

## *A Time to Play: Giving a Three-Screen Film Its Third Act*

**Audrey Amidon (Motion Picture Preservation Specialist)**  
**The Moving Image and Sound Preservation Labs**  
**National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, USA**

While my colleagues' piece "Resurrecting USIA: A Second Act at the National Archives" details the everyday, often invisible, work necessary to preserve and make accessible the films created or acquired by the United States Information Agency, some titles within this record group present additional challenges. A prime example is *A Time to Play* (1967; NARA Local Identifier [306.8364](#)), which was first requested by researcher Brian Real in 2015. As laid out in "Resurrecting USIA," we see a film's first act as defined by its creator, while the second act is made possible by the archival and preservation work that expands access to the content. The third act is written by the researcher. Real's request for *A Time to Play* [Figure 1] kicked off a series of regular procedures, but ended up requiring us to figure out a few new tricks in the course of making it available for its third act.



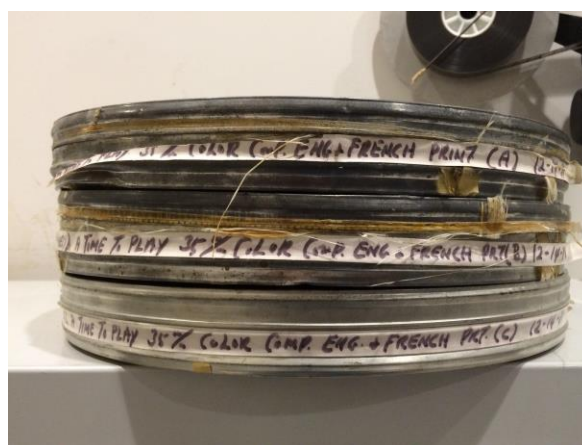
**Figure 1: *A Time to Play* (1967), children play "Follow the Leader"**  
[Director, Art Kane. [NARA 306.8364]]

In "Designing Diplomacy: Jack Masey and Multiscreen Cinema at Expo 67," Real describes *A Time to Play* as "tame," having a production tale that is "perhaps more interesting than the film itself." He is not wrong, but as the only multi-screen USIA film the Lab has reconstructed to date, *A Time to Play* also has a more-interesting-than-average preservation story.

Government film productions generally employed only the most standardized technologies in filmmaking in order to ensure portability for screening at a variety of venues for a period of several years. World's Fair films, however, were intended to be exhibited as long-term installations for a single event. Agencies such as USIA, the Department of Commerce, and the State Department took advantage of the opportunity to employ non-standard displays. *A Time to Play* may not be the most

remarkable of these productions, but it is one of a handful of Worlds' Fair titles that have been wholly unavailable to the public for decades because of their non-standard nature.

In March of 2015, I received an email from Brian Real asking about *A Time to Play*. The subject line read "New film mystery," and Real described the film as "a three-screen thing," meaning three separate reels were projected synchronously across three individual, adjacent screens. I forwarded the information on to archivist Mike Taylor, who replied that, although we had an item number attached to a film with that title, he could not locate the elements. They were likely in the vast volume of unprocessed material that he was then surveying. In October, Taylor completed his shelf-read of the unprocessed USIA holdings and reported that he had located five 2000-foot cans for *A Time to Play* [Figure 2]. It was unclear at that time whether we had the complete film or how the reels worked together. Real submitted his reference request the next day.



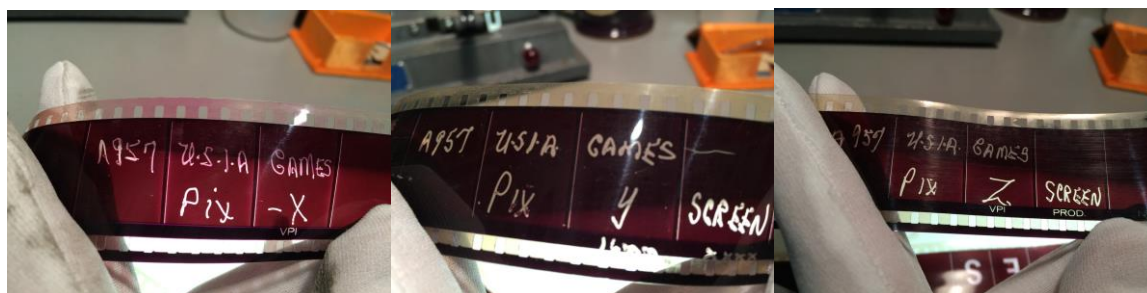
**Figure 2: *A Time to Play's* (1967) original cans**

[Before Real's request, NARA had physical possession of *A Time to Play* but staff had only completed minimal processing and the reels were contained in beat-up metal cans. The reference request triggered a string of preservation procedures in NARA's Motion Picture Preservation Lab, including inspection and re-housing. [NARA 306.8364]]

When Real initially asked about *A Time to Play*, I told him I wasn't sure whether we could actually provide access to the three-screen film. In the past, we had been unable to serve other multi-screen World's Fair films requested by researchers. Real responded that he would be happy with files of the individual prints and could have them put together in Adobe Premiere, and I realized it might actually be simple to make a single digital video file out of the three separate 35mm reels, even if we couldn't recreate the film exactly. In fact, the issue with making our other World's Fair films available was not that they were projected onto three screens, but that our film elements were 65mm negatives or 70mm prints, which require special equipment for scanning. It is undoubtedly true that, prior to our switch to digital capture in 2010, we would not have been able to serve a reconstructed version of *A Time to Play*, despite the standard 35mm format. Real's request, submitted at just the time when Taylor was surveying the USIA holdings and the Lab had the digital capability to reconstruct the film, allowed *A Time to Play* to emerge in public again.

Every film that comes to the lab for digitization or preservation receives a complete inspection to identify the elements and record condition information. The inspection of *A Time to Play*

unfortunately revealed that NARA did not receive any pre-print elements, such as original cut negatives, or even the color internegative that would have been used for printing. As was the fate of so many non-commercial productions, those elements were likely left at the film lab with which the USIA contracted to make the prints. Elements stored at film labs were frequently discarded when those facilities closed. All that remains of *A Time to Play* are beat-up projection prints. Upon inspection, I discovered that printed into the leader of the reels was an X, Y, or Z, which I thought likely indicated the left, center, and right panels. The right panel had only one copy, while the left and center panels had two copies that I could assess. All of the reels were scratched, dirty, and [faded to magenta](#) [Figure 3]. Based on the vintage of the prints, they had likely faded before they even arrived at NARA for preservation. I retained the best, most complete copy of each and moved on to digitization of the reels.



**Figure 3: Leaders of three project prints for *A Time to Play* (1967)**

[Close-up of writing printed into leaders of three project prints. Note that the order in which they were inspected is made visible by the increased dirt that transferred to the white cotton gloves.]

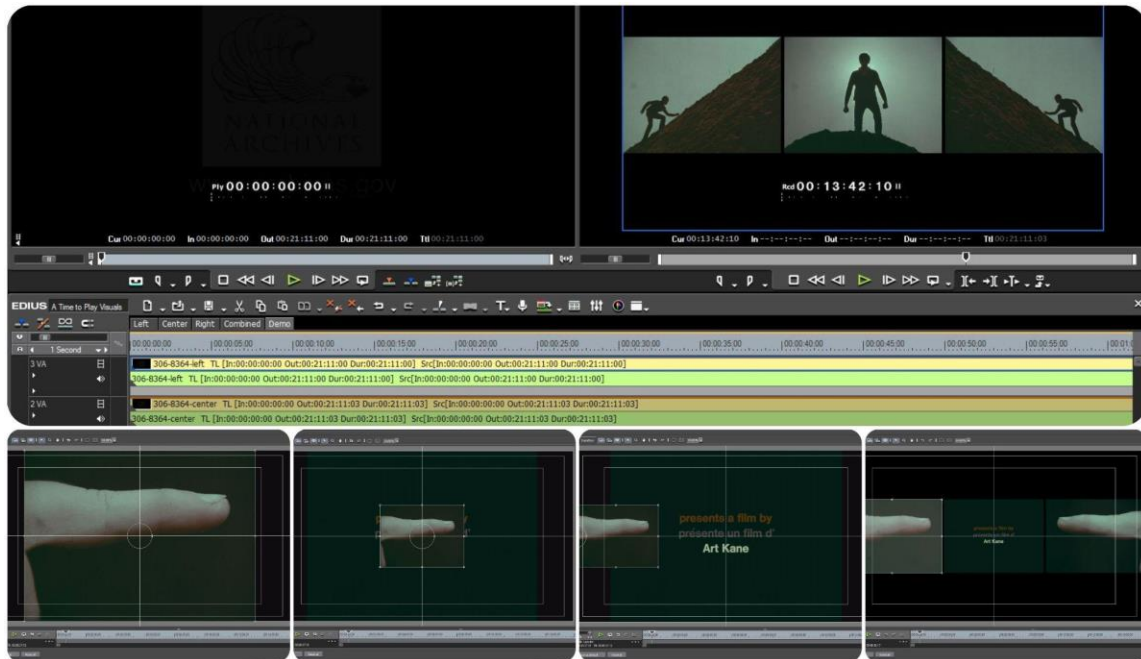
We have some ability to correct color fading when setting up a film for digital transfer, and basic color correction is a standard part of our reference digitization procedure [Figure 4]. Regrettably, *A Time to Play* had deteriorated too much to fix all of its color issues. I managed to balance the color so that the grass looked relatively green in spots and the sky was kind of blue, but overall the look was muted compared to what it would have been originally.



**Figure 4: A Time to Play (1967), color correction process**

[A scene from the projection reel (top left) is used for the image (top right) during inspection. Below, we the scene after color correction and in context. The color cannot be recovered fully from a badly faded print using our reference scanner and software, but it is balanced. [NARA 306.8364]]

In our non-linear editing program, putting the three panels together was a simple matter of using the layout function to resize and shift each reel to its proper screen position [Figure 5]. I consulted Real on whether there should be a gap between the three images, and he shared an illustration (included in his piece in this issue) so I could approximate the look of the original.



**Figure 5: Merging three screens into one**

[By simply using the layouter in our non-linear editing program, we can merge the three screens into a single image that simulates the original film. [NARA 306.8364]]

The final product obviously does not replicate the experience of viewing *A Time to Play* in the US pavilion at Expo 67, which no longer exists; nor does it replicate the environment of a three-screen projection. However, NARA is now able to share an approximated version of the form and content of the film and make it available for viewing and study. While the digital file in our online catalog is now free to be re-used and reinterpreted outside of NARA's walls, *A Time to Play's* story in the Motion Picture Preservation Lab shows some of the detailed work and problem-solving that goes on behind the scenes. The film also presents the ideal example of how our researchers, unwittingly or not, drive access to our collections for the larger public. If Real had not requested the film, it would not be available for everyone to view today. While few see the day-to-day labor of the Lab, our work is necessarily collaborative. When Real filled out his reference request, he started a process that allows *A Time to Play* to have a third act as the subject of scholarly research.