Foreword

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This diverse and fascinating collection of essays on virtual heritage takes the reader on a tour of some of the most pertinent issues and challenges currently facing the domain. There is a scholarly focus on the digital technologies deployed in a virtual heritage context, what these can achieve in terms of representation, and the relationship between precision, accuracy in representation, and the characterisation of authenticity. It is refreshing also to see consideration of less technical issues such as ethics and the related question of (digital) data preservation and long-term access. While these aspects of virtual heritage may be intimately related to various technical developments they also help to situate virtual heritage within the heritage domain more broadly by drawing out the similarities, and differences, between the 'virtual' and 'non-virtual' in how the issues should be addressed. The impact of our interactions with the communities we serve and our obligations to care for and curate the content we create on their behalf are too often afterthoughts in project design.

You will also find chapters here addressing key questions around visual effects, animation, visualisation, evaluation, and the role of gaming. Each topic is handled in a way that points to the importance of remembering human experience in all aspects of heritage. Heritage, especially virtual heritage, unquestionably benefits from the advanced technologies it can now mobilise. However, at the

heart of heritage there remains a dynamic and complex discourse around how the multiple values and diverse forms of significance attached to tangible and intangible heritage impact on communities in the present.

The tools and methods deployed today under the banner of virtual heritage serve to inform and facilitate this discourse, rather than to stifle it with a spurious authority derived solely from technical sophistication. A key task of the practitioner in virtual heritage is to recognise the active role that their work plays in informing heritage discourse and the impact that this discourse has on people, in the context of their personal and community identities, their politics, and even their livelihoods, through tourist and cultural economies.

A fundamental way in which this role can be acknowledged is to break down the barriers between the professional and academic and the communities they impact. Much of the work of virtual heritage can be done *with* communities as well as *for* communities. If the ceaseless development of hardware and software tells us anything, it is that the next version, (of whatever it is), will be easier to use, and likely cheaper and quicker too. What appears to be the sole domain of the expert one day, for example, laser scanning, becomes a ubiquitous feature of a consumer phone handset the next. Consequently, there are few meaningful technical barriers to community co-production and engagement, that last for long (see Haukaas & Hodgetts 2016). What we do in virtual heritage and who we do it with and why, are bigger questions than what are the latest technologies for recording or dissemination?

It is part of the work of the virtual heritage practitioner to find and engage with the constituencies and communities that are invested in the heritage in question or to work together with these communities to develop alternative forms of significance around heritage that may be important to them, but which often lies out with the traditional regimes of significance operating in academia and cultural heritage management (see Jeffrey et al. 2020; Jones et al. 2017).

It has been a common failing of much heritage work dealing with the distant past to assume there is no current community to engage with, and that work can be carried out as if the space in question is neutral or without stakeholders. This notion, itself now antiquated, is antithetical to the practice of heritage today and, in the virtual domain too, we must never take our eyes off the various communities with which, and for whom, we do our work.

This collection of essays, with its broad mix of topics and perspectives, avoids the pitfall of treating its topic as an adventure in a technological playground. Taken together, the chapters and topics covered here provide the reader with a valuable springboard from which to explore virtual heritage. This includes technical developments and future directions, but also many of the broader questions around what we do in virtual heritage today and why we do it.

References

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