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Back to the Future:

The Role of New Technology in Archaeological Presentation and the Past

Only a decade into the new millennium, it is clear that the future of archaeology is one of highly technical presentation, increasing reliance on the digital record, and most obviously, rapid change. As we continue the struggle to, as Gavin Lucas puts it, maintain both the social and archaeological contexts of our sites, we must consider how to properly present them against a backdrop of constantly changing technology and methodology (2001: 105). As Addison (2008), Lewi (2003), and Roussou (2003) describe, the surging interest in digital representations of the past for both public display and scholarly use has lead to an increasing “cross-fertilization” of multiple disciplines (Roussou, 2003: 225). However, with further developments in this so called area of “virtual heritage” comes a new set of complications about how to create an accurate, organized presentation that still captivates and educates an audience. In recognizing these new challenges, the authors provide a series of recommendations for sites transitioning to different forms of digital presentation and record-keeping. Our excavation at the John Brown House (JBH) serves as one such example of a transitioning site. While in many ways our current methods illustrate some of the authors’ concerns, as the JBH findings get more extensive and complicated, there is certainly room for improvement in the digital realm. Thus, by analyzing the JBH site and its steady transition, we can see not only the rise of new presentation technologies, but also their future implications.

 While the explosion of the Digital Age will undoubtedly prove influential, Addison (2008), Lewi (2003), and Roussou (2003) are quick to note a variety of complications which must be considered if virtual heritage is to be beneficial to future archaeological practice. As Lucas states, in presentation, it is our duty as archaeologists to represent not only individual components or typologies, but the greater site as a whole (2001: 83). In thinking about this goal, Roussou argues that digital presentations, in order to be valid, must ensure a rich mixture of what he calls “representation,” “experience,” and “interaction” (2003: 226). Roussou’s “representation” refers to actual simulation which, according to Addison, must strike a balance between realistic images and believable environments and archaeological accuracy (Roussou 2003: 226, Addison, 2008: 34). Within this balance, a visitor will get a imaginative “experience” and meaningful “interaction” that includes tactile elements (even if this is just controlling a computer screen), a guiding narrative, and some freedom to determine the linearity of the program, all of which will eventually lead to a greater intellectual understanding (Roussou 2003: 238). Furthermore, Lewi and Addison argue that virtual heritage also serves as a kind of archive for archaeologists that should include all relevant data in an easily accessible, technologically up-to-date format (Lewi 2003: 271, Addison 2008: 37). Thus, when creating digital media, we must consider both its entertainment and captivating qualities for the public as well as its accuracy and research potential for archaeologists.

 The John Brown House site is an example of an excavation that is steadily shifting to incorporate the new technologies described by Addison (2008), Lewi (2003), and Roussou (2003). While this transition is far from complete, the current digital presentation of the JBH site does reflect many of the authors’ concerns. Displayed primarily through the Joukowsky Institute of Archaeology website, presentation of the JBH site includes updated field blogs from excavators, weekly excavation and unit summaries, relevant historical documents, images of the site, and archives of previous final publications. All of these components combine to show the evolution from raw data and research to the final polished report. Thus, as Addison (2008) and Lewi (2003) would suggest, this data is accessible, up-to-date, and in an easily translatable format. In addition, the final 2010 excavation report will feature a multimedia walking tour of the entire John Brown House site. Because the walking tour will combine real images of excavation in progress, primary documents, and video footage, the DVD will effectively balance artistic and interpretative representation with accurate information, one of Addison’s major concerns (2008: 34). Finally, in relation to Roussou’s notion of linearity, within the constraints of the website, a visitor has the freedom to control which areas they choose to explore or ignore while simultaneously being partially guided by thematic structure (2003: 238). Therefore, even in the initial presentation of the JBH site, we can see many of the authors’ suggestions put into action.

 While the Joukowsky Institute of Archaeology website does serve as an excellent form of archaeological presentation, there is still room from improvement. As our understanding of the JBH site increases, we need to seriously consider more advanced methods of digital representation and their potential complications. For instance, many fundamental elements of Roussou’s “experience” and “interaction” are strikingly missing from the JBH displays (2003: 226). Without the inclusion of any sort of three-dimensional program, visitors have no access to the tactical component of “experience” that can “enhance their understanding of the material attributes, weight, and volume of architectural members” (Roussou, 2003: 234). Furthermore, the website lacks Roussou’s concept of a guiding narrative (2003: 234). In other words, while visitors can explore elements of website in any order, it is very difficult to get a logical and relatively concise idea of the JBH excavation without sifting through almost two hundred pages of text, some of which can be quite technical. Perhaps a better example of a guiding narrative is the Greene Farm Archaeological Project website which features links to material remains by relative chronology and summaries of major finds in a slideshow format. So, we can see that in the midst of changing technology, the JBH presentation is just a few steps away from being a truly comprehensive model.

 With the growing complexity of digital mediums, archaeological presentation is going through significant and rapid changes that come with their own set of considerations. As Addison (2008), Lewi (2003), and Roussou (2003) demonstrate, transitioning sites such as the John Brown House are faced with the responsibility of keeping up with the increased digital needs of the general public and other archaeologists. However, because this is a relatively recent shift, its much wider repercussions remain unknown. Certainly, on the surface, we see a rise in the general standards of archaeological presentation. Yet, we still cannot predict whether this will translate into a permanent change in the actual creation of archaeological displays or just the image of the ideal display. As archaeologists and as members of the public, we can only hope that whatever future technology entails, it leads to a more thorough and entertaining look into the past.

Works Cited

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