Kaitlin East Due November 8, 2011

Critical Response 3

The data obtained from the archaeological record is an important part of many people’s modern lives and so is incredibly valuable. As such, it is necessary that the data be shared and well documented in order to ensure that it is available for both the public and other researchers. One way to share this information is digitally. Although there are numerous challenges to disseminating information digitally, there are a number of ways in which to approach archaeology in this way. At the John Brown House, there are a variety of ways that we are incorporating digital contexts into our excavation, publication, and presentations, but we can improve what we are doing further by taking into account the arguments of the authors from this week.

Despite the importance of sharing archaeological information there are a number of challenges posed by the act of dissemination as well as by the nature of the data itself. This first obstacle is presented by the data. Archaeological data is inherently complex and difficult to standardize because of varied research designs and questions (Kansa 2011: 58, 87). Furthermore, archaeology incorporates a great deal of tacit knowledge, or assumptions and experience, in order to make its data meaningful (Kansa 2011: 84). However, it is incredibly difficult to incorporate this kind of knowledge into a digital database of any kind because it cannot be standardized and oftentimes cannot even be out into words. Problems in digital presentation also include the need to take into account privacy and heritage issues concerning local peoples which denies the possibility for universal methods of presentation and the need for sustainability (Limp 2011: 276);(Kansa 2011: 72).

The authors from this week suggested many ways to approach digital presentations of archaeology that addressed these issues and many others. The main argument of most of the authors is that archaeological data should be contained within an online database in order to make the data shareable and usable far into the future. Limp suggests using university library systems to account for the problems of sustainability (Limp 2011: 276). Furthermore, the system needs to be user friendly and accessible to make it easy to share the information and to ensure that publishers see a reward for their energies (Kansa 2011: 59, 87); (Limp 2011:267,271). The formats used by the sites need to be easily translatable or useful in other contexts and user feedback should be accounted for in making the information more useful and easier to access (Addison 2008:34; (Kansa 2011:61)).

Most importantly archaeological data presented digitally needs to be shareable and allow other researchers to build off of it (Limp 2011: 268, 277); (Addison 2008: 30, 35). That means that the items listed in databases need to be extensively tagged with context and need be less protected by copyright laws (Addison 2008:36-39). Data must be complete; it should include primary data as well as context including what it is, why important, and how it was recorded (Addison2008: 32, 39); (Kansa 2011:70). This will allow individuals to make progress without having to back track on research that has already been completed and to incorporate information from a number of different projects while also allowing for peer review (Kansa 2011: 58). This peer review should also be able to take place during the excavations and so be able to effect the excavation itself and the questions being asked while there is still a possibility for change. This would require information being made accessible during different stages of the excavation, not just at the end presentation stage. When building off of past information it is also important that archaeological databases use software that is already available, such as googleearth, instead of creating new versions (Limp 2011: 273).

In order to make information shareable the problems of the nature of archaeological data needs to be addressed. Firstly, tacit knowledge needs to be documented in any way possible. Kansa suggests asking individuals to “define meaningful relationships within their data” (Kansa 2011:84). It is important for the excavators to define what they see as meaningful relationships because information will be lost in throughout the process and so defining these relationships allows those that come later to see what the original researchers deemed important even if it is no longer as clear in the data. In attempting to document gaps in data, different observers, or changes in methods, information will always be lost, and so it is necessary to ensure as complete a record as possible (Kansa 2011: 84). Furthermore, data from each particular project needs to be managed well which, in the long run, will lead to better quality data overall (Addison 2008: 39) ;( Kansa 2011: 87). It will also lead to a greater standardization in the types of information recorded and so will allow greater sharing of information across different projects.

Another problem that digital presentation can help overcome in both excavation and publishing is that of splitting up the data. Both presenting and recovering material can divide finds from features and finds from each other (Lucas 2001: 64). Archaeology is very concerned with context and so by presenting finds in context throughout the process of excavation the finds can be understood more completely (Lucas 2001: 105). The finds should be written up alongside features and should not always be split up by type so that the site may be understood in its entirety (Lucas 2001: 73, 74).

At the John Brown House we are doing a good job of incorporating digital formats in presenting information during the excavation. The use of field blogs and weekly summaries allows us to write up what is being found each week in the context of the site as a whole and to comment on each other’s so that we make changes during the season. Furthermore, the inclusion of pictures and final reports online ensure that the information is accessible to those who are interested in it.

Although we are making our finds available to the public, it is not in an easily accessible forum. Perhaps we could find a way to make the reports from this and prior seasons searchable or input them into a database. This will allow individuals to use our information who are interested not only in the John Brown House but in some of the wider themes we have relevant data on. Furthermore, perhaps we could put up pictures of our finds and our flip videos from each week as well as the DVD final report so that individuals may discover our data in a number of formats. We could also include the GPR and magnetometry report so as to give our audience more context. Lastly, in order to increase used feedback we could open a forum to allow for feedback on our weekly field blogs so that suggestions can be taken into account immediately.

Presenting archaeological data digitally is a great way to reach new people and further the field. Although there are obstacles to the task of digitizing all data and putting it in a database the profits of doing so far exceed the costs. The information will be more shareable, more accessible for peer review, and could last much longer. At the John Brown House, we do a great deal to ensure that we are fulfilling our responsibility to provide information to the public and other researchers but there is always more we can do to make our data more easily accessible. By focusing of making data digitally available archaeologists can aid other researchers, themselves, and ultimately the field as a whole.

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