Towards an oral history of new media art
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INTRODUCTION

New media art presents a challenge to existing documentary and archival practices. In this paper, I argue that documenting audience experience is both one of the greatest challenges and one of the most promising new directions in this field. With its emphasis on interaction, systems and generative processes, experience is frequently the content, location and driving force of new media art. Critical accounts of new media artworks emphasise the role of the participants, but descriptions of their experiences in their own words rarely appear in the documentary record. The field of oral history provides a valuable approach to addressing this gap. It offers arguments for the historical legitimacy and significance of first-hand accounts of actual experiences as well as a wealth of good practice in creating and managing such resources. The idea of an oral history of new media presented in this paper provides a framework for tackling the issues surrounding the documentation of audience experience. It also provides a concrete vision of the potential of this line of work.

The work reported in this paper was conducted primarily during a research residency at the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology in 2007. The ideas were developed through a practical attempt to document the audience experience of the artwork *The Giver of Names*, by David Rokeby, as it appeared at the exhibition *e-art: New Technologies and Contemporary Art* at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 2007. This case study was conducted in collaboration with Caitlin Jones, whose work is based on the tools and techniques of the Variable Media Network[1]. Together we created a documentary collection for *The Giver of Names* that draws together the conceptual, technical and experiential aspects of the work. This collection is available online [http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2121], and the reader can reference the experiential material presented on this site as an accompaniment to this paper.

A future-use scenario for an oral history of new media art

Let us begin with the story of an experience. Imagine this…

> *It is the year 2032. You are a 25-year-old artist living in London and writing a doctoral thesis on the explosion of interactive installation art at the turn of the century. The Tate Modern has a permanent exhibition devoted to computer-based interactive art from the 1970s to the present day. The works from the 1990s and 2000s are particularly interesting to you as technological relics representing a kind of human-computer interaction that, only 25 years later, seems archaic. You are curious to know how different these works may have seemed to your parents' and grandparents' generations. Books on art history and*

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[1] See Jones, C. (2008) Surveying the State of the Art (of Documentation), The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology [http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2125]".
For more information on the approach of the Variable Media Network, see Depocas et al (2003).

criticism describe the important impact a number of these works had on the development of artistic practice, and some propose theories about how these works related to people's everyday life in the 1990s and 2000s. But the question remains: how did audiences at the time experience these works?

You go online to search the oral history of new media art. You begin your search with David Rokeby's The Giver of Names *(1991-), a work that, despite its antiquated rendition of artificial intelligence, seems poignant given the current ethical debates surrounding domestic and industrial robots. There are 34 records for* The Giver of Names *associated with two different exhibitions of the work— one at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 2007 and the other at Tate Modern in London in 2013. The records include interviews with audience members and museum invigilators from both exhibitions as well as one with David Rokeby himself. You search the records using the catalogue system to find interviews with audience members aged 50 and over from both exhibitions. There are 11 records matching the criteria, including audio and video files, some with accompanying transcriptions. You scan the abstract of each record and pull out three records that describe anxious or uncomfortable encounters, and four records describing fascination or pleasure. You listen to short extracts from each of these interviews and realise that there is a great variety of different responses by these older participants to the work, but that very few of them actually interacted with it—preferring to look at the installation or observe others interacting. You download all 11 records as well as accompanying photographic and video documentation that shows the configuration of the work in the two different spaces, and meanwhile you search for records of older people participating in other interactive works from the year 2007. You find records for several artworks—including* Subtitled Public (2005) *by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, and* Day of the Figurines (2006) *by Blast Theory—artworks you have read much about but never experienced. As you explore the experience of older participants who witnessed these works in 2007, you realise that their relationship to interactive art was complex. They were at once fascinated by the novelty and variety of the new forms and confused by how to read the cues to interaction. Most preferred to watch others interact and draw their conclusions from what they saw. You wonder to yourself: Do the over 50s still prefer watching interactive art to participating in it? Is this a feature of older people's behaviour in general, or was that just the behaviour of a generation who did not grow up with digital technology? You go back to the oral history database and search for records of older people using artworks made in the last two years. What will you find?*

This story provides a future-use scenario[2] for an oral history of media art that shows how such a resource would allow future generations of researchers access to primary experiential material. Many other scenarios can be imagined from the perspective of curators, archivists and conservators working not only in the future but also throughout the world today. A great deal of our knowledge of global contemporary art practice is based on documentation rather than first-hand experience of artworks.

Such scenarios allow us not only to describe concrete examples of the usefulness of an oral history of new media art (the "Why"), but also to begin to imagine the many aspects

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[2] Future-use scenarios are tools used in the field of Human-Centred Design to ground the design of a new product in the real-life experience of users, see Bodker (2000).

that may need to be included in such a resource to make it useful (the "How"). Examples include the provision for researchers from different places and moments in time to upload records to a common repository; the need for some type of uniform structure and catalogue that can facilitate searching; and the need for contextual information, such as photographs or details about the conditions of the production of particular interviews, to ensure that experiential records remain intelligible. The whys and hows of creating an oral history of new media are addressed in more detail in the paper that follows.

WHY CREATE AN ORAL HISTORY OF NEW MEDIA ART?

Identifying the experience gap in the history of new media art

> "[T]he work of art is often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience. Since the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience, the result is not favorable to understanding." (*John Dewey,* Art as Experience, *1959*)

> "I'm an interactive artist: I construct experiences" (*David Rokeby,* The Construction of Experience: Interface as Content, *1998*)

In the opening paragraph of John Dewey's *Art as Experience,* first published in 1934, Dewey argues that research in art mistakes its own object by focusing on objects rather than experience. He describes the dual existence of art as growing from the experience of the artist and manifested in the audience's experience of the work. Dewey's words foreshadow a powerful movement within contemporary culture away from a focus on objects and towards an emphasis on experience.

This emphasis finds particular expression in new media art. David Rokeby acknowledges, in his influential essay *The Construction of Experience: Interface as Content* (1998), that as an artist working with computers his role is not to create objects but rather to create experiences. As computer-based systems, new media artworks have a liminal existence on the threshold between material and immaterial things; they are things in potential. New media artworks cannot be considered or treated simply as objects. Their full existence occurs when they are used; in other words, they exist, in a very literal way, "in experience."

This liminal existence is sometimes seen as a barrier or a problem for documentation, raising the question of how, or even whether, we should preserve fleeting and immaterial art forms. Others argue that the ephemeral nature of new media art is a valuable opportunity for developing new ways of documenting art. Alain Depocas has pointed out that in our approach to documentation, we must accept the "transitory and transitional state" of new media art; "denying this state [he writes] would mean renouncing the fundamental nature of such artwork. Yet grasping all the consequences of this transitoriness requires a profound paradigm shift" (Depocas 2002).

Already there have been significant developments in methodologies for documenting ephemeral works from an archival and preservation perspective. The Variable Media Network, for example, has developed an approach that seeks to identify the essential qualities of an artwork through the detailed questioning of the artist and others involved in the creation of the work (Depocas et al 2003). The Capturing Unstable Media project

has developed a formal conceptual model for describing and preserving aspects of electronic artworks that is flexible enough to accommodate the iterative and processual nature of media arts projects (Fromme and Fauconnier 2005).

Both the Variable Media Network and the Capturing Unstable Media initiative agree that audience experience is important, and while both make space in their structures for experiential material, neither has developed methods for dealing with this aspect of documentation. Fromme and Fauconnier conclude their recommendations for capturing unstable media in this way:

> *"Finally, the specific, subjective characteristics and quality of a user's interaction with an electronic art piece cannot be captured through formal modeling; specific documentation of a user's experience is needed here… For a good understanding of user interaction, it is often necessary to create audiovisual reports…of someone interacting with a piece. Interviews with users may also prove very useful; in general, recordings and registrations of user testing activities are rare, but interesting documentation materials."* (Fromme and Fauconnier 2005).

As Fromme and Fauconnier acknowledge here, audience experience continues to be a gap in the documentary record, despite the leaps forward made in documenting ephemeral art. Recording the material aspects of a work, such as its technical specifications and spatial configuration, are essential, but alone these will not convey how the work exists in experience. We know, from the extensive empirical research on "user" experience that has been conducted in Human-Computer Interaction and Interaction Design (e.g. Dourish 2001, Suchman 1987) and from the reflective accounts of artists such as David Rokeby (1998), that the maker's perspective of the experience of a work frequently offers an ideal account that can be very different from the audience's lived experience. By contrast, all experiential descriptions from individual audience members will offer partial accounts of a work, presenting some aspects that the artist would hope to see and also inevitably other aspects that the artist may not have imagined. These partial accounts capture the vibrant, living, generative existence of the work. The content of such accounts goes beyond an itemised recording of the historical, social or contextual factors surrounding it to show how all of these factors are synthesised within a unique, active experience. Such accounts, as Fromme and Fauconnier suggest, are always specific, and resist formal modelling. They must be gathered for each artwork and require painstaking audiovisual documentation techniques. To create such documentation, the researcher must engage in a dialogue with the audience.

Oral histories: valuing experience, listening to voices

> *"Many limit the value of oral history and interviewing to anecdotes, the illustrative incident, the ambience of the time, to clues on where to search further; or a mere feel for the facts… I think it helps get the event itself… Not colour, or peripheral facts, or a feel for the situation, but the guts of the event, the heart of it."* (Walter Lord, Oral History Review, 1968[3]).

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[3] Quoted in Reimer (1984)

I originally looked to the field of oral history to find precedents, models and guides to good practice in recording, cataloguing and preserving accounts of individual experiences. But I also began to see the great relevance of the underlying aims of oral history to my project; to redress an historical imbalance in the kinds of information that are recorded, valued, and made available to people in the future. Reimer (1984) describes oral history as the use of the actual words and voices of those who lived and witnessed history to document people and subjects previously absent from the historical record. Such gaps appear, he argues, when "groups in society [have] neither the means nor occasion to represent themselves by written records and hence our knowledge of them [comes] through impersonal statistics or the observations of detached and unsympathetic elite" (Reimer 1984). The audience of new media art is such a group. Despite the increase in qualitative and formative research with audiences in museums, in-depth individual interviews with audience members rarely form part of the historical record.[4] I argued in the previous section that there is a gap around lived experience in the documentation of artworks, but there is also, more specifically, a gap around the experience of the "non-professional" audience of the work. The audience is a kind of silent majority in the historical records of new media art—much talked about but rarely heard from.

As curators, conservators, artists and arts administrators, we have the power and the responsibility to select or produce the institutional archival records about the artwork of today. An oral history of media art would address the gap in experiential documentation by recording many different perspectives on a work, including the views of the artist, curator, technician etc. But its particular contribution would be to emphasise the experience of the *general* audience; creating a rich and varied portrait of how the artworks existed, in the words of Dewey, "in experience." Such an emphasis would necessarily widen our understanding of the relationship of new media art to its social and cultural context.

It is crucial, if somewhat obvious, to emphasise that oral history is part of a spoken rather than written tradition. Its materials are produced from a conversation between archivist/researcher and subject (which implies a significant ethical dimension as we shall see in the section on "How"). As described in the quote from Walter Lord, many historians immediately consign documents produced in the oral register to the periphery. Such accounts are necessarily less polished and more partial than written records and therefore seem to have less authority in the text-based world of academic research. Countering this position, Reimer (1984) points out that oral history was in fact one of the first ways of registering history and was eclipsed when the technology of the written word became our primary mode of recording. However, modern technology, such as the telephone, video and Internet, is bringing orality strongly back into our culture. Mackay (2007) argues that oral history has developed hand in hand with technology. Beginning with the open reel tape recorders of the 1930s and 1940s, developments in recording technology first made the recording of people's verbal descriptions possible. The 1960s and 1970s represented a boom in oral history recordings due to the introduction of small portable tape recorders. The digital technology of the 1990s opened new options for preserving and presenting records, and video offered the possibility of adding visual information.

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[4] For an overview of existing research into audience experience in museum environments, see Muller et al (2006).

The relationship of oral history to technology makes it a particularly interesting form of documentation for new media art, as both the art form and its means of documentation reflect and exploit technological change. Advances in Internet technologies—particularly the ability to easily upload and download video and audio content to Web sites—offer the possibilities of distributed production and widespread dissemination of audiovisual records.

Whereas in the early days of oral history the written transcription of an account was considered the primary document, current practice emphasises the central importance of the audiovisual recording (Mackay 2007). This emphasis recognises that the value and content of an oral account is inextricably bound up with its telling: the time-based unravelling of the story in the voice of the person who tells it. The tone of voice, attitude and emotion of the speaker, the lapses in memory and self-correction are all vital parts of oral records, which situate the account given by the speaker. In their complete form, oral records are clearly partial, subjective and selective; no single oral record claims to hold the whole truth. As Reimer argues, few historical records show the biases of their creators as openly as oral interviews. The challenge, then, in creating an oral history of new media art, is to find a way to present experiential accounts in ways that allow the oral register to be valued, understood and placed centrally in the history of new media art.

HOW TO CREATE AN ORAL HISTORY OF NEW MEDIA ART

The purpose of this section is not to try to provide a "How To" for oral history in general. There are numerous resources addressing good practice in the field, some of which appear in the reference list for those who would like further information of this sort. The aim here is to examine particular issues that relate to documenting the audience's experience of new media artworks, which have arisen through my own practical attempt to document David Rokeby's work *The Giver of Names*. The account concentrates on the creation of records, including the rationale, methods and challenges for recording experiences, and discusses briefly the curation of records, including how to organise them, preserve them and make them available.

Case study: *The Giver of Names (1991-)* by David Rokeby

The following discussion of methods and issues for capturing and curating experiential documentation is based on the case study of the artwork *The Giver of Names (1991-)* by David Rokeby as shown at the exhibition e-a*rt: New Technologies and Contemporary Art* at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, September – December 2007. *The Giver of Names* is an interactive installation first developed in 1991. Since then it has undergone many iterative developments, and Rokeby now considers it to have reached its "sweet spot,"[5] where further major changes are very unlikely.

At this point, the work consists of a pedestal with a small projection screen suspended above it on one side of the room, while on the other side of the room sits a large computer monitor with a camera mounted beneath it pointed directly at the top of the

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[5] Quoted from the interview with David Rokeby conducted by Caitlin Jones and myself as part of the *Giver of Names* documentary collection.
See [http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2125] for the full interview.

pedestal. On the floor between these two modules is a pile of colourful objects, mainly consisting of toys. David Rokeby intends that visitors place one of the objects from the floor onto the plinth. The camera captures an image of the object, which it displays on the projection screen above the plinth, so that the real object and its image are seen next to one another. The screen then shows the way in which the computer breaks down this image into components. From an extensive language database, the computer generates a series of descriptions of the image, which appear on the screen as text and are spoken by the computer. Meanwhile, the monitor shows a visual representation of the way in which the computer searches the database and constructs the description of the image.

Figure 1. *The Giver of Names (1991-)*, by David Rokeby at the exhibition *e-art: New Technologies and Contemporary Art* at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2007

I worked with Caitlin Jones to create a documentary collection for *The Giver of Names*. Our collection includes an interview with David Rokeby, interviews with audience participants and museum attendants, as well as detailed technical documentation of the work, photographs and bibliographic references. Our approach was to emphasise the powerful dialogue between the "ideal" notion and the "real" existence of the artwork, which allowed us to articulate the relationship of experiential material to the broader archival context (Jones and Muller 2008).

During the course of the exhibition, I interviewed audience members of all ages and backgrounds who represented a variety of professions and many levels of experience with art and technology. Short extracts of some of the interview transcripts are included below to illustrate the nature of the material gleaned using different recording methods. The full set of interviews as well as contextual information on the artwork and exhibition can be accessed online:
[http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2121] .

The role of the researcher

Created documentation is controversial in some quarters of the archivist community, where its appropriateness, validity and reliability are questioned. Created materials are considered by some to have diminished status among other forms of historical record,

because they necessarily reflect the personal viewpoints of both the archivist and the subject (see Ellis 1993 for a discussion of the controversy surrounding created documentation). It is not the place here to enter too deeply into this debate, as this paper clearly contributes to an established field of practice where the usefulness of creating documentation is accepted. However, it is helpful to emphasise two strategies that Ellis proposes to counter these objections. The first is to make created materials available in conjunction with a variety of other kinds of materials wherever possible. This allows for a form of triangulation in which different types of material can validate and problematise one another. The second is to emphasise the unique value of the proactive, self conscious way in which created documentation is produced. Created documentation implies a proactive role for the archivist/researcher as initiator or creator—and not merely as custodian. Materials are produced self-consciously for an array of future purposes and with an awareness of current practice. Oral history, then, is produced by concerned individuals who see a gap in the historical record and aim to fill it. The rigour of this practice is generated through an emphasis on clarity of motives and methods and a reflexive and critical appraisal of one's own role in the process. These two strategies will have an important bearing on the following section, which discusses how to create an oral history of new media art.

Capturing experience

There are already many oral history projects that relate to art, but these focus mainly on the lives and accounts of important or powerful figures in art history. The Archives of American Art Oral History Program, for example, which began in 1958, documents the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers and critics. I have not found any archives that feature interviews with non-professional audience members. Such interviews present particular challenges of procedure, ethics and technique. For example, the subjects are unknown to the interviewer in advance and have greatly varying levels of experience with art, to which the interviewer must be able to adapt.

Capturing the experience of the audience is difficult and controversial. There are various objections even to the notion that it can be done, such as the inseparability of "an" experience, from an individual's past or future memories, or the ineffability of experience in language. This is not the place to take on the varied objections in detail, but it is important here to acknowledge that such objections exist and to counter them with two crucial points. Firstly, having identified the central importance of experience in understanding new media art and the existing gap in the documentary record, the worst thing we can do is to ignore the problem. While attempts to capture experience may provoke objections, it is necessary to make the attempt and open up the discussion. Secondly, alongside oral history, there are many other disciplines and fields of research, such as anthropology, sociology and psychology, which offer useful methods and practices for recording experience.

Within these many disciplines are numerous different ways in which accounts of experience may be gathered, and an oral history of new media art would need to be as flexible as possible in terms of the kinds of information it could incorporate. For example, a researcher may choose to conduct a retrospective or longitudinal approach in which someone's account of their experience of an artwork is recorded several years after it has occurred or perhaps on several different occasions over a period of time.

Following Ellis's (1993) insistence on the accountability of the researcher, I argue that it is fundamental for each researcher to identify a definition of experience that they are comfortable with and to rigorously and reflexively develop recording methods that capture their notion of experience as fully as possible. My own research has been influenced by phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and pragmatist John Dewey. As such, my notion of experience emphasises its embodied and situated nature and the entwining of its pre-reflective and reflective aspects. I select and develop methods that capture the immediate impressions of visitors and record in as much detail as possible the way in which each particular experience of an artwork unfolds in place and time.[6] A selection of these methods is described below to illustrate some of the pros and cons of different techniques and to open up some of the theoretical and practical considerations that arise when such work is undertaken.

Methods for creating experiential records

During my residency at the Daniel Langlois Foundation, I developed three methods for recording experience based on my previous qualitative research with audiences (Muller et al 2006 and Muller, Turner et al 2006). The video-cued recall interview was adapted from the fields of video-based ethnography and design research (see Costello et al 2004). The semi-structured interview and exit interviews are based on interviewing strategies in the field of qualitative social research (see Kvale 1996 and Richards). The exit interview also borrows from a journalistic style, the limitations of which are described in more detail below, but it is worth noting that the skills and techniques of broadcast journalism and production have much to offer in the creation of an oral history of new media art. To adapt these three methods for the creation of permanent public records rather than for private qualitative research material, I incorporated elements of good practice from oral history interviewing techniques (see Reimer 1984), which focus on the intelligibility of the interview for future listeners rather than just its intelligibility to the researcher.

1) Video-cued recall
With this method, participants (either general audience members or invited participants) are video taped while they experience the artwork. They are then immediately taken to a separate room, where they are shown the video and asked to simultaneously describe their experience in as much detail as possible. The final record is the primary video with the report as a voice over. Through the combination of video and verbal material, this method records individual experiences in detail, particularly revealing how each experience unfolds in time and relating motivations and reactions to movement in the space. The process usually takes approximately 45 minutes, depending on how long the participant spends with the artwork.

Video-cued recall is difficult and time consuming to execute. Because of the time it takes and the need to conduct interviews in a separate room, it is hard although not impossible to attract general visitors to participate in this process. An alternative is to invite participants specifically to come and take part in the research, which will necessarily

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[6] For more background on my methodology for capturing and recording audience experiences, see Muller et al 06 and Muller et al 06b), which explain in more detail the strengths and weaknesses of various methods and the challenges of applying them in artistic contexts.

create a more artificial experience. The pros and cons of "manufacturing experiences" in this way are discussed in the next section. Capturing video-cued recall records is labour intensive and technically challenging; it involves considerable equipment and resources and at least two people (interviewer and camera operator). The records also require some post-production to synch the verbal and visual aspects.

The payoff for all of this hard work is the compelling "self contained" documentation, which tells the story of the participant's experience in great detail. Participants in video-cued recall reports tend to reveal a great deal of detail about the motivations behind their actions. In the eight interviews I gathered for *The Giver of Names*, the participants revealed highly personal thoughts, including the more negative or challenging aspects of the experience. This short extract from the video-cued report by Mary Beth la Violette, for example, shows how the technique reveals her confusion before she is aware of how to interact with the work;

> Mary Beth: I can see how the picture is changing, but I'm not sure if the picture is changing in relation to my positioning—where I'm standing—or [if] the viewer is not a part of this at all. [laughter]
>
> I wondered at this point if the screen behind me with the text was trying to describe what was on this screen here... I wondered about that...
>
> [Lizzie Muller demonstrates changing the objects on the podium and Mary Beth experiments; placing a small plush red mouse on the podium with other soft toys]
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> Mary Beth: … I have a son who's 17 years old who still has all these kinds of kids' toys—toddler toys—and while I was picking through things in the pile I was thinking to myself: "I wonder when Duncan is going to get his act together to have a garage sale so we can get rid of some of this stuff that's in our attic."

Mary Beth's subsequent description of the way the toys remind her of her son demonstrates the particularly intimate and engaging material that can be captured through video-cued recall. Several of the video-cued recall reports revealed the participant's intense personal and emotional reactions to the objects in *The Giver of Names*—a detail that was not so evident in the records gained from other methods of capture.

2) Semi-structured interviews
Semi-structured interviews take place in the installation space and allow a social and naturalistic form of data gathering with fairly low barriers to participation. The method is based on dialogue and allows the interviewer to probe specific areas of interest while at the same time facilitating a conversation through which new and unexpected aspects of the experience can emerge. It has the double benefit of supporting and enriching the participant's experience by answering their questions about the artwork. The loose structure provides a degree of consistency between participants' descriptions of their experiences, which is helpful in organising, analysing, and categorising the reports. The structure that I use to guide my interviews begins by focusing on the description of the

participant's perceptual experience and moves through their conceptual reflections to their evaluative feedback.

The final record includes an audio or video file of the interview and ideally a transcript. The process varies in time but is usually less than 20 minutes. This method is technically fairly simple, and it is relatively easy to persuade audience members to participate.

One of the major problems of semi-structured interviews is that a video camera in the installation space can be intimidating for participants. Awareness of the camera can impact the natural course of their experience and deter participants from giving an interview. I had considerably more success using a digital voice recorder, which allowed me to wait unobtrusively in the installation area. I found this way of working very efficient, allowing me to record several interviews in one day. These audio interviews are often candid and intimate, but without a visual dimension they may be difficult for listeners to understand. To be intelligible to future researchers, such records require considerable accompanying visual documentation.

The following extract from an interview with Julie-Ann, a French speaker, gives a flavour of the kind of material gleaned by this method and shows how the interviewer can clarify statements made by the interviewee in order to more clearly understand their experience;

> Julie-Ann: I was trying to see the words. I thought it was like an enigma, to try to find the good object to put there. So I was trying to understand the link between the words and the objects to see if there was an enigma to find …the right answer.

> Lizzie Muller: So you thought the computer was describing an object and you had to find that object in the pile?

> Julie-Ann: Exactly.

This extract also shows how semi-structured interviews can reveal the "misunderstandings" or different understandings that lie behind a participant's actions, providing a richer insight into their experience than observation alone.

3) Exit interview
The exit interview is a version of the semi-structured interview, but it records the participant's experience of the whole exhibition rather than just one artwork; it takes place, as the name implies, as the participant leaves the exhibition. These interviews are necessarily wide ranging and shallow rather than deep and detailed. They focus more on the reflective and evaluative aspects of a participant's experience rather than on the pre-reflective perceptual unfolding of experience and action. The script I developed for this style of interview covers broad areas, such as the participant's motivation for coming to the exhibition, their expectations, the reasons why they liked or disliked certain artworks, and their overall thoughts about museums, art and the themes of the exhibition. As with the semi-structured interviews, the social and opportunistic nature of the method makes it fairly easy to persuade visitors to participate. As I was stationed (with the camera operator) outside the exit of the exhibition, the video camera did not have a negative effect on how the participant's actual experience unfolded. Compared to the video-cued recall and semi-structured interviews, the exit interviews appear general and lacking in

specific detail. However, as an edited compilation, they provide an interesting and diverse overview of people's experience of the exhibition. What they lack in depth and detail they make up for in offering a broad and lively picture of the general response to an exhibition, as this quote from the interview with Lorelei Robins demonstrates:

> Lorelei: I was quite fascinated by [the whole exhibition]… I always feel there's room for me to learn and appreciate a different kind of art... I do believe that we have to explore all areas of human experience, and especially in this world where things go so fast….we have to take time to explore our minds, and our art and our abilities.

Such broad and evaluative reports provide interesting contextual information, revealing a great deal about the general audience's understanding and appreciation of new media art as a new form of practice. Such impressionistic information may prove invaluable to future researchers by offering real-life viewpoints on the position of new media art in the general public consciousness.

Issues and considerations

1) Technical considerations
Creating audiovisual documentation of digital installations is notoriously difficult because of the prevalence of darkness, screens and projections. Often the local conditions of an artwork (e.g. the ambient lighting) will need to be altered in order to create good photographic or video documentation. When documenting audience interactions, this kind of alteration is impossible, as it will affect the participant's experience of the work. This is particularly problematic for video-cued recall, where the quality needs to be good enough to prompt the participant's memory of their experience and produce a watchable documentary record. There is no magic solution to these problems, and my own experience suggests that a combination of the best camera available with maximum manual control (to avoid particular problems like auto-focus), a skilled camera operator, and considerable tweaking during post-production achieves reasonable results.

On the other hand, it is important to remember that in recording audience experience, the verbal report of the participant is the most important information. My technical priority was always to ensure that the sound quality was as good as possible. Fortunately, with good microphones and the availability of portable digital voice recorders, this was very achievable with sufficient planning and consideration.

From a storage perspective, there is considerable existing guidance in the oral history literature regarding the archival stability of different digital recording formats (Mackay 2007), which I will not repeat here. Suffice to say that in my experience, whatever format is chosen, maintaining detailed logs of the location of data and backing up records as soon as possible are key tasks in the job of keeping recorded material safe and secure.

2) Ethics, consent, copyright
The ethical and legal status of an experiential record is vital if it is to be made available to future researchers. This is an area that features strongly in the oral history literature, where it is dealt with in some detail (see, for example, Mackay 2007). The main points relate to the need for informed consent and the transfer of copyright from participant to researcher. In my own work, the need to complete the proper paperwork was offset by

the need to persuade general visitors to participate in an interview. Long, complex and intimidating forms could put off potential participants. Using a model template (Mackay 2007), I created the shortest possible consent form I could that covered the key legal requirements. Most visitors who had agreed to an interview were willing to look at the form, and none of those who read it were unhappy with its content.

3) Manufacturing experiences
The techniques I use to record audience experiences all, to a greater or lesser degree, affect those experiences. The most profound effect comes from the video-cued recall technique, in which people are aware, throughout their experience, that they are being recorded. Some participants report that they are conscious of the presence of the video camera during the experience, while others say they are able to ignore it. Whether conscious of the camera or not, all participants spend longer and try harder to engage with the artwork than the average general visitor. Participants in the video-cued recall are often volunteers who have come to the museum specifically to take part in the research, so their motivation and interest in the work is greater than many of the general visitors. I also offered assistance to the participants during their experience to ensure that I could record an interesting report (although I would wait until I was asked for help, or, if they were struggling, I would allow the participant to thoroughly explore the work alone before intervening). While the experiences of the video-cued recall participants are *real*—in that they are the unique and actual encounter between person and artwork— they are also *manufactured* for documentary purposes.

In my opinion, this does not detract from their usefulness. They represent very thorough encounters with the artwork, which is a useful thing to document as long as it is placed in the context of the normal range of experiences (more on this in the following section). In my experience, even these high-quality experiences were significantly different to any idealised description of the work, containing numerous idiosyncrasies, difficulties and negative aspects. Nevertheless, it is important to be clear about the effect of the documentation process on the experience by clearly noting, for example, how the participant came to experience the work (were they a volunteer or a normal passer-by?), how much they knew about the artwork before they came, and how much the researcher assisted them. All of these aspects are part of the requirement for the researcher to be self-reflexive, which Ellis (1993) describes in relation to the rigour of oral history.

4) Capturing the range of experiences
An important challenge in creating experiential documentation is to record negative experiences. During the course of my case study, I realised that I was selecting participants who had clearly had a satisfying, or at least reasonably long interaction with the work. As I observed the general interaction of the audience with the work, it was clear that a large number of visitors had very minimal engagement with the installation; some walked straight through without even pausing, while others looked briefly and moved on. My interviews were only recording the small proportion of high-quality interactions with the work.

On the one hand, this selectivity is reasonable; to be of interest to future researchers, records need to have enough quality content to make them worth listening to, and visitors who, perhaps because they are hurried or tired, do not choose to give the installation a great deal of attention will not be able to provide an interesting report of their experience of the work. On the other hand, in order for the documentation not to be misleading, it is necessary to place the high-quality experiences in the context of the

larger proportion of less attentive encounters. The question is how to record *interestingly* the experience of the large number of participants who did not engage with the artwork.

My solution was to conduct interviews with the professional gallery attendants who watch over the artwork every day. The attendants describe their own perception of the general behaviour of the crowd and provide something of a contextual overview of the audience told from their own perspective. Capturing the experiences of the attendants therefore provides an interesting source of more general information.

5) How many experiences to record?
The aim of creating an oral record of an audience's experiences of any particular artwork is not (and could never be) to create a complete record of the different ways in which an artwork manifests itself. Each person's experience is at once necessarily partial—only showing some of the many aspects of an artwork—and complete in itself. Just one *real* experience is enough to open up the field of possibilities that exists in an artwork and add a spark of life to its documentation. The kind of records of experience that would form an oral history are qualitative rather than quantitative in nature and therefore do not lend themselves to statistical uses.

On the other hand, comparisons between different people's experiences can be very illuminating, and recording a variety of different types of experiences adds richness to a collection. My own approach in *The Giver of Names* case study was to try to create a multi-layered portrait of the work as it existed in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. I tried to imagine myself as a reporter or documentary film maker and to ask: what different kinds of experience might provide interesting and provocative insights into the nature of this work? There were some clear possibilities for enriching the kind of portrait I could create through the types of participants I selected, such as a balance between the sexes, a variety of ages, and a range of expertise and interests.

Audience experience records are time consuming to both produce and listen to, so the desire for more and more material needs to be balanced with what is reasonable and useful to produce. In my own previous research, I have found that as few as three audience interviews can demonstrate a great variety of detailed and unexpected experiential aspects (see Costello et al 2005).

Preservation and access

Creating an oral history of new media art is a process of *creating* documentation in order to fill an important gap in the historical record. This offers an opportunity and responsibility to consider how each experiential record will be kept and used. A key aspect of preservation and access is the type of media used for recording. The instability and rapid obsolescence of digital formats make this a much researched and debated issue as well as being far from a certain science.[7] But preservation and access are as much concerned with the intelligibility of a record as with its materiality. To preserve a record in any useful way, one must ensure that future researchers understand the context and significance of the work at the moment that it is created (as well as the way this significance changes over time). This has implications for the specific information

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[7] For more on the technical challenges and current good practice in the field of digital preservation, one could begin by visiting the American Library of Congress's Digital Preservation section: [http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/]

that is collected and stored alongside each interview and the mechanisms by which each record and collection of experiential records relates to other collections and sources of information.

Firstly, the methods, details and particular circumstances surrounding each interview need to be meticulously documented and presented as an integral part of the record's existence. This contextual information can be used in cataloguing and for online search processes that provide access to the records in the future. In my own case study, this information included details about the subject (name, age, occupation), the method used to conduct the interview, comments about the interview conditions, as well as a short description and a transcript excerpt to facilitate access for future users.

Established cataloguing and archival standards and practices allow experiential records to mesh with existing bodies of information. The intelligibility of experiential records relies on their interconnection with other forms of material. There are a number of initiatives currently underway that seek to extend models of classification and archival structures to accommodate more process-based and iterative art forms, such as the Media Art Notation System (MANS) developed by Richard Rinehart (2007) and the Capturing Unstable Media Conceptual Model for Media Art (CMCM) (Fromme and Fauconnier 2004). As part of *The Giver of Names* case study, I worked with archivist Caitlin Jones to articulate the relationship between experiential records and other forms of documentation. Our structure for the case study follows the MANS model, which specifically provides space for records of audience experiences as "versions" and builds on it by emphasising the tension between the "ideal" notion of the artwork (as a composite, theoretical idea constructed from artist statements, technical schemas and the accumulation of many iterations) and the "real" situated and individual experiences of the audience members at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Our introduction to the case study explains in more detail the way we have articulated the relationship between audience experience and the archival context:
[http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2121]

These fundamental questions of physical preservation, intelligibility and interconnection through cataloguing are precursors to the question of how an oral history of new media art could be accessed and contributed to online. The future-use scenario presented at the beginning of this paper is based on the notion that an online oral history could be accessible from anywhere in the world and would gather information from artworks exhibited around the world. *The Giver of Names* case study demonstrates that the Internet is a natural and accommodating home for such a resource in terms of receiving, organising, storing and distributing audiovisual information, and for the integration of experiential material with other kinds of documentation. Brokering reciprocal connections between other online resources and archives would be an essential part of placing audience experience within a global landscape of new media documentation and preservation.

CONCLUSION

The vision I propose for an oral history for new media art casts my own work in this area as a contribution to a repository of collections produced by many researchers around the world. The work done for *The Giver of Names* case study demonstrates that this kind of documentation is valuable and possible but also time-consuming and difficult. To make a significant impact on the way that new media art is understood now and in the future, an oral history would need to pool the efforts of the many researchers and institutions who are interested in audience experience and galvanise others to begin to include this type of work in their documentary processes. The increasing ease of uploading and downloading video content via the Internet makes such a global perspective not only desirable but achievable.

The issues and considerations raised by this paper show that such an initiative would need to strike a delicate balance between openness and flexibility on the one hand, and rigour and structure on the other. It would need to be as open as possible to the many different techniques, approaches and formats of experiential record that would be generated by researchers. This openness would need to be built upon a rigorous insistence on the reflexivity and accountability of the contributing researchers and a clear and consistent system of organisation and cataloguing. An oral history of new media art would need to establish standards of collection and curation that, as this paper has shown, cover a range of areas, including:

- Interesting, high-quality content

- High production values

- Ethically and legally sound records

- Valid records produced by reflexive and accountable methods

- Intelligible records supported by detailed contextual information and cataloguing

The Giver of Names case study has demonstrated that all of these standards are achievable in the context of an individual project, and the challenge implied by the larger endeavour of an online repository of such material would be to achieve such standards across many different cases. The reward would be a powerful reparation of the gap that currently exists in our records of audience experience. Such a resource would ensure the lively existence of today's artworks in the future as well as a re-balancing of art historical accounts to include the reality—not just the theory—of the audience's active role in new media art.

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