Lost in Details

Digital Archaeology's Universalism

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In 2019 I claimed that archaeology suffers from 'digital escapism', a term that can denote two different phenomena. The first is the dismissal of arte-facts as subjects of scientific interest and a shift in focus to digital methods as subjects of studies. The second is the use of big data in archaeology and the attempt to make the discipline more scientific (Stobiecka 2019). While the first understanding of digital escapism refers mainly to the proliferation of method-oriented studies that praise technologies and unveil a particular technosolutionism described by Jeremy Huggett in his paper, the second way of embracing digital escapism falls into what Tim Flohr Sørensen has described under the banner of 'new empiricism' (Sørensen 2017).

Both tendencies have universalistic ambitions. A method-focused approach aims at developing means for pushing digital archaeology for-ward and making it more applicable – sometimes regardless of the costs, potential users, general availability and meaningfulness of purpose. The second dimension has far more serious consequences, suggesting that, as in 'new empiricism', all small details are lost in the quest for big data.

Similar concerns are presented in an interesting and thought-provoking paper by Jeremy Huggett. He views the last thirty years of digital archae-ology in realistic terms and accurately diagnoses the main challenges for

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the development of this research field. His paper is another attempt, after a brilliant study by Colleen Morgan (2022), to summarize the scientific achievements related to digital infrastructures in archaeology. I particularly appreciate his research questions, which provoke us to ponder upon the future of digital archaeology. The questions posed about the purpose, influence on archaeological practice, concepts behind certain tools and the infrastructures and technical, political and ontological dimensions of decisions related to digital archaeology are crucial to imagining a more technologically sustainable theory and practice. I would like to first comment on these questions and later address the issue of the universalism of digital archaeology, which I find particularly pertinent and not fully recognized in Huggett's otherwise exhaustive study.

My comment will be illustrated with a recent example of a bottom-up initiative by Quinn Dombrowski, Anna E. Kijas and Sebastian Majstorovic which resulted in the setting up of a database and virtual gallery of endangered and/or destroyed Ukrainian cultural heritage. SUCHO (Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online) was opened 26 February 2022, two days after the Russian invasion in Ukraine. Since then, more than 1,500 volunteers have archived thousands of websites and dozens of terabytes of data on Ukrainian cultural heritage. The records in the database are varied, including scanned documents, photographs or 3-D tours, and therefore it cannot be seen as a 'standardized' repository. SUCHO has come up in many discussions that I have had with colleagues involved in providing humanitarian assistance in Ukraine. Although it would be interesting to explore further the technical aspects of this database, they have never come up in these discussions. What was most important, of course, was its purpose. This interventional tool aimed at empowering a community that has suffered so much resonates well with what William Caraher called the 'archaeology of care', which 'recognizes the human consequences of our technology, our methods, and the pasts that they create' (Caraher 2019:381). The purpose and sociocultural meaning came first, unlike in many digital archaeology projects where the priority seems to be placed on methods. The SUCHO case shows that digital infrastructures can be sustainable if they engage communities that identify themselves with the cause.

I would like to emphasize that the SUCHO example is not meant to encourage ad hoc emergency solutions for digital archaeology, but rather to challenge thinking about the political status quo, recognized by Huggett as characteristic of many digital infrastructures. Although I see Jeremy Huggett's summary of the last thirty years of digital archaeology as a much needed one, it covers mainly Western scholarship (and related projects), and this brings me to my biggest reservation about the presented paper, one related to digital archaeology's universalism.

Technosolutionism, mentioned at the beginning of Huggett's discussion, is a universalistic approach that favours, first and foremost, the development and applicability of methods. Less space is given to theoretical frameworks and the sociocultural and political consequences of it. Moreover, technosolutionism is a tendency that develops under specific conditions: within a well-financed academic milieu and among trans/interdisciplinary groups of scholars with access to specialized know-how. In the case of archaeology, it is thus generally reserved for prosperous countries. The solutions they offer might be seen as applicable, functional and affordable (for some). What is lost, however, in this universalistic approach to developing methods are the details.

The details that are missed may be cultural, political or social and relate to further, pressing questions that were not asked by Huggett in his interesting contribution. They are as important as the ones posed, but in addition, sensitize us to the universalistic dimension of digital archaeology and its infrastructures. For instance, where are these technologies developed? Who is using them and where? Who can afford to develop these technologies and fully participate in digital archaeology? How then might these infrastructures be perceived as open and accessible? Who is really benefiting from them? These questions relate especially to the issue of interoperability discussed by Huggett. Which universities are able to take part in the networks and consortiums? Given the debate over the sustainability of digital infrastructures dependent on commercial imperatives, it would be interesting to see this matter discussed more broadly outside of the UK and US. The differences between private, national and university-based funding are another key matter mentioned in the discussion on sustainability. Here, a number of new questions arise: to what extent does funding shape digital infrastructures? Is there any secure funding in the age of fast academia, which prioritizes short-term grants and immediate results? Finally, in regard to all of these questions: what is the political meaning of digital archaeology and its emerging and/or collapsing infrastructures?

Jeremy Huggett covers some of the political questions raised here, but certainly a deeper engagement with digital archaeology's politics is much needed. Huggett maps out many important aspects entangled in digital infrastructures (for instance, invisible labour), but surely more papers like this should follow to address how digital ethics can meet the challenges posed by the realities of the Anthropocene, decolonization, late capitalism and the rise of nationalism around the world.

Huggett's paper should encourage us to examine more closely archaeological infrastructures from regional perspectives. These, in turn, provide the groundwork for discussing cultural differences related to functioning of digital repositories and databases in various contexts. Huggett describes the British and American examples, DINAA and PAS. Both are interesting

illustrations for the cultural background to user-depositor-platform relations; however, more contributions are vital for understanding the future of digital infrastructures.

Last, but not least, I find the mention of the messy archaeological data very thought-provoking. When so many archaeological finds are unruly (Olsen & Pétursdóttir 2016), it is difficult to think about standardized representations of objects that in digital infrastructures are reduced to 'unknown' or 'undefined'. Whereas the stubborn materiality of things encourages us to reflect and theorize about things and objects, their digital 'translation' (Stobiecka 2020) might sometimes only show their uselessness. It is a classic Latourian question to revisit in digital archaeology (in a future and more extensive study): how can we translate material objects into immaterial data (Latour 1999, see also Lucas 2012:245)?

Finally, I would like to offer my response to the last question posed by Jeremy Huggett in his inspiring study. Huggett asks about infrastructure-related developments and their fate after being presented in the CAA conference proceedings. This brings me to the memory of an excellent session titled 'digiTAG 2.0' organized during the TAG conference in Southampton in 2016. The session provided a great opportunity to discuss, first and foremost, the theory in and of digital archaeology. Today, encouraging a more theory-focused approach to digital archaeology and its infrastructures should remain a priority. I treat Huggett's paper (as well as the recent contribution by Morgan [2022]) as a call to end the 'regime of methods' in digital archaeology, especially those methods that are supposed to be 'universally applicable' no matter the cultural, social and political costs.

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