

# Sustaining MedArt:

## Assessing the Persistence and Longevity of a Pioneering Digital Humanities Project

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### INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, digital scholarly projects have accreted at a rapid rate, and yet, there is a surprising paucity of analyses on their usability, especially over time. The digital humanities (DH) are an area of research committed to scholarly engagement, but without investigating the ways in which user experiences change over time, digital humanists unwittingly intimidate potential users, and the tools and resources created within their project's scope run the risk of redundancy or failure. Additionally, and most importantly, the lack of usability analyses reduces the likelihood of investment in sustainable digital preservation methods. Low adoption rates or inadequate preservation strategies can be devastating for digital humanists, whose pursuits often require the establishment of a unique knowledge infrastructure, developed through the investment of substantial time and energy. Despite a lack of usability attention, some DH tools and websites manage to persist, continuing to receive a particular set of faithful visitors. However, even this loyal group may drift away, as the digital tools or websites grow increasingly alien to a contemporary audience. **In a digital environment, this study argues, usability is fundamental to sustainability.** Without analyzing this former element, and thereby creating a user knowledge base, successful and responsive digital preservation cannot occur.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

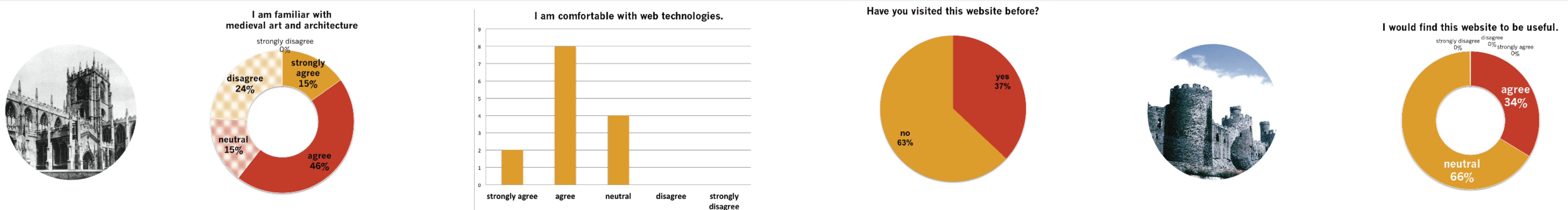
This study focuses on a very long-standing DH project, **"Images of Medieval Art and Architecture"** (<http://www.medart.pitt.edu>), conceived almost two decades ago in 1995. Dr. Alison Stones, now Professor Emerita in the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh, created the MedArt website as a means of collecting images and image metadata for pedagogical and scholarly work. The website was initially committed to promoting "education and research in Medieval art and architecture," and has become an enduring scholarly resource. Emerging during the Internet's infancy, the site has remained surprisingly constant in appearance and functionality throughout the years, but still receives visitors.

This study seeks to understand how/if: **user expectations** + **engagement** → **long-term preservation strategy**

Our study proposes a path towards long-term preservation in the form of a reinterpretation of the project informed by contemporary usability studies. Our early findings suggest that the utility of this resource is fading, in part, because of its stability. This work may also reveal generalizable principles of use to other DH projects focused on image sharing in a scholarly environment.

### METHODS

For the initial stage of this process, we are employing the **Qualtrics survey tool**, provided through the University of Pittsburgh, to conduct usability testing. The survey, disseminated to both Medieval and Renaissance scholars and non-specialists, requires users to complete **2 image-retrieval tasks** and respond to a total of **15 questions**. The creation and implementation of usability analyses reveal not only predominant features or issues inherent to particular tools or resources, but also expose broader conceptual questions that provide further opportunities for development. The process of conducting usability analyses requires a thorough examination of project objectives, and also imposes self-evaluation that might otherwise be lacking.



### ANALYSIS

Analysis of survey results, and the discussions that orbit these findings, lead to recommendations for establishing initial DH project infrastructures and improving end-user experiences. Our preliminary survey responses suggest that **self-reported** experts of Medieval and Renaissance studies do not find "Images of Medieval Art and Architecture" to be a useful website **in its current format**. Of these respondents, 62.5% consider themselves to be comfortable with web technologies, yet only 37.5% of this cohort reported that the first task was easy to complete. This may be due, in part, to the fact that the first task required the survey-taker to locate images on the website using a search term that was not actually explicitly incorporated into the site. Furthermore, the site lacks navigational features that are almost universal in websites, more generally, so even participants who are comfortable with technology may not necessarily be able to use this website. **If engagement with the website correlates to sustainability, this site is in peril of obsolescence, as even expert scholars find it difficult to use.** According to the premise that usability equates with sustainability, these initial findings suggest that our investigation is absolutely vital to the survival of this website.

#### References

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