

HISTORY ON THE WEB / L'HISTOIRE ET LE WEB

PUTTING THE REVOLUTIONARY INTO THE INTERNET

REVOLUTION: HISTORIANS ON THE HOLODECK

By John Lutz

What was the past like? We all want to know since our identity depends so much on our imagination of the past. Was it dirty, colourful, smelly, colder, nasty, and brutish but with loving extended families? Historians are taking the first steps into a world of three dimensional (3D) re-creations of historical places and landscapes. Is this a colossal waste of resources or a revolutionary opportunity to do things we have always dreamed of?

In spite of our every-day talk about the “new media” the Internet is not really a media as much as it is a carrier of many media, most of which are not new. We have faster, easier and cheaper access to documents and artwork that historians and teachers have always used, and to photos, audio and video that have been common sources since the 1970s, if not before.

What is *new* is the capacity of the Internet to bring other people into our home, office and classroom computers to interact with us. For the first time we can easily interact with groups of dispersed people via blogs, joint writing projects, games, virtual second lives, video conferencing and a myriad of other ways.

For centuries we have been able to bring other people's imaginations into our lives via books but the Internet is the first carrier that supports media which allows us to step into those imaginary worlds — to see precisely what the creator wants us to see and to move around in them. Combine interactivity and virtual worlds and we do have a media form that is as novel to our time as the printed book or film was to earlier times.

Today's Internet offers early attempts at 3D historical recreations. We can visit, among other place-times:

- Ancient Pyramids, Stonehenge or the Roman Parthenon - <http://www.3dancientwonders.com>
- Anasazi Kiva - <http://sipapu.gsu.edu/SAA00/>
- Viking Vinland - <http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/vinland/home/multimedia/indexen.html>
- Ancient Castles - <http://www.timeref.com/3dindex.htm>
- Captain Cook's ship the Endeavor - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire_seapower/launch_vt_endeavour.shtml
- Nineteenth Century Palestine - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ay3aQat0GKQ>

In Canada, historian Léon Robichaud is at the forefront of field with his work on Old Montréal, Virtual Savanvah - <http://vsav.scad.edu/> and the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History project (see the multimedia in the “Torture and Truth” and “Explosion on the Kettle Valley Railway Line” - canadianmysteries.ca). Kevin Kee - <http://www.simulatinghistory.com/index.html> leads a consortium exploring 3D possibilities and his Brock colleague John Bonnett is a leader in the laying out the conventions needed for progress in the field (“Charting a New Aesthetics for History: 3D Scenarios, and the Future of the Historians Craft,” *Histoire Sociale / Social History*, vol. 79, May 2007).

So, strap yourself in, hover your mouse over one of these 3D urls and “CLICK” —take a trip through time.

The first thing you will notice is that to view another's visions we need more new media: add-ons in the form of “plug-ins” that allow browsers to interpret “Virtual Reality Mark-Up Language” which describes the imaginary for your computer. These plug-ins (i.e. Shockwave, Cortona VRML Clientt) are sometimes large files that need to be downloaded. When we finally arrive the the best we can do is to lumber and crash around the past like so many virtual drunken sailors — walls crashing into you, the horizon continually spinning, and your destination regularly eluding you for want of control of your limbs. If you are like me, even when you have mastered control of your (disem)bodily functions, you will generally be disappointed. Judging by the state of the art, the past is monochromatic, crude and largely uninhabited. The software available to us to create and navigate such visions is still more suited to viewing engineering drawings than moving through richly textured landscapes. In our experimental stage, many of the 3D recreations function more like “eye candy” and disposable party favours than entrées into the mysteries of the past.

Yet, the potential is obvious. What more striking illustration of the difference between wealth and poverty could there be than the re-creation and comparison of a gilded age mansion and a tenement; what better glimpse into power than the perspective of a Roman coliseum from the viewpoint of a slave? How much better to appreciate the complexity, craftsmanship, and through these, the social organization of a community that could build a kiva or a pyramid than to walk through one?

Link the re-creation to datasets of census information, tax assessments, parish registers and you can know almost every person who lived in that space at that time. Link the re-creation to artificial intelligence systems, commonly known as gaming engines, and you will be in a world where characters behave according to the rules of the time you have traveled to and you have to enter into that culture to understand what is happening “around” you. Link this to social networking interfaces and you are co-operating with different “moderns” in a journey though a past space. Link to “Google Earth” and your imaginary past can sit in its modern landscape. We have never before been able to get ourselves and our students so far into historical thinking so fast and so completely than even the raw, experimental reconstructions of the early 21st century permit .

The key problem with historical re-creations is that they are just that. No matter what or how much research, they are, in the end, the product of contemporary imagination. They have

in this respect the same Achilles heel as history books and films. 3D landscapes, are, as R.G. Collingwood said in the 1951s about scholarly monographs “a web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points.” (*The Idea of History*, 242) What is clearly needed are conventions in 3D worlds like — but unlike footnotes — which grew up in books for the same reason we need them in a virtual world — to show us the “fixed points”. We need standardized tools, VRML enabled browsers, faster computers, and an attention to the microscopic detail of past landscapes that until now has been beneath our dignity and our radar to pay attention to.

There are many obstacles to the “Historian on the Holodeck”: funds, standardized tools and a critical vocabulary of the 3D but the most critical is: will.



Detail from the 3D recreation of the L'Anse Aux Meadows Viking site by the Visualization Design Institute on "Where is Vinland?" at www.canadianmysteries.ca.