



## Introduction and Intentions

The old models of commercial art distribution are, in the contemporary digitally dominant world, no longer applicable. The Internet, which is, in essence, the greatest and most prolific information copying and distribution machine so far conceived, has already changed the way that media of all kinds is sold, shared and stolen. When an artistic work is created and distributed digitally, no physical artifact ever exists, and the old assumptions about where value exists in an artwork are challenged.

A line must be drawn somewhere in the cybersand. When there is no physical artifact (that which in previous artistic terminology would have been called “the original”) a new understanding of the nature of and the relationships between art, artifacts and artistry must be achieved. Something must exist as a unique and original expression of an artistic concept. Something, at some time, in some place, must be considered the source point of the work, the “original” - the part of an artwork that can exist as both the creative core of the work, and as a commodity.

The aim of the **Digital Originals** group is to address many of the faults and inadequacies inherent in applying an outdated and inflexible valuation paradigm, which evolved as a methodological system to qualitatively assess the value of physical artifacts designed to transfer information in a non-physical sense. This system aims to revolutionize the entire way that digital art is treated as a phenomenon, as entertainment and as a commodity.

**The Digital Originals group** wish to facilitate discussion and create a consensus regarding these issues by bringing together an on-line community of artists, collectors, museum folk, art historians and critics. We wish to offer plans for a model by which artists and collectors can buy and sell digital artworks, whilst facilitating the mass distribution of content, at no cost to the consumer. How this will be achieved, and why these aims are becoming more and more important, as we go forward into the confusing realm of the new digital reality, will become increasingly apparent as we dissect what this system is, how it will operate, and why **Digital Originals** represents a good model for commercial and independent artistic enterprise in the digital realm.

## What is an Digital Original, and how does it work?

Firstly, the **digital art is created** by whatever means an artist would usually create their digital art. Generally speaking, there is no reason that any computer program or peripheral device could not be employed, nor any reason why more traditional means of content generation cannot be digitized.

Secondly, a **globally unique Internet address or domain name** is acquired that effectively acts as a type of title for the work. For example, as in the case of the first **Digital Original** work by Colin Colorful - [www.spamcans.com](http://www.spamcans.com). Usually, this is simply a matter of paying a small registration fee, payable annually to an Internet registrar such as [www.GoDaddy.com](http://www.GoDaddy.com) or similar.

Thirdly, the **artwork is framed by a website**, and this website – a combination of its’ content and globally unique domain name – become the “digital” original of the digital artwork, and are treated from this point as a cohesive package.

This method is most easily applicable to digital visual art, such as computer generated paintings, videos, photo montage, Flash and 3-D works, and can easily be applied to multimedia works such as those that are sound based, or recordings of physical installations; even music, films and books when these are primarily artworks, rather than consumer goods. The same basic principles are applicable to any work that can be distributed via the Internet – which, in our accelerated world of ever-increasing bandwidth and processing power, will soon be anything which does not have a primary physical form.

## Value

How does art and in particular digital art attain value?

This is a much debated and studied question and there are many theories. The very top end of the art market is an imperfect market sometimes without price transparency, dominated by a few vested interests, providing a lot of room for what some have termed “the irrational premium” (i.e. that extra value attributed to a work by a particularly wealthy buyer who has a personal connection to the work which pushes the price beyond any logical rationale).

At the more earthy level, through innovation, experimentation and intuition, artists create aesthetic and conceptual artifacts. These are, typically, sold to the primary market – first buyers and then over time through the secondary market to later collectors and museums. The price is usually (though, notably, not always) reflective of the consensual levels of these achievements and once on the secondary market, the provenance of the work becomes more important. The more individual, unique and beautiful these objects are, the more acclaimed by critics, studied by art historians, museum folk and previously being owned by established collectors, the more valuable they are likely to be.

Thus, like in the old property market saying – “Location, location, location” - it can be said of the art market “Provenance, provenance, provenance” - who has owned the work? Where it has been kept and displayed? And (after Dali especially) proof and agreement among experts is required of its actual originality. This last point is made doubly troubling in a world where it is possible now to copy almost any work.

This ties in with our current understanding of valuing other physical commodities, which can, in essence, be surmised by the following rule: the rarer or scarcer something is, the more valuable it becomes.

Digital art still has this problem. It is easily reproducible and distributable at a very low or even no cost, which presents a problem for artists and collectors as it means that the price of digital art, as well as any other digitally stored data, falls instantaneously to zero (or as near to as makes no odds), once the work is made available in public on a distribution system, or inexpensive media.

We believe that the natural human intuition around digital art automatically leads us to think there is no “original” or if there was one it would be worthless as it is easily duplicated and thus the scarcity value is diminished and thus not worth “collecting”.

And this has led to a commercial devaluation of the digital art medium and the associated industry. At its best, digital art is more complex and difficult than other artistic mediums. In terms of its potential to stimulate and inspire awe, beauty, creativity, craft, imagination and intellectual challenge, it can be far superior. More importantly it is now the dominant visual, written and auditory medium, and will become even more dominant going forward.

However, if artists can now get high paying, often very creative and stimulating work at web publishing, film production and video games development companies where they are producing commercial art, and they can't sell their digital art due to the devaluation of the art original in a digital world, we could end up in a world where art for art sake dies and is replaced by art only within a commercial context and all the limitations of the intellectual growth of culture, that that will bring with it. This would seem to leave the creation of digital art, as a practice not worth the render time

There is a practicable solution to this problem, as outlined earlier – the creation of consensual community support for the idea of the “digital” original.

Under such a consensus, an artist can register and host their digital work at a globally unique Internet address domain name and declare this to be the “original”. The global uniqueness of the associated website, its legal registration and its contents then form a unique good that can be bought and sold without fear of duplication and with full proof of provenance. This system has a number of fringe benefits, also. These will be discussed later in this essay.

### **Image vs Value**

Is the value of a painting contained in the aesthetic quality of the image? No. If this were the case, a high quality reproduction of, for arguments sake, *The Mona Lisa* would have the same value as the painting by Da Vinci that sits in the Louvre – which, obviously, it does not have.

The original has a value which any reproduction lacks, value brought about through the consensus by the community that it is actually the “original” - and the treatment it has received as an artifact in this context. Generally speaking, the mystical qualities of “the original” mean that:

- a) there is only one,
- b) the art cognoscenti agree it is the original,
- c) a lot of people want to own it, and this drives up the “value” of the work.

Thus – one of the main ways art achieves value, is when there is more demand for a work than there are copies of the work. This is a basic principle of the supply-and-demand system of a market economy.

But when we wind up with pure data being the “original” artwork, what do we do then? To answer this, we need to look at several aspects of ownership in the context of owning an original work of art.

### **Property Rights**

One reason why owning an original artwork is such an attractive investment is the easy transferral of associated property rights.

If one purchases a work of original art, they can:

1. display it where they choose and to who they choose,
2. alter, modify (even destroy, if they wish) the work,
3. rent it out to who they wish, when they wish; and
4. give/resell it to whoever they wish at any time.

This is a feature lacking from digital art, as a rule. When we are talking about a single digitally generated work (for arguments sake, a visual image stored as a .jpg file) we can see that only some of these points hold true. Yes, the owner of the image can display it where they choose. Unlike a conventional artwork, they have the option to display it in as many locations as they have screens to display it (not to mention the ability to render hard copies via printing). They can certainly alter or modify the work, and they could delete it (the digital equivalent of destruction). Though we certainly do not recommend destruction of art unless this is the art performance itself, it is important to the entire concept of ownership, that the owner of a work/object has this right.

However – how can one rent a digital file to someone else? This happens any time that one hires a DVD from a video store, but what are we really renting? It is a nice idea to assume that data alone can be rented or hired, but this is plain naivety. Data is infinitely reproducible. If one person rents data from another, the renter does not lose data whilst the rental arrangement is in place. Likewise, once the rental period ends, what is to stop the renter keeping a copy of the data? And, if this is the case, how does one distinguish between the selling and renting of data?

A trick question. One can't – and this is the point. Data, in the sense that it is a binary representation of information coded by some sort of algorithm which can reproduce the intended aesthetic or functional information contained within, cannot be bought and sold as a commodity in its own right. To do so is to sell nothing except a pattern. This is the main reason why digital art has achieved neither the recognition nor the level of interest that it deserves.

### **Provenance**

So, what changes when we employ the **Digital Originals** system? Firstly, data stops being the focus of the issue. Instead, provenance – that is, the origins of an artwork and its history of ownership – becomes the important issue. This is achieved primarily through the application of a globally unique domain name to each work and registering this at an Internet registrar, a globally registered organization that follows a set of internationally agreed ownership rules. This means that it is impossible to have multiple owners of the same digital work (as the case might be when data alone is the focus) and likewise impossible for artistic fraud to be perpetrated in terms of the selling of another “original” or such as the selling and distribution of data, that is not the distributor's to begin with.

As discussed previously, provenance is a major determining factor of an artworks ongoing value. In fact, the major contributor to any artworks perceived value is the amount of money that changed hands the last time it was sold. In the world of physical paintings, this figure can be extremely high. One of the problematic aspects with this system, though, is the immense amount of time and effort dedicated to determining the authenticity of a work of art to be sold or bought. Many specialist examiners are called in to study every aspect of the work imaginable, and based on their conclusions, the artistic community makes an essentially “best-guess” judgment about the potential value of the work. This leads to frequent misappropriations of authorship, artistic frauds, authenticity disputes and many other unpleasant quarrels for art collectors, museums and galleries.

This is not an issue with **Digital Original** works. Firstly, a domain name is unique, and cannot be copied. No matter how many times one tries to buy or sell a domain name, only one person (or one group entity) can own it at a time, and this information is monitored by external, third parties such as [www.whois.org](http://www.whois.org), and many others.

In addition to this, as text can easily be incorporated into the design of a **Digital Original** work, the entire history of a work can be stored and presented within the work itself. This means that **Digital Originals** will be one of the most secure forms of artistic investment ever conceived – there is no chance of not receiving the genuine article, nor is there the chance of fraud or accidental damage. Also, a **Digital Original** cannot be stolen, as physical artworks frequently are.

### **Exclusivity and Ownership**

It might occur to many potential buyers to hold exclusive viewing rights to an artwork. Certainly in the case of a conventional work, such as a painting, it is quite easy to prevent people from looking at a work you don't want them to: simply take the work away and hide it. Without wanting to overtly promote the idea of withholding viewing privileges from the general public, it is entirely possible for the owner of a **Digital Original** to restrict or control the overall number (or create a specific list) of people who can view an artwork.

By using a *secured connection*, the same type of Internet connection used during eCommerce or Internet banking, one can apply encryption to their **Digital Originals** site. To allow access, it is possible to either have a username/password protection system (which would usually be the case) or to supply the site with a specific list of IP addresses (a numerical system which differentiates between every computer on the Internet) which provides more difficult, but more secure, protection to the site.

This means that it is entirely possible to make access to viewing a **Digital Original** work as exclusive as the owner desires. Viewing privileges may be sold, or there is the possibility of loaning the work out to a museum – in much the same way that paintings are loaned to museums today.

### **Copyright Issues**

When, in the familiar physical world, an artist sells a work, the copyright is not typically transferred with it. This becomes quite a tricky issue when contemplated from a digital art standpoint. When a digital work is sold, it is typically copied. Thus, the proud new owner of a digital image/film/audio recording (or whatever else might be sold) gets his copy on a CD/DVD/BluRay disc, and that's that. This means that purchasing art would be treated in the same way that purchasing a film is treated today. Obviously this is not desirable, as a stand-alone DVD copy of a film is of decidedly reduced quality from the original, and no ownership or property rights are transferred with the purchase.

Thus, when purchasing a film/music/audio CD/DVD, we're not really buying a copy of that artwork. We are, basically, paying a small fee to be "allowed" to watch it, and a mechanical reproduction fee for the printing of the data to a portable format (and designing the DVD menu system, the case layout and so on) and the transport/warehousing costs associated with its distribution.

This would be the equivalent of purchasing a print of an artwork – really only the mechanical production fees for the art and its distribution container are paid for (not to mention the original author of the work seeing very little of the end purchase price). In fact, buying a print of an artwork actually gives the buyer a greater level of control over an image, as there are no licensing restrictions preventing them from public displaying of the print – unlike video and audio recordings, which usually have quite severe limitations preventing use of the work for general display.

Thus, we have a situation which requires immediate thought and attention be applied. We would love to hear from artists, collectors and critics regarding this issue, as well as from legal specialists who know the specifics and subtleties of copyright law (or those who can speculate how these legal structures might adapt or erode due to the continual technological development of the Internet). One potential solution would, simply, be to give the artist or buyer the option to negotiate the inclusion of copyright as part of the overall sale package.

If copyrights are not sold as part of a **Digital Originals** package, what other forms could an artwork be distributed as? Artists have been creating prints/lithographs/photographs of their own work as either consumer goods or as limited edition series for quite some time, and, for many artists, this constitutes a majority source of income.

This could continue to be the case with **Digital Originals** – the existence of a hard-copy representation of an image does threaten neither the originality nor the provenance of the domain name/website/artwork package. However, there are obvious concerns raised by this practice in this context: how do artists, collectors, critics and academic observers draw the line between original and derivations? Could artists create several unique domain names with the same content and claim that they are “original”? Would this count as a limited edition run of secondary derivations?

Our view is that this is similar to many artists’ current analog based practices where popular works become an artist’s “theme” and many similar works are produced, but often the first and most unique of those themed series works, are worth more than the later and similar ones.

Artists should have some measure of freedom to follow up their own work with alternate versions, derivations and appropriations. Artistic history is the story of innovation and appropriation in somewhat equal proportions, after all. On the other hand, collectors and art owners should have some measure of guarantee that their “original” will stay an original regardless of other endeavors that the artist responsible undertakes thereafter.

We at the Digital Originals group feel that this particular issue needs a public forum, where all the varied views and opinions can be thrown into the mix. If you have any feelings or thoughts about this matter, feel more than free to jump onto the forums and share your view. The future of artistic enterprise is not going to evolve without your input!

### **Digital Signatures and Anti-fraud Protections**

How does one purchasing a Digital Original know they have the primary version of a work, recognized by the artist and the artistic community as such? Not that uncertainty about authorship is a new phenomenon in the art world – the history of artistry is rampant with misappropriations of authorship and very cleverly engineered frauds. Surely, once art becomes digitized, the certainty of collectors that they own “the genuine article” is going to be harder to come by.

This is not necessarily so. We are currently exploring many potential solutions to this highly contentious issue. The required outcome of such a solution would be as follows:

#### **1. That each work contains a digital equivalent of a signature.**

Artists have been signing paintings as long as they have been painting them. Our collective relationship with creative media manufacturers (to give artists the most generic title available) leads to us having vicarious, but very real, relationships with certain creators of art. Thus, a **Digital Original** needs to be signed in some way that viewers can be quite certain as to the legitimacy of authorship – at the very least so they can track down other works by the same artist (if any exist).

## **2. That the digital signature is unique and non-copyable.**

A signature that can be signed by or which can represent multiple artists is not a desirable outcome. Much in the same way as an art movement or collective can create works that are extremely varied in content and quality, a signature (digital or otherwise) which represents multiple content creators is not really a statement of anything. Thus, each individual artist should have their own signature; content with multiple creators could sign with all applicable names, use one of the group as a figurehead, or create a collective alias and sign their work as that. There is no reason that accompanying information cannot explain the technicalities of the signing, provided there is a clear set of guidelines stating what is and what is not allowed under a to-be-drafted fair-exchange policy.

In addition, the signature must specify exactly which artwork the particular artist is signing. It should, ideally, contain the domain name of the specific work being signed, as well as a general outline of content. In this way, the digital signature can operate much as a statement of authenticity; in fact, there is no reason why a hard-copy statement of authenticity should not be provided to a buyer upon request. It is proposed that such a certificate be available on request to potential art investors.

## **3. A digital signing system must be easily for a general viewer to access.**

There is little use having a complicated meta data attached to the source file of a work for two reasons. Firstly, this is often easy to fake, and typically, cannot be used as file-type containers for content any more advanced than text. Secondly, and most importantly, a very large number of potential art buyers are not familiar with what a meta data is (and fair enough). Thus, a digital signature would be more useful for all concerned if it was a separate, stand alone file of some kind, of a generic enough format that most users of the system are able to access the file, and understand exactly what the digital signature means both explicitly and by implication.

## **4. There can be no doubt as to an artist's perceived relationship to a work.**

The digital signature must allow the artist to state their own convictions as to their relationship to their own work. The vast majority of works considered "original" are so because that was what the artist stated was the original work. Thus, a digital signing system should allow an artist to make an extended statement regarding their authorship of the work in such a way that there can be no doubt as to their intentions.

### **Thus:**

Text is not a useful option for this purpose, as it is entirely prone to fraud, due to it being extremely difficult to verify authorship of text in the digital world. Even an audio recording can be manipulated subtly and without general detection. However, a combination of video footage with synchronized sound is very difficult to change or edit, particularly if there are no pre-existing edit points in the video.

Ergo, the proposed format for a digital signature is a video recording. Most likely, this would consist of a close-up of the artist responsible explaining their relationship to the work and endorsing the uniqueness of the domain name it is attached to. Ideally, this should be done in one shot with no edit points.

However, not all artists would want or allow their image to be broadcast over the Internet. This is quite understandable, as there are many individuals of many backgrounds who, for various reasons, would not want an image of themselves broadcast worldwide. Thus, we need to solve the problem of the digital signature in this context. If an artist in the position of having to validate their work did not want their image shared publicly, how could they guarantee the provenance of their own work? What would constitute suitable proof without compromising the artist's right to privacy?

If you have the solution, an idea or question regarding this issue, jump straight on in to the forum and share your two cents with us...

## Nature of the Digital Medium

How can an infinitely copyable stream of 1's and 0's – which is all any computerized data is, after all – have a value? What methods do we have for appraising the value of an aesthetic work derived from interpretation of this data stream? The more research one does into this perplexing oversight in modern commercial art, the more one finds that there really isn't an adequate answer to this question.

In his 1994 essay *The Economy of Ideas*, John P. Barlow analyses the value of information in the digital age, and draws several very interesting conclusions. He shows that, historically, information was freely shared and commonly owned, only the medium of information transfer was subject to ownership, copyright law and patenting. Thus, one could patent the telephone, but not the conversations people have on them; one could patent the bottle wine comes in, but not the wine itself. Thus, he proposes, information is *not* a commodity, but an event, unfolding in time.

In addition, data, in the same way as information, is entirely reproducible – that is, by sharing an idea with someone you don't lose access to that idea in the same way as a physical object. Example: sharing your files with someone doesn't prevent you using your computer, but selling your computer does! Thus, the computer definitely has inherent value, whilst the information doesn't. Perhaps most importantly, Barlow argues that that information is a process, not a thing – or, in his words, a “verb, not a noun”. The implications of these observations when applied to Internet distributed art are profound.

Thus, an artwork distributed over the Internet can be broken down to just a stream of 1's and 0's – not being anything in a physical sense, except a *process by which it is replicated*. An interesting concept to consider, as it strongly debases the model of selling information as a commodity.

## Standardization of the Web

The Internet is not only a revolutionary communication tool, it is a worldwide standard – rather, a series of standards – for information transfer. This makes it an exceedingly useful medium for viewing, hosting and distributing digital art. In fact, the Internet – being accessible from all types of personal computers (being Windows systems, Apple, Linux etc) and many other devices, such as mobile phones – is the most universally accessible network on the Earth.

In addition, there is a certain level of empiricism to the addressing of Internet content. For example, if one was to enter [www.digitaloriginals.org](http://www.digitaloriginals.org), one would be directed to this site from any computer in the world (assuming an active Internet connection). This is the equivalent, in digital terms, of a physical address; it is empirical, unchanging and, most importantly for the purposes of this exercise, utterly unique and non-copy able, in other words property or capital.

The Internet is also good at distributing a wide variety of file formats, most of which can be read natively by Internet browser software packages (such as Internet Explorer or Safari). Examples of these, sticking for a moment to only visual image containers, include: .jpg, .gif, .bmp, .tiff and so on. Of course, these are not presented alone – the context in which the images appear is entirely customizable. By using web design standards (such as HTML or PHP) combined with specialist but widely supported applications (such as Flash) and languages (such as Javascript) one has practically complete control over the look, feel and content of their Online presentations.

This means that **Digital Original** works can be of any digital media, or, in fact, multimedia. There is no reason at all that programs cannot constitute a part (or even the whole of) a **Digital Original** – this would certainly be an unusual form for an artwork to take, but arguably no bigger a transition than was made in the painting world, when artists first started using oil based pigments; something which now we consider so integral to the evolution of artistry as both form and craft that it's hard to imagine what we would have done without it.

There are, naturally, some problems to be overcome with regard to hardware and software standardization. Returning to our example of a digital image stored as a .jpg file for a moment, we can reason that each different system will display the image slightly differently. This will be due to several potential variations. In terms of software, different Internet browsers will render pages in different ways, and the contextual look of an image may change dramatically.

However, the variations in appearance of Internet pages from browser to browser is less problematic than it may seem. In January, 2009, for example approximately 75% of web users were using Microsoft's IE (versions 6, 7, 8) and 20% using Mozilla's Firefox with the rest accounting for only 5%. Thus, standardizing pages for only two browser types practically guarantees that at least 95% of viewers see a **Digital Originals** page in a standard format as intended. We are extremely interested in hearing from web developers about these issues.

What often presents a bigger problem is non-standard hardware issues, combined with user configurable systems with questionable configurations. Let's assume for a moment that every single computer on Earth was running identical hardware and software configurations (of course, they're not) and that the only variation between them was the type and size of screen used. Some systems still had an old-school VGA 640 x 480 CRT (looks like a standard definition television from the 1980's), whilst some systems had a modern HDMI 1920 x 1080 LCD monitor (looks like a large, high definition television from now) and other systems fell somewhere in between. (This is a simplification – there are many display devices considerably better and worse than those in the examples in relatively common use.)

How might the appearance of a **Digital Originals** page be affected by these differences? Obviously, at least the framing of works would be quite different, as well as the perceived color hues and depth. Compounding these concerns are the sheer number and diversity of graphics cards installed now in computers, as well as the many customizable settings on readily available screens (such as brightness, contrast, hue, etc) which many, if not most, average users simply don't know how to set. Even in many "professional" studio environments, monitor settings are often imperfect; even if they are set right (most likely through the use of expensive, specialized equipment designed to do exactly that) over time the responsiveness of monitors tends to degrade.

These could be major problems for artists who spend great deals of time trying to get their artwork "exactly right" (whatever that looks like). It also leads to concerns when it comes to physical installations of digital works – where, presumably, a screen (possibly with a frame) could be set up inside a gallery, displaying the digital work in much the same way as a traditional painting would be seen. On the positive side of things, this would allow the artist to do interesting and different things with their digital works, such as creating motion, montage or even being able to include a soundtrack to their works. On the downside, it comes right back to the various issues surrounding hardware standardization.

We see a partial solution for artists and distributors to create custom application specific derivations of **Digital Original** works. In this way, a DVD (or BluRay) disc could be created specifically for the home theater, and **Digital Original derivatives** could therefore be marketed directly for use in the home. This certainly reduces the need for a computer with an active Internet connection as part of the required hardware for viewing **Digital Originals** works, as well as take some concern away from standardized hardware issues (DVD, for example, is a highly standard format, and will play in an extremely similar way when played in any player throughout the world).

However, this would be the equivalent of a print of lithograph in the analogy of painting due to the easy reproduction and therefore the inherent problems with lack of scarcity, provenance etc. as previously discussed.

Another possible solution is one that is soon coming: that is, the onward march of technology towards new, innovative designs and features which would today seem like science fiction. One of these developments is *surface computing*, currently being developed and marketed by Microsoft. In this paradigm, the Internet enabled computer monitor sits flat as the surface of a table, and is operated by touch. This would be an extremely attractive option to be used as a virtual gallery for **Digital Originals** collectors to display their collection in their home or office, as it is a very attractive design combined with perfect functionality for the purposes of an interactive art display. In addition, as the surface computer design looks suspiciously like a coffee table, this automatically places the screen at an extremely prominent point in the room, and makes whatever is displayed on it an attractive conversation piece.

And things are only going to get more and more advanced. As screen technology becomes cheaper, thinner and more photo-real, there is no reason not to have many screens in the home dedicated to displaying digital art. This is only a stepping-stone to the final solution; a home or office where every wall was a screen, and repainting the entire building could be achieved in seconds via a settings menu. In this case, every surface in the building could be used as art space, with a constantly changing line-up of digital works being constantly cycled through.

These are only a few ideas – the possibilities of combining artistic enterprise with the unfolding technologies which could aid it are almost limitless. This is only the starting point for a much more in depth dialogue, which we invite you to participate in. Keep reading, or jump into the forums.

## **Benefits of the Digital Originals concept...**

### **...for Artists**

Why would an artist want to support the **Digital Originals** concept?

Well, for one, using the world wide web as the medium of choice as the digital artwork original instantly places the original on the world stage. The Internet is a global phenomenon: any collector from anywhere, any gallery, any museum and any critic can access what you have created with no more than a few words typed into a computer. In terms of artist promotion, it is hard to imagine a better, or more accessible, forum.

Furthermore, once the **Digital Original** is sold, it is anticipated that many collectors would leave public access to the work unchallenged – in addition to philosophical motivations to do so, the more known an image is in the consciousness of society, the more of a demand there is to own that image, and this will only lead to higher demand (ergo prices) for the work and others by the same artist.

Many artists would allow creative non-commercial common copyright licenses, allowing anyone on the web to copy the image to their own or other websites and download it onto their PC's at their own choice. The "Free access and distribution" business model has worked wonders for Google, YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and many other digitally based content providers / media, in that it built their audiences dramatically, and once they reached mass numbers, they could later make money from selling advertising, subscriptions etc.

Similarly but of course not by selling advertising, digital artist can build up critical mass and acclaim on the web, by allowing reproduction and distribution of the invaluable images far and wide, will still keeping the value of the digital original based at the registered domain name.

A website format for a digital art original allows far more information / critique / explanations / provenance / press and feedback to be added to the work via additional pages of content alongside the actual work, if discreetly laid out. This is particularly well demonstrated in Colin Colorful's seminal work [www.SpamsCans.com](http://www.SpamsCans.com), which includes all of these elements and more.

These benefits before simply can't be afforded to an physical analog works, which by their very natures don't display, handle and travel with multimedia additions very well.

Once displayed in a directory of digital art, that the digital originals concept will naturally leads to, the cost of an exhibition and display are significantly reduced. One can set up the entire system, complete with domain name and basic web design, generally for less outlay, than one would spend on a canvas and paints.

It is envisaged that [www.DigitalOriginals.org](http://www.DigitalOriginals.org) will provide a free directory of digital art, as well as standard web templates that digital artists can use to create the sites to display their works. Once the website is published, the work is entered straight into the public forum, reducing the need for expensive and often difficult transportation costs and extended public exhibitions of the work.

### ...for Collectors

There are many reasons why supporting the Digital Originals conceptual framework is good for collectors.

From an investment perspective the most important of these, is the security in knowing that the work purchased cannot be replicated and that it therefore has in even stronger legal protections and proof of provenance, than its physical counterparts and so will be easily marketable in the envisioned future.

Secondly the costs of display, storage, transportation and insurance are fractional compared to their physical counterparts, this allowing for less leakage and a better long term return on the investment.

For collectors whose main aim to support the arts and to preserve the world's cultural heritage; one of the more obvious benefits revolves around the potential to display owned works. Rather than, as is typically the case when purchasing an original artwork, security being a large concern, **Digital Original** works cannot be stolen, and cannot be damaged in the same way as physical artifacts.

By being displayed on the Internet, the original work is available to anyone with a sufficient Internet connection and therefore to many more people than could ever see a physical work in a museum or any other real world location.

Furthermore even private collectors often have no space for all their works and so many end up in storage out of sight and beyond the cultural memesphere, with all the drawbacks that attach thereto.

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Another potential benefit of owning a **Digital Original** is the potential revenue source it could generate. For example, it would be possible to secure the domain name address, and allow viewing of works on a subscription or pay-per-view system. Alternatively, there is the possibility of licensing the website for display in a museum, in much the same way that artworks are currently loaned in this manner. Of course, loaning a digital work is somewhat desirable over a physical, as there is no risk of it being damaged or stolen (saving huge insurance costs) and the owner can still look at the artwork whilst it is on loan. The benefits of having the option, to showcase works in many locations at once is extremely desirable.

### **...for Museums**

As some of the largest owners and custodians of artworks worldwide, most of the benefits associated with collectors above, will also accrue to museums.

As custodians of our cultural heritage most museums are directed to collect, preserve, study and exhibit the artistic creations of our past and present art history for the intellectual benefit of the culture as a whole.

Naturally as many of these institutions are non-profit government run or charity based, they need to show, on an ongoing basis, their cultural value to society and how they are measuring this. Most often this is in visitor numbers, significant works purchased, significant art historical exhibitions and prudent use of resources.

The display of digital works in museums today has similar problems to physical works, and other problems as well such as the cost of the equipment, to the lack of PC display, color, software and resolution standards, as well as the lack of “display space” on the actual equipment.

The Internet has helped this display problem a lot with the ability to digitize works in a fairly standardized format, so that even if they are not available physically for viewing either digitally or physically, then they may be made available on the web, and most likely from a database directory with incorporated search functionality.

The digital originals concept goes even one step further, by standardizing a format for standalone digital works, that will not only make them easy to display and find universally, but more importantly will provide proof of provenance, alongside all the critical study and acclaim in one single interface. The security provided here is particularly important due to the number and turnover of people working in these institutions and the access they have to the digital files.

### **...for Art Appreciators**

The **Digital Originals** framework will, hopefully, lead to large numbers of hitherto unknown digital artists displaying and exhibiting their work on an unprecedented scale due to its viable commercial model. The benefits of this for art connoisseurs and appreciators is obvious: more exhibitions, more often, more work and more artists – all with less travel, less logistics and lower costs.

It is anticipated that the majority of **Digital Original** works will remain on display on the Internet long after being sold. As it is of great benefit to owners and collectors to keep their works on display as familiarity tends to increase the sales price of artworks, it is likewise advantageous for appreciators of art, as the work will have a longer exhibition on-line than they could ever attain in a physical gallery space.

### **...for Humanity as a Whole**

It is entirely likely that we, as a species, stand on the brink of something truly amazing happening to art, culture and information. For the first time in history, we have the ability to create, share and modify raw data at a rate never before imagined, let alone experienced. Whilst this offers limitless potential, we must remember that everything we understand now is grounded in an understanding of reality where these things are not possible.

Thus, we have a terribly large job before us of trying to refit our inherit assumptions about what is information, what is data, what is property (of both the physical and intellectual sense) and, especially, rethink our assumptions about what these things are worth. This becomes doubly true as we move towards a world of such technological innovation and excellence that data becomes so easily copy able that not only are things no longer deleted, they are copied endlessly as insurance against accidental data loss. Binary information storage will become so plentiful that we, as a species, simply won't be able to fill it. Once this immense storage and information processing capabilities are installed directly into the human brain – this is not nearly as science-fiction as it might sound – we will enter a world where physical objects are much less significant than they are now.

It is this world that will most benefit from the work that **Digital Originals** is doing now. Much in the same way that a developing country lays down an exhaustive transportation infrastructure long before such a thing is required (or should have done, in the case of many countries), we now need to lay down specific exits from the information superhighway to make sure that we can still undertake commerce as we have come to know it in a time when all physical interaction and objects are taken out of the commerce system.

But the question raised at the beginning of this discussion still stands: how do we value a theoretically never-ending stream of bits, 1's and 0's, that can be endlessly replicated? The answer, we don't. We value the origin point of the data, the zero-point; what, in a simpler age, would be referred to as "the original". Said another way: **it is not the data that is valuable, it is the source.**

The **Digital Original** is the source point of an artwork. Though a copy can be copied as many times as deemed desirable (and long past that, should anyone care to do so) there is only one accepted source of the data available to anyone anywhere; the **Digital Original**. This is the name of the work as it enters the collective consciousness, the unique address which distinguishes this packet of data from all other datum in the world. It is a single unique reference point – a nexus between copy and source.

**www.DigitalOriginals.org** is a website that represents a model by which artists can continue to produce their work in a freelance way. At the same time, it is a meeting place where art can be viewed, bought and sold, or artists commissioned for specific tasks. Perhaps most importantly, **Digital Originals** just might change what we think of as "original".

### **Specifically Cited Sources:**

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