

**Review of the book *Theorizing digital cultural heritage: A critical discourse*,
edited by Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine**

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2008

Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 59(8), 1360–1361.
doi:10.1002/asi.20820

Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse Edited by Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007; 465 pp. \$40.00 (ISBN: 978-0-262-03353-4)

This is the first book since *The Wired Museum* to address the theoretical discourse on cultural heritage and digital media (Jones-Garmil, 1997). The editors, Fiona Cameron, a Research Fellow in Museum and Cultural Heritage Studies at the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney, and Sarah Kenderdine, the Director of Special Projects for the Museum Victoria, bring together 30 authors from the international cultural heritage community to provide a foundation from which to explore and to understand the evolving significance of digital media to cultural heritage.

The editors offer the collection of essays as a reference work to be used by professionals, academics, and students working and researching in all fields of cultural heritage including museums, libraries, galleries, archives, and archeology. Further, they recommend the work as a primary or a secondary text for undergraduate and graduate education for these fields. The work succeeds on these counts owing to the range of cultural heritage topics covered and the depth of description on these topics. Additionally, this work would be of value to those individuals working and researching in the fields of human computer interaction and educational technology.

The book is divided into three sections: Replicants/Object Morphologies; Knowledge Systems and Management: Shifting Paradigms and Models; and Cultural Heritage and Virtual Systems. Many of the themes in the first section resonate throughout the book providing consistency of language and conceptual understandings, which ultimately offers a shared knowledge base from which to engage in the theoretical discussion on cultural heritage. This review will briefly summarize selected themes and concepts from each of the sections as the work is vast in thought and rich in detail.

The first section, Replicants and Object Morphologies, describes and defines digital culture as it exists in the work culture of heritage institutions. The following dichotomies describing the experience of digital media are discussed: authentic objects and copies, material and virtual experiences, interpretation of art and art, and science and art. Through this contrasting lens, a shift from an understanding of digital objects as referent of and inferior to original authoritative artifacts to an understanding of digital objects as uniquely digital is revealed. Intellectual heritage is being transformed by the engaging nature of digital expressions of culture in which production, documentation, and distribution of a cultural artifact are one and the same. The user

experience of culture is heightened in importance through this transformation as the materiality of the digital object exists in the affective responses experienced by individual users. Individuals experiencing digital culture are touched in ways that create empathy, remembrance, and knowledge. Additionally, understanding and defining digital culture has implications for art documentation practices and redefining the community experience of cultural institutions.

In the second section, *Knowledge Systems and Management: Shifting Paradigms and Models*, the essays discuss the impact of digital culture on transforming the roles and responsibilities of museums and other cultural institutions to their constituents. Through personal computers and other digital devices, the individual has unprecedented access to archives and cultural exhibits. This access has enhanced the ability of museums to fill their role of encouraging community building, civic engagement, and community bonds. The 2001 American Association of Museums (AAM) community dialogues are cited in support of connecting communities museums through digital media. The AAM dialogues conducted across the United States revealed a perceived disconnect between the role of museums within communities and the communities being served. Museum activities were perceived as patronizing by community members rather than as reciprocal or co-created. Through access to digital culture on the Web, museums exist within their own walls and within the personal spaces of their communities, thereby creating a connection that is personal and outreaching.

Through the interactive involvement of community members in the consumption and co-creation of digital cultural exhibits, museums can create reciprocal exchanges rich in engagement and learning. A continuum of museum participation is described with the passive observation of traditional and static cultural exhibits at one end and interactive and dynamic digital cultural experiences at the other end (p. 152). The Digital Cultural Communication initiative places an emphasis on connecting communities to institutions through accessible technology-derived literacy programs. As new media require new literacy skills, museums and other cultural institutions are presented with the opportunity to inform community members' understanding of both personal and institutional spaces.

Communicating with community members outside of museum walls means adapting established museum documentation processes to new information environments. Collection databases once used solely by museum professionals are now being made available to local and global communities through the Web. The traditional scholarly and technical representation of cultural content is expanding to represent the multiple levels of understanding individual users are bringing to the interpretation of the documentation and the art objects themselves. Some institutions have responded to meet the needs of the new users of their databases through documentation practices that emphasize context in addition to content and through the provision of navigation tools that facilitate interaction and interpretation. Themescaping virtual collections is an example of how concepts can be presented such that users can browse and navigate them according to personal interests.

Art documentation records the descriptive aspects of physical objects and also attempts to record the human experience that surrounds art objects during a specific time. Documentation is an essential part of the life of an art work as it provides historical veracity. The transient nature of digital objects requires new kinds of documentation, differing from established documentation

for more permanent art media. The shared development and use of Cultural Information Standards are discussed as vital for guiding collection creation, access, and preservation.

The final section, Cultural Heritage and Virtual Systems, explores virtual historical sites and the user's experience of history as place through them. Increasingly, access to cultural heritage is digital and experienced through electronic images and simulacra. Maintaining authenticity is a concern when cultural heritage is represented through 3D modeling, panoramas, and other virtual environments as the potential to create disconnect from the historical material evidence is great. To represent physical objects and places virtually means to, at some level, separate the objects and places from their material history. This prevents individual visitors to virtual historic sites from engaging completely with the objects and places of history. Through the incorporation of “tangialities” (which are defined as direct sensory inputs that create sensations), in the creation of virtual historical sites, individuals can begin to engage with history in a material way.

The concepts of “placeness” and “placemaking” are important to creating a virtual experience that is historically connected. Placeness regards locating cultural artifacts in a space that is context specific to architecture and cultural geography. Placemaking describes the user experience of a historical setting that is memorable, evocative, and distinctive, an experience that results in engaging with space rather than observing it. These concepts express the importance of keeping authenticity in cultural heritage experiences when transferring physical objects from physical places to virtual representations of a place in time. The representation of historical materiality and authenticity in digital cultural works is a significant theme through the book.

The major strength of *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse* is the balance of theory and practice achieved by its authors through the inclusion of discussion on digital culture exhibits and programs. By describing the work being done at diverse cultural institutions life is given to theoretical discussions. By relating theory to practice, the work becomes accessible to a broader range of readers. Further, these essays provide many examples of how libraries and museums could partner with each other in the realm of digital culture. The field of museum studies is dealing with the same issues as information and library science with regards to data organization, user behavior, object classification, and documentation schemas. Also, the emphasis on the users of digital cultural heritage and how individuals make meaningful connections with art, history, and geography is another asset of the book. Each chapter is well researched resulting in helpful and extensive bibliographies on various aspects of digital culture. Overall, the work is rich in discussion, description and illustrative examples that cover the subject of digital cultural heritage in terms of depth and breadth.

The primary weakness of the title is on the focus on museum studies in the discourse on digital cultural heritage. There is much to be shared and discovered across other cultural institutions such as libraries and local historical societies and a more interdisciplinary approach to the essays included would have captured this. The overwhelming emphasis on museums, unfortunately, may cause some researching and studying digital cultural heritage from another perspective to overlook this work; thereby further dividing the efforts and communication of knowledge in this area.

This work is highly recommended for collections on museum studies, cultural heritage, art history and documentation, library and information science, and archival science. This work would be most useful to educators and researchers interested in a theoretical understanding of cultural institutions and user interactions in view of the social and political impact of the evolving digital state of cultural heritage rather than in the specific technologies and specific user studies on the digital cultural heritage. *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage* is an insightful work that will encourage further discourse and research.

References

Jones-Garmil, K. (1997). *The wired museum: Emerging technology and changing paradigms*. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.