Olivia Petrocco

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Critical Response #7

Presenting Archaeology through Digital Methods

When considering moving into virtual space to present information, there needs to be serious consideration of the medium itself. Unlike other methods of presentation, like museum exhibitions or written texts, which have existed long enough to develop genre conventions and allowed consumers of the media to learn how to read the data presented, virtual presentations have yet to find their voice. Maria Rossou, Hannah Lewi, Gavin Lucas, and Alonza C. Addison examine different aspects of presenting the information discovered through archaeological excavations.

Advancing technology, when properly utilized, can improve archaeology both for the workers in the field and the wider public audience. Rossou’s evidence in “The Components of Engagement in Virtual Heritage Environments” supports the movement towards VH. Virtual Heritage is uniquely suited to archaeological presentations because it provides audiences with a higher level of understanding while simultaneously being able to convey a subjective way of interpreting the excavated finds (Rossou 231). Virtual experiences improve audience’s experiences by triggering and maintaining level of interest, empathy and imagination, forging stronger bonds to the past (Rossou 233). Also, the method for delivering information is suited towards forming links between pieces of evidence similar to the method that archaeologists use to hypothesize the past. For example, the presentation of West Australian history was divided into the four categories (Place, Type, Material, and Style) that allowed the same evidence to be viewed multiple ways (Lewi 268). The flexibility and interconnectivity of VR allow archaeological finds to become more accessible to the public.

Adapting to the new and improved technologies will also support professional archaeologists. Improved technology could easily aid the transparency and coordination of grant money to protect more sites than simply the attention-grabbing, glamorous, or (in Alonzo’s words) “sexy” sites (30). Better communication would also help ensure that all sites get the attention they deserve. The evolving technology could also bring an era of new guidelines that ensure the preservation of as much information as possible. More raw data is available so that in later years data could be re-analyzed and better understood, so long as the memory and technological information was gathered and shared responsibly (Alonzo 39). Better documentation is always in the best interest of archaeology.

In crafting the adoption of a new form of presentation, the medium needs to be developed in a way that supports the methodology of the practice itself. Gavin Lucas examines the ramifications of current textual representations of archaeological finds on the evolution of archaeological processes and interpretation. Lucas critiques the current method of dividing finds from the context in which they were found, as he believes the practice has led to the evolution of specialists in archaeology, a somewhat arbitrary system of typology, and an inadvertent diminished value for context (74). By critiquing the effects of the medium in which data was presented onto the practice of archaeology itself, Lucas’s argument adds a solemn note to the consideration of VR and other new media presentations of data. The adoption of such new methods needs to be carefully considered, as it might negatively affect the practice of the field.

In our excavations of JBH, our postings on the class wiki combine fieldwork and publication for public consumption. The Internet is a perfect vector that allows us to make our research and experience as excavators available to the public, and yet retain our claim to the work we have done. We should consider the increased accessibility that VH tactics offer to audiences, like the incorporation of characters or imagination engagement, when drafting our final presentations on our findings.

Most importantly, I think these readings remind us that the territory for digital representations of excavations is still being defined. There are no limits on the cultural scripts that our audience would expect from us, as the technological innovations for presentation are still being defined. We have the ability to help create the model that will serve the field of archaeology in the way that we want to be, rather than in the fractured way it gets presented through printed text. Hypertext on the Internet among our reports can help connect the shared aspects of our experiences and findings, rather allowing pages to become a divisive factor among our reports. Still, we cannot rely on the curatorial authority that more established methods of delivery, like printed text, offer the public to accredit our findings.

The adoption of digital representations into archaeological findings is a current and exciting way to improve the quality of the research and the experience of the public when interacting with archaeological finds and evidence.