Call for Papers: Design History and Digital Material Culture,
A Special Issue of the Journal of Design History

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This Special Issue of the Journal of Design History is dedicated to promoting the study of digital material culture. The study of digital material culture is a growing topic of interest in design history, and this Special Issue will form the first foundations for its entry into the field. The issue aims to have a mix of theoretical papers on the study of digital material culture and case-studies of digital objects. The issue will define different kinds of digital artefacts, propose new methods for studying non-analogue and hybrid objects, and hopes to include papers that address museological challenges in curating and collecting digital design, histories of digital design and digital cultural heritage and existing interdisciplinary efforts that have been undertaken to study digital material culture.

Within the academic design community, there is a recognition that digital objects are different. Design theorists Johan Redström and Heather Wiltse wrote in 2018 that ‘the ways things are made and used have fundamentally changed’ because they ‘do not take only physical form’ (Redström and Wiltse, p.6). The cultural significance of these new things has also been recognised by institutions such as museums, galleries, archives and libraries. In early 2022, the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council supported two studies on digital objects as part of their Towards a National Collection initiative: One, titled ‘Preserving and sharing born-digital and hybrid objects from and across the National Collection’, a collaboration between the V&A, Birkbeck University of London and the British Film Institute sought to ‘instigate a conversation and build confidence across the museum sector to support the collecting of born-digital objects, and to lay the foundations for future research in the field’ (Arrigoni et al., p.4). The second, a digital collections audit aimed to ‘understand the number, scale and attributes of digitally-accessible collections across the UK cultural heritage sector that might form part of a future national digital collection infrastructure’ (Gosling and Cooper, 2022, p.1).

Pressingly, researchers have noted that the ephemerality of digital makes it especially prone to disappearance. It is the responsibility of historians, in part, to preserve digital culture heritage through research. This SI is concerned with theoretical papers outlining methods for studying and understanding ontologies of digital material culture. It also is interested in object-focused histories of digital design and institutional critique of the place of digital design in design history and cultural heritage institutions. Potential paper topics might include:

• Histories of digital material culture/digital objects and artefacts.
• Methods for studying non-analogue and hybrid objects.
• Museological challenges in curating and collecting digital design.
• Pedagogy of digital material culture.
• Institutional critiques of the place of digital design in design history and cultural heritage institutions.

This SI is not a “how-to” guide for conducting online research of digital design. Rather, it is concerned with the ontology of digital artefacts and how this affects their study by design historians. This issue will also not address the technical conservation of digital object as such, though discussions about the ephemerality of digital objects is very welcome.

If you would like to discuss an idea for a paper, please contact the guest editor Anna Talley at anna.talley@ed.ac.uk. Please submit abstracts of c.300 words along with a working title, your name and institutional affiliation to anna.talley@ed.ac.uk. The submission deadline for abstracts is 15 May 2023.