Digitizing What is Valued: Protecting, Respecting, and Caring for Digitized Collections

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Introduction

Miriam Clavir, in her book, *Preserving What is Valued*, (2002) argued that conservation care for object collections is important – but has a history deeply rooted in European ideals of science and objectivity. Nearly 20 years ago, she documented the efforts from many First Nations people and the Museum of Anthropology (UBC) to challenge those ideals, and posit that 'collections care' should ultimately be the care for living populations and their connections with their belongings. This short paper investigates some questions that arose in a collaborative project on digitizing belongings at the Museum of Vancouver in the Spring of 2018. Initiated by Sharon Fortney (Curator of Indigenous Collections) and with support from the Centre for Digital Media; Sharon, Kate Hennessy, Conrad Sly and I worked to 3D Scan a group of belongings in the collection that were being sent on long-term loan as part of an ongoing repatriation claim. These belongings are private, yet it was also desired that the museum to retain digital copies and data of the belongings for safe keeping. We posit that this might be a way forward for museums working on repatriated collections, but this paper will pose some of the challenges and questions that arose when working to protect data while keeping it secret. These issues are ongoing and unresolved, but posing these questions here will provide useful insights into the protections need when considering digitizing returned collections.

Context

There has been at least a decade of experimentation in the use of 3D imaging, scanning, modelling and printing used to document cultural heritage all over the world. Because of this, there is a growing interest in the practices and processes required to build digital 3D reproductions, and how values are encoded into digital systems. Digital representations, scanned and modelled in 3D, are now seen not just as experimental media, but as useful for preservation and long-term care for museum collections. With these new attitudes towards technologies that are used to document and represent both material and intangible heritage, there is also increasing care being taken in designing digitization projects. These issues come most into relief when working with traditional or proprietary collections from Indigenous or originating communities.

When working at the intersection of museum care or preservation of material heritage, museums and Indigenous peoples (particularly in North America) have worked together to define and take into account other ways of caring for belongings. Often described as

preserving or recognizing differing ontologies or alternative ways of knowing, these models take into account the lived experience of seeing ones' belongings in collections storehouses, as well as the shared difficulties in navigating access to belongings from institutions around the world. Likewise, digital care is the way we manage digital representations of museum collections. This includes respecting objects and originating community desires, wishes, and ways of knowing during the design and implementation of any digitization project – from respecting which images can be taken to ensuring that certain belongings are protected, to returning belongings home. It also concerns how digital objects – in particular 3D scanned representations – can afford new interactions or relationships between institutions and communities. This also touches on issues such as ownership, rights, and repatriation (of the belongings themselves, representations, and of the traditional knowledge of that belonging).

In this talk, I will explore some of these questions that have arisen about the scanning and construction of digital 3D scanned models in museums and interrogate how media and software affordances may limit (or alternatively, enable) other forms of engagement with digital objects that do not conform to Eurocentric ontologies or ideals. I am interested in how specific digitization projects can lead toward or enable repatriation through the ethical digital object management (a subject that mixes technologies, designers, museum professionals, cultural knowledge safe-keepers, and artists) to plan for future generations. This is a local issue, and is connected to specific individuals, institutions, and lands. This paper will therefore briefly review some of the current projects that, in collaboration with the Museum of Vancouver in British Columbia, and engage with our questions concerning digital care, affordance, and the potentialities of good relations and ethical standards when it comes to digital representations in museum collections.

Caring for Collections at the Museum of Vancouver (MOV)

In 2017, I was contacted by Dr. Sharon Fortney, while I was working as a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Making Culture Lab with Dr. Kate Hennessy, at the School of Interactive Art and Technology at Simon Fraser University. Sharon is the Curator of Indigenous Collections at the Museum of Vancouver (MOV), and she was working closely with a family in the Northwest Coast to return some of the collections of a secret society. At the time, the formal repatriation process was just beginning at the institution, and the Making Culture Lab was asked to investigate the possibility of 3D scanning the belongings at the request of the family, but also of MOV. The museum and the family was thinking about the long-term care of the object and others like it in the collection, and they wanted to have a full digital model available for discussions around options and opportunities in repatriation. The hope here being that the museum could retain better digital 'copies' of originals to use for education or long term preservation, while returning the actual belongings where appropriate. This would also be the first time the museum repatriated to a family, and not a community, and this was also part of the reason that they desired to document the belongings in such detail.

Another complicating factor was that these belongings are from a secret society, and therefore cannot be shown or seen by those not initiated. This raises lots of important issues around the protection of the 3D scan data as well. When working at the intersection of museum work to return and the requirements of academic research – how do we, or how could we, speak about the process and the possibilities while retaining the secret and private nature of both the repatriation and the final digital models? Our solution was to scan another belonging – this time a public performance mask – that exhibited some of the same physical qualities (wooden, painted) and could be used as a test object. It is this belonging that is shown below, and which I will describe in more detail.

Figure 1: Mask, prepared for 3D Scanning, Museum of Vancouver, Photo Courtesy the Author

This, is a Northwest Coast public performance or festival mask from the MOV collection. This mask, and several other wooden pieces in the MOV Northwest Coast collection, were repainted in the mid-20th century to "conserve" them. At the time, painting over belongings in the collection was a common way that items were preserved, and it shows the use of similar paint in the broader context. This history of the belonging within the museum one way that the museum also found it beneficial to have the mask documented with photogrammetry or a scan – to document the layers of paint and the physical changes over time. We began by scanning the mask in situ in the museum with same Creaform scanner.

With the help of the Centre for Digital Media (CDM), we worked with designer Conrad Sly to use the scans to create a digital model. During our previous scanning process with the teaching kits we attempted to achieve the most accurate scan with the scanner itself and the accompanying software; here the digital model that was created was more of an interpretation by the modeller and artist. We have this sense that the scanner is "capturing" or "recording" the information of the mask, and to some extent it is, but perhaps it is more helpful to think of this as the raw data from the scan that must be processed. Once the scan was made, Conrad used the raw data to craft the topographic map of the mask; essentially he digitally drew over the scan data to create a map that would allow for different lighting and texture effects to be applied. When we see the resulting 3D digital model, we imagine it to be 3D. Of course it does not actually exist in three dimensions; it is a 2D image rendered nicely and incorporating these lighting and texture effects.

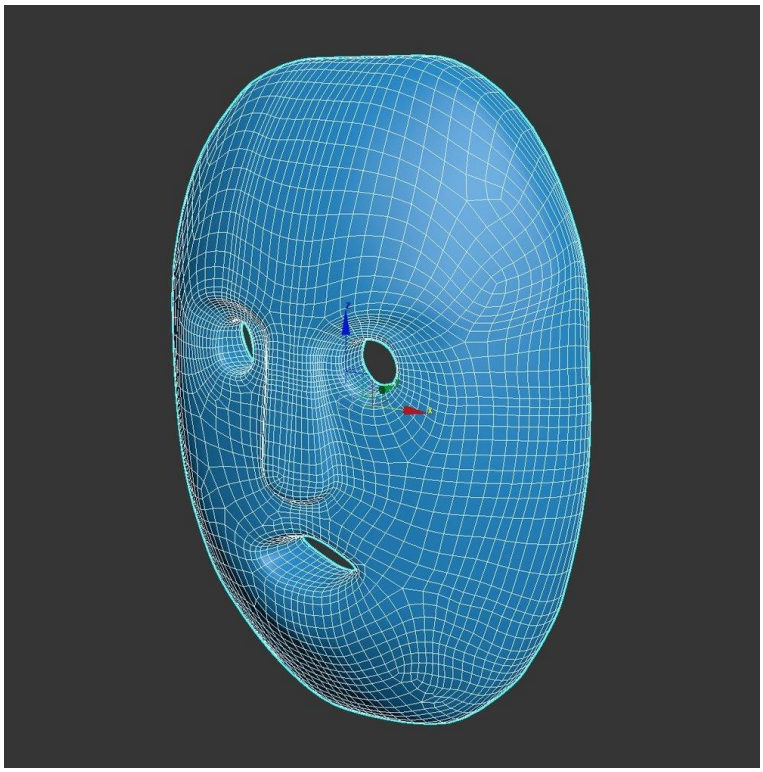

Figure 2: Mask, Screen capture, Re-topologized after scanning, Museum of Vancouver. Photo Courtesy Conrad Sly.

Figure 3: Mask, Screen Capture, 3D Digital Model, Photo Courtesy Conrad Sly.

Figure 4: Mask, reverse, screen capture, 3D digital model, Photo Courtesy Conrad Sly

The scanning and artistic 3D modelling processes certainly raise questions about intellectual property. It might be simple enough to agree that the scan data belongs to the same family or community as the belonging it represents. But who makes the decisions around how the 3D digital representations are made? Because of the kinds of values we place in new technologies – that somehow technological devices are neutral and the "tech whizzes" who operate these devices must then also be neutral based on the affordances of the technology – we may assume that this question does not even warrant asking.

The process and practices of scanning also invites questions for repatriation. We are also interested in looking at ways to ensure that the property rights and managements of digital models can be cared for, similar to the belongings themselves, when the original belonging is returned to the family or community. This is of primary importance because it ensures that the digital rights can be protected, and the intellectual property still remains with the original maker's family rather than with the museum or model maker. The standards that exist for

safeguarding digital representations or 3D models when a belonging has been repatriated are not well established. If museums can continue to act as custodians of these models, photographs, or other documentation and data, scanning could prove to be a step way forward to returning more belongings back to their communities when requested and when appropriate. The Museum of Vancouver one example of an institution that is looking to return belongings but has been asked to safeguard the digital data. The museum has conflicting mandates from the community to both preserve certain items, while letting them be used by the rightful individuals. Creating a 3D model is one option, and everyone in the community expressed interest in exploring this form of preservation.

Digital Conservation and Collections Care

In this research, I am asking how we care for this digital representation - and respect it as both a belonging and preservation practice. How do we - or how should we care for collections now - when there are no longer just physical objects or audio recordings in our museums and archives - but immeasurable data points; unruly, large databases; and all of the complexities that come along with that? My goal with these projects is to inform policies, procedures and best practices, in order to care for digital collections. In this case, we saw the possibilities in having a digital representation – as ephemeral may seem – stand to be important for both the family and the museum and fulfil shared goals. Yet, there are always issues when working with museum budgets and capacities. This project was very low budget, in part due to the already existing resources at the Making Culture Lab like the 3D scanners. Other institutions certainly do not have resources like this. However, as some of you may know, who work in digital collections work; photogrammetry is another option that is much more lightweight and produces similar (if not better) results. Further, the control and the protection of the data itself is still under question – and aside from hard disks that are password protected, the museum does not have a shared strategy to protect it long term, outside of their regular institutional norms. Do new metadata categories need to exist to ensure these digitized objects are protected yet preserved? Managed properly yet controlled (ultimately) by individuals external to the institution? What are the other issues that might potentially arise? All of these things are important, and speak to the necessity of developing digital care frameworks for similar projects and institutions.