Archivlo: Digitizing the Archival Research Workflow

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This poster describes the development and uses of Archivlo, an application for improving the archival research workflow and enabling a more collaborative digital research community. In recent years, digital history has emerged as a vibrant subfield of the digital humanities community (see Robertson, 2016; and Weingart, 2016).Currently, the majority of digital history projects rely on digitized corpuses or community compiled datasets. However, the archival materials used in these projects represent only a small fraction of the archival sources that scholars currently utilize in their research.

Moreover, the proliferation of digital cameras and scanners has resulted in a wealth of archival material for scholars, but this digitized archival data is usually scattered across hard drives. To organize this data, scholars currently either keep notes or re-purpose bibliographic software.

Data management software provide some solutions to dealing with this abundance of material (such as Devonthink, Evernote, Zotero, and most recently, Tropy) but individual scholars often must invest a great deal of energy and time replicating the organizational structure of the archives to make sense of their research. This siloed approach to archival research makes finding information about archival collections or other scholars working in the archives difficult. Archivlo is designed to solve these problems, and create a more coherent workflow for organizing archival data.

This poster will outline the development and design of Archivlo, from the early idea stages to our initial beta model. Archivlo is currently in progress, and the poster will share our experience building a web-based application, as well as designing a user interface that privileges data interoperability and flexibility. Archivlo is written in Python and Angular, and is fully open-source on Github. To access archival data, Archivlo utilizes archives' APIs and web page annotations to allow researchers to find collections. Users are able to save their archival collection research in their profile, and indicate whether they have worked in these archives or are interested in using the archive. This functionality adds efficiencies to how scholars locate and keep track of their archival research. Users can also export their records to multiple file formats, as well as other data management software, such as Zotero andDevonthink.

Additionally, Archivlo enables users to share their lists of visited and interested in archives, which we believe will help scholars share information about archives and potentially even form collaborations. For archivists, Archivlo can also provide data on user interest vis-a-vis usage of their archival collections. We believe our experience with Archivlo will be of interest to other digital humanities developers and project managers, as well as digital humanists who work with archival collections.

Previous efforts to encourage digital collaboration among researchers in archives have, with a few exceptions, largely faltered, with most of these projects requiring a high technical literacy to contribute to a database or extensive time to transcribe records (see Mostern and Arksey, 2016. Moreover, these efforts to construct large databases of archival data have been forced, through copyright restrictions, to limit their scope to material that is either from prior to the early twentieth century or born digital materials).Instead of requiring large resources to digitize materials or standardize collections, Archivlo presents an alternative solution to this problem - focusing on how scholars work with archives to enable more digital and collaborative research. We believe Archivlo will encourage more productive data management practices among scholars, and reduce inefficiencies in the archival research workflow. Much of Archivlo's goals remain experimental, and the opportunity to present our work at DH 2017 would help us share our progress and consider future directions for the tool.

Ultimately, we hope that Archivlo can help further the digital humanities ethos of digital collaboration, and present one solution for using tools to help foster digital research communities.

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