



[click for feelings](#)

[click for useful stuff](#)

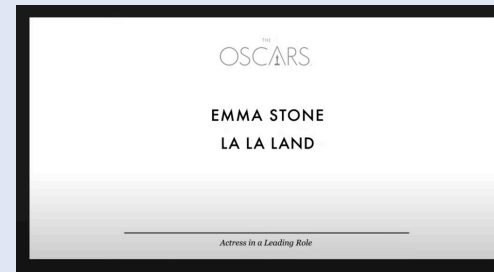
No Man's Land

# Seeing is understanding

In the drawing on the front page you see someone in a dark space surrounded by glowing orbs. This drawing is my ideal research space. A tranquil space where I have a 360 degree view of my thoughts, notes, and references. The space is an extension of my brain, a visualisation of my research that I can physically explore.

The idea of having the physical space around you function as an extension of the brain is not a new idea, designers use it all the time with their whiteboards and sticky notes. Jake Knapp, the creator of the design method Google Sprint, explains how humans have a far better spatial memory than short-term memory. If ideas, notes, and research are displayed around you, you will be able to recall them a lot easier than if you tried to keep them all in your head. Not that everything has to be displayed on colourful sticky notes, sometimes simply writing down your to-do list helps you order your thoughts.

In the drawing the expansion of my brain is embodied by the glowing orbs. The rest of the space is an infinite plain of darkness. In order to truly focus on your research you have to edit out any unnecessary noise. There is a reason libraries are quiet and people have apps that lock them out of their phones for long periods of time. Humans are easily distracted and have short attention spans. In today's attention economy there is a battle for your time and energy, so if you are offered the choice between reading a long text (think Keir Starmer's essay) or just looking at a fun colourful slogan (think the Brexit NHS lie bus) then people generally choose that latter. I am not calling for the transformation of archival material into clickbait, but I do wish for a deeper reflection on how archives and catalogues display information.

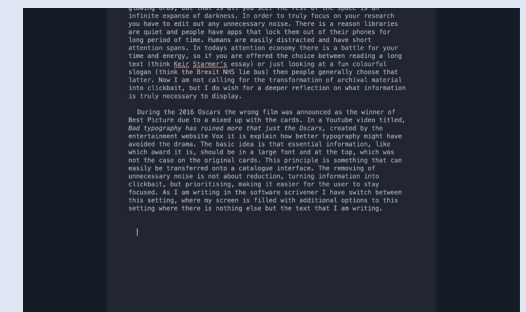
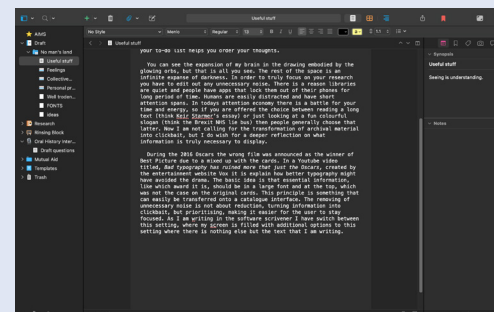


Original Card



Edited Card

During the 2016 Oscars the wrong film was announced as the winner of Best Picture due to a mixed up with the cards. In a Youtube video titled, *Bad typography has ruined more than just the Oscars*, created by the entertainment website Vox it is explained how better typography might have avoided the whole drama. The basic idea is that essential information, like which award it is, should be in a large font and at the top, which was not the case on the original cards. This principle is something that can easily be transferred onto a catalogue interface. The reducing or removing of unnecessary noise is not about reduction or turning information into clickbait, but prioritising, making it easier for the user to stay focused. For example, as I am writing in the software Scrivener I have switch between the setting pictured below on the left, where my screen is filled with additional options, to the setting pictured on the right where there is nothing else but the text that I am writing.



These ideas of: extending the brain through physical visualisation, the editing out of unnecessary noise, and the prioritising of useful information are concepts that are not often present in the interface of archives, be that digital or analogue. I feel that with the designing of the Seaton Delaval Hall oral history system these ideas have to present. They might seem simple and obvious but I believe they are the tools I need to be successful in my design.

To the ideas →

# I'm going on an adventure!

The drawing of floating orbs of light in an infinite black abyss is not something that can exist in the real world. We do not have the room, technology, or money to create a physical space for each individual person to have their own personal magical research sphere full of flying lights. There is the possibility of creating such a space through virtual reality, but I personally believe that the required headset for such an endeavour would be extremely annoying, and also deeply exclusive. However, it is the feeling of such a space that interests me. The reason I drew this image was not because I thought I could build it, but because this was what, to me, an archive should/does feel like. The excitement of having the ability to wonder about a plain filled with ideas to collect, problems to solve, and dots to connect. This is a feeling that the archive already arouses in people. In her paper, *Touching the void: Affective history and the impossible*, Emily Robinson, among wider theorising on the affect of archives, brings together various historians' accounts on working in archives and what they made them feel. Arthur Bryant talks about how "curiosity gripped [him]" in the archive, while Deborah A. Symonds was sorry to leave behind "the sense of absorption in her work" that the archive push her into. Robinson's paper is full of these examples of really intense and overwhelming experiences. I saw a similar in one of the Seaton Delaval Hall volunteers, who was part of the research group for the property. During the oral history interview I asked why they loved working in archives so much. Their replied by telling me a story of their journey to find a particular map of the site. The reason for their archival research was because they loved "the thrill of the chase" and enjoyed the "detective work".

I related to this feeling and was reminded of the time I spent in the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, muddling through the Provo archive. I vividly remember the pure excitement of finding a note left by one activist to another and sending a picture of it to my mother, who in turn sent me a thumbs up emoji of encouragement.

The feelings evoked by the archive I also feel when I play the video game *Zelda: Breath of the Wild (BOTW)*. BOTW is a game in the Zelda saga made by Nintendo, but unlike all its predecessors it is an open world game. An open world game allows the player more freedom than a linear game. In BOTW you can fight monsters or do really mundane tasks like collecting flowers. I want explore the similarities between the affect of the archive and the feeling of playing a video game, how both cause the researcher or player to become fully immersed in their respective worlds of history and fantasy. I believe that there are techniques and ideas used in game design can help create an archive or system that makes reuse easier but also more fun.

For the sake of this document I have split the ideas over the collective experience and the individual experience. Please click.

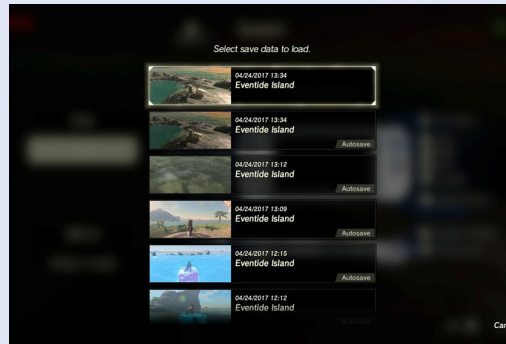
collective experience

individual experience

[click here to play](#)



# The Individual Experience



## Start the Journey

Starting your research is pretty hard, there is so much information out there that you spoil for choice. Picking a word to enter in the empty space of the search bar is daunting. When you do take the plunge you are confronted with a list of more than a thousand or a million results. The ability to search vast amounts of documents is amazing, but as, oral historian Michael Frisch says it has the potential to make people lazy in their research, always clicking on the top result and never looking past page one of a hundred. So how do we make people less lazy in their research?

### Step One: Make a to-do list

In Zelda: Breath of the Wild (BOTW) you have an adventure log where your journey is broken down into smaller tasks. If the user of the oral history reuse system is required to start their journey by reflecting on what they want from the archive and writing a realistic to-do list, they already start the journey with a more targeted approach than "I need to do some research".

### Step Two: Map out the journey

Numbers and amounts are not the easiest to conceptualise. When someone says "40 000 people tested positive for Covid-19 today" you know that is a lot of people, but when someone says "a football stadium of people tested positive for Covid-19" you actually understand that number because you know what that looks like. In open world video games, like BOTW, you are given a map. From the start you are given a visual representation of the size of the ground that you can cover. I wonder if by presenting the information in a visual way, rather than a list the user is encouraged to be a little more creative and targeted in their search.

## Map the Journey

Research involves a lot of remembering, which is a messy thing and difficult if you are spending your days pumping your brain full of new information. There are multiple ways that open world video games make it easier for the player to remember where they are and where they have been. This takes the form of an inventory of all the stuff they have picked up along the way, or a map that shows how they walked, or an adventure log that shows tasks that need to be done and tasks that have been completed. In addition they have the option to flick through the various save points in the journey meaning that they can travel back in time. To map out your journey and be able to flick through it so easily I believe would really benefit the researcher.

The majority of these principles are routed in the digital. You can find ideas for digital solutions here. I have not yet thought about how I would apply these ideas of helping people with the start of their journey and the mapping of it in an analogue setting.

# The Collective Experience

A Minecraft landscape with trees, a red flower, and a red cube.

## Leaving traces

Research is not often the result of one individual sitting in a room and thinking about the world. The best ideas are the result of groups of people coming together and swapping ideas. One of the most successful games ever is *Minecraft*. Minecraft is a sandbox game meaning that the game gives the players a set of tools and limitless freedom. The things created in Minecraft range from a fully functioning computer, to a library containing banned texts from countries with oppressive regimes, to a theatrical epic played out by players and watched by millions. Access to space in Minecraft functions pretty much the same as real life via the use of servers; some are public and some you have to be invited to. If you are in a public server you are able to do what you want in that space. You could destroy or you could leave something behind. I want to take this idea of leaving something behind and apply it to the oral history reuse system at Seaton Delaval Hall. I believe that allowing people to leave ideas and thoughts behind in the space will boost idea exchange and allow for the creation of a bigger picture. The concept inspired the development of my more analogue ideas for the system, which can be found here.

## Connecting

Although you can play Minecraft on your own, it is also a very social game. People meet and hang out in the servers and they build things together - many hands make light work. In archives one works alone, which I have always found a bit annoying. I love sharing my discoveries and enthusiasm with other people. The more people that are in the archive sharing ideas the more things are found. This idea of connecting with people reminds me of the *Break the Archive* workshop I ran. During the workshop we created the anti-archive, the complete opposite of an archive. When I reflected back on the results of the workshops, the archive appeared to be a place for the dead, full of dust and silence, while the anti-archive was for the living, full of noise and creativity. I want to the system at the hall to be for the living.

## No Man's Land

I do realise that opening an archive open up so much would cause complete chaos: a similar thing can be found in public Minecraft servers. This is why I am leaning towards the idea of creating a space between the archive and the rest of the world - a no man's land. A place where there is access to archival material but the material is still protected. The no man's land will be like a Minecraft server where people are able to leave their ideas behind and meet people and chat to them without being shushed.

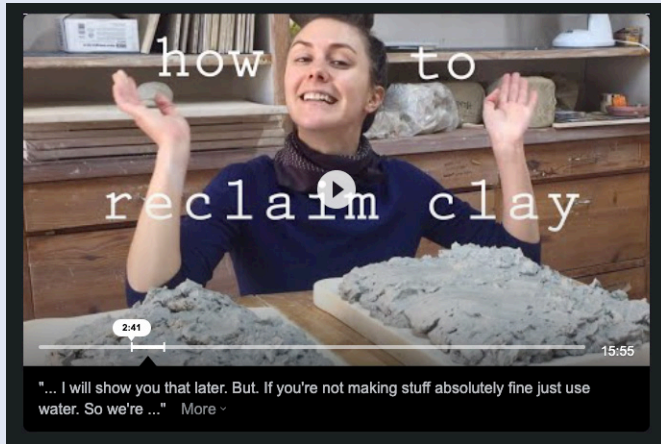


Analogue Ideas Here

Digital Ideas Here

# The Digital Collection

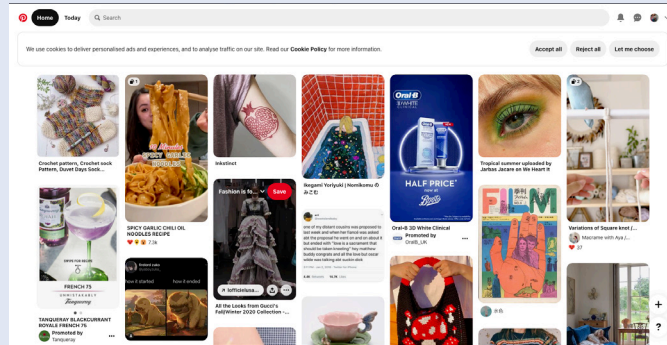
Digital solutions are pretty boring to me because the majority of technological solutions already exist in different places and they just need to be brought together. I also feel that it is unlikely that I will be able to build such system during the three years of this CDA. However, just like how I talk about video games serving as inspiration for the design of this system at Seaton Delaval Hall, I believe some of these technological solutions can do the same. Below I selected a few digital solutions that I think can be used to build a better digital catalogue.



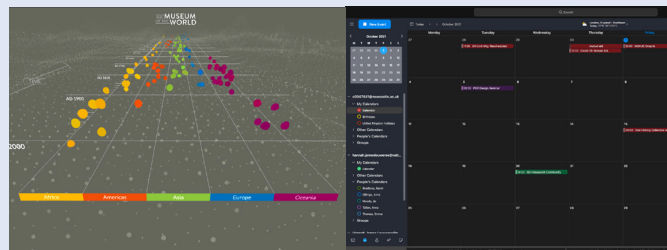
Being able to select a clip from a longer recording like Google does.



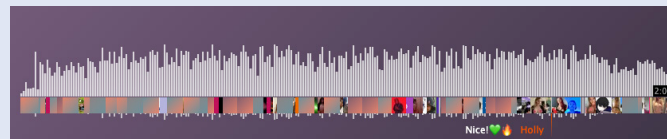
Having the option to have a "quick look" at something with out losing your place in the search like you can do on some shopping sites.



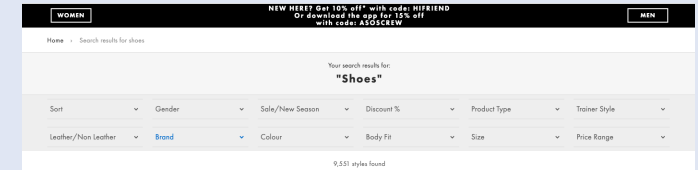
"Pinning" things from a collective space into your own personal space like Pinterest.



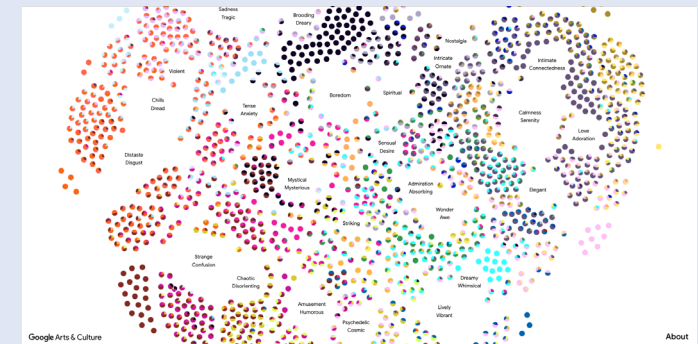
Tracking your research journey onto a calendar so you remember when you looked at things.



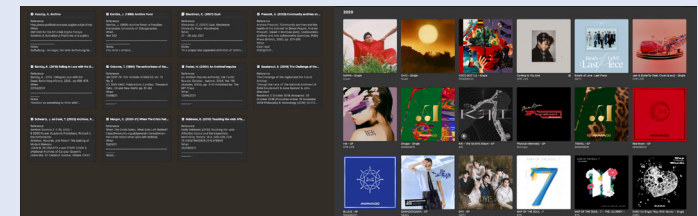
Mapping people's comments onto the recording, so the user can see when the most comments are left, like Soundcloud.



Refining your search through easy to use drop down menus like you can on any online shop.



Having the results displayed not in a list of 14 000 results but in a way that truly displays the amount of results, like the picture above.



Having the recordings display an album cover or index card like way instead of a list, like iTunes and Scivener.

# Ghost Boxes and Books

The two analogue ideas displayed here have been inspired by the ideas of thinking collectively and leaving traces as discussed here on the collective experience page. You could describe them as an analogue version of a comment section, they are partly inspired by visitor comments books that you can find in church, but I want them to be a little bit more fun. They were originally called vandal books and boxes, but I knew that an archivist would not like that.

The basic idea behind the books and boxes is that the user of the archive will take out a book or box and have access to notes and information left behind by previous visitors. Each box or book has a corresponding oral history recording which can be accessed via a QR code or a reference number. Each box or book also contains the original metadata of the recording. The user, like those who came before is invited to leave behind something for the next person. This could be commentary on the recording or a statement on why the recording was accessed. The user can leave behind their personal details in case another person is interested in their work and notes.

When the book or box is returned, the archivist sticks a sticker onto the outside of the box or book indicating that it has been used. The purpose of these stickers is to show the paths of previous researchers and display which recordings get used the most. This creates two things: the well-trodden paths and the unexplored wild. I think the different users can benefit from this system depending on what they are looking for. One user might be targeted in their research and need to get hold of specific recordings. However, another user might want to uncover the unknown and explore the boxes or books with limited or no stickers.

## The Box

When you lift the lid of the box it collapses revealing all the notes from previous users. I like the box because I think that is more playful and is a deviation from the language of the archive, which I believe might be accommodating to a wider audience.

## The Book

The book, which is actually a folder, means that you are able to file the notes, comments, and traces of users in chronological order, which for historical research purposes is pretty helpful.

