Reproduction or revolution?

written by Jeremy Huggett | 21/12/2014

Emma Bryce (2014) has recently written about her autistic brother's interest in technology – something that is quite commonly associated with folk on the spectrum. I deliberately wound up a conference audience some years ago by characterising computer-usage amongst archaeologists as fetishistic, but I'm not about to claim that digital archaeologists are autistic. However, one phrase at the end of her article jumped out at me: that regardless of where we are, on or off the spectrum, we all use technology as a form of comfort and security.

> "By its very structure, technology invites us to practice repetitive behaviours and keep familiar habits alive. It transports us to places we feel comfortable…"

In some respects, this flies in the face of common expectation – surely digital technologies encourage and facilitate novelty, break down boundaries, disrupt practices, expand horizons? All true, to a point. But that perspective is also a characteristic of the fetishistic approach I've written about before: the way in which we are easily seduced or enchanted by the new, that we want access to all the promises of innovative potential not because we will necessarily use them, but because we would feel disempowered and inadequate without access – theoretical or actual – to them (Huggett 2004, 82-3).

Is this idea of a digital security blanket what lies behind the counter-perception that, despite expectations of novelty, digital archaeology has largely been a follower rather than an innovator – that although it provides the technical underpinning of modern archaeological practice, it essentially has adopted little more than a support role with a marginal impact on approaches and theoretical perspectives more generally? As with all generalisations, this is an unfair characterisation in a number of respects (it undervalues the importance of digital repositories, for instance, or the significance of new data capture technologies, the growing impact of social media, etc.). It is perhaps more a matter of looking beyond whether or not digital archaeology has followed a relatively unambitious trajectory and thinking about how we actually put the digital tools and technologies to use. Are we essentially reinforcing the practice of repetitive behaviours and keeping familiar habits alive by focusing on normative practices with a few extra technological bells and whistles? Is this why digital archaeology has not transformed archaeological practice: that for largely implicit pragmatic reasons, the focus – consciously or otherwise – has been to reproduce rather than revolutionise practice?

Whether or not this is true, it does matter – even an apparently straightforward reproduction of practice in a digital environment changes the underlying way in which the information about that practice is captured, processed, and retrieved. So a conservative, low key approach to digital archaeology actually offers the prospect of affecting the underlying knowledge base in more subtle ways than might be expected or appreciated. Digitally supporting habitual, repetitive practice behaviours therefore disguises more fundamental change which may go largely unrecognised

precisely because it is not perceived as revolutionary.

References

E. Bryce 2014 ‘My brother’s digital security blanket’, *The Atlantic* (December 14, 2014).

J. Huggett 2004 ‘Archaeology and the new technological fetishism’, *Archeologia e Calcolatori* 15, 81-92.