

LabEL (Laboratory for Electronic Literature):

Indexing and Preserving Belgian Digital Literature at KBR (Royal Library of Belgium)

The LabEL project is a collaborative initiative of KBR (National Library of Belgium) and the University of Louvain. KBR has as its stated mission the legal deposit of works from Belgian authors (published in Belgium or abroad) as well as works published by Belgium-based publishing companies. An amendment to the current legislation to include digital literature in the remit of the legal deposit is in the work. The creation of the Lab is motivated, on the one hand, by this identified gap in the archival workflow in Belgium and, on the other hand, by the opportunity to preserve and research this aspect of the Belgian cultural heritage. In the context of this project, a database of Belgian works of born-digital literature is in development. The process of collecting and modelling this data is presenting various challenges.

First, the focus on Belgian content dictated by the legal deposit laws is problematic in the context of digital literature. How to identify Belgian content online when digital literature is often a subversive cross-border format which is not anchored in a specific territory? Is it a relevant distinction to make? Moreover, the socio-political particularities of Belgium must be considered when devising the Lab's acquisition strategies. Due to trilingualism, the fragmentation of the national audience and the small size of the country, Belgian authors are likely to write in English and/or work with French, Dutch and German publishing media. We cannot resort to techniques linked to a specific language to harvest content on relevant publishing platforms, nor assume that most of the relevant material will be published in Belgian media or disseminated in Belgian events.

Second, the historically largely peripheric and transgressive nature of digital literature contrasts with the institutionalisation mission implied by the inclusion of the form in the legal deposit legislation. From a practical standpoint, the absence of publishing houses responsible for depositing copies of the works to the library entails the development of alternative acquiring strategies. Content creators who do not identify as 'authors' and do not see their production as 'literature', but whose work would fall within this archival mission due to a strong textual component further complicate the mission and raise key questions about the primacy of the text in the genre. The Lab is exploring various acquisition avenues, ranging from automated harvesting to crowdsourcing campaigns targeting art schools, and artistic/literary institutions and networks.

Third, this database is a stepping stone towards a preservation project which will aim at creating experimental collections of Belgian works of digital literature. However, for many of the works in the database, the metadata themselves and accompanying description will be the only archiving process which will be undertaken, due to financial or technical constraints. How can we optimise memory in this 'descriptive' archive (Bouchardon and Bachimont 2013), as well as the continued accessibility, interoperability and discoverability of this data? In addition, digital literature is a highly heterogeneous form, which increasingly steps outside the confines of the Web and relies on proprietary platforms. Because of its varied forms and locations of publication, it inherits the preservation challenges of several types of digital content, such as websites, social media platforms, gaming platforms, mobile applications, VR games etc. The rapid evolution of digital technologies implies a constant game of catching up from heritage institutions. To collect, store, preserve and give access to such a diverse range of works, a selection procedure must be undertaken. Importantly, in the context of a legal deposit library such as KBR, the processes in place for print books cannot be easily adapted to such content. Instead, direct contact with publishers, developers and authors is often a prerequisite for the archival process to take place.

To address some of these challenges, we are opting to develop our database using the WikiBase infrastructure to promote community involvement in the data input, allow for a more horizontal and

transparent indexing/archiving process, as well as facilitating interoperability with other collections and datasets. Thanks to the SPARQL Query Service, the database could be queried simultaneously as Wikidata and other interoperable knowledge bases. In addition, we are adopting a metadata schema developed in other contexts and in use in several other existing databases, such as the “Répertoires des Ecritures Numériques” and “COLIN (Catalogue des œuvres littéraires numériques du Québec)” in order to promote interoperability and long-term preservation of the data.

This presentation introduces the decision process behind the infrastructure and the metadata schema, as well as its role in the long-term preservation strategy of the works it will index. In addition, it explores the tensions between, on the one hand, existing legal deposit workflows, archiving practices and library (meta)data management strategies, and, on the other hand, the reality of locating, acquiring, and preserving access to digital literature in the Belgian context.

References

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