**DIGITAL PUBLIC HISTORY IN A DIVIDED WORLD: STORIES, COLLABORATIONS, COMPLEXITIES, FUTURES**

**Centre for Public History, Queen’s University Belfast**

**ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2024**

**12-13 September 2024**

**Conference Abstracts**

**Plenary Speakers**

**Speaker:** Keith Lilley (Queen’s University, Belfast)

**Title:** Mapping divides? Connecting public histories through digital cartographies

**Abstract:**

**Speaker:** Julia Laite (Berbeck University)

**Title:** Digital Chaos

**Abstract**

Carolyn Steedman once warned us that the archive is 'one of the few realms of the modern imagination where a hard-won and carefully constructed place, can return to a boundless, limitless space’, and that was before the mass digitization of so much of the historical record. Moving between the esoteric and the practical, the digital and the material, this talk will explore histories large and small, stories that may or may not be able to be told, and the perils and possibilities of writing about the ‘everliving, everworking chaos’ that is the past.

**Speaker:** Alexa Alice Joubin (George Washington University)

**Title:** ‘Generative AI as a Social Collaboration Tool: An Investigation through Interface Theory’

**Abstract:**

Our relationship to public history has always been governed by questions we put to it. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, such as ChatGPT, complicate the inquiry-driven culture we live in. Algorithm-governed inquiries and responses frame our contemporary life from navigation to scholarly research. One of the most notable features of this type of technology is the natural language interface that encourages discursive inquiries (as opposed to keyword-based queries). Users’ prompts about historical knowledge are delimited by their normative ways of knowing, which in turn constructs their relationship with history.

In many ways, the arrival of generative AI, with its celebrations and damnations, is an old story. Technological transformations have brought cyclical adulation with worry since at least the printing press, as scholars such as Adrian Johns and Jeff Jarvis have argued, respectively, in *The Science of Reading* and in *The Gutenberg Parenthesis*, both published in 2023.

What is missing from the current debate are humanistic insights on the relationship between historical imagination and machine-generated texts. How do we use generative AI’s interactive features foster students’ curiosity to learn about the early modern? If AI seems capable of synthesizing patterns in historical texts, what productive activities can we build around them to cultivate critical questioning skills? How do educators redefine critical thinking and writing as human endeavors, particularly in terms of teaching early modern histories?

This paper employs interface theory to analyze AI’s outputs. Bringing interface theories and performance studies methods to bear on AI as a technology of representation, this paper argues that screens are a site where historical meanings are generated and negotiated.

Interfaces facilitate human relations. Building on Brandon Hookway’s idea of the interface as a “zone of relation that comes into being between human beings and machines”, my working definition of interface highlights its role in enabling or delimiting the publics’ access to historical knowledge and their relationship to it. The interface is both a part of the infrastructure of cultural meanings and a mode of expression that is interwoven with content creators and users.

Similarly, publics are not only collaborative entities but sets of dynamic relations that govern and are produced by ambient conditions of social life. Specifically, a public is formed first within a social space with shared purposes before gaining coherence by discourses that address them. Connecting public and private life, the current AI is characterized by its interrelations with humans and data.” ChatGPT can be seen as a ghost of the publics, a synthetic version of the publics, or a shadow public.

**Storytelling**

**Speaker:** Aleena Din (University of Bristol)

**Title:** Digitising British-South Asian Histories: Visualisation, Access and Storytelling

**Abstract:**

In 2023, the digital humanities project ‘Remaking Britain: South Asian Connections and Networks, 1830 to the Present’ began in partnership with the University of Bristol, Queen Mary University of London, and the British Library. The project team is currently developing an interactive digital resource, consisting of 750 entries on British South Asian individuals, events, and organisations. The aim of the resource is to bring new historical research and key digitised sources on British-South Asians into the public domain, by uncovering, exploring, and visualising British-South networks and connections across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland from 1830 to the present. This process – which involves archival research and oral history interviewing - has required tapping into the expertise of archivists and researchers as well as forging relationships with South Asians in the community to ensure the resource reflects their local histories as well as their research needs.

This research absorbs, expands, and updates the digital humanities project ‘Making Britain’, which launched in 2010 and utilised technologies of the time to visualise the relationship between key individuals, events, and organisations between 1870-1950. The ongoing popularity of ‘Making Britain’ amongst public audiences highlights the importance of accessible digital spaces in centring marginalised British and transnational histories.

This paper will demonstrate the centrality of digital technologies in connecting, visualising, and re-presenting British-South Asian histories from 1830 to the present for public audiences. Intersecting public history with technology has been significant in highlighting the long and embedded presence of South Asians across the four nations of Britain, and their role in affecting social, political, and economic change in local and national contexts. Moreover, ‘Remaking Britain’ has fostered collaboration with experts in digital spaces and other practitioners to unveil new and important ways of reimagining, capturing, and disseminating marginalised histories. This paper will highlight how technology has amplified the possibilities of storytelling through data visualisation processes, by making complex and long-ranging histories of migration and settlement accessible and understandable. These methods include geographic trails which collate entries from across the resource to highlight changing networks and connections across space and network maps to visually represent and weight the relationship between entries on the resource. The paper will trace the practical ways in which the research teams involved with ‘Remaking Britain’ have leveraged the possibilities of new technologies to design ambitious research objectives which highlight the oft-overlooked dimensions of British-South Asian histories, and how digital spaces offer new ground to showcase multifaceted narratives that can transform existing ideas about the histories of migration, race, gender, community, labour, and activism in modern Britain.

**Speaker:** Rūta Kazlauskaitė (University of Helsinki)

**Title:** From Victimhood Stories to Victimhood Storyliving: Embodying Past Suffering in Polish Virtual Reality Storyworlds

**Abstract:**

Writing in 1922, Walter Lippmann observed that the media put “pictures in our heads,” forming a “pseudo-environment” that shapes how people perceive themselves and others, who they vote for, and what issues they see as important. Those who create and disseminate media images wield significant influence over the political landscape. What does a “pseudo-environment” entail in the age of immersive digital technologies, when media not only transmit images into people's “heads” but also offer a bodily and multisensory encounter, allowing to touch, interact, and move within a pseudo-environment? When storytelling becomes storyliving, how do these vivid experiences in virtual reality storyworlds change the way people engage with the past and contemporary politics? In Poland, the illiberal Law and Justice party (PiS) has significantly invested in creating VR content on historical themes since 2018. New VR films, apps, and games are displayed online and in museums, schools, festivals, both in small towns and big cities, free of charge. In 2023, the Polish government announced the launch of a new partnership with Meta, the company most invested in the advancement of VR and AR as the next big computing platform. The collaboration aims, among other things, to integrate VR in school-history. The Institute of National Remembrance in Poland has an entire new department, New Technology Division, which aims to “show history that affects you.” This new immersive VR content remains widespread in museums and history education despite the recent governmental changes in Poland. In this talk, I discuss how Polish VR storyworlds enable users to personally embody a story of victimhood, transforming cultural memory narratives into personal experiences of being victimized by enemy “others.”

**Speaker:** Kirsten Riley, Georgina Sutherland (English Heritage)

**Title:** Reframing Reality: Storytelling with XR

**Abstract:**

In 2023 English Heritage delivered a series of mixed reality performances, entitled Sancho’s Journey, at Marble Hill House, the 18th century home of Henrietta Howard.

Participants of the experience interacted with live actors while being immersed in an augmented virtual (XR) environment, accessed via Microsoft HoloLens smart glasses. The aim of the project was to platform under-represented stories from the 18th-century slave trade in London, investigating the combination of immersive digital technologies and theatrical performance as tools for decolonisation.

The project explored challenging themes and investigated questions around how mixed reality performance can aid heritage sites in their endeavour to attract diverse, 21st-century audiences. It also critically engaged the public with under-represented voices and viewpoints of troubled European and colonial histories. Heritage decolonisation as a practice has often been perceived as divisive. Immersive technologies can help to mitigate some of this division by making the personal stories behind these practices richer and more resonant with audiences engaged in the experience.

This presentation will explore the development of Sancho’s Journey - from storyboarding contested histories to managing pioneering complex technologies in a challenging space - and ask the question: how can heritage sites act as spaces for innovative curatorial and interpretative practice using XR?

This AHRC-funded research project - conducted by English Heritage in partnership with colleagues at Brunel University London, University of Essex, Farmingdale State College- SUNY, and Historic Deerfield - was part of a research study entitled ‘Designing Mixed Reality Heritage Performances to Support Decolonisation of Heritage Sites’. This study focused on the use of technology and live performance as a means to explore how to engage audiences in a theatrical story-driven participatory experience that challenged colonial narratives.

**Digital History in Public**

**Speaker:** Leanne McCormick (Ulster University), Elaine Farrell (Queen’s University, Belfast)

**Title:** Reimagining Bad Bridget: Historians, Digital Technology, and Stories from the Past

**Abstract:**

Using our Bad Bridget project as an example, this paper considers how the digital helps to (re)include historical individuals in public history. As part of this project, we have encountered thousands of Irish girls and women who were accused of criminal or deviant behaviour following their migration to North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For many of these individuals, we have no photographs, no voice recordings, and no first-hand textual (or other) accounts. Their stories comprise tiny fragments gathered from diverse sources such as prison registers, charitable society reports, and sometimes newspapers. This academic project was funded by the AHRC (2015-2019; 2021-2023) but most of the outputs to date have been public facing. Digital techniques have allowed us to showcase these women’s stories orally and visually. Using our Bad Bridget podcast, and our Bad Bridget exhibition at the Ulster American Folk Park as examples, this paper showcases the ways that historians can engage audiences in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Irish history. It considers how historic individuals can be reimagined for a contemporary audience and the issues this can raise for historians around dramatic license and interpretation.

**Speaker:** Petros Apostolopoulos (University of Luxembourg)

**Title:** Crafting Digital and Public History: Experiences of Wikipedia Editors

**Abstract:**

In 2021, the American Historical Association published a study on how the American public perceives and understands the past. The study was based on a national survey of 1,816 people and signified the most current overview of the public’s view on history. According to AHA’s study, 46% of respondents turn to Wikipedia to learn about history and acquire a historical understanding of the past. Wikipedia was ranked higher than other historical activities, such as “Historic site visit,” “Museum visit,” “Genealogy work,” “Social media,” “Podcast/radio program,” “History lecture,” and “History-related video game.” Almost half of the respondents argued that they use Wikipedia as a source of historical knowledge. These findings combined with the appropriation of Wikipedia’s corpus by ChatGPT and Wikipedia’s partnership with the most central search engine in the digital world, Google, and other digital assistants, such as Siri and Alexa, make clear how crucial is the role of Wikipedia in how the public learns about history and makes sense of the past. But who, how, and why produces history on Wikipedia?

This paper explores how and why Wikipedia editors get involved in the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia. Specifically, this study is based on an online survey, in which 100 Wikipedia users participated and shared their stories and experiences from writing about history on Wikipedia. The results of the survey and the stories that participants shared provide an overview of how Wikipedia users engage with history, how and why they choose to edit specific historical themes and topics over others, their editing challenges, their historical interests, their personal relation with the historical topics they choose to edit, their educational background, and their collaboration with other editors. Overall, the paper discusses challenges and opportunities that technology offers in how the public engages with history in a digital and public environment, such as Wikipedia.

**Speaker:** Wacław Kulczykowski (University of Gdańsk)

**Title:** From Archaeological Video Games to Historical Game Design Classes – How We Do It at the University of Gdańsk

**Abstract:**

In my presentation, I will show: how did an archaeologist and a game developer collaborate to create science video games that were educationally successful, being played over 2 million times all over the world; how does an academic lecturer use video games to teach the candidates for history teachers, science promoters, and historical game designers.

There are two games “Excavate!”, “Waterworks!” I made in cooperation with Mateusz Sokalszczuk from scriptwelder studio: both based on my historical and archaeological research. The games are free, prepared in two languages (Polish and English), and their main task is to popularize science, especially some archaeological and historical topics. Both games are examples of successful cooperation between a game developer and a scientist. The first game called "Excavate!" was made in 2015. In the game, we play the role of an archaeologist during excavation at the former 17th-century cemetery in the village of Nowe Monasterzysko, located in north-eastern Poland, near Elbląg. The game was based on my research that I carried out at this cemetery. It was financed by the Foundation for Polish Science as part of my project called "Archeology Live & Online”. It has been played over a million times all over the world after being published on the most popular online gaming sites - Armor Games, Newgrounds.com, Kongregate. The second game called "Waterworks!" was released in 2020. It is a strategy game about a water supply system in the medieval city of Grudziądz (Poland). The game is based on research from my doctoral dissertation and was financed by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education. “Waterworks!” received high ratings on the largest online video game portals. The well-known British-American magazine PC Gamer awarded Waterworks! as one of the best free PC games of 2020. The game was presented at many festivals, including the famous international Games for Impact Festival; it was a festival of socially engaged games. Like “Excavate!”, “Waterworks!” was published on online gaming sites (itch.io, Armor Games, Newgrounds.com) and has been played more than a million times till now. I am showing that free online video game is an attractive way of disseminating research results, propagating the science on the example of both these games. Furthermore, it reaches a wide audience practically all over the world.

The games are needed not only in science propagation but can also be used by academic lecturers teaching students various subjects, for example history. Unfortunately, the didactic and educational dimension of video games (and other games) is still underrated. However, over the past few years, the Institute of History of the University of Gdańsk has implemented several innovative teaching solutions. Now, I am teaching students history in an up-to-date way in a course named History in games. In the well-equipped IT lab, I familiarize students with games as effective tools for transferring historical knowledge. I am doing it on the example of various digital games, board games, role-playing games, paragraph games, and outdoor games. I also show that historians can play a significant role as consultants and co-creators collaborating with the video game industry. In October this year, a new field of study will be launched at the Institute of History: Historical game design. Here, we will educate not only future game designers and historical consultants, but also specialists working in institutions promoting cultural heritage and conducting historical education, such as museums, cultural centers and other organizations that increasingly focus on interactive and digital technologies.

**Mapping**

**Speaker:** Shriya Dasgupta (Purdue University)

**Title:** Lost Dreams and Lost Homelands: Documenting Tales of Refugee Revolutionaries in Post-Independence India Through Digital Storytelling

**Abstract:**  
This paper explores attempts at decolonising the narrative of the anti-colonial struggle in India that seeks to propagate non-violence leading to the freedom of the nation. This is congruent to the colonial account that independence was a ‘gift’ bestowed upon the Indians, obliterating the contributions of the revolutionaries in securing freedom. In declassified British documents, the impact of the violent movements were privately acknowledged but were repressed from being introduced into the official decolonization historical narratives. Using a qualitative research methodology, this paper interrogates the impact of the cartographical cleavage developed as a result of the partition for the loss of the ontological knowledge base about the revolutionaries. The majority of them were from East Bengal. The paradox of the revolutionaries as victims of forced displacement by the decolonization process is observed.

This paper uses primary data collected by Agnijug Archive, which aims to digitally document the tales of the Bengali revolutionaries on both sides of the border, challenging the cartographic barriers. Through interviews with the descendants of 70 revolutionary families who resettled post-partition in India due to the cartographic divide based on communal lines,the interaction of the anti-colonial actors with decolonisation has been established. It further explores the collective amnesia owing to colonizer’s cartographic dismemberment through public surveys in Eastern India on the Bengali revolutionaries and their lives and works through analysis of history textbooks by quantifying the extent to which this alternative history has been covered.Finally the popular culture depiction of such alternate history analyzed through three films- Khelein Hum Jee Jaan Sey, Bagha Jatin, 8/12 Benoy, Badal and Dinesh. Thus, the pedagogical impact of separation’s geography has been demonstrated and their role in the politics of memory has been elucidated. Microlevel exchange of personal and local historical experiences through participatory oral history is supported by Gordon Allport’s Contact Theory and identify socio-cultural similarities transcending nation-states. It can be concluded that oral history and micro-level storytelling projects can contribute to challenging hegemonic colonial knowledge structures and overcome artificially constructed cartographic hindrances.

**Speaker:** Alisea Williams McLeod (Rust College, University of Chicago)

**Title:** The Last Road to Freedom Project: A Fourteen-Year Reflection

**Abstract:**  
Eleven years ago, a group of American scholars responded to expansion of the field of history in light of public access to technology and to digitized archives. The increase in lay practitioners raised the question of what public history would mean going forward, who would count as a historian, how university-trained historians would engage the lay public in alternative spaces for writing, sharing, and conversing around new histories living inside and outside of digital spaces. “Such digital spaces expand and blur considerably the spectrum of what counts as historical practice,” Madsen-Brooks observed. Some scholars voiced concerns about maintaining standards of practice especially in light of growth in public engagement of sites for public historical knowledge. Madsen-Brooks, using an example of public spaces in which a mythology of Afro Confederates (of black men serving of their own volition the Southern Confederacy) gained traction, criticized the historiography that informed the making of a narrative in which blacks as Confederates seems plausible.

I am neither a university-trained nor lay historian but, rather, a rhetorician interested in how historical narratives are constructed on all fronts, in what kinds of evidence gets prioritized even with a massive opening of archives, and in how new evidence is treated. I will focus my paper on a fourteen-year-old digital history project that began as a website hosting transcriptions of public registers of formerly enslaved blacks. In its brief history, the lastroadtofreedom website transitioned from a digital space where perhaps a relative few living descendants of enslaved people might discover their ancestors’ names, along with names of former masters or mistresses, to funded research aimed at increasing the amount of data available to the project. The LastRoad project, established in 2010, has partnered with other scholars, namely a sociologist working on digitization of soldiers’ enlistment records and a digital humanist visualizing encounters of self-emancipating blacks with federal forces. Under Freedom’s Movement and Practices of Emancipation, the team has convened scholars of digital projects focused on U.S. Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction.

More recently, I have, focusing on the soldiers’ records, created a subset (1500+) of black enlistees bearing surnames of a tight-knit clan of landed Virginia Tidewater and Piedmont planters. Presented this year at Stanford University as “Digitization of African American Soldiers’ Records,” the project mapped the soldiers’ places of birth for essentially what is a name-place or surname study. Visualization of the data reveals a clear clustering of names across four mid and lower-southern states: Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The clustering is representative of a migrating people, in this case, of white planters and their enslaved people beginning in the late eighteenth century. While this early migration is not unknown, the soldiers’ data create a counternarrative to that of Edward Baptist’s depiction of a less coherent migration of enslaved people sold to and brought deeper into the South by slave traders. The counternarrative our digital projects anticipate would likely not emerge without a commitment to (1) digital history in service of public history, (2) collaborations that transcend disciplinary boundaries, (3) increased access to understudied archives, and (4) funding. At the same time, ongoing collaborations confront different scholarly practices, for example, digital humanists’ commitments to suspending conceptual frameworks and deemphasizing hypotheses, and to forestalling critical theory. In the vein of an ethnographic report, this paper narrates my personal/professional journeys that were the main iterations of the larger project of bringing emancipation data to a public. The paper will describe collaborations and some public responses to these small efforts to increase access to emancipation-era records, weighing scholarly against public interests and confronting Madsen-Brooks's hyper concern over the mythologies created by lay historians.

**Speaker:** Cheryl Thompson (Toronto Metropolitan University)

**Title:** Mapping Ontario’s Black Archives and Digital Mapping of Space, Place, and History through Storytelling

**Abstract:**  
In Canada, a few community-based digital archives have been launched over the past few years. Mark Campbell’s Northside Hip Hop Archive is a digital archive of Canadian hip hop culture from the 1980s and 1990s. Co-founded by Phil Vassell and Donna McCurvin in 2020, Canada Black Music Archives (CBMA) is a digital archive that aims to research, preserve, and amplify the rich, largely untold music history of Black Canadians. Other community-based Black archives include Building A Black Archive (BABA), which seeks to unearth and document contemporary Black Canadian histories and experiences as well as histories and experiences within the African diaspora, and the Legacy Voices Canada 150 Project, spearheaded by Kathy Grant, to raise awareness of the contribution made by Black Canadians who served in the Canadian military during conflict and in peacetime.

All of these projects are built on local search engines that do not connect to collections external to their website. Furthermore, because these are community-based archives, they do not follow institutional norms related to metadata and tagging. This proposed paper aims to present Mapping Ontario's Black Archives (MOBAProjects), which has catalogued over 5,500 records from 94 archives in Ontario with Black collections. This inventory has divided the province’s archives into five major categories: (1) county-level archives; (2) city-level archives; (3) university archives; (4) provincial-level archives; and (5) federal-level archives. What has been revealed through this work is a knowledge gap among stakeholders, specifically archives, universities and colleges about Black communities and digital technology. These archives need innovation in terms of how digital technology could be used to support pedagogy about Black histories that have been left out of curricula in multiple disciplines of study. MOBAProjects is also concerned about what community-based archives must also standardize their language in finding aid descriptions, in order to inform their ability to adopt metadata literacy that will increase the discoverability and searchability of their collections, as well.

This proposed presentation, delivered digitally, aims to use a community-based approach that will involve digital storytelling curated in a way that will immerse an audience in an experience that will reflect migration, movement, memory, objects, and images within Ontario's Black archive. Furthermore, within the archival field, decolonization conversations have coincided with calls for equity to be applied to all aspects of the archive from data descriptions to digital archiving practices so that communities are discoverable, searchable, and located for their contributions to the national narrative but also discourses around identity, culture, and heritage. This presentation will use first-person storytelling, audio/visual content that will provide a holistic experience of how Dr. Thompson's five-year project, Mapping Ontario's Black Archives (MOBAProjects), is reshaping space and time across place and space and changing the meaning of Black history in Canada's digital space.

**Collections**

**Speaker:** Chiara Carosi, Elena Almangano (Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici)

**Title:** Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung: A Digital Edition

**Abstract:**  
The Istituto Italiano di Studi Germanici in Rome, in partnership with Fondazione Gramsci and Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, is currently working on the creation of a digital edition of the historic illustrated serial Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung (AIZ).

Created in 1921, from a German editor and political activist Willi Münzenberg, the magazine was a monthly publication with the initial name: Sowjet Russland im Bild (Soviet Russia in Pictures). Through it, Münzenberg wanted to propagandise anti-fascist and communist ideas to Western countries. In the 1930, the AIZ, became the most widely read socialist pictorial newspaper, with a circulation of 350,000, featuring amateur workers photography supplied by the German-Soviet Worker Photographer network, directly linked to Münzenberg, and skilfully arranged into photomontages by German artist and political activist John Heartfield.

Studies and researchers have already analysed this publication and its context, and their studies give us the political, cultural, and social background of this publishing venture.

Our aim is to give a scientific digital edition of this illustrated periodical with a complete set of metadata that will explain the historical contest and the importance of this publication in Germany between 1921-1938.

The phase of the project can be conceived in two parts. A first, an initial study and feasibility analysis; A second phase more practical and committed to the project.

In brief, our objectives are:

* Analyse the Italian, German and European law about copyright to publish our work in the correct way;
* Analyse all the platforms to guarantee a long life and a long fruition of the edition;
* Reconstruct the structure and map all its place of conservation;
* Digitalize the whole periodical, considering every title it took;
* Create a platform;
* Give access to all the pages of this serial, with the transcript of each part;
* Metadating every page in order to underline people of interest, places, historic events and historic process;

We want to show that AI can be a useful tool for deepening historical studies and generating new ones. Furthermore, the digitization of this serial would not be possible without the valuable collaboration between historians and researchers in digital humanities. AI is opening up new fields of study; the challenge is precisely to start ploughing these unexplored territories.

Our aim is to sharing knowledge and improve new possibilities of studying History and human historians are crucial to understanding the extent of these changes and must guide the use of these new tools for an ever-better study of the past to understand the present.

**Speaker:** George Gyasi Gyesaw (University of Ghana)

**Title:** Beyond the Paper Trail: African Archiving in the Digital 21st Century

**Abstract:**  
It is often said that Africa has jumped straight away from oral and non-paper-based processing of information into digital communication formats. While this may be an exaggerated and prejudice-ridden claim, the rapid technological change nevertheless poses considerable challenges for the documentation and preservation of history on the African continent.

In this presentation I focus on an issue that archivists are already grappling with globally: How can we preserve formats such as e-mail, tweets, social media posts, webpages, etc. which for good or bad have left McLuhan’s Gutenberg galaxy? Is there still the realistic possibility of preserving the (electronic) correspondence of an eminent African politician, scholar, or artist for posterity? How do we select from the myriads of pictures stored on an uncountable number of private phones (even aside of their accessibility and issues of copyright) those which we deem to be an adequate representation of social and political life in our time? Who is, could, or should oversee their selection and for that matter direct archival discourse and heritage formation?

This nagging issue, which has led to various debates on archival ethics, principles, and techniques with respect to digital-born sources, has so far hardly been discussed from an African perspective, where archives usually remain marginalized and are still busy with safeguarding and digitizing some highly endangered analogue sources from the colonial time and the early years of independence. Future (African) historians will nevertheless rely on us, the archivists, to suggest and devise a suitable method to preserve at least some of these digital-born sources and make them available for research.

In this context the routinely encountered perception of digitization as a form of “re-oralisation” which accordingly should be of particular benefit for a continent with a rich tradition of non-written transmission of knowledge needs to be critically examined. At the same time, it becomes more and more obvious that the preservation of remnants of the digital age might require new and unorthodox forms of interaction between archivists and the wider public.

My presentation will combine theoretical observations from an African point of view with practical challenges from my work at a leading archive in Ghana, which handles a large number of different formats, ranging from manuscripts to audiovisual, written, and digitized sources.

**Speaker**: Christopher Lawton (Georgia Tech)

**Title**: Writing the Lives of Enslaved Georgians: Reckoning with the Past through Student-Authored Public History

**Abstract**:

This paper will explore what has come from creating seenunseenbook.com as a digital archive that is accessible and intuitive for scholars, students, and the public.We see this interwoven process as both an educational process and an act of restorative history. As scholars, our work is driven by the need to acknowledge the trauma inflicted in the past while also emphasizing that it was inflicted on fully three-dimensional human beings with complicated lives. As educators, we have found that having students use our website to construct biographical narratives of the enslaved is far more impactful than narrating traumatic anecdotes for them. This paper will include student reflections on both the process and its meaning. Our goal is not only for our students to become biographers of the enslaved, but also to develop and hone unique tools for engaging with both the past and the present.

**Speaker**: Laura Nelson (Princeton University)

**Title**: Centering the Enslaved: Seenunseenbook.com as an Archival Corrective

**Abstract**:

This paper examines the design decisions that have gone behind the creation of seenunseenbook.com, a website relating to nearly 800 people enslaved by a family in antebellum Georgia. It will explore the challenges of finding the voices of people silenced within the archive. It will also consider the extent to which technology —including AI-based handwritten text recognition— can help make visible and center people who were rendered invisible in the documentary record. The website includes a searchable and filterable database of what ultimately will be thousands of primary sources. These sources are the basis of what we refer to on the site as our “directory” of enslaved people, a collection of biographical sketches drawn out of thousands of otherwise disconnected archival fragments. This work has clarified the affordances of conducting a research project in a digital space, allowing it to expand beyond its published counterpart.

**Speaker:** Kristen J. Nyitray, Dana Reijerkerk (Stony Brook University, USA)

**Title:** Prophesying AI in the Archive: Archivists’ Emotional Labor, Public Encounters, and Private Personas

**Abstract:**  
Archives require their collection stewards to emotionally engage with colleagues, researchers, and collections. The rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in society offers opportunities to explore how these relationships are reshaping collective memories of archives, public history, emotions, emotional labor, and personas of archivists. This academic paper critically interrogates the complex interplay of the newly prophesized impact of AI on archivists and the sociological concept of emotional labor (EL), and its archival manifestations in the United States. In considering how archivists manage EL, we highlight how these relationships are transforming the way archives are viewed and understood, both within the field and by the public. We examine the strategies archivists use to manage emotional labor, particularly the adoption of different personas to align their personal beliefs, professional standards, and the expectations of their users. The creation of these personas, where archivists alter their behavior in reaction to external pressures, serves as a tactic to handle the ongoing influx of requests for collections and services. This approach also implies that there is a general lack of awareness among researchers that the increased accessibility to archives, both physically and digitally, is heavily reliant on the work performed by archivists.

The emerging use of AI in the archival field has quickly become a hot topic among professionals. As we contemplate AI’s future path, the contrast between our shared experiences and individual identities within the archive prompts evaluating our grasp of professional history, along with societal, cultural, and professional standards. The effectiveness of AI in revealing obscured historical narratives will depend on archival work, which includes tasks like digitizing collections, cataloging, and website development. The paper explores how the intersection of AI and EL among archivists is activated in both digital and physical realms by archival collections, their tangible nature, and their environments. For archivists, the advent of AI has sparked a reassessment of their role within the data ecosystem. In an effort to challenge the public and AI’s stereotypical views of archivists, we are redefining the archivist’s role in establishing a distinct and consistent professional identity, while also considering what AI reveals about the public’s perception of the archival profession.

**Gaming**

**Speaker:** Vinicius Marino Carvalho (Universidade Estadual de Campinas - UNICAMP)

**Title:** Past Epidemics and the Problem of Historical Agency: How Videogames Can Help Us Rethink the History of the Black Death

**Abstract:**  
Recent historiography on the Black Death has forced us to reexamine notions of historical agency. The reasons have been manifold. As a combination of environmental, ecological, political, and social processes, the plague pandemic problematizes the distinctions between ‘nature’ and the human experience. Contemporary criteria designed to identify, measure and qualify social and cultural responses to epidemics not necessarily apply to pre-industrial societies. Furthermore, the intertwined nature of the phenomena that facilitated the spread of the disease – transcontinental trade networks, planet-wide ecological and climate dynamics – cast doubt on the centrality of local agents within broader interpretative schemes. Communicating these theoretical developments to a broader audience has proven to be a formidable challenge, given the centrality of human (and, often, individual) historical agency in much of non-academic history. This paper intends to address this conundrum by taking inspiration from game studies, a field that is also experiencing lively discussions about agency on both a practical and a philosophical level. In the first part of this presentation, I will explain how agency became a pressing issue in both the philosophy of history and in contemporary game design, and what these conversations have in common. In the second part, I will introduce and discuss Galar, an upcoming scholarly videogame that aims to explore issues of historical agency surrounding the Black Death and other upheavals in 14th century Ireland.

**Speaker:** Shu Wan (University at Buffalo)

**Title:** Making The Past Gameable: Virtual Realization of Oral History

**Abstract:**  
This presentation proposal aims to explore the potential of Visual Reality (VR) technology in changing the traditional format and landscape of oral history, especially the exhibition of its outcome before the general public, in a gameable manner. It mainly consists of three sections.

Its first component primarily reviews the progress of VR and its use in the practice of oral history. While an increasing amount of research literature discusses how VR changed the exhibition and representation of oral history in the GLAM contexts, how individual and independent oral historians use the technology still needs to be addressed. Concerned about how to employ VR in gamifying the exhibition of the outcome of a low-budget oral history project, the subsequent two sections are comprised of a case study and theoretical reflection.

The second component reviews the procedure of developing my immersible and playful project on the web-based VR platform A-Frame. The materials used in the project are the outcome of my oral project of recording Chinese Americans’ voices during the pandemic, including oral history recordings and visual materials. Different from the traditional exhibition of oral history material only by audio recordings and transcript, the application of VR technology gamifies its reception and renders it more entertaining.

The third part shifts to theoretical moderation with the gamification and (virtual) reality of oral history in the digital age. Along with the digitization of the production of oral history materials in the 2000s, the facilitation of the exhibition represents a new trend in the development of this field. Regarding the public-humanities feature of oral history, using VR in its representation could facilitate the reception of oral history to young audiences, especially in the classroom. Contrary to the traditional dull and unidirectional manner of exposing oral history materials, the VR-featured immersive gamification makes them more interactive and interesting. Besides the case study, this chapter expects to draw more historians' attention to the exhibition, instead of just the production, their research to the public audience instead of producing oral history merely for peers.

**Speaker:** Victoria McCollum, Andrew Sneddon, Brian Coyle and Sabrina Minter (Ulster University)

**Title:** Islandmagee Witches 1711 Creative and Digital Project

**Abstract:**  
The ‘Islandmagee Witches 1711 Creative and Digital Project’, led by Dr Victoria McCollum and Dr Andrew Sneddon is an interdisciplinary, collaborative public history initiative designed to take an important (often overlooked) part of Northern Ireland’s intangible ‘dark’ heritage and ‘difficult’ history to the wider public. Its outputs, in different ways and for different target audiences, use digital storytelling to tackle key issues/themes, including gender inequality, gender-based violence, social exclusion, and diversity. Blending cinematic aesthetic, historical understanding, and in-depth knowledge of digital and creative media the project has created the following outputs: an award-winning Virtual Reality application; an animated film; a graphic novel; a student performed play at the Riverside theatre in Coleraine; digitised original trial documents; a museum exhibition; a bespoke musical score, and a ‘serious’ video game.

For this talk, McCollum and Sneddon will focus on the ‘Islandmagee Witches’ video game and consider it in its public/contested history context, while discussing the problems of producing ‘difficult’ histories in places where the past is heavily contested. The game’s co-developers, Brian Coyle and Sabrina Minter will then conduct a walkthrough of the game, while discussing the creative process of working with Sneddon and McCollum to create a visually impressive, immersive and historically accurate ‘serious’ game: ‘serious’ as opposed to games created specifically for commercial and/or entertainment purposes without anticipated educational or learning outcomes