

## Going Digital: Considerations and Collaborations

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[Furnace & Fugue](#) is a born-digital edition of the 1618 book *Atalanta fugiens* and a very cool experiment in scholarly publishing. The book presents a musical alchemical allegory as a series of fifty emblems, each of which contains text, image, and a musical score for three voices. The digital edition includes reproductions of every page of the original publication, an English translation, newly commissioned recordings of the book's 50 fugues, and scholarly essays contextualizing and analyzing the work. The Elephant asked four of the key collaborators—Allison Levy, digital scholarship editor at Brown University, volume editors Tara Nummedal and Donna Bilak, and University of Virginia Press editor of history and social sciences Nadine Zimmerli—to talk about how they developed and published the project.

**Elephant:** Allison, When you first started working on *Furnace & Fugue*, how did you envision its ultimate publication? What did you think “publishing” would look like?

**Allison Levy:** I started at Brown in 2017, a couple of years into our first Mellon grant cycle (Brown's [Digital Publications Initiative](#) was generously launched with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2015 and received renewed support from the Foundation in 2019), so the scope and goals of the initiative had already been well defined by senior leadership. The initiative is a collaboration between the University Library and the Office of the Dean of the Faculty.

In short, the initiative collaborates with humanities faculty to develop new scholarly forms that take full advantage of the digital environment to advance arguments in ways that could never be accomplished in a conventional book, whether through multimedia enhancements or interactive navigation systems. Brown partners with scholarly publishers to ensure that these groundbreaking born-digital works are validated via rigorous academic review and disseminated to the broadest possible audience for the greatest possible impact.

The welcome challenge for me, then, was how best to realize [this extraordinary vision for digital publishing](#).

**Elephant:** How did you proceed? What did you discover along the way? Did you change course at any point?

**Levy:** *Furnace & Fugue*, then known as Project Atalanta, had been selected a year before my arrival by the Digital Publications Initiative's faculty advisory board (every fall, Brown's Dean of the Faculty issues a call for expressions of interest; Tara and Donna's proposal, along with Massimo Riva's project on the genealogy of virtual reality [forthcoming with Stanford]), was selected in 2016). By

2017, work was well underway on one central component—the digital edition of *Atalanta fugiens*, Michael Maier’s musical alchemical emblem book of 1618. This involved some heavy lifting by my colleagues in the Library’s Center for Digital Scholarship in consultation with the co-editors, Tara Nummedal, a professor of history who was on sabbatical in Berlin that year, and Donna Bilak, an independent scholar who was teaching at NYU. Zoom meetings were the norm for *Furnace & Fugue* well before COVID-19!

My arrival at Brown coincided with Tara’s return to campus and Donna’s more frequent visits, so the three of us were able to home in on the chief component that defines and distinguishes Brown’s born-digital publications—a dynamic, longform interpretive narrative. In the case of *Furnace & Fugue*, that content takes the form of eleven interdisciplinary, multimodal essays that explore *Atalanta fugiens* and its place in early modern culture, written by an international group of scholars from a range of humanities disciplines.

During this same period, I pulled together a remarkable design and user-experience team consisting of Crystal Brusck, Brown’s Designer for Online Publications, and Studio Rainwater. They worked together on interactive, multimedia components that had not yet been developed—or even imagined. There were many wonderfully productive and creative surprises at that time, and sometimes we did alter course to accommodate new ideas and new modes of digital expression. But striking the right balance between innovation and scholarly rigor was imperative, and here we were well guided by the overarching goals and objectives of the initiative—to rethink scholarly publication via innovative digital expression and a deeply engaging user experience, an idea embraced by the co-editors of *Furnace & Fugue*.

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**Elephant:** Normally, authors are responsible for finding publishers for their work. Why did you, Digital Scholarship Editor for the Brown University Library’s Digital Publications Initiative, take the lead in this case? At what point in the development process did you start approaching publishers? What kinds of questions did you get?

**Levy:** From the outset, it was understood that the Digital Scholarship Editor would assume the responsibility of initial outreach to publishers. There are a few reasons for this. Given the newness of the enhanced and interactive born-digital enterprise, it was important to introduce Brown’s novel university-based approach to digital content development as a whole, and also to survey the landscape to better understand what kinds of digital content scholarly publishers were interested in and could accommodate. When I first started meeting with publishers, in 2019, Brown had a total of

five projects in development. Though my main goal at that time was to find the right publishing partner for *Furnace & Fugue*, I was also thinking about possible placements down the road as I learned more about the strengths of the different presses.

As soon as we had a polished staging site for *Furnace & Fugue* (still today but especially in the beginning, due to Brown's innovative approach to digital monograph development, it was critical that I had a demo site to present to prospective publishers), in early 2019, I took the show on the road. Fortunately, both AHA and MLA were convening in Chicago that year, which allowed me to meet with several dozen press directors, editors, and marketing specialists across two venues. There was no shortage of interest in Brown's Digital Publications Initiative generally or in the stunning *Furnace & Fugue* demo. Questions largely revolved around open access, the possibility of bringing out a print component, and hosting and preservation responsibilities (on all of these points, Brown is flexible). Every conversation included the question, what is Brown looking for in a partnership?

When I met with University of Virginia Press's Eric Brandt, Assistant Director and Editor in Chief, and Richard Holway, former Senior Executive Editor of History and Social Sciences, our conversation moved forward rapidly. They immediately saw *Furnace & Fugue* as an excellent fit with UVA Press. Moreover, they responded enthusiastically to the prospect of collaborating with Brown, building upon the distinctive and complementary strengths of the initiative and the press. Nadine Zimmerli joined the press as Editor of History and Social Sciences just as the peer review process was wrapping up, and she expertly shepherded us through to publication.

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**Elephant:** Tara and Donna, when you first started working as the volume editors of *Furnace & Fugue*, how did you envision its ultimate publication? What did you think "publishing" would look like?

**Tara Nummedal and Donna Bilak:** We knew from the outset that we wanted to include both a multimedia edition of Michael Maier's 1618 book as well as new scholarship about it. We also knew that we wanted to publish our book with a university press and that we wanted it to be a rigorously reviewed scholarly publication so that it would be legible as scholarship. Beyond those core elements, however, it was unclear initially what form the book would take, whether there would also be a print component, whether university presses would be receptive to a digital book, and what the "publication" process would look like.

The process of creating *Furnace & Fugue* felt like an experiment in process and form, which made it both exciting and sometimes also disorienting as we felt our way towards the final project. One of the biggest differences between publishing *Furnace & Fugue* and a typical print book was the central role from the very outset of editors, technologists, and designers. These experts always play a crucial role in creating academic books, of course, but most authors only work with them at the end, once the book is mostly written and in press. Because *Furnace & Fugue* was a digital publication, however,

much of this team was in place from the very beginning, making their expertise and contributions much more visible to the authors and performers and creating space for real collaboration.

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**Elephant:** Normally, authors are responsible for finding publishers for their work. What did you think of having Allison take the lead in this case? At what point did you get involved in discussions with publishers?

**Nummedal and Bilak:** We felt incredibly fortunate to have Allison at the helm as we looked for the right press! Fortunately for us, she is a scholar of early modern Europe, and so she understood the scholarly significance of *Furnace & Fugue* and was able to communicate that to presses. Just as importantly, however, Allison was able to draw on her publishing experience to help translate between the scholarly and business sides of publishing and to speak with presses about what publishing a digital book might look like. As authors and editors, we only spoke with publishers once Allison had already established relationships with them, and once it was clear that they were interested not only in the scholarly contributions *Furnace & Fugue* aimed to make, but also in joining us in our experiment with digital publishing. University of Virginia Press was enthusiastic about both elements of the book and felt like the right intellectual home, which made it an obvious partner for us.

**Elephant:** What was the peer review process like?

**Nummedal and Bilak:** *Furnace & Fugue* is a complex multidisciplinary, musical, and digital text; accordingly, the peer review process was tailored to ensure careful attention to all of these components. We received detailed comments about the edition's digital and intellectual apparatus (e.g., navigability, the translated discourses), yet initially it proved difficult to get substantive feedback about the essays as a coherent collection and scholarly intervention. (Nadine Zimmerli expands below.)

**Elephant:** Do your scholarly colleagues regard *Furnace & Fugue* as the intellectual equivalent of a monograph? Or does it "count" more or less than the standard publication? And what's your view of the intellectual value of this project?

**Nummedal and Bilak:** This is a profoundly important question. It highlights the need for academe

to de-emphasize the monograph as the only standard for tenure-track hires and promotion, and to view the scholarly edition as a legitimate and vital form of producing new knowledge. The project's intellectual merit extends beyond its value as a resource for teaching and research; it also lies in how *Furnace & Fugue* will establish a standard for evaluating collaborative scholarship and digital publication based on modeling what academic diversity and intellectual risk-taking produce. Every stakeholder associated with this project took a chance on it; *Furnace & Fugue* involved a real range of career stages and relationships to the tenure track. At its core, *Furnace & Fugue* shows what academe is capable of when we work together and make informed, critical decisions about producing a project using the most appropriate publication format.

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**Elephant:** Nadine, what did you think when you first heard about *Furnace & Fugue*? As an acquisitions editor, what questions did you have about it?

**Nadine Zimmerli:** I joined UVA Press in late August of 2019 and inherited this groundbreaking, born-digital project from my predecessor, Richard Holway. When I first learned about it, I was very excited to experiment with the various features in the beta version of the project. I found the creators' and editors' approach to this seventeenth-century musical alchemical emblem book to be a highly innovative and exciting showcase for merging digital, collaborative, and interdisciplinary scholarship. My questions revolved around whether and how the acquisitions editor's role would differ as I shepherded this project to publication, and where in my acquisitions portfolio it fit.

**Elephant:** What kinds of issues came up when you discussed this project with your colleagues?

**Zimmerli:** Thankfully, Richard Holway and UVA Press's Editor in Chief Eric Brandt had already resolved the thorniest questions in-house, namely how to handle peer review (they drafted a completely new, tailored set of questions and selected reviewers who were both subject experts and versed in the digital humanities), whether the project would be a standalone digital project in UVA Press's series on [Studies in Early Modern German History](#) or part of our digital imprint Rotunda (the former), which institution would host the project (Brown University), whether to make it open access (yes), and the costs involved in that decision. We also had to decide how to handle copyediting digital-

only files embedded in a standalone website, (we eventually converted the essays and other text into Word files and asked Brown's designers to enter changes on their end).

**Elephant:** What exactly did the University Press of Virginia do on this project, and what is it continuing to do now that the project has been published?

**Zimmerli:** We treated the project like we would a traditional essay volume in *Studies in Early Modern German History*. Richard Holway worked with series editor H. C. Erik Midelfort on identifying appropriate peer reviewers and sent the project to three scholarly experts for evaluation. I then shared these reviews of the scholarly and digital components of the project with Allison Levy, who in turn worked with her team at Brown and volume editors Donna Bilak and Tara Nummedal to implement revisions. Once revisions were in place, I presented *Furnace & Fugue* to our Board of Directors, who accepted it for publication. Let me add here that all peer reviewers were both subject matter experts and had worked on digital humanities projects in some capacity. At first, however, they provided a lot more commentary on the technical components of *Furnace & Fugue* than the individual essays—they found the fully digital-born project very exciting and welcomed the chance to shape it in terms of ease of use. But of course all of us were eager to receive feedback on the project's scholarly merits as well. I therefore wrote to each reader to ask for substantive feedback on the essays specifically and subsequently spoke to reviewers on the phone as well. This resulted in more targeted feedback than the press's initial questions had produced. Even though this comprehensive initial list had included a number of questions that we ask readers to consider for every anthology we publish, the reviewers initially appeared more inclined to engage with and respond to questions about the digital expression of scholarly ideas. A lesson here might be to separate questions on the technical and the scholarly components of a born-digital project, so reviewers must answer two distinct sets of questions. This way, a university press editor can signal that digital-born projects must fulfill the same criteria as print-only anthologies or monographs in addition to standing on their own as technical accomplishments.

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I then worked on the contract with Allison (more below), transmitted it to the Editorial department, and launched it with all departments to coordinate everything from modified cover design to publicity rollout. Morgan Myers, our senior project editor, copyedited all textual materials in close collaboration with Allison Levy and designer Crystal Brusca at Brown University, while our marketing department crafted catalog copy and solicited blurbs—like they would for any publication.

During this process, we also assigned an ISBN to *Furnace & Fugue* and registered copyright in Brown University's name. Registration with the Library of Congress Copyright Office provides the formal protection of official registration to any press publication; we also assigned a Creative Commons license that indicated that Brown University was lowering some restrictions on use. In short, even though we adapted review questions and work processes along the way to suit a digital-born and digital-only publication, it was important to all involved that *Furnace & Fugue* be treated—and would subsequently be viewed by users/readers—like any other rigorously peer-reviewed university press publication.

In terms of the project's release, our director of marketing Jason Coleman gave it a two-page spread in our catalog, emailed our [Rotunda digital imprint](#) customers and German history scholars, and made sure that it has its own portal on [Project MUSE Open](#). Brown University is hosting *Furnace & Fugue*, but we created a special page on our website with an image gallery and the official link to the *Furnace & Fugue* site. In addition to a UVA Press webinar to mark *Furnace & Fugue* going live a year ago ([archived on YouTube](#)), which I was delighted to host, we promoted it through our blog and social media channels. Going forward, we are hoping for reviews to come in; we will feature the volume on our [Manifold Open Access](#) site; we will continue to promote it within our early modern German history series; and we will showcase *Furnace & Fugue* on a tablet to encourage discovery and interaction at history and electronic-resources conferences once they resume as in-person events.

**Elephant:** Without revealing any confidential information, can you talk about how the contract for *Furnace & Fugue* was different from the standard book contract?

**Zimmerli:** The contract is completely different! We merged the [model publishing contract](#) for digital scholarship that Emory University and the University of Michigan developed with some language from our standard publication contract. In the end, every single department head at UVA Press read through it and weighed in, and Allison and her team as well as Brown University's Counsel reviewed the document on their end. Everything from specifying which creative commons license to apply ([CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)) to who would send out and collect contributor agreements had to be negotiated and adapted—a process that took three months.

**Elephant:** Can you share any usage numbers with us? How much attention is the site getting?

**Zimmerli:** We launched *Furnace & Fugue* with the webinar on August 25, 2020, and the site has since been viewed by more than 9,000 unique visitors, who either discover the project independently or through UVA Press's website portal (at the time of this post, Google Analytics reports 16,000 sessions). On the press's end, the website we created for *Furnace & Fugue* has had 2,885 page views and 1,700 unique site visitors since we launched the project. If *Furnace & Fugue* had been published as a traditional book, we likely would have started with a print run of 500 cloth copies, so engagement with the project in digital form far outweighs the reach a print publication would have had in its first year.

**Donna Bilak** is a historian of early modern science and a goldsmith. Donna's research areas as a historian and maker encompass early modern alchemy, laboratory technologies, and emblem culture; alchemical reconstructions of artificial gemstones; jewelry studies on extraction and environmental toxicity; sustainable jewelry advocacy.

**Allison Levy** is Digital Scholarship Editor for the Brown University Library's Digital Publications Initiative, generously launched with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Serving in this role since 2017, she brings together key organizational, academic, and technological resources across the University to support new forms of faculty-driven scholarship. Beyond the Brown campus, she spearheads efforts at the industry level to advance the conversation around the development, evaluation, and publication of born-digital scholarship in the humanities.

**Tara Nummedal** is Professor of History at Brown University, where she teaches courses in early modern European history and the history of science. She is the co-editor, with Donna Bilak, of *Furnace and Fugue: A Digital Edition of Michael Maier's Atalanta fugiens (1618) with Scholarly Commentary*, and the author of *Anna Zieglerin and the Lion's Blood: Alchemy and End Times in Reformation Germany* and *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire*.

**Nadine Zimmerli** earned a B.A. in history from Shepherd University in West Virginia and then an M.A. and Ph.D. in history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Before joining UVA Press in 2019, she worked at the University of Wisconsin Press and the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture. At UVA Press, she acquires books on American history and politics across five centuries, oversees series on Early Modern German and on Southern African history, and develops academic and trade books on the history and culture of Virginia.

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