VIDEOTEX ART RESTORATION
Technical and Conceptual Challenges

John Durno
University of Victoria
Canada
jdurno@uvic.ca
0000-0003-0419-9742

Abstract – This poster will discuss the technical and conceptual challenges associated with achieving an authentic restoration of videotex art, in the context of a project currently underway to recover Canadian Telidon videotex artwork from the early 1980s. Strengths and weaknesses of various strategies will be discussed, including emulation, format migration, software reconstruction, and the use of period hardware. Goals of the poster include showcasing the strategies employed to date, and inviting criticism and comment from others with relevant experience to share, so as to refine and improve our methodology going forward.

Keywords – Videotex, artwork, emulation, authenticity

Conference Topics – The Cutting Edge: Technical Infrastructure and Implementation.

I.   INTRODUCTION

The Digital Preservation Coalition has identified videotex materials as "practically extinct," requiring urgent action if these important early examples of our emergent digital culture are to be preserved [1]. This poster will discuss the challenges associated with achieving an authentic reconstruction of videotex art in the context of a project to recover Canadian Telidon videotex artworks from the early-mid 1980s.

The project to recover and restore Telidon art began in 2015 with the restoration of several Telidon artworks in the collection of University of Victoria Archives. The project has since grown to involve artists and arts organizations across Canada, as more digital files and video recordings have since come to light, and news of the project has spread. Participants in this collaborative project now include the University of Victoria Archives, the Toronto-based arts centres InterAccess and Trinity Square Video, the Artexte Archives in Montreal, and a group of independent artists and curators, working together to achieve our goals of developing web and gallery exhibitions, and a permanent digital archive of Telidon Art and related materials [2].

II.   BACKGROUND

From 1978 through 1985 Telidon was a project of the Canadian federal Department of Communications to create interactive computer-based information networks using a made-in-Canada version of videotex. Although Telidon was only one of several international efforts to create videotex networks, the Canadian version was capable of presenting more sophisticated graphics than its competitors and for a time was seen as having a strong potential to become the dominant standard [3].

There was considerable interest in Telidon from across the cultural sector, as corporations, technologists, educators and artists all sought to harness its potential in various ways. Several hubs of Telidon art production formed, such as at the Creative Writing Department at the University of Victoria, Video Inn in Vancouver, Trinity Square Video and Toronto Community Videotex (later InterAccess) arts centres in Toronto, the University of Quebec in Montreal and NSCAD University on the east coast. These hubs provided access to the tools of production to a broad spectrum of cultural producers and artists.

III.   CURRENT STATUS

Information services built upon Telidon were not ultimately commercially viable, and federal funding was withdrawn for the project in 1985. Although considerable content was created for Telidon systems during the time it was active, little of it has survived into the present in an intelligible form. Until recently, the remaining digital files known to exist from the Telidon era were thought not to be viewable due to their dependence on long-obsolete Telidon terminals, special-purpose devices for interpreting and displaying vector-encoded Telidon files [4].

As Telidon was not widely adopted, a relatively small number of Telidon terminals were produced and very few are still known to exist. Alternative, approaches to rendering Telidon graphics have been

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developed for this project, combining emulation, format-migration and software reconstruction, but none perfectly recreates the experience of Telidon on period hardware, due to differences in timings, colours, fonts and visual textures. One may question whether a perfect recreation is even possible given the variation that existed among hardware implementations in the 1980s. Using examples drawn from several different artworks, this poster will discuss what interventions might be necessary to restore works of Telidon videotex art, and to what extent such interventions can be made without compromising the authenticity of the works.

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