

Thoughts on Preserving Digital Numismatic Literature

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Despite numerous prognostications, the book is not dead. However, the range of forms numismatic literature can take has certainly expanded. Knowledge that once could only be easily transmitted in paper books or journals is now embodied (to use the term loosely) in digital texts, datasets, and audio and video recordings. The increasing volume of numismatic information produced, both hardcopy and digital, raises important questions about how we can preserve this material and pass it on to future generations of enthusiasts and scholars. Unlike paper books, storing digital files on sturdy shelves in a cool, dark room is not going to do the trick.

My aim here is to continue and expand upon the numismatic community's conversation about the implications of digital publishing for the hobby, particularly those relating to how the community can responsibly maintain long-term and sustainable access to numismatic literature. Some aspects of this question are quite technical, such as archival file format standards, digital media degradation, and file authentication. These are important, to be sure, but I think solutions will be devised once we clarify and reach some agreement on social and policy questions, two of which I will discuss: why is digital preservation important, and who should be responsible for it?

WHY IS PRESERVATION IMPORTANT?

The oldest books relating to coins have survived for roughly half a millennium. What are the chances numismatic resources produced in the last century, or even decade, will be available to numismatists five hundred years from now? Without some intentional, consistent maintenance, the odds are not very good. There are two primary categories of threats to digital information: hardware failure and software obsolescence. Unlike archival paper, which can last hundreds of years, most

media on which we keep digital files, like hard drives, CDs, and DVDs, do not reliably remain functional after a couple decades at most. For large collections kept in one place, one catastrophic event (flood, power surge, media corruption) can wipe out everything. Software can have an even shorter life. As new versions of a program are released, often a file made in version 1.5 will not open in version 4.0. Every so often, digital files need to be migrated to new media and file formats.

The point is that if we do not take sufficient precautions, numismatists twenty, fifty, or a hundred years from now will have significant problems accessing the digital materials we are now producing. While it is true that not every file must be preserved forever, surely some material is worth keeping. Copies of electronic newsletters, like the *E-Sylum* and other club publications, could be used to show how the hobby adapted to the emergence of the Internet, not to mention contents that were not published elsewhere. Digital copies of printed books would prevent tomes with small print runs from falling into obscurity. With digital versions of catalogues like the *Red Book* and *Standard Catalog of World Coins*, scholars could use computers to trace market patterns and combine information into ever more complete and accurate databases. If one wants to research the activities of famous dealers of the early twentieth century, one looks to print advertisements, price lists, and paper correspondence. Researchers of the future will want to look at websites and email. The potential benefit digital research can offer to numismatists is great, but we limit that potential if we do not keep the basic resources.

WHO SHOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR PRESERVATION?

So, assuming we agree that preserving digital numismatic literature is important and set aside for the moment questions about technical solutions or precisely what materials will be preserved, another major question is who should be responsible for preserving these materials. No matter what preservation solution is adopted, virtually all of them require consistent curation. For example, if a digital archive of a journal were kept on CDs, someone would need to check the CDs every so often to ensure they still work, and move the information to new discs or migrate the files to the latest software as needed. It is very improbable that a disc forgotten for fifty years will be discovered and still be useful.

The need for relatively long maintenance points towards vesting responsibility in institutions that have sufficient resources for us to be reasonably confident that they will exist and preserve the archives for the foreseeable future. On that basis, the American Numismatic Society and American Numismatic Association libraries seem like good candidates. They could combine resources to create an archive. Or they could agree to mirror each other's digital collections, enabling an easier recovery if a disaster struck in Colorado or New York.

A more distributed solution could be arranged. Each hobby organization could establish repositories of its own publications and other thematically related materials. Standards exist that would permit organizations to search each other's holdings, thus creating a federated library. Another option would be for publishers to maintain "dark archives," digital holdings that are preserved but not made accessible unless a "trigger event" occurs, like a publisher dissolving, discontinuing a journal, or letting a book go out of print. This would be more attractive to publishers that are currently selling the materials. Regardless of which archiving model is chosen, arrangements should be made to ensure the archive is passed on to another responsible party in the event the first holder of the archive is unable to continue maintaining it. I hope producers of electronic numismatic information, like the digital versions of *The Numismatist*, *Coin World*, and the *Standard Catalog of World Coins* have contingency plans for their holdings.

Individual collectors have a role as well. Given that most manuscripts are produced on computers now, most numismatic writers have some digital files (such as drafts, email correspondence, photos) to consider preserving. Collectors can organize and migrate their files as needed. If the materials are particularly valuable, an institutional library may eventually be interested in taking them. Documentation of the processes of scholars and dealings of collectors could be interesting to future researchers as historical material. If a publisher does not have a preservation policy, a diligent collector could assemble digital backfiles that would be useful in the future.

Of course, copyright law must be a consideration here. Many important numismatic works were published before 1923, which probably places them in the public domain in the United States and thus open for archiving. Otherwise, the copyright owner will need to preserve the

works or grant permission for archiving. Hopefully authors and publishers can be made aware of the need for preservation and persuaded to give permission for archiving to occur, especially after a work has fallen out of print or ceased to be commercially profitable. Even if the market does not wish to pay for a work, future researchers may well be glad to read it.

CONCLUSION

Numismatists and bibliophiles often refer to themselves as temporary custodians of historical items, preserving them during their tenure and then passing them on to future generations. In addition to preserving the bound artifacts, we should also consider ensuring that digital numismatic information will be available for our numismatic descendants. This will require some resources, but if we combine our efforts, the works over which many numismatists have toiled will not be lost, but will continue to serve future hobbyists.

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