

Josh Harle's
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polemic unpaper on

The Ethics of Digital 'Capture'



Police forensics TV-shows celebrate the 'poetics of capture': murder mysteries are the ultimate disruption of rationality, as both a catastrophic breakdown of the law and order aimed for in civilised society, and as a terrifying existential and metaphysical unknown. The 'Crime Scene Investigators' are there with forensic science to take control of the chaos, and calmly and meticulously piece together a stable narrative.

As an approach to 'making sense' of a mysterious world, this celebration sits perfectly as an example of enlightenment ideology: Science as a grand narrative, the progressive attainment of knowledge, and the triumph of (reasonable) man over (chaotic) nature. Such thinking fitted perfectly with the colonial politics that came with it – mapping out and making sense of the world, rationalising, categorising and measuring through objective observation of the subject matter from a detached distance. The mysteries of the unknown progressively interrogated, and brought into the body of scientific knowledge.

Though in the academic domain enlightenment thinking has been critically destabilised (like it or not, we are living in a post-modern world), the idea of 'science as a grand narrative' persists in popular 'secular mythologies' such as police forensic shows, and the techno-optimist, techno-humanist mentality of popular science and silicon valley.

Recently, archaeologists have adopted the emerging technology of Structure-from-Motion in order to replace the photographic documentation of archaeological sites with photorealistic 3D renderings. These 3D models operate with a different epistemological modality to photographs: while photos are partial, and exhibit signs of their own contingent and specific creation (the lighting, time of day, angle and position of vantage point, people in the shot, etc.), the 3D models are representations that appear to show the subject with unprecedented veracity, claiming equivalency with the original: unlike photographs, this form of documentation seems to 'capture' the subject.

The implicit politics of this form of representation exacerbates common power inequalities around the practice of archaeology in Australia: university researchers taking trips into 'the interior' to collect imagery, data and traditional knowledge from remote

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The implicit politics of this form of representation exacerbates common power inequalities around the practice of archaeology in Australia: university researchers taking trips into 'the interior' to collect imagery, data and traditional knowledge from remote

Indigenous communities, returning to the the city to catalogue, organise, and extract (research) value from it. This perpetuates a colonial dynamic of theft, control, and exploitation that is tangible in land rights but no less heinous with knowledges and culture.



The apparent equivalency between digital representation and original site could also offer some a mitigating tonic to the possible destructive development of heritage sites, something that archaeologists are often instrumental in and specifically tasked with working towards: i.e. an archaeological heritage report is a necessary stage in a mining companies application for development permit.

The right and credentials of an outsider to speak for a site (to decide what is recorded and articulated and what is not) becomes extremely dubious without privileging western knowledge systems and its sources of authority. However, sites of Indigenous cultural heritage are under threat, and many communities are keen to explore new technologies for management, education, and keeping sites alive, with researchers competent in these technologies able to inform discussions on developing culturally-appropriate applications.

In contemporary anthropology, a 'fictocritical' approach to research has been proposed as a way of escaping toxic colonial overtones of academic knowledge production. Fictocriticism could be considered a form of 'gonzo research': the author as embedded researcher, rather from an objective observer: research presented as personal reflection without an implicit claim to authority, and articulating the contingency of the research as a partial and tentative.

This Year I was resident with the Centre for Rock Art Research and Management, UWA, and had the privilege of brief fieldwork with the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation (Burrup Peninsula) experimenting with 3D modelling. With ongoing collaboration, I'm attempting to answer the question "What might a fictocritical virtual environment be like?"

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