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Preserving History: CAMiLEON Revives BBC Domesday Project

01 December 2002

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Researchers at the University of Leeds have rescued the BBC Domesday Project, preserving it for future generations. The CAMiLEON Project has developed software that emulates the obsolete BBC computer and videodisc player on which the original system ran.

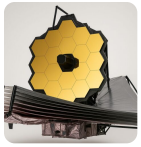
The BBC Domesday project was conceived by the BBC to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the 1086 Domesday book. It formed a social snapshot of life in the UK during the mid eighties. Information was recorded on two virtually indestructible interactive videodiscs that could be accessed using a special BBC Microcomputer system.

The makers had hoped it would be the beginning of a move to digital resources and the end of the written word. Two decades on and "the visual power of video and the flexibility of the computer" have indeed had a major impact on print but not in the way originally

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predicted. The videodiscs far outlived the computer system, without which they prove useless.

The CAMiLEON project is based at the Universities of Leeds and Michigan and has spent the last three years developing strategies for digital preservation and testing them with practical preservation work with materials like BBC Domesday. The project is funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the US-based National Science Foundation (NSF) as part of their strategy for long term digital preservation.

The two videodiscs included contributions from about a million people around the UK: including professional and amateur photographers; journalists and other writers; academics and researchers; cartographers at Ordnance Survey and statisticians at the UK Census bureau; video clips from the BBC and ITV companies; schoolchildren at 10,000 schools and other members of the British public.

CAMiLEON Project manager, Paul Wheatley, said: “BBC Domesday has become a classic example of the dangers facing our digital heritage. Our work has demonstrated that techniques like emulation can provide successful routes to preservation, even with incredibly complex resources like BBC Domesday. But it must be remembered that time is of the essence. We must invest wisely in developing an infrastructure to preserve our digital records before it is too late. We must not make the mistake of thinking that recording on a long-lived medium gives us meaningful preservation.”

The rescued image of the BBC Domesday resource, along with the emulator on which it runs will be deposited at the Public Record Office on the completion of the CAMiLEON project. The PRO is currently investigating copyright issues with the BBC with a view to making the system available to the public once again.

Neil Beagrie, JISC Programme Director for Digital Preservation and Secretary of the Digital Preservation Coalition comments “The emulation of BBC Domesday represents a major milestone in digital preservation. However, digital technologies continue to move forward and so does legislation. Encryption and technical protection measures could make future digital preservation even more difficult or even illegal. The CAMiLEON Project highlights the need for action on legislation and infrastructure to ensure archives, libraries and museums can preserve our digital heritage.”

The CAMiLEON project will be demonstrating its BBC Domesday emulation at the University of Leeds on the 2nd December at 4pm. Speakers will include, Peter Armstrong, the Chairman and Editor of the BBC Domesday Project. Invitations are available from Paul

Wheatley at the address below.

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