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IMAP OBSOLETE VIDEOTAPE PLAYBACK EQUIPMENT  
PROJECT: NATIONAL SURVEY  
FINAL REPORT

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I. Overview

With a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Independent Media Arts Preservation (IMAP) conducted an online survey in late 2007 and early 2008 to determine the scope of institutions holding obsolete videotape playback equipment. This survey also sought to gauge interest in several potential projects for the future, including: an online registry of playback equipment, the creation of a template that could be used to help inventory and catalog such equipment, and a cooperative effort to share parts and expertise.

The issue of format obsolescence is a major obstacle to videotape preservation. Since videotape was first introduced in 1956, more than sixty different formats have been developed and marketed. Some were unsuccessful, adapted briefly by a small number of users. Others were widely adopted – an array of diverse formats ranging from the 2” reel-to-reel broadcast format that dominated the television industry in the 1960s and 1970s, to the low-quality VHS cassettes that were ubiquitous in home use for more than two decades. Each of these formats requires specific equipment to play it back, and without the right equipment, videotapes are essentially useless. They cannot be preserved without playing them back – so access to the right equipment is critical to video preservation.

The survey was open to responses between December 11, 2007 and February 10, 2008. The response to IMAP’s survey was both gratifying and illuminating. In total, 128 people from 34 states and the District of Columbia (as well as 7 foreign countries) responded to the survey with at least a name and e-mail contact<sup>1</sup>. Out of these, roughly 100 completed the survey – the total number of responses to each question varied between 93 and 103.

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<sup>1</sup> There were two responses not complete enough to consider – i.e., no name or e-mail.

A wide majority indicated support not only for an online registry devoted to obsolete equipment, but also to a consortium or co-op for access to parts, manuals, and expertise.

The survey respondents themselves are a valuable resource in refining ideas for these projects to suit the needs of this self-described community – one which, prior to this survey, would have had little or no means of contacting, or even knowing about, one another. In addition to gathering information, the survey helped IMAP build a pool of potential partners, as well as potential members.

IMAP maintains a copy of the full set of survey responses; a list of respondents' institutions, cities, and states (when given) which is not for public consumption.<sup>2</sup>

Note: In each case described below, percentages expressed are for those responding to the question. In some cases, more than one answer was permitted.

## II. Project background

The genesis of this research lies in a project called the Artist Instrumentation Database, created by Mona Jimenez as a researcher-in-residence for the Montreal-based Fondation Daniel Langlois.<sup>3</sup> In 2002, Jimenez created a FileMaker Pro database template for cataloging video equipment created by and for artists. Today these machines pose serious challenges for the institutions that own them because of the large amount of specialized metadata needed to describe them. The template Jimenez created, which is available for free download from the Langlois website, was quite elaborate, containing more than 50 fields – a reflection of the complexity of these unique objects.

In 2005, the IMAP Board of Directors proposed that Jimenez's work could be modified to create a simpler cataloging template, one that could be used to build an online registry of mass-produced, obsolete video playback equipment. The goal of this registry was to provide a centralized source of information about extant equipment in all obsolete formats. Intended users would include archivists, artists, videomakers, and labs. Each of these groups needs to find working playback equipment for aging tapes. Many smaller institutions, in particular those with limited financial resources, would

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<sup>2</sup> Respondents' names have been withheld for privacy reasons. In cases where more than one individual from an institution responded, duplicates have been eliminated.

<sup>3</sup> Jimenez's report can be found at <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=708>.

find in-house playback and transfer of videotapes to be much more cost-effective than outsourcing to specialized vendors.

Preliminary work for the registry was begun as part of an independent study project in New York University's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation program in 2005. In 2006, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts allowed for an expansion of the project in the New York City area, including onsite visits to meet with archivists and technicians, and to survey their equipment holdings.

These preliminary projects showed a definite desire for better access to obsolete videotape playback equipment, and interest in participating in projects that would allow for easier sharing of knowledge and expertise in this area. IMAP thus decided to pursue a national survey, reaching out directly to even more institutions holding obsolete video equipment, asking them specifically about their needs, and in the process generating a valuable list of sites that could participate in future initiatives.

### III. Funding/staffing

IMAP Executive Director Dara Meyers-Kingsley served as project manager; IMAP's Board hired Jeff Martin to write the survey and oversee its administration. Martin is a 2005 graduate of New York University's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation MA program. His work in New York included assessments of collections at the Guggenheim and Brooklyn Museums. He supervised the preservation content for the new online Media Art Resource developed jointly by Electronic Arts Intermix and Independent Media Arts Preservation.

### IV. The Survey

Martin drafted the survey in fall of 2007, based on the preliminary projects, with guidance and input from IMAP's Board of Directors. The survey was open to responses between December 11, 2007 and February 10, 2008.

In order to achieve maximum cost-efficiency, rather than hire a programmer to create a custom survey tool for online use, it was decided to use a low-cost online service, [surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com). This provided an acceptable level of customization for a reasonable cost. In addition to the online survey, Martin created a .pdf file listing the questions for distribution to potential respondents, so they could gather relevant information before completing the online form.

The survey consisted of 27 questions, both multiple-choice and short-answer. IMAP's Board, as well as a small group of professional colleagues,

tested the online survey tool's functionality before it was announced to the public.

## V. Marketing/publicity

The survey was publicly announced at the 2007 Association of Moving Image Archivists Conference in Rochester, New York. The announcement was made during an IMAP-sponsored a day-long symposium on the preservation of media art funded by the New York State Council on the Arts, the Experimental TV Center and the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation. (Symposium transcripts available on the IMAP website at [www.imappreserve.org](http://www.imappreserve.org)) A signup sheet and press release were distributed to workshop attendees – who formed a natural constituency for this project, as many media arts conservators and artists are dealing with issues of format obsolescence.

Additionally, the survey was publicized by distributing the press release to numerous online lists and groups, including listservs of the Association of Moving Image Archivists, Society of American Archivists, Association of Recorded Sound Archives, and the Electronic Media Group of the American Institute for Conservation. Notifications were also delivered to IMAP's e-mail list, the Telecine Interest Group mailing list (devoted to professionals working with film-to-tape transfers and other video technology), as well as the Board's personal contacts in the video preservation field. One indication of the relative success of these outreach efforts is that only 13 of the respondents were already IMAP members.

## VI. Respondents

### a. Geographic distribution

As noted above, the responses came from across the United States and seven other countries. Seven respondents did not give their location.

New York	21	New Mexico	2
California	19	New Jersey	2
Tennessee	5	Florida	1
Arizona	5	Minnesota	1
Illinois	5	Michigan	1
North Carolina	5	Delaware	1
Ohio	5	Georgia	1
District of Columbia	4	Arkansas	1
Pennsylvania	4	Washington	1

Texas	3	Iowa	1
Wisconsin	3	Arkansas	1
Indiana	3	Utah	1
Massachusetts	2	Nebraska	1
Oregon	2	Alabama	1
Virginia	2	Alaska	1
Maryland	2	Kentucky	1
Connecticut	2	Maine	1
New Mexico	2	Wyoming	1
		TOTAL	112

Canada	3
Italy	1
Germany	1
Norway	1
Switzerland	1
England	1
Sweden	1
TOTAL	9

b. Types of institutions responding

The largest percentage of institutions responding defined themselves as archives: 21.9 percent. Included in this broad category were the archives of not-for-profit institutions; state archives; the archives of religious institutions; and specialist archives within larger institutions.

This group was followed by, in order, public access television stations (12.3%); Museums (10.5%); Private Collections, University Libraries, and post-production facilities (each 7%).

A number of valuable observations can be made by reviewing the types of respondents. First, their diversity is striking. Fully 47 percent considered themselves to be in the "other" category, a group which included a stock footage company, an audiovisual consultant, and a range of cultural and professional organizations.

Respondents also ranged widely in size and financial resources. The survey drew participation from large corporations, and major cultural institutions, small not-for-profits, and individuals (both collectors of equipment and artists who have used it in the past).

A particularly surprising result was the number of public access television stations which responded. IMAP made no direct appeal to this group; indeed, "Public Access Television" was not given as a choice in the survey. These stations all indicated "other," and described themselves in different ways – sometimes as public access stations, but also at times by the government institution of which they are a part – a public library, for example. It was decided to gather these together under their common interest.

Given the extremely broad range of respondents, it is safe to say that this group – artists and corporations, museums and television stations – has few truly common needs, and has previously had no way of knowing they share one common interest: the need for access to obsolete video equipment. This survey is thereby proving to be a critical tool to build bridges between these stakeholders.

## VII. Video formats

By a wide margin, the most common type of playback equipment held by respondents is 3/4 inch U-matic decks, with fully 87 percent of respondents holding U-matic decks. In order, Betamax (46%) and 1/2" open reel (38%) followed.

Interestingly, 60 percent stated they held other formats beyond the most common ones listed in the survey. Fifteen specifically said that they held VHS or S-VHS equipment – by far the most common "other" format. Beyond that, nearly every video format developed was referenced by at least one institution or another.

## VIII. Documentation

Aside from gathering a listing of institutions, perhaps the most critical task of the survey was to determine what kind of cataloging information or documentation these institutions possess regarding this equipment. IMAP's goal has been to provide a means to share detailed, specific information about obsolete video decks. Determining what kind of information these institutions already have is a necessary first step to providing access to this information.

IMAP believes the first step to an online registry is to provide a template that can be used within institutions to catalog equipment. We have had great success with the database template we developed for cataloging moving image materials, and have recently introduced a similar template for audio materials. A template for equipment seemed the logical next step.

Reviewing the responses clearly showed there is a need for such a template: only 16 percent of respondents have item-level electronic (i.e., database) records for their equipment. Just over half of the respondents report they rely on institutional memory and staff knowledge to some degree when maintaining intellectual control over their equipment – an ephemeral and unreliable tool at best.<sup>4</sup>

#### IX. Respondents' desires for future projects

The survey proposed three specific ideas for future projects:

- A cataloging template, as described above, that institutions could use to create individual records for each piece of video equipment. The template would provide fields for all relevant information about video equipment (format, production date, make, model, etc.) and guidelines for standardizing terms within the database's fields.
- An online registry of equipment – which takes information organized by the cataloging tool and makes it available to the public, or to other institutions on a restricted basis.
- A cooperative or other shared resource that could facilitate the exchange of spare parts, repair manuals, and technical expertise.

Of these three ideas, the most interest, by a slight margin, was expressed in “an online registry of video equipment, or of sources for information/services in this area” – with 84% responding positively.

Second-ranked in terms of positive responses was participating in “an exchange or co-op for parts and documentation,” with 81.3% saying they were interested.

The third proposal, a cataloging tool for use within collections, received a positive response of 71.3%.<sup>5</sup>

Outside of these three proposals, the responses made it clear there is a need for access to repair services: 32% said they had no maintenance plan whatsoever, with an additional 49.5% dependent in part or completely upon outside vendors. Also, 53.7% stated they had non-functioning equipment they would like to put to use – and an overwhelming 94.9% indicated they consider their equipment partially or entirely as working tools (as opposed to historical artifacts).

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<sup>4</sup> Just over 8 percent reported having no information at all about their video equipment.

<sup>5</sup> Though 71 percent expressed interest in using such a tool, fully 95% checked at least one of the fields in the list of those proposed for the cataloging tool.

## X. Recommendations for future action

The respondents have made clear statements as to the next desirable steps for this project:

- Create a cataloging template for video equipment. Jimenez's database for artists' equipment is available for modification by users; this would form an ideal starting point for a database template. Creating this template will require services of a consultant and programmer, as well as input from and testing by a selected group of institutions (drawn from the survey respondents).
- Using this template, create "copy cataloging" records for the most commonly held video decks. Libraries utilize copy cataloging – the creation of records for common books shared among institutions – to simplify the cataloging process. A similar effort for common equipment – fully completed records which could be modified by users – would be a valuable aid to creating in-house databases of equipment.
- Based on the use of this cataloging template – if a sufficient number of sites complete records and are willing to share them – IMAP could build the online registry using these records as a starting point.
- Develop further the idea of an Equipment Cooperative by surveying survey respondents to determine: 1) the most pressing specific needs (i.e., which parts are most needed – playback heads, belts, cables, repair manuals, etc.); and 2) the number of sites needing these items and/or manuals. Armed with this specific information, the Cooperative can then proceed to work with vendors to have necessary items reproduced or purchased in quantity, negotiating for reduced costs.
- The surprisingly large number of respondents from the Public Access Television community indicates the desirability of a project developed specifically for these stations. These constituents could be contacted through the Public Access Awareness Association to determine parameters of such a project.

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