

# Presentation and Contextualisation in the Online Archive of Internet Art

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## ABSTRACT

This poster presents the initial findings of a collaborative practice-based PhD research project at London South Bank University (London, UK) and Rhizome (New York, US). The project analyses challenges associated with presenting and contextualising internet art<sup>1</sup> in an online archive through the lens of user interaction design. Using methods from human computer interaction (HCI) and user experience design, the project proposes a new design framework for the ArtBase, Rhizome's online archive of internet art.

## KEYWORDS

Online archives, internet art, human computer interaction, user interaction design

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Changes in web standards and developments in new patterns of interaction between users and computers creates multiple challenges for digital archives and long-term provision of access to digital artefacts of significant cultural value [3]. Curation and presentation in archives of internet art, in particular, pose multiple sets of problems closely associated with the question of what constitutes the art object. Internet artworks are not single digital objects, but rather assemblages, dependent on specific software/hardware environments to be executed and rendered. They oftentimes change over time and require specific user input in order to be performed.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *internet art* is contentious. It is used here within the definitions given by Stallabrass (2003) [1] and Greene (2004) [2]. This is to distinguish it from the earlier narrower definition of the term *net.art* or the later expanded term *internet-based art*. Other more general terms like *born-digital art*, *digital art* and *new media art* are avoided in order to keep the focus on art which uses digital networked media and is made to be experienced online.

This practice-based research project seeks to better understand problems associated with the archiving of internet art and to address the question of how artworks can be made accessible to the public in their native environment – online – while enabling users of the archive to gain an expanded understanding of the artworks' context. The primary case study of this research is a redesign of the user interaction framework of the ArtBase, the online archive maintained by Rhizome, an international arts organisation curating and archiving internet art.

## 2 THE CASE STUDY OF THE ARTBASE

In the fields of user experience design and HCI, there has been substantial research done around issues of discoverability, accessibility and usability in digital archives, but the studies have focused primarily on archives with text or image-based documents [4, 5]. Presentation and contextualization, as well as models for user interaction in archives of more complex digital artefacts, however, have been discussed much less, particularly from the point of view of the user's experience.

Unlike plain text documents or static digital images, internet art spans beyond the boundaries of a single object and can become 'diffuse' [6], referencing external, dynamic and real-time data sources, or existing across multiple locations and platforms. Capturing multiple layers of dependencies on media-specific properties of computers and networks, as well as various user interaction models, poses technical as well as social challenges when presenting internet art online. Technical aspects related to the documentation in metadata and/or indication through interface design elements of unsupported browser plug-ins, changes in web languages or syntax, interaction models which develop over time and/or over various platforms, among others, remain yet to be fully resolved. In addition, the lack of clear parameters in defining the social context of internet art, including spatial, temporal, aesthetic and behavioural context [7], has implications both for the presentation and interface design of the archival system, as well as the art historical record of the artworks. A further aspect of consideration is the context of the art institution itself and its influence on the archival interface.

Rhizome has recognised the inherent vulnerability of internet art since its inception as an organisation and community-building

platform in 1996. The ArtBase was established in 1999 as an online space to present and archive internet art, as well as to build a community and a discourse around the works [6]. Initial strategies towards presentation of artworks in the ArtBase reflected contemporaneous developments in the fields of interaction design and digital preservation. More recently the archival system has struggled to accommodate the growing number and variety of artworks in the ArtBase. Increasingly the focus of preservation efforts at Rhizome has been on building tools to support the presentation of complex artworks with multiple dependencies.

The remote browsing framework, first introduced in Rhizome's oldweb.today project to emulate old browser environments, has facilitated the online restoration and re-performance of historic internet art works in contemporaneous environments. Furthermore, the capacity to create high-fidelity archives of the dynamic web with Rhizome's browser-based web archiving tool, Webrecorder, has enabled the preservation of artworks utilising third-party web services.

Remote browsers, in particular, could become a powerful tool allowing presentation of artworks either as a *link out* of the ArtBase page into a new page running the emulated browser, or as an embedded iframe *within* the ArtBase page of the artwork. In each of these cases, users would encounter a "browser-within-a-browser" presentation paradigm. Potential challenges here include users mistaking the remote browser environment for other secondary representations (a static screenshot, for instance), or users misinterpreting (or failing to interpret) outdated interaction patterns within the remote browser.

The poster will outline these challenges and showcase initial prototypes for user interactions which facilitate engagement with complex and 'diffuse' artworks within the case study scenario of the ArtBase.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

This project is multidisciplinary, combining qualitative research methods from the fields of the digital humanities, information sciences and HCI. Following common HCI qualitative research approaches, the research work uses ethnographic observation, contextual inquiry and grounded theory towards the design of a new interaction design framework. Additionally, drawing on relevant concepts from contemporary archival theory and curatorial practice, will allow the formation of a concept-driven interaction design approach [8] with an underlying design theory to inform the case study practice.

The initial phase of the research project, which will be visualised in the poster presentation, includes findings from the contextual inquiry for the case study. This phase of discovery and user research involves three key milestones: 1) understanding the organisational context and goals; 2) understanding the domain (of ongoing related R&D or pilot projects at other institutions); 3) understanding user needs and goals. The poster will include qualitative summaries of findings from ethnographic observation, quantitative data based on audits of the current ArtBase data structure, as well as initial interaction design prototypes.

### 4 CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD

Computers and networks have become transparent delivery systems for text-, image- or video-based media which they are able to fully represent and contain. This research project looks to the media-specific properties of computers and networks which can represent and contextualise digital artefacts that are inherently outside of these containable formats.

The research applies methods from HCI to study user behaviours and carry out concept-driven design exploration in order to develop a design framework supporting increasingly complex and 'diffuse' artefacts and their related user interaction models. While the design of the framework will answer the specific requirements of Rhizome's organisational goals and policies, the thesis developed alongside the practice-based research will critically analyse the role of the institutional context in this R&D study. Through evidence gathered from user research and design practice, the thesis will aim to outline new concepts and interaction design principles in the HCI field relevant to the archiving and presentation of artefacts which fall outside easily containable formats.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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