



Archival Play

The Magic Circle of Fragments, Finding Aids,
and Curious George

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“Curiosity, a form of anticipation, leads to discovery, a dividend of play.”
—Scott G. Eberle, “The Elements of Play: Toward a Philosophy and a
Definition of Play.”

In his essay “Dreams and Play: Historical Method and Methodology,” Robert J. Connors (1992: 17) describes the archive as the place “where storage meets dreams, and the result is history.” While broadly concerned with historical research in composition studies, Connors’s essay includes a handful of poetic flourishes that transfigure the question of methodology through the play of metaphor, relocating the archive in the play between storage and fantasy. In three of these figurative turns, he articulates three primary elements—curiosity, fragments, and play—that are essential to understanding archival research and the growing presence of archives in pedagogical theory and practice. Taken together, they illuminate the primary elements of archival engagement and remind us how the result of such engagement is not just historical research, but the poetic redemption of fragments into what Walter Benjamin (1985: 34) describes as those “timeless constellations” that redeem historical traces against the ruins of time. As Benjamin (1968: 261) has taught us, a central task of the historian is to ensure that fragments are not just narrativized into stories, but periodically “blasted out of the continuum of history” to be

restored in their discrete and spontaneous particularity. Archival engagement, therefore, is as much about playing with elements and constellations as it is telling stories and narratives—a distinction that carries enormous significance for how we use, understand, and theorize archives as pedagogical tools and instruments.

Let me start by taking each element in turn, using Connors's language to introduce my argument and method. The first element—curiosity—arrives during Connors's (1992: 16) discussion of the historian's intellectual interests, which he argues “stimulate questioning, excitement, and curiosity, without which history of any sort is a dead compiling of facts without affect. Without intellectual curiosity, without the wish to discover and explain something about life, history *is* a dust bin.” In this remark, “curiosity” breathes life into facts and throws into relief the final metaphor of history as an empty “dust bin.” Without curiosity, no affect; without affect, no significance—only the “dead compiling of facts” into waste. We find a similar turn to metaphor in Connors's description of fragments: “All of historical work, then, is provisional, partial—fragments we shore against our ruin. We are trying to make sense of things. It is always a construction. It is always tottering” (21). Here Connors draws on images of construction and ruin to compare historical research to the “provisional,” “partial,” and “tottering” process of building, with fragments playing the role of supporting planks, props, and beams. The affect of curiosity has found its object: fragments to “shore against our ruin” and support the provisional building of history and hermeneutics, two branches of knowledge that seek to recover the past and “make sense of things.” In both cases, Connors's wordplay reconfigures “historical method and methodology” through the figurative language of “dreams and play,” drawing on affect and metaphor to transform his essay into a formal, rhetorical, and methodological playground.

Which brings me to the significance of play—the third element in my constellation that transforms historical research into a “magic circle” marked off by the archive's boundaries, its consecrated fragments, and what Michel Foucault (1977) describes as its playful oscillation between order and disorder.¹ Here is Connors (1992: 23) at length:

What do historians do in the Archive, when they confront that inert, dusty mass of past records? Though it would be neat to be able to say that they sift through everything with hypothesis in hand, “keeping up a running fire of exclamations, groans, whistles, and little cries,” drawing scientific deductions Holmes-like, t'aint true. What historians really do in the Archive—and really need to do—is play. Search is play.

This is Connors's most enduring and significant insight: that what historians do in the archive is best understood as a form of play. While the metaphor strikes the reader as playful, it enacts yet another figurative turn that syncs Connors's wordplay with the play of his search and discovery, his methodological attempts to "make sense of things" (21) and find his way. Language and methodology become indistinguishable here, guided by the curiosity of Connors playfully trying to "make sense" of what he finds in the form of language and fragments. In the midst of composition, he is finding and discovering poetic constellations: patterns of elements that loosen historical methodology from "scientific or social-scientific paradigms," as he writes in his introduction, and realign it with the play of "traditional humanities inquiry" (15).

In the spirit of Connors's method, I offer in what follows my own critical and personal reflection on the role of curiosity, fragments, and play in creating meaningful encounters with archives in the college classroom. My starting point is Benjamin's (1985: 34) famous metaphor, "Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars," since it is only "by virtue of the elements being seen as points in such constellations" that objects of study are illuminated into ideas and insight. The same principle, I argue, applies to education and pedagogy. Knowledge begins with the delineation of elements; it ends with their transfiguration into constellations. While it may sound romantic, teachers invite students to read and write the stars: to search, find, and discover in the elements of study an image, a figure, a shape, a pattern—some kind of organizing idea that reconfigures the elements into meaningful order, shape, and significance. Pedagogy thus cannot be isolated from the play of affect, subjectivity, metaphor, and desire, nor should it be. Like our students, we all observe the sky from our own vantage points, illuminating some elements and throwing others into the dark. The elemental wonder that I find in curiosity, fragments, and play, for example, is simply my own redeeming trinity for understanding archives in my research and teaching. In the spirit of Benjamin (1968, 1985) and Marshall McLuhan (1962), I have found in the metaphor of the constellation a map and mosaic, a galaxy of elements that allows me to make sense of things and find my way—as both a scholar committed to archival play and as a professor dedicated to cultivating acts of archival play in the classroom.²

The article that follows, therefore, should be read as a provisional playground shaped by the constellation of my current interests. Drawing on play theory, poetics, media studies, and archival theories of pedagogy, it reimagines archival collections as formal and material playgrounds open to

spontaneous configuration and experimentation. Marked off into five sections, it illuminates the concept of archival play from different perspectives. In the first section, I posit play as a kind of neglected other in contemporary scholarship on archives and pedagogy, drawing on theories of play to reconfigure the archive as something akin to a magic circle shaped by playful engagement. In the second and third sections, I expand this vision of archival play through close readings of two unlikely figures in my constellation: the finding aid and Curious George, which I reframe as “curiosity amplifiers” (Brown 2010) that can inspire students to reflect on the dialectical movement between spontaneous discovery and the organization of archival systems. In the fourth section, I then turn to the archival play of fragments themselves, throwing into relief what Susan Howe (2014) describes as spontaneous particulars that poetically redeem history through material details and delineations, rather than abstractions and narratives. Finally, I conclude with two episodes of archival play in the classroom that illustrate how the oscillating movement between elements and systems, fragments and narrative, can be harnessed to create a radically spontaneous pedagogy organized around student curiosity. Cultivating curiosity, I argue, empowers teachers to actively shape the playful dividend that arrives when students enter the archive and begin to search, find, and discover meaningful patterns in the fragments of history.

Archival Playgrounds

In the past decade, scholars and teachers in the humanities have increasingly found in archives a useful tool for pedagogy. In rhetoric and composition, scholars have explored how physical and digital archives can be used to promote different forms of literacy, historical research, rhetorical analysis, civic engagement, and political activism (Purdy 2011; Enoch and VanHaitsma 2015; VanHaitsma 2015; Hayden 2017). Wendy Hayden (2017: 135) argues that the archival turn in composition studies has produced a number of different methods and techniques for capitalizing on what Susan Wells (2002) describes as the archive’s diverse pedagogical gifts. In literature, history, and the digital humanities, scholars have likewise turned to archives as pedagogical tools for close reading (Diaz 2012), tinkering and innovation (Sayers 2012; Harris 2013), collaboration and curation (Gold 2012), and bibliographic training (Waitinas 2018). Across the humanities, archives are now one of the hottest topics in pedagogy: richly diverse and historical, infinitely flexible and pragmatic, and primed for any number of different uses and applications in the classroom.

Notwithstanding this diversity, I find it curious that pedagogical theories frame the archive almost exclusively in terms of its educational use. How can archives be used and incorporated in the classroom to improve pedagogy? That question—above any other—has monopolized scholarship to the point that archives are now circumscribed as a tool to be used and exploited as functional resource, co-opted in the service of diverse pedagogical objectives. One irony of the archival turn is how it has turned the archive into a victim of what Martin Heidegger ([1938] 1977: 20) describes as the “enframing” (*Gestell*) logic of modernity by which things are converted into resource and subjected to cycles of production and consumption.³ In terms of scholarship, it could easily be argued that the archival turn has actually limited—rather than expanded—the spontaneous potential of archives to reveal themselves in more poetic and speculative forms. By framing the archive as a means to an end—a tool used for pedagogical objectives—most contemporary scholars unwittingly suppress the spontaneous play inherent to archives as technologies of search and discovery, technologies that organize the logistical play of myriad elements, formats, fragments, and historical materials.

With its focus on use in the classroom, pedagogical theory eclipses more poetic and elusive gifts of the archive that exceed functional and pragmatic use—gifts like seriality, spontaneity, fragmentation, and the play between elements and systems that characterize the archive’s *modus operandi*.⁴ While these gifts surface in poetic flashes by scholars, they are rarely moved to the foreground as central figures in the drama of archival engagement. Even in Connors’s essay, for example, they simmer in the intervals and reveal themselves only in figurative turns. Which leads one to ask: What would a pedagogy focused on the play of these elements even look like? Could such a spontaneous pedagogy even be imagined, or does the elusive ambiguity of play make it incompatible with the Apollonian order of archives and functional systems? After all, there is good reason that Apollo—not Dionysus—grounds the majority of pedagogical theory about archives. Academia’s collective debt to reason, theory, discipline, and other Apollonian virtues testifies to a functional desire that play radically unsettles. As historian and theorist of play Mihai I. Spariosu (1989: xi) writes, “Play is one of those elusive phenomena that can never be contained within a systematic scholarly treatise; indeed, play transcends all disciplines, if not all discipline.” Since it “cannot be approached with critical or analytical tools” (3), play withdraws from the rules of Apollo used to justify rational objectives, lessons, and instruction in the classroom. Uncanny in its familiarity, it remains intractable in its paradoxical ambiguity and resistance to rational method. Play has been

called “the Other of Western metaphysics” (3) for the same reason that it has become the other of pedagogical theory. Simply put, its spontaneous and autotelic essence makes it irreducible to ideologies of use and purpose. Play is an end in its own right, not a means to an end—a fact that doesn’t play well with modern education’s obsession with objectives, outcomes, resources, and strategies (features of games and gamification, not the ontology of play).

Too often we tell ourselves that college is serious—a place for work, not play—without ever reflecting on the ideological limits of such rhetoric. This focus on work, productivity, use, and efficiency marginalizes Huizinga’s (1949) provocative insight in *Homo Ludens* that all culture—ancient and modern—is permeated and produced by play. Huizinga posited play as the common denominator of culture and thus a significant element in expressions not just of education but also of war, art, poetry, theater, religion, and all cultural arenas. “Play is older than culture” (1), he argued, because its formal movement precedes its materialization into specific contexts. Acts and spheres of cultural performance begin as formal outgrowths of elementary playgrounds—grounds for play that are marked off from the ordinary world by special rules, rituals, and elements. “All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course,” Huizinga wrote (10). “The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds. . . . All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (10). In other words, play “moves and has its being” within magic circles that formally delineate their own material, conceptual, and cultural playgrounds. For Huizinga, a soccer field and a classroom are not worlds apart; they are both “in form and function play-grounds” distinguished by their own elements and boundaries, their own “consecrated spots” (10) in space and time.

While Huizinga has his critics, the enduring significance of his theory is how it understands play as a form that moves across different fields and disciplines. This flexibility has remarkable value in allowing us to see cultural arenas as circumscribed playgrounds with their own formal and material dimensions. In his recent book *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games*, Ian Bogost (2016: 109) draws on Huizinga to reframe play as “a generic process of circumscription” by which virtually anything can be marked off into a material or ideal playground. Drawing on his background in game studies, Bogost finds in Huizinga a general understanding of play and its relation to things, systems, and structures.

As he observes, “The circumscription of play is really just the context of particular uses or states of things,” a process that marks off certain elements and reframes them as grounds for play (110). Anything can be construed as a playground so long as we formally delineate its elements and structures. Play is “a material property of all objects,” Bogost writes (119), essentially regrounding Huizinga’s formalism while exorcizing its transcendental aura. When we play, we always play with something, which means that play is both formally and materially circumscribed, always entangled with structures, rules, elements, and systems. By inviting us to “understand play as a condition of objects and situations,” Bogost redefines play in the most elemental form possible: “the deliberate exploration of something as a playground” (119).

Applied to archives and pedagogy, Bogost’s (2016) revision of Huizinga (1949) allows us to reconfigure play in a way that accounts for both the play of elements and structures, as well as our role in deliberately attending to them as playgrounds of discovery. “Play comes from the deliberate operation of the things among which we find ourselves,” Bogost writes, “and those things are constantly shifting and reconfiguring themselves” (22). Scattered and malleable, playgrounds are all around us, “available for our address and manipulation, if we draw a magic circle around their parts and render them real” (44). They are archives waiting to be discovered, elements waiting to be consecrated, configurations of materials waiting to be delineated, arrangements of things waiting to be found and discovered. If “search is play,” as Connors (1992) attests, archives are the playgrounds where search finds its material boundaries. They delineate a space in which discovery is preserved and sanctioned, marked off from the ordinary world as a “consecrated spot” (Huizinga 1949: 10) where things can be searched, found, and revealed. When we enter the archive, we enter a playground that throws historical objects into relief, safeguards the spontaneous particulars of history, and consecrates the play of search and discovery.

Finding Aids and Logistical Play

Every scholar who works with archives knows the power of a good finding aid: that indexical first door through which the scholar and student pass and find their way. While they quickly recede into the background, few technologies are more important in shaping how we find, search, and discover historical materials. Finding aids frame and facilitate access to the archive from start to finish, reconfiguring a collection into a logistical constellation wherein items are divided, counted, indexed, separated, and distinguished. Like the archive more generally, they are an example of what John Durham Peters (2013: 41)

calls “logistical media,” or media whose purpose is to “arrange people and property into time and space.” Unlike content-driven media, logistical media organize the flow of information by controlling “the grid in which messages are sent” (41). “Calendars, clocks, and towers are classic logistical media,” Peters (2008: 6) writes, “So are names, indexes, addresses, maps, tax rolls, logs, accounts, archives, and the census.” All of these belong to a neglected category of media whose invisibility belies its organizing power—its logistical play in dividing, counting, and manipulating discrete elements.

Redeployed in the classroom as “curiosity amplifiers” (Brown 2010), finding aids are flexible pedagogical tools for flipping foreground and background—for taking what typically functions as the ground of research and giving it the space to materialize as a playground in its own right. They are an easy place to illustrate, for example, how the boundaries of rules and constraints allow things to be separated, combined, and arranged into different configurations. Like playgrounds, they circumscribe boundaries and throw objects into relief, drawing borders around items to render them discrete and playable: open and accessible to search and discovery. They provide collections with a map and index—an inventory for finding historical materials—but they also delineate these materials as discrete elements with meaning and significance. In this capacity, they are wonderful tools for reminding students that “the archive has no narrative memory, only a calculating one,” as Wolfgang Ernst (2004: 46) writes. Indeed, even the most cursory glance at a finding aid is enough to show students how their primary functions are indexing, accounting, and the accumulation of data—not storytelling and narrative.

Since students tend to approach archives looking for stories, finding aids help illustrate how archives formally unsettle narrative with their characteristic lists, fragments, and nonlinear procedures. They reveal how archives short-circuit narrative by confronting us with serial data open to the logistical play of counting, manipulating, and calculating. By opening the door—many doors, in fact—to the configurative play of elements, they liberate fragments outside linear and narrative time and allow us to select, arrange, and combine historical materials into different constellations. At the same time, they throw into relief operations such as dividing, indexing, combining, and articulating—precisely the kind of logistical operations that precede the transfiguration of elements into stories, narratives, and history. By animating these operations and putting elements into play, finding aids are a technology that gifts scholars and students with the power of finding their own constellations, the power of configuring elements into patterns that redeem history from different vantage points.

Through the articulation of discrete elements, finding aids thus stimulate the process of search and discovery, of finding and “mak[ing] sense of things,” as Connors (1992: 22) puts it. To illustrate this point with students, I often draw on Stephen Ramsay’s (2014: 114) distinction between searching and browsing, emphasizing how finding aids lend themselves to both operations. Whereas search follows a methodology of focused research, browsing follows a “hermeneutics of screwing around,” which Ramsay defines in terms of play, exploration, and spontaneous encounter (119). As tools of search, finding aids cut specific paths in a collection; as tools of browsing, they facilitate “serendipitous engagement” with different paths (117). In both capacities, they are flexible tools for translating what Ramsey describes as “the Screwmeneutical Imperative” (117) into pedagogical and archival practice. By literally and formally delineating an archive’s contents—articulating its many paths of entry and access—they draw attention to the poetic singularity of individual searches, choices, discoveries, and connections. Rather than hiding behind the illusion of open search—or a blank search bar—they render their links and paths explicit, marking them off as a playground where items are found, paths followed, things retrieved, and fragments redeemed.

Ironically, such archival play has been rendered more explicit with the finding aid’s remediation in digital environments. Since the development of Encoded Archival Description (EAD), the standard for encoding finding aids in XML, the genre of the finding aid has found itself deconstructed by digital markup.⁵ Replaced by online search, the illusion of openness ostensibly liberates the finding aid from the classical structure of catalogs and inventories, introducing new tools and interfaces that have “material and epistemological implications for how we discover, access, and make sense of the past” (Solberg 2012: 53–54). But this illusion of openness belies the fact that most of these tools and interfaces simply remediate older logistical media by digitizing conditions of search and findability. As collections turn digital, finding aids grow more flexible and rhizomatic, subject to links, tags, search queries, and other digital affordances. They now reflect the fact that most archives no longer traffic in the physical storage of files and folders, but what Ernst (2012: 84) describes as “the dynamic connection of documents and links.” Subject to the play of algorithms and markup, archives have developed, as Ernst puts it, “new forms of ‘finding aid’” (86)—new forms of search and discovery that have their origin in logistical media but are now remediated by the electronic playground of code and algorithms.

One reason finding aids lend themselves to remediation is that they consist of discrete elements that can be broken down, analyzed, and recon-

figured. According to Elizabeth Yakel (2003: 18), this fact has gone neglected by scholars and teachers who continue to “treat the finding aid as a document genre, rather than as a set of discrete data elements.” For most of us, finding aids are a means to an end, a document genre whose value lies in its functional purpose, not its logistical play. But when viewed as logistical media, finding aids rematerialize as formal and material playgrounds open to serial, configurative, and non-narrative play.⁶ Like digital media more generally, their seriality allows for the liberation of discrete elements and the circumscription of playgrounds in which things are combined, configured, and arranged. In a very literal sense, then, finding aids are simply an extension of the earliest function of our fingers, remediating the original digits that we and our fellow primates—Curious George included—have always used to count, distinguish, and play with the objects around us.

Curious George Plays in the Archive

Among the many finding aids I have played with, few are more curious and meticulous than the finding aid to the surviving papers of H. A. and Margret Rey, authors of *Curious George* and other children’s literature.⁷ I have used this particular finding aid in a number of different courses, from themed composition courses to graduate seminars in literature and book history. It was during my own research on *Curious George*, however, that I began to reflect on the finding aid as a pedagogical instrument. At some point it dawned on me that my recursive reading of the finding aid—my repeated attempts to find, search, and discover new elements in the collection—reflected the recursive adventures of Curious George himself. I began to feel as if the charming monkey was guiding me in different directions, curiously throwing into relief the discontinuity of his history as it materialized in paths and items delineated by the finding aid’s index. The more time I spent with the finding aid—marking off elements, distinguishing fragments, tracking down items—the more I began to find in Curious George a reflection of the finding aid itself. Both figures seemed to reflect and embody the archive as a playground that separated elements from the ordinary world, marking them off for new adventures, constellations, and configurations. Every time I found a trace of Curious George in the finding aid, he revealed himself as a reflection of the archive’s *modus operandi*, mirroring its oscillating play between order and disorder, system and spontaneity, rules and chaos, and adulthood and childhood.

Just consider the recursive beginning of every *Curious George* book: “This is George. He was a good little monkey, and always very curious.”⁸

Few lines capture the attention so efficiently, anchoring our imagination with a deictic expression—“*This* is George”—that linguistically circumscribes the playful boundary of the monkey’s goodness and curiosity. We are introduced to George as a safe companion, and every time we read those opening lines we know what’s coming: an interlude of monkey business in which spontaneous play will temporarily throw into relief the adult world of rules, orders, and regulations. With each adventure, George leads the reader through a brief interval of play and archival disruption, a temporary suspension of order in which his curiosity breeds chaos and reanimates the adult world into a playground. In the original seven books alone, his curiosity unsettles the organization of a fire station, a traffic light, a zoo, a hospital, Hollywood, a newspaper delivery route, a circus, a plumbing system, a farm, a museum of natural science, the space industry, and the letters of the alphabet. And in each case, his curiosity disrupts an archival order, unleashes the disorder within it, and animates the archival play between order and disorder that Foucault (1977) described as opening the door to the world of fantasy and imagination.⁹

For the sake of time, let me simply draw your attention to the way George manipulates discrete elements, using his hands and feet—the digits of his curiosity—to play with the particulars of different systems. Examples are endless, but perhaps the most relevant here is *Curious George Learns the Alphabet* (Rey [1963] 2001), where we see George marveling at a book and breaking it down into its archival components. “They were full of little black marks and dots and lines, and George was curious: what could one do with them?” (283). His curiosity begins with basic elements—the marks, dots, and lines inside the book—and then moves to the question of action and manipulation: what can be done with the elements? How can one play with them and rearrange them, and to what end? Eventually, his desire to manipulate elements comes into tension with the adult world of the symbolic order, represented by the man with the yellow hat who begins to alphabetize George into the world of stories: “You don’t tear a book apart to find out what’s in it,” the man says, “You READ it, George. Books are full of stories. Stories are made of words, and words are made of letters. If you want to read a story you first have to know the letters of the alphabet” (284). As he steers his pet child to literacy, the man illuminates the book as a technology combined of different elements, yet scaled to increasing levels of abstraction—from marks, dots, and lines; to letters and words; to sounds, shapes, and stories. He also teaches George how to write and remember individual letters by drawing a picture around the shape of the letter itself: “A becomes an Alligator with

his mouth wide open,” for example (286). He pauses after three letters, then seven, then thirteen, each time pointing out to George how the discrete letters are combined to make different words. Throughout his pedagogy, we follow George as he listens, plays, practices, and learns, creating words out of letters by rearranging them as discrete elements.

The alphabet functions here as an archival media made up of discrete elements, each letter recording a different sound and image that allows for the processing of letters into words and words into stories. This is evidenced by the fact that the alphabet—like any archive—holds the potential for as much disorder as order, as much nonsense as sense. Indeed, part of the genius of the book is that George unsettles the archive as he learns it. At one point, for example, the man with the yellow hat instructs him that certain combinations of letters do not spell out words: “But what on earth is a Dalg or a Glidj or Blimlimlim? There are no such things,” he tells George (317). In this and other moments, we feel the tension between spontaneous play and the imposed order of the archive, as the Reys amp up the tension between order and disorder in order to expand the margin for imaginative play. The fact that letters can be sorted and shuffled, spelled and misspelled, is precisely what makes them a liberating site for archival play. By the end of the book, George has learned not just how to read and write, therefore, but also how to play with an archive of letters by manipulating the elements that define them. In the book’s final scene, for example, he secretly edits the man’s note to the baker so that it reads “ten” dozen doughnuts, instead one. And then, in the final double-page spread, Rey illustrates him literally spelling out “The End” with his newly acquired doughnuts, repurposing them as discrete elements in his own writing system: a series of dotted lines diagrammed into the shape of letters. For George, it is discrete doughnuts all the way down, his newly trained digits primed for their playful markup and manipulation.

Guided by curiosity, George thus engages his adventures with a lusory attitude. Using his hands and feet, he playfully animates symbolic orders into playgrounds of discrete elements that reframe the adult world through acts of archival play. In this respect, Curious George personifies what Matt Cohen (2017: 444) describes as one of the archive’s most remarkable features: “its preservation of an experience of disorientation.” Like the archive, he recursively activates an experience of disorientation that unsettles organized systems, turning them inside out by playing with their parts and fragments. It is in this capacity that I have found him an ideal model for students engaging with archives for the first time. His playful curiosity mirrors the imaginary element at play in archival collections more generally: how dis-

crete elements can be temporarily loosened from systems of classification and control. Like George himself, archives materialize the potential for disorientation by returning us—again and again—to a magical time when lists and orders were once flexible playgrounds, not reified hierarchies. Despite their appearance of being clean, good, and organized, archives return us to the spontaneous sites of childhood where things still elude capture and control. They are packets of monkey business, adventures in embryo, playgrounds concealed as systems, and curiosity amplifiers that liberate fragments into stories and configurations. This is the archive. It is a good little structure, but its curiosity always exceeds its containment.

Spontaneous Particulars

Archives are messy. While they preserve what William Blake ([1808] 1965: 205) called the “minutely organized particulars” of art and science, they also cut through abstraction with their dusty particulars and fragments. According to Ernst (2015: 18), they are “formed only out of atoms,” the kind of serial elements that are “calculable but discrete.” Before they coalesce into stories, they are non-narrative technologies that list, divide, organize, and index discrete units, drawing our attention to the singularity of “the fragment,” which, as Hans-Jost Frey (1996: 32) observes, “does not fulfill the presuppositions of wholeness” on which other units are founded. Unlike a text, for example, a fragment “creates a contradictory situation” in which “either the discourse about the fragment must deny it as what it is and falsely make it into a whole, or it must itself be put into question in its claim to master the text” (32). Always partial, fragments resist coherence and continuity by preserving a poetics of the archive that attends to its brokenness, where discrete bits wait to be redeemed and reclaimed. I have lost count of how many times a fragment has caught a student’s attention, sparked their curiosity, and set their eyes and fingers in motion. A book, a manuscript, a letter, a page, an image, a scrap of paper—all of these particulars speak across time and invite students to observe, distinguish, and articulate dead matter into living history. Temporarily marked off from narrative time, fragments surprise us with details, confuse us with glimpses, and gift us with poetic constellations simmering with redemptive power. As I tell students, the stories and narratives will come. But first you have to confront the archive as a playground of dead fragments, where traces of hands and bodies survive in all their broken and discontinuous singularity.

In *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*, Susan Howe (2014) celebrates the material sensuality of fragments and finds in the archive

a poetics that bears witness to history by attending to what Cohen (2017: 444) describes as “the sensory songs documents sing.” Playing witness to these particulars, Howe argues (2014: 17), allows us to animate the “visionary spirit” that is “gathered and guarded in the domain of research libraries and special collections,” those temples of culture that preserve history in the poetic margin of what she describes as “insignificant visual and verbal textualities and textiles. In material details” (21). She writes, “Each collected object or manuscript is a pre-articulate empty theater where a thought may surprise itself at the instant of seeing. Where a thought may hear itself see” (24). Each time we enter an archive we sound its synesthetic depths, inviting the dead to speak “through an encounter with the mind of a curious reader, a researcher, an antiquarian, a bibliomaniac, a sub sub librarian, a poet” (24). In the process, spontaneous particulars liberate the past to the instant, throwing into relief poetic details that resist abstraction and closure. By playing witness to these particulars, Howe argues, we consecrate them for a time yet to be written, a time when faith in the telepathy of archives promises to redeem the past “one historical-existential trace (at a time)” (21).

Playing with archival particulars is messy. Marked by spontaneity, archival engagement introduces “into the very roots of thought,” as Foucault (1972: 231) writes, “notions of chance, discontinuity and materiality.” No matter how efficiently organized and indexed, every archive is subject to gaps, biases, and constraints. Unlike a book, they are never complete and closed; they are faulty, fragile, and fickle, marked by fragments that unsettle the illusion of coherence and compete for individual attention. In this capacity, they give rise to what Suzanne Bost (2015: 616) describes as a “messy materiality” distributed across “multiple material actants,” in which each actant articulates the conditions of its own particular existence.¹⁰ Tagging a collection with a name only belies the manner in which archives deconstruct their subjects into marks, manuscripts, and notations. “Archival memory is monumental; it contains forms, not people,” Ernst (2004: 48) writes. I have to remind students that they will not find H. A. or Margret Rey in the archive, nor the monkey that made them famous, nor any author with a good story to tell. As Stephen Enniss (2001: 115) remarks, “The one person we most want to find in the archive” is always “the one person we can be sure we will not find.” Archives dissolve “the emphatic subject . . . into a text of discrete bits” (Ernst 2004: 48), a network of papers and inscriptions that require assembly, configuration, and reverse engineering.

Curious George is no different. The only way to excavate his story, I tell students, is to travel through the finding aid and distinguish his adven-

tures one inscription at a time, remediated by different technologies across the century: pencil, charcoal, crayon, manuscript, color separation, toys, television, film, digital software, and so on. There is no original monkey in the archive—only traces of his evolution in disguise, his history materializing “one historical-existential trace (at a time)” (Howe 2014: 21). If the origin of “C Geo” exists anywhere it exists in the myriad marks and intervals of Rey’s developing craft, the artistic skill and techniques that he used to recursively play George into different formats and narratives.¹¹ Beneath the popular biography of the Reys, the history of George is a history of inscriptions and fragments, an archival history in which each appearance of the monkey preserves the trace of its archival origin. “This is George,” each fragment says—a material effect born out of the playful inscriptions that historically call and recall his character into existence.

Consider H. A. Rey’s 1966 letter to Lena de Grummond, the founder of the de Grummond Children’s Literature Collection.¹² After acknowledging Lena’s request for original materials, Rey describes a litany of items that he has attached in a separate mailing tube: “an autographed proof sheet” of *Curious George Goes to the Hospital*, “a star chart” from his popular constellation book, “an autobiographical folder,” “a set of miniature book jackets,” “a photo of author plus monkey,” “a fan-mail-answering card,” handcrafted New Year’s Cards from 1965 and 1966, and “a small rough sketch of George about to swallow a piece of jig-saw puzzle.” He ends the letter by wishing Lena well on her new career in library science, expressing hope that she will be able to “use the material” for the archive. In a small graphic footnote (fig. 1), he then sketches a colored picture of George holding a scroll of papers and some folio documents, walking past a sign marked “To Hattiesburg.” A small bird is perched above, singing the song of George’s journey as he travels to the archive with papers in hand, literally carrying the evidence of his history as he travels to his eternal resting place.

The letter invokes my curiosity for a number of reasons, not the least of which is Rey’s catalog of discrete items that illustrates the archive in the process of construction. Similar to the poetics of Howe (2014), Rey’s litany of artifacts allows each item to speak for itself, liberated from narrative and classification. While all of these items have since been indexed, they arrive to the archive here as fragments and particulars, freely singing their songs and inscribing the conditions of their history. Whatever story they tell, they tell it through particulars that delineate their history in material form, which is why Rey’s illustration of George carrying his papers to the archive is so revealing. It encapsulates how the history of George’s character is entangled

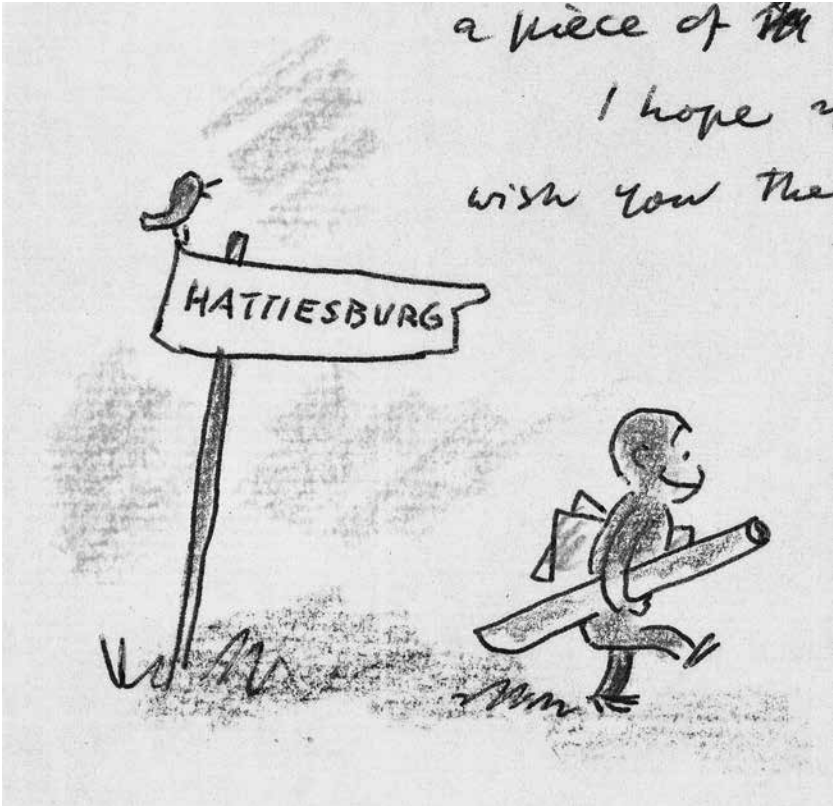


Figure 1. Colored sketch of Curious George carrying his archive to Hattiesburg, MS. The small illustration sits in the bottom left corner of H. A. Rey's letter to Lena de Grummond, dated 20 April 1966.

with the history of its inscription—a lesson that Rey, a compulsive archivist himself, understood well. There is no Curious George without the play of marks, dots, and lines on paper, recursively inscribed in different contexts, media, formats, and narratives. We find in this history not the narrative continuity of a character, in other words, but the discontinuities of an archival history in which George bears the marks of his evolving markup and graphic design. Whether engineered via notations during color separation, or reconfigured for different formats during adaptation, Curious George is a creation always on the move, evolving with different media and technology. His history is the history of twentieth-century media, which is one reason the Rey collection is so dense and diverse, and why Dee Jones, its original curator, approached its organization in such meticulous fashion. Before drafting the

original finding aid, for example, she compiled two preliminary inventories of the collection—one of them color coded—in which she cataloged specific items by marking them off through playful inscriptions. Studying her notes, we can feel her curiosity as it constructs order out of chaos, classifies items into categories, and playfully tags the archive into a color-coded playground.

Evidence of Jones's archival play includes pages from a yellow legal pad that she used in her accounting, notes on unclassified items and preservation details (the size of Mylar sleeves, for example), and a typed inventory of the collection entitled "The Organization of H. A. & Margret Rey Papers."¹³ The most curious document, however, is a small scrap of paper on which Jones mediates the inventory through the interface of her own color-coded key—a key remarkably similar to those used by Rey during the process of color separation. Encoding items with different colors, Jones effectively supplements her inventory with instructions about location and preservation, adding layers of metadata to her ongoing accounting. The key links different swatches of color with different instructions, stealing a page from the color guides that Rey regularly sent to printers with his pre-separated artwork.¹⁴ Rather than indicating shades and color values, however, the swatches of color encode different archival functions: green swatch ("Needs Preservation Copying"), red swatch ("Needs Staples Removed"), yellow ("Needs Mylar Sleeving"), light blue ("Item Out On Exhibit"), purple ("Needs Chronological Arranging"), dark blue ("Item on Exhibit in de G."), and brown ("Needs Special Conservation").¹⁵ While no bigger than a Post-it note, Jones's archival play here colorfully mediates the tension between particular items and organized categories, using color to mark off elements and functions while circumscribing the boundary of the archive's magic circle. The color interface also plays with elements in a spirit reminiscent of *Curious George* and his illustrator, both of whom were no strangers to the playful manipulation of colors, notations, and other units. In short, its particularity sings a tune marked by Jones's curious and meticulous hand, drawing our attention to the playful beginning of the archive as it assembles into existence.

Spontaneous Pedagogy

At the risk of dividing practice from theory, let me conclude with two instances of archival play brought to the classroom. The first involves the Digital Archives Research Group at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM), which I co-organized with my colleague Joyce Inman to encourage new pedagogical approaches to archival engagement.¹⁶ We believed that a focus on archives could productively open the black box of the digital humanities,

break open disciplinary boundaries, and offer new forms of archival discovery for students and teachers in the humanities. During its first year in 2016, we launched a project called Save Our Stories: Engaging with Digital Collections (SOS), which invited students to find an archival artifact and compose a short essay contextualizing their discovery in a creative or critical way. We kept the call for submissions general enough to be adapted for different courses, inviting entries that reflected on artifacts historically, artistically, rhetorically, visually, orally, or in whatever way suited the discipline and classroom. By allowing different formats, we encouraged students to tell stories best suited to their objects, inviting instructors to customize the assignment to meet their course objectives. Some kept the assignment open and flexible, others connected it to a course theme (monsters, Disney, political cartoons, children's literature, etc.).

In my case, I adapted the call for papers for a graduate seminar on book history, asking students to submit a description of an archival document from the perspective of a book historian. In addition to bibliographic features, students were asked to explore matters of design, format, and typography, fleshing out the object's history through archival description. Some chose a traditional book, others sketches and photographs. One student explored the relationship between text, image, and paratext in Kate Greenaway's *Little Folks' Painting Book* (1879), the first coloring book published in the United States. Another described the history of monosyllabic storytelling in an analysis of Lucy Aikin's *Evenings at Home: In Words of One Syllable* (1868). Others looked beyond the book, describing ephemera such as a diagram of Curious George's head, sketched by Margret Rey for the Knickerbocker Toy Company. The artifacts varied, but each essay found original ways to animate the archive into living history, playing witness to particulars through deliberate attention, careful research, and precise description. The assignment cultivated a mode of "archival reading" (Brown 2017: 229) focused on the material features of documents, inviting students to supplement narrative with affective, sensory, tangible, and bibliographic details. In the process, students followed the path of their curiosity and found a number of different ways to constellate archival particulars into historical narrative and research. By inviting students to find objects, delineate their formal boundaries, and mark them up in writing, the SOS project sparked a range of different submissions that set archival play into motion, transfiguring particulars into poetic and critical constellations.

Another instance of archival play involved undergraduate students in my advanced composition course, "Reading and Writing in Digital Envi-

ronments.” For one of their major assignments, I asked students to curate, compose, and design presentations on *Curious George* based on primary archival research.¹⁷ Supported by the de Grummond, I was able to scaffold the project with lessons on the history of the Rey collection, how to handle archival materials, and how to scan and generate metadata about specific items. After these sessions and workshops, students would then return to the de Grummond to explore designated boxes in the collection, composing narratives out of the fragments they discovered. At first they were filled with excitement and enthusiasm—that is, until I decided to limit their focus to the making of a single *Curious George* book, with each group researching a different aspect of the book’s history. I noticed that their curiosity began to wane as I explained the assignment, deflating previous weeks of anticipation. I quickly realized that I was colonizing their curiosity with one of my own topics of research: the history of the book. Instead of allowing them to discover their own paths in the archive, I was foreclosing the potential of their own “screwmentetical imperative[s]” (Ramsay 2014: 117). I began to wrestle with the tension between adopting a clear scholarly project—a history of one book—and liberating them to the structured chaos of their spontaneous discoveries. I found myself returning to the finding aid—the base of my recursive inquiries—to search for new ways to organize their branching interests. Eventually, I decided to take solace in the fact that this particular finding aid was a good and curious document, filled with color-coded treasures to be explored, excavated, and discovered. It already organized an elaborate network of doors and pathways that students could use to follow, find, and excavate historical traces. Why not just let it perform and play out logistically? Why not let the finding aid itself *aid* students in finding their own discoveries? After all, rather than colonizing items into a coherent narrative, the finding aid already contained a logistical form of play—distinguishing particulars, marking them off for study, and teasing them out of darkness through its indexical webs.

With renewed faith in the finding aid, I scrapped a week’s reading from the syllabus and told students to spend the next few days reading through the finding aid from start to finish—all 303 boxes. We then discussed the experience of reading through a document without explicit narrative or argument, reflecting on the genre of the finding aid in the context of a broader discussion about archives, metadata, and systems of classification. After discussion, I divided students into groups and told them to find ten things in the finding aid that caught their attention: a specific item, a category, a folder, a genre, a topic—anything that sparked their interest. We then sorted

the various lists into categories, thinking with and against the finding aid to create a list of topics that could be researched in five weeks. Ideas included Rey's sketchbooks, his interest in animals, his unpublished alphabet books, his work on astronomy, his journals, his personal artwork for friends, his advertising work, and his interest in alternative energy. We also included topics related to *Curious George*: press material, translations and adaptations, fan mail, educational software, and other materials related to the seven original books. We then broke the primary material down into working notes, plot outlines, early sketches, typescripts and outlines, dummy pages, color guides, pre-separated artwork, page proofs and press sheets, dust jackets and promotional materials, and documents related to sales. After an hour, we had filled the board with our own color-coded litany of categories, some organized by the finding aid and some not, but all spontaneously inspired by its indexical structure—a structure that had fueled the freedom and flexibility for particulars to emerge on their own ground.

We settled on seven groups and seven topics, each one narrow enough to be contained within fewer than three boxes. From there, I copied relevant sections of the finding aid for each group and gave them an objective: write, design, and curate a presentation around their topic, using images from the collection to tell a story. They chose the objects and angle of approach: historical, aesthetic, cultural, technical, literary, or any combination thereof. I divided the project into tasks and deadlines, each with a due date, and required that they revisit the archive at least twice to take notes and photograph different items. For every item annotated, they had to include the box and folder of its location, as well as a brief description. Aside from that, I encouraged them to read and study the materials carefully until a potential playground emerged. The method was elementary: search, find, discover, articulate, distinguish, and constellate. Go to the archive and redeem your findings into a constellation.

The results ranged from brilliant to vaguely interesting. Sparking students to play and think in the archive is one thing; training them to play and write in a semester is quite another. To be honest, the results were less important than the process itself, since my goal was simply to expose students to the spontaneous joy and freedom of archival research by teaching them how to engage the archive as a magic circle—a playground where they could discover fragments, separate and distinguish details, combine and arrange elements, and find meaning in the play of their own search. As curators, students learned how to approach archival history from two perspec-

tives at once: one in which they searched for the continuity of narrative, the other in which they browsed the spontaneous particulars of discrete items. While the challenge was great, the rewards were internal and immeasurable, qualitatively aligned with the degree of their attention. For those who passed through the finding aid, its elements became a stimulus to their curiosity and began to form timeless constellations, speaking out of time like a ghost from the past. Let the fragments tell their story. Follow the trail of their spontaneous particulars. Cultivate curiosity and create constellations. Mark off the world into magic circles. Go play.

Notes

1. In play theory, the idea of the magic circle originates with Johan Huizinga's classical theory of play in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1949). The concept was formalized during early work in game studies, with scholars appropriating the term to describe how games are formally marked off and separated from the ordinary world. While not without controversy, the term offers an appropriate metaphor for understanding how different forms of play create provisional playgrounds distinguished by their own special boundaries, rules, and elements. For an introduction to the term, see Salen and Zimmerman 2004.
2. McLuhan (1962) turns to the metaphor of the constellation in his introduction to *Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. In contrast to linear history, he adopts the constellation as a model for describing his "mosaic or field approach" to history, where forms and elements interact and thus undergo "kaleidoscopic transformation" (i).
3. See Heidegger's ([1938] 1977: 20) essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," where he describes how modernity frames things and phenomena exclusively as functional resources, foreclosing the possibility for more spontaneous, poetic, and playful modes of revealing.
4. I am not the first to draw on Wells's (2002) description of archives in terms of "gifts" (see also Hayden 2015 and Purdy 2011).
5. For more on the history and development of the finding aid, see Trace and Dillon 2012.
6. To emphasize its logistical function, I am ignoring narrative-based parts of the finding aid such as the "Scope and Content" and "Biography" sections, which are best seen as supplements to the finding aid's primary logistical function: to account for discrete items in non-narrative fashion.
7. The Rey collection consists of more than three hundred boxes organized by six major headings, each divided into alphanumeric subheadings. See H. A. and Margret Rey Papers (DG0812), de Grummond Children's Literature Collection, University of Southern Mississippi. The finding aid can be accessed online at www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/degrum/public_html/html/research/findaids/DG0812b.html. Hereafter, all remarks on the finding aid refer to this edition.

8. In the first seven *Curious George* books, the only ones illustrated and authored by H. A. and Margret Rey ([1941] 2001), the opening lines also include a sentence about where George lives. In the first book, for example, it reads: “This is George. He lived in Africa. He was a good little monkey and always very curious” (4). Unless otherwise noted, all citations come from *The Complete Adventures of Curious George* ([1941] 2001).
9. In “Fantasia of the Library,” Foucault (1977) famously deconstructs the library as a metaphor for order and rationality, illustrating how the presence of order implies disorder as its opposite: without order, no disorder; without rationality, no irrationality; without sense, no nonsense; and without reason, no fantasy.
10. This is also similar to Jane Bennett’s (2010: 122) notion of “lively matter” and her claim that archives “chasten [our] fantasies of human mastery” by confronting us with a messy multiplicity of actors that unsettles narrative continuity and coherence.
11. Rey was a meticulous archivist of his work and work schedule, keeping daily notations in small, pocket-sized journals for close to forty years. See box 166 and 167 in the H. A. and Margret Rey Papers (DG0812) for his annual journals between 1936 and 1974. The abbreviation “C Geo” was his preferred notation for Curious George. Sample entries in the notebook include inscriptions such as “Color seps / C Geo,” “Blacks C Geo,” and “check C geo proofs.” In their detail and discreteness, the entries provide a rare window into the technical operations that went into the making of *Curious George*. They also play witness to the spontaneous particulars of history described in Howe 2014.
12. See Letter, H. A. Rey to Lena de Grummond, 20 April 1966, H. A. and Margret Rey Papers (DG0812). The letter is one of many artifacts available in the H. A. and Margret Rey Digital Collection, which can be accessed online: <https://www.digitalcollections.usm.edu/de-grummond>. During her tenure at the archive, Lena began the habit of writing authors of children’s literature to request materials for the collection, and the Reys were among the earliest and most generous contributors. They began sending material to Lena in the 1950s, and Margret eventually willed their entire literary estate to the de Grummond Collection upon her death in 1996. Today, the de Grummond is one of the leading archives of children’s literature in the country.
13. For Dee Jones’s manuscript and typed inventories of the Rey collection, as well as her color-coded key, see box 229, folder 8, assorted processors’ notes, March–August 2002, H. A. and Margret Rey Papers (DG0812).
14. Like the figure of Curious George himself, Rey’s early books were a product of notations and engineering, not original watercolors. Within a month of arriving to New York in October 1940, Rey signed an unprecedented four-book contract with the new editor at Houghton Mifflin, Grace Hogarth. She introduced Rey to the New York printer William Glaser, a specialist in fine color printing. During the original printing of *Curious George* (1941), Rey worked closely with Glaser to teach himself the complex process of color separation, which was far cheaper for American firms than photographing original watercolors for printing. Over time, Rey developed his own idiosyncratic approach to color separation. He often supplemented his pre-separated artwork with detailed color guides that included notations on what hue and value should be used for different elements in his illustrations.

15. Dee Jones, Color-coded key, box 229, folder 8, assorted processors' notes, March–August 2002, H. A. and Margret Rey Papers (DG0812).
16. For a brief history of the Digital Archives Research Group, see Brannock, Carey, and Inman 2018. The emphasis on digital archives was part of a strategic attempt to capitalize on the institutional popularity of the digital humanities, while still speaking to the broader concerns of scholars, librarians, and students—all of whom interact with digital archives on a daily basis, using them for research and teaching.
17. The student projects were later presented during the inaugural event of the Digital Archives Research Group, “Curious George Goes to the Archive.” This event was the first in a yearlong series of events and workshops designed to promote the collaborative possibilities of working with archival collections at USM. See Brannock, Carey, and Inman 2018.

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