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 Power of the Digital

The readings from this week suggest that as the world becomes more centered and reliant on technology, so has the field of archaeology. It appears to be an inevitable and necessary evolution which none of the authors dispute. The authors seem to suggest that the field needs to be more organized, more refined in it’s use of technology, and a clearer understanding of what can be gained and lost through using digital means to preserve and present cultural heritage and the past. Through the posts, final publication and multimedia final projects on the class run wiki page, we are able to bring fieldwork, publication and public presentation of the JBH together in a digital context. The authors raise interesting points about how one needs to approach the organizing and storing of digital data to make it last through the generations. I think that our class should look at their example and change a few aspects of our work to help maximize its impact now and in the future.

All the authors agree that there are major benefits of approaching archaeology and cultural heritage digitally. These benefits are education and spread of information for a greater amount of people, professionals and non-professionals because of increased accessibility, a “flood of interest”(Addison, 27) in the general population, and its ability to preserve. The accessibility aspect of this digital approach is key. If organizations and people allow their information to be public and free, they are able to create a greater sense of the past belonging to everyone, therefore getting more people to be interested and invested in preserving archaeology and history. Websites like UNESCO’s, virtual museums and virtual reality programs and other digital presentations give greater opportunity to experience and exposure to artifacts and sites that need attention (Lewi, 263). However, what is most important is the potential for preservation through use of the digital. Lucas explains the fragility and temporality of sites and it’s features and artifacts. Addison says that with digital recording such GIS, photography, scanners etc., and eventually virtual reality sets to replace visiting and viewing sites and artifacts, archaeologists will be able to preserve these resources without denying people will be able to experience and see the sites and artifacts. However perfect this may sound, there are many issues of using digital means to approach archaeology and cultural heritage.

The largest problem that faces this new approach besides the great monetary expense is the inherent, rapid evolution of technology. Addison explains that there is such a vast quantity of information in so many different formats and stored in so many ways that the information is rendered nearly useless because of the difficulty of sorting through and opening files to find what one is searching for (Addison, 33). This may be due to the fields increasing emphasis on quantity over quality and image over accuracy, which also has lead to a lack of credibility of digital representations of archaeology and cultural heritage. This high volume of “pretty pictures” often leads to a lack of essential recordings of measurements, which is of a greater lasting value than photographs (Addison, 32). In terms of digital projects like virtual reality sets and virtual museums, the complications include accuracy of photorealistic representations, subjectivity and lack of room for multiple perspectives, among other things. This is essentially is a “loss of the real,” experiencing something in person (Lewi, 27) and “loss of the serious,” the approach becoming more about entertainment rather than education (Roussou, 227). There appears to be a lack of organization in the field and its approach, which is hindering its potential value. According to Addison, the manner in which the current approach of archaeology and cultural heritage through digital means is going, gives the digital information a life prospect of not lasting beyond a few years or decades.

I think the way in which we are approaching using digital means to record and present our work and findings at the JBH is responsible. I feel that we have found a balance between quantity and quality and image and accuracy by carefully recording both through numerical photography and written context sheets. The information and photography is carefully placed onto our well-organized wiki page. Eventually we are presenting our work digitally on the wiki, which is great because many of the final projects are multimedia and allows scholars, family, friends and regular people to access our work. I also think that it is important that we are printing and publishing a non-digital version of our final report because it insures that even without technology there is record of our excavation for future generations to use.

 The greatest improvement I think that we could make is publicizing our wiki page. We are working closely with other organizations such as the Rhode Island Historical Society, the John Brown House Museum staff and the Joukowsky Institute, who have been very helpful. I think that the information on our wiki is crucial to all three organizations and their audience, so it would serve them well to help expose our work. Also, I think including a print out of each page of the wiki into the library would be valuable for the preservation of our fieldwork and research. Finally, the problem addressed by Addison of there being too much information effects us. The pages from the 2008 and 2009 seasons still exist, and if someone is to Google search us, they often get lead to those pages, therefore are not privy to the most updated information and interpretations of the site. I suggest that the old wiki pages are printed and digitally saved somewhere, and the final site reports placed on the 2010 wiki page, then the previous wikis be taken down. And as a final change, I would like to see the page become more eye catching like that of Greene Farm, because it helps draw people in and maintains their interest.

 It would be a large mistake to dismiss the potential of digitally recording and presenting the past. Digital means offer a greater ability to create a narrative for archeology, something which has been important since the 19th century (Lucas, 68). However, the presentation of archaeology and cultural heritage has come along way since “cabinets of curiosity” and will continue to evolve and progress (Lucas, 69). It would serve the field and the public now and in the future if those approaching archaeology and cultural heritage digitally organized their efforts and found a way to increase the longevity of the work.