

## *Editors' Introduction*

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The idea for this special issue emerged from the same big questions that led to the existence of this journal itself.

Namely: *What are we doing and why?*

The professional life of a digital librarian (a term we use primarily to denote professionals who work with unique cultural items stored and transmitted in digital formats) is one that oscillates between emerging and shifting best practices on one hand, and on-the-ground realities of understaffed and underfunded institutions on the other. In short: our days are busy and simply understanding the shifting realities of our work responsibilities keeps us from imagining what more our jobs could be.

We know that it takes time to generate big ideas. It takes energy to rethink our roles as professionals, people, and community members. Given how much we need to get done on any given work day, it's not likely we'll have the time and capacity to dream big without prompting and assistance.

The current special issue, "Turning It Off and Back On Again: Speculative Digital Librarianship," is our attempt to clear a little space for big dreams. In addition to playing on the idea that we might fix something problematic with our status quo by rebooting our current practices, the use of the word "speculative" is an invitation to engage with the unproven and even unknowable. In contrast to the limitations of our day jobs, we've encouraged contributors to deviate from the safe and sure. Through our four submissions, we see a number of attempts to rethink our work.

"Speculative Telephone," an eleven-part audio article, was envisioned and created by Kae Bara Kratcha and reflects the ease with which non-practitioners can crave impossible imaginings from libraries. The piece asks what librarians can learn about knowledge creation, preservation, and dissemination from oral histories. To uncover answers to that prompt, Kratcha interviewed three oral historians about their personal experiences with libraries and their visions of an ideal digital library. These raw interviews were then edited down to ten minutes, and each was shared with one practicing digital librarian who was in turn interviewed for their response. What results is an insightful conversation between folks outside the field with big ideas and librarians on the inside with equally big dreams tempered by familiarity with the limitations in which we operate. The dialogue demonstrates the productive spark that results when practitioners are faced with those imaginings and must confront the ways in which librarianship can be complacent, resisting change that feels too big, too "impossible."

While interrogating the possibilities of digital libraries, the piece does the same for scholarly conversations. Kratcha's work is a self-described "experiment in method."

The multi-authored piece "Desire Paths in the Information Landscape" embraces the theme of speculation through the research and writing process itself. It pushes the bounds of the traditional article format through its incorporation of author-to-author comments, questions, revision detritus, and reviewer comments. In doing so, the authors (and editors, and copy editors...in fact everyone who read and touched the piece in some way during its development) make visible the often hidden labor and intellectual give-and-take that occurs during a collaborative writing project. The impact of making visible is also reflected in the content of the article. In landscape architecture, desire paths are physical representations of human behavior acting out of sync with intended interaction: for example, dirt tracks created by pedestrians taking a shortcut off a paved pathway in an urban park. The authors ask, how might these desire paths show up in digital librarianship? How might we, as librarians, recognize unanticipated behavior in information landscapes? How might we improve our tools and services to better accommodate the ways people actually use them?

In *Let Us Fail: Speculative Futures and Digital Librarianship*, Natalia Estrada, Kristina Bush, and Stacy Snyder offer a podcast series and a plea: let us experiment, let us learn from mistakes, and, yes, let us fail. In the first episode, the authors/hosts discuss, among other topics, their positionality, inclusion in digital and physical spaces, and labor relations. The second episode, "Play at Work, Let Us Fail," begins with a discussion of metrics as an example of dragging traditional concepts into the digital realm. They ask, what *should* metrics look like for digital pedagogy? What new things could we try if we weren't tied to the old ways of justifying our work and decisions?

Kestrel Ward invites us to consider the personal nature of preservation. They do so by grounding us in a discussion of queer community building in Tumblr. "We can take our culture in our own hands and preserve it in the way that makes the most sense for *us* and that centers our wants and needs," they write. "Our community has exhibited great power in the past, and we can do it again." To match the form with the message, we embed a Tumblr blog into our journal platform to showcase Ward's ideas.

We, the editors, hope these pieces help us all think more deeply about our work.

The term "speculative" in the title of the special issue is meant to bring to mind speculative fiction, a field that boasts authors such as Octavia Butler and N.K. Jemisin, both of whom are Black women. Digital librarianship, much like librarianship as a whole, is very white. Homogeneity of lived experiences necessarily restricts the bounds of speculation. Though our contributors represent different identities and positionalities, the whiteness of the field is mirrored in the submissions for this issue. The same is true of the editorial team. As we continue the project of speculation beyond this special issue, we plan to confront this shortcoming.

This is not our only challenge.

The editors struggled to evaluate and review work that took forms beyond the traditional article that we are familiar with reviewing. JCDL is not a literary magazine and we do not require our authors to be creative writers, yet we created an opportunity for our authors to experiment with that form, which in turn required us to review fiction. We had no established standards for fiction and were unsure what reasonable expectations we could set that both allowed authors to take advantage of this special issue in all its non-traditional glory, while simultaneously adhering to the quality and rigor that readers of an academic journal expect. Though no works of fiction are ultimately represented in this special issue, we appreciate the patience and cooperation of our authors who gamely joined us in facing those challenges in real time.

We faced similar difficulties in reviewing audio submissions. How do you solicit copy edits for an article with no textual document? Should a recorded interview even be copy edited? The work of re-editing an audio recording to adjust a grammatical quirk or suggested style change felt significantly more burdensome than making those same changes to a text document. We worked with creators of our audio pieces to suggest edits early and iteratively, in order to proactively avoid the need for changes made to pieces that were already edited by the creator alone. It was thrilling at the onset of this project to ask our authors to abandon their expectations for what a journal article should look like. Learning to let go of those same expectations as editors proved more difficult. Yet throughout the process of questioning and reevaluating our own biases regarding what scholarship “should” look like, we emerged with a collection of articles (be they text, recordings, or even curated Tumblr posts) that reflect what scholarship can look like.

We hope that this issue is not a singular academic experiment in form, but the beginning of a conversation. The choices we make every day in our professional lives—both in how we do our jobs and how we communicate about our work—are building the foundation for the future of digital librarianship. It is important to pause every now and again to consider if the future we are creating matches our expectations. And then to pause once more and imagine a future beyond even our own expectations.