

What's In A Name?

Mission

To provide a forum for collaborative interdisciplinary research into the technological, cultural, discursive and institutional aspects of collections of material media and communication technologies. The current focus of the Residual Media Depot's collection is early video game consoles (1972-2002). When possible, we aim to obtain a complete-in-box example of each console we acquire, in as good condition as possible, as well as secondary and tertiary working examples.

The Depot console collection is unique in that it also includes a large number of modified ("modded") consoles, specifically, those that have been modified to output RGB and HDMI signals. We also have a wide range of upscalers, signal processors, converters and custom-made cables to use with these consoles.

A third aspect of the collection consists of a growing number of arcade machine marquees.

Defining Terms

The Residual Media Depot (RMD) is a research and teaching collection associated with the Media History Research Centre (MHRC) in the Milieux Institute at Concordia University.

The RMD is not a media archaeology lab, nor is it an archive, though it shares characteristics with both, and borrows some of their methods. Media archaeology labs tend to focus very closely on the functioning of the technological mechanism, and often do not retain packaging, instructions, ephemera and other externalities. While archives of material objects strive to retain and conserve such material, their collections are often inaccessible without special arrangements. Archives also usually place strict limitations on the handling and operation

of their holdings.

The RMD aims for the middle ground: a working collection that considers externalities as necessary to the historical understanding of technology. As Lisa Gitelman's influential definition of media in *Always Already New* points out, media are "socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation"((Gitelman, Lisa. *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006. 7)). If you want to understand historical media, you need to pay attention to more than the bare machine on the shelf. It doesn't mean now what it meant when it appeared, and in the future, it won't mean the same thing that it means now, because protocols for the use of technology can and do change.

Ephemera, instructions and box art provide valuable information about the protocols that positioned a given technology at the moment of their presentation to the public. Handwritten annotations, modifications, ebay ads and even the amount and type of packing tape on boxes speak volumes about the ways in which material technologies circulate through culture, and how they were transfigured into something else even as their movement changed the culture around them in important ways.

There's another reason that "lab" and "archive" don't appear in the RMD's name. These are powerful words. Each invokes an entire system of legitimacy every time it is used.

The RMD isn't a lab because it doesn't produce knowledge using the scientific method. It's also worth noting that for much of the 20th century, artists often claimed the label of "lab" for themselves, with varying degrees of irony and for a range of political and aesthetic purposes. In the early 21st century,

though, anything and everything can and does claim to be a lab. Likewise, at a moment when “archive fever” grips the Internet to the extent that every second Pinterest and Tumblr account utilizes the term, it’s worth stating that the RMD is not an archive because it doesn’t always adhere to the protocols of archival and museological practice.

The word “Depot” is in the name for two reasons. The physical space that the RMD currently occupies was formerly an equipment depot for the Concordia Photography program. And, like most equipment depots, the RMD stores, cares for and circulates equipment, without ceremony or pretense.

The RMD is closest to the centuries-long tradition of university research and teaching collections from around the world. David Ludwig and Cornelia Weber have described how university collections in Germany emerged as an essential part of teaching and research across the disciplines during the 18th and 19th centuries, only to be marginalized in the 20th century as other forms of research, especially laboratory work, rose to prominence. At the beginning of the 21st century, they argue, the re-emergence of interest in university collections is happening because we are starting to recognize that the legacy of science is material as well as theoretical. ((Ludwig, David, and Cornelia Weber. “A Rediscovery Of Scientific Collections As Material Heritage? The Case Of University Collections In Germany.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 44.4 (2013): 652-659. 652-53. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2013.07.012>))

A collection of scientific instruments doesn’t “do” science; it teaches scientific principles and scientific history through the analysis and explanation of scientific instruments and their uses. Likewise, a university collection of media technologies like the RMD teaches media history by describing the way that emerging technologies were taken up and positioned by various discourses over the course of their existence. The question is not just how technologies were

used, or how they processed signals in a literally instrumental sense, but who determined how they were used, who used them, and who determined what the significance of that use was for various kinds of communities, and for culture at large.

There are also very particular reasons for the use of the term “residual media.” Coined by my colleague and [Media History Research Centre](#) co-founder Charles Acland in the introduction to his anthology of the same name ((Acland, Charles R., ed. *Residual Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007)), the concept of residual media has several things to recommend it.

Despite Foucault’s own careful admonitions to the contrary ((Foucault, Michel. “The Archeology of Knowledge.” *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*. Trans. John Johnson. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. New York: Semiotext(e), 1996. 45-56. 46)), the use of “archaeology” in “media archaeology” nevertheless continues to connote the (re)discovery of something lost or half-forgotten rather than issues of surface relations. Residuality, on the other hand, connotes a kind of stubborn persistence akin to Edgerton’s “shock of the old” ((Edgerton, David. *Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History Since 1900*. Oxford: oxford University Press, 2006.)). To turn [William Gibson’s famous aphorism](#) inside out, the past is still here; it’s just unevenly distributed.

The technologies that the university is only now discovering as important or valuable have been in more-or-less constant use in various segments of culture around the globe. That we view the recognition of their importance as a kind of discovery speaks volumes about academic myopia. A huge part of the work with residual media collections will involve speaking with community experts, transcribing their histories, and reading the documents they produce for their own communities. We have an enormous amount to learn from them, not only about media, but about why the university as an institution has been

largely incapable of figuring out how to produce knowledge about media like video games.

Both in Acland's own work and here, the concept of residuality refers to the model of history in Raymond Williams' famous essay "Dominant, Residual and Emergent" (Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Marxist Introductions. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. 121-27)). For Williams, historical analysis involves dealing with a series of tensions rather than engaging in a one-way consideration of what the past has to say about the present. For Williams, history is also the source of innovation; The New emerges out of an encounter with history (following Deleuze and Guattari, Žižek makes a similar argument in *Organs Without Bodies* (Žižek, Slavoj. *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*. New York/London: Routledge, 2004. 11-12)). This process of searching the archives for half-realized, never completed, lost or abandoned possibilities is a familiar theme in hardware hacking, circuit bending and modding, all activities that the RMD supports through research and teaching (see [Advanced Media Archaeology syllabus](#)).

Research

Teaching

Part of the rationale for the construction of the Residual Media Depot is to train Arts and Humanities students to begin their theorizing from an encounter with an object, rather than to drop a preconstituted theory over an object like a template and expect the object to justify the existence of the theory. To that end, we incorporate the Depot and its holdings into graduate and undergraduate classes whenever possible.

The Residual Media Depot has served as the focus for two week-long courses on the subject of Media Archaeology, the first in August 2016, the second in May 2017. The 2016 version of the course was the pilot for the new Concordia Arts & Sciences

[International Graduate Summer Schools.](#)

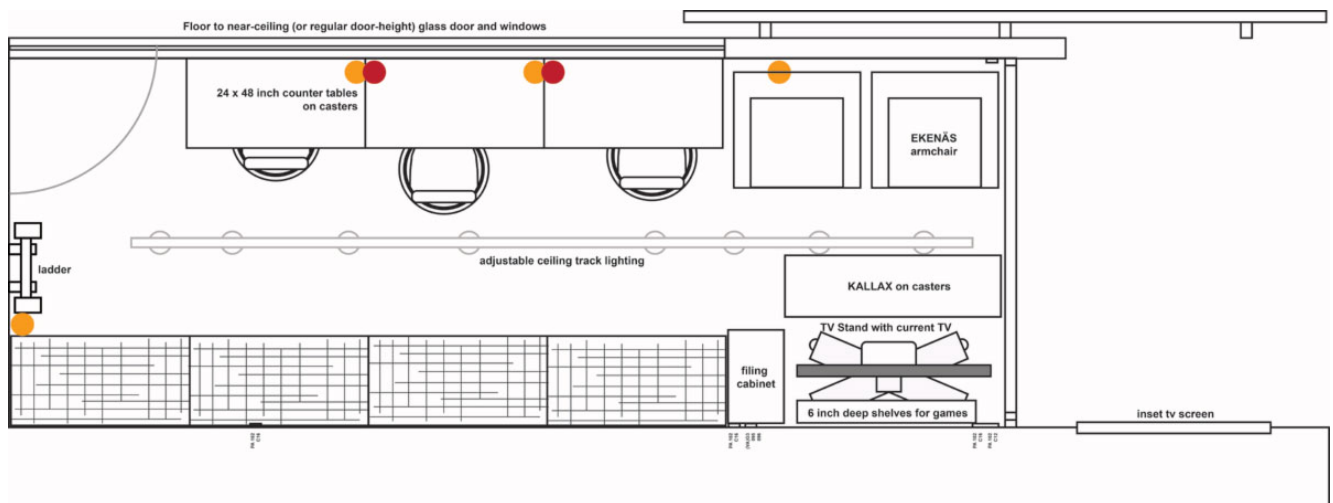
[Media Archaeology 2016 syllabus](#)

[Media Archaeology 2017 syllabus](#)

In fall 2017, the Depot will support a new graduate class, ENGL 645: The Research Collection (see [Teaching Page](#) for course description).

Physical Space

The physical space of the RMD is a former depot for photography equipment. The room itself is long and narrow (100" x 270"), with a steel rollup door on the East end and a smaller, standard door in the outer corridor wall, near the opposite (West) end.



RMD floor plan (initial)

The south wall of the RMD is devoted to storage shelving for the collection. We chose stainless steel Uline wire shelving to maximize air circulation around the boxes in the collection, to prevent moisture from pooling underneath them, and to avoid any problems associated with rust. A two-drawer horizontal filing cabinet sits under the bottom of one shelving unit to house the paper components of the collection.

The North wall of the RMD has three workstations, each with a

steel work bench and an accompanying stool. Each station is equipped for the receiving, cleaning, testing, documentation and demonstration of consoles and other items in the collection. Cables, hardware, power converters, upscalers and tools are stored on shelves under the benches. One table is topped with a cutting mat, the others with anti-static mats. At least one workstation will include a small computer which houses local backup files and a master copy of the RMD holdings database.

Activities which involve heat and fumes (e.g. soldering) take place elsewhere in Milieux, which has designated areas to support such work, such as the maker space in the main TAG lab. Consoles can also be checked out and taken to use in spaces like the MHRC and TAG, which are better suited for group use.

The East end of the depot, by the roll-up door, stores two armchairs, large CRT (cathode ray tube) TVs and other types of monitors. When the depot is in use, the door rolls up and the armchairs and screens move out into the foyer area at the top of the stairs. Typically, one of the consoles from the collection will be hooked up to the TV and available for general use.

Future plans include the addition of a series of display cabinets along a nearby corridor wall, so that the RMD takes on the quality of an exhibit space as well as a storage and work pace. We are also developing the area outside the rollup door as a social space and a display space. This area can be used to demonstrate the use of upscalers like the XRGB Mini Framemeister with older consoles, and for the screening of play demos, unboxing videos and other RMD footage when the lab itself is not open.

Storage space is always at a premium, even assuming that sections of the collection will often be on display in cases elsewhere in Milieux, or on loan to galleries and other

institutions. Ideally the RMD will store consoles and peripherals externally to the original boxes, in archival-quality cardboard containers, which will immediately double the square footage of storage. We may attempt to secure secondary storage elsewhere in the Institute, or with the Concordia library system. The RMD is not equipped to store large collections of removable media, another issue we are discussing with Concordia librarians and archivists.

Nick Montfort and Natalia Fedorova's "[Creative Material Computing in a Laboratory Context](#)" has been extremely useful in the preparation of this document.