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Section Response

This week’s readings deal with the advantages and disadvantages of digital archives and the ways in which they do or do not serve archaeologists’ interests to preserve documentation of history more easily and for longer periods of time. All of the articles point to the fact that modern technological advances have afforded the field of heritage and historic preservation new tools that can aid in representing and engaging interest in history; however, they also point out several shortcomings and pitfalls of this so-called concept of “virtual heritage”.

As a general introduction to the biases of artifact presentation, Lucas’s paper analyzes the various axes of classifications and their influence on our interpretations of the past. He illustrates how archaeological motives of the past have included and excluded various sub-groups of study (e.g. botanists, ceramicists) and that this exclusion also precluded a more diverse and thorough analysis of the past. However, his primary concern is an analysis of larger systems of taxonomy and archaeological typology. He discusses the problems with various approaches to classification, yet argues that a system is necessary in order to contextualize finds and give them a deeper archaeological significance than antiquarianism.

In terms that are more directly relevant to virtual heritage, Addison’s “The Vanishing Virtual” addresses the fact that the influx of modern technology has led to an academic field in which there is a “data overload” and the reliability of data is often questionable because increased ease of production now precludes interdisciplinary teams that can work together (32). Addison argues that ironically, the artifacts that are archaeological subjects of study seem to have a greater longevity and consistency than do the modern modes of data collection and storage. Additionally, he argues that despite these advances in technology, they have not been used to *share* the data they collect and consequently, the goal of a shared digital heritage remains unachieved.

Roussou explains that modes of representation currently used to construct a virtual heritage almost entirely eliminate concerns of realness or authenticity in depictions of archaeology because of their ability to so closely emulate reality. She also points out, however, that the technology itself has shown itself to be capable of also depicting inaccurate representations of the real world as fact and hence, changing perceptions of history. Additionally, Roussou argues that interactivity, while key to the successful use of VR in digital heritage to engage interest, is simultaneously difficult to achieve in a meaningful way and hence an illusion of interactivity must be substituted in order to simulate interactivity.

In light of both Addison and Roussou’s theoretical concerns, Lewi presents a fascinating description of the modern digital heritage that Addison argues does not currently exist in the form of a museum. Lewi’s paper presents a museum that, as Preziosi says, remains a place “within the present that [establishes] an ambivalent figuration of the past and future (as cited on 269).” She argues that this combination of history with technology “heightened the representation of visual performance,” and “allowed for a more visually rich and engaging evocation of historical architecture (269.” However, she also clearly illustrates that the replacement of physical artifacts with digital representations of them, even if they are interactive, represents a noteworthy shift that is in many ways analogous to other current “losses of the real” with respect to culture (271).”

Lewi’s paper and its parlance with Addison and Roussou’s works presents an interesting paradigm for how we might present our own work we have conducted at the JBH. Throughout our field season, we have used digital photography, video, and digital audio recordings to document our field work and the artifacts we have discovered on site. These technologies simultaneously serve to document the artifacts as well as our own experiences as archaeologists uncovering them and contextualizing them from within the present. These works suggest that we are correct in collecting this type of data and that it might indeed be a useful tool for presenting our work to the public to achieve the public interest Lewi mentions; however, Addison and Roussou’s concerns about the dialogue between mode of representation and the actual impact on reconstructing history are sound and should be taken into consideration. Therefore, perhaps it is likely that we will use these types of data in the construction of our own virtual heritage of the John Brown House site, but we will need to carefully contextualize and validate them using more reliable sources of historical evidence (e.g. primary documents and the literature).