

Can Digital Interactions Support New Dialogue Around Heritage?

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Can Digital Interactions Support New Dialogue Around Heritage?

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My abracadabra wish for interaction design is for the field to take a renewed look at heritage as a practiced domain, to go beyond the visitor-interpretation-focused functional approach of conveying content, often in only one “institutional” voice.

Interaction design and cultural heritage have a long and sometimes conflicting relationship. Technologies for collection management and information capturing have been used by cultural professionals in their practice for several decades, providing an effective infrastructure for archiving, retrieving, and cross-linking information about heritage holdings. This also established a set of expert categories shaping how objects are understood and displayed to the public, often to the exclusion of other perspectives or voices. Information-capturing tools (for images, audio content, etc.) enabled the recognition and archival of a large body of heritage content (such as oral histories) in a more democratic way, but also created other forms of exclusion and access [1]. Interactive technologies have featured in museums, exhibitions, and historic sites since the early days of audio guides enabling visitors to personalize the trajectory of their visit. At the same time, they have been known to hinder social interaction and limit dialogue by delivering only one perspective on an exhibit or series of objects. Even these early examples brought to the fore the complexity of the discourse around heritage technologies.

Overall, digital technologies in heritage contexts have been both praised and critiqued: for the way in which they can mediate the experience of heritage (Are they distracting? Do they negatively affect social interaction?), affect the management of a heritage institution (Do they add to the workload of curators and guides?), and support representation (Do they exclude communities who might not be digitally literate or able to access such tools?).

Much of this debate is ongoing. Furthermore, while many technological platforms and their application to heritage settings have been explored, interaction designers have been largely reproducing one model of engagement with heritage: the one in which an expert curator or guide acts as the voice of the museum, providing information to visitors.

In actual fact, we must instead acknowledge how heritage is often difficult, political, ideological, and challenging. Heritage holdings often carry with them difficult histories of war, conflict, colonialism, or discrimination. In parallel, the infrastructure that mediates the interpretation of heritage (its established categories, values, and ideologies) can be difficult, challenging, and challenged. For all these reasons, the form of engagement with digital technologies where predesigned content is delivered to an audience is a limited one.

Something else that interaction designers must reconsider is how museums and heritage sites are approached. As a community of practice ourselves, as interaction design researchers studying cultural heritage, we tend to focus on a limited range of forms of engagement with this domain. Too often we see exhibitions and exhibits as opportunities for evaluating our designs, rather than as complex, lived settings, a confluence of many values, tensions, goals,

and strategies. And these represent people in various roles—managers, designers, educators, learners, tourists, enthusiasts—and their practices.

When we design “interventions” that augment a heritage space, we often also limit the range of stakeholders to engage (usually visitors and, only recently, heritage professionals) and the range of relationships between people and those things that they value. While interaction designers often adopt user-centered or participatory approaches, these can be limited in scope in terms of who is recognized as significant stakeholders in the discourse around heritage. We researchers are preoccupied with the demographics of users (families? schoolchildren? tourists from overseas?) and with their behaviors, while not focusing enough on the multiple communities that heritage engages, the values and intentions they represent, and how digital technologies could support them. These communities could include local residents, volunteers, enthusiasts, and special interest groups, among others. This is an immense set of opportunities, as the majority of heritage sites worldwide rely heavily on communities’ contributions and efforts.

Therefore, while interaction design researchers have been working for some time to encourage participation, dialogue and collaboration around heritage, it is time to consider more deeply who may wish to engage, and to broaden the view of heritage beyond something that carries interpretations established by only one voice. It is time to stop viewing heritage settings as a convenient demo ground and to become part of the complex set of transformative practices put in place by those communities that are taking heritage beyond museums.

In June 2015, I, along with colleagues working on the European project meSch (Material Encounters with Digital Cultural Heritage; <http://www.mesch-project.eu>), organized a workshop on “Cultural Heritage Communities: Technologies and Challenges” as part of the Communities and Technologies conference in Limerick, Ireland. meSch had the goal of creating a hardware and software platform that would enable communities of professionals, volunteers, and amateurs to embed digital heritage content into tangible interactive installations. As part of the project, we created opportunities for different cultural heritage stakeholders to come together and share experiences. The workshop included researchers, practitioners, and community activists and facilitators; it featured illuminating discussions and brainstorming about the challenges and ways in which different communities relate to heritage and want to engage with it, from becoming more involved in or challenging established institutions, to initiating grassroots initiatives that can aid social cohesion, community regeneration, and political action. The group taking part in the workshop brought together an astonishing richness in communities, roles, interests, and motivations: professionals, enthusiasts, volunteers, and civic communities.

Furthermore, they showed examples of how communities of practice come together by doing, learning, and developing joint interests [2]). One example was how a community in rural Ireland learned archaeological remote-sensing techniques to document and campaign for interest in a never-excavated Bronze Age mound [Barton and Curley in 3]. Another example

is how indigenous communities in Namibia were engaged in designing the tools for documenting their own oral histories [Stanley et al. in 3]. Crafters in Great Britain and Romania, indigenous activists in Hawaii, small, volunteer-run museums in the Netherlands, emotionally resonant WWI outdoor heritage sites around the Italian–Austrian border—among others—were featured in the event, demonstrating the huge complexity and potential for which digital technologies can be a tool in the hands of many different actors with many different goals and aspirations.

The workshop was the beginning of a process of gathering significant examples of communities’ engagement with and outreach around heritage, which culminated with the publication of our book [3]. What we have learned throughout this process is to be open to new forms of engaging with heritage and new roles for communities, and to see communities as actors of change and very often of challenge and subversion, with the goal of democratizing heritage discourse.

Truly focusing on heritage with a practice lens should encompass a greater and more diverse set of stakeholders. On one hand, this would mean more innovative designs, going beyond just conveying information but moving toward facilitating the dialogue with groups that can offer different perspectives. On the other hand, this could mean an active contribution to making heritage institutions and interest groups actors of change, while the history of museums is often one of preservation also from an ideological and societal point of view:

Whilst museums have often operated in ways which exclude, marginalize and oppress, there is growing support (and evidence) for the idea that museums can contribute toward more just, equitable and fair societies [4].

To achieve better HCI and interaction design work in heritage domains, and to achieve what truly can have an impact on this key domain of representation, social cohesion, and reconciliation, we must reconsider our approach to bringing “interventions” into often immutable domains, and to embrace the practiced life of multiple active and intersecting communities.

Endnotes

1. Kidd, J., Cairns, S., Drago, A., and Ryall, A. *Challenging History in the Museum*. Routledge, London, U.K., 2014.
2. Lave, J. and Wenger, E. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, U.K., 1991.
3. Ciolfi, L., Damala, A., Hornecker, E., Lechner, M., and Maye, L. *Cultural Heritage Communities: Technologies and Challenges*. Routledge, London, U.K., 2017.
4. Nightingale, E. and Sandell, R. *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*. Routledge, London, U.K., 2012.

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