

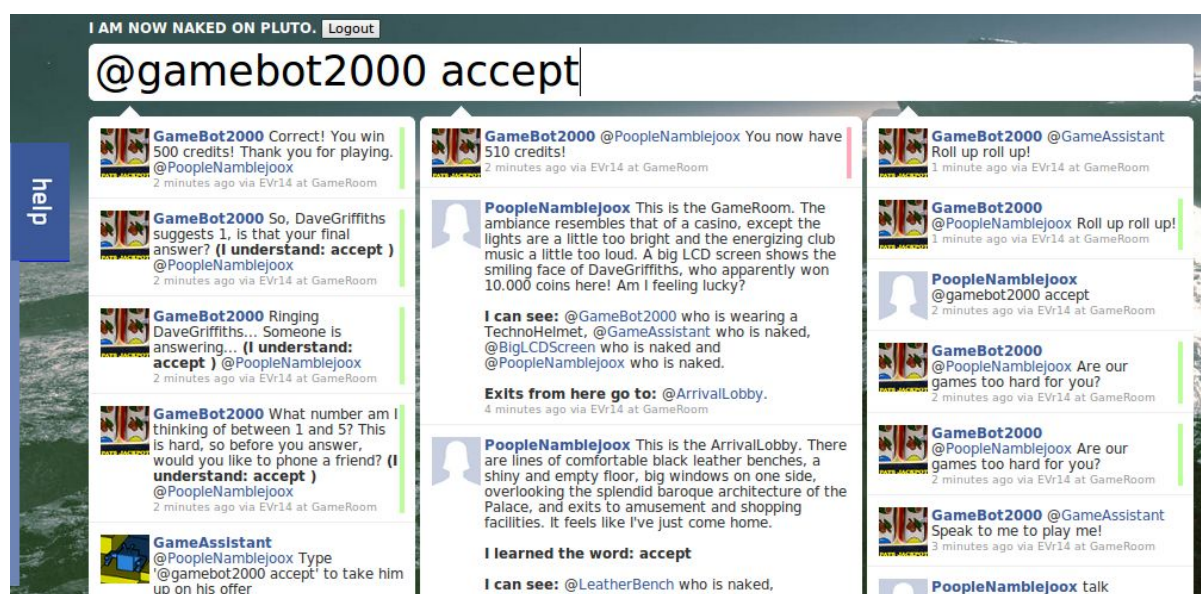
Summary workshop Documenting Digital Art: Documenting *Naked on Pluto*, 30.06.2020

Summary by Mila van der Weide

Documenting Digital Art: “Experimental Publishing as a Strategy for Preserving Research-based Art: Documenting *Naked on Pluto* on Monoskop wiki” by Julie Boschat Thorez (independent researcher), Dušan Barok (doctoral candidate at the Media Studies dept. University of Amsterdam, editor of Monoskop) and Aymeric Mansoux (artist). Moderated by Annet Dekker (Curator & Researcher, Assistant Professor of Media Studies University of Amsterdam).

In June 2020, LIMA continued its Conversation on Preservation programme online, recognizing the need for connections and exchanges. Focus is on documentation. Documentation — a work’s physical remnant or trace — is created and used in different ways, depending on its use, perspective and timing. In performance and digital art, documentation has become the focus of conservation and presentation strategies. What can be learned from other practices within and outside of the scope of the museum? This series of workshops is part of the collaborative project [Documenting Digital Art](#), initiated and coordinated by the University of Exeter.

In preparation of the workshop, participants were asked to read and watch the [case study report](#) and a [video](#) about the work by the artists.



Intro

Naked on Pluto (2010-2015, NoP hereafter) is a rich and complex research-based and activist artwork, comprising a variety of components and practices. The work is generally known as a Facebook-game, however, the work is more than just the game. Essays, blogs, interviews, workshops, installation presentations and more, these elements all form equally crucial parts to the artwork and their importance should be emphasized.

Described on Monoskop as follows:

“*Naked on Pluto* proposed a fun yet disturbing online game world that parodied the

insidiously invasive traits of much social media. The city of “Elastic Versailles” was animated by the quirky combinatorial logics of a community of AI bots that gleaned the Facebook data of participants in the game. Disconcertingly familiar moments and traces from one’s own and associated profiles were mixed indiscriminately in a brash landscape. Players could try and override the game’s access control and team up to crash and escape the system.

Naked on Pluto caricatured the proliferation of virtual agents harvesting personal data and insidiously reframing online social environments and profiles. The work highlights the euphemisms of social networks: friends as quantifiable assets and carefully crafted personas imparting a sense of “intimacy”, and disingenuous publication of “private” data as self-advertising.”¹

The context of NoP’s creation coincides with a time in which game apps such as *Mafia Wars* or *Funville* were thriving over Facebook. These were games for which users receive notifications and invitations, and people would click and accept terms of use very quickly to access the game, usually not reading the little lines that stated what they were providing the game. Particularly notable about these games is how they paved the way for the Cambridge Analytica scandal, as the data for Cambridge Analytica was actually obtained this way through authorizations, for applications to access different information on user profiles using the Facebook API for the game developments.

Currently, the game doesn’t function anymore, as it relied on a graph API from Facebook which was launched in 2010 and depreciated in 2014. Without the API functioning, the only option to make the work function again would have been to simulate the friends and the items in the work. This would not fit with the work’s purpose, which was to reimplement some items specific to one’s own experience or to one’s own account and friendships on Facebook. All in all, once the API was depreciated, the access to friends was not possible anymore, so simulating the API wasn’t really an option because the work wouldn’t be the same and its purpose wouldn’t be there anymore. That the game is not functioning anymore can be considered a positive outcome, as the game also served as an alert on the loophole of the API and privacy intrusion.

The artists together with researchers explored how to map the work and document NoP and how to keep the work alive. The research considered existing frameworks and approaches for documenting installation art, some of which were considered suitable as a starting point and to build on further. For NoP, structuring information according to existing documentation templates at times raised more questions than answers. Basic metadata such as ‘artist’ or ‘year’ proved to be already problematic.

Some approaches were very useful, but seemed to focus too much on one aspect of an artwork, which doesn’t fit with NoP’s versatile nature. Examples mentioned are LIMA’s Digital Canon (software-based), SFMoma’s MediaWiki (installation-based), Rhizome’s Net Art Anthology (net-art based, described as a ‘narrative approach that combines preservation and presentation of works while translating the works to a general audience’). The design of these platforms is crucial for structuring the presented information.

What should we remember about the work? What about the work should we carry into

¹ https://monoskop.org/Naked_on_Pluto

the future through documentation?

Even when the game was no longer operating, its remains are still online in the Git repository, as an 'open source relic'. The artists could continue the work in the form of workshops, essays, statements, interviews, research process etc. In the realm of current debate on privacy and social media, the 'core' of NoP is still relevant: trying to break down all the myths of what it is to have some sort of communication with your friends on a platform that is only derivant of surveillance capitalism, through a practical approach to programming.

What kind of documentation do we need now and in the future to understand the work, how the work functions or functioned?

The work can be furthermore seen in the context of artistic research.² The preservation of such works, that are based on artistic research, is still in its infancy. However, especially since the 1990's, artistic research has grown to be a major approach for artists working today. Presenting a discursive work to the public and proliferating its key aspects can be done through publishing (SFMoma MediaWiki) outside of a museum context (Digital Canon, Net Art Anthology) and through an accessible narrative (Net Art Anthology), thereby using the existing documentation templates and forms.

What is missing in our documentation?

The recently launched Monoskop Wiki for NoP³, consists of four layers of content:

1st page: "Work": introduction of the work

2nd page "Documentation": components and documentation of the work in a structured way

3rd page "Archive": index (inventory) of the work's archive⁴

4th page "Preservation": explaining/ introducing approach

This is certainly not a definite structure, but it represents key aspects of the work identified together with the artists. It is inspired by documentation approaches by LIMA, [Guggenheim](#), [SFMoma](#) and [Rhizome](#). But it distinguishes itself in rather than aiming for future iterations or activations of the work, it's really designed to amplify its various elements. This amplification is also a function of publishing. We could say that if you consider (digital) publishing as a preservation strategy, its aim is to frame and amplify, and to make current context/discourse for discussion that the artist intended to have by doing the work. So in this sense, this approach could be useful at least as a basis to further talk about preserving artistic research and research based works in general.

How might the use of a collaborative inter institutional platform allow us and others to work with documentation?

Implementing a documentation strategy on an internal wiki, like SFMoma did, opens up the

² Here, the researchers refer to an essay by Hito Steyerl (TITLE?) who describes a historical trajectory of research based art as starting in the 1920s and considers it from the perspective of conflict (social struggles).

³ https://monoskop.org/Naked_on_Pluto/Archive

⁴ Retrieved information is assembled into a page as an inventory, creating a long list of information that as such offered a lot of clarity about the work. It should be noted that this is an inventory to a dispersed archive, as the materials are hosted on numerous websites. So these materials are merely indexed but they can still be accessed at their source. The reasoning behind this choice was that this leaves the materials in their original context. Ideally, source files are collected on a dedicated server to preserve them in case the hosting sites do no longer operate.

possibility for cross departmental collaboration, as well as being a rich publishing platform that allows content (articles) to be easily adapted to suit particular needs of respective artworks.

How can a collaborative inter institutional platform help us and others to have access to this documentation?

The use of Monoskop Wiki as a site for documenting NoP was made based upon the aforementioned experiences and theoretical frameworks. Decided was to start working collaboratively from the traces that the work left behind, and it was relatively easy to assemble an archive of the work as the artists followed open source attitude, in development, and documented in detail the whole process of the development and released this in public domain.

What are the problems in documenting digital art?

In the case of NoP, to a certain extent the work can be framed as a software-based work or net-based work of digital art. But the work is not so much medium centric, as the emphasis of the artists is on research. The work is furthermore not merely conceptual, in the sense that it encompasses statements and declarations that could be re-executed or performed over time, as the concept of the work only forms its starting point. The artwork was deliberately unfolded over time in multiple ways that are as important to the work as the program itself, think of participation in the game etc. Process art was another option, but its focus on materiality is not so much in line with NoP. After realizing that choosing any medium as primary wouldn't do justice to the work, the research lead instead to treating NoP as *discursive* - starting from a 'problem', the work pursues its analysis into context of other practices. This approach doesn't exclude anything (concept, process), but allows for broadening of object boundaries to make it more inclusive. It can be reviewed by others - almost like how scientific research operates. However, instead of looking for solutions, the artists are creating situations in which the problems can be experienced by participants.

How can we improve on common practice?

This is something that really requires effort. Dialogue. A way to extend it further would be to involve people from outside museums. Various institutes are trying to bring discursive works to the public, in different approaches. For example the SFMoma MediaWiki, that shows this can be done through publishing, maybe even outside the museum, such as in the case of Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon. This was our reasoning behind choosing Monoskop wiki as a site for documenting this work. And then there are also various documentation templates used in practice by LIMA, Guggenheim and SFMoma, and there is this narrative approach by Rhizome's Net Art Anthology, to really combine preservation and presentation, while translating the works so to say to a general audience.

Can better documentation inspire museums to collect or acquire more digital art?

Net art is an almost perfect opportunity for museums to think of documentation in an open way. The internet is where these artworks live and are presented. How to bridge these two worlds of presentation and preservation. It also helps the institutions as well as artists themselves. People with expertise contribute to it. Net Art Anthology and Digital Canon might be a new wave of new approaches, at least something to think on and take it further. In that sense, preservation and

preservation are becoming more closely intertwined.

What do we need to know about different iterations this work may have had?

Over time the work has been developed and shown as different expressions such as an online game, a multimedia installation, workshops, lectures, essays, documentation, all of which are considered 'the work'. So the various iterations are each contributions to the same project, in order to understand the work/its context it is important to know what these iterations entail. All in all, we started off with the game and installation exhibition and then focusing more on what was the core intention of the project. The workshop⁵ became a really handy medium in that sense.

What do we need to know about the experience of this work by different audiences?

Not part of current research, but possibly in a next research. Talking to the people who played the game could bring a new element to the process.

How does audience-generated documentation become part of the documentation of the work?

Focus for the current workshop was more on how to map this kind of work, so audience-generated documentation is not something we currently explored. Maybe in the next study we will open it up more to other people and we can discuss more

The program is part of the Documenting Digital Art research project and made possible by the Arts And Humanities Research Council.



⁵ With an application called *FaceSponge*, yet another Facebook application was a livecoding sandbox for Facebook. So you were able to connect through a trick that is completely breaking the rules of Facebook developer policy, and you are able to live-code the manipulation of the user data. By making a very simple JavaScript line, we were able to show workshop participants how to be able to do these sorts of things.