

Experimental Archiving & Preservation of New Media Art

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Abstract:

A spectre is haunting Media Art – the spectre of digital decay. All the powers of old school archiving have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Academics and industry, Microsoft and Free Software, pirates and copyright law enforcers.

My paper explores experimental approaches to archiving and preservation of Media Art. As such I define artistic and academic theory-practices that dare to think beyond the confines of traditional archiving and preservation, for these strategies have proved to be inadequate to meet the challenges posed by Media Art.

Outline

While recent years saw the spring of numerous research initiatives for preserving and archiving New Media Art, the question remains if New Media Art is archive-able at all, archive-able in the old sense. Database archives and research initiatives on meta data have been launched and disappeared again, without offering solid, sustainable solutions. Increasing technological decay and the loss or inaccessibility of data caused by it not only pose a threat to Digital Cultural Heritage (as defined by UNESCO¹) – of which New Media Art constitutes an important part – but also show the shortcomings of traditional archival practices when applied to this field. In my paper I investigate alternative theory-practices of archiving and preserving. I call these approaches experimental, for they go beyond the confines of traditional means and have not been considered in relation to this field yet. I am curious to see if “out in the wild” (f.e. on Social Media platforms and their modes of viral dissemination) theories and practices exist that offer viable models for the challenges at hand.

How the notion of archiving changes in times of rapidly progressing digital decay is central to this investigation. It raises questions about the authenticity of an artwork and the art historical concept of the original. Archiving in the context of this paper is understood in a broad sense and includes strategies aside from librarian formalities and mere technical questions. This ranges from storing to disseminating, from restoration to remixing, transcoding and sampling. Strict archival strategies mix with free artistic interpretation. The goals of archiving and the change of meaning in the light of progressing digital decay are highlighted and contrasted with one another. The interests of all parties involved (from artists to archivists, audience to curators and scholars) will be considered. One hypothesis of this investigation is that the notion of the artwork as a closed entity will no longer hold, but has to be replaced by thinking of it as an open system. Furthermore, that the scope of archiving can no longer be restrained to storage and the prolongation of the shelf life of assets, but

¹ UNESCO, Charter for the Preservation of Digital Heritage,
http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17721&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

has to include the circulation of copies, versions and instances, reaching as far as the remixing of content. Thereby the concept of the original – the holy cow of art history – will be slaughtered and Walter Benjamin's notion of the aura in his seminal text “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” has to be reread with a different mindset.

The aim is not a research about formats and technologies, but about strategies and concepts. Shifting realities of archiving and preservation require a shift in approach as well: away from the artwork as a static entity to art as an ever ongoing, open process; an exploration of how artists, audiences, museums and other interested parties meet the fact of planned and rapidly progressing technological obsolescence and digital decay and of how these challenge the way we think about New Media Art; an investigation about how artistic practices and Open Culture can contribute to a new and better understanding and handling of New Media Art and its archiving/preservation issues. It is a theory-practical approach, positioned as artistic research within the realm of Digital Humanities.

keywords:

experimental archiving && preservation for New Media Art, digital decay, technological obsolescence, artistic strategies, theory-practice approach, pirating, versioning, remixing, viral dissemination

topic areas:

- culture & technology
- social software & semantic web
- cross-media strategies for museums

bio:

Nina Wenhart is a Media Art historian, artist and independent researcher. She currently is a PhD candidate at Interface Culture's Lab at the Art University of Linz (Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau) and graduated from Prof. Oliver Grau's Media Art Histories program at the Danube University in Krems, Austria with a Master Thesis on Descriptive Metadata for Media Arts. For many years, she has been working in the field of archiving/documenting Media Art, recently at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Media.Art.Research and before as the head of the Ars Electronica Futurelab's videostudio, where she created their archives and primarily worked with the archival material. She was teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and the Media Art Histories program at the Danube University Krems.