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Critical Response #3 (Response 7)

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This week’s readings dealt with archaeology and cultural preservation as digital processes and practices. Despite the current problems and inconsistencies associated with the publication and sharing of data via digital resources, Addison, Lucas, Lewi, and Roussou on the whole support it to document and make more widely accessible the information gleaned from cultural and heritage research. They offer interesting and extremely applicable points of consideration in regards to our excavation at the John Brown House.

In his article *The Vanishing Virtual: Safeguarding heritage’s endangered digital record*, Alonzo C. Addison emphasized the need for open communication between both different parties of researchers, from those actually visiting the site to take digital surveys to those who rely on reports to conduct their own analyses (university students being one such example). He calls for greater coordination of documentation efforts—not only for greater efficiency in recording what may be lost to time or unforeseen future destructive processes (war, natural disasters, looting, etc), but also because a wider spectrum of perspectives “… is in many ways beneficial, leading to diversity of data, ideas, and interpretations” (Addison 30). If such communication structures were established, then mishaps (such as his anecdote about multiple teams unknowingly documenting the same aspect of the Angkor Wat) could be avoided and more research ground could be covered. What needs to happen is the development of a standard system of recording, aggregating, and sharing digitized research. This is not only quite feasible (due to the flexibility of most digital media) but would save time and research efforts—at its simplest, if a registry (of sorts) of what is already known is made available to everyone who needs data on a particular subject in that group, then time does not need to be spent re-doing what has already been done and energy and money can go into new research. Copyright laws (or the increased prevalence of “copyleft” policies) would do better to be flexible to the changing needs of researchers in a digital age. As Addison succinctly puts it, “If our digital efforts are to out live the heritage they are meant to record and protect, we must actively work to share data, work together and document our documentation” (Addison 37). I agree very strongly with the points made in this article, and feel that collaboration is *imperative* if we are to attempt to definitively preserve and classify our cultural heritage resources, particularly in light of the fact that what’s here today might not be here tomorrow.

Maria Roussou’s article *The Components of Engagement in Virtual Heritage Environments* discussed the potential of Virtual Heritage (VH), a discipline at the intersection of Virtual Reality (VR) and cultural heritage. She argues, “…virtual heritage productions may be ideal in responding to a need for a fashionable synergy between scientific enquiry, technology, art, and everyday life, and, consequently, influence more serious cultural demand” (Roussou 226). VH’s “preoccupation with representation” to truthfully reduplicate a site or artifact is mind-bogglingly useful—as archaeology is a science based on questions, hypotheses, and interpretation, digital preservation of an artifact or site not only allows for ease of transmission but also closely observed research from anywhere in the world. VH in right in line with the multi-disciplinary approach to presenting research, for the benefit of researchers of any level of interest—from professionals to those with a casual interest—who don’t have direct access to a site or artifact, and their engaging nature may do well to foster cultural interest and concern for preservation: “…VH productions are in a position to pave the way for a widespread acceptance of the technology and, provided they are designed carefully, to serve as indisputable means to disseminate knowledge and raise public awareness” (Roussou 226).

While Addison and Roussou focused on the practical applications of digital techniques to archaeology and heritage documentation, the articles by Lewi and Lucas focused on the presentation of material as considered through the lens of “traditional” presentation methods. I thought Lewi’s discussion of the virtual museum in Perth was fascinating—particularly the fact that they not only digitized a collection and made its information available online, but that they crafted a virtual architectural space to house it all. Well done to whoever came up with that; this project was well-planned and well-designed. I think this is a valuable innovation—many of the positive aspects of museum experience are preserved, and anyone with Internet access can afford to partake of it. This sort of democratization of archaeology, particularly because it sometimes has the reputation of being a stuffy and aloof science (perhaps due to its beginnings as a rich man’s pastime and its heavy reliance on conjecture and interpretation?), is I think I wonderfully engaging for anyone, and very useful to foster awareness and concern for heritage preservation among the general public. Lucas honed in primarily on classification and how its design should satisfy two sides—scientific researchers on one hand, and amateurs looking to learn on the other.

The questions raised and advice offered by these articles is of the highest relevance and applicability to our work at the John Brown House. Within our class, communication between units, having a standard method of recording and documenting, and referencing site reports written by previous ARCH1900 students all serves to create a unified record of the work done at this site. Taking advantage of varied forms of documentation (photographing, video-recording, blogging, note-taking) allow for multiple sets of records both online and off, and collaboration with the Rhode Island Historical Society and other related endeavors (such as the Greene Farm Project) serves to make what we’re learning accessible to related parties and works toward the higher goal of creating a consistent, accurate-as-possible, easily accessible record of Rhode Island history and culture. By making this information available online, it can be used not only by the Brown University community and RIHS members but also by anyone researching on these topics, and our collaborative efforts make it such that what we are presenting is whole, organized, and cohesive.

Works Cited

1. 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.
2. Lucas, Gavin. 2001 Chapter 3, "Splitting Objects", In Critical Approaches to Fieldwork. Routledge: London, pgs. 64-106.
3. 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.
4. 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.