Digital Discovery

written by Jeremy Huggett | 12/12/2014

Matt Edgeworth (2014) has recently sought to consider how the computers used by archaeologists mediate the production and reproduction of archaeological knowledge (2014, 41) and the way the act of archaeological discovery has changed since his innovative ethnographic study of an excavation was carried out around 1990. In particular, he points to the way that the 'site of discovery' has in some instances moved to the computer screen from the physical world. He describes how the archaeological workplace has changed in the intervening years, and estimates that most archaeological project managers now spend an average of 70-80% of their time working in digital environments (2014, 43). He points to the increased pace and quantity of work that is consequently achieved, which may lead to an increasingly stressful working environment. That is not to say computers are involved across the board – as he says, some areas of archaeological work remain resistant to computerisation with excavation itself remaining a largely manual process despite the various attempts to use computers onsite (2014, 45). As a result, he suggests archaeologists typically move in and out of different modes of perception – from computer-based work to manual work and back again (2014, 47).

He provides a case study of an archaeologist using Google Earth in conjunction with GIS and comments on aspects such as the speed of access, the availability of data that in the past would have been restricted or difficult to access, the facility to have multiple simultaneous views of data. He describes how as a result his view of archaeological discovery has changed – that:

> "It is clear that a general rethinking of archaeological discovery is necessary, taking due account of computers and the Internet as intrinsic elements of the mixture of human and nonhuman flows, forces and materials that together make up contemporary archaeological assemblages and encounters." (2014, 51).

His characterisation of "the plugged-in archaeologist" is interesting: the way that she is

> "totally removed from her own embodied situation in the here and now. Although she is using embodied skills and multiple senses in physically engaging with the computer hardware, the displacement of archaeological reality onto the screen prioritises vision and excludes all but the shadows of other sensory experience" (2014, 54).

Furthermore, he points to the way in which software is being developed and used to identify archaeological sites and so "part of the work of archaeological discovery has been delegated to the computer" (2014, 55).

Much of this essentially goes unchallenged – for example, the shift of the act of discovery into the realm of computer software is presented more as a question of how an ethnographic study might

best be carried out in a world of networked computers. This is not a breathless utopian view, however, as references to the stressful consequences of aspects of engagement together with a recognition that there will be resultant changes in organisational and political structures of archaeology demonstrate. But these aspects remain undeveloped, and ultimately questions about implications of these developments for the production of archaeological knowledge remain unanswered.

Reference

M. Edgeworth 2014 ‘From Spade-Work to Screen-Work: New Forms of Archaeological Discovery in Digital Space’, in A. Carusi, A. Hoel, T. Webmoor, and S. Woolgar (eds.) *Visualization in the Age of Computerization* (Routledge), pp. 40-58.