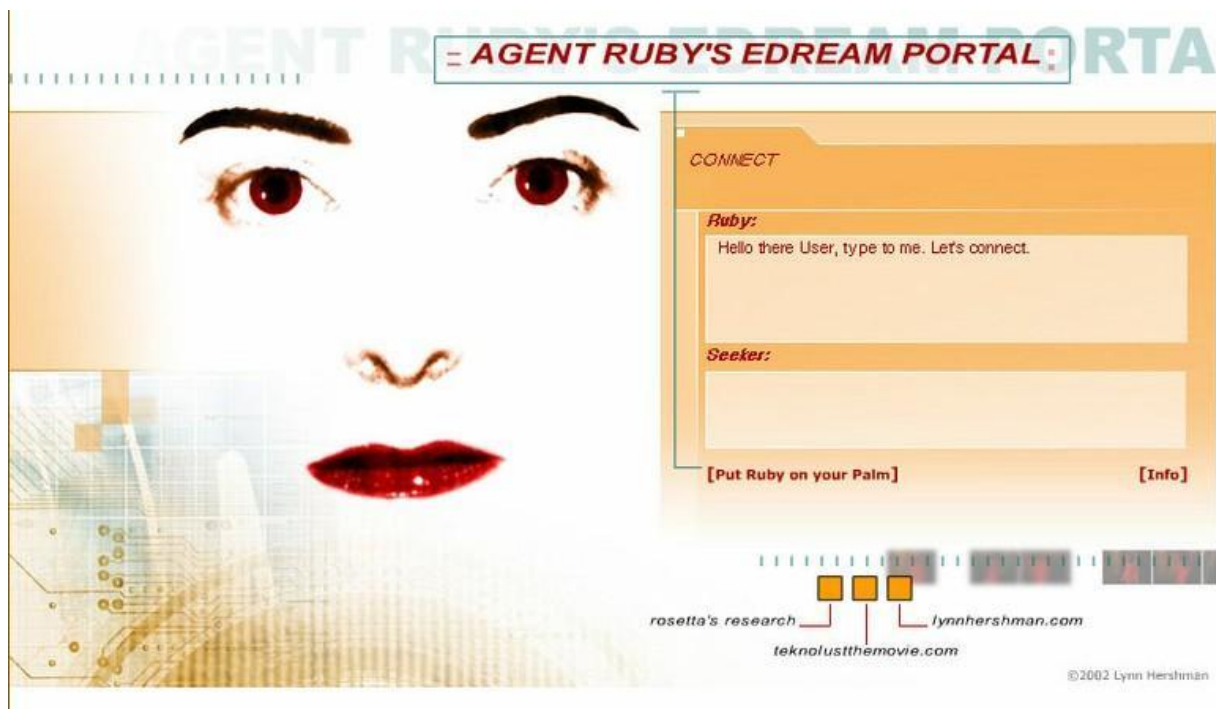


Summary Workshop Documentation Digital Art with SFMOMA
Friday 26 March, 18h00 - 19h30 CET
Transformation Digital Art Symposium
Summary by Joost Dofferhoff

Workshop by Layna White (Director of Collections SFMOMA), Rudolf Frieling (Curator of Media Arts SFMoma), Mark Hellar (Technology Consultant, Hellar Studio) and Grace Weiss (Assistant Registrar, Media Arts - SFMOMA), moderated by Gaby Wijers (Director, LIMA).

In March of 2021 LIMA held its annual symposium Transformation Digital Art. Because of the pandemic circumstances the symposium was held entirely online over the course of a 3-day period. The symposium focussed on the documentation of digital art and consisted of public lectures, in depth workshops and projects discussions and contributions. 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. The series of lectures and workshops is part of the collaborative project Documenting Digital Art, initiated and coordinated by the University of Exeter.



Case Study *Agent Ruby* (1999-2002) by Lynn Hershman Leeson

Agent Ruby is many things, a piece of expanded cinema, an artificially intelligent web based characters and an “e-dream portal”, but what *Agent Ruby* is most of all is a conversation partner. Conceived in the period of 1999 to 2002 *Agent Ruby* is a companion piece to Hershman Leeson’s 2002 feature film *Teknolust* in which the character of Ruby is played by Tilda Swinton. The artwork also reflects Hershman Leeson’s interest in the interaction of fictional characters with real people (SFMOMA, 2013). *Agent Ruby* can, in simple terms, be described as a chatbot that, through its custom-made AI program, chats with its users. Based on the contents of the chat *Agent Ruby* adapts the way it answers and learns from its

conservation partner. Now, almost 20 years old, *Agent Ruby*'s chat logs are what might have saved its identity.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) commissioned *Agent Ruby* for their experimental online exhibition platform *e.space* in 2002. This made *Agent Ruby* among the first web-based works commissioned by SFMOMA. The work was acquired by the museum for its collection making the long-term maintenance, display and preservation part of the museum's duty. This work includes keeping the website available to all and to save all documentation, and create new documentation, about the designs and ever-expanding chat log of the work. The documentation of *Agent Ruby* is not just for future consultation, but has through the years become part of the artwork.

When *Agent Ruby* was chosen for exhibition in 2013 extensive research had to be done in order to display and give context to the work. In the research phase Jill Sterret, then head of collections and conservation at SFMOMA, found 12 years' worth of chat logs from *Agent Ruby* and decided, collectively with the team, that these sources should not be kept hidden in the vaults but put on display next to the artwork itself. This was done through printing out a selection of chat logs and exhibiting selected pages in binders that were spread through the exhibition room. Plans to print out every single chat log from that archive were quickly abandoned since that would require eight truckloads worth of paper in order to materialize every conversation.

Agent Ruby is an example of an artwork that becomes one with its documentation, but also an artwork that is kept alive through its documentation. Next to being a chat bot, *Agent Ruby* also is and has a distinct personality, a personality that can be found within the logs of its conversations. This type of identity can be likened to the works of Annie Abrahams and Martine Neddam. Questions about the nature of preserving identities were asked just as many other questions about the future of the work and the future of its documentation. Below are summaries of questions and answers given during the workshop and its subsequent Q&A round.

What should we remember about the work?

An important aspect of the work that should be remembered is the context *Agent Ruby* holds. This context is not only present as the identity but is also present temporally because to *Agent Ruby*, and its artificial intelligence, it is still around the year 2002 when it was made. This shows, for example, when *Agent Ruby* is asked about current USA politics and answers that George W. Bush is still president. Not only *Agent Ruby*'s technology and aesthetics are reminiscent of the early web, its answers and replies to people's questions are as well.

What should furthermore be remembered about the work is that it is a testament to the wit and humor of *Agent Ruby* and its creator Lynn Hershman Leeson. As Rudolf Frieling mentioned during the workshop; even though *Agent Ruby*'s technology is not as cutting edge anymore as it was when it was first made, the bot's clever and witty answers do still amaze users to this day.

What about the work should we carry into the future through documentation?

Things that should be carried into the future through *Agent Ruby's* documentation are the artworks identity, humor but most of all its interaction with its users and the conversations that it is having. In the eight truckloads of chat logs that are archived by SFMOMA, of which prints are also exhibited in trucks, there are not only interesting examples of interactivity between the virtual and the real, but also very personal conversations between *Agent Ruby* and its users. In the years that *Agent Ruby* was online, which it now is again, many people had repeated conversations with the artwork. For this reason *Agent Ruby's* documentation should not just carry forward its functionality but also its computer-human relations. As Rudolf Frieling said: "*Agent Ruby* in this way highlights and lays bare the conversational strategies that people are familiar with".

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

An important form of documentation that is needed to understand the work is technological documentation. *Agent Ruby* has gone through different versions and iterations and has most recently been completely rebuilt. In the first phase after *Agent Ruby* was acquired for the collection in 2010 the hardware that *Agent Ruby* ran was declared obsolete. At this point a choice was made to run *Agent Ruby* through a virtualization, meaning that the artwork ran on a modern computer that was emulating *Agent Ruby's* original software system. Ten years later, in 2020, *Agent Ruby* running on the Adobe Flash framework which has lost future support from Adobe and Google and has been declared dead. For this reason the team at SFMOMA, and Mark Hellar in particular, have completely rebuilt *Agent Ruby* in HTML5 and Java. The artwork now works on two different websites, one for the interface and one for the artificial intelligence that works behind the interface.

For this the work was decompiled and broken into its original components. This meant cataloguing all assets, such as *Agent Ruby's* mood swing diagram which consists of images of *Agent Ruby's* face that change depending on the tone of the conversation, for future use and in the case that the artwork needs to be rebuilt once more.

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

SFMOMA always works with a team based approach when choosing artworks for exhibiting and preservation. This is what they call 'Team Media' and consists of curators, registrars, technicians and other people, inside or outside the organization, who can be helpful for the project. They meet periodically and go through questions and problem solving that leads to advancement in the project. This helps to get as many viewpoints as possible and helps to create diverse documentation that ends up in one place. In this way all people involved have access to this documentation and many people have knowledge of the project in case it needs to be reworked in the future.

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

The team-based approach and the documentation that is created during the project results in SFMOMA expanding and adding content to their media wiki. This wiki, which can be openly used within the limits of the organization, is meant as a platform for interdisciplinary sharing of documentation. This system, which is quite new, mimics their traditional system which they replace but is easy to build upon if need be. This was the case with *Agent Ruby* as their traditional collection management system was not built for the documentation and registration of media art or other complex art forms. Through the new wiki structure more people have access to the collection system and more people can voice their opinions about the shortcomings of this system.

About giving others access to this media wiki, which for now is only available within the organization, SFMOMA says that this is something they will be working towards in the future. Even though the system is built with an Open Source mindset, the wiki structure is not yet open to anyone. Only on certain projects external collaborators have been given limited access.

What are the problems in documenting digital art?

One of the problems of documenting digital art in the case of *Agent Ruby* is that the artwork is a living record. Since the artwork is, and has been, constantly on display on the web the documentation of the artwork keeps building. Even though the documentation that it creates is not difficult to archive, because it is web-based it will always be prone to obsolescence. The team-based approach, again, helps here because the more people know about the documentation of the work, the more attention it will keep getting in the future.

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

Because of the achievement of bringing *Agent Ruby* back online and giving it the amount of attention and care that this artwork deserves and requires, SFMoma's work on *Agent Ruby* can be considered a success story. And success stories like this can inspire other museums to take up more digital art. Because acquiring digital art, and especially the complexities it brings with it, can seem a daunting task, success stories can help to show that there are possibilities with amazing outcomes.

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

Important to know about *Agent Ruby* is that its technological background also shows a history of the web. From moving from Flash to Java and HTML its history shows the changes that the World Wide Web has gone through in its lifetime. *Agent Ruby* is not only an artwork, it is an artifact of its time, and will continue to be that with every iteration and version it goes through.

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

Audience-generated documentation is the reason why *Agent Ruby* works. From the conversations that people have with *Agent Ruby*, the artwork gets better and better because it uses these conversations, which by this point can be considered documentation, to build its answers. Besides this these conversations also became a part of the exhibited work, in paper binders, because they can be used as examples of the work in action. Not only do they show *Agent Ruby's* answers, it also shows ways in which people interact with virtual identities, something which is not often put on display.

Bibliography

<https://www.sfmoma.org/press/release/lynn-hershman-leeson-the-agent-ruby-files/>