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Developing Collecting Areas through Digital Surrogate Donations: Are the benefits worth the risks?

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At Pepperdine University, we've been experimenting with a somewhat unorthodox approach to developing new or mission-driven collecting areas in our Special Collections and University Archives: digital surrogate donations in which we scan material that donors are not ready part with, keep the files in our digital archive, and let the donor keep the originals (at least for now).

Pepperdine University, Malibu, California

We've learned that Pepperdine is not alone in this approach—other institutions are beginning to encounter this issue. While this approach has proved successful in expanding key collecting areas, filling critical gaps, and providing the cornerstone for new areas, there are, of course, many risks, unknowns, and—potentially—consequences. All of which I will explore in this presentation.

digital surrogate *n.* a faithful digital copy that seeks to represent an analogue original as accurately and in as much detail as possible*

*Adam Rabinowitz (2013)

Twin brothers. *Trancas Riders and Ropers Collection*

I begin with a definition of digital surrogate: "a faithful digital copy that seeks to represent an analogue original as accurately and in as much detail as possible." I'll draw your attention to the words "faithful" and the idea of representation. [I thought that twins was an appropriate image here—by the way, all of my slide images come from digital surrogate donations that we've received.]
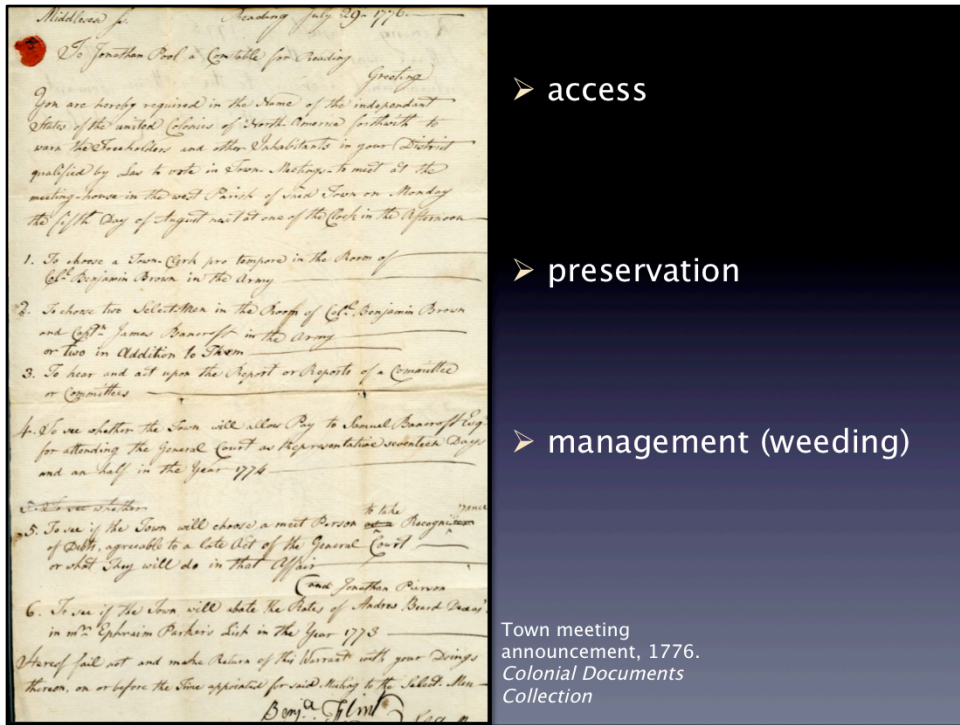
access

preservation

management (weeding)

Town meeting announcement, 1776. *Colonial Documents Collection*

Now, of course, digital surrogates have served many functions and led multiple lives for decades. They greatly improve discovery and access. They play a critical role in preservation, both as backup and as an access surrogate for fragile materials. And digital surrogates—in certain cases—may replace their physical originals altogether, assisting with collection management.
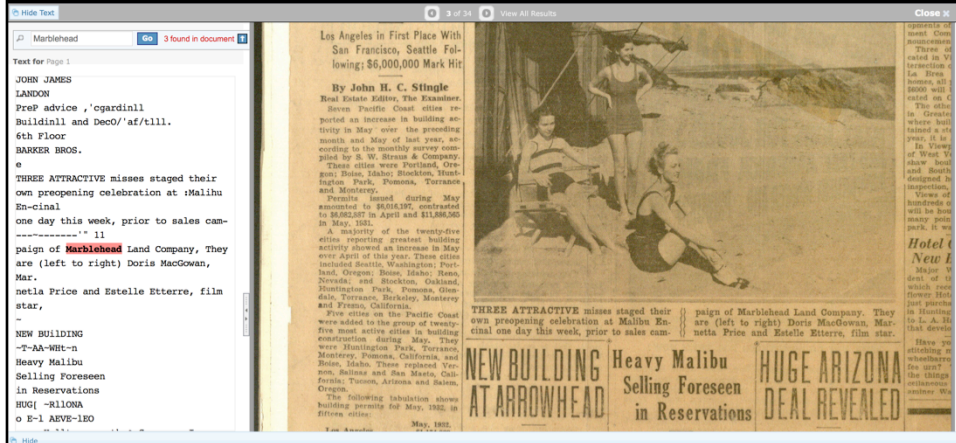
But digital surrogates can also *enhance* the research use of their physical originals in ways previously unimagined, as we've seen over the last decade in the digital humanities, digital archaeology, and similar fields. Institutions may also utilize digital surrogates for *digital repatriation* projects, providing source communities with surrogates of their physical holdings.

Digital Surrogate Donations?

Filming "Conquest of the Planet of the Apes."
Chuck Waters Collection
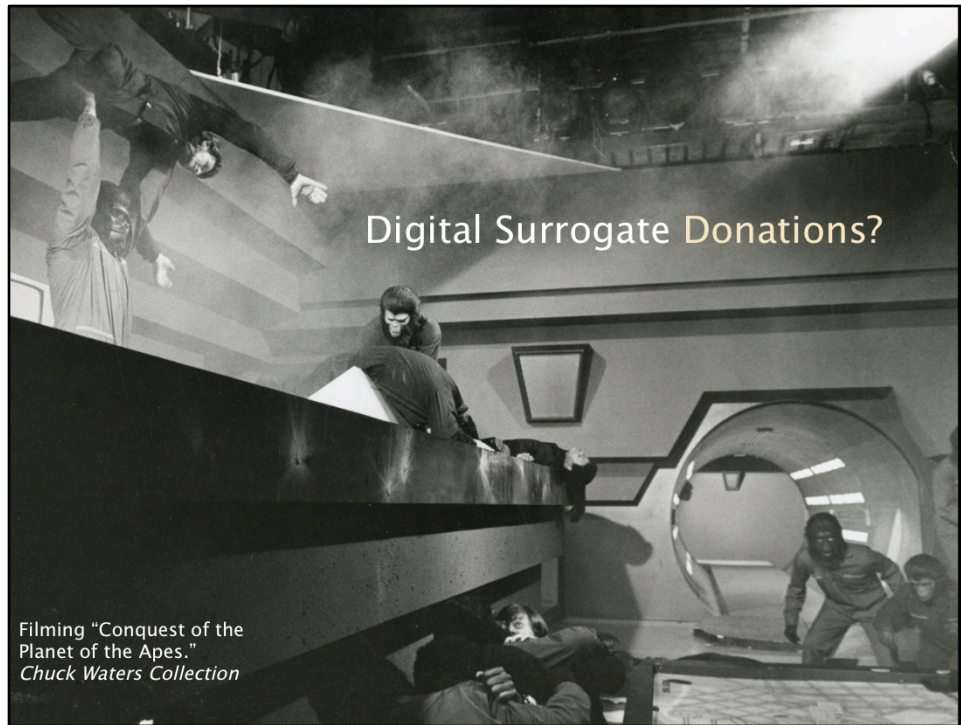
Of course, all of these approaches to the digital surrogate are premised on the assumption that the archive is in custodial possession of the physical originals. A digital surrogate *donation* breaks with this fundamental idea. But in an age increasingly dominated by the donation of born-digital material—in which the donor may simply be depositing a *copy* of their records—perhaps the time is right to challenge orthodoxy.
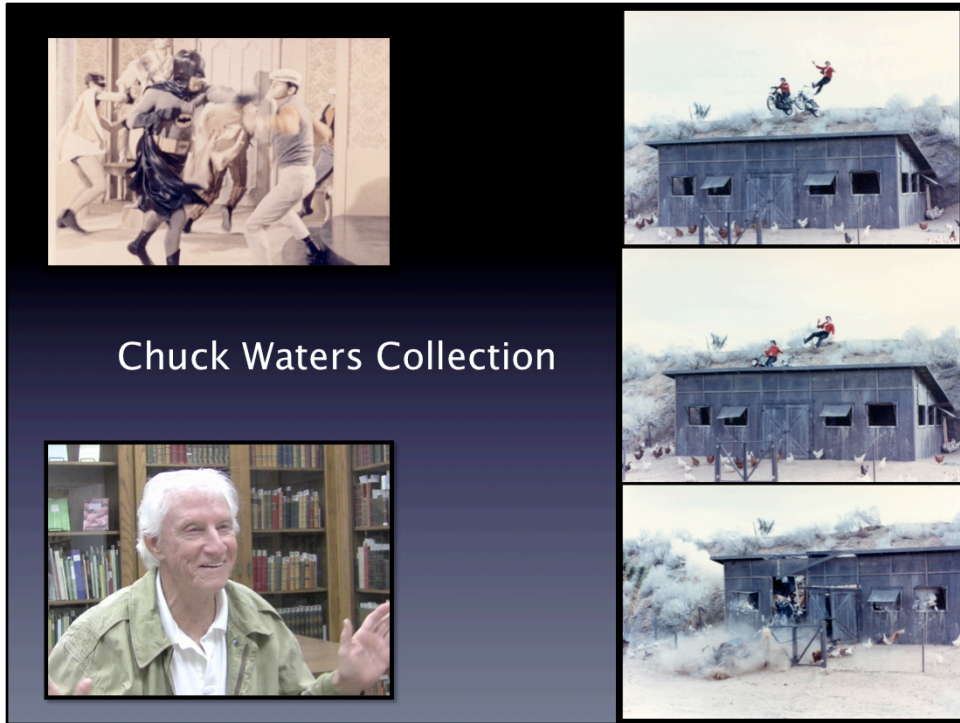
Chuck Waters Collection

OK, here's an example of one of our digital surrogate donations. Chuck Waters, now 80, is a veteran Hollywood stuntman. He had previously donated a scripts collection, but wasn't ready to give us his photographs. The digital surrogate donation of his photos was a nice addition to our film and television collecting area.

John Mazza historical surfboard exhibit
(on semi–permanent loan)

In reference to our theme today—creative solutions to common problems—we see digital surrogate donations, again, as a way to jump-start collecting areas when traditional donations aren't forthcoming. Other sources include alumni donations and scanned materials from temporary exhibits. Most of our surrogate projects are small in scope and manageable.

What makes a good digital surrogate?

1. Verifiably authentic

Signature and seal of King George the Third, ca. 1776. *Colonial Documents Collection*
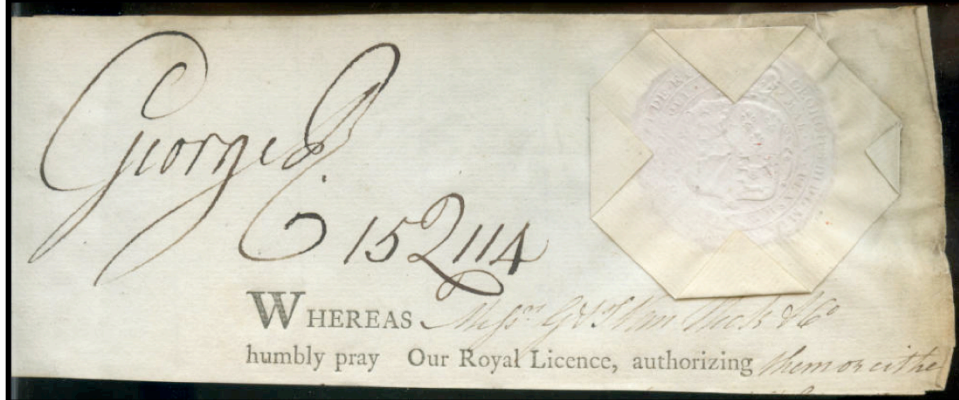
Digital surrogate donations are premised on the notion of a "good" digital surrogate. Ultimately, the *success* of a digital surrogate depends on 1) the needs of the user; and 2) the *quality* of the digital surrogate. So the first criterion is that the surrogate is *verifiably authentic* from a technical point of view in terms of completeness and accuracy.

What makes a good digital surrogate?

1. Verifiably authentic

2. "Experiential and affective" authenticity

Surfboard in digital collections.
John Mazza Historic Surfboard Collection

Deck View

Logo Detail

Bottom View

Fin View

However, many observers are concerned about the potential loss of "experiential and affective" authenticity with digital surrogacy—the tactile, physical qualities of an object. This is particularly problematic with 3D objects—and you can see our attempt to overcome this challenge with our surfboards.

Here's our basic procedure: We work with donors to identify materials, have them sign a customized gift agreement (which may or may not include a transfer of copyright), digitize the materials for deposit in our digital archive (and often our digital collections), and then return the physical originals to the donor along with a copy of the digital files.

Some Risks and Unknowns

➢ challenge of creating good digital surrogates

Stunt for "Swashbuckler".
Chuck Waters Collection

Now, as mentioned, there are several risks and unknowns involved with accepting digital surrogate donations. This first is ensuring that they are good digital surrogates in the first place, which is why we consider *control over the digitization process* a key component of our workflow.

Some Risks and Unknowns

➢ copyright implications

Police officer. *Trancas Riders and Ropers Collection*
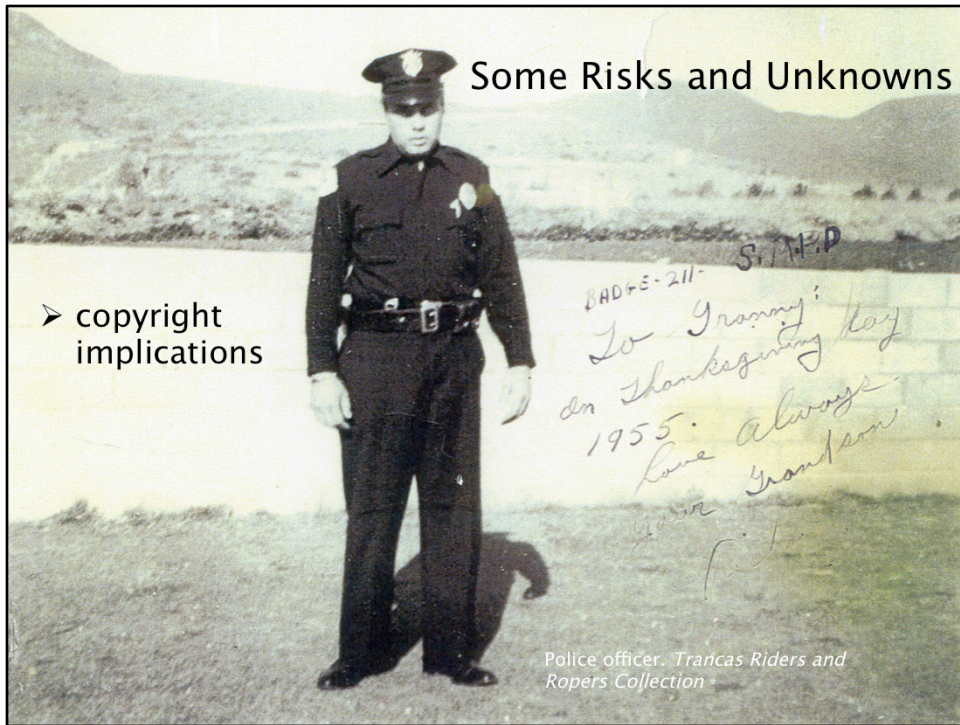
The issue of copyright and intellectual property is an area of key concern here. This is where a *carefully worded gift agreement becomes critical*. Digital surrogates carry the same copyright protections as their physical sources, so a transfer of copyright (although less likely for a surrogate donation) will help you manage the life cycle of the object.

Some Risks and Unknowns

➤ eventual donations of materials elsewhere

Confrontation on the Space Needle. *Chuck Waters Collection*
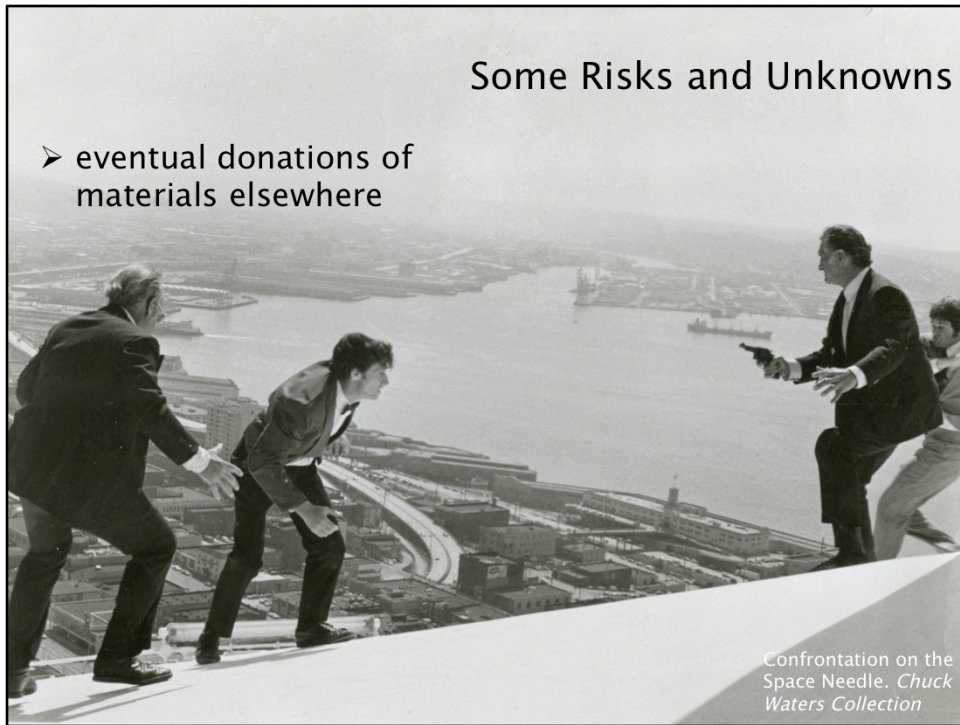
One concern that many archivists have is that the donor (or their heirs) may eventually donate the physical originals to *another* institution. The fear here is that archives will end up with non-unique collections—or worse—a custody dispute. As a solution, archives can push for a gift agreement that stipulates eventual donation of the physical originals.

Some Risks and Unknowns

➢ tracking custody of the originals
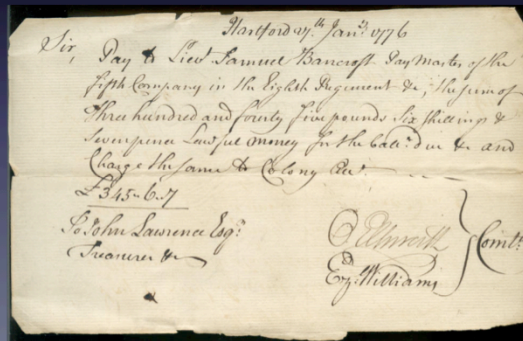
Revolutionary War pay order, 1776. *Colonial Documents Collection*

Which raises the issue of *tracking the chain of custody of the original materials*. How do you keep contact with the donor? How can you monitor for a *change* in custody? At a minimum, you can return materials with documentation (and embed metadata in digital files) that records previous donation to your institution.

Some Risks and Unknowns

➢ What about your backlog?

Brochure excerpt.
Malibu Association of Realtors Records
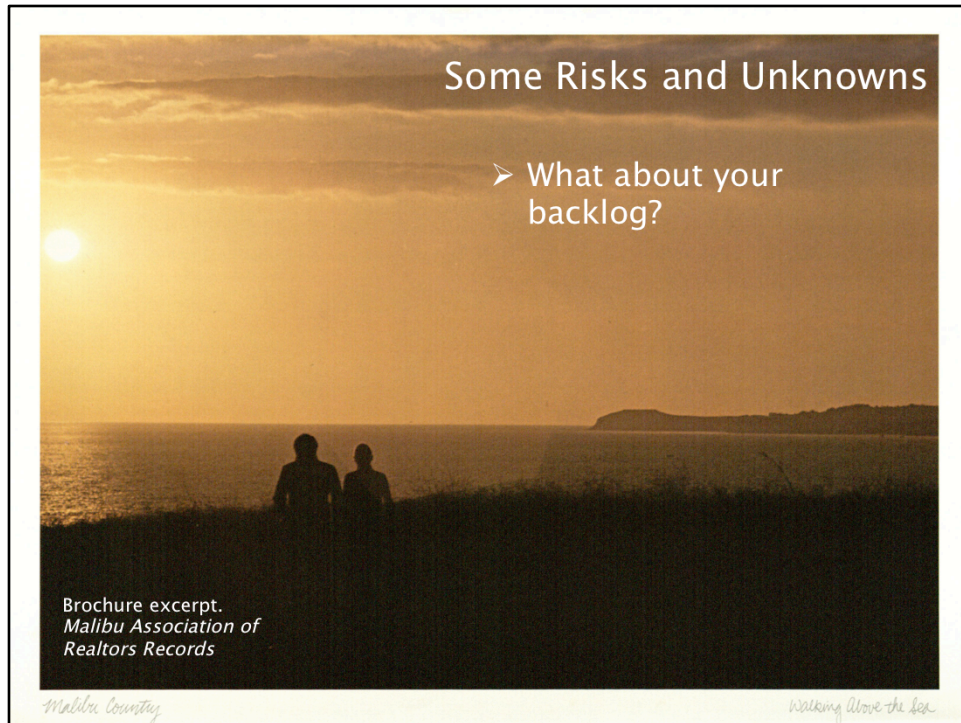
And what about your backlog? Should resources be directed to scanning digital surrogate collections when there is an existing backlog of digitization projects with your current holdings? In other words, given limited labor resources, is the surrogate collection worth the investment?

Some **Benefits**

➢ expand collecting areas

➢ expose materials

Elizabeth Taylor and "The Pie".
*Trancas Riders and Ropers
Collection*

Here are some of the *benefits* of accepting digital surrogate donations. As mentioned, these donations have helped us grow some key collecting areas, including alumni collections, Malibu history, and film and television research. In doing so, we've exposed materials to the research community that would otherwise be in private hands.

Some **Benefits**

➢ expand collecting areas

➢ expose materials

➢ build donor relations

➢ attract other donations
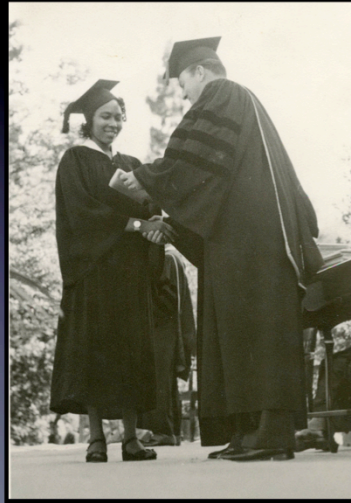
Bernice Pitts at graduation, 1949.
*University Archives Photograph
Collection*

Furthermore, we believe that accepting these donations has helped to build donor relations and win their trust. The greater goal, of course, is to have them eventually donate the physical originals as well. We also believe that these surrogate "seed collections" have helped us attract new donors. [pause] I thought I'd end with a different sort of twins:

Conclusions

Chuck Waters and Martin Sheen.
Chuck Waters Collection

…stuntman Chuck Waters dressed to double actor Martin Sheen. One is a surrogate of the other, although, as we've seen, the surrogate can do things and go places that the original cannot. The pros and cons of digital surrogate donations highlight two competing images of special collections and archives in the 21st century…

Conclusions

Chuck training.
Chuck Waters Collection

On the one hand, the increasingly remote access that researchers have to special collections through digitized material challenges the very notion of *what* constitutes an archival object. At the same time the *uniqueness* of special collections increasingly contributes to the *identity* of a library and its larger institution. If digital surrogate donations do indeed proliferate, negotiating these two concepts will require a delicate balance. Thank you.