Scripturient

The emulation game

> " A networked open-source emulation platform is a great example of the kind of international cooperation and generosity that we need to solve complex, shared problems.

Barbara Lemon is a curator, historian and library professional who specialises in oral history and digital collections for national libraries. See more at www.lemonbell.press

"The people who grew up with digital media are now of the age where we are decision-makers. For a long time, nobody would take my calls, I was banging my head against a brick wall. Now people reach out to me." – Prof. Melanie Swalwell.

CYBERFLESH *Girlmonster* was just one of 150 works chosen for display at the LA County Museum of Art's 'Digital Witness' exhibition this year. What's distinctive about this 30-year-old artwork is that it can still speak to its audience – literally.

Linda Dement's animated scans of female body parts are made interactive with words, video, stories and medical information in what she describes as a "macabre comedy of monstrous femininity, of revenge, desire and violence". The original was created in Adelaide, Australia on CD-ROM in 1995.

Digital preservation

Digital art has been in the too-hard baskets of cultural heritage institutions for years, along with video games, computer aided design files, databases and other programs requiring outdated software to run. Keeping up with the digital preservation of documents, photographs and audio files is already a challenge. Adding interactive legacy born-digital material can make a collection policy-maker's head spin. How to access it, let alone value it, determine copyright on it, reproduce it?

Well over 10 years ago, Klaus Rechert and researchers at the University of Freiburg broke new ground with an open-source platform for software emulation. In New York, Rhizome used it successfully to reproduce decades-old digital artwork for public access. Funding from the Sloan and Mellon Foundations saw the platform further developed at Yale University, and what we now know as EAASI (Emulation as a Service Infrastructure) is managed by the Software Preservation Network (SPN).

Nostalgia

In Australia, home of *Cyberflesh Girlmonster*, the platform was taken up by Professor Melanie Swalwell and colleagues with the *Play It Again* project, emulating Australian and New Zealand video games from the 1980s and 90s. This was exciting work, not only for the nostalgia trip but for the research value. "Games have led the charge, definitely", she says. "A lot of the emulators have come from the games community. If you can emulate a game, then you've learnt an awful lot about how to emulate other things." In the 1990s especially, "people were pimping their machines to get them to run just-so and remaking those configured environments can be difficult".

Project

On the strength of that work, Swalwell assembled 40 partner institutions to participate in the AusEAASI project, now in its third year. "We're treating infrastructure as technology and people. It's not just about training, it's actually about building community. People who are trying to emulate software-dependent collections in their organisation can feel very isolated, they often don't have all the answers and that can very quickly become

dispiriting. You need to be able to turn to a group of people who are also working on this to share tips and tricks, to discover workarounds, to share your successes and have them appreciated."

A networked open-source emulation platform is a great example of the kind of international cooperation and generosity that we need to solve complex, shared problems. So, what happens when global politics intervene?

"I think we've got an important role at the moment – to lead internationally in Australia – because we don't know what's going to happen in the US", says Swalwell, noting that the two primary sources of funding for digital preservation research there (NEH, IMLS) have just been culled and digital preservation projects cancelled. "Australia is an ideal test bed. We've got EAASI up and running, we've got clear legal exceptions in the Copyright Act that make it possible to do what we're doing. Bigger countries will be able to bring more grunt but it's harder to get things off the ground. Australia is small enough that you can talk to all the major libraries."

Swalwell's next step is to work with partners to get more born digital cultural heritage into our national collections.

"I think there's a lot of important content out there in the community, significant born digital heritage that has not been acquired into collections and it is collection worthy. The reason that work has not been done is because cultural institutions didn't think they could. Now they realise they can take content, emulate it and make it accessible, the attitude has changed to taking those important collections when they're offered. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

More info at
softwarepreservationnetwork.org or visit project partner acmi.net.au to interact with playable artworks. **IP**