

free radical

According to Carrie Bickner, New York Public Library Assistant Director for Digital Information and System Design [http://www.roguelibrarian.com], digital archivists have two main concerns. The concern is not just with "bit integrity" (the integrity of the actual media being preserved); there exists the equally troublesome task of preserving the technology used to read the media. For example, my MS Word 2.0 document may be perfectly intact, but this does me no good if I no longer have any software that can read it.

Imagineer Danny Hillis looked into the problems of making a clock that would still be telling time thousands of years from now, and his best solution was to build a non-digital clock, trusting in the continuity of human culture to wind it physically as needed. [http://www.longnow.com] [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/6.05/hillis.html]

But what if one relies on the peculiar quirks of a particular technology to create one's signature art? Where would Jimi Hendrix be without Marshall tube amp distortion? AmpFarm currently makes a digital Plug-In for Pro Tools that simulates the Hendrix amp set up, and the results are close, but no cigar.

Recently, Microsoft announced that it will no longer support Internet Explorer for the Mac. This means that all the Mac surfers currently using IE (a huge majority) will eventually migrate to something else, most likely Safari. And (as Nick Barker [http://www.nickbarker.org] recently pointed out) Safari does not support tiling animated gifs.

To hardcore conceptual net artists and Action Script / Lingo/ Java net artists this is no big deal, but to a lo-fi dhtml net artist like myself, this failure is of some concern. It means that, for a poten-

Digital archivists have two main concerns...not just the integrity of the actual media, but also preserving the technology used to read the media. My MS Word 2.0 document may be perfectly intact, but this does me no good if I can no longer read it.

Curt Cloninger

On Archiving, Ephemera, and Analog Distortion



tially increasing number of visitors, the technology used to create some of the "art" of my "art" no longer functions desirably.

Not that Netscape 6 for Mac ever displayed tiling animated gifs "properly." It actually chokes on them, but in an interesting way [surf <http://www.playdamage.org> on Mac N6 for examples]. But Safari doesn't even attempt to animate them. This is akin to the difference between analog and digital distortion. Analog distortion is messed up, but in a warm, gradual way that remains in dialogue with its source signal. It's a good thing. Digital distortion is binary. You either have a clear non-distorted signal, or a boring monotone clip that in no way resembles its source signal. Safari not animating the gifs at all is equivalent to this monotone clip.

To a hardcore conceptual artist for whom aesthetic craft is tangential fluff, my animated gif concerns are insipid. To a hardcore programmer coding abstract interactive vector shape environments, my animated gif concerns are obsolete. To a W3C-aware software developer at Safari, my concerns are ridiculous. But to a net.art archivist, my concerns are of potential interest. [cf: <http://rhizome.org/artbase/policy.htm>, "appendix D: artist's intent"].

There is a legendary story about Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page that seems applicable. A rock journalist once asked Jimmy Page what rig he used (guitar, foot pedals, amp head, speakers) to get his signature tone. Page said, "I no longer answer that question publicly." Page went on to explain that he uses vintage equipment that's no longer newly manufactured. One time a few years ago, Page named the specific make

and model of the equipment he used in an interview that was widely circulated in a major British publication. The next time Page's vintage equipment needed replacement parts, he went shopping around to vintage equipment dealers and pawn shops for the parts he needed, only to find that they were unaccountably sold out. Tons of young British guitarists had read the article and snatched up the remaining vintage equipment. Now their hero was no longer able to continue creating the original tone his fans were trying so hard to emulate.

This tale is usually told as a cautionary one regarding fame and mass media, but it also speaks of the ephemerality of the technology with which we develop our personal symbiotic relationships. Auriea Harvey [<http://www.e8z.org>] confided to me a couple of years ago that she was feeling like all the work she had done on the Web was in vain and lost. At the time, I thought she was over-reacting, temporarily burned out on the medium. Now, as browser companies crumble and the ephemerality of my early work becomes more apparent, I begin to understand a bit of what she was feeling.

The "solution" in commercial web design is, "code to standards." But if part of your art involves using non-standards code to "overdrive / break" standard browser rendering practices, then coding to standards is not always possible.

Perhaps the solution is to embrace the ephemerality and just keep making new stuff. If that's the case, it could be argued that pimping one's own work becomes more important than ever. If people don't see it now, they won't be

able to see it four years from now. The focus then shifts to the artist as public figure, and away from any single work itself. How many web designers revere Josh Davis without ever having seen early versions of <http://www.once-upon-a-forest.com>? How many net artists revere jodi without ever having seen early versions of <http://www.jodi.org>? Thus the net artists who "succeed" are those good at PR, good at branding themselves, good at coming up with projects that spin well and are viral, good at peppering the press with ongoing small projects instead of working for extended periods of time on larger, more meaningful projects.

Perhaps the solution is to pull an entropy8zuper -- abandon the Net as an artistic medium altogether, go into hibernation for a year, and develop a grand narrative entertainment game that is neither net nor art. [<http://www.tale-of-tales.com>]

Or perhaps the solution is to keep working in the medium, dare to take on larger projects (perhaps making them modular, like <http://www.worldofawe.com> or <http://www.marrowmonkey.com>), and then just not really care about what lasts or who sees it. Personally, I think I'm over the "who sees it" part (as much as any artist can be), but I'm surprised at how much the "what lasts" part is goading me.

References:

http://www.afsnitp.dk/onoff/Texts/tri_bearchivingne.html
http://www.afsnitp.dk/onoff/Texts/di_etzcuratingont.html
http://www.intelligentagent.com/archive/Vol3_No1_curation_schleiner.html
<http://www.deeptyoung.org>