

ARCHIVING

ART OF THE NETWORK

Artists were some of the first computer users to see interesting and unexpected potentials in the Netscape Web Browser when it was first introduced just ten years ago. Australian new media artist Melinda Rackham surveys the first decade of net art and poses questions about its preservation in this extract from her presentation to the International Conference on Archiving Web Resources held at the National Library of Australia in November 2004



↙ Detail of Emotional Intelligence 61
→ Detail of Motivation Seminar 62
net artworks by Enrique Radigales
<www.idealworld.org>

ADOPTION & ADAPTATION

It is easy to see why artists were drawn to the Internet. When Marc Andresson's Netscape Web Browser was introduced in 1994, it opened up a new frontier of space unmediated by the art museum. Unlike previous browsers, it promised aesthetic control over embedding both graphics and sound into pages of easily navigated text.

On the net, artists could retain complete control of their content, they could be instantly connected to a global audience and, initially, they could not be censored. Existing artforms, such as drawing, poetry, video, animation, radio and the theory surrounding them, moved to the Internet, adopting the unique aesthetic of chunky, pixelated low-resolution images, low-bit sound and the rhythmic feel of download art.

Since these early beginnings, net art has evolved in symbiosis with the parameters and the possibilities of the web environment itself. The online context has influenced artists' creative processes. Forms have mutated, and new and hybrid practices have emerged. The living organism of the web supplies the raw data, which is reformatted and recontextualised to become an artwork.

New genres are constantly emerging as we and net art become more and more mobile. Mobile phones and personal digital assistants with locative technologies can create works which respond to a participant's physical location and context. Artists are also responding to multi-user virtual reality and game spaces — the largest genre of online culture, with around 10 million users. Net artists are performing inside game spaces or authoring game modifications and creating their own games. Or creating new theatrical and cinematic forms like avatar performance and machinima.

COLLECTION

While all these works provide entertaining cultural experiences, they also raise many challenges for preservation. Each gives a very different picture of online culture today. How do cultural institutions decide what to archive? Which site should be kept, which is of most cultural value? How do you decide between truly innovative works which break all the standards or easy-to-archive works which may be more stable for longer periods? Whose responsibility is it to maintain and

NET ARTWORKS REPRODUCED COURTESY OF ENRIQUE RADIGALES



update works in the public domain and where does this end? Should it be the artist (who doesn't get paid)? Or the archive (using public monies)?

Should online artists make video documentation of their work (minus the interactivity)? Could the work be migrated to new formats? How would that affect works where discovering the code is also a part of the work? What time slice do you preserve, when a net artwork is generatively and dynamically evolving in conjunction with the net or captured from current databases? Do you archive every version of constantly shifting soft and hardware standards?

There are no easy or right answers to these questions. However, I am very excited that the challenge of networked art preservation is being taken up. Speaking as both an artist and a curator it has been dispiriting to see the net artwork of the last decade — the early period of innovation and experimentation — decay and disappear before my eyes. This intention of maintaining our Internet cultural heritage means that in years to come people will be able to authentically immerse themselves in today's fledgling art of the network.

Dr Melinda Rackham is an artist, curator and new media producer. She initiated *empyre*, the online space for the discussion of media, networked arts and cultural practice <www.subtle.net/empyre>

For interesting examples of net art, see the following sites:

Enrique Radigales (Spain)
<www.idealword.org>

Deliciously reformatted versions of the everyday work environment with weird and wonderful texts revealed in the source code beneath the surface.

Peter Murphy (AU)
<www.mediavr.com/blog/>

A panoramic virtual reality weblog on the public cultural, political and social life of our nation.

Jimpunk (France)
[http://www.jimpunk.com/1n-Out/Jimpunk's code](http://www.jimpunk.com/1n-Out/Jimpunk's%20code)
Temporarily takes over your browser, makes you sit back and become a passenger ... try this one at home.

The full survey of net artworks from Melinda Rackham's presentation can be seen at
<www.subtle.net/archive/archiving.html>