

The Past in Data | EXARC

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Guests

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Introduction

This month we're joined by two partners in the RETOLD Project to talk about the importance of digitisation, documentation and sharing. Julia Heeb is one of the key figures in the RETOLD Project and also works as the exhibition and research manager at the Open-Air Museum, Museumdorf Düppel, in Germany, a partner institution on the project. Cordula Hansen is an experienced VR designer and developer at Nüwa Digital Media Content Production Studios, a Dublin-based digital media agency also partnering the RETOLD project. The RETOLD project, with EXARC as Lead Partner, will ensure that open-air museums can continue telling important cultural heritage stories to a diverse public by developing a standardised workflow to collect, digitise, and share data on buildings, crafts, and traditions. See Retold.eu for more information.

Transcript

It's the first Friday of the month, which means that it's time for the next episode of #FinallyFriday, bringing you insights and discussions from around the world focussing on experimental archaeology, ancient technology, archaeological open-air museums and interpretation.

Phoebe: Hello and welcome to #FinallyFriday. My name is Phoebe Baker and today I'm joined by two specialists from our EXARC community, focussing on digitisation, documentation and sharing with the RETOLD project.

The RETOLD project is a multinational project coordinated by EXARC and aims to develop a standardised workflow for open-air museums to document and digitise data on buildings, crafts and traditions. The project's emphasis on sharing will mean that collective data will be freely available in open access formats so that museum professionals, researchers, and the public can access and use them easily.

Julia Heeb is one of the key figures in the RETOLD project and curator at the open-air museum Museumsdorf Düppel in Germany, a partner institute on the project. In addition to her work as part of the RETOLD project, Julia also has a PhD and MA in experimental archaeology, focussing on experimental approaches to shaft-hole copper axes from Southeastern Europe.

Cordula Hansen is an experienced VR designer and developer at Nüwa Digital Media Content Production Studios, a Dublin-based digital media agency also partnering the RETOLD project. As well as working in digital design, Cordula has a PhD in art and archaeology, and she is hugely enthusiastic about working to enhance interactions between people and technology in cultural spaces.

So welcome to both of you, thank you for joining me. To start the discussion off, I've got a quick question and it's quite a simple question. Why do you think documentation is so important? Would you like to go, Cordula?

Cordula: Yeah. So from a creative perspective I think documentation is used to really make sure that we don't reinvent the wheel. In an archaeological context it's probably a little bit different, but from Nüwa's perspective, for example, we document our workflows to just make sure that we evolve our creative practice and also that we don't backtrack too much. So it's very practical.

Phoebe: That's a really good point. Do you have any ideas, Julia?

Julia: I think the reinventing the wheel bit is probably the most important aspect of it. But in terms of our RETOLD project and the house documentation, it's only when you document that you can answer specific research questions, like how long does a certain post last, covered in different materials, in different soil conditions, et cetera. So it's a matter of keeping track of what you did and also being able to tell the stories to your visitors of what has been done before.

Phoebe: You've mentioned the RETOLD project, Julia, it's quite a big project from what I understand. What kind of things are you hoping to collect data on as part of the project?

Julia: We are hoping to collect data on house reconstructions and craft or activities, anything that isn't necessarily material-made, sort of gestures and that's a very unique thing, I think, that we are combining the two. The house reconstructions is pretty straightforward. There are things that you want to collect. You have ethnographic open-air museums that have been documenting houses for decades. That's just a matter of standardising the documentation for archaeological open-air museums. But when we come to document crafts and skills, that's quite innovative. The question is how to document it because, in a way crafts can only be preserved if they're being practised. So the documentation can only ever be a sort of helping hand for passing it on, but it's not enough, it has to be kept alive.

Phoebe: Yeah, definitely. Do you have anything to add to that, Cordula?

Cordula: Yeah, I think we're really fascinated by the challenges of documentation in open-air museums in particular, because Julia has already said, a lot of the material, or maybe we shouldn't say material, maybe the subject of documentation in open-air museums is so ephemeral that you

do have objects, but unlike sort of more collection-based museums, these objects are not static, so they're not preserved and then documented, but quite often they're created in order to change. So for example, reconstruction might be a really good visitor attraction, but quite often it's also part of experimental archaeology. So, the house of reconstruction might happen and then decay might be the thing that the archaeologists are actually interested in. So they let the exhibit or the object in the museum basically rot and change over time. And from a documentation point of view, I think that's a huge challenge, where you're not documenting once, but you have an ongoing documentation process and then same with digitisation, like how do you digitise those documents then. Is that something that happens after the documentation process itself, that you start digitising or does digital technology offer something to the process itself? So that's one thing that we're really interested in with this project. And then it's also the appropriateness of digital technology in the documentation process. It's not something that, I feel, museum practitioners need to conform to. So the digital technology shouldn't necessarily influence too much how the museum practitioners work, but it should accommodate that and maybe further that documentation process as well. So there's a lot of user research that we're doing at the moment to make sure that we're not imposing a digital workflow onto something that's more complex and more organic. So yeah, it's the how to, and why of digitisation that we're trying to figure out.

Phoebe: That kind of links to a question that I had about digital formats. They seem to be kind of the future for quite a lot of things archaeology-related, but you spoke a little bit about how you don't want impose those digital solutions or digital tools on a museum. Could you talk a little bit more about that and how might you encourage or help smaller museums that might not have the time or money, but might have the interest or might not have the interest to start using some of these digital tools.

Cordula: So the first thing that was really important to us in devising a potential digital tool that helps open-air museums with documentation, is to make sure that we really create something that can be used in museums that are quite often, as we know, underfunded, people don't have a lot of time and we don't want to come in and propose adoption of a product where we think this is a really good product, everybody should use it. So we go about it kind of a little bit upside down and it's quite common in user experience design in software development, for example, that we really want to make sure that we understand how museums work and how museum staff work. First of all, we conducted a lot of interviews just with museums to ask them about how they feel about digital technology in general and how they feel about how that fits into their day-to-day work. And that was really interesting because quite often, it seems very intimidating, that maybe use of a particular platform or a particular archiving tool seems like something that you have to really work yourself into. And if you don't use it the whole time, you forget how it works and then you have to relearn. That was something that a lot of the museum staff that we talked to mentioned, that it's something that takes a lot of time. And sometimes those solutions tend to be quite expensive as well. What we're trying to do is to make sure that we understand even the small steps that museums can take in documenting. For example, for some of our museum partners digital technology was just something that belonged into their everyday workspace, something that they were really used to, but then the type of media formats that they used were something that they felt they could improve on. Other museums were pretty much..., almost like non-digitised, so they used email and that was kind of it, so email, Microsoft Office. But then, as we started working together, they started understanding how maybe we work, that we kind of go collaborative first, that we use maybe Google documents where everybody can write into the same document and some of those things are new to some organisations as well. And they felt that even that helped a little bit understanding how they can use digital technology and digital workflows to work better together. We are really interested in how we can provide smaller museums with easy ways of getting entry into a more

digital workflow. Not because digitisation is a good thing, but because digitisation might help even solve some of those time problems, that you're not doing the same thing over and over and over, but maybe that you use a digital tool to speed up some workflow so that you can make more time to interact with your visitors or think about social media campaigns or something like that.

Julia: For me it was an eyeopener to work within the RETOLD project on trying to create a digital documentation form, basically. The Museumsdorf Düppel was responsible within the RETOLD project to come up with sort of first documentation forms where we would collect all the fields you might have to fill in when documenting houses. And then we started thinking, how could we make this process easier? And as Cordula just explained, it was a very sort of holistic way of going about it. And really, if it makes life easier, then more people are going to adopt the product in the end. So once the basics of each house are documented - which obviously takes somebody who knows about archaeology, about the reconstruction, about the craft - the sort of annual documentation could be done by volunteers, for example, or students with our tool, because it's very straightforward. You just pull up the information on the main documentation and then you can just add changes to already existing drawings or photographs or take new photographs and they will just automatically be added to the file. Things like that, or drop-down lists, you know, that you can't do on paper-based sort of documentation.

Phoebe: So had you had much experience working with digital things before being part of the RETOLD project?

Julia: I'd say not above the usual Office-based workspace, just the normal software that you use.

Phoebe: I've got a more specific question about the RETOLD project: what kind of outcomes are you hoping the project will have? I kind of spoke about there being a database in the introduction, but do you want to talk a little bit more about that?

Julia: We would like there to be a sort of archive that will be used by as many open-air museums as possible to add their own data to. And that can be queried open access, of course. What we will also work on is a sort of manual on best practice, so there will be a sort of written product as well as the archive or application or whatever the product will be in the end. We are still searching for the best form, but I think Cordula could maybe add something in terms of the digital finished product.

Cordula: By the very nature of the project, I think, yes, of course it's about the outcome as being, as Julia said, like a resource for open-air museums, that's specific to the kind of information that open-air museums deal with and that they generate. To the manual I would add that we are probably going to go a little bit, sort of educational on it. So we want to talk about best practices and why we follow them, but we'll also include tutorials and recipes - the best way I can describe that I think - where it becomes very easy for somebody in a museum who has a lot of maybe physical material in front of them, to decide how to organise that material and how to get started, putting all that into the archive and the database. So we want to lower the threshold between the chore of having to digitise all your stuff and the museum worker. We want to make sure that it's easy for everybody to start and to see how things are working for them. And then maybe exchange with other museums, exchange with us and talk about how it's going for them and if they have any questions to use our resources that we're creating, like tutorials. And I think a really positive outcome of the collaborative approach that EXARC is obviously encouraging in this project is that we also get to do workshops. We get to go to the museums. See, first of all, physically what's there. From our perspective as a creative studio, we don't get to do that often enough. It's nice to do some field work and to just really understand the environment in which this digital solution will be used. The kind of added value that things like maybe 3D documentation, 3D files can bring to that. I think

it's a nice side effect that because we're doing this almost like a conference or workshop format is that we get to try things out. We've talked about things like photogrammetry already and some of the museum partners have gone out and bought a drone, so there's a little bit more courage to engage in maybe new technology that can be used by open-air museums for their own purposes, so that it becomes embedded in the organisation. And I think that's something that we will obviously document as well as a use case or as a case study.

Julia: Personally, for me, one important outcome is also that if the museums use the resource to collect the data, it will be inherently collected in the same way, cause they're using the same system. So then the data will be comparable. That was one of the important issues that I had when I started working at the open-air museum Düppel in Berlin that so many questions come up by visitors, by the volunteers and you can always say, well, in this case, it lasted that long, but you don't have a large enough data set to actually come to conclusive answers. And so I think that's a way of collecting data and then being able to compare them and to actually do research for questions that are being posed.

Phoebe: That actually brings me really nicely into another question I had, which was: what kind of scope will the final project have, like in terms of geography you've said you wanted as many museums involved as possible. How do you plan to get people involved in the future?

Cordula: The first and most hopefully convincing step is for us to create a working prototype, for this digital archive. We're going to keep it within the project partners first of all, to really iron out some of the usability issues that will probably pop up. The prototyping phase is very much part of the project but the overall plan is to make this accessible to EXARC member organisations to see what kind of information people find really important to archive as well. The development of the digital solution, the archive, is ongoing so it's something that can be iterated on as well. After the first stage of the project, the prototype itself, we would want people to test and we would be delighted to hear from organisations who would like to try it out and give us some feedback on it.

Phoebe: That sounds really good. Do you have anything extra, Julia, that you'd like to add to that?

Julia: Well, we have been talking about how do we get the product to be used as widely as possible. So that it is a proper outcome and not just something for the shelves and, again, it has to make lives easier because time is always a scarce resource in museums. We've been talking about maybe visiting some museums to actually explain it in person, things like that, conferences. I think that's a bit further down the line in the project. We will talk about rollout but it is already in our heads on how to do that.

Phoebe: You've got a lot of different partners on this project. What do you think are some of the strengths of doing this and have you encountered any difficulties yet or has it all been positive?

Julia: I think generally it's been a very positive experience, because everybody sort of brings, as you said, different strengths to the project and different perspectives. So it makes you question your own perspectives on things and that's always valuable.

Cordula: I think having project partners from first of all, different geographical locations is invaluable because we know from a lot of software development, for example, that we do work in our bubble, so it's really good to have those inputs where, you know, some people just don't feel included. Some users are saying 'I don't feel this is for me'. And then it's our job to find out why is that the case? Is it the structure? Is it the language that we're using or does it look too technological, does it look too much like a consumer app? In professional software packages users are very proud of

being able to manage a certain platform or a certain application as well. So you don't want to dumb it down too much either. It's always that balance between extremely intuitive usability and professional engagement as well. That is really interesting and that varies a lot from museum to museum that when people say this needs to be very easy, sometimes that means this needs to look a lot like what we're already doing. And then if we are thinking about developing workflows and maybe changing practices slightly, then we have to be very sensitive to where people are coming from. It's really great to have a museum that is very extensive in its exhibits. We have Astra, who have hundreds of exhibits and hundreds of colleagues as well on the team. So that's a different structure in which this platform will have to work. Then we have Julia, who's been thinking a lot about how to document the best. So we get a lot of input into how to organise all the information. And then we have project partners who just haven't had the time and opportunity to really get their head around digital workflows and the platform will need to work for those as well. So it needs to be appropriate for lots of different contexts and that is its own particular challenge.

Phoebe: I've got a kind of a more broad one about digital tools in general, cause I know Cordula, you are quite enthusiastic about working between people and technology in cultural spaces. And I think on one of the web pages for RETOLD they had mentioned storytelling and things like this. So I wondered: how do you think digital tools can help to tell stories and enhance visitor experience at museums and how can this complement real life reconstructions that you might see in an open-air museum?

Julia: Personally, I'm very much torn if it is such a good idea. I think it's fantastic having these tools for documenting and working, but in terms of the other side of it, the visitors experience... when I watch our visitors and especially the kids, they're really happy to actually use their hands and not look at a screen. It's one of the few places where you actually don't have use for your phone because you have to do things. You have to grind the grain, you can pull the plow and it's just such a central experience that I'm not sure if you can top it with digital technology. That's one extreme. And then I come to the point when I want to try to explain to visitors that the house reconstructions probably did not look like that in the Middle Ages, because we just had post holes. And from these post holes, the archaeologists came to some interpretation and it probably looked completely different. Not completely, but not as we reconstructed it or not as it was reconstructed. It could also offer a great opportunity to actually show different reconstructions of the same post hole structure or of the same archaeological features for different houses. So there are possibilities but I'm more tentative, let's put it that way.

Cordula: I think one of the tendencies, when we talk about immersive technology, maybe augmented reality or something like that in museums, it is a huge barrier that you do have to use your phone to create this augmented environment. You're basically still stuck to a screen. It's a really good example where I think that we need to be considerate and really think about what's an appropriate use of technology in that open-air museum setting. The museums themselves, they're so tactile and the experience that we have is very much - I'm not gonna say non-digital - but it is centered on a different type of embodied experience than what we get with the digital media side of it. So, from my perspective, the use of digital tools for storytelling should be in the office, you know, so the main benefit in relation to this project is to create digital tools that free up time and budget so that you can do the things that are slower, that take a lot more time, that are more practical, more hands-on. Like building reconstructions or educational activities with the visitors, those are the kind of things that we are hearing from museums that are valuable to them. So we want to make sure that you're not tied up doing the paperwork when you could be doing the things that are really valuable to the open-air museum experience. On the other side, I would say that educational material offsite and the social media side of it, can be really valuable as well. It's a particular type of

storytelling, but we are finding that with things like Instagram posts or whatever, it doesn't put people off from coming to the museum. It's quite the opposite. They're seeing well-presented images and videos and they get curious. So they want to actually go. And I think that kind of storytelling is something that a lot of museums are leveraging. About the place of a digital application within the museum, I think it shouldn't take away from the very physical and the phenomenology of the open-air museum, if you wanna go that far.

Phoebe: No, I do love a museum that's got nice social media platforms and fun engagement on those kind of things. I think it does make a difference and it does make me wanna go to the museum.

Cordula: On the other side as well for storytellers, if we flip that around a little bit, I think open-air museums are really valuable for people like filmmakers, who really want to get a feeling of the environment that maybe they only know as a stage set or something like that. Roeland likes to bring this up that people are coming to his museum to have a look at the exhibits and to think about them as a backdrop or a tool for storytelling as well. And I think there it becomes important that open-air museums have a say in that. That we don't have the storytellers coming to the museum, telling their stories, but that museums have an input into telling the stories that they need to tell as well. So there needs to be a bit of give and take. And that's where I think those workshops that we're doing as well are really valuable, cause participants are becoming more fluent in talking about things like photogrammetry or 3D or visual effects or whatever. But they can then think about how those techniques and storytelling techniques can be used for what they want to say. Not what other people want to say about them necessarily. I think that's super important.

Phoebe: Yeah, that's a really nice point. I like it when museums like this use an online technology that can be used offsite, as you said. I recently went to the Lascaux reconstructions. They've got a 3D model that you can go through online and I'd already gone through that a few times because my masters is specialising in early prehistory. I think it just made the experience so much cooler because it's like 'oh, I recognise that, but this is so much bigger than I expected it to be in real life'. So it's nice how digital technology can complement things in those kind of ways.

Cordula: Yeah and especially in formal educational settings. Any teacher will tell you that it's great to have things to point out, to have proper illustrations. So I think it's fair that open-air museums present themselves that way, rather than being the subject of documentation, illustration, in those contexts.

Phoebe: From everything that you said so far, it seems to be a really kind of core ethos of the project is the museums first and it's very, very user-orientated. So another question is kind of a more broad one as well about digitisation in the current climate. Do you think the pandemic has had any impact on how museums or people in heritage are using or see digital tools? I know that I'm much more open to using them and have had to use a lot more of them. But do you think that that translates at all into the museums that you are working with?

Julia: In our case, definitely. Something as simple as video conferences, never used to do it before COVID and then it was all set up quickly and it became just very normal. That's the sort of inside working of the museum. And then obviously we started thinking what products could we offer our visitors if we are closed? So then immediately you start turning to digital formats. Unfortunately, our infrastructure in our museum was not at all geared up for that quicker change or changeover in technology and so it took some time. Part of the RETOLD project is a sort of work package on vlogging and we had some workshops on how to make little movies and do things like that and

report on the project in a video format. So we actually used that quite a lot in Düppel, the input from the RETOLD project, to also communicate with our visitors. So yes, definitely, it made a difference, it sort of kicked off something.

Phoebe: That's actually reminded me. I think it was the British museum, maybe the Black Country museum that got really big on TikTok over the pandemic. I think that probably wouldn't have happened if the pandemic hadn't happened.

Cordula: Obviously, I can't really speak for museums, but other cultural and heritage clients that we had, I think they really opened up to what is out there, in terms of technological, digital products or solutions or platforms. I work a lot in VR, so people start getting interested in social VR as a way to present, say, performance pieces and things like that. There wasn't a sense that everything was over just because our performance spaces had to close, but it is a very challenging and ambitious type of technology to deal with. So anything VR and 3D can get out of hand pretty quickly and it's sometimes not the most user friendly. There was a little bit of... how can we make up for this crisis moment really quickly? And I would say that, if we don't find ourselves in a crisis situation, we need to look at small improvements that we can make over time and that we can iterate on. So things like a museum getting really big on TikTok is a really good example of that because it's short form content, relatively easy to produce. You just keep doing that and you build a following that way. You don't always have to come in with a big, massive solution. Something that I like to explore as well with clients is what is the minimum thing that you can do here to get a bit of an improvement and then how can we build on that? digitisation doesn't happen overnight. You need to think about small steps that you can take and that don't disrupt the entire organisation. In digital tech, we like to talk about disruption as much as we possibly can, but when you're dealing with organisations that had to slowly build expertise over decades, the last thing you want is disruption. You want continuity. So that's something that we're dealing with is, how can we integrate the digital technology into those organisations without breaking everything.

Phoebe: Yeah, that seems to make it much more manageable, looking at it in that way. One of the aims of the project, as I understand it, is to contribute towards a sustainable future for open-air museums. Do you think that the things that you've spoken about are part of that and I mean, the sharing ethos is a really core part of the project. Would you like to talk a bit about how that also contributes to the sustainable future that we would like to see in open-air museums?

Julia: A quick answer is, of course. Sustainability is not just how to be environmentally friendly, it's a lot more than that. It's about having sustainable working conditions. It's about working effectively and that other people can use your work open-access. It's a whole suite of things that need to be part of that. So in that respect, I think the project will help make the museums more sustainable in terms of, also of survival. There are lots of archaeological open-air museums that have problems surviving. If we can make their work easier, if we can help them reach more visitors, that's a big step towards making them also sustainable.

Phoebe: Do you have anything to add to that, Cordula?

Cordula: Yeah, I think the sharing ethos of the project, it's as much about sharing knowledge as it is sharing data. So the 'how to do' stuff, both in terms of the skills that are inherent in the open-air museums, but also the how to, running your museum, managing your data. I think there's a lot more potential for sharing things like work practices. And for us, it's really nice to work on this project because it's very long term, so we get a lot of feedback from users, from project partners and it's collaborative. So we are not working on something that a company or a corporate is hoping to create to get a competitive advantage. This is very much about the networking and almost like a

maker culture ethos. And I think to include digital technology into that, where you might be happy to learn about textile making in The Middle Ages, but also about making 3D models of a house reconstruction. It's kind of the spirit of discovery and of practical application. And I think a networked and collaborative outcome and interaction during the project, it does help to make organisations more stable, the more collaborators they have. It's not specific necessarily to open-air museums, it's just what we're doing is - we hope - really tailored to that environment.

Phoebe: Lovely. Do you have any kind of favourite or most interesting aspects of the project so far, either of you?

Julia: So far my favourite bit was probably testing a very, very first prototype at our meeting in Barcelona, for the documentation that Cordula prepared.

Cordula: That was super exciting, to just see how people interacted with it and to see the sparks going off, where people were now starting to have ideas about what else they might do. I think a nice moment was also when one of the museum partners who was not very confident about digital technology said 'you know what, once we got started, it's not so bad'. It's a very sort of human thing, you know, once we become a little bit more familiar with even things like digital workflows, it's okay. It just shows me that a lot of the potential barriers is maybe a lack of confidence. I am curious about why our digital tool is so intimidating in some contexts. So that was super interesting and encouraging.

Phoebe: That sounds really good. As a final question, before we wrap up, what are your plans for the future and how can the EXARC community help to make a difference in regards to the points that we've been discussing today?

Julia: Our plans for the future in regards to the project, I think we've touched on quite a few, in terms of developing this platform or archive. I think the EXARC community could help, if you are working in a museum or practising a craft, we will need people testing our prototypes at different stages. That's always very helpful, to get as much feedback as possible.

Phoebe: I can imagine a lot of people within our community would be really, really enthusiastic to be involved in that respect.

Cordula: I can only echo what Julia has already said, that we do rely on feedback from people who work in museums who may later use this digital solution. We always want to talk to people about digitisation and even just visit, see how you work, where you work and hear as well what kind of material you want documented. So it really helps us to understand the format of maybe the files, file sizes, file formats that we need to accommodate. So yeah, we want to hear from you as much as possible.

Phoebe: Thank you very much, Cordula and Julia, for joining us today and thank you for sharing your experience and expertise. It sounds like such a cool project to be part of and I'm really looking forward to hearing where it goes. And thank you to everyone else for listening to this episode of #FinallyFriday by EXARC. If you would like to become more involved with EXARC, why not become a member? Alternatively, you can make a small PayPal donation through the website to help support EXARC in its endeavors.

Join us next month for another episode of #FinallyFriday and learn more all about the world of experimental archaeology, ancient technology, archaeological open-air museums and interpretation. Don't forget to follow the show through exarc.net and our associated social media channels. See

you soon.