

October 29, 2010

Richard Dupuis
Clerk of the Committee
Standing Committee on Heritage
Committees Directorate
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street
House of Commons
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6

DupuiR@parl.gc.ca
chpc@parl.gc.ca

Submission to the Standing Committee on Heritage

Re: Study: Emerging and Digital Media: Opportunities and Challenges

The Independent Media Arts Alliance is a non-profit national arts service organization that promotes and advances the interests of a vibrant media arts community. Representing over 80 independent film, video, and new media production, distribution, and exhibition organizations in all parts of Canada, the IMAA serves over 12,000 independent media artists and cultural workers.

We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to bring the views and concerns of our members to the Committee's attention in conjunction with this important Study.

We assert that independent artistic expression makes a crucial contribution to the diversity of Canadian voices and to the future evolution of Canadian digital content. We are writing to bring to your attention an aspect of the transition to a digital media environment that is not fully recognized as an integral Heritage issue.

Digital media culture has its own history and heritage that needs to be recognized

The documentation, preservation and continued accessibility of Canadian digital culture are not only pressing concerns today, but will become increasingly urgent as time passes. This requires a new, concerted national approach to Digital Heritage to enable strategic actions to be taken to ensure continued access to the emerging digital culture that Canadians are creating.

A culture of digital media cannot be based solely on innovation in a vacuum – Canadians need to be able to access, refer to, understand and learn from the media and art that have been produced in the past and that are being produced today. There is an urgent requirement for a national digital heritage strategy for the documentation, preservation and long-term accessibility of the culture Canadians are creating in media and digital forms.

We propose the question of heritage is central to the ability of culture of understand itself. Societies that cannot preserve their culture in the present, and transmit it into the future have no way to communicate with generations to come. In a context of changing technology, cultural heritage includes both the products of digital media and the other media such as film and video that have laid the groundwork for them.

As culture is transforming itself through technology, we propose that at least some of this transformation should be documented and preserved – and much more than is being done currently. Digital media already has a history and it is important that this period receive attention in preservation – or we will have no memories of this time. In a universe of media and images, authentic documents of the cultural diversity of Canada’s media and digital past and present have an immeasurable value for the future.

This principle is well recognized in other areas of culture (for example, historic preservation of buildings). Preservation has created important by-products in both cultural and economic domains. In the mid-twentieth-century, the heyday of demolition of historic buildings, it was little realized that the urban heritage districts that were able to be preserved would turn out today to be engines of economic growth, regional branding and tourism development that shape cities as attractors of investment and innovation.

It will be a tragic, and still avoidable, mistake for the efforts of Canadian creators to simply vanish due to technological compatibility, decay and obsolescence.

Obviously not everything can be preserved. This would not be desirable even if it were possible. Some products of culture are ephemeral. But we cannot take the attitude that all Canadian media art production of the last 5 decades - the collective expression of Canadians as creators - and its current digital development should automatically be consigned to oblivion simply due to a lack of awareness.

It is crucial to understand that a vast part of Canada’s emerging media arts and digital heritage is not all concentrated in large national institutions (such as, for example, the National Film Board, Library and Archives Canada or the National Gallery of Canada) but exists all across the country in small museums, arts galleries, film and video production cooperatives, independent distributors, collectives and other community organizations. Many of these organizations are small and do not have the capacity to initiate, much less carry out, preservation projects. These organizations, including the few that have been able to develop their own media preservation infrastructure, need support to expand the capacity of the cultural sector to creatively address the question of preservation and future access of the analog and digital content that Canadians have created.

How can government policies help?

We note that the Canadian Culture On-Line program of the Department of Canadian Heritage, which expired in 2008-9, previously provided an annual investment to improve the accessibility of Canadian culture to on-line audiences, and assisted many organizations in developing initiatives to address digital and media arts preservation and migration initiatives.

We propose that a nationally accessible program of support for digital media heritage initiatives be established, perhaps through the Department of Canadian Heritage.

A clear national Digital Heritage strategy should be articulated and supported to help organizations holding digital culture assets at the local level. The successful and respected Canadian Cultural Spaces Fund helps arts and cultural institutions in Canadian communities build and improve physical facilities to more effectively deliver their programming and projects. A similarly effective Digital Heritage strategy and program would give organizations and communities across the country access to the capacity to meaningfully address their heritage and conservation challenges for the preservation and future accessibility of their analog and digital media.

Most importantly, such a program would not simply provide passive preservation, but make the appropriate, and on-going on-line accessibility of the preserved content a central focus.

We recommend that government establish a national Digital Heritage initiative for preserving Canada's media arts and digital culture and making it accessible into the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this information and our recommendation.

If you have any questions or would like any additional information, please contact the Independent Media Arts Alliance at:

Tel. 514) 522-8240

Email: dir@imaa.ca

Contact: Jennifer Dorner, National Director