

Digital Culture: Here to Stay

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ABSTRACT

Information signified by bytes in the digital world is as valuable to future generations as words on a piece of parchment. It is tempting to believe that the preservation of digital information is someone else's problem, that what happens in the virtual world is too ephemeral to matter in the future. However, for many in the preservation profession we can already see the importance of digital information in documentation related to archaeology, architecture, manufacturing and in the cultural and governmental fields.

Introduction

Engagement with the preservation of all things digital has been growing steadily in our profession over the last ten years. The definition of digital culture is still being formed, but for the purposes of this essay it is those things which exist digitally that we will need to preserve as evidence of this period of history and culture.

There is a common reaction from friends and professional colleagues when a conservator discusses digital preservation. Can we leave this to the IT professionals? Have you left your field? My answer to both is "no". Yes, there is great challenge. We, as conservators, will not replace the IT specialists. There are however parallels between preservation in the digital world and the traditional knowledge, skills and experience of preservation in the material world. Most importantly, digital culture is significant to this world we live in now and preserving what is essential from today for future generations is our responsibility.

This essay is written to indicate a path to follow where preservation principles can guide us. The purpose is to encourage more professional colleagues to engage, to become more comfortable with, and participate in new professional relationships that will address the preservation of digital culture. Engagement has to begin with a passion for continuous learning, a desire to communicate in another language, a nimble and flexible ability to form and reform teams, and at times to experiment wisely to achieve the goal and a core of practical principles to frame the effort.

What is digital culture?

Most of us take part in digital culture every day: in our personal lives as we plan and carry out our financial matters and share personal thoughts with friends and family; and in our professional lives as we learn and carry out our work. When we buy a new computer one, two or five years from now, we realize we will want to preserve at least some of the significant information in the memory of the computer to back it up or migrate to a new computer. The digital preservation idea is exemplified by photographs with people you will not see again. We do not preserve those images for the sake of the photograph; we preserve the photograph because of its value for memory and sharing with others. A major advantage of digital sharing is that one can share widely and simultaneously, with many, in the moment.