

The Digital Dark Ages?

Ever go looking for the electronic version of that document you stored on an eight inch floppy disk written in WordPerfect 2.0? If you did, then you are entering the digital dark age. While paper has been around since the year 105, most digital media is at best decades old. Older analog electronic data such as wire recordings, records, Dictaphone belts, 8-track tapes, and reel to reel tape, even when preserved under ideal conditions, often are unplayable because the hardware to read them no longer is working. I know of one collector of Western movies, that converted his entire collection of VHS tapes to DVDs. When I suggested to him that his collection of “gold label” DVDs might not be playable in 25 or so years, he was not happy. We live in a society that believes that the newest technology will always be available in the future. Music on compact disks, a relatively recently innovation, is now moving up into the cloud computing arena. I am writing this editorial using Word 2002, on an XP machine with 512MB of system memory. In short a machine that most people would have long since discarded. At some point I’ll probably buy a wireless keyboard for my iPad, but right now that’s just more money to spend and something else to lug around. My institution recently tossed out their entire print run of *L’Annee Philologique*, the primary reference tool in the classics. The main reason given for this decision was that we needed the stack space and online access provided a more “universal platform” for faculty, on campus students, and distance education students. Lev Grossman, in the September 4th, 2011 *New York Times Book Review*, points out the many virtues of the codex book, primarily the ability to “jump to any point in a text instantly.” This ability is not present in historical scrolls, DVD movies, music or video games. Of course, with a “tablet” e-book reader you can “scroll” around, an interesting play on older writing technologies. Digital media are undergoing a process similar to what the codex book did back in the fifteenth century. Not every item produced is destined to be saved. Some will be placed on the *Index* (until Wikileaks frees them), others will end up in the digital equivalent of the medieval bonfire, the delete key. Will the electronic version of *L’Annee Philologique* be available to researchers in fifty years? That depends on how successful we are at the curation of what society thinks is important. In fifty years will we have electricity to read all of these digital files? What about batteries for portable devices? Some of us are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the United States Civil War. I wonder what would happen if you gave my iPad to a civil war soldier (you get to pick which side)? He or she would probably think it made a neat thing to sit on. Even if we have in the future perfectly stable low-cost unlimited storage capacity, would we want to store everything? I suspect not, even important legal documents like tax returns have limited retention periods. One area where people are making a difference in curation, is video games, where *ad hoc* groups of users are getting together to convert games to newer formats. There is a small, but loyal group of Word Perfect users for Mac, who still peck away on their ancient software. Do we want *Pac-Man* and *Super Mario Brothers* or *L’Annee Philologique* preserved for the future? If we want the latter, we best be getting about our business as curators of recorded knowledge (librarians).

Letters to the editor should be addressed to the editor and sent to Joyner Library, East Fifth Street, Greenville, NC 27858, or by electronic mail (scottr@ecu.edu). We reserve the right to edit all submissions. If you are interested in writing for *North Carolina Libraries* or would like consideration for news and product information, please send brief information to the editor at the above address.

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