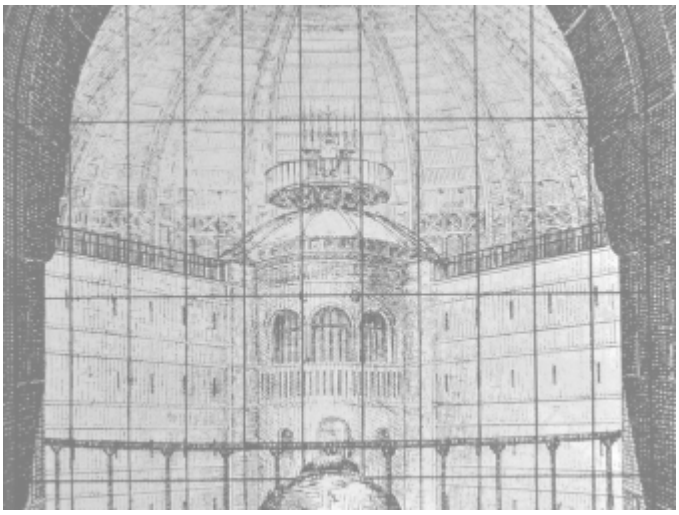
Who watches the digital?

written by Jeremy Huggett | 26/03/2018



Jeremy Bentham's panoptic prison design (Foucault 1975, pl.4)

I was struck by a question that Colleen Morgan asked me over lunch several months ago: "Is there a need for a digital archaeology specialism in the future?". Of course, Colleen together with Stu Eve famously declared in 2012 that "we are *all* digital archaeologists" (2012, 523) given the extent to which we delegate a significant share of our work and life as archaeologists to digital devices, and the way in which the digital has penetrated to the furthest reaches of the discipline.

More recently, Andre Costopoulos picked up on this in his opening editorial for the archaeology section of the *Frontiers in Digital Humanities* journal, essentially arguing that digital archaeology was the not-so-new 'normal', and that we should stop talking about it and get on with doing it. The 'digital turn' has already happened in archaeology: digital technologies now regularly and habitually mediate, augment, and simulate what we do.

Is the fact that 'we're all digital archaeologists now' or that archaeology has 'gone digital' simply a sign of our success? Should we now meekly accept the need to move on and become properly reintegrated in archaeology as our digital tools have already done? That there is no need for a digital archaeology specialism in the future?

Accepting that we're all digital archaeologists to some degree, I've argued elsewhere that 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 I capitalised the D in Digital archaeology to differentiate it from the widespread application of digital tools across the discipline as a whole. My thinking was that 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. I'm not 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 office-based tools with a handful of geographers, computer scientists and others applying more advanced tools using archaeology as a convenient testbed for experimentation and validation.

But rather than seeing digital archaeology as a discrete field of archaeology we should perhaps see it as more of a spectrum. To paraphrase Lincoln Mullen writing in 2010 about the digital humanities, "all archaeological scholars use digital practices and concepts to one degree or another, even those who do not identify as digital archaeologists. Working as a digital archaeologist is *not* one side of a binary, the other side of which is working as a traditional scholar". So in effect we could see the digital archaeologist at one end of the spectrum with the Digital archaeologist at the other.

Where does this leave digital archaeology as a specialism? Back in 2011 Marcos Llobera asked how much of archaeological practice has actually changed as a consequence of digital archaeology, or whether we are simply doing technically enhanced versions of much the same things. Over the years, digital archaeology can be characterised as primarily concerned with exploring the practical uses of computer techniques and technologies and the computations that can be applied to different kinds of archaeological data in the pursuit of analysis. Small wonder perhaps that a distinction between big-D and little-d digital archaeology is somewhat blurred.

So if Digital archaeology is to have a future as a discrete field or subdiscipline, how does it need to change? We could simply sidestep the 'we are all digital archaeologists now' claim by changing the name – for instance with Marcos Llobera's proposed 'Archaeological Information Science', which is:

> "concerned with the generation, representation and manipulation of archaeological information within the context of information systems. It would call for archaeologists becoming more skilful and having a more pro-active role in the use and design of these systems" (2011,218).

But in many respects this calls for more of the same and so doesn't move us very far forward.

Here are four suggestions for how might we flesh out Digital archaeology and give it real identity and purpose into the future:

1. *Digital archaeologists need to do digital research as well as research digitally.*
   If 'we are all digital archaeologists now', then doing research digitally is no longer the preserve of Digital archaeologists. So what might constitute digital research? One key area in which we've done little so far is to develop an archaeology of the digital as material culture – after all, if there's something we archaeologists know about, it's material culture. So we might legitimately pursue an archaeology of code, an archaeology of software, an archaeology of digital design ranging from ontologies to systems and everything in between, and an archaeology of digital environments – what I've suggested elsewhere to be a form of digital cognitive archaeology.
2. *Digital archaeologists need to build digital things.*

Or to put it another way, digital archaeologists need to be makers. This may entail coding, but as with the parallel debate in the digital humanities, making and building doesn't necessarily involve programming as such – it can include conceptualising, designing, and managing the building of things. This has implications for our education programmes – how many of the courses that fall within 'digital archaeology' loosely defined actually teach this kind of thing? I know mine don't any more. What we do need to guard against is the reinforcement of gender divides – for instance, Miriam Posner has written about how programming knowledge is not neutral and something that white, middle class men will tend to have more often than women or people of colour.

3. *Digital archaeologists need to develop studies of digital practice.*
   For digital archaeology to be perceived as more than simply a supplier of technical methods it has to be better theorised, so there is an intellectual challenge as well as a practical challenge to be pursued. It's an area I've been working in to some extent – most recently conceptualising digital tools as cognitive artefacts, for instance. But I'm also thinking of more behavioural approaches too – for instance, Christine Finn's contemporary archaeological study of Silicon Valley that she published way back in 2001, though we have few more recent examples of ethnographic approaches to digital practice this as yet. Elsewhere, there's been relatively little consideration of how the digital transforms data, or how it changes interpretation in new and innovative ways, and its implications for knowledge creation.
4. *Digital archaeologists need to resist and critique the digital*.
   This brings me back to my opening title: who watches the digital? (alternatively *Quis custodiet ipso digital?* according to Google Translate's Latin). The context for the introduction, implementation, and development of the range of digital tools we use should be accompanied by critiques and debates about their use and implications. Some might call this luddism, but I have argued (e.g. 2015) that we have an intellectual responsibility to do this and are the best positioned amongst the digital humanities to understand the implications, transformations, and repercussions of digital technologies, to look beneath surface appearances and isolate the traces of digital interventions embedded as a consequence of digital intermediation in the collection, manipulation, interpretation, and communication of archaeological data and the knowledge created using it.

Hopefully that's a rather more coherent and considered response to Colleen's original question to me than my somewhat garbled reply at the time. Ultimately, I think that as Digital archaeologists we have a good stories to tell about both the transformational impact of information technology within archaeology and also about the digital transformation of culture more generally. What we have to do is to develop those compelling stories for there to be an assured future for Digital Archaeology.

I am grateful to Colleen Morgan for asking the question in the first place! This text is derived from a provocation prepared for the Round Table on 'The Value of Digitally Mediated Archaeology' held at CAA 2018 in Tübingen.

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