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Review: 'The Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation'

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THE THEORY AND CRAFT OF DIGITAL PRESERVATION. Trevor Owens. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2018. 240 pp. $34.95 (softcover). ISBN: 9781421426976

The Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation is intended to be a guidebook and a basic introduction to the field of digital preservation. Although some of the content is practical, it is not a manual on how to "do" digital preservation, as digital preservation—and all forms of preservation—is an ongoing process. Instead, practical techniques are interwoven with theory, a strategy which assists readers in developing an understanding of what it means to practice digital preservation as a craft.

Owens is both an experienced practitioner and educator in the field of digital preservation. Currently serving as the head of digital content management for the Library of Congress, he also teaches digital history at American University, and digital preservation at the University of Maryland. In a previous role, Owens contributed to the creation of National Digital Stewardship Alliance's (NDSA) "Levels of Digital Preservation" framework.[1]

The Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation sets itself apart from other digital preservation texts in several ways. Most notably, it explores the multiple lineages of preservation. Owens emphasizes an opening remark at a meeting of the digital preservation task force at the Library of Congress: "There is no such thing as digital preservation, there is only the conservation of digital media" (p. 12). Throughout the opening chapter, he provides specific examples using three distinct preservation traditions: artifactual, informational, and folkloric. As Owens explains, these three traditions each have different objectives. Preserving the physical item, such as a historic house, is important to artifactual preservation. Each copy of Frankenstein—whether a paperback or an e-book—satisfies informational preservation as long

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[1] The NDSA Levels of Digital Preservation is a tool used frequently by organizations to assess their current preservation practices and next steps in enhancing their workflows. National Digital Stewardship Alliance, "Levels of Digital Preservation." Accessed February 15, 2019. https://ndsa.org//activities/levels-of-digital-preservation/.

as the words are the same. Finally, for folkloric preservation, the exact words of the Frankenstein story can be different, as long as the general idea of the story remains the same. Understanding these traditions helps readers to approach answering more complex questions about which aspects of their institutions' material they hope to maintain for future users.

The target audience for this book includes librarians, archivists and museum professionals, though it also has value for the researchers and scholars who interact with them. Much of the terminology will be familiar to archivists, both those who typically deal with digital material, and those who do not. The basic steps of digital preservation—collection development, arrangement and description, access and use—apply to all content regardless of format.

A major strength of Owens' writing is the clear and approachable structure of each of his chapters. He begins with a broad concept, and then succinctly articulates how the chapter will address this concept through several examples that support and clarify it. The reader is never left without a roadmap of how the pieces all fit together.

For example, in chapter five, "Preservation Intent and Collection Development," Owens argues that establishing preservation intent prior to completing any preservation tasks is crucial, because the means of preserving a digital object depends on what information is significant. In the case of writer Salman Rushdie's laptops, acquired by Emory University, the archivists determined that preserving Rushdie's digital working environment was important to researchers interested in his writing process. Rather than simply copying his files, archivists created an emulated version of this environment with which users could interact. Owens juxtaposed this example with astrophysicist Carl Sagan's papers and floppy discs, which were acquired by the Library of Congress. Sagan did not primarily work on the computer. Instead, he dictated notes that a service then transcribed. Sagan printed out the transcriptions and made handwritten edits to

the papers. The floppy discs in Sagan's collection mostly contained transcriptions: information objects that someone else had created, the content of which was duplicated in the marked-up paper copies. In this case, the digital files gave little insight into Sagan's process, so a less elaborate preservation and access strategy than that used for the Rushdie laptops sufficed. These examples substantiate Owens' argument that practitioners should first answer the simple question, "why are we doing this?" before considering how digital preservation should be done.

It is worth noting that Owens deliberately uses examples throughout the text from institutions of varying sizes and types, each with their own goals and approaches to digital preservation. From *World of Warcraft* to *Know Your Meme*, the examples are timely, interesting, and sufficiently complex for readers to engage with aspects of digital preservation that they may not have encountered at their own institution.

The Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation achieves the difficult balance of being a text referenced for everyday work by practitioners, without prescribing or endorsing specific tools or processes that would quickly become outdated. This allows the text to be useful to librarians, archivists, and museum professionals, while also approaching the topic in a broad enough manner to be valuable for scholars, researchers, and other professionals engaging with digital preservation.

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