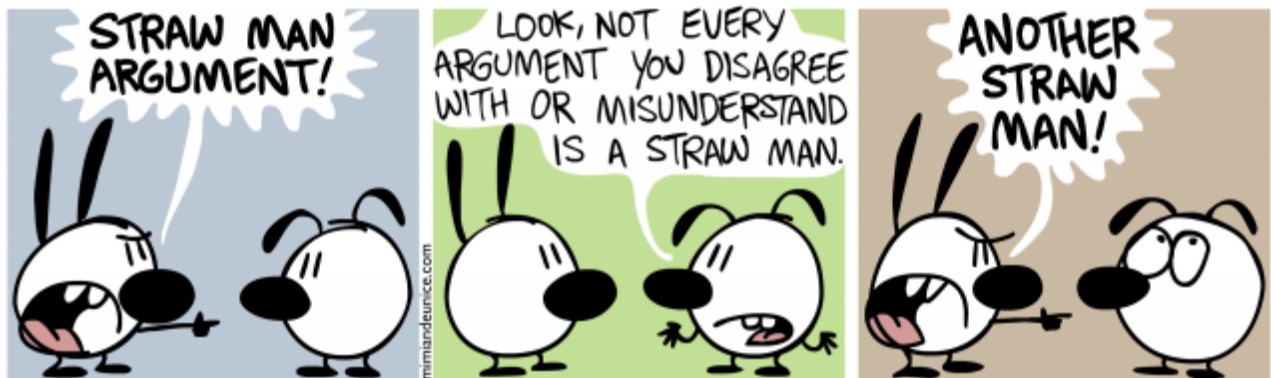


Let's talk about digital archaeology

written by Jeremy Huggett | 10/05/2016

Andre Costopoulos lays down a series of provocations in his opening editorial for the new Digital Archaeology section of the *Frontiers in Digital Humanities* journal. So far, there doesn't seem to have been much response – Twitter chatter, for example, simply draws attention to the article without comment (except perhaps in one instance where it may or may not be addressed tongue-in-cheek – such is the danger of social media!).



Mimi and Eunice – (CC BY-SA 3.0)

He starts by saying simply:

"I want to stop talking about digital archeology. I want to continue doing archeology digitally ... I would like to lay the groundwork for the journal as a place primarily to do archeology digitally, rather than as a place to discuss digital archeology".

There's certainly nothing wrong about a journal focussed on digital archaeological applications, but what's wrong with **talking** about digital archaeology? He goes on:

"In the social sciences and humanities, we have an unfortunate tendency to make approaches and tools into objects of study (literally, we essentialize them) and to organize the conversation around them. There are meaningful and even heavy conversations about the implications in other fields of the use of new digital tools. We will have those conversations in this journal. But those conversations in other fields have tended to facilitate rather than impede the setting up of things ... Those conversations have been immensely productive, but they have been more focused and results oriented than I feel they have been so far in archeology."

A superficial reading of the article suggests a degree of weariness and cynicism here. But it seems to me that the article potentially questions the very legitimacy of what I understand by digital archaeology.

There's no doubt that every archaeologist is a digital archaeologist, in the sense that everyone uses a computer to some extent at some point in their work. As Costopoulos points out, this is evident in the way that data are collected, curated, analysed etc. However, not everyone is a digital archaeologist in the same sense that not every archaeologist is a bone specialist, or a pottery specialist, or an excavation specialist. So let me introduce some capitals to Digital Archaeology, just to emphasise that what I'm talking about is the field, sub-field, sub-discipline or whatever, not the widespread, increasingly fundamental application of digital tools across the discipline as a whole. Or, to put it another way, archaeologists may be digital, but it is Digital Archaeologists who design, develop, implement and to some extent, still build the digital tools used by digital archaeologists. This ranges from the recognition, adoption and demonstration of tools such as GIS before they become mainstreamed, through to the creation of complex data management systems for onsite recording, processing and digital archiving. I'm not attempting to ring-fence digital archaeology by somehow claiming that only Digital Archaeologists can do digital archaeology – it's simply that without Digital Archaeologists, digital archaeology would be a very different creation, in all probability one almost entirely predicated on commonplace everyday tools – word processors, email, spreadsheets – and reliant on the likes of Dropbox, WordPress, Flickr, etc. alongside a handful of geographers, computer scientists and others using archaeology as a convenient testbed.

Nor have these developments happened without conversations about their implications, and to suggest otherwise is to deny the range of critiques and debates that sit behind many of the digital tools used in archaeology today. That's not to say they are perfect – indeed, I've argued that they are lacking in many respects (e.g. Huggett 2012) – but nonetheless, they provide a context for the introduction and implementation of the range of tools we use and so I would argue that they **do** facilitate rather than impede the setting up of things. Hence, it is not the case that “progress has often been quite removed from the conversations about digital archeology”, although perhaps these conversations have taken place outside the white heat of mainstream journals for the most part.

So is there a problem with making these approaches and tools into objects of study and organising conversations around them as Costopoulos suggests? In my view, not to do so would be an abrogation of responsibility and indeed, seems to negate the very idea of having a digital archaeology section in a journal called *Frontiers in Digital Humanities*. Can we seriously discuss working on frontiers and seeking to extend those frontiers without considering the tools that we're using and the implications of their use? Can we really assume that digital tools are neutral and have no effect on their subjects, and hence discussions of them largely consist of examining the academic fluff in our digital navels? Perhaps the implication of the suggestion is that we've gone about it the wrong way, and I'd certainly agree that there is room for improvement here, but that's a very different argument.

Instead the implication seems almost to be to leave it to others to have these conversations in our place. To my mind this would appear to deny that archaeology and archaeologists have a contribution to make to these larger debates. As a subject predicated on the study of material culture, to not apply an archaeological eye to digital material culture would be more than just a wasted opportunity. That said, it is certainly true that we can often seem largely unaware of highly

relevant debates taking place in other areas – Costopoulos makes specific reference to virtual archaeology, for instance:

“Much of the online reconstruction of the past and the bulk of online debate about how to accurately represent past contexts has escaped the orbit of professional archeology and been captured by the computer gaming community. One need only look at the often informed and sophisticated debates taking place about realism on forums dedicated to historically based computer games to see that the full range of archeological concerns, from the details of material culture to economic and social organization, are explored by a globally distributed community that dwarfs professional archeology by several orders of magnitude.”

Again, this seems to me like an opportunity for archaeology to make a contribution beyond its traditional boundaries, rather than a case for letting others get on with it and living vicariously off their results. Ultimately, this argument comes across as a development of the anxiety discourse in digital archaeology (e.g. Huggett 2013), but one in which the conclusion drawn is that we delegate the debates to others and simply get on with ‘doing’ it.

Costopoulos is undoubtedly correct to draw attention to the way that developments in digital curation and distribution, for example:

“... keep bringing up serious problems of standardization, intellectual property, funding, ethics, and so on. These problems are not new. They are not unique to digital archeology or even characteristic of it. They belong to archeology as a whole. Some will gradually be solved, and some will remain, as they have, since the dawn of the discipline. Let us not get hypnotized by their current ephemeral incarnation. Let us treat them as the timeless things they are and focus on their essence.”

However, nor should we assume in the process that these issues constitute the sum total of debates within digital archaeology – far from it. Questions surrounding the introduction, development, and implications of new technologies within the subject go far beyond questions of standardisation, ethics etc. in addressing the very fundamental stuff of archaeology and its interpretation – or, at least, they should do. A failure to do so to any great extent may well lie behind Costopoulos’ critique and is an aspect I’m particularly interested in (e.g. Huggett 2015).

Costopoulos concludes:

“Forget the label. We are building a digital archeology by doing archeology digitally. This is what we do.”

Quite, but unless doing digital archaeology includes the conversations surrounding doing archaeology digitally it will be only a partial archaeology, subject to the vagaries of fads and trends, underdeveloped, undervalued, and underwhelming.

In all of this, of course, I have a vested interest and I'm grateful to Andre Costopoulos for putting the debate on the table, because otherwise I might as well pack up this blog and do something else altogether. Which you might think would be a good idea ... ☐

References

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