



Dissertation Defense

Doctor of Philosophy in Information Culture and Data Stewardship

“Representing Difficult Histories in the museum: Virtual and Augmented Reality as tools for communicating intangible heritage” by Zoë Faye Pickard

Date: July 12, 2022

Time: 9:30AM – 11:30AM

Place: https://pitt.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0Jy1XoQjBpl21Ey

Committee:

- James 'Kip' Currier, Assistant Professor, ICDS
- Jacob Biehl, Associate Professor, CS & ICDS
- Alison Langmead, Associate Professor, ICDS, History of Art and Architecture
- Leanne Bowler, Professor, School of Information, Pratt Institute

Abstract:

Museums have often avoided displaying difficult and controversial historical subject matters in favor of more commercial and celebratory topics. The display of these difficult histories has now become a significant topic of debate within the museum community; the shift in this emphasis coincides with a rise in dark tourism and a movement by the museum to reach the visitor on a more personal level. Representing history through the stories of individuals to promote personal meaning-making, also brings into focus the responsibility of displaying a more holistic representation of the lived past. This representation of the problematic elements of the past presents a unique set of considerations and opportunities that need to be explored. As museums develop these aspects of interpretation, and new opportunities afforded by technological advancement emerge, it is vital to investigate how visitors interact with information in this environment. Within the current information climate, the boundaries between library science, archive, and museum fields have become blurred. The use of emergent technologies is a particularly well-suited space to utilize human information interaction theory to explore the issues relating to visitor or user experience. This thesis investigates the influence and potential impact that display medium has on information interactions within this context. Specifically, how virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) may influence human information interactions with difficult historical topics. A qualitative approach has been employed to explore these interactions with a focus on the visitor's perceptions of their experiences of, and with, difficult histories. This research has identified ways in which the use of these technologies' affects visitor responses to displays of difficult histories. Visitors across the full data set communicated the beneficial nature of both VR and AR in the understanding and experience of difficult topics. This research provides a foundation for further research which could lead to the development of professional practice guidelines for the use of VR and AR in enhancing visitor responses and understanding. This has the potential to bridge the information or "otherness" gap which often exists in this context.