Transscript

Ecosystems of Writing. Interview with Michael Murtaugh

http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/?p=617

MM: 00:22   At the moment I'm very much busy working on websites for two different institutions, Constant, again, in my role as sharing a system administrator job and also for the ERG, the école de recherche graphique in Brussels.

00:43   **"active archives"** (subtitle)

MM: 00:43   When we started the work on the ERG, there was actually very explicit this question about how could we build a new website? But not in a classical kind of way, where you end up actually just creating – I use the metaphor of the chocolate cake – which is kind of a way of saying you know, you create this kind of whole, beautiful structure and then you deliver it at the end with, you know, a lot of sweat and tears, and then maybe you realize, we don't really want a chocolate cake, and then you're stuck with this chocolate cake, that actually you can't actually do anything with. Following that sort of metaphor in a sense, we thought about actually how could we create a kind of more a kitchen?

MM: 01:28   And again also trying to find larger ecosystems of use in the tools that you use. So rather than me as a developer, creating a very specific sort of flow of editing to publishing a website, we're going to use a kind of tool that has a real community around it, many kinds of, so you can ask other kinds of developers. Many people are familiar with working with MediaWiki, doing sprints of editing...

MM: 01:53   And in fact actually going forward, we're looking forward to thinking about how there could be other kinds of interfaces. So we did also create then a sort of cartographic interface as part of this work. And it involved actually also working with students, and so again, with this idea of that here's the website, let's think about what it could be. So, on many kinds of levels, that involved a lot of collaborations, Alexia Fisher and Stephanie, to name two. And Sammie, who's the administrator working with this team to try to create a platform that can live on.

MM:	02:29	So it's all about actually these different kinds of writing spaces and different kinds of temporalities, different kinds of formalities, and how to bring them all together, and the kind of living ecosystem where then the archive kind of fluently continues to be written with and written into the present. And then in that sense, allow the archive not to be just something after the fact, sort of question of freezing something, but actually something which continues to serve, continues to live as a kind of resource to draw on.
	03:06	**"active tools: the etherbox"** (subtitle)
MM:	03:11	So actually etherbox is something we've just, it's a collective project around the organization of Constant, which I'm a member of, and it is actually a kind of publication. We've now made a release – what we're calling a release – and the interesting thing about that is, it's a publication. But actually, there's both a physical sort of booklet, but there's also, with the booklet comes an SD card, which is actually the software, which is this platform that we use with a kind of small computer that is the server. And in fact it's the platform which was used to create the document.
MM:	03:53	So this idea of actually releasing this software, which is something that we use within Constant and within different work sessions that take place. Constant twice yearly has work sessions with groups that work together. So it was a way to make a kind of snapshot of a set of processes and a set of tools, in a way that makes it accessible to others. So you can literally download, take the card and put it into one of these raspberry Pi computers and actually have the same kind of platform that we're describing in the book, and even use it to do other kinds of projects.
MM:	04:34	The computer itself – as many people have seen – the computer that's this RaspberryPi. So it's a very inexpensive computer, 35 € or something like that. And which is indeed based on, just, all the software is on an SD card. So it has this kind of a very lightweight, yeah, way of working with it. But, and I happened to have used a Lego case, because I like Lego and I have a lot of Legos laying around, it turns out. But the students actually, I started to show up at these events – we actually have several boxes, we also sometimes work with a network router and a switch, and I had sort of built it into all sorts of Legos so that you could [gesture of stacking Lego], and it was immediately, it was something, I mean it's basically just a kind of aesthetic gesture. Of course, it's not that by changing, you know, the Legos, you're actually changing the infrastructure. But of course people get that idea, that it's about

suggesting the fact that indeed it is. Thinking about infrastructure is something you can play with. Think about how, you know, we often feel kind of at the, how do I say, at the mercy of, you know, the big platforms and it's just a kind of question of imagination at some point to start to think: Oh, this can be fun to think about actually a local network and let's make a kind of microcosm of infrastructure, sort of speculative infrastructure.

MM: 05:57   And that was really when we started to even think about, you know, how the kind of terms of services could be something, rather than that we just sort of fear and don't read or skip and feel guilty about. Actually, it's something to really think about, as a group, not to just avoid because it's actually really interesting to think about: Okay, here's where a group of 20 people is coming together for five days, we're going to do some work together. What are our terms of service? What are our expectations? And I should say that was actually also one of the motivations originally. We wanted to actually make explicit the fact that after an event, it would be ideal that the people, who have taken part in the work session, maybe had already thought about what an afterlife, for instance maybe some writing we've done together, could or should be. And I felt as a sort of system administrator often in a kind of empowered position that I didn't want to be, in making decisions about do projects live or die, do they stay online or not?

MM: 06:59   So that was really an important part of the visibility, was to say, you know, this is a kind of a contingent platform. This is a platform that is not going to exist forever. We're going to work with it as we are, also kind of temporarily, together in a space. And, we want it to, yeah, really in a playful way, have people start to think about infrastructure. Because again, it's not always something you want to have to think about. But its's, yeah, interesting to do so.

MM: 07:29   You know, part of what's really interesting about Etherpad as a software is the fact that it's just a text document and everyone writes at the same time. It has this kind of aesthetic choice of these different colors. It's kind of like a ribbon cable, a rainbow sort of markers, as people work at the same time. And it really lends itself to this kind of format, of not just collectively writing, but, I dunno, different kinds of forms of writing, like while someone's presenting, taking transcriptions, but in a way that, that allows for different kinds of transcriptions to take place, people who are faster at typing for instance, or people who are more about correcting names or references, or adding links. So this, so that's where I think it's interesting to think about then, ideally, in this kind of publication series,

there would be a kind of relationship between the kind of writing that's taken place and the resulting document as it were, and the platform that was used to create it. Because we are wanting to say that infrastructure matters, that the platform matters, your tools shape your practice, and vice versa. The practice then, again, shapes the tools, and we're very much, as an organization, as a project, interested in that kind of synergism or cycle.

08:51   **"art context"** (subtitle)

MM: 08:59   Yeah, I think for me the working within an art context is really important because it has allowed very, allowed a lot of kind of excellent explorations, that work across disciplines. There's a lecture that we like to show, where a man in, I forgot, it's [inaudible], I believe he's a lecturer in the American University and he's talking to a kind of undergraduate engineering course in computer vision. And at some point he talks about, you know, we've had centuries of time speaking written languages but we have no language for images so we need to make one, like, basically, it's what he's saying to them. And it's such a kind of strong statement about, you know, like actually, we engineers need to kind of come up with a language to think about images. And that, I really enjoy the fact that I have this perspective from thinking from an artistic point of view, that of course, there developed, you know, many kinds of languages and ways of looking at images and thinking about images, and actually I'm just realizing in these kinds of moments what a gap there is.

10:14   **"the commons"** (subtitle)

MM: 10:20   So for me, the commons is absolutely, yeah, a central idea and specifically connected for me, it's connected to this idea of free software practice. One of the interesting things about free software, in contrast to more proprietary software, is that it's not so much about, you know, finding an analog. For instance, if you have Indesign there is a free software program called Scribus, which is kind of like similar. But actually I think a lot of times it's dangerous to make those kind of comparisons, and you'll just end up complaining Scribus isn't as good as Indesign, which yeah, it isn't, in some way it isn't. But it's also because the strength of free software is more of this kind of ecosystem of diverse tools and ways of putting different things together. It's not so much about a kind of a seamless, a singular, a monolithic application. It is about that fact that it's a community that shares its sources, you know, that you create things. But it's also about really an interest in what other people, how other people are working. Yeah, it's all about creating

something together and this kind of common heritage of, in this case software tools, but thinking around the software. There was also a kind of click moment at some point where I let go the idea of licenses to talk about, you know, the status of the code that you release. And at some point I just stopped caring about code because, I mean, I write code as a practice, but it's not about the code, you know, I'm happy to rewrite code and rewrite code. It's about the whole kind of processes around it and the thinking, which is really important.

MM: 12:05   In the sense of the archive then, the commons notion is absolutely there in the sense of, yeah, again, how can a community work with the materials, for instance, of an archive? How can those archives stay accessible, not just in, again, as that sort of preserved form of a singular, historical artifact. But to stimulate a new kind of thinking, writing, exhibition. So in that sense, I guess there's an aspect of that kind of what I think of as this ecosystem of writing, and writeability, and malleability, of materials, that yes, you could call a kind of commons, and a functioning, living vibrant commons. Yeah.