Towards an Approach to Building Mobile Digital Experiences For University Campus Heritage & Archaeology

Ethan Watrall
Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology
Associate Director, MATRIX: The Center for Digital Humanities & Social Sciences
Director, Cultural Heritage Informatics Initiative

The spaces we inhabit and interact with on a daily basis are made up of layers of cultural activity that are, quite literally, built up over time. While museum exhibits, archaeological narratives, and public programs communicate this heritage, they often don't allow for the public to experience interactive, place-based, and individually driven exploration of content and spaces. Further, designers of public heritage and archaeology programs rarely explore the binary nature of both the presented content and the scholarly process by which the understanding of that content was reached. In short, the scholarly narrative of material culture, heritage, and archaeology is often hidden from public exploration, engagement, and understanding. Additionally, many traditional public heritage and archaeology programs often find it challenging to negotiate the balance between the voice and goals of the institution and those of communities and groups. In recent years, the maturation of mobile and augmented reality technology has provided heritage institutions, sites of memory and memorialization, cultural landscapes, and archaeological projects with interesting new avenues to present research and engage the public. We are also beginning to see exemplar projects that suggest fruitful models for moving the domain of mobile heritage forward considerably.

University campuses provide a particularly interesting venue for leveraging mobile technology in the pursuit of engaging, place-based heritage and archaeology experiences. University campuses are usually already well traveled public spaces, and therefore don't elicit the same level of concern that you might find in other contexts for publicly providing the location of archaeological and heritage sites and resources. They have a built in audience of alumni and students eager to better understand the history and heritage of their home campus. Finally, many university campuses are starting to seriously think of themselves as places of heritage and memory, and are developing strategies for researching, preserving, and presenting their own cultural heritage and archaeology.

It is within this context that this paper will explore a deeply collaborative effort at Michigan State University that leverages mobile technology to build an interactive and place-based interpretive layer for campus heritage and archaeology. Driven by the work of the Michigan State University Campus Archaeology Program, an internationally recognized initiative that is unique in its approach to campus heritage, these efforts have unfolded across a number of years and evolved to meet the ever changing need to present the rich and well studied heritage and archaeology of Michigan State University's historic campus.

Ultimately, the goal of this paper is not only to present and discuss the efforts at Michigan State University, but to provide a potential model for other university campuses interested in leveraging mobile technology to produce engaging digital heritage and archaeology experiences.