

NEH Digital Humanities Advancement Grant

Early Online Communities in Context: The Thing BBS Message Archive

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, online communities have played an increasingly significant role in shaping culture and politics. While practices of posting and sharing on social media are now the subject of considerable study and public debate, the early histories of many important online communities remain relatively obscure, relying heavily on first-person accounts.

Among these, BBSes (bulletin board systems) represent a particularly important and under-analyzed aspect of network culture. As Kevin Driscoll observes, “For nearly two decades, the predominant form of online community in North America was the dial-up bulletin-board system or ‘BBS.’”¹ Early BBS networks served as important testing grounds for ideas of virtual communities and networked economies. Driscoll notes, “the users and administrators of early BBSes were the first to confront the fundamental challenges of living and working in online communities. Their experiences and experiments with anonymity, identity, privacy, sexuality, and trust established norms and values that were reproduced in the commercial services and social media systems to follow.”² As an immediate precursor to the internet age, these small networks offer a recent historical example for an online community that is “independently/communally owned and managed, whose technical infrastructure is intentionally modest, and whose slowness is fully embraced.”³ These characteristics are in marked contrast with those of the centralized platforms that dominate the formation of internet culture today, a context in which questions of platform governance largely out of the hands of community members themselves.

BBSes are characterized by a transparent technical infrastructure that is best suited to relatively small groups. A BBS allows users to connect to a central server, where they can upload and download files, exchange messages, and publish posts, often in threaded forums. BBSes were designed to be accessible via the telephone network, and were not reliant on the internet. In fact, they significantly pre-dated the rise of the World Wide Web—CBBS, developed by Randy Seuss and Ward Christensen in 1978, is widely acknowledged as the first public BBS, although the coin-operated Community Memory system, which launched in Berkeley, California, in 1973, already bore many characteristics of the BBS. While the broader framework of the BBS remained relatively consistent until the rise of the public web in the mid-1990s, individual BBSes varied widely, with volunteer operators shaping their individual system with a specific “theme, personality, visual culture, and social architecture.”⁴ The online communities that flourished

¹ Kevin Driscoll, “Hobbyist inter-networking and the popular Internet imaginary: forgotten histories of networked personal computing, 1978-1998,” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2014). 161

² Driscoll 2.

³ Lori Emerson, “Did We Dream Enough?” THE THING BBS as an Experiment in Social-Cyber Sculpture,” *Rhizome*, December 2020. <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2020/dec/16/did-we-dream-enough-the-thing-bbs/>

⁴ Driscoll 161.

within BBS systems were intricately tied to their technical infrastructure, which shaped community relations and forms of communication within the BBS.

This intricate connection between content and infrastructure may be one reason why BBS culture is an elusive historical subject in the present day.⁵ While published posts from BBS forums have been preserved by the Internet Archive and other organizations and initiatives, gaining an understanding of the dynamic relationship between technical infrastructure and the sociocultural processes of the BBS poses considerable difficulties even where material is available. For example, documentation of the technical structure and configuration of a BBS often does not exist, and accessing legacy BBS material in relation to a given community's software and hardware context and social norms requires considerable reverse engineering. Nevertheless, the scholarship that does exist shows how important a contextual reading is to analysis of BBS content.⁶

The original premise of *Early Online Communities in Context* was that the ways in which online communities form (in a dynamic relationship with hardware and software infrastructure and practices) could be made more legible by making archives of a BBS community available through online emulation. Online emulation, a digital preservation strategy that is frequently used at Rhizome, involves the use of cloud computing tools that run legacy software environments and make them accessible via a contemporary web browser. The project proposed to test this hypothesis using recovered material for *The Thing* BBS, a board that had been the focus of previous preservation research at Rhizome.

Following a lengthy investigation of this approach, we determined that this was not the best methodology in this case, as discussed below. The use of legacy BBS software presented significant practical barriers to structuring and facilitating access to recovered materials from *The Thing*. Instead, we found that offering contextualized access to these BBS archives was best achieved through a contemporary interface that made legible crucial aspects of the structure of the online community, in particular the threaded, temporal aspect of the exchanges it hosted.

Ultimately, the question of how to offer contextual access to legacy materials from this early online community rested on a question that animates Rhizome's digital preservation program as a whole: How do we restore something that's neither an artifact nor an activity, but something in between?

⁵ Driscoll, 387: "Faced with an almost total lack of representation in the dominant histories of the internet, former BBSers are denied opportunities to participate in rituals of nostalgia that would preserve their memories." On Twitter, Lori Emerson observed on Twitter, "Is someone out there working on a book on BBS?? I sure hope so because if not then there is a massive decade long gaping hole in internet / computer history---" <https://twitter.com/loriemerson/status/1272621897419591680>

⁶ In addition to Driscoll, see Fred Turner, "Where the Counterculture Met the New Economy The WELL and the Origins of Virtual Community," *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Jul., 2005), pp. 485-512.

The Thing BBS

The Thing BBS, founded in 1991 by artist Wolfgang Staehle, began in New York City as a hub for artists and thinkers. For many, it was their first experience online, and it fostered formal writing and criticism as well as experimental modes of writing and self-presentation that networked media make possible. Community members discussed everything from contemporary art, politics, and psychoanalysis to sex and gossip. As the conversation flourished, new nodes were opened in European cities, including Düsseldorf, Cologne, Hamburg, Basel, Berlin, and Amsterdam, creating an international exchange among primarily local networks. *The Thing* BBS was marked by an overt concern with what computer networks might mean for artistic creation and exhibition, and its participants included key figures in networked art of the 1990s.⁷

While all BBS networks are marked by a dynamic interplay among users, software, and a broader cultural context, *The Thing* stood out in that participants explicitly understood that they were part of a project to figure out what online writing and art might be in this new context of a networked community. The structure of the community itself, the nature of art criticism therein, and the implications it held for the art world as a whole were frequent topics of conversation. Therefore, historical consideration of such a BBS involves not only the study of message content, but also an understanding of the technological context in which the messages originally circulated, and the community's relationship with this infrastructure.

The Thing launched at late stage in the development of BBSes, and was based on an installation of The Bread Board System (TBBS), a powerful and expensive proprietary software package. In an article commissioned for this project, scholar Lori Emerson describes the system that powered the BBS as follows:

Unlike most BBSs, THE THING had no call limit, download limit, or minutes per day limit for users; it also started out with two phone lines connected to USRobotics 2400 baud modems and, within a year, it operated using four powerful 9600 baud modems. Without question, these technical conditions contributed to how quickly THE THING established itself; it started out with only around a dozen users, but by the end of 1991, THE THING had about fifty users and, by the end of 1992, there were roughly 120 with an active core of around 40.⁸

Remarkably for BBS software of the time, TBBS made it possible to have up to 16 lines on a single BBS which (assuming one could afford to pay for the phone lines) meant it

⁷ Participants included Benjamin Weil, curator and founder of äda 'web; curator/critic Joshua Decker; and artists such as Julia Scher, G. H. Hovagimyan, and Josefina Ayerza.

⁸ Emerson, forthcoming, citing Wolfgang Staehle, "The Thing questions / partly about TBBS set up." Email, 20 July 2020.

could potentially handle as many as 32 simultaneous callers. This capability allowed THE THING community to grow rapidly and sustain itself in ways that less sophisticated BBS systems could allow. Moreover, as users dialed in directly to an individual's phone number (in this case, Staehle's)... users had a transparent relationship with the technical infrastructure that, in turn, created a level of informality on the network that further helped build a sense of community.

Also, as evidenced by THE THING nodes that were created across Germany, the software was capable of providing service in multiple languages. Unlike most other BBS software available in the U.S. at the time that only provided service in English, TBBS put THE THING in the unique position of being an international network as its English-speaking and German-speaking nodes would gather and transmit data late at night and early in the morning while calling rates were low. System administrators (sysops) could also customize nearly everything about the user interface - from the menu titles and menu structure to the number, name, and functioning of chat rooms, forums, file sharing, and electronic mail.⁹

The infrastructure of *The Thing* was relatively powerful for online communities of its time, facilitating a significant international network, but also at a scale that was legible to the community. A key aspect of *The Thing* was its ability to host customized content structures, a feature of the TBBS software. Emerson writes,

For example, there are many posts on THE THING from 1992 and 1993 dedicated to discussing, reorganizing, and revising new discussion fora. Blackhawk, aka Peter Von Brandenburg, posted in 1992 that "I feel we should take advantage of TBBS's capability for nesting and not overburden the opening menu selection screen. Therefore I will include and combine new and old fora in larger structures and try to maintain the 10 item screen we have now."¹⁰

Blackhawk's message included lists of nested structures such as an area called "Sensation State" that would include such fora as "Lounge (area to discuss S&M theory)" and "Parallel Hell (a primal scream shock corridor)."

Thus, speed, multi-user access, and customizability were key aspects of *The Thing* BBS. As a result of this infrastructure, *The Thing* BBS was able to facilitate dynamic exchanges among users, often playing out over long periods of time.

⁹ Emerson.

¹⁰ Emerson.

Source Material

For any restoration project involving software, an ideal starting point is some sort of snapshot of a system at work, in a temporally consistent state. A typical manifestation of such a snapshot is the hard disk of a computer: the contents of the disk can be copied and connected with an emulator, which then boots the legacy system and allows access to the software and data contained on the disk in the original software environment. In the studies of digital communities, where the material produced is often intertwined with the technical setup the community members use, a disk artifact can provide the richest context.

However, attempts to recover such a disk or complete computer containing *The Thing* were not fruitful. Instead, the available material was screen scrapes of terminal sessions of a specific user's interaction with the bulletin board system, saved as WordPerfect files.¹¹ "Terminal session" in this case refers to a text-based connection to a remote system in which the user dialing in to *The Thing* transmits keystrokes to the BBS and in return receives text output, such as menus to navigate sections, the contents of messages, and functions to compose new messages. A log of a session contains any characters returned by the remote system written to a text file, so in addition to messages they can contain all kinds of interaction prompts, menu screens, unrelated technical information displayed during a session, and transmission errors.

¹¹ Former Rhizome preservation director Ben Fino-Radin acquired a CD-R from a user who went by the name BlackHawk. The contents were WordPerfect files containing tens of thousands of lines of text, containing recordings of several years of BlackHawk's sessions on the BBS – a "self-archiving from a user's perspective," as Fino-Radin put it.

messages were recorded across multiple visits, they sometimes would appear in different sections of the bulletin board with different IDs.

Emulation and its Limits

Rhizome’s preservation program facilitates access to legacy born-digital works of art, and in doing so places great emphasis on emulation as a strategy. As argued in a previous white paper, preservation of born-digital artworks requires

accepting that born-digital artifacts are not like traditional, “self-contained” archive objects. Instead, they are able to perform their objecthood when an array of technical elements explicitly outside the artifact align: in the case of a browser-based artwork, that would be the artifact, a browser, maybe a series of browser plug-ins, an operating system, networking connections, screens, input devices, and so forth.¹⁴

In keeping with this philosophy, materials recovered from *The Thing* would best be made legible when performed within a particular technical ensemble—in this case, via emulation of TBBS.

TBBS used to be an expensive proprietary product. As it made less and less sense to run a commercial bulletin board system with the advent of the web, TBBS became “abandonware.” Today, it is possible to find copies of both the software and instruction manual online, and run TBBS in an emulator.

In theory, it should be possible to import available message data, or a subset of it, into the software to construct a synthetic snapshot of the community’s activity in a contemporaneous software environment. This would provide a truer sense of how the community interacted than could be gleaned by reading the static messages.

Several structural problems with the software prevented such a re-enactment on a technical level:

1. The existing records of *The Thing* consist of messages captured over the course of several months. During this period, message sections were renamed or merged, threads were moved, and the ID numbers identifying individual messages changed. For example, a message may appear twice in the BBS records under different sections, or appear once with a three-digit sequential ID and then later in the access records with a new four-digit ID. No extant metadata describes these changes, and only reading of the content reveals section merges, which messages received new IDs, or how often these

¹⁴ Dragan Espenschied and K. Rechert. 2017. “Tools & Concepts for Safeguarding & Researching Born-Digital Culture” DFG/NEH Bilateral Project White Paper.

changes occurred. This makes it impossible to construct a consistent, truthful “snapshot” of the BBS state at any point in time.

2. The information available about each message was limited to what was visible in the terminal and could be stored in a text file. Documented information includes the sending user’s handle, the recipient user’s handle, the date when the message was composed, the name of the section the message was posted in, a subject line, and a message ID. Information about how messages are connected in threads (which message is in reply to another) is only revealed in interaction with the system (for example, by pressing “N” to navigate to the next message in a thread) and was not well-represented in the data. Most subject lines contain references to unstable message IDs, but since users could edit subject lines without the system losing threading information, many users did so and used this additional space for expression. Additionally, subject lines on messages transported via FIDO from other BBSs were frequently truncated.
3. Since TBBS was proprietary software, the data format of the “messagebase,” the set of files representing the messages on disk, is not documented. There is also no “bulk import” functionality for external data built into the software. In practice this means that either the message base format would need to be reverse engineered and a synthetic version created to be processed by TBBS, or messages would need to be placed into the software environment via automating the interactive message composer under simulated user logins and a modified emulator system clock.

Weighted against other goals of the project, these constraints make it hard to justify a reconstruction of the whole software environment:

1. The available messages already only represent a fraction of the actual amount of messages users would find when logging into the BBS. Having to reduce the amount of messages that can be continuously navigated would be a disservice to people who want to learn about *The Thing* as a community rather than a software platform. Additionally, terminal session logging was a community practice rather than a controlled effort to preserve the contents of *The Thing*, making it likely that more stashes of such logs will be discovered that would be of great value to integrate and consolidate with an existing public archive.¹⁵
2. Providing access to a software environment would likely give the false impression that the reconstruction would include other aspects of interacting with the BBS. In fact, one of TBBS’s most attractive features was that it could be heavily customized, but it is unknown which customizations were applied to *The Thing*, also making it impossible to document what parts are missing from a restoration. A previous restoration effort undertaken at Rhizome by Ben Fino-Radin in 2013 focused solely on recreating and presenting *The Thing*’s custom-designed log-in and navigation screens. Presenting the

¹⁵ The Thing project itself published some select records from the 1990’s on <https://old.thing.net/html/archives.html>

messages in a default TBBS installation would have been inappropriate for these reasons.

3. TBBS was not designed to present an archive, but one optimized for active use. Therefore it has no means to call out gaps in the data, or make transparent any curatorial decisions that have been made. The missing custom configuration discussed above cannot be marked as missing without impacting the perceived authenticity of the software environment further. More importantly, message and user data that has to be partly redacted for privacy reasons cannot be reasonably displayed, and the TBBS software provides no solution for representing these redactions.
4. Finally, following a discussion on TBBS requires some familiarity with legacy keyboard-centric user interface design patterns that are not at all common for a contemporary web audience. In fact, browsing or even citing messages would probably appear so difficult that the body of data would be effectively lost for the scholarly record.

Restaging Threads

Given that only an inconsistent, non-continuous record of activity from *The Thing* is available, only certain aspects of the online community would be meaningfully and reliably reproducible via emulation. Considering the additional need for the archive to remain mutable for new material to be integrated, replicating *The Thing's* technological setup was ultimately counterproductive to meaningful preservation of its content.

On the other hand, preservation of message content alone was also not a satisfactory strategy for providing access to recovered materials from *The Thing* BBS. Messages represent artifacts produced by communication between community members, but are not a meaningful unit to understand the modes and rhythms of how topics were formed and discussed or on how decisions to organize the community were made. Instead, through careful consideration of the content of *The Thing*, it became clear that threads (groups of messages that belong to the same conversation) need to be regarded as the system's basic unit. During a conversation, users did not commonly quote parts of the previous message they were referring to, but instead would write wholesale responses or one-liners that TBBS would present as "replies" to the original message. Hence, standalone messages are usually not meaningful since they lack the context of the thread where connections between messages were revealed when users interacted with the system and chose to view them. It was also common for conversations to "fork," when particularities of a discussion topic were explored, or different users joined and took the conversation in disparate directions. Long lulls might pass between messages, followed by a spurt of activity when a particular user would log on and reply to all messages in a thread, regardless of how recent. Some discussions played out for months before going quiet, only to be sparked again by some new contribution.

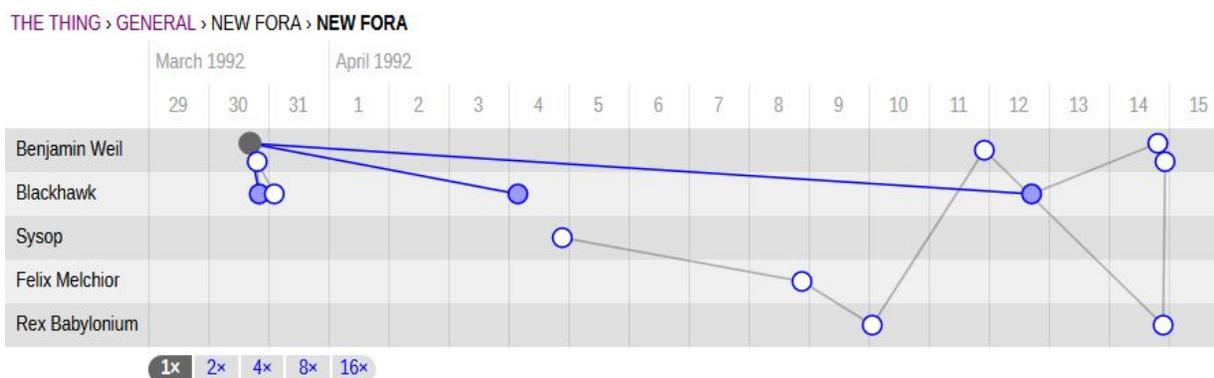


Fig 2. Screenshot of the user interface developed for *The Thing* BBS Message Archive, showing an example of a fork in a message thread called "New Fora."

As described above, technical information available about how messages were grouped into threads could not solely be based on the unstable message IDs. Instead, each recovered message was given a new synthetic ID, and thread information was manually constructed by comparing different candidate messages based on not only their original ID, but also publication time, conversation participants, and message content. As the available body of data is based on a single user's activities on the system, the messages in many cases were recorded in semantically meaningful groups, as the user creating the existing message archives via recording terminal text would follow conversations instead of randomly or linearly accessing them. Still, the decisions about which messages belong together in a thread are in many cases subjective.

A new website was created to house messages from *The Thing*, now accessed and referenced via their new stable IDs in the URL. Links to messages do not only reveal that message's contents, but also any other messages that are part of the thread. The timeline display is designed to highlight the rhythm in which messages appeared, which users were active, and how the discussion structurally coalesced. If a message was understood as being in reply to a previous message, the relationship is expressed with a line. Sometimes, messages seemed to obviously be part of the same conversation, but their exact relationship remained inconclusive. In that case, messages are visualized together, but no lines are drawn between them.

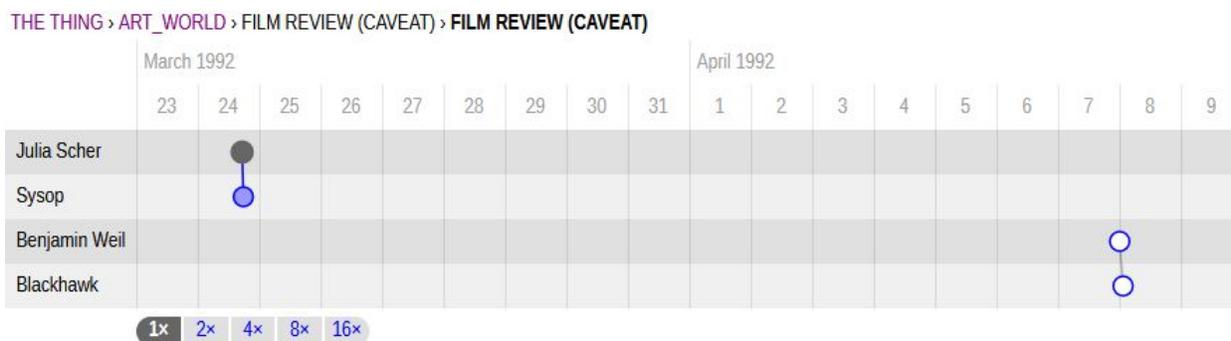


Fig 3. Screenshot of the user interface developed for *The Thing* BBS Message Archive, showing messages that are thematically related, but no directly linked.

Many messages could not be identified as belonging to a thread at all. This could happen when a message prompted no replies, such as an announcement of an event that didn't cause a discussion. These messages are displayed among all other messages of a section, without any threading indicated.

By considering the thread as the primary unit of *The Thing*, we were able to give present-day users a sense of the community dynamic that shaped exchanges. Crucially, this temporal structure would not have been possible through emulation. TBBS was designed to facilitate access to the most recent message posted to a community first, not to make the rhythm of communication legible in an archival interface. Thus, expressing this crucial aspect of the archive could not be achieved through legacy software.

What was not preserved through the web-based archival approach was a sense of the interface through which users would access the BBS. The experience of accessing *The Thing* via a series of green text menus loading slowly on a black screen might have been a key part of the original experience of using *The Thing*, but attempting to recreate these elements in a present-day archival interface presented practical and conceptual problems. TBBS was proprietary software, and attempting to modify it for archival purposes would likely pose insurmountable challenges. Recreating this experience outside of TBBS itself would have made the restaging of the archive mostly a fantasy of little scholarly value. Even if this was possible, use of the archive in a TBBS menu would have required significant training for users.

Thus, in order to be true to the available material, the interface was designed to express the archive's structure, and not to recreate the experience of the BBS itself.

Contextual Integrity

While the rights to the restoration and publication of *The Thing*'s data feel firmly defined, the *ethics* around republication of *The Thing*'s data remain a separate consideration. While all of *The Thing*'s public messages were technically accessible by anyone at the time of publication,

the surface area of browseable text was much smaller. In republishing the content of *The Thing*, the archival process was informed by both what personal dial-in access to the BBS would have looked like, and also the way in which modern web access flattens a multi-dimensional structure.

When *The Thing* was hosted as a TBBS system, users would have dialed into the BBS, using their computers as a dedicated access terminal for the system. This mode of interaction would have necessitated a deliberate mode of reading and writing: browsing and interacting with one thread at a time. While the presence of “lurkers”—users who only read and did not write messages—was well-documented and discussed, there was an expectation that anyone reading the messages would have at least had obtained the BBS dial-in information and dedicated their time and resources to BBS access. While the TBBS software’s marketing materials boasted about its multi-user capabilities, even 100 concurrent users was novel in the BBS era. The messages of *The Thing* BBS were certainly public, but the technical bounds of the BBS era provided a hard limit to the size of that public.

Transferring recovered messages to an archive interface on the web dramatically changes the mode of access in terms of direct user experience, but also opens up the text to web crawling and search engine indexing. Thus, publishing the BBS posts to the world wide web at large would mark a dramatic departure from norms surrounding their expected usage, a breach of their contextual integrity.¹⁶ Even more than two decades later, some of this material has the potential to cause embarrassment to users.

We sought to mitigate this by adding a robots.txt file discouraging crawling, requesting exclusion from the Internet Archive, and by omitting several private or particularly sensitive forums from our archive, but crawling and archiving by third parties is still possible. A determined user could easily search for certain keywords or messages by a certain user, a feature that would not have been possible in the original mode of access. Although the public content remains the same, the possibility of wider access and automation-assisted access seems to present a new level of visibility for which consent should be sought.

Because of this, Rhizome made an effort to contact the original authors of each message included in our restaging of messages from *The Thing*—not to ask permission, but with the option that messages could be removed from the archive as a courtesy. While this was not always possible (some members had passed away, some were pseudonymous and unknown by real name to the community at large, some did not reply), those who responded were uniformly supportive of the effort and none asked to be excluded. We will continue to respond to removal requests in future should they arise. Redacted messages will appear as empty placeholders in the list, so as not to disrupt the threaded structure of the website data.

¹⁶ Helen Nissenbaum, “Privacy as Contextual Integrity,” *Washington Law Review* 79:1, 2004. 119–157.

Conclusion

The born-digital artifacts recovered from *The Thing* BBS presented an interesting challenge to Rhizome's digital preservation program. As with most born-digital artifacts, these materials relied on context that was external to the artifact itself—however, in this case, performing the materials in their legacy technical context actually obscured key aspects of the archive. In particular, the temporal nature of threaded discussion, a particularly key dynamic in understanding BBS interactions, was impossible to represent by the original software interface. Moreover, the original software interface presented potentially insurmountable problems for reconstructing a legible archive and facilitating access to it. Recreating aspects of this legacy interface, such as fonts and colors or keyboard navigation, using contemporary means of access such as a web app or mobile app, though, would merely offer a nostalgic fiction of little value to understanding this original context.

Thus, it was concluded that emulation was not an appropriate strategy for restaging the materials recovered from *The Thing*. Although the original software was available as an artifact to be used in a potential restaging, it was ultimately not useful for making legible the social processes of *The Thing* as an online community.

The restaging of *The Thing* BBS usefully illuminates the way in which born-digital artifacts may contain traces of social and technical processes that can only be made legible, and not fully recreated. This model can usefully be applied to other BBS archives—the interface created for *The Thing* BBS might reasonably be applied to other threaded message forums, especially BBSes.

Beyond this, it also suggests possible questions that may be asked when considering emulation as a preservation strategy for BBS artifacts and other born-digital materials. What traces of social and technical processes are embedded in a given set of born-digital artifacts? Can the process embedded in these artifacts be meaningfully restaged through emulation? Or, do these artifacts contain traces of processes that can best be made legible by using alternative interfaces?

Appendix

This section contains screenshots of *The Thing* BBS Message Archive, a website published by Rhizome in July 2020 to restage artifacts recovered from the original BBS in a contextually appropriate manner. All screenshots were taken on Google Chrome 86.0.4240 for Mac OS X.

THE THING | ART_WORLD

	1992	1993																					
	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	
: -)	5																						
10 QUESTIONS	63																						
30'S ARCHITECTURE IN NYC	7																						
ALFRED RUSSELL	3																						
ALL	2																						
ART SUCKS! BEAUTY'S COOL ;-)	61																						
ART WORLD ORDERS	13																						
BLOCKED VIEW	6																						
BOROWSKY AT PAULA COOPER	3																						
BRITISH ART	5																						
BUSINESS AS USUAL	6																						
CALL FOR PROPOSALS	2																						
CLOSED READINGS	3																						
COLD AND STIFF	6																						
COMPUTERS & GOD	2																						
CORRECTION	9																						
D-LAND AND THE EXPORT OF TH	3																						
ETHNICITY	3																						
EVERYTHING STARTS WITH AN E	2																						
FILM REVIEW (CAVEAT)	4																						
INTRODUCTION	3																						
KOSUTH,BICKERTON, ET AL.	5																						
L/L PUMPER	5																						
MARY'S NEW FRONT DESK	8																						
MULTIPLES / DUSSELDORF	3																						
NEWSPACE	0																						

Fig 5. List of available threads in the “Art World” section.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar containing the URL `thingbbs.rhizome.org/thread/3784d74c-8fb5-4969-a318-d53c04cc0393`. The page title is "THE THING > ART_WORLD > ART SUCKS! BEAUTY'S COOL ;-)> ART SUCKS! BEAUTY'S COOL ;-)". Below the title is a calendar grid for August and September 1993. A list of names is on the left, and a line graph connects points on the calendar grid. The current message is highlighted with a gray circle on August 25. Below the calendar is a list of names: Jeff Harrington, Josefina Ayerza, John Dunn, Daniel Georges, Jordan Crandall, Curtis Mitchell, Daniel Pinchbeck, Dennis Summers, Morgan Garwood, Jeffrey Schulz, and Masa Yanagi. At the bottom, there are zoom controls (1x, 2x, 4x, 8x, 16x) and the text of the email.

Mag#: 303 *ART*
08-25-93 14:02:45
From: JEFF HARRINGTON
To: ALL
Subj: ART SUCKS! BEAUTY'S COOL ;-)
ART today is too symbol-driven, too obsessed by it's propagandistic potential, too contrived in its lukewarm nihilism to interest us any more (yawn). So, the good folks at IdEAL ORDER have decided to call it quits, with regard to ART ;-). From now on, our work will be driven solely by the investigation of BEAUTY.

Only BEAUTY can induce true corruption; the corruption of the "good." Only BEAUTY is truly meaningless. Only BEAUTY can foil the machinations of the ART industry and its search for symbolic novelty.

BEAUTY is beyond ART. BEAUTY storms the heavens and robs our gods of their peace. BEAUTY brings these gods - money, fame, power, religion, the threat of knowledge beyond thought.

Unfortunately, not all "ARTists" have what it takes to explore the realm of the beautiful, because BEAUTY cannot be attained. So good luck, people, ART is dead... most of you might as well all call it quits ;-).

Another irrational provocation from:

Fig 6. View of a message from the archive with interface showing its location in the threaded structure. The message currently being viewed is indicated by the gray circle.