Seeing in New Ways*

American Council of Learned Societies Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Huma

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1 Seeing in New Ways

Evolving technologies not only provide unprecedented access to a variety of cultural artifacts but also make it possible to see these artifacts in completely new ways. Thanks to high-end digital imaging, we can examine and compare ancient cuneiform inscriptions with new precision and clarity. [1]We can see the much-damaged manuscript of Beowulf in a way that renders the text more legible than the original, and we can "peel back" successive conservation treatments to see how the varying states of the artifact over time have influenced interpretation. [2]Other ambitious and comprehensive editing projects reproduce the complex genealogy of a medieval text [3]or recreate the many sources and states of the works produced across an entire lifetime by an influential nineteenth-century author working in the age of print. [4]Three-dimensional modeling makes it possible to recreate Roman forums, [5]medieval cathedrals, [6]and Victorian exhibitions. [7]These models may provide more than just a sense of place for the user—in the process of building the model, scholars often learn surprising new things about how the originals must have been constructed.

Digital video reformats fragile film and thus gives us access to rare footage of dance performances from the early decades of the last century. [8]Mapping technology allows us to understand the rapid spread of religious hysteria in the Massachusetts Bay Colony during the seventeenth century [9]or to observe the evolution of the built and natural environment around Boston's Back Bay over two centuries. [10]The Valley of the Shadow project contains extensive records in the form of digitized diaries, letters, newspapers, statistical records, and

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[1]University of California, Los Angeles, and Max Planck Institute, Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (2005) http://cdli.ucla.edu/; InscriptiFact and University of Southern California, West Semitic Research (2004) http://www.inscriptifact.com/ (<http://www.inscriptifact.com/>).

[2]British Library, The Electronic Beowulf (2003) http://www.uky.edu/∼kiernan/eBeowulf/guide.htm (<http://www.uky.edu/∼kiernan/eBeowulf/guide.htm>).

[3]University of Virginia, The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive (2005) http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/seenet/piers/ (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/seenet/piers/>).

[4]University of Virginia, Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, The Rossetti Archive (2005) http://www.rossettiarchive.org/ (<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/>).

[5]University of California, Los Angeles, Cultural Virtual Reality Lab (2005) http://www.cvrlab.org/ (<http://www.cvrlab.org/>).

[6]University of Virginia, Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, Salisbury Project, Cathedral Model (2005) http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/salisbury/model/index.html (<http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/salisbury/model/index.html>).

[7]University of Virginia, Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, The Crystal Palace (2005) http://www.iath.virginia.edu/london/model/ (<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/london/model/>).

[8]See, e.g., the Library of Congress's American Memory site's List of Variety Stage Films http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/vshtml/vsfmlst.html (<http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/vshtml/vsfmlst.html>).

[9]University of Virginia, The Salem Witch Trials (2005) http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/home.html (<http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/home.html>).

[10]University of Virginia, Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, Evolutionary Infrastructure (2005) http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/backbay/ (<http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/backbay/>).

photographs and other images of the period leading up to and following the Civil War; it also has animated maps of battles that visually reconstruct troop movements, points of battle engagement, and other data drawn from army and navy records of the time. [11]

These and other digital projects show how digital technology can offer us new ways of seeing art, new ways of bearing witness to history, new ways of hearing and remembering human languages, new ways of reading texts, ancient and modern. With some extension, the same infrastructure used for such projects can also allow us to work in collaboration with distant colleagues who provide complementary expertise, and whom we may meet face-to-face only rarely. And all of this is about access: access to colleagues; or access through digital representations to distant, damaged, or disappeared physical artifacts; or intellectual access to the meaning or significance of these artifacts.

[11] University of Virginia, The Valley of the Shadow (2005) http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/ (<http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/>).