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DIGITAL CURATOR
TRAINING TOOL BOX

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Enriching Heritage through Digital Curation

Practice and Training Handbook

EDITORS Ramona Quattrini || Carlos Smaniotto Costa || Catarina Patrício

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The Cultural Heritage in the Age of Digital Reproducibility

The Authenticity of Digital Replicas

Paolo Clini, Renato Angeloni

In today's digital age, the integration of digital technology and cultural heritage has led to profound transformations in how we perceive and experience it. Moreover, within our increasingly interconnected global society, the historical knowledge and cultural significance embedded in cultural heritage have become essential for maintaining cultural diversity and sense of place. Whether it encompasses historical landmarks, artifacts, traditions, languages, or cultural practices, each facet contributes to preserving the richness of communities, providing a connection to their roots, and fostering a sense of belonging and continuity with the past and the places they inhabit. This innate need to relate to the past may not be as vital as basic human needs such as housing, food, sanitation, or public health, but it is nonetheless crucial for sustaining life, as evidenced by the inclusion of cultural access among essential human rights (United Nations, 1949).

Embracing technological innovations in the management of cultural heritage offers numerous opportunities for engaging communities and fostering a deeper connection with their history (European Commission, 2023). By leveraging digital tools, cultural heritage organizations can create diverse and inclusive experiences tailored to a wide range of audiences. From virtual exhibitions and interactive installations to digital storytelling platforms, digital heritage initiatives hold the promise of sparking meaningful dialogues within communities about their shared past and its relevance in contemporary times. Furthermore, using digital replicas, cultural heritage can transcend geographical and cultural barriers, reaching global audiences and facilitating new forms of engagement compared to the original objects. The interaction with digital objects differs from that with physical ones, raising fundamental inquiries into the concept of authenticity when experiencing cultural heritage through digital replicas (Di Giuseppantonio Di Franco et al, 2018).

Contemporary dialogues on the impact of multimedia technologies on museums, archaeology, and heritage often presume a contrast between the virtual and physical realms, articulated through various dichotomies. The physical world carries significance—weight, aura, evidence, the passage of time, the signs of power through accumulation, authority, knowledge, and privilege. In contrast, replicas are often perceived as diametrically opposed—immediate, superficial, temporary, modern, popular, and democratic. This discourse highlights a dichotomy between original (authentic) artifacts and their inauthentic replicas (Witcomb, 2010). Materialist perspectives have traditionally dominated discussions on the authenticity of replicated heritage objects, with the creation of digital replicas seen as the next step in reproduction technologies after mechanical reproduction (Muller, 2017). Consequently, the authenticity of digital replicas is often compared to that of physical replicas. Debates surrounding physical replication often circle back to Walter Benjamin's seminal essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). Benjamin argues that even the most flawless reproduction lacks the inherent authenticity of an original object. He suggests that an object's authenticity resides in its unique history, encompassing its substantive duration and its testimony to the experiences it has undergone—a quality beyond reproducibility. Con-

trary to Benjamin's materialistic theories, Latour and Lowe (2011) argue that aura is not lost through replication. They claim that advanced technologies can instill replicas with a degree of the original object's aura and authenticity. According to them, the key lies in the quality of the replica, particularly the precision of the final product, which enables it to be comprehended and revered. They even suggest that replication might enhance the aura surrounding the original, challenging the notion of authenticity as intrinsically linked to the original object. According to them, the crucial factor lies in the quality of the replica, especially the accuracy of the final product, which allows it to be fully understood and respected. In fact, they argue that replication may even enhance the aura surrounding the original, thereby challenging the notion of authenticity being inherently linked solely to the original object.

Following these theories, in recent times, there has been a significant focus on the authenticity of digital replicas, particularly concerning their accuracy, resolution, and aesthetics. However, while ensuring the accuracy of these replicas is crucial, solely prioritizing precise reproduction can lead to technological fetishism. It is imperative to also consider the new insights that a digital replica of a cultural object can provide about the original. These insights have the potential to yield novel understandings and connections with

communities, thereby fostering innovative forms of authenticity for the replicas that were absent in the original. Indeed, digital replicas enable individuals to interact with them in ways that the original artifacts could not facilitate. These novel forms of interaction, supported by digital tools, are arguably authentic. Therefore, the authenticity attributed to replicas should not solely depend on the replica itself but also on its ability to generate authentic experiences (Jeffrey, 2015).

While the questions surrounding the authenticity of digital replicas may be complex, they can be grounded in a simple principle: the original concept of heritage digitization, which underlies the generation of digital replicas. At its core, heritage digitization aims to preserve, document, and make cultural contents accessible. It is noteworthy that The London Charter (2009) outlines principles for the documentation, interpretation, and dissemination of cultural heritage using computer-based visualizations while avoiding the term 'authenticity', possibly due to its potential for misleading interpretations (Hermon & Niccolucci, 2018). Defining an object in terms of authenticity may imply that it is the real and undisputed entity, contrasting with anything fake or copied. Conversely, adherence to The London Charter ensures that replicas are considered 'authentic' copies, meaning they are accurate and trustworthy, grounded in factual information. Such

information is meticulously documented to uphold the intellectual integrity of the scientific research supporting the creation of the digital artifact, along with ensuring data transparency. The principles outlined in The London Charter were specifically designed to ensure that these two aspects are consistently considered whenever computer-based visualization is employed in cultural heritage studies. As a result, the quality of the visualization output can be quantitatively assessed, considering factors such as pixel count, point cloud density, scan quantity, environmental conditions, and more. This allows each researcher to establish their own criteria for determining whether the result is authentic or not. However, this level of precision does not inherently impact the concept of 'authenticity' as long as it is transparently reported and documented. What is considered 'authentic' for communication purposes may not necessarily hold the same authenticity when scientific analysis is involved. Adherence to The London Charter provides the necessary information for any subsequent researcher to evaluate whether the digital replica in question meets the threshold of being 'sufficiently authentic' for its intended re-use.

In conclusion, the advent of digital replicas marks a transformative moment in the dissemination of cultural heritage, surpassing any previous scale in human history. Drawing parallels to Benjamin's

time, the introduction of photography foreshadowed similar advancements, evoking concerns about the potential loss of intangible quality with the ease of image reproduction. However, hindsight reveals that the mass reproduction of art is not as ominous as initially feared by Benjamin. Instead, it presents a multitude of opportunities for cultural institutions to navigate. As digitization professionals, it is imperative to focus on the authenticity of the copy, intended as its measurable correspondences with the original object. This entails ensuring that the digital

replica fulfills the specific authenticity requirements dictated by the intended purposes of use. The central challenge facing cultural institutions lies instead in effectively navigate the complexities and opportunities presented by digital technologies, promoting authentic cultural experiences of digital replicas. Museums and other cultural sites have the potential to lead the way into the future by transcending historical constraints and embracing innovation, shaping the future of heritage preservation and dissemination in the age of digital reproducibility.

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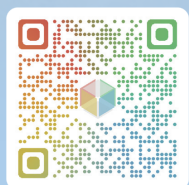


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