What is Virtual Heritage?

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The notion
"Visualisation has been defined as 'to form a mental image of something incapable of being viewed or not at that moment visible'… (Collins Dictionary)... a tool or method for interpreting image data fed into a computer and for generating images from complex multi-dimensional data sets" (McCormick *et al.* 1987).

So the point of virtual heritage might be to visualize a culture through its artefacts. Virtual heritage is thus a 'visualisation' or 'recreation' of culture. In virtual heritage projects, the aim is typically to "recreate" or "reconstruct" the past through three-dimensional modelling, animation, and panorama photographs. In some advanced cases, objects are laser-scanned, and accurate textures of what used to be there are applied to the resulting digital models.
Why would we do that? For many reasons, for when a culture is no longer with us, when a culture is so ingrained that we do not normally notice or appreciate it, or when the remains of a society or civilisation are currently inaccessible or scattered.
It may now seem to us that virtual heritage is simply the recreation of what used to be there. Yet what used to be 'there' was more than a collection of objects. Those objects had specific meaning to the cultural perceptions of the land's traditional inhabitants.
The problem of culture

If the cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1998) is to be believed, culture is that which is not seen: "Seeing what is not there lies at the foundation of all human culture". He has further defined culture as a shared form of escapism. Such a definition raises an interesting paradox for the visualisation of past cultures. How do we see what is not there?

There are many issues in the presentation of culture. One is the definition of culture itself, the second issue is understanding how culture is transmitted, and the third is how to transmit this cultural knowledge to people from another culture. In the case of virtual heritage, a fourth also arises, exactly how can this specific cultural knowledge be transmitted digitally?

The problem of meaningful engagement

Research has indicated that the general public does not want realism but entertaining immersion. Various researchers have suggested that virtual environments (specifically heritage environments) often lack several features that would make them more engaging to the general public.

"... [T]he archaeological use of VR is at present all about the creation of pictures... Only after they have been generated does attention turn to the uses to which such models can be put" (Gillings, 2002: 17).

Both Gillings and I suggest it is not a lack of realism but a lack of meaningful content which impedes the enjoyment of virtual heritage (Champion 2006). I call it the 'Indiana Jones' dilemma. On the one hand, adventure films have popularised archaeology as an interactive and engaging pursuit. On the other hand, they and computer games typically destroy the very object of admiration. Digital media can recreate both objects and activities, but what sort of activity is both engaging and educational? How can we both significantly preserve and meaningfully communicate the past?

References

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