

Think Outside the Square You Live In: Issues of difference and nation in virtual heritage

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Abstract. This paper will explore how virtual heritage can create meaningful experiences for exploring issues of identity politics and the nation state. Virtual heritage is responsible for the technological interpretation of the memories, lives and beings of people around the world. Yet interpretation in virtual heritage is often inadequate for dealing with the complexity of cultural difference within a modern nation state. This paper will discuss how cultural difference could be shaped through the model of civic pluralism and further, how virtual heritage projects can play an active role in exploring multiple voices. This paper proposes the need for designing projects that move beyond virtual heritage as a mere 'tool' towards virtual heritage as affording collective experiences about a nation's past. This is expressed through conceptualising users of projects not as a single, universal user but as multiple and varied people. Virtual heritage needs to be embedded within the evolving and fragmentary nature of national identity and cultural difference. In this way, virtual heritage can become a public space for dialogue on a nation's past.

Keywords: virtual heritage, social dimension, cultural difference, interpretation, civic pluralism

1. Introduction

This paper will explore how virtual heritage can create meaningful experiences for exploring issues of identity politics and the nation state. Virtual heritage is responsible for the technological interpretation of the memories, lives and beings of people around the world. Yet interpretation in virtual heritage is often inadequate for dealing with the complexity of cultural difference within a modern nation state. This paper will discuss how cultural difference could be shaped through the model of civic pluralism and further, how virtual heritage projects can play an active role in exploring multiple voices. There is existing research that focuses on the relationship between interpretation and interactivity in virtual heritage, as well as its relevance to learning: this paper asserts what is needed in this equation is exposing the layers and dimensions of culture. This paper proposes the need for designing projects that move beyond virtual heritage as a mere 'tool' and instead presenting a collective representation of a nation's past. The paper argues that users of projects cannot be conceptualised as a single, universal user but as multiple and varied people. Until virtual heritage embraces a higher level of interactivity, it will remain a passive conveyor of the past and based on hierarchical and objective knowledge. Virtual

heritage needs to be embedded within the evolving and fragmentary nature of national identity and cultural difference. In this way, virtual heritage can become a public space for dialogue on a nation's past.

My argument proceeds as follows: in the first section, I will frame the discussion by giving a brief introduction to the nature of cultural difference in contemporary society. This will draw on theoretical positions from cultural studies and multicultural policy, where there is a solid body of work around cultural difference and interpretation. In section two, I will discuss why the interpretative framework of many virtual heritage projects fail to adequately deal with cultural difference. At the moment many interpretative frameworks are inadequate for the dealing with the complexity of cultural difference and interpretation, as they are often based on Modernist perspectives. This can be problematic as it interprets the past as objective, hierarchical and monolithic. With the two previous sections in mind, in section three I discuss approaches towards solving the problem. This is specifically done through understanding virtual heritage as a cultural form that can be embedded and intervene with interpretations about the past. This shift is important so the virtual heritage field can be an active player in understanding and forming the nation's past. The idea of virtual heritage as a cultural form is then connected with the model civic pluralism for dealing with cultural difference and interpretation.

The theories and models in this paper draw on multiple disciplines: multicultural policy, interaction design, media studies and critical theory. The connection between these disciplines is through the process of dialogue and contestation. An interdisciplinary perspective is significant because it aims to overcome virtual heritage research written from a technologically-defined point of view. Similar to other media dealing with the past, virtual heritage is concerned with issues of cultural difference, especially in relation to appropriation, production and meaning-making. In this way, the paper employs intercultural and postcolonial perspectives seeking to "move beyond traditional conceptions of the 'West and the rest' towards genuinely dialogic, multidirectional and polyphonic perspectives" [1].

2. Nation-making

It is increasingly difficult to view humanity as made up of discrete and bordered cultures, as the complexities of cultural difference intertwine with the spread of globalisation and multiculturalism. The ebb and flow of cultures can both expose societies to different ways of living but also breed negative feelings about cultural difference, such as intolerance, subjugation and exclusion towards others. The values and beliefs associated with cultural difference are significant in this era and require critical attention at the beginning of the 21st century. The impact of cultural difference on identity, belonging and memory has local and global implications for humanity. The interaction between people from different backgrounds, generations and nationalities is not a new phenomenon. However, many of the forces propelling globalisation in modern society – mass immigration, Internet and low-cost air travel to name but a few - mean the frequency and the depth of these interactions have evolved on a scale unprecedented [2].

Issues of interpretation and cultural difference are paramount in the virtual heritage field. The shape and form these issues will take in virtual heritage can be found in the humanities. Critical theory in the humanities has been concerned with exploding myths and fictions of nationalist thought, particularly in colonised societies, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, for the past few decades. This turn in discussions has emphasised the multiple, shifting, fragmented and often contradictory modes of national identity, values and relationships in the contemporary world [3]. This is in opposition to the idea of nationalism or nation-making, which was the organising unit of modernity based on the 'imagined communities', the 'invention of tradition' and the 'usable past' of people living in a similar geography [3]. The myth of nation-making was utilised to create a shared understanding of the country's identity and past. In this way, nation-making was used to privilege a select group of homogenous people and "claims a community... it involves determinations of who 'we' are, and where we belong; and simultaneously defines 'them' and the difference that threatens us... Like all imaginings, (nation-making) consists... of fabrication and intervention, memory and amnesia, solidarity and murder" [4]. Mass media, such as newspaper and radio, helped to propel these ideas about nation-making. The problem with nation-making is that it often excludes many within a nation's geographical borders and interpretations are based on an 'imaginary' sense of the nation.

This thinking about nation-making has come under attack by many critical theorists in the humanities, as the perspective was criticised as excluding people and has sometimes been referred to as having 'selective amnesia' about the past. Instead, there has been a shift in critical theory towards deconstructing dominant myths about identity and nation, which foregrounds the multiple voices of those previously excluded from histories. Importantly these multiple voices, such as minority groups and indigenous people, contest who tells the story, how it is told and how it intercepts with other histories. In the public realm, this has meant acknowledging the presence of multicultural voices. A prominent example in Australia was eradicating references to Indigenous Australians as 'exotic' and 'primitive', and acknowledging that Indigenous Australians have the right to self-determination.

The significance of the move away from 'nation-making' in this paper is to highlight firstly, that there is more than one way of interpreting the past and secondly, that employing multiple voices has a large amount of legitimacy in researching the past. To illustrate this point, the quote below elaborates on the prevalence of cultural difference and interpretation in society:

Most of the knowledge that we have of pre-literate societies comes from the interpretation of archaeological 'works' that have survived. However, key aspects of the argument are speculative. Let me take as an example the cave paintings at Lascaux. Opinion is divided about whether the paintings show a hunting expedition or represent a ritual activity in which image-animals are slaughtered symbolically as an auspicious prelude to the actual hunt. The reason that this important distinction cannot be reliably made is because the images do not embody information about their use, i.e. whether it is depictive or symbolic. This is not a problem confined to objects of great antiquity. For example, there is little material difference between a pair of

chop-sticks and a pair of knitting-needles except the cultures in which they are found and the way in which they are used. This is even more apparent if one considers that there is nothing about their physical form that prevents them being exchanged and the one used for the purpose of the other [5].

The problem then with many virtual heritage projects is that they are often inadequate for dealing with the complexity of multiple voices. Many projects adopt the perspective of nation-making and thus are perpetuating the myths and stories of a select, unified group rather than the more heterogeneous, complex reality of a nation. Similarly, many virtual heritage projects are often based on empirical models that prioritise hierarchical and objective knowledge.

This is problematic as many virtual heritage works, particularly those dealing with cultural difference, are interpreting and presenting only a marginal understanding of the past. We can no longer assume that the past represents all people at all times. Further still, it can mean that the interpretative strategies of virtual heritage can have very little to do with the actual experience of people living in those countries. This neither acknowledges the diversity of people who exist in a nation state or the complexity of people from different cultural backgrounds, regions or generations. When dealing with the past, it is important that virtual heritage understands that interpretation of identity, place and space in projects can have far reaching implications and these requirements need to be integrated better.

There are many virtual heritage projects that perpetuate a marginal understanding of the past. A prominent example within the sector is constructing three-dimensional models or animations about the past, whether it is a monument, heritage site or object. Typically, a virtual project of this nature will enable the user to explore the space, as well as providing information, such as materials or techniques are being used. The possibilities of this approach provide the opportunity for innovative, creative and imaginative ways of working. However at present, many projects are limited not by their technological prowess but by their level of interpretation: content and user interaction is based on the problematic perspective of nation-making. This can be found in several ways in virtual heritage projects. Firstly, many projects do not have strong dialogue between people from different disciplines, resulting in a gap of knowledge between the cultural heritage experts and technology experts. The consequence is projects do not present a resolved understanding about the past and the technological research taken precedence. Secondly, content is presented from a single and universal viewpoint about the past. Interpreting cultural heritage content in this way can expect users from all nationalities, generations and regions to understand the project. The past can be understood as heterogeneous and can be interpreted from multiple viewpoints, which is often neglected in projects. In a similar vein, thirdly the experience of the project is often closed and users are unable to make a 'mark' on the project. To support multiple perspectives, the past needs to be interpreted in an open-ended and dynamic manner. Currently, many projects present a static narrative of the past and do not reflect the evolving and shifting nature of knowledge about the past. And finally, virtual heritage projects exclude, cover and deny diverse voices, for example minority groups, instead supporting the voice of a select and homogenous group. It is time for the virtual heritage field to acknowledge and address: the influence of virtual heritage and its users; that virtual heritage is

implicated in identity politics; and virtual heritage has broad socio-cultural implications.

3. It's All About the Experience

Addressing cultural difference does not imply a complete overhaul of the virtual heritage field. The application of digital technologies is vital to the innovation and production of the virtual heritage field. What is required is a shift in thinking about digital technology on a conceptual level, such as focusing on the process of people using digital technology. This requires a shift away from a technologically-defined perspective in virtual heritage towards “the importance of designing new products around the needs of the user, not the demands of the technology. Too many technology firms think that clever innards are enough to sell their products, resulting in gizmos designed by engineers for engineers” [6]. A framework that is more reflexive to cultural difference and interpretation can then be articulated for the virtual heritage field.

The shift towards conceptualising the user and technology relationship as an ongoing ‘experience’ or ‘process’ can be found in a growing body of thinking about technology. These commentators argue it is the intangible, dynamic and experiential characteristics of technology that can impact on a culture’s beliefs and values. A more succinct way of understanding this idea is by Flew [7] who uses the term *cultural technologies*, to express that “technologies (are) not simply material forms that impact upon culture, but rather themselves as cultural forms”. Flew explains this idea by identifying three levels for understanding technology:

- as media or physical object, tool or artefact;
- able to produce and distribute content; and
- situated within systems of knowledge and social meaning that accompany their use and development.

The purpose of digital technology cannot be solely found in its materiality as hardware, gadgetry or as a device; similarly digital technology is not limited to its content, in the human expression of words, speech or presentation of thoughts. It is the last level that is most significant and connects people and technology relationship as an experience, through technology “being situated within systems of knowledge and social meaning that accompany their use” (ibid.) where actions, processes and performances are central.

The materiality of digital technology is often much more visible, in terms of its production and its commentary. One does not need to look very far to find digital technology being referred to in this way. The advertising for iPhone produced by Apple Computer promoted their new product through its key functions (my italics): “a revolutionary mobile phone, a widescreen iPod® with *touch controls*, and a breakthrough *Internet* communications device with desktop-class email, web browsing, searching and maps—into one small and lightweight *handheld device*” [8]. This is not to point the finger at companies, such as Apple Computer, as the cause for

society viewing technology by its functions, neither is it to say that the advertising is misleading or misguided. What I would like to highlight is that if companies talk about their products to customers through the technology's functionality, then there is a chance that this discourse will become a dominant idea amongst users: that the worth of digital technology in its materiality. These examples are by no means substantial or diminish the value of technology but give an indication of how technology can be confined to merely being a tool and a conveyer of content.

This situation can be seen as filtering across to the many virtual heritage projects where technology is produced and evaluated on a material level. There is a proliferation of technologies being created as virtual heritage 'objects', 'tools' and 'artefacts' that more often than not, focus on the development and refinement of the technology, such as 3D scanning, rendering and animation, and augmented reality guide (ref). These perspectives can be seen as a form of technological determinism, where "the development of new technologies is a 'given', pre-ordained by progress, science, and Modernity. This perspective demands that societies 'adapt' to new technologies is a convenient way of avoiding more complex questions about who controls such technologies, or their social and cultural impact" [7]. Technological determinism tends to prevail when technologies are believed to be on a development continuum and a purely positive force for society, such as techno-utopianism. Despite the prevalence of technological determinism, it is a problematic perspective as it views the production of technologies as distinct from the cultural and social values associated with their use. There is a need to reframe these discussions to examine the more complex social and cultural issues that surround the use of virtual heritage and its objects, tools and artefacts.

Virtual heritage needs to engage more deeply with Flew's third level of cultural technologies: technology being situated within systems of knowledge and social meaning that accompany their use and development. This idea shifts the focus of technology to its relationship with social, political, environmental, economic and cultural, and not just its materiality. For virtual heritage, this means acknowledging that: interpretations can be open ended; that the knowledge inherent in the past is constantly shifting and evolving; and that a two-way relationship is being exercised between the technology and the user. In this way, virtual heritage can be viewed as a cultural form and provides a framework for virtual heritage to begin being embedded and intervening through interpretations and cultural difference about the past.

4. Black and white - or Grey all over

The context of addressing cultural difference in virtual heritage is proposed through the model of civic pluralism. At its core, civic pluralism advocates a move towards a more 'open' understanding of diversity in public spaces [10]. The boundaries of civic pluralism are still evolving but is a model being adopted by Australia and Canada in their policies on cultural difference. Civic pluralism attempts to address the multiplicity of voices that exist in interpreting identity and nation through a *negotiated* dialogue between people:

Instead of core culture and national standards, the civic is a space for the negotiation of another sort of social. It is a place where differences are actively recognised, where these differences are negotiated in such a way that they complement each other, and where people have the chance to expand their cultural and linguistic repertoires so that they can access a broader range of cultural and institutional resources. Civic pluralism necessarily changes the nature of the "civic" [11].

A negotiated dialogue supports a sustainable two-way relationship between the virtual heritage project and the user. The past is culturally represented through multiples voices and ongoing contestation, which creates a dialogue within the virtual heritage project and the user. Cultural difference in virtual heritage can then encourage multiple voices about the past, as well as moving beyond pre-conceived labels or values as it can be "problematic to discuss Western, non-Western, indigenous, immigrant and diasporic constructs of knowledge as separate from each other in an era marked by a constant crossing of cultural boundaries, concepts and lifestyles" [12]. This is important in addressing cultural difference, as it encourages a genuine dialogue between people of different backgrounds. Virtual heritage is not about us and them - virtual heritage needs to be structured around connections and dialogue between people.

But why should the context that virtual heritage is operating within be based on civic pluralism and not multiculturalism? In recent years, multiculturalism has become a problematic model because of its real and perceived compatibility with nation-making. Although acknowledging and respecting cultural difference is crucial in understanding a nation's identity, Soutphommasane (amongst others) has suggested that the separation between majority/minority can actually further lead to feelings of oppression, marginalisation or powerlessness [9]. Thus virtual heritage projects that make a clear distinction between different cultures can be seen as having a damaging effect on promoting intercultural relations between virtual heritage and its users. The issue of multiculturalism is illustrated the policies of Australia on cultural difference:

That is, because Australian multiculturalism expressly incorporates ethnic difference *within* the space of the national, it provides a framework for a politics of *negotiation* over the very content of the national culture, which is no longer imagined as something fixed and historically given but as something in the process of becoming... Against the background of the state's concern with the construction of (national) unity, multiculturalism can be seen not as a policy to *foster* cultural differences but, on the contrary, to direct them into safe channels... multiculturalism can be understood as coming out of the same modernist ideological assumptions on which the notion of the homogeneous nation-state was based. The ultimate rational remains national unity; tolerance of diversity is just another means of guaranteeing that unity. [13].

Similarly, an emphasis on difference also complicates issues of cultural universals versus cultural relativism, as "although the language of 'shared values' has an obvious

appeal in satisfying a collective yearning for unity, it can in fact operate to belittle a multicultural society's diversity" [11]. The problem with 'us' and 'them' approaches is also that the distinction can maintain a hierarchy of beliefs and values, by promoting cultural universals and suppressing cultural relativism within society.

The application of civic pluralism in virtual heritage can be expressed through acknowledging projects that are not used by a single, universal user but multiple and varied people. Virtual heritage can then address the multiple perspectives of users from a multitude of nationalities, regions and generations and consequently, negotiating a multitude of interpretations about the past. Civic pluralism is then sympathetic to the evolving, fragmentary and shifting nature of knowledge about the past.

A salient example of civic pluralism in virtual heritage can be seen in the work by Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN) who prioritise the socio-cultural purpose of virtual heritage in their work. CHIN has developed several online projects for diverse audiences to engage with Canadian history, one of which is 'Community Memories' that is "an aggregation of multimedia objects and local history online exhibits drawing from the collections of museums and reminiscences of individuals from those communities" [Geber, VSMM 06]. The construction and architecture design of the project as a virtual museum encourages visitors to contribute the development of the project in an ongoing dialogue. This enables the project to be open-ended and dynamic from the ground-up, enabling the users to actively drive the direction of the Communities Memories project. Similarly, CHIN is reconstructing relationships between the curatorial professionals, collections and audiences that brings knowledge about the past from the different groups closer together. Curatorial knowledge of collections is intermingled with knowledge from audiences, both presented as being equally important and valuable as each other in interpreting Canadian history. More importantly, this openness to heterogeneous voices enables the development of new narratives about the past.

Dealing with cultural difference can involve sensitive issues and there are concerns to highlight for adopting civic pluralism in virtual heritage. Firstly, in interpreting cultural difference, a balance needs to be made between representing diversity and overcoming ethnocentric views. This matter was highlighted by Colors Magazine by Benetton a decade ago, when the publication aimed to promote diversity through foregrounding people from different cultures in their images and editorial. However, Benetton was accused

by joining the author and audience, the argument assumes that the audience takes on not only the spatial perspective of the author, but the ideological perspective as well. This strategy of argument is effective in attempting to persuade the audience of an editorial position. At the same time, a serious problematic occurs precisely because of the audience's separation from the subject and its unification with the author [14].

Another concern with pluralist models is that the use of multiple perspectives in interpreting the past can have the effect of virtual heritage negating any meaning at all. On the one hand, presenting multiple voices may have a democratic intention but in turn can actually "deny(ing) that one may be 'better history' than another – implies

that we forgo the possibility that anyone should take responsibility for the past” [15]. This can become complex, particularly in situations of extreme intolerance and subjugation of others, as treating all perspectives on the same level can make it impossible to deal with historical responsibility.

5. The Shape of Things to Come

If civic pluralism is used as the context for virtual heritage projects dealing with cultural difference, then the objective of virtual heritage shifts from technological to a more culturally-defined one. Similarly, the catalyst for projects is not about exercising the strengths in the latest technologies, but in solving actual problems for humanity.

This paper has argued that current frameworks in many virtual heritage projects are inadequate for dealing with issues of cultural difference, as they tend to be premised on nation-making that prioritises hierarchical, objective and monolithic knowledge. Instead, definitions surrounding virtual heritage exhibits need to be expanded to include understanding digital technologies as cultural forms or cultural technologies. This means virtual heritage is considered not only as a tool to interpret the past, but also has the capacity to be embedded with broader social and cultural structures. The conceptual framework proposed in this paper is then premised on technology being a cultural form, and further still, emphasises building virtual heritage exhibits on civic pluralism. This is because the heterogeneous characteristics of pluralist models can deal with multiple perspectives and the dynamic nature of multiple voices. The conceptual framework is then a proposal for beginning to deal with issues of cultural difference where virtual heritage can begin to articulate the context surrounding a nation’s past.

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