Conference Reviews

Gorffennol Digidol/ Digital Past 2017
The Riverfront, Newport, Wales
15th-16th February 2017

The Digital Past conference is an annual two-day conference organised by the Royal Commission of Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales, and was this year held in Newport, Wales. The conference was bilingual, in that the chairs of sessions would introduce each speaker in both Welsh and English, and there were headsets given out to hear instant translation of any Welsh presentations or questions into English. While it is likely that almost everyone attending the conference spoke English, the idea of this was to promote the Welsh language and celebrate the heritage of the host nation.

Rather than purely presentations, there was also an ‘unconference session’, in which delegates were able to give shorter talks. There were also workshop sessions, including a tour of the Newport Ship, and an introductory session into the use of Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) in GIS. These served to promote a more friendly, informal atmosphere and facilitated networking and discussion.

In several cases, presentations were given by representatives from companies or organisations that were developing software, or using digital technologies within heritage management. For instance Craig Oates, the director of Digichemistry Productions, gave a presentation about their Virtual Heritage Wales (VHW) project. The VHW project involves children and young people in the creation of virtual reality for archaeological sites, for inclusion into an app. Ben Bennet, a representative of Luminous, also gave a presentation on the use of virtual reality in heritage. Luminous is a company who are commissioned to develop virtual reality using gaming platforms for both heritage and non-heritage uses. This provided an interesting addition, as it continued the theme of digital technologies in heritage, but from the point of view of the digital researchers, rather than the heritage researchers. These presentations provided insight into how different public and private bodies, for instance heritage organisations, public volunteers and technology developers, are working together to incorporate digital technologies into heritage management.

Access to heritage was another key theme that was explored by several speakers. Jill Cousins (Executive Director, Europeana), provided an insight into The Europeana project, which aims to make heritage and art freely available online. More than 3200 European institutions have contributed over 50 million pieces to this project, which are now freely available digitally. The project is based on the belief that heritage, and reproductions thereof, should be usable and of good quality, in order for pieces to be properly appreciated and understood. Dr Karenovoska (Institute for Digital Archaeology, University of Oxford) also gave a presentation on access to heritage assets. She discussed the destruction of heritage by terrorist organisations, and a project that was undertaken to create an exact replica of the destroyed monumental arch of Palmyra, Syria. 3D scanning and machines traditionally used on car assembly lines were utilised to create the replica, which was displayed in cities around the world, such as London and Dubai. In this instance, digital technologies were able to potentially prevent the loss of this historic monument, as long as the data used to recreate it is kept. However, Dr Karenovoska also raised questions of authenticity, and the importance assigned to authentic sites and artefacts compared to replicas. This ethical issue was too broad to be resolved within the timeframe given, but provided interesting food for thought. Finally,
Marino Jaén Espinosa, Director of PanamaTipico.com, presented the ongoing progress of a project in Panama that used Whatsapp as a crowdsourcing mechanism to engage the public in sharing knowledge about Panamanian heritage, such as religious events and music recordings. Epinosa aims to increase public access to the heritage of one district in particular, Los Santos, as the high out-migration rates towards large cities were threatening the loss of cultural traditions.

Other presentations included subjects such as the geometric analysis of medieval vaults, the analysis of the Antonine Wall, the discovery and monitoring of WWI shipwrecks around Wales and the impact of this on scour, and the digitisation of Welsh tithe maps. The interdisciplinary nature of the talks at this conference was striking, and meant that each presentation was refreshing and engaging. Each report brought new insight into the way that digital technologies can be used in heritage research and management.

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