Sustainable Heritage in Southeast Asia: Post-Digital Theory and Digital Humanities Praxis

Harold Thwaites

Introduction

It is now very clear that society is moving into an era of post digital. We are no longer focused on e-learning, e-culture, e-heritage, etc. Post digital describes the discourse around digital artistic practice, is concerned more with the human being than with “being” digital and with the fact that digital technology has become so pervasive that we no longer speak about it, but instead we are experiencing and grappling with the “impact” of it. It also asks us to consider “what do we learn when we digitize everything?”

Digital media have revolutionized the practice of scholarship from archives to the creation of content. Continuing into the next decades,
computation will become as integral to humanistic research-creation projects such as the analysis of digital collections, too large for traditional methods. 21st century scholars and researchers now require formal competence with digital technologies to have a competitive edge, both in academia and their workplaces.

**Digital Humanities**

Digital Humanities, generally applied, refers to the use and application of computational tools and methods to humanist fields of study, and vice versa. Large-scale databases, text-analysis software, geographical information systems (GIS), consumer-programmable hardware, and countless other tools empower new approaches to research, as well as posing new challenges to scholars (Fig. 1).

At the Centre for Creative Content & Digital Innovation (CCCDI), University of Malaya, we are interested in fostering transdisciplinary connections to inspire new research questions and approaches, while at the same time leveraging on new media technologies for content creation and dissemination to a wide variety of public interactive applications (Fig. 2).

This presentation examines a variety of work that reflects the potential and impact that Digital Humanities are having on Asian Studies and Asian culture and heritage research/creation projects and in particular highlighting the *Mah Meri Unmasked* exhibition as an example.

**Information Design**

Mah Meri Unmasked was created as an information complex, based on theory and practice from the field of information design. Museums, galleries and exhibitions of different kinds are prime examples of spatial information complexes, whereby information delivery takes place between the information source (exhibit, artifacts) and the receivers (visitors) under specific time/space transmission conditions described as an information chain (Fig. 3).

![Figure 2. Information Chain.](image)

Under the term information design I see the process of capture/creation, selection, testing and organisation of various pieces of reality, or their mediated forms, into a predetermined impact on the receiver (visitor), ranging from a single person to large group audiences. It is a systemic thinking approach that is a special kind of research-creation process.

Every genre of mediated content holds within it a certain information impact resulting from perception via our human senses, particularly those of sight, sound, and touch and the resulting processing and storage within the human brain. It is this impact that I sought to design using the cultural heritage content that the Centre team had captured around the Mah Meri Mask project in 2013. It must consider and combine the style, form, and content into a meaningful design structure (see images below).
Exhibition Design

As a starting point, I considered the interplay of these six key notions: Virtuality :: Art of Exhibition :: Spatial Practice :: Digital Mediation :: A Multimedial Gallery :: Curatorial Design. All of these elements had to interrelate in a meaningful way to inform how the exhibition would be created. By focusing on emerging forms of a multimedia gallery and a curatorial design, Mah Meri Unmasked guests are encouraged to suspend their expectations of what a cultural exhibition should be like in order to allow themselves to be fully immersed in the experience. The CCCDI team thus created an Intermedia, Polysensory Exhibition wherein guests can explore various aspects of the Mah Meri culture.

Enhanced by new digital technologies the traditional physical structure of a gallery or museum can be expanded and thought of as a matrix of diverse and yet still interrelated physical and virtual spaces. This is the barrier that I set out to cross in thinking about how to present new forms of culture and heritage content within the Malaysian gallery and museum community showcasing it for the first time (November to December 2013) at University of Malaya Art Gallery (UMAG).

The exhibition was a form of “event-structure” with a concise scenographic design and techniques of visual display to foster the relationships of material to immaterial, experience to information, the fixed to the variable, and the virtual to the real. It comprises synthetic image spaces, illusionistic imagery, a mise-en-scene environment, and sonic atmospherics, which build into an integrated visitor experience. The resulting “unmasked” narrative unfolded as the guests moved through the different sections of the exhibition.

Conclusion

In this gallery/museum project, the concept of virtuality was tied to viewing conditions in physical space and described the character of the visitors’ aesthetic experience presented via technologized conditions. It also operated on an intuitive, even subconscious level of audience, visitor engagement using various techniques that showcased the interdependence between the objects, space and perceptual process of mediated digital culture and heritage content. As a result, Mah Meri Unmasked was a resounding success evidenced by the visitor iPad survey and comment books. It was a benchmark of its kind for both University of Malaya and Malaysia. All of the research-creation capture, planning and applied design theory came to light in a meaningful way. Over a thousand plus guests shared the experience in one short month. It was indeed an event greater than the sum of its parts.

Exemplar Images from the Mah Meri Unmasksed Exhibition

Overture Room

The “Glass” Exhibition Rooms
Public Interactives Image Compilation

Tree to Mask Room ~ Panorama