museum, with the Principal Investigator, Technical co-Investigator and Postdoctoral Research Fellow all based at the V&A. One co-I is based at Birkbeck, University of London, another at the British Film Institute.

Principal Investigator – provides overall project leadership, co-ordinating activities, managing the budget and line-managing the Research Fellow.

Technical co-I – focuses on technical aspects of making digital culture accessible and sustainable in the context of a collecting organisation.

Co-I (BFI) – leads on the development of 'digital preservation and conservation' project strand and facilitates collaboration with digital conservation community.

Co-I (Birkbeck) – leads on the delivery of literature review and case studies.

Research Fellow – supports the PI in delivery of the project, works alongside co-I (Birkbeck) on research into approaches to born-digital collections, and carries out independent research in the field.

Project partners – Tate and British Library – play an active role in knowledge sharing and participate in project workshops planned for 2021.

Staffing Structure

Principal Investigator - Natalie Kane, Curator of Digital Design (V&A)

Co-Investigator - Joel McKim, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies/ Director of Vasari Centre for Art and Technology (Birkbeck)

Co-Investigator - Stephen McConnachie, Head of Data for Collections and Information (BFI)

Technical Co-Investigator - Richard Palmer, Technical Lead (V&A)

Postdoctoral Research Fellow – Gabriella Arrigoni (V&A)

COVID-19 Impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the project and led to an 8-month delay to its delivery. One of the co-Investigators contracted COVID-19 in spring, which caused a significant interruption to their ability to participate in the project and posed initial delays. Alongside 72% of V&A's staff, the Principal Investigator was furloughed in April 2020, effectively bringing the project to a halt only 2,5 months after it had started. The PI returned to work 1 day per week only in August 2020 and full-time in November 2020. In addition, the impact of the pandemic on University teaching and increased workload brought about by a shift to online delivery, the exceptional pressure on the Technical co-Investigator due to increased requirements for website support in response to repeated Museum closures/reopening, as well as the ongoing pressures on the cultural sector have meant that all co-Is' capacity has been limited since work on the project has restarted.

The recruitment of the Postdoctoral Research Fellow has also been impacted by the pandemic. In March 2020, the V&A introduced a recruitment freeze in response to the emerging crisis. This freeze, combined with the furlough of the PI, meant that it was only possible to recruit for this post in October. A Postdoctoral Research Fellow was appointed in November 2020 and will take up the post in January 2021.

A new project schedule has now been put in place to mitigate against ongoing impacts of the pandemic and to ensure that the project is delivered in a timely manner. The revised programme has been carefully designed to not only address the challenging delay but to also make possible delivery of all key project components in the ongoing pandemic context.

Revised Overall Programme

February 2020	Project start
August – September 2020	Revision of project timetable
September - October 2020	Recruitment of Postdoctoral Fellow
November 2020	Appointment of Postdoctoral Fellow
December 2020 - February 2021	Literature Review
February – May 2021	Case Studies

May – June 2021	Workshops
June - July 2021	Public events
July 2021 – January 2022	Data model pilots and testing
February – March 2022	Delivery and dissemination of project outputs
March 2022	Project end

Events and Consultations

Workshops with participants from the museums sector, collecting institutions, industry professionals and academia. (May – June 2021)

Collections management (x2)	15 pax per workshop	May 2021
Digital Preservation and Conservation (x2)	15 pax per workshop	May 2021
Access, Experience and Meaning (x2)	15 pax per workshop	June 2021

Public Events

Preserving and Sharing Born Digital and Hybrid Objects (x2)	100 pax per event	June - July 2021
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Research approach

The project seeks to build on existing, but currently unrelated initiatives interrogating different aspects of born-digital and hybrid culture (e.g. digital artworks, time-based media, born-digital archives, complex digital design and other digital objects). It is designed as a comprehensive scoping study aimed at assessing current approaches to collecting born-digital objects, analysing and interrogating existing and emergent standards for born-digital collections, as well as commonalities and differences across digital and hybrid object types. As such, it consists of a combination of desk-based research, which will lead to the production of a literature review, a series of case studies of born-digital and hybrid objects, workshops, and related development of small-scale prototypes for collections management (interrogating governance frameworks and data standards), preservation (exploring skills, training, and infrastructures) and access (modelling approaches to interactive digital approaches) to born-digital collections.

The prototypes will trial Linked Art Data Models across the assigned case studies for born-digital and hybrid objects, linking outputs from research across the project, in cooperation with the Linked Art group. In doing so, the project will lead to a better understanding of and make recommendations for skills and infrastructures necessary to ensure adequate care for and access to complex digital and hybrid collections.

Early research results/outputs

Due to significant delays to the project (see discussion of COVID-19 impacts above), there are no project outputs on which to report at this stage. The literature review is under way and work is progressing in preparation for the delivery of workshops and case studies, in line with the revised project timeline.

Next steps

The majority of the work on this project is yet to be delivered. The Research Fellow joins the project team on 4 January 2021 and will focus in the first instance on the literature review, alongside McKim, to be completed in February 2021. The PI and the co-Is are preparing to start work on the project case studies, which will follow on from the literature review, and are planning a series of workshops and events for late spring/early summer 2021. The second half of 2021 will be spent on the development and testing of data prototypes, with the final three months of the project committed to consolidation and dissemination of project outputs. As a result of an 8-month extension, the project is now due to finish in March 2022.

The team is committed to ensuring that the project is delivered in line with the revised schedule to ensure its timely completion. As such, focus in the next phase of the project will be two-fold: 1. delivering all key components of the project (literature review, workshops, case studies, data prototypes, publications) and 2. actively working to mitigate against ongoing COVID-19 impacts to ensure no further delays to the project occur (planning for online project management and virtual event delivery, reallocating travel funds to purchase of key research material to mitigate against limited library access, planning for project delivery with reduced team, should further illness or furlough affect any of the core project team members).

Contacts

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