

ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN MAP LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

**BULLETIN**

**Here Today, Here Tomorrow? Preserving Objects After the Retirement of Digital Platforms**

**GIS Trends**

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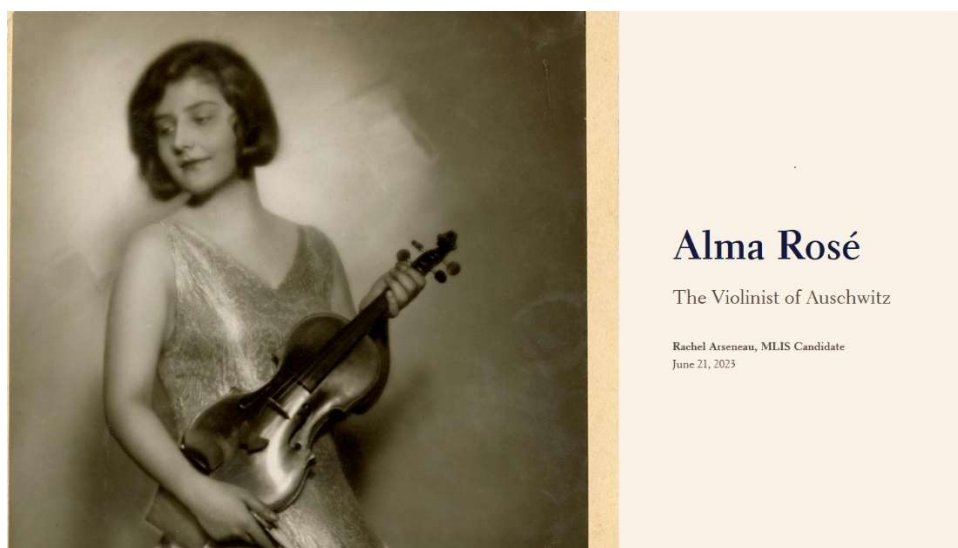
**Review**

If you've been working with GIS in the past several years, you probably know about, or at least have heard of, Esri StoryMaps. They have been around since 2013<sup>1</sup>, and are part of the Esri ecosystem. Combining maps, text, images, videos, and other digital objects, StoryMaps offer a compelling multimodal method of presenting information narratives. The current modes of StoryMap creation are more user-friendly - a far cry from the custom built methods, which are still around in more open-source tools.

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<sup>1</sup> Evans, Owen. "Classic Story Map Transition Timeline (December 2022)." *ArcGIS Blog* (blog). Accessed July 19, 2024. <https://www.esri.com/arcgis-blog/products/arcgis-storymaps/announcements/classic-story-map-transition-timeline-december-2022/>.

2019 saw the introduction of ArcGIS StoryMaps, and the previous platform shifting into "Classic Story Maps". The templates from the classic platform became various elements in the new. Esri has announced the retirement of the classic platform, slated for October 2025. As the platform and templates are being retired, so too will their content – any story map currently on a classic platform will need to be relocated to an ArcGIS StoryMap, or it will be deleted.



*Sample Story Map created by Rachel Arseneau<sup>2</sup>*

In a presentation at the IASSIST & CARTO 2024 conference, Melinda Kernik<sup>3</sup> presented on this topic and issues of preserving them as digital objects. Web crawlers struggle with some of the script tools used; third-party preservation apps do better but are unable to capture proprietary services and some embedded content; and static versions (e.g. pdf exports of the story map) capture basics of the information but not the dynamic nature of its presentation, thereby flattening and reducing the actual information presented to a static document. This has the benefit of moving the material to a more stable format, and offering more tools for digital preservation while having the drawback of changing the presentation (and thus changing the content – since the medium is also the message, as McLuhan<sup>4</sup> wrote) and requiring extra work on behalf of the creator, assuming that they know about the pending change; have the time and capacity to do the work;

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<sup>2</sup> Image reference: Arseneau, Rachel. "Alma Rosé: The Violinist of Auschwitz". *Bulletin - Association of Canadian Map Libraries and Archives (ACMLA)*, no. 173 (April 1, 2024): 7. Accessed August 19, 2024. <https://openjournals.uwaterloo.ca/index.php/acmla/article/view/5683>.

<sup>3</sup> Kernik, M. Digital Narratives in Flux: Navigating Preservation Challenges for Classic ESRI Story Maps. Zenodo, doi:10.5281/zenodo.11392233. IASSIST & CARTO 2024, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

<sup>4</sup> McLuhan, Marshall, and W. Terrence Gordon. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Critical ed., Gingko Press, 2003.

and are invested in preserving the information, or even have an understanding of what preservation looks like.

The question of preservation does highlight some further issues in StoryMaps, and in digital content more generally. Is everything worth preserving? Should we keep every StoryMap created, or every digital object created? Many are created solely for training purposes, or as items for a class, or intended as an ephemeral item for an undefined but, ultimately, limited time period. While we often try to preserve everything, the amount and nature of content published is such that not everything can or should be preserved. This brings one to consider the nature of the role of librarians and archivists as information – what's past is prologue<sup>5</sup>.

We will not delve too deeply into the ethics of creation of digital platforms without modes of long-term preservation here. That's a subject for a longer research paper. However, it does bear saying that we have been burdened by information formats that don't have a reliable means of preservation. We are just past 30 years of the World Wide Web, and despite the work done in the information field so far, we cannot know how long-term our long-term digital preservation strategies will truly be, and new information tools pop up regularly. Between bit rot, format changes, or some little catastrophe to the physical server(s) it lives on (after all, even "the cloud" is a physical data centre somewhere, burning resources to suck power to running major cooling systems in the middle of the desert and destroy a community, as per Bianca Bosker<sup>6</sup>), digital is not the problem-free preservation and storage solution society is sold.

Which brings us back to StoryMaps. Not just the ones that will disappear in 2025, but the ones that will disappear the next time Esri makes a format change, or a change in service offerings, or decides to end their educational wing entirely, or merely joins the legions of defunct companies due to economic, feudal succession, or other reasons. Lacking any means of preservation, the information will be gone. Will it exist elsewhere, in another format, more or less equitable in information content? We can certainly hope so. Or maybe someone will solve the larger digital existential issue. Or, perhaps, it didn't need to exist anyway, which raises questions about why it did, but again, that is a bit beyond our scope.

Until then, best to view these digital objects as here today, gone tomorrow, and now with 20% more jpeg<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. London & Glasgow: Collins Clear-type Press, 1923.

<sup>6</sup> Bosker, Bianca. "Why Everything is Getting Louder". *The Atlantic*, Nov. 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/11/the-end-of-silence/598366/>

<sup>7</sup> "Needs more JPEG" meme. *Know Your Meme*, 2006. Accessed on July 18, 2024 from <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/needs-more-jpeg>