

ARCH1900: Archaeology of College Hill
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Critical Response #7

The readings for this week discussed the use of digital technology by archaeologists to communicate their efforts and the issues that prevail throughout the field of 'virtual heritage'. The writers of the papers, Addison, Roussou and Lewi, all agree that the rapid advance of technology has opened up a variety of opportunities for archaeologists to record, process, present and conserve sites of the past in various manners yet they also raise the several issues associated with digital technology, including accuracy, reliability, longevity and sharing of data.

According to Addison, virtual heritage is a term that describes 'the use of digital technologies to record, model, visualize and communicate cultural and natural heritage' (Addison 27). He points out that as the field has grown and 'more heritage data brought into the digital domain' (28), so have the problems associated with it. He argues that although 'decreasing costs and ease of use' (29) have allowed more people to record different sets of data, currently a system does not exist that would allow 'linking and synchronizing data into a common data set' (31) and thus sharing of data which could be beneficial is not common or easy to do. Even if a system did exist, because data can come in many different formats, 'the lack of convenient data portability leads many to abandon past data' (34) and the purpose of a digital record is then questioned. Additionally, Addison notes how it's a challenge to store and manage sets of data that

become increasingly sizeable as advancing technology allows efficient and faster data collection, and that there are many errors associated with digital devices, including 'rounding errors, calibration, color accuracy and human bias' (32).

Roussou is much more supportive of virtual heritage and believes it to be an example of 'cross-fertilization' of disciplines (Roussou 225) and a tool that can be applied ideally in archaeology to support research and educate the public. Roussou also discusses how the field of virtual archaeology allows archaeologists to create multiple models that can 'serve the needs of both scholars and non experts' (231) as long as 'a distinction is made between VR worlds intended for use by archaeologists and environments created as a means to bring the past alive and educate about it'. She notes how recent virtual archaeological productions, including 'Mummy: The Inside Story' have managed to engage the audience 'into the cultural narrative' (233).

Lewi examines an interactive CD-ROM that was used to educate users about the heritage of Western Australian architecture by allowing them access to a virtual museum. Users could navigate around the museum between rooms and galleries (Lewi 267) while listening to audio narratives, and could also examine artifacts. Lewi points out that not only did the virtual medium 'heighten the representation of visual information' (269), it also helped share immense amounts of data using its storage capabilities and allowed for a 'visually rich and engaging' experience (269). Lewi

addresses Addison's issue with longevity of virtual records and suggests an Internet version would have more longevity than a CD-ROM.

It's important that we consider all of the issues raised by Addison, Roussou and Lewi in their respective papers when we work on the presentation of our findings. Addison points out that we need to 'actively work to share data, work together and document our documentation' (Addison 37) if we want our digital efforts to 'outlive the heritage they are meant to record' (37). I think through our use of digital photography and video to document our fieldwork and findings, and our use of an online wiki to publish our progress and conclusions, we are trying our best to make our work at the John Brown House as accessible as possible to a wide audience for a long period of time. Furthermore, I think the various virtual representations of our findings, including field blogs, a formal excavation summary and a multimedia presentation, help us cater to both scholars and non experts as Roussou suggested a virtual reality could.

Works Cited

Addison, Alonzo C. 2008 The Vanishing Virtual: Safeguarding heritage's endangered digital record. In Y. Kalay, T. Kvan, and J. Affleck, *New Heritage: New Media and Cultural Heritage*, 27-39.

Lewi, Hannah. 2003 Designing a Virtual Museum of Architectural Heritage. In S. Kane, ed., *The Politics of Archaeology and Identity in a Global Contest*, 261-274.

Roussou, Maria. 2003 The Components of Engagement in Virtual Heritage Environments. In S. Kane, ed., *The Politics of Archaeology and Identity in a Global Contest*, 225-241.