

# The Craft of Database Curation: Taking Cues from Quiltmaking

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*How can technology designed to last just a few years be used to sustain digital data collections that last generations?* This is a fundamental challenge of digital stewardship, and the guiding question of the IMLS-funded “Migrating Research Data Collections” project. Through multi-site case studies, we seek to better understand the strategies information professionals use to maintain, repair and migrate knowledge infrastructures. In this poster we share emergent findings describing the craft involved in this work; specifically, we use the lens of quiltmaking to tease out the craft practices in database curation.

## Two cases of data migration

- The University of Michigan natural history collections. These include over 15 different collections and dozens of individual databases. At the time of our interviews, they were working to migrate databases to a unified system (n=15)
- The Archon User Collaborative, an archival database software user community working to adopt a new database after theirs became obsolete (n=6)

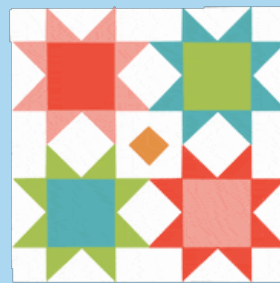
“We have maybe six or seven decent sized, digitized collections available through ContentDM. **It's a patchwork, a quilt, if you will, of digital surfaces.**”

## Quiltmaking as an analytical lens

- Our participants used this metaphor repeatedly in interviews
- There are parallels between quilting and database work. Both require decomposition, algorithmic thinking, abstraction, and pattern recognition
- Using a quiltmaking as a theoretical frame helps surface otherwise invisible craft practices

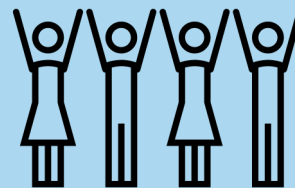
## The craft of curation

### Piecing systems together



11 out of 21 participants described using multiple databases, collection management systems, and even spreadsheets to complete their workflows

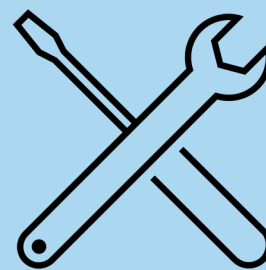
### The databasing bee



Database curators often build their own communities to bring collective knowledge to their databasing projects

They draw on each other's knowledge to avoid common pitfalls, and to build interoperable systems that follow community norms

### Creating – and repairing -- multi-generational data objects



Participants inherited their collections databases from a predecessor and are working to create a digital object that enough for future generations will be robust

Remnants of legacy data are the reality in most migrations, and they require substantial work to erase. (Pictured left: a screenshot of a museum database featuring HTML traces of past database formats)



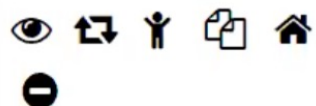
Basket

Native/Common Name

+ Add Native/Common Name

Description

black ash splint basket: curled patterns <br /><br /> made or collected in 1933



In sets GRASAC Ethno, Student Showcase Objects 2021, Ziib. Baskets

## Future work

We plan to hold a virtual workshop in May 2022 with participants to share further findings, design database maintenance and migration best practices, and build a critical community of those interested in research data maintenance and migration. If you are interested in participating, please reach out!



Acknowledgments

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