Engaging with losses lies at the foundation of philological and historical research. Awareness of and attention to that which may have been lost or destroyed, as well as that which cannot be preserved or archived is fundamental to humanities researchers and yet this is one of the most difficult and under-explored aspects of scholarly research. Research is made precarious by the uncertainty of the degree to which surviving, extant material represents reality or distorts it, not least because the gaps are often hard to measure. What guarantees are there for the significance, the representativeness of extant material (Esch 1985; Cook 2007; Lepper & Raulff 2016)? What forms of productive engagement with loss are possible in these situations? Such questions are of particular concern to those areas of collections research that are not only interested in given archival or printed ›holdings‹, but also in the traces of earlier material collections and epistemological contexts as well as the provenance of objects, i.e. the temporality of their subject (Schneider 2012; Savoy 2018). In the increasingly digital environments of both researchers and memory institutions, these questions attain a new urgency.

Research based on fragmentary source material can easily be suspected of lacking scholarliness when it moves into the realms of playful hypothesizing on transmission processes. How do research tools used by Digital Humanities alter this situation? What opportunities do they offer in the encounter with loss in the archive or the library? Is the loss of ›authentic‹ transmission recoverable? What implications does this hold for (digital) collections research? Beyond these theoretical and methodological questions, digital transmission presents a clear challenge to archives and libraries because it calls into question that which defines their semantic core (Assmann 2011, Gehring 2016): for the losses are now not merely incidental, but relate to issues of storage and especially to storage formats that are not primarily intended to be long term (Kramski 2016). Which properties of digital archival objects or digital collection objects should, which can be preserved in order adequately to meet the demands of the questions posed by researchers on the one hand and the demands of ›authentic‹ transmission on the other? It is doubtful whether digital ›content‹ can truly ›overcome‹ the boundaries or bonds imposed by material hardware (Ries & Palko 2019). What is lost when information is separated from its physical carrier (Krämer 2015) – for example, in the case of the latter's obsolescence – so that the information can be preserved? Moreover, to what degree can the environment, in which born-digital objects are used, be preserved through emulation (Kirschenbaum, Farr, Kraus u.a. 2009)? And, with particular regard for the archiving of computer games (Guttenbrunner, Becker & Rauber 2010) – considered as complex born-digital objects and complex narrative phenomena that no longer adhere to traditional concepts of authorship – should forms of use and interaction also be preserved?

›Losses‹ – i.e. that which is not stored or is not capable of storage and is meant to disappear, the ephemeral –, its interplay with such fundamental questions and new research exigencies, through the lens of specific case studies, is thus the focus of the Midterm Conference of the MWW Research Association.
We therefore invite proposals from researchers in the fields of history, literature, and cultural studies, as well as methodological and theoretical approaches from computer linguistics, Game Studies (ludology), and Archives & Library Studies. We welcome interdisciplinary questions and perspectives combining materials-focused research with theoretical and methodological reflections, as well as papers dealing with both current problems of the preservation and accessibility of complex digital objects (such as narrative computer games) and their aesthetic or historical value. Proposal submissions from all academic career stages are invited, and proposals from early career researchers are particularly welcome.

Abstracts of max. 300 words (in German or English) for a 30-minute presentation as well as a brief biography and selected publication list should be submitted by 15 February 2021 to forschung@dla-marbach.de.

Conference languages are German and English. Speakers’ travel and accommodation expenses will be reimbursed.

Literature:


