

## ARTICLES

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# EXPLORING DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY THROUGH EMBODIED PERSPECTIVE, ROLE-PLAYING AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND DESIGN. INTRODUCTION

### ABSTRACT

*This special issue of Visual Ethnography explores the idea of digital ethnography in terms of community participation and design and perspective and role-playing in digital media. This introduction briefly outlines the place of perspective and role-playing in expressing cultural heritage and cultural experience, and provides an overview of insights and techniques from the fields of participatory research and design. An introduction to the articles in the special issue follows, focusing on the diverse ways in which they offer practical and reflective perspectives on community participation, collaboration, and perspective in projects involving living cultural heritage, as well as the negotiation of space between researcher, subject matter, and the medium(s) through which lived experience is conveyed.*

### KEYWORDS

digital ethnography; digital heritage; digital storytelling; visual ethnography; participatory approaches

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## INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *Visual Ethnography* explores the idea of digital ethnography in terms of community participation and design and perspective and role-playing in digital media. The articles in this special issue offer practical and reflective works on digital heritage particularly as they address concepts of participatory research and design and perspective as enabled (or problematized) by multimedia ethnography. As such, the articles in this special issue offer practical and reflective perspectives on topics such as community participation, collaboration, and perspectives in projects involving living cultural heritage, as well as the negotiation of space between researcher, subject matter, and the medium(s) through which lived experience is conveyed.

Digital heritage is a field that has benefited from contributors from diverse fields including history, geography, architecture, and the arts (Bentkowska-Kafel, Denard, and Baker 2012; Cameron and Kenderdine 2007; Cohen and Rosenzweig 2006; Kalay, Kvan, and Affleck 2007; Knowles and Hillier 2008; Parry 2007 and 2013; Tallon and Walker 2008). Cameron and Kenderdine's edited volume (2007), for example, critically examines the ways in which cultural heritage practitioners use digital media.

The contributors to this work consider these approaches and practices from a theoretical perspective, while grounding those theories in practice to explore topics including the influence of digital technology on the concept of scholarly authority and the relationship between the material and digital object. Kalay, Kvan, and Affleck (2007) digital heritage volume considers topics such as efforts to capture both tangible and intangible heritage in relation to fields as diverse as philosophy and architecture. Bentkowska-Kafel, Denard, and Baker's (2012) volume addresses issues of best practices in the practice of virtual heritage, including the ethics of "transparency" in creating computer-based visualizations.

Other digital heritage works concern the application of this field to museum studies. Parry (2007), for example, investigates the uses of computers by the museum sector, and asks whether and how a basic "incompatibility" exists between museum practice and computer science. The book provides a history of museum computing and explores how the increase in and refinement of standards and coordination has resulted in the development of a new cultural role for museums. Tallon and Walker (2008), meanwhile, explore the creative incorporation of technology into museum exhibit practice. The volume discusses the potential of mobile technologies for increased visitor interaction and learning, and offers guidelines for future work.

Digital heritage work concerning the field of history also contains helpful insights for cultural heritage theorists and practitioners more generally. Cohen and Rosenzweig (2006) explore the uses of the Web for historical research and practice, offering a practical, step-by-step approach to topics including

understanding and choosing appropriate technologies, creating a useful site design, and reaching and communicating effectively to an audience. Knowles and Hillier (2008), meanwhile, discuss the use of GIS (geographic information systems) in the study of history, offering case studies and essays concerning the use of a diverse set of tools to visualize historical information, as well as how digitally modified and georeferenced images enable researchers to study GIS in relation to history.

Two areas of particular relevance to this special issue concern community participation and design, and perspective and role-playing in digital media. These will be addressed in the following sections before moving onto an introduction to the articles that form part of this special issue.

#### COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND DESIGN

Community participation and design are methodologies that have emerged from two main areas: participatory research on the one hand, and participatory design on the other. Community-based participatory research (CBPR), a broad category of research methods, is used in such fields as health, environmental, and related areas of study. It is a form of collaborative research that involves enabling structures of participation by communities affected by a particular health or environmental issue. This includes such collaborative practices as shared decision-making and shared ownership of research processes and products (Viswanatha, Ammerman, Eng et al. 2004).

Castleden, Garvin, and First Nation (2008), somewhat similarly, defines CBPR as: “an attempt to develop culturally relevant models that address issues of injustice, inequality, and exploitation” (Castleden, Garvin, and First Nation 2008: 1393).

One such methodology is Photovoice, “a CBPR method that uses participant-employed photography and dialogue to create social change” (Castleden, Garvin, and First Nation 2008: 1393). Photovoice was originally developed by Caroline Wang (Wang and Burris 1994). Castleden, Garvin, and First Nation 2008 et al. have written on their efforts to modify the methodology for use with a First Nations group in Canada. They write: “CBPR is an umbrella concept that includes research conducted under many different designations, including action research, participatory research, participatory action research, and collaborative inquiry” (Castleden, Garvin, and First Nation 2008: 1394). Generally concerned with issues of social justice and questioning the “objectivity” of the researcher, CBPR and its related methodologies typically involve reflection, dialogue, and action (Kirby and McKenna 1989). Other participatory research methods include digital storytelling (Lambert 2012), participatory geographic information systems (PGIS) and participatory archives and museums (Gubrium and Harper 2013). Participatory design (PD) is a methodology that seeks to actively include end users in the design process (Schuler and Namio-ka 1993). The approach began in Scandinavia as part of computer systems development, and since then has expanded to a number of fields that seek to involve stakeholders in the design process.

PD follows an iterative process, one that involves gathering evaluative feedback and using this to help plan redesign cycles. Watkins (2007) describes this methodology as an iterative process involving design, production, and evaluation, moving from a period of “due diligence” involving observation, review, and project strategy creation to prototype production, evaluation, and then redesign. In PD projects, scholars from multiple disciplines are brought together with potential users and a design/production team to collaborate. Ethnographers and digital heritage experts can make an important contribution to this area of work by advising on structures of collaboration and interaction in such projects and in building the social infrastructure necessary to promote community involvement (Giaccardi and Palen 2008).

In relation to participatory design (PD), Rode (2011) argues that ethnography and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) (within which PD figures) can intersect powerfully in terms of reflexive approaches. Rode (2011) advocates adapting particular practices for HCI; namely, through the composition of reflexive ethnographies, which stand in rather stark contrast to the normally positivistic production of the HCI field. Such reflexive (and generally ethnographic) techniques include: “discussing rapport, writing thick description, engaging in participant-observation, and presenting work as confessional or impressionistic tales” (Rode 2011: 9). She writes: “Given our participatory design heritage, our design informant’s voice is relevant. We need to integrate this dialog into our own. Conversely, we need to make sure the voice of the ethnographer’s first-hand experience in the field is not lost as we record these experiences...Participant observation allows us to explore technology use through embodied experience. Reflexive text, at its best, embraces and impacts the data gathering encounter, providing untapped sources for design inspiration” (Rode 2011: 9).

The contributors to this volume each grapple, albeit in different ways, with issues related to community participation and design. For example, Walters and Michlowitz’s article in this volume provides both practical and reflective perspectives on the possibilities and risks of developing story-based virtual reality applications for the humanities involving recent historical events. As their projects involve subjects who may still be alive and history which is still being written, their work offers a compelling test case for engaging with issues of community participation, collaboration, and negotiation. In addition, the PeruDigital project discussed by Underberg-Goode and Hopp in this volume, like others that employ the Participatory Design model, uses an iterative process. In this case, opening up the design and interpretation process can enable new media designers to better create new media representations of cultural heritage that reflect cultural values and ideas. Argo et al.’s digital heritage project about an African-American neighborhood in Orlando, Florida follows a methodology that involves community outreach, evaluation, and negotiation in developing this mobile storytelling resource. Reedy and Clemons’ article, too, addresses issues of collabora-

tion in the production of a multimedia documentary project about Kentucky bluegrass musicians Frances and John Reedy.

The articles in this special issue, then, draw upon the insights and techniques of participatory research and design. They also share a concern with the ways that the potential for perspective and role playing enabled by multimedia can be used to express cultural heritage and cultural experience.

#### PERSPECTIVE AND ROLE-PLAYING

Scholars have considered whether and how digital media has changed the way ethnographers have sought to convey cultural knowledge through their attempts to recreate a sense of “being there.” Boellstorff (2008), after engaging in fieldwork inside Second Life, argues that such a virtual world is nonetheless a profoundly human one. He writes: “Virtual before the Internet existed, ethnography has always produced a kind of virtual knowledge...Representations of persons in virtual worlds are known as ‘avatars’; Malinowski’s injunction to ‘imagine yourself’ in an unfamiliar place underscores how anthropology has always been about avatarizing the self standing virtually in the shoes...of another culture” (Boellstorff 2008: 5-6).

Multimedia and multisensory ethnography potentially permits us to share and understand culture, in part, through enabling a sense of perspective and, in the case of interactive media, spatial navigation. Multimedia and multisensory ethnography understands culture as concerned with feelings and the senses—as more than just thinking or being (Marion and Offen 2009).

Pink (2008), writing about the visual ethnography in/of movement, argues that ethnographers can represent routes and mobilities — and thus a sense of place — using audiovisual media. Taking a cue from Casey (1996), she argues that place is a “process” rather than a static “thing,” and that such work can be understood in terms of Rodman’s (2003) notion of multilocality (or how place is constructed from multiple viewpoints). As she writes: “audiovisual representations offer us possibilities to empathetically imagine ourselves into the places occupied, the sensations felt by others...We may not feel precisely the same sensations as those represented did, nor understand these through the same culturally and biographically informed narratives. Nevertheless it is important not to undervalue the potential of visual images to invite us to imagine ourselves into other people’s worlds, and in doing so to empathise with their emplacement—both physical and emotional” (Pink 2008: 4).

Such an approach may involve constructing non-linear or interactive multimedia expressions that facilitate the adoption of perspective and the sense of immersion (Bell and Kennedy 2007). By giving audiences a sense of “being there” while being invited to explore materials more deeply, viewers/users are encouraged to consider how to see, question, and interact with a culture from multiple points of view. The goal is thus to help the audience grasp the situated nature of cultural knowledge. This cultural knowledge and experience can be shown through

a sense of perspective and spatiality perhaps unique to the digital medium (Coover 2003). Flynn (2007) encourages digital heritage experts to consider how to enable an embodied mode of interacting with heritage through the act of navigation, made possible by adapting ideas from game design to cultural heritage projects. Champion (2011, 2015), in particular, has written on the design and evaluation of cultural heritage environments that incorporate game design techniques to facilitate cultural learning, including role-playing, interaction with objects, and avatars. The idea of role-playing, like that of conveying a sense of “being there,” of course, has a long history in anthropology and performance studies (Goffman 1959; Turner 1987). Both playing a role in a cultural performance and playing one in a role-playing game require some kind of understanding of the underlying philosophy or set of rules by which the “universe” operates (Hughes 1988).

The contributors to this special issue of *Visual Ethnography* have also grappled with the way that perspective and role-playing can figure in the presentation of cultural heritage and cultural experience. Walters and Michlowitz, for example, focus on how the application of virtual reality, with its ability to engage the imagination and form visual links, can weave together the individual threads of a singular discipline into a multidisciplinary tapestry of exploration. In the ChronoLeap project, the journey is conveyed to the target user group, 9-13 year olds, through a time travel storyline. Here a time paradox transports the user back to the 1964/65 NYWF in search of STEM clues to assist in closing the rift in time. These activities provide a motivating and informative vehicle to encourage students’ appreciation for a multidisciplinary viewpoint during key years in their educational development. The PeruDigital project discussed by Underberg-Goode and Hopp, on the other hand, uses the potential of hypermedia and digital environments to address how linguistic communities and cultures view and interpret the world. Argo et al.’s essay focuses on the design, prototype, and evaluation stages of a multimedia heritage project combining text, images, audio, and maps into an augmented reality mobile story experience that presents the heritage of the Parramore neighborhood of Orlando, Florida. Reedy and Clemons, for their part, frame the issue of perspective in terms of autoethnography, “voice”, and counterhistory. Finally, Borecky’s contribution, in contrast, takes a different tack, arguing against the human-centered viewpoint dominant in much contemporary visual ethnography. As he explains: “Building upon the audiovisual project on a Tallin shopping mall...[the article] tells the story of a personal struggle for the embodiment of a non-representative and object-oriented attitude and challenges the main premises of human-centered observational filmmaking style.”

Taken together, the articles in this issue provide a diverse set of ways to conceptualize perspective and role-playing in visual anthropology and digital cultural heritage scholarship and practice.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTICLES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The approach illustrated by the articles in this special issue use ethnography and related methodologies to inform problem-solving at all steps of the project process, which, one hopes, can lead to a more inclusive approach to the digital realm that can facilitate cultural learning.

Underberg-Goode and Hopp's article "Investigating Cultural Learning in Digital Environments through PeruDigital" examines the PeruDigital project, a digital ethnography project that presents Peruvian festivals and folklore on the Internet through an immersive and interactive environment. This project, like others that employ the Participatory Design model, is an iterative process, one that involves evaluation and garnering feedback into the design loop. In addition to employing Participatory Design principles, the project seeks to bridge current work in digital heritage with the concerns of current anthropological theory. This chapter focuses on current interdisciplinary research between faculty in Digital Media, Anthropology, and Education to study what and how students learn about cultural heritage from the website. The experience suggests that the role-playing and immersive potential of digital environments can be used to facilitate cultural learning, but that pathways through those environments need to be carefully structured so that cultural knowledge can be learned.

Walters and Michlowitz's article "A Retrospective Perspective on the Digital Recreation of Mid-Century Subjects" reflects on lessons learned and suggestions for future projects focused on using the tools of virtual heritage for the representation of the recent past. The challenges and opportunities involved in this type of work result from the fact that those who are still alive can both contribute to the development of such projects and "talk back" regarding the representation of their history, lives, and culture. The authors explore these issues through consideration of multiple projects engaged in over the years: *Shadows of Canaveral*, *ChronoLeap: The Great World's Fair Adventure*, and *ChronoPoints*. The participatory approach to involving the public in the projects raises interesting questions about community participation, collaboration, and negotiation in contexts in which those represented can answer back and offer critiques.

Bartley Argo, Nicholas DeArmas, Amanda Hill, Sara Raffel, and Shelly Welch's article "The Way it Used to Be: Exploring Cultural Heritage Through the Augmented Reality Story of a Neighborhood Soul Food Restaurant" explores the challenges and successes in developing a mobile app-based "situated documentary" project undertaken by graduate students at the University of Central Florida (UCF). The project has the goal of documenting and telling stories about the heritage and lives of the historically African-American Parramore area of Orlando. The article focuses on the design, development, and evaluation of a prototype project focusing on the experiences and memo-

ries of a local soul food restaurant owner, and efforts to develop connections (both partnership and curricular) with Parramore-area schools to empower young people to both learn about their community's heritage as well as how to make similar projects of their own so they can participate in telling their community's story.

Timi Reedy and Tammy Clemons's article, "Audiovisualizing Family History: An Autoethnography of a Digital Documentary" explores visual media production in the Appalachian cultural region of the United States, examining video as a method to not only research and document others but also to empower communities and individuals to tell their own stories through film. With a focus on the process of co-producing a multi-media documentary project about Frances and John Reedy, relatives of the documentary producers and founding Bluegrass musicians and songwriters, the article explores issues of collaboration, perspective, and representation, as the documentary itself is based on the lives of relatives of the project producers.

Pavel Borecky's article, "Tuning Solaris: From the Darkness of a Shopping Mall towards Post-Humanist Cinema" builds upon an audiovisual project on a shopping mall in Tallinn, Estonia, to outline the conceptual resources essential to an ethico-aesthetic agenda of sensory ethnography and to link them with the ambitions of post-humanist cinema. By doing so it tells the story of a personal struggle for the embodiment of a non-representative and object-oriented attitude and challenges the main premises of human-centered observational filmmaking style. The article argues that by provoking the experience of disorientation and *more-than-human* closeness, sensory ethnography can contribute to the birth of post-human sensitivity and profound ontological reconstitution of our being-in-the-world in the Anthropocene era.

## CONCLUSION

This special issue of visual ethnography was written with the hope of expanding the field of visual ethnography by focusing on how ethnographic and related methodologies can inform project conceptualization through evaluation and perhaps lead to a more inclusive approach to digital heritage creation. In addition, the volume's general focus on the authors' work with contemporary communities produces an informative and rich discussion about the delicacy of negotiating the space that exists between the researcher, the subject matter, and the people with whom scholars work.

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