

MAC Membership Renewal Time Approaching

Keep an eye out for E-mail reminders this fall about renewing your MAC membership. Only individual voting members whose renewals are postmarked by January 31 will be able to vote in the MAC spring election.

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Fall Symposium on User Studies

Have you ever wanted to see your archival program through the eyes of its users? Have you wondered how the experience of using your repository compares to other research experiences? While we might wish for *Twilight Zone* moments in which we archivists could insert ourselves into our researchers' consciousness, the 2010 Fall Symposium, October 21–23, in Dayton, offers a more feasible alternative: affordable and accessible training in conducting user-based archival evaluation.

The symposium on user studies offers you the opportunity to learn how to create user studies and interpret the findings in order to improve your archives program. Through formal presentations, small group discussions, and hands-on activities, you will develop an understanding of the fundamental theories and the practical skills necessary for successful implementation of archival user studies. The symposium will examine the role of user studies in nurturing and sustaining an archival program and explain the "nuts and bolts" of conducting user studies.

Befitting a symposium on user studies, participants will be asked to complete a pre-symposium survey. The Web-based survey will be sent to registrants via SurveyMonkey and will request information regarding experiences with user-based evaluation and expectations for this symposium. The speakers will tailor their presentations as necessary based on the survey results.

Furthermore, the surveys will be used to gather participants into small working groups during the symposium. The groups will be formed based on what you most want to learn from your users or what you want to know about your users. Are you interested in evaluating your instruction programs? Or the usability of your finding aids? Perhaps you are planning a remodel and want to learn about the functionality of your physical space. What about the quality of your reference services? Or are there specific groups of users, such as genealogists or undergraduates, on whose needs you would like to focus? These and other topics are all possibilities for the user study you create in your small group.

Participants will come away with a strong understanding of the benefits and practicalities of user studies, a variety of methodologies to employ, and

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You are about to enter another dimension. One not only of sight and sound, but of mind. A journey into the unknown... the minds of archival researchers.

Next stop...

USER
STUDIES

Digital Preservation the PLANETS Way—Can It Work for Smaller Archives?

By *Susanne Belouari, Ph.D., Digital Collections and Archives, Tufts University*

All of us are interested in digital preservation—the prevalent formats of documentary evidence of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century are digital. Bit and carrier deterioration make digital preservation urgent and difficult. Faced with that task, we tend to feel that we lack the expertise, the resources, the answers, or even the ability to approach this new and multi-faceted area of our professional responsibility.

PLANETS, or Preservation and Long-term Access through Networked Services, claims to provide the first scientific approach to digital preservation by offering a structured way to create a preservation plan, and a test bed (i.e., controlled environment) where preservation tools can be tested and evaluated by empirically comparing experiment results. Think of PLANETS as the virtual equivalent of a preservation planning tool for physical formats such as paper or leather artifacts, which might be sent to a preservation/conservation lab to test, evaluate, compare, and carry out preservation/conservation treatments.¹

PLATO is PLANETS' Preservation Planning Tool: an on-line resource that guides users through four phases in which archivists define preservation policy requirements, develop, run and evaluate experiments, analyze results of the experiments, and build a preservation plan with recommended preservation actions. In fifteen steps, PLATO has archivists determine (1) identification and status of repository, (2) institutional setting, (3) collection and sample records, (4) preservation requirements: institution/donor/record creator-specific,² (5) preservation alternatives, (6) decision to go ahead/forego, (7) run experiments, (8) evaluation and transformation of experimental results, (9) ranking results by using weighted multiplication, (10) ranking results by using weighted sum, (11) conclusion/choice for one preservation strategy, (12) create a preservation action plan: specifying a series of steps or actions along with organizational responsibilities, rules, and conditions for executing the preservation action, (13) costs, (14) monitoring rules, and (15) approval.

At a London PLANETS workshop that I attended this spring, several people raised concerns that PLATO might be difficult to adapt to small archives. At least three of its overall design features appear to be driven by the needs and resources of large national archives and libraries. Such repositories are, after all, PLANETS' main stakeholders.

First, PLANETS defines a collection as a large number of homogenous digital objects. Its test cases use huge numbers of single objects, such as PDF files or JPEG images. According to PLANETS, archives or libraries should create a preservation plan for each such collection. However, archivists typically define "collection" in a very different way: records and personal papers are generally provenance-based, and our institutions have hundreds, if not thousands, of relatively small collections, which usually do not contain homogenous digital file formats. More typically, one file format, such as Microsoft Word, is scattered across hundreds of provenance-based collections. Some collections contain only a handful of such files, and each collection typically contains many different digital file formats.

Second, developing a preservation plan and then acting on it does imply a certain degree of digital expertise and resource availability, which likely is not available in a smaller archives. Finally, PLANETS assumes that a group of digital experts, archivists, donors, and users will be available to meet for a couple of days each to work out preservation requirements for each homogenous collection; preservation plans are, thus, institution- and collection-specific. Given these factors, PLANETS appeared irrelevant to attending archivists from smaller and relatively resource-poor archives.

A few months after the workshop, I carried out a case study using PLANETS for the "Practical Approaches to Electronic Records: the Academy and Beyond" seminar organized by The Centre for Archive and Information Studies at the University of Dundee. I wanted to see whether PLANETS could be adapted to the needs and resources of smaller archives. My particular case study failed to develop a preservation plan for complex Word documents (generously provided to me by the University of Dundee archives), due both to the complexity of the documents and limitations in the software.

I, nevertheless, concluded that PLANETS offers the first all-encompassing approach to digital preservation planning for under-funded, resource-poor archivists. Using it would force us to elaborate and document our digital preservation plans. PLANETS' operative definition of collection, its required resources, and its work model are neither so different from traditional preservation planning for physical formats nor so inflexible that they cannot be adapted to the needs of smaller archives. There are several reasons for this:

First, recall that archival physical formats such as scrapbooks or paper also are scattered across many of our provenance-based collections. Specific physical preservation plans and policies, thus, also are developed for particular formats and not for particular collections; i.e., we typically have one preservation plan for scrapbooks. Therefore, we can adapt PLANETS to writing preservation plans for particular file formats found across our provenance-based collections. Second, compiling preservation plans for physical objects is not a simple undertaking and takes a tremendous amount of time and expertise despite our long experiences with those formats. Moreover, our every-day and exceptional physical preservation efforts take money. So by extension and expectation, digital objects under our care deserve at least that much of our time, expertise and resources—and, alas, probably more. Third, it is true that PLANETS work group model is not quite workable for small archives. Adjusting the model, we can organize work groups for preservation requirements for particular file formats. If we feel that we lack the resources and expertise to organize work groups, we can crib from publicly available PLANETS preservation requirements or policies. When copying preservation requirement trees and overall plans, we have to accept that we will lose some of the donor/user and institutional specificity in setting requirements and policies. But that is a compromise many of us will be able to live with.

At the time I used it, PLANETS suffered from some problems common to beta software: outdated help pages, no support for PLATO, a very limited public preservation plan template library, and an incompletely functioning interoperability framework. PLATO was geared mainly toward image files, and it did not yet offer stable services. My own case study failed because of these last few reasons. But working with PLANETS also convinced me that smaller archives would benefit from the final version of the software, whether we use it only to develop a preservation plan or actually to test and evaluate preservation alternatives.

Using it would confer some very specific benefits:

1. Documented preservation plans will help get funding or will point out constraints regarding particular digital preservation services.
2. Preservation plans document the state of the art and your decision-making at a certain point in time (based on institutional factors, money, staff, hardware, tools, etc.).
3. Preservation plans document your current preservation choices against future challenges.

4. Preservation plans are also your guidelines for accepting new digital donations and demonstrate to donors/record creators what you can and cannot do to preserve particular digital files. Its clear cost and infrastructure requirements might help you to ask for and get funds from donors/record creators to preserve their particular digital files.
5. PLANETS lets you test open software tools with sample files inside the Testbed and it lets you evaluate local tools within PLATO. Both can be downloaded and installed locally.
6. PLANETS assists you in creating preservation requirement trees to compare results from various tools (its requirement/policy template is one of its most useful tools, graphically mapping many factors to consider for digital preservation).
7. PLANETS works quite well for image files of various types.
8. PLANETS has a Fedora plug in.
9. Finally, PLANETS is free of charge, has major stakeholders that most likely will guarantee its continuation, and you will need less digital expertise and less software/hardware than if you work without it.

As I see it, PLANETS is the first tool offering something akin to a comprehensive verifiable approach in handling digital preservation planning and actions. It does not require unreasonable expertise and resources and is, thus, an encouraging beginning—despite its problems. In the best of all worlds, small archives soon will have the choice either to work with such tools on our own, hire consultants who can work on preservation plans with us, or use consortiums and regional archival organizations that offer expertise and templates just as Northeast Document Conservation Center already does for physical preservation.

Notes

1. PLANETS is a recently-completed four-year project that was funded by the European Commission. Information about the follow-on Open PLANETS Foundation is available at <http://www.openplanetsfoundation.org/>.
2. This approach reflects recent digital preservation literature, arguing that preservation requirements vary by institutions. For example, preservation file size might be essential for one archives, ease of using a preservation tool most important for a second archives, and maintaining original search functionality for a third.