Digital Cultural Heritage – an Overview of the Field

Stefan Trajković-Filipović

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Stefan.Trajkovic-Filipovic@geschichte.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

The edited volume *Digital Cultural Heritage* is a collection of thirty contributions dealing with cultural heritage in the digital context. Covering a broad geographical and chronological scope, it presents the reader with an extensive overview of the current work in the field. Some of the topics that were given special attention in the volume are questions of preservation and presentation of (digital) cultural heritage, as well as possibilities for its enrichment with the help of digital tools. While rich in examples, the volume, however, lacks reader guidance and a rounded approach to the topic.

Digitales Kulturerbe - ein Überblick über das Forschungsfeld

German Abstract:

Der Sammelband *Digital Cultural Heritage* besteht aus dreißig Beiträgen, die mit einem breiten geographischen und zeitlichen Rahmen einen umfassenden Überblick über die aktuellen Entwicklungen in diesem Forschungsfeld anbieten. Einige der Themen, denen im Band besondere Aufmerksamkeit gewidmet wurden, sind die Fragen der Konservierung und Präsentation von (digitalem) Kulturerbe, sowie Möglichkeiten zu dessen Anreicherung mit Hilfe digitaler Werkzeuge. Obwohl der Band reich an Fallbeispielen ist, fehlt es ihm jedoch an Leserführung und einem umfassenden konzeptuellen Ansatz.

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Digital Cultural Heritage – an Overview of the Field

Stefan Trajković-Filipović
Justus Liebig University Giessen

Over the past years, digital cultural heritage has been increasingly attracting attention, leading to many digital heritage projects appearing around the world. These projects, dealing both with the digitization of existing heritage and management of the born digital one, are often expected to (re)establish and (re)approach the cultural value and significance of a particular heritage (material or non-material). Such expectations can, sometimes, be a sensitive topic, particularly when they relate to a public memory or cultural identity. The multitude of possible approaches to this problem is reflected in the content of *Digital Cultural Heritage*, edited by Horst Kremers. The volume aims to tackle the complexity of the research in digital cultural heritage by collecting many contributions coming from different academic and research environments. With a total of thirty contributions, it covers a wide range of topics and offers a broad chronological and geographical scope, presenting the reader with a cross-section of current developments in the field.

One of the issues addressed by this volume is the preservation of cultural heritage. For many scholars, preservation is the main incentive for contributing to digital heritage research. Preservation, however, needs to be carefully planned in terms of documenting the heritage, especially when dealing with heritage characterized by scarce but valuable information (e.g. certain archaeological sites) and with integrating different types of digital documentation into one project. As shown in the contribution by Sandro Parrinello and Federico Cioli, this issue becomes apparent when the project deals with the preservation of heritage that is in danger of disappearance, as one needs to use the digital tools to contribute to the renewal plans in the field, with digital heritage research playing the role of an important step in the restoration work.

The volume also addresses the question of sustainability of digital heritage projects, both in terms of durability, but even more so in terms of re-usability. In their contribution, Rolf Däßler

and Ulf Preuß propose a "concept for the digital preservation of the cultural heritage of smaller cultural institutions without their own infrastructure" (p. 109), thereby addressing the need for effective sustainability solutions, which are particularly crucial in the context of small projects and institutions (local archives, libraries, or museums) that often do not rely on existing infrastructures. While their conceptual proposal is targeted specifically at smaller institutions, it tackles challenges that are inherent to digital heritage projects of any size, as the infrastructure behind digital projects is often subject to change (researchers migrate, servers change, and online platforms need regular maintenance) and good organization and standardization of (meta)data about digital heritage contributes to the re-usability and ongoing relevance of the selected heritage. Reliable digital cultural heritage projects that aim for the long-term availability and usability of the material also aim to develop good cataloging and indexing practices, as well as metadata models for easier knowledge transfers.

Finally, the (digital) presentation of digital cultural heritage is another challenge to be considered. As Bernadette Biedermann shows in her contribution, contrary perhaps to non-digital exhibitions, the "needs of expert as well as non-expert users" should both be taken into account in the presentation (p. 203). In order to design and develop an interactive and dynamic user-interface that would complement these goals, the scholars need to consider the target audience of a project, that is, to deliver the heritage content to the broader public and to consider the user-friendliness and user experience of a project, making the heritage more alive and active in the lives of the users. At the same time, for expert users, it should serve as an instrument for exploration, analysis, and evaluation of the current state of the selected cultural heritage.

The contributions in the volume at hand discuss not only the various ways in which cultural heritage can be digitized, preserved, and presented but also how it can be enriched with the help of the available digital tools. This can be done, for example, by recognizing the relational properties of cultural heritage and the possibilities of framing it relationally, thus opening an option for social network analysis (e.g. the contribution by Jörn Kreutel). Digital annotation of heritage (texts) also enhances information processing and improves the effectiveness of close reading in the context of heritage research (e.g. contribution by Federico Caria and Brigitte Mathiak). Other examples of enriching the cultural heritage through digital tools include visual

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63 / 2021
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perspectives, such as augmented reality (e.g. contribution by Sander Münster et al.) or digitization and geo-referencing of historical maps (e.g. contribution by Milan Talich).

Apart from opening new possibilities, digital tools also introduce certain virtual distances to heritage. To cope with it, researchers aim to develop best practices and clear design patterns, which can be challenging in the competitive and ever-changing online environment. The contributions in the volume offer useful insight into an array of possible solutions for practicing digital cultural heritage, acting as a cross-section of the state of the research field. They provide vivid descriptions of the practical aspects of the research projects and the reader should expect some technical proposals, as many contributions aim to be systematic in their explanations of their methodologies, as well as of the tools they benefited from or worked on developing. The volume would, however, benefit from an introductory chapter or editorial comment that would inform the reader on an overall theoretical and methodological framework for the contributions, explain the volume's overall agenda as well as guide the reader. Perhaps the biggest flaw of the volume is the lack of subsections, which would have provided necessary structure. Its absence renders the table of contents a long list of overlapping theoretical, technical, and practice-oriented articles, leaving the reader the task of locating contributions that speak to their interests.