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Digital Preservation / Assignment 1

### The Rhizome.org ArtBase

Rhizome.org is a non-profit organization that provides a platform for new media and net art. The Rhizome ArtBase is the organization's online archive, with over 2000 mostly born-digital "art objects" [(1) p.6] including games, software, codes, moving images and browsers. Founded by artist and curator Mark Tribe in 1996, Rhizome evolved from a popular email list into a full website and became a non-profit organization in 1998. Initially intended to serve as a discussion forum for net.art, over the past fifteen years it has become a foundational network of stakeholders including artists, art enthusiasts, researchers, curators, and conservators for new media art.

The Rhizome ArtBase was created in 1999 to provide a space for artists to submit their work. The site is now primarily membership based but submission to and use of the ArtBase remains free to the public once a user has created a profile. The shift towards non-profit status and creation of the ArtBase was facilitated by Rhizome's unique position to become one of the first online museums for these then emerging electronic art forms. In a 2010 interview with Laurel Ptak, Tribe explained his first vision of the ArtBase as "a safe place where they [artists] can put their stuff for long term storage and access. And we wanted to just keep track of the existence of works, even if we couldn't get copies," (2). Working from this simple idea, the ArtBase now aims "to provide free, open access to a public collection of new media art objects, and preserve these works in a sustainable archival format" [(1) p.5].

The archival process begins with the artists' submission, either as an archival copy of their work for preservation and inclusion in the archive, or a URL to the work where it is maintained by the artist and included in the archive as a "linked object" [(3) p. 2]. In both cases, the artist must have copyright control over their submission, but this process allows the artist to share source code and lay out instructions for how the work may be altered to facilitate preservation and future access.

In 2002, Richard Rinehart, Director of the Samek Art Museum at Bucknell University (then Director of Digital Media at Berkeley Art Museum / Pacific Film Archive) worked with Tribe to write *Preserving the Rhizome ArtBase* (2002), outlining a plan to implement archival practices and building on the policies and structures already in place. At this point, the archive was functioning on the initial database structure and taxonomy that Tribe had invented to describe the collections, and this plan established clearer guidelines for a sustainable preservation model, including a metadata schema, the use of an artist questionnaire, and an emphasis on using the method of *emulation* [(3), pgs. 3, 4] to provide access to works created with obsolescent media and equipment.

The ArtBase currently describes and categorizes the formats of incoming work using the metadata schema Dublin Core to catalogue the wide range of manifestations that emerging media can take, and continues to implement other standards developed by the archival community, including adoption of three standard methods for restoration: *emulation*, *migration*, and *reinterpretation*. These methods are used to address the "inherent vices" of born-digital and emerging media such as diffusion and data obsolescence [(1), p.7,8].

Among these risks inherent to new media art objects are the issues surrounding "imbalance of responsibility among the stakeholders in the new media community",

which Ben Fino-Radin outlines in his 2011 paper *Digital Preservation Practices and the Rhizome ArtBase* (p.12). In describing the task of artists to maintain access to their works, many of which are created on old web sites, defunct browsers or complex un-compiled source code, he recommends adapting ArtBases's practices and policies to facilitate the preservation process and allow artists room to create new works, rather than dwell on the maintenance of older ones.

Another issue described by Fino-Radin is the preservation of physical objects associated with digital works in the collection, which lies beyond the ArtBase's abilities. Their solution to this is to document the mechanical specifications of the physical components of a given piece, and preserve only this representation/documentation within the archival record. This compromise draws attention to the limitations and inconstant definitions of authenticity, preservation, and representation, and allows for the possibility of future iterations.

Part of their effort to confront these issues begins in the first stages of their archival process, which requires completion of an Artist Questionnaire upon submission of an object. This allows artist to create their own definition of authenticity for their work, setting a foundation for how best to preserve or reinterpret it in the future, and gives ArtBase curatorial staff opportunity to assess the risks associated with any given format. The Questionnaire includes fields for title, creator, date, byline, URL, summary, statement/description, content for the display of its record, and technologies used: software/programming language/internet protocol, etc. [(1) p.14].

The ArtBase has several methods for identifying and correcting problems with objects within the archive. One is by creating a script that crawls the ArtBase and produces a "report of all the linked objects pointing to defunct URLs" [(1), p.17]. Another is by providing users of the ArtBase with a form to report problems and broken links. By allowing users to assist in the upkeep of the site, problems are brought to the attention of the curatorial staff who can then assess and correct them.

One of their more innovative proposed solutions to confronting the complex issue of preserving objects in their original "environment" is the possibility of collaborating with web browser developers to create manageable versions of their products that can be preserved to maintain access to works that are reliant on them (i.e. Partnering with Google to create a scaled-down version of Google Maps API to host the piece *globalmove.us* by the artist collective JODI [(1), p.10]. The end product would be a kind of "museum-quality browser" or browser extension / feature native to already existing and popular browsers to host a backwards compatible / emulated platform that can be constantly upgraded to ensure protection against its *own* obsolescence.

Fino-Radin's encouragement of an "opt-in open source code component" (p.20) to the ArtBase's submission process, to allow educational institutions and students to build on their work, is an extremely positive and inclusive way to provide access to emerging media, one which I think would also foster more innovation in the field of preservation as students and researchers would be able to engage with the objects and experiment with manifesting new iterations that can be representative of the original. This idea seems in tune with the movement as a whole, embracing the nature of the beast for the benefit of the emerging media community and reflecting the adaptive spirit of Rhizome.org.

## WORKS CITED

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- 3) Rinehart, Richard. *Preserving the Rhizome ArtBase*. 2002. Web. September 20, 2014. <http://media.rhizome.org/artbase/documents/Preserving-the-Rhizome-ArtBase.pdf>
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