Ekphrasis, Artists' Intentions, and Anthropological Polemics in Angle Brackets: Toward a Thicker Description of Digital Documentary Material

Joseph T. Tennis
University of Washington Information School

Introduction

In our contemporary networked information landscape we have many different regimes of descriptive practice. Many, but not all, come from the information field - comprising Library and Information Science, Archival Science, Semantic Web, and the like. Others grow out of other forms of communication, both formal and informal. Examples of other forms include social tagging, wikis, ambient metadata given off by location based technology, and search behavior logs on our devices as informal communication *cum* description.

In a formal and broad sense we might also consider more well-established forms of description as part of this family of practices. I would count the anthropologist's description in the form of ethnography as one of these practices. Art and book history descriptions, catalogues raisonnés, and even ekphrasis[1] are candidates for inclusion. It is possible with a broad definition of this phenomenon to recast description as a unified whole, rather than as a collection of dispersed servants to different disciplinary masters. I feel they fit here because I think we have something to gain from looking at the entire universe of description in relation to our professional practices, steeped as they are in a particular lineage.

We might expand our view, and create a comparative landscape by starting with a broad definition. We can say that description is a form of writing (inscription). The purpose of description, this particular form of writing, is to re-create or visually present a thing, person, place, event, or action so that the reader of the description may picture that which is being described.

If we do include ethnography, histories, diverse types of catalogue description, and ekphrasis in the options a describer has of an object, then our experience of the material described is enriched. The purpose of this paper is to (1) outline the possible forms of description available to us, (2) assert how our experience is so enriched by each of these diverse forms of description, and (3) to measure the pros and cons of approaching description in this way. What kind and how many concentric circles can we draw around an object? How many linkages between different genres of description make for fruitful human-information interaction? What are the potential benefits and hindrances employing a thicker form of description?   How can we use these descriptive genres to curate digital documentary material?

What Is It That We Describe?

---

[1] Ekphrasis is the description of one art form using another. The quintessential example of ekphrasis is Keat's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, but there are others.

For the purposes of this paper, I will talk about documentary material, that is, material that says something to some audience, and is therefore preserved for some period of time. Documentary material can be images, documents, whether they are records or publications, sounds, etc. In the abstract, documentary material can be digital or otherwise. We will focus on digital in this paper. Historically, we have different traditions of description that have grown up around different forms of documentary material, coupled with different institutional management regimes and mandates. Increasingly, since documentary material is increasingly available through the computer interface these diverse practices have grown closer and closer. They are closer together on the screen, they are closer in kind as far as users are concerned, and the digital representations and management of this material allows (and in some instances) requires us to ask where our descriptions overlap and where they stand apart – that is where are the descriptive practices so close as to be identical, and where are they complementary, and finally where are they distinct? For the purposes of this paper we will take one example, a record for a video game.

The Video Game Record
In the lineage of archival science and librarianship we might examine a video game in our collection and create a particular kind of record – one that is concordant with the standards of our practice, and that folds nicely into our catalogue and registration sytems.

In OCLC's WorldCat we can see this record, for instance:

The Legend of Zelda
Author: Nintendō Kabushiki Kaisha.
Publisher: [S.l.] : Nintendo, 1987.
Edition/Format: Computer file : 5.25 in. disc : Program : No Linguistic Content
Summary: Try to rescue the Princess Zelda from her captors.

Depending on the context of the records, in a donor's papers we might find something like this, from the archivist's perspective:
Promotional Materials
box
2008-091/24   The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time pre-sale give-aways, 1999

In both of these examples we see the lineage of the form of description come through. What strikes me is how *uncurated* these descriptions seem to be. It is in this regard that I see a need for a *thicker* description, specifically a description that curates the object, across contexts, interweaving description lineages, and crossing the boundaries of the routinized regimes we traditionally understand.

To that end, and with the goal of helping the Seattle Interactive Media Museum, we can reflect on other forms of description, like ethnography, art and book history

descriptions, catalogues raisonnés, and ekphrasis in relation to this entity: the video game and its record in the bibliographic sense.

However, just because we might want to begin to *curate* the video game record, does not mean we can engage in wanton description. Our work has purpose and only has meaning because of that purpose, so what then is the purpose of description, and how does it relate to our concept of a thicker description?

What is the Purpose of Description?
One of the primary purposes of archival description is to establish *respect du fonds* which mandates that the archivist understands and represents (at the very least intellectually) provenance and original order. This descriptive work articulates where the body of records has come from (provenance) and represents to the reader how the creator (not the archivist) organized items, files, and series showing through meaningfully sequential lists and in nested hierarchical description which documentary material was filed first, which second, and which are last. By writing out the *respect du fonds* we see the archivist as authenticating the body of records as being what the creator did (intentionally or unintentionally) in the ordinary course of business.

This work is different in kind from what the librarian does when she crafts a bibliographic record. Bibliographic description (that process that gives rise to a bibliographic record) is done in service to the functional requirements of the library catalogue. Those requirements are to find, identify, select, and obtain material in the library (or now, accessible via the library).

Yet another kind of description is the work done by systems that use OAI-PMH or now OISTER metadata. This is a minimal level of description, and is not as prescribed as other forms of description. The purpose of this form of description is resource discovery. Resource discovery is a lightweight functional requirement demanding only that a single item be identified by some basic characteristics. There is not design requirement in the open web to distinguish between two documents that share other attributes – at least not in the descriptive regime of resource discovery description.

A fourth kind of descriptive practice is what we see in LibraryThing, which is a social networking site dedicated to helping book lovers describe their books and share these descriptions with other book lovers. In this descriptive regime we see many things that are drawn from the bibliographic description regime. MARC records are linked to books described in other ways in LibraryThing. However, LibraryThing users also add tags that go further than standard bibliographic description practice. For example, users can tag books with any form of tag they see fit. As a result tags like Chick-Lit, surface to help connect users to this genre – a potentially unstable and controversial term that is accepted in this book-loving community, but is less than characteristic as a genre term for library catalogues.

In the case of *Legend of Zelda* example tags are:

'08 | 5-10 hrs | [nes] | beat | must | RPG | top 100-vg

I assume these tags stand for publication date, how many hours of play, the system (nes = Nintendo Entertainment System), the genre (RPG = Role Playing Game), and its relative rank among games (top 100-vg = in the top 100 video games). The tags 'beat' and 'must' are not as clear, but we can imagine that

That retrieval is a complex process goes without saying. The rich traditions of archival and bibliographic description have remained separate and intellectually separable practices and bodies of knowledge. We can add to that, two examples of retrieval that have emerged from the web – resource discovery and social tagging. Each offers its own frameworks that align with their respective purposes.

Now is a time of convergence in information systems design. We have available to us the possibility of layering different descriptive regimes and purposes on to one another. In this context, and as a experiment in theory, I want to consider other descriptive regimes that are not exploited systematically by information systems – at least not in the same way as bibliographic and archival description. There are three other regimes of description that I would like to explore in the rest of the paper, each of them with a curatorial bent to them. I feel that our information systems can be enriched by the thicker form of description brought forth by the catalogue raisonné tradition, the ethnography tradition, and the ekphrasis conception of description. I will bracket this discussion with first a discussion of the concept of curation in this context and I will finish with the evaluation of a thicker description by outlining what I see as its pros and cons.

The Concept of Curation
What is the concept of curation in this context? And how does it relate to classification theory and these other descriptive practices? For our purposes curation, is the representation of special objects by a curator for a user or viewer. The concept has its origins as *one who cares for something special*. In the case of description of documentary material, we can imagine that some things are very special and require special attention. And though there is a rich and sophisticated tradition of preservation and conservation that is often associated with curation, we are here talking about a different kind of stewardship – a stewardship that is based on the representation of documentary material not only its preservation. Thus we are not talking about something quotidian here – not the act nor the documentary material – but something worth preserving and something that requires special care. For us, we will consider one type. There are many kinds of documentary material that require special care in description. For instance rare or unique materials require special description so that we understand their place in our collections and to society. Also, complex digital documentary material, like large and labyrinthine hypertexts demand more of us than a simple description. In both cases we might, as users, demand more of the information professional's service in

our information interaction. We are not only concerned with retrieval in its most basic form, rather, we are interested in making sense of the documentary material in a more complete way. We need help to make something that might have in the past been considered research to be a simple aid to our work or leisure.

For the purposes of this paper we will consider the video game and what might be required of description if we are to curate this kind of documentary material. We feel this is a particularly interesting type of documentary material because it has surfaced at a particular point in our social and technological history, it has different meaning depending on the community, and it stands as a particular point of evidence, i.e., the concept of game and leisure or art and innovation. Below we will show how a video game could admit to being curated with thicker description, but first we will introduce the other forms of description useful for this purpose. They are the genres of the catalogues raisonnés, anthropological ethnography, and ekphrasis.

Catalogues Raisonnés

The catalogue raisonné is a completing listing of an artist's output. The works are listed along with descriptions that point out the physicality of the items and the intellectual and custodial provenance. Further, the catalogue raisonné can include a *curatorial note* that aims to describe what the artist was exploring in the work. Finally the catalogue raisonné documents how many copies (if it is a print for example) were made by the artist, and mentions how many are known to survive.

Anthropological Ethnography

The discipline of anthropology has designed and over many years refined the form of writing called ethnography. Ethnography is a means of data collection for social scientists in general, and there are two characteristics that distinguish ethnography from other forms of observation: prolonged engagement and thick description. Both of these provide the ethnographer with a rich view of his participants. The success of the written product of this prolonged engagement, the characteristics of a good thick description are that it answers in the positive, these five questions (Richardson, 2000 p. 254):

1. Substantive contribution: Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social-life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) human-world understanding and perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text?

2. Aesthetic merit: Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?

3. Reflexivity: How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Ethical issues? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self

exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view? Do authors hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied?

4. Impact: Does this affect me? emotionally? intellectually? generate new questions? move me to write? move me to try new research practices? move me to action?

5. Expresses a reality: Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived-experience? Does it seem "true"—a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the "real"?

With regard to digital documentary material, the genre of anthropological ethnography can inform a thicker description of the social life of the work. This seems a necessary form of description if we follow Smiraglia's conception of work (2001) as a social construct expressed in many and diverse instantiations. What is the social life of a video game? How is it reinvented, reappropriated, marketed, used as a meme in counter-culture?

In the context of video games generally and *The Legend of Zelda* specifically there are many different ways we could incorporate this ethos of description. First, we can see that video games have affected social life and are part of national identity perhaps. We would want to document the way in which the game has had an impact on a group or a society as an example of digital documentary heritage. Further, we might want to know more about the people who make Zelda a part of their lives. This may add value to our understanding of the game.

The Outer Limit: Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis is the description of a work of art; say a portrait or a poem using words or another form of art. Ekphrasis defines and describes the work's *essence* and *form*. Through words the poet, for example Keats, describes what he sees as the Platonic form of the work of art, and thereby allows us insight into the art in relation to ourselves, communicated in the supplementary medium of poetry. In Keats' example there is an explicit call to see the essence and form of Grecian urn. We are called to imagine the urn and what it depicts, and it finishes with a demand to understand the human condition. He finishes his poem like this.

"When old age shall this generation waste,
   Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
   Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou sayst,
   "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all
   Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." (Keats)

Ekphrasis, like this, invokes a different descriptive sense. We could create a set of items based on an ekphrasis but not based on derived characteristics. Rather the set would be based on assigned characteristics related to an author's (the describer)

feelings about the essence and form of the items described. So we might see all those items that invoke beauty and truth feelings in the collection. Ekphrasis can be done by third parties and incorporated into description or it can be done by the curator.

The Thicker Description

A thicker description combines function and the descriptive practices that support those functions (Tennis, 2006). Below we have listed the functions of (1) bibliographic description, (2) archival description, (3) resource discovery, (4) social cataloguing, (5) the catalogue raisonné, (6) anthropological ethnography, (7) ekphrasis, and finally the combined list of (8) a thicker description.

Bib Desc	Arch Desc	Res Disc	Soc Cat	Cat Rais	Anth Ethn	Ekphrasis	Thicker Description
Find	Find	Find	Find	Find			Find
Identify	Identify		Identify	Identify[2]	Identify	Identify	Identify
Select			Select?	Select			Select
Obtain	Obtain		Obtain	Obtain			Obtain
	Attest to Provenance			Attest to Provenance[3]		Attest to Provenance	Attest to Provenance
	Attest to Original Order						Attest to Original Order
			Share				Share
				Attest to The Aims of Art			Attest to The Aims of Art
					Reflect on Writer's Stance		Confess stance
					Link to Social World		Links to Social World
					Is an aesthetic work itself		Is an aesthetic work itself
					Link to some reality		Links to some reality
					Is a moving work itself		Is a moving work itself
						Form	Describes of the form (Platonic) of the work
						Essence	Describes the essence of the

---

[2] Identity here is akin to archival identity or identities, but might vary by type of documentary material. A comparison would be instructive here.

[3] Provenance is both intellectual and custodial. Intellectual provenance might be for manuscripts of writers, which version did they decide not to send to the print or to place online?

							work
						Imagination	Imagines the universe not depicted, but possible because of the work
						Narrative	Narrates the universe not depicted in the work, but is plausibly associated with the work

Table 1. Functions of different descriptive regimes

Thicker Description			
Find	Attest to Provenance	Confess stance	Describes of the form (Platonic) of the work
Identify	Attest to Original Order	Links to Social World	Describes the essence of the work
Select	Share	Is an aesthetic work itself	Imagines the universe not depicted, but possible because of the work
Obtain	Attest to The Aims of Art	Links to some reality	Narrates the universe not depicted in the work, but is plausibly associated with the work
		Is a moving work itself	

Table 2. A list of areas of description in thicker description

Applying Thicker Description to our Case: The Video Game

Let us take a particular *Legend of Zelda* cartridge held by the Seattle Interactive Media Museum. We can then curate this particular object. We can describe it with the functional requirements: find, identify, select, and obtain this particular cartridge. If that is the case, we would want to control the title of the game and the creators, show the edition of the game, and show where it lives in the Museum. From here we can add functionality to the description. Attesting to authenticity and evidence we can describe who owned this particular cartridge before the museum. We also want to know what other cartridges or perhaps even what other documents and paraphernalia were associated with this particular cartridge. We can now turn to the three additions suggested in this paper, the functions of the catalogue raisonné, thick description, and ekphrasis.

The function of the catalogue raisonné is manifest in descriptions of the item's aim as a work of art. What is it that the creators of *Zelda* were aiming for? This is then authored and entered by the curator of games at the Museum. It can be used to compare *Zelda* with other similar games. The thick description of *Zelda* would be a position statement of the relationship of the game to its social impact. We might

describe all the subcultures that have grown up around the characters of the game or the music. We would need to position these statements as authored text with a perspective, but rooted in evidence. The ekphrasis component of the curated description can be of dual nature. We can use words to describe the essence of the game. We can also use another work of art to do this, or perhaps part of this. We can perhaps use Chris Garneau's *Fireflies* as an example of this (Garneau, 2009). This music video uses *Zelda* themes as a backdrop to the game, thereby adding a layer to the narrative of the game.

Conclusion

I have offered an interpretation of curation as special care in description. I have also presented three additional descriptive regimes that could be used in the act of curation. Expanding our understanding of the techniques and functionalities of description is an important next step in advancing our thinking about the possibilities in knowledge organization work and knowledge organization systems.

References

Garneau, C. (2009). "Fireflies." Track on *El Radio.* Absolutely Kosher Records.

Richardson, L. (2000). Evaluating ethnography. Qualitative Inquiry, 6(2), 253-255.

Smiraglia, R. (2001). "Works as Signs, Symbols, and Canons: The Epistemology of the Work." In Knowledge Organization 28(4):192-202.

Tennis, J. T. (2006). "Function, Purpose, Predication, and Context of Information Organization Frameworks." In Knowledge Organization for a Global Learning Society: Proceedings of the 9th International Conference for Knowledge Organization. International Society for Knowledge Organization. (Vienna, Austria. July 5-7, 2006). Advances in Knowledge Organization vol 10. Ergon: Würzburg: 303-310.