Born Digital.
Identifying Intangible Museums

Cary Karp
Director of Internet Strategy and Technology
Swedish Museum of Natural History

President and CEO
Museum Domain Management Association
What’s real?

- possesses physical dimension
- brick and mortar edifice
- real museums = physical museums
- have signs over their doors graven in stone, unequivocally labelling them: MUSEUM
- take considerable time, effort and expense to create
What’s virtual?

- lacks physical dimension
- gives the appearance of reality
- created through the use of computers
- resident on the Internet
- born digital
- digitally borne
If it’s not really there -

How do you know what it really is?
Besides -

• Most museums operate in both the physical and digital realms.

• click and mortar
Also -

- It is easy to verify the legitimacy of the physical component.
- There are no equally clear means for verifying the digital component.
- If it exists exclusively in the digital realm, is there any way to recognize *bona fide* museum activity?
More importantly -

Virtual museums should not be seen exclusively as digital extensions of, or digital surrogates for, physical museums.
VIRTUAL MUSEUM

• is a powerful metaphor that can be applied to the presentation of creative activity and knowledge repositories.

• The current association of this notion with physical museum activity is understandable but imposes what may well prove to be irrelevant and counterproductive contraints.
Is it a museum or isn’t it?

• However virtual museum practice may develop, the term museum is subject to the prior definition of the traditional professional museum community.

• Virtual museums may derive significant legitimacy from being recognized by that professional community.
Answer the question!

• Regardless of any qualifier in its name, a museum is:
  – what the public recognizes as museum
  – what the professional community recognizes as a museum
  – what governmental authorities recognize as a museum
Defining terms

- Popular notions of museum are the result of centuries-long action by the professional museum establishment.
- Legislative notions of museum reflect the same process.
- The International Council of Museums - ICOM - provides an international forum for discussion and codification of a widely accepted definition of the eponymous term.
ICOM says -

• ICOM defines museum in its Statutes.
• There is a core definition of the essential attributes of museums.
• There is an extensive listing of organizational types which, although not generally identified as museums, are considered to be such for the purposes of the definition.
A museum is -

a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.
A museum is also -

• Many things, including:
  – non-profit institutions or organizations undertaking conservation, research, education, training, documentation and other activities relating to museums and museology
  – cultural centers and other entities that facilitate the preservation, continuation and management of tangible or intangible heritage resources (living heritage and digital creative activity)
On the cusp

Although the ICOM Definition does not yet nominally recognize virtual museums, it clearly embraces digital creative activity and other intangible action intended to increase the public understanding of museums.
Recognizing virtually

• Physical institutions exist in contexts that provide reliable clues for assessing their legitimacy.
  – It is unlikely that anyone would erect a building solely to give the appearance of being a museum.

• Virtual institutions can only be assessed on the basis of the digital material that they provide on the Net.
  – Creating a Web site solely to give the appearance of being a virtual museum can take less than an hour and requires technical resources that are readily available to anyone with access to the Net.
Domain names

• An organization conducting activity on the Internet identifies itself by its domain name:
  – mailme@famousmuseum.org
  – www.famousmuseum.org

• A born digital organization is identified by Net users solely by its domain name.
Who’s who?

• How does a user know that famousmuseum.org is really a museum?

• How does a user realize that
  – famous-museum.org
  – famousmuseums.org
  – famousmuseum.net
  are impostors?
  – for example, created as a sales platform for unauthorized reproductions of works held by the actual famousmuseum.org
Web Deception

• A deliberately deceptive Web document can contain both misleading content and correspondingly misleading metadata.

• Assessing the authenticity of a Web document solely on the basis of the data it contains is therefore impossible.

• Some external verification mechanism will be necessary.
TLD Deception

• A name in an uncontrolled top-level domain may be acquired by anyone for any purpose.
• There are tens of thousands of domain names that contain the letter sequence ”museum”, of which only a fraction designate *bona fide* museums and of which many are operated without regard to the interests of the museum community.
The other IC

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers - ICANN - was established in 1998 to coordinate the administration of key aspects of the Domain Name System – DNS.
New TLDs

• One of ICANN’s early concerns was examining the semantic utility of the DNS.
• The notion of chartered top-level domains was conceived to permit new TLDs to be operated in a controlled manner on the basis of clearly stated policies and for the benefit of a clearly defined target community.
.museum

- In November 2000, ICANN selected seven new TLDs for introduction into the DNS.
- One of these was .museum, specifically intended to enable Internet users to recognize *bona fide* museums on the basis of a TLD label that would be directly associated with the ICOM Definition.
One of a kind

• Each of the seven new TLDs was selected to test a specific concept in the development of the DNS
• .museum was the only one associated with the activity of non-commercial organizations
• .museum was the only one associated with cultural activity
Who cares?

• A well-branded museum that expects to be recognized regardless of the platform on which it appears, has probably invested a good deal in establishing its Net identity may not care about the availability of .museum.

• The same museum may, however, have a great deal of concern with freely-available domains that are deliberately confusing corruptions of its own.
Who else cares?

• A museum that does not have domain name with which it is clearly and easily associated is likely to welcome the availability of a dedicated museum TLD.
• A museum that uses the domain name of an otherwise unrelated organization that provides it with a host platform is similarly likely to appreciate a meaningful alternative designation.
• A virtual museum with no other mode of association with the museum community may regard a museum TLD as a *sine qua non*. 
Long-term benefit

- The success of .museum can have two primary results:
  - the realization of the primary goal of enabling the verifiable recognition of museums on the Internet
  - proof of the concept that focused public benefit activity, such as that conducted by the museum sector, provides a useful basis for the establishment of further new TLDs
A cultural sector on the Internet

• The pilot venture is .museum.
• Subsequent TLDs might include:
  – .library
  – .archive
  – .monuments
• There may be benefit in proposing a cluster of such TLDs in a single coordinated proposal.
Virtual culture

• Nascent recognition of the points of separation between virtual and traditional museums must be the focus of rapid development.

• A cultural sector on the Internet cannot be created without giving born digital creative activity its full due.
Conclusion 1

• The creation of .museum is a pivotal event in the development of the DNS.
  – Its success can open the door to a broad cultural sector on the Internet.
  – Its failure can as easily ensure the opposite result.
Conclusion 2

• The recognition of a chartered museum sector on the Internet provides fertile ground for the development of virtual museums
  – as manifestations of hybrid click-and-mortar activity conducted by traditional museums
  – as expressions of activity that harness unique attributes of the Net, and provide benefit to Net users, in manners that have yet to be considered fully in mainstream museology
Further info

• http://musedoma.museum

• http://icom.museum

• http://www.icann.org