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Rosetta Disk

KRON-TV (San Francisco): 6/13/03

A Bay Area group is preserving thousands of the world's endangered languages on a small disk that is being sent into space.

Can you read the following two sentences? A bay area group is attempting to assemble the smallest ever archive of earth's languages. It's so small that it cannot be seen with the naked eye, but it's big enough to read with a common magnifying lens.

The Bay Area's Longnow Foundation is building a three-inch nickel disk with a two thousand year life expectancy. Aspects of approximately 1,400 languages are micro-etched in nanoscale on the tiny disk. It is an effort to recreate a modern and microscopic version of the Rosetta stone, which helped decipher hieroglyphics from ancient Egypt.

The goal is to build a permanent archive for future civilizations and to encourage comparative language study for current cultures

Nestled amid the officer barracks of San Francisco's Presidio is a group of visionaries who study our history and future on a grand scale of time. This quirky group of scientists and scholars at the Longnow Foundation is more interested in what happened between the extinction of dinosaurs and modern times than what's happened since World War II. They want to apply the same sort of "big scale" chronological thinking to the future.

With their Rosetta Project, Longnow has two goals. One is to preserve a piece of our civilization, our language, for future generations and civilizations. The other is to encourage and facilitate the study of languages.

Project director Jim Mason says the Rosetta Project will create a near permanent physical archive of roughly 1,400 of the approximately 7,000 languages on the planet on one three inch nickel disk. In addition to information, alphabets, grammar, and words from each language, the disk will contain the book of Genesis in the Bible translated in each of the languages, since it is one of the most widely translated books on Earth.

"Rosetta Project" director Jim Mason wants current and future humans as well as what he terms "other possible species" to know the definition of words like "amyaku" ("bark" in the tribal language Amtu). As a means to that end, the Longnow Foundation has designed a tiny disk that utilizes a big word in its own right: nanotechnology. Nanotechnology is molecular

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manufacturing, or building things one atom or molecule at a time with programmed nanoscopic robotic arms.

Using these tiny tools, the Longnow team is etching microscopic words onto the disk. Think of one whole page of text being etched onto a groove the size of a dust speck in your fingerprint. Mason says the disk will last longer than digital encoding, and requires just a magnification lens to read it. Although a 6x magnification lens will be included in the encasing on each produced disk, it only allows the viewer to see the aesthetic markings. A 100x magnification lens will be needed to read all of the information. Longnow has hired a team at Norsam Technologies in Oregon to micro-etch text of up to 350,000 pages on one three-inch nickel disk. Norsam, along with Los Alamos National Laboratories developed the micro-etching technology.

In a symbolic gesture of the Rosetta Project's goal, one of the thousands of disks that will be produced is heading into space. In January, an Ariane-5 rocket will blast off from French Guiana, sending an unmanned spacecraft on an eight year journey to a comet called Wirtanen, or "Comet 46P" as astronomers refer to it. The space vehicle will rendezvous and make contact with Wirtanen in 2011, spend 18 months making observations, and then continue on to a permanent orbit around the sun. The disk will stay housed in the space vehicle as it orbits both the comet, and later the sun, in perpetuity.

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LINKS

KRON-TV in San Francisco broadcast this story.

Longnow Foundation's Rosetta Project aims to preserve the world's endangered languages.

The Rosetta Project has an interactive language list.

The European Space Agency is launching the vehicle that will carry the disk.

The European Space Agency's Rosetta Mission harkens back to the original Rosetta Stone

The Endangered Language Fund runs down which languages are endangered.

Los Alamos National Laboratory helped design the technology used to make the disks

Norsam Laboratories is building the disks for Longnow.

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