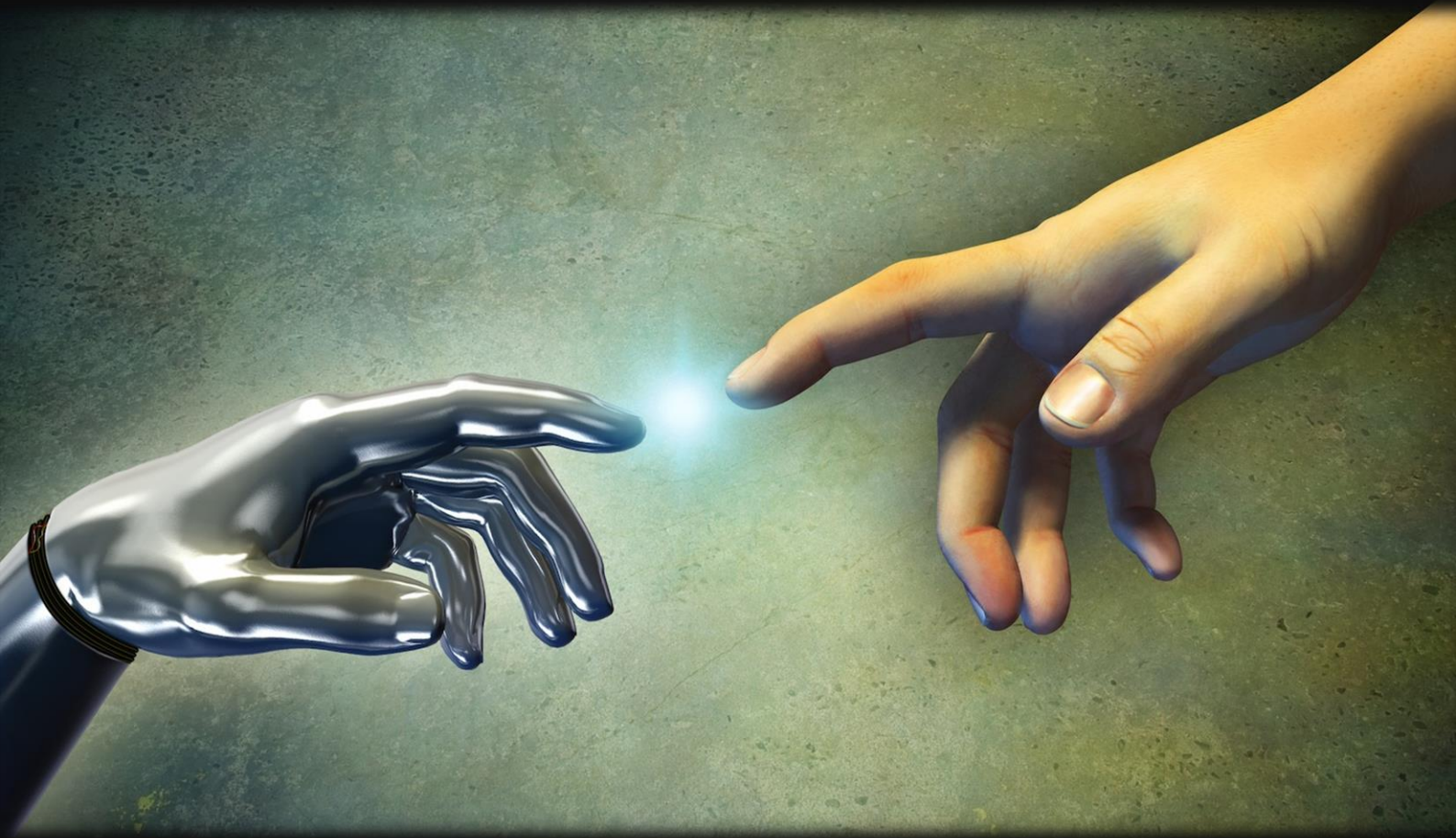


Digital Cultural Heritage in the Ethnographic Museum

Rethinking the digital object from the museum's perspective



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By Lyonne van Gaalen

Abstract

Within the field of ethnographic museums, the concept of digitality as something worth collecting is still unusual. Digital objects do not belong in these museums, unless they are used as technological tools in either the exhibition or the process of collection management. Even though ethnographic museums claim to represent contemporary societies and cultures from all around the world, they still keep a blind eye to the one thing that connects us all: the digital.

In this thesis, I discuss the different considerations towards adding digital cultural objects to the museum's collections from the perspective of the museum itself. I thereby draw upon the data I collected during my ethnographic fieldwork among the associates of the research department of the *National Museum of World Cultures* in the Netherlands, also known as the *Research Center for Material Culture*. Therefore, the research findings presented in this thesis give a unique insight into different aspects of museum practices by showing the broad scope of experiences, ideas and opinions of museum professionals concerning digital cultural heritage in relation to these specific museums and their ethnographic collections.

Keywords

Digital cultural heritage - digital objects - ethnographic museums - ethnography - materiality

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1. Introduction

Digital Horizons and Virtual Selves

1.1 Social relevance

There is no denying that we live in a fast changing cultural world, which is highly influenced by the way we use digital technologies in almost every aspect of our daily lives. From playing Candy Crush on our smart phones to ordering new shoes via web-shops and from cyberbullying on social networking sites to the online meme-based communities which can be considered to be cultural groups on their own. The digital has already passed the level of emersion in which it was only a technological tool, it has become part of our everyday behaviour, our social identity and provides us with a lens through which we form our understanding of the world around us.

The American businesswoman and former Vice President of Retail at Apple Inc., Angela Ahrendts, describes this phenomenon as follows: *'I grew up in a physical world, and I speak English. The next generation is growing up in a digital world, and they speak social'* (Ahrendts, 2013). To some extent, this so called digital generation already became reality. This does not only apply to 'western' societies, but it is actually the case in every part of the world, even though it might be expressed in different cultural ways. Therefore, I argue that it is important to take a closer look at the level of digitality in our daily lives from a less technological and a more cultural perspective, because after all, human behaviour and social interactions will always form the keystones of society, even when it will eventually merge into a digital form.

1.2 Academic relevance

'In the past two decades, digital technologies have become omnipresent in the museum. They have changed the ways museums document, preserve, make accessible and present cultural heritage. Ethnographic museums follow this trend: they have embraced digital technologies as tools for engaging the public, for cataloguing and disseminating knowledge about their collections and for democratizing knowledge production. However, scant attention has been given by these museums to thinking about digital technologies as cultural objects and practices in their own rights.' (RCMC 2016).

This piece of text, which was part of the introduction of last year's conference, *Digital Horizons, Virtual Selves: Rethinking Cultural Heritage in the Museum*, of the *Research Center for Material Culture* (RCMC), provides us with a striking description of the main topic of this thesis and can be seen as a useful introduction to the current mindset of the museum regarding the digital. This specific

conference was the first time that I experienced the combination of digitality, museology and anthropology within an academic event. I have always had a strong interest in these three disciplines, but the diversity of topics that were discussed during this conference inspired me to proceed in this specific field. Therefore, I contacted the *RCCM* and started to investigate how I could take up this topic, where the *Digital Horizons, Virtual Selves* conference left off: giving attention to digital technologies as cultural objects and practices in their own right.

Within this research, I had the unique opportunity to rethinking digital objects in the museum from the inside out, which is connected to different academic fields, such as media studies, museology, heritage studies, and, to some degree, cultural anthropology. Therefore, I combined the views of different authors and museum professionals, from different academic backgrounds, into a multidisciplinary approach. This is relatively common within studies that concern material culture in relation to digital culture, but in most of these cases digital technology is mainly seen as a tool that is used in providing additional information about material objects to museum visitors. It is rare within the academic world that the digital is considered to be an object on its own in the sense of digital cultural heritage. I argue that it is important that institutions, such as museums, whom are mainly focussing on material heritage, need to pay attention to the importance of the digital in relation to materiality in the form of digital cultural heritage.¹ Especially within a museum that has human behaviour and culture as its main topic. We cannot analyse people's daily lives anymore without looking at the way they interact with the digital, so this needs to be taken into account on the understanding of material culture as well.

I analyse the idea of digital objects in ethnographic museums by also taking their controversial backstory into account. Controversial because of the original way in which European countries and their ethnographic museums portrayed different people from all around the world through their objects. By including these aspects of the development of the ethnographic museum and their anthropological role, I want to stress the importance of proper representation of cultural objects, which means that they are represented in such a way that it does justice to both the cultural backstory and current context of the objects, including a more critical, layered and multi-sighted approach in the way of describing a certain objects and its cultural meaning (Hall 1997: 28). Right now, this debate is again more important than ever, because with the introduction of digital culture into the museum, the present-day curators face new challenges related to this proper representation. Especially when the value and meaning of these objects are focussed on something mainly immaterial such as digitality.

¹ See 1.1 *Digital Horizons and Virtual Selves*

1.3 Research questions

Within this research, I will use the following research question: *What are the considerations of ethnographic museums on adding digital cultural objects to their collections?* I chose to use this particular question, because I wanted to analyse the possibilities and the obstacles of digital objects through the eyes of the museum itself. In this way, I put the considerations of my respondents at the centre of my research, instead of getting ahead of myself and immediately start asking questions such as how or when digital cultural objects can be added to the museum. Therefore, I decided to focus on creating a starting point within this field of digitality and the ethnographic museum. By using the ideas and opinions of museum professionals, who are familiar with the environment and can provide me with a clear insight in the actual possibilities and obstacles that I might be dealing with.

In addition to this main research question, I formulated the three following sub-questions:

- *How is digital cultural heritage currently represented in the ethnographic museum?*
- *How should digital cultural heritage be represented within the ethnographic museum according to the curators, exhibition makers and employees of the collections department of the ethnographic museum?*
- *What are the possible changes that must be made within the museum in order to add digital cultural objects to the collections?*

Each of these questions has helped me to analyse a certain area of my research field in a more detailed way. For example, the first question allowed me to create a starting point from which I was able to discuss the different considerations on the topic of digital cultural heritage in the ethnographic museum. The second one helped me to delve a little deeper into the different viewing points regarding the belonging of digital culture within the museum. And in the process of finding an answer to the last question, I could consider a hypothetical future of digital objects through the eyes of my respondents. Together, these questions formed the backbone of my research, which made it possible to create the diverse dataset that provided me with an overview of the general consideration of my respondents on adding digital cultural objects to the museum's collections.

1.4 Research material

The *RCMC* provided me with the fundamentals of my research, both as an inspiration through last year's conference and by enabling me to get access to my research material. This research center in Leiden is part of the National *Museum of World Cultures* in the Netherlands, which is a collaboration of three ethnographic museums; the *Tropenmuseum* (Amsterdam), *Museum Volkenkunde* (Leiden) and the *Afrika Museum* (Berg en Dal). During my five months of research within the *RCMC*, I collected my

information by mostly working in the office in Leiden, attending curatorial and project meetings and interviewing a total of fifteen respondents. Therefore, the *RCMC* can be seen as the central link in my research, through which I was connected to the different aspects of my research material.

This research material can be divided into three aspects, namely the context and usual practices of the ethnographic museums, the digital objects which I used as case studies, and finally, my respondents whom I interviewed about their views on digital cultural heritage within the museum. Thereby, the first aspect played an important contextual role within my research, such as the usual museum practices in making exhibitions or the criteria that are used for the purchase of new objects in the museum collections. Because of the ethnographic study that I did within the museum, these relatively small bits of contextual information that I collected during less formal discussions and meetings, were just as important as my case studies and interviews.² This information provided me with a certain perspective in which I could situate the other information and insights that I discovered during my research.

The second aspect of my research material, my two case studies, played more of an in-depth role within my research, because through these digital objects I could discuss the possibilities of digital cultural heritage in relation to the current exhibitions and collections with my respondents. In order to be able to cover as much space within this relatively vague field as possible, I chose to use both a semi-digital object, which is an object that is built up out of both physical and digital material, such as robots or mobile phones, and a born digital object, which only exists in a digital form until it is made visible by either showing and interacting with it through a screen or other technological tool, such as video games or social media platforms.³ Both objects that I used as case studies are currently part of a temporary exhibition in *Museum Volkenkunde* in Leiden, which made it easier for me to discuss them as examples of digital objects with my respondents, because they already knew the objects.

Besides, I was able to analyse these two objects based on the criteria that the museum uses by making the distinction between 'real' museum objects and props. In this context, 'real' means that the objects are considered to hold enough cultural value in terms of cultural heritage, unicity and authenticity, to become part of the 'official' museum's collections. These props, on the other hand, are supporting objects that are mainly used to tell and illustrate the story of an exhibition, but according to the collections policy, do not acquire the necessary value to become part of the collections. Examples of

² See 3.1 *Ethnography*

³ See 4.1 *Semi-digital objects* and 4.2 *Born digital objects*

these props are parts of the decoration of an exhibition, interactive aspects such as games or touchscreens, but also cultural objects that are specifically bought to become part of a certain exhibition, but are not (yet) considered to become part of the museum's collection. Both the digital objects that I used as case studies are currently part of this second category of museum props, but by discussing this distinction with my respondents and looking further into the collections criteria in relation to these two digital objects, I am positive about the changes that this situation might change, specifically for digital cultural objects that are currently props, when digital cultural heritage will gain its recognition as an important theme within the ethnographic museum and its collections.

The last aspect of my research material, my respondents, were probably the most important part of my research. They provided me with a vast collection of insights and perspectives on different museum practices that were related to the process of collecting and showing cultural objects in the museum. Therefore, this group of respondents included both curators and exhibition makers as well as employees of the collections department of the *National Museum of World Cultures*. By combining all the information that I got through my interviews and my own experiences during my work at the *RCMC*, I created a diverse data-set, which enabled me to make an overview of the current considerations towards digital cultural heritage in the ethnographic museum. Besides these more policy and mindset related considerations, this also included a lot of brainstorming and speculating about the categorisation and classification of cultural objects in general. When are objects considered to be cultural heritage? Where do we draw the lines between material and immaterial? Global or local? And, in this case, how is the collection of digital cultural heritage related to these discussions?

2. Theoretical framework

Digitality + culture + heritage = digital cultural heritage

Digital cultural heritage, it is a complex combination of three much-discussed concepts within academia. In this chapter I will delve into this challenging discussion by looking into the academic background and current debates concerning each of these three concepts; digitality, culture and heritage. By doing so I will create a theoretical framework which can be used to understand the analysis' and assumptions which are later made in this research report. It is thereby important to first operationalise each of these concepts separately, after which they can be combined into the central topic of this research, digital cultural heritage within the ethnographic museum, at the end of this chapter.

2.1 Digitality

Out of the different concepts to be discussed in this chapter, digitality might seem the least obvious and most innovative regarding the ethnographic museum. Nevertheless, on a technological level, the digital is not that new to the museum of world cultures (Modest 2015: 1). During the past decennia, digital technologies have been used frequently in different aspects of the museum, such as research, digitization, documentation, exhibition, education and communication. This diversity of digitality is also clearly embedded in the way the RCMC defines this concept as one of their research themes on their website: *'Digitality explores the impact of new information and communication technology in our lives, as well as on knowledge production, data storage and the consumption and dissemination of cultural heritage inside and outside the museum'* (RCMC 2015). Although this specific definition sounds promising, the digital is still mostly represented within the ethnographic museum as a technological tool, for example in the form of a touchscreen within an exhibition or collection databases and digitization software, rather than using digital objects in terms of collections, in telling a story about the relation between people and the digital in contemporary societies all over the world.

But before I delve further into this relationship between the digital and society, I will explain how I use the concept of digitality in my own thesis research. Thereby I borrow the basic definition of the digital by Horst and Miller (2012) in which they describe this concept as *'everything that has been developed by, or can be reduced to, the binary'* (Horst and Miller 2012: 5). This is possibly the most simplified understanding of the digital, which makes it a useful starting point from which we can build towards more complex concepts, such as digital culture and heritage. In addition to this first operationalisation I also want to shed a little light on the way this digital system works, by comparing it to a similar system,

namely that of modern money. Inspired by Georg Simmel's (1975) work, *The Philosophy of Money*, I consider this to be a valid comparison, because just like the digital, the idea of money is also based on something abstract and alienating, like value, while it also has a more physical form, in the way it constantly influences people's behaviour within society (Horst and Miller 2012: 5-7). This is similar to the functionality of the digital, because it has an abstract side, binary code, but also plays a prominent role in people's everyday lives. In this way, the digital and the non-digital can no longer be separately analysed, especially within an ethnographic museum which is basically a museum about people: *'The digital should and can be a highly effective means for reflecting upon what it means to be human, the ultimate task for anthropology as a discipline'* (Miller and Horst 2012: 3). The anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, even argues that *'our "real" lives have been "virtual" all along'*, because he compares the way people experience life through a prism of culture with the way they experience digitality. Or in his own words: *'Culture is our "killer app": we are virtually human'* (Boellstorff 2009: 5).⁴

This brings me to the understanding of digitality as an actual anthropological or ethnographical collection field within the museum, comparable with existing categories such as photography, fashion or popular culture, which are universal topics that are not connected to any specific part of the world. This is also the case with the digital, because it has no regional boundaries and is not only a 'western' aspect of everyday life. The next question then might be, what kind of objects should the ethnographic museum use and collect within this digital field? The answer is not that easy, because, even though the museum is already familiar with the collection of some non-material objects, like digital photography, music and film, the current collection habits and practices are not yet prepared to include more interactive and fluid sorts of non-material objects, such as games, software or social networks.

In order to theoretically bridge the gap between the material and the digital, I chose to split up the term digital object into two different categories, namely the semi-digital objects and the so called born digital object (Sabharwal 2015: 28). This first group of semi-digital object can be roughly described as material objects which also contain digital software that needs to be programmed in order to create interactions, which is the case with objects like robots or mobile phones. Born digital objects on the other hand, do not have a material form, but originally exist only within the digital, although they might need some sort of technological tool such as a screen or game console to be visualised. Examples of these born digital objects are video games, social networks or digital photography. The main reason

⁴ The term 'killer app' is normally used to describe a computer program that is so necessary or desirable that it proves the core value of some larger technology.

why I eventually chose to draw a line between these two categories was the applicability to the current digital objects within the museums' exhibitions and the range of objects that I discussed with my respondents during the interviews. During my research it turned out that, using these two categories, made it a lot easier to conceptualise what digital objects within an ethnographic museum should or should not be according to my respondents.⁵

Nevertheless, I will not claim that this is the only way in which ethnographic museums should approach digital objects as part of their collections. For now, I argue that these two categories will indeed be useful as a tool to bridge the earlier mentioned gap between materiality and digitality within the general mindset of ethnographic museums, but in the long run these categories might need some reshaping during the construction of an actual collection policy on digital cultural heritage. Because in the end, both semi-digital object and born digital objects will have a similar level of materiality within the context of museums, either in printed form or visualised through a screen or other technological tool, which is even not that different from the cultural non-digital objects that are currently part of the ethnographic museum's collections.

With this comparison in mind, I will draw upon the work of Ann-Sophie Lehmann (2012), who analyses the materiality of digital objects in a more bottom up kind of way, by using the *Utah Teapot* as her case study through which she shows the different material aspects of digital objects.⁶ Lehmann speaks of in-material rather than immaterial, by which she points out that digital objects always need to be presented by something material: *'in order to be there and in order to be seen, a computer graphics image needs hardware equipped with a monitor, screen or projection device. In other words, it has to be in another material'* (Lehmann 2012: 180). This idea is to some extent similar to the earlier mentioned ideas of semi-digital objects and the visualisation of born digital objects, but the actual difference here is that she also included the process of making and eventually showing the objects in her analysis: *'To study how exactly the Utah teapot is in-material means to include all the steps taken from rendering to displaying, not to forget additional layers of metadata and watermarks, which become accessible when the object is viewed in different programmes'* (Lehmann 2012: 181).

⁵ See 4.1 *Semi-digital objects* and 4.2 *Born digital objects*.

⁶ The *Utah Teapot* was the first 3D computer graphic model that represented a real-world object. It is created by computer graphics researcher Martin Newell in 1975 and quickly became the standard reference object within the computer graphics community.

This is an interesting approach, especially when situated within an ethnographic museum, that strives to also collect and present the background and contextual information of its cultural objects. In this way, the distinction between semi-digital and born digital might eventually become irrelevant, because, by using this approach towards the materiality of digital objects, museum professionals will recognise the materiality of the digital no matter its physical form or way of presentation. Therefore, I want to point out that the use of these two categories must be seen as a temporary distinction, which main purpose is to make museum professionals think about the relevance of digitality within this particular museum. This might eventually add up to the development of a new mindset which will be closer to Lehmann's understanding of the materiality of digital objects, because if digital cultural heritage will become a full-fledged collection field within the ethnographic museum, they need to reconsider the idea of digital materiality within the cultures they represent.

2.2 Culture

The word culture is probably the single most central concept within the field of anthropology and ethnography. In a more traditional definition of the term, *'Culture is said to embody the "best that has been thought and said" in society. It is the sum of the great ideas, as represented in the classic works of literature, painting, music and philosophy – the "high culture" of an age.'* (Hall 1997: 2). Within this research, the term does not refer to the understanding of culture in relation to so-called 'high cultured' people or products. From an anthropological perspective, influenced by the work of early anthropologists such as Boas (1898) and Lévi-Strauss (1949), the world is divided into different cultures in which *'any particular person is a product of the particular culture in which he or she has lived, and differences between human beings are to be explained (but not judged) by differences in their culture (rather than their race)'* (Barnard & Spencer 2012: 168-169). Geertz on the other hand, has taken this general operationalisation of culture a little more towards a semiotic understanding. In his book called *The Interpretation of Cultures*, he writes: *'The concept of culture I espouse is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal pended in webs of significance he has himself spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.'* (Geertz 1973: 5)

So, in general the core idea of culture within the anthropological discipline still is that of examining people, their behaviours and practices from different cultures all over the world and by doing so, trying to understand them from the inside out. Nowadays, this way of thinking about culture is fundamental for the ethnographic museum. But this has not always been the case, which has everything to do with the term material culture. To operationalise this term, I need to go back to the beginning of colonial era, when explorers and colonizers brought back descriptions of the people they encountered together

with artefacts as part of the process of mapping, describing, collecting and eventually colonising the world (Morphy 2012: 487). The collections of material culture that emerged from these expeditions became the basis of the ethnographic museums all around Europe and made them the main site for anthropological discourse. At the turn of the twentieth century, the so-called fieldwork revolution took place within anthropology, which shifted the focus away from museums and towards the study of culture and society in context (Stocking 1985: 8-9). This revolution divided the discipline into museum anthropology, which studied material objects that were literally and metaphorically removed from the societies that produces them, and the more human oriented social and cultural anthropology.

At the end of the twentieth century, during the second wave of decolonization, museum anthropologists were criticized because of their association with colonialism and because they portrayed indigenous societies as 'other', exotic, unchanging and disconnected from the present (Morphy 2012: 487-488). In response to this criticism, museum anthropologists were among the first to recognise their role in exhibiting cultures. They became aware of their colonial legacy and of the need to reconnect their collections with the producing societies. Nowadays, this way of thinking about material culture is still present in the ethnographic museum, in which social and cultural anthropology are no longer separated from museum anthropology and *'material culture as a form of evidence is now generally recognized by anthropologists across the discipline'* (Morphy 2012: 454).

But what if the particular culture you want to include and represent in the museum, does not, or only partly, exist in a physical form? Finding an answer to this question is actually not that hard if we take a look at similar material objects in the collections that are connected to the immaterial, like rituals, music, dance and language. These immaterial aspects are now stored as additional data connected to certain objects of collection fields. Therefore, it should not be that difficult to find a way of collecting digital practices, like the museum already did with other forms of immaterial culture. According to Deborah Lupton (2015), it is important that we, as social scientists, start collecting the digital as fast as possible, because right now almost every cultural society on our planet already has access to the digital, which means that substantial parts of these cultures also exist within this digital landscape. I thereby need to highlight that this digital domain should never be analysed apart from the physical world. Or as Lupton describes it: *'The very idea of 'culture' or 'society' cannot now be fully understood without the recognition that computer software and hardware devices not only underpin but actively constitute selfhood, embodiment, social life, social relations and social institutions'* (Lupton 2015: 2).

Therefore, I dare to argue that the digital should also be included as a cultural collection field within the contemporary ethnographic museum. Especially, because these museums fulfil a crucial role in

society by representing the diversity of cultures, by using both material objects as well as non-material practices, such as the rituals, traditions, music and digitality, from these communities. These digital practices may be even more interesting for the museum, because of their social and international characteristics. Through virtual spaces, such as social networking sites and online gaming platforms, people with common interests regardless of their geographical situation and their social and cultural belonging are now able to connect and create their own community and accessory digital culture (Broadbent 2012: 128).

2.3 Heritage

Now that I have created a framework for the concepts digitality and culture, it is time to combine these insights by analysing the concept of digital cultural heritage. But before I will be able to do so, I need to take a closer look at the term heritage in general. The basic definition of heritage, as formulated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is: *'heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations'* (UNESCO 2008: 5). This definition can be applied to basically every aspect of everyday life. So, the next question will be, where do we draw the line between the sorts of cultural heritage which are deemed worthy of collecting and showing in a museum and which are not? This is a subjective matter that depends most of all on the political climate and collections policies within the ethnographic museum and the way it forms its own identity both within the field of museology and towards the outside world (McDonald 2003: 5). This often translates into the mindset and vision of curators and exhibition makers on the stories that a museum needs to tell using its collections. Therefore, this question can only be answered by taking a closer look at the way the different collections and exhibitions of the ethnographic museum are designed and how they have changed over the past decennia.

One of the biggest changes that have taken place in the understanding of cultural heritage within the ethnographic museum, was the introduction of intangible cultural heritage in addition to the tangible, material objects that form collections (Fairchild Ruggles and Silverman 2009: 1). Willian Logan defines it in the first place as *'heritage that is embodied in people rather than in inanimate objects'* (Logan 2007: 34). However, over the last couple of years this concept has become a little more complex than that. Just like the digital and the non-digital cannot be analysed apart from each other, tangible and intangible heritage in an ethnographic museum are always connected to one another by the underlying cultural ideas and practices in which they are originally created. For example, performing arts, such as traditional music, are specifically identified by UNESCO as intangible heritage, but this heritage cannot exist without a tangible, musical instruments and the musician that plays it. This works vice versa as

well, because presenting a musical instrument as an object in an exhibition has no meaning or value without including the way it sounds (Fairchild Ruggles and Silverman 2009: 11).

For my analysis and operationalisation of digital cultural heritage, I will continue to use this example of music as a form of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, because in many cases the digital has a lot in common with the way music works. Especially semi-digital objects, such as robots, can easily be compared to musical instruments. Including a robot in an exhibition, just like showing a musical instrument, has no further meaning until you can make it move and interact with it. In this case the programmer can be seen as the composer of the 'music' of the robot, whose input defines its interactions, just like a composer determines the sort and genre of music that is played by the musicians, in this case the people who will use the robot in their everyday lives. Therefore, if music is considered to be tangible cultural heritage, why would digitality be any different? Because nowadays, the digital has developed itself to be one of the most influential cultural objects in contemporary societies all around the world, or as Lev Manovich puts it: '*new media is culture "encoded" in a digital form*' (Manovich 2001: 23). From this perspective, it should be clear that ethnographic museums, whose main goal is to represent a diversity of cultures in their collections, have no choice other than investigating the possibilities of digital cultural heritage. Because if they do not, they will possibly not be able to create a comprehensive representation through which their audiences will be able to critically analyse the rapidly digitizing cultural world in both their collections and future exhibitions.

But how will the ethnographic museum be able to do so when they still try to hold on to problematic concepts like authenticity and unicity within the criteria for their ethnographic collections and cultural heritage in general? If we take a look at the current collections, these two terms already seem to be irrelevant, because of the enormous amount of similar everyday objects or even copies and duplicates of these cultural objects, like pottery, masks, clothing and other somewhat stereotypical objects within the ethnographic museum. The fact that these objects already seem to be a little outdated within a museum that claims to focus mainly on contemporary culture and people in general, has a lot to do with the idea of 'New Museology', which emerged at the beginning of the 21st century. Haidy Geismar describes this so-called 'New Museology' as '*a shift in interest in museums away from objects and towards people, society and experience*' (Geismar 2012: 267). This shift seems to be present within the field of ethnographic museums as well. For example, cultural stories and context seem to be more important than the objects, which are mainly used to illustrate the story that the exhibitions tell their visitors. The authenticity or unicity of the objects still play a role, but it is way smaller than it was during the colonial era, in which the museum still was a showcase of rarities. Nowadays, the main goal is to show different cultures in a more social and society related way, in which digital culture may not

be forgotten: *'the digital has become a leitmotif of a broader field of museum practice in which museum objects may no longer be understood in and of themselves, but as part of broader fields of representation, mediation and communication.'* (Geismar 2012: 267).

In the following chapters of this thesis, I will analyse digitality as a potential collection field in collaboration with a variety of curators, exhibition makers and employees of the collections department of the National Museum of World Cultures in The Netherlands. By doing so I will try to create a better understanding of the considerations of the ethnographic museum regarding the complex discourse that I described in this theoretical framework.

3. Methodology

An ethnographic study within an ethnographic museum

During the last couple of months, I worked on an ethnographic fieldwork among the associates of the research department of the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherland, also known as the *Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC)*.⁷ During this fieldwork I used critical discourse analysis as my main approach. Because of the flexibility of the term 'discourse analysis' within academia, it is necessary to also explain what discourse analysis means within this specific research. By doing so, I will use the ideas of Linda Graham (2011) on the matter, who points out that using discourse analysis '*What one is doing is greatly dependent on the epistemological framework being drawn upon.*' (Graham 2011: 663). Therefore, I want to make clear in what kind of epistemological field my research is situated, before I can continue explaining the more practical aspects my methodology.

Starting from a 'Foucauldian' viewing point on discourse analysis, I will first of all state that, within this research, my goal will not be to discover and present the 'ultimate truth' about digital cultural objects in ethnographic museums (Graham 2011: 665-666). Nevertheless, I will delve into the discourse of digital cultural heritage in the ethnographic museum and create an overview of the current situation, problematic aspects and ideas of my research material in such a way that it illustrates the context to the best of my abilities as a researcher. Therefore, I will present the outcome of my research as my personal findings, because they are strongly influenced by my own interpretations of the discourse. With this idea in mind, I describe the epistemological framework of this particular discourse analysis as an epistemology of multiple personal experiences filtered through an ethnographic lens.

3.1 Ethnography

Before I will continue with a detailed explanation of the different methods that I used in order to do my discourse analysis, I will describe the actual backbone of my research methodology, namely the earlier mentioned ethnographic approach. Through this ethnographic study, which is basically the study of peoples and cultures from their own perspectives, I was able to become part of the corporate culture of the museum and thereby became an insider in my own research group (Bernard 2012: 346). In my case, this was relatively easy, thanks to my internship and work at both the *Tropenmuseum* and *Museum Volkenkunde* I was already familiar with the organization. Therefore, I already knew a lot of my respondents and I was quite familiar with the different departments that I needed to work with during my research.

⁷ See 1.4 Research Material

Nevertheless, before I started this research I had never cooperated with the *RCMC* and I only knew them from some of their events and programs. Via the earlier mentioned conference on digitality in the museum, I came to know Liza Swaving, one of the research associates and curators on public programming at the *RCMC*. She shared my interests in digital culture and ethnographic museums and was willing to help me with my research, which resulted in the opportunity to work as a research intern on this topic. Consequently, Liza became my key informant within the *RCMC*. She helped me by choosing and contacting my respondents, acquiring basic information on for example collection criteria and enabled me to have access to curatorial meetings and the digital archiving system of the museum.

In this way, I got the freedom to analyse different aspects of the museum, varying from curatorial practices to exhibition making and the usual role of the collections department in all this. This diversity contributed to the multi-sighted overview that I was able to create as a result of my research. I thereby, need to state that, even though I have tried to be as objective as possible, this final overview will always be biased by my own interpretations, opinions and ideas as both a researcher and an employee of the museum. This is also the case in my interviews, if someone else would have determined the questions and direction of each interview, the results of the research would probably be different from the ones I present in this thesis. Therefore, I cannot state that this research findings will be representative for every ethnographic museum or even every associate of the *National Museum of World Cultures* in the Netherlands, because this research is based on the museum practices within only two ethnographic museums, the experiences and ideas of only fifteen museum professionals, which were interpreted and analysed by only one researcher.

Nevertheless, I would still argue that this research provides the *National Museum of World Cultures* and ethnographic museums in general with useful information for the possible increase in the number of digital objects in its collections. My research findings show a situation in which museum professionals struggle with the idea of the introduction of new material and immaterial forms of digital culture. And even though, some of these results are partly based on speculations about possible scenarios about the future of digital objects, these still are real considerations and thereby an answer real answer to my research questions, which is for now the most substantial starting point on digital cultural heritage in ethnographic museums that academia can get.

3.2 Data collection

During the ethnographic fieldwork, I used two different research methods to collect the data that I later used for my discourse analysis, namely participant observations and semi-structured interviews. Through both methods, I collected mainly qualitative data, which was suitable for this type of ethnographic research, because most of my data is based on the personal experiences, ideas and opinions of either my respondents or myself. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to express or translate these data into plain numbers.⁸

In the first case, I took on the role of participant observer within the *RCMC*. I worked on my research at the institute, took part in curatorial meetings and was invited into some of the project meetings concerning one of my case studies, *Pepper* the Japanese robot. In this way, I became, to a certain extent, an insider within my own research material. This provided me with in-depth information about the everyday practices of the museum and the different viewing points towards their collections and exhibitions. In other words, the participant observations mainly helped me to create a basic understanding of the context in which my research topic, digitality and the possibilities of digital objects, and case studies were situated. This process of analysing my research environment, turned out to be very useful, because during the analysis of my interview data, I was able to look at my findings from both an academic and a more practical perspective.

My second research method, the semi-structured interviews, then provided me with more concrete data, compared to the participant observations, which were mainly filtered through my own interpretations and therefore highly subjective. In every interview, I started the conversation by asking some questions about the personal vision of my respondents regarding digital objects within the museum. I used this information as my starting point in each of my interviews, which allowed me to ask more questions to find out where these ideas came from. I thereby used the two earlier described case studies to trigger them to think about the digital object in a relatively new way. In some cases, this was not even necessary, because of the experiences that some of my respondents already had with these sorts of objects, but in other cases, it was hard to open a discussion about digitality when the respondent I was interviewing had no idea what I was talking about.

Therefore, it turned out that none of my interviews were the same. Initially, I started every interview with the same set of questions, but along the way every interview took its own course influenced by

⁸ Nevertheless, in a later stage of my research I quantified some of my data in such a way that it became easier to analyse. See 3.3 *Analysing data*.

the ideas and examples that my respondents came up with. In this way, my decision to use semi-structured interviews, turned out just as I expected, based on my earlier experiences with ethnographic interview techniques and the practical descriptions of semi-structured interviews by Russel Bernard (2011: 156-158). I wanted to ask some key questions to every respondent, to enable me to later compare the answers of different respondents to one another, but also make the interviews feel more like a discussion about digital cultural objects in general, in order to provide my respondents with the opportunities to introduce their own experiences and examples. This approach made it possible for me to really pick the brains of my respondents by asking about the origins of their opinions or ideas and alter the order of my questions whenever that felt right. Again, this turned my research methodology into a mainly subjective one, because of the relatively high influence that I had as a researcher, but it also enabled me to collect in-depth information about my respondents' personal ideas about digitality and the museum.

Because of this relative high level of personal involvement of my respondents, I had to make sure that my research was also ethically correct towards the privacy of my respondents. Therefore, I decided to present personal data, such as specific quotes and ideas of my respondents, as anonymous as possible. I am thereby aware of total anonymity would not be possible within a research environment like this, because each of my respondents has a specific speciality within the museum that might reveal their identity. For example, when I would use a quote about a certain object or project that originates from Africa, it would be easy to assume that this information is provided by the curator who is specialised in African culture. Therefore, I have included a certificate of informed consent in my research, which I asked each of my respondents to sign in order to make sure that they were aware of the possible risks their cooperation.⁹

3.3 Data analysis

During the first few months of my research, I focussed mainly on the collection of my data through participant observation and interviews. This resulted in a vast collection of interview data that needed to be structured in such a way that I could use it for my discourse analysis. Using a method of coding and clustering the main quotes and ideas from each of the transcribed interviews, I managed to create a data-set that was divided into three main categories, namely defining, collecting and presenting the digital. Each of these categories held a collection of quotes that were clustered by codes and sub-codes, such as 'digital objects' as a main code with sub-codes such as 'tools', 'games' or 'social media'. In this way, I was able to analyse the big number of quotes from my respondents in a relatively easy

⁹ See appendix B. *Informed consent*

manner. It allowed me to compare the different viewing points of my respondents on all the topics that I had discussed during my interviews by just selecting a particular topic in my data-set.

Besides this qualitative approach on my data, which mainly focussed on the content and differences between the quotes of my respondents, I was also able to analyse the discussed topics and opinions in a more quantitative way. I thereby made use of the codes and sub-codes, that I had distinguished from my interviews, and clustered them based on the number of times that each of these codes and sub-codes occurred in my data-set. This resulted in a quantitative overview of the different considerations towards digitality and digital objects in the ethnographic museum in which defining the digital turned out to be the most important topic, which was mainly pushed by codes which were related to the debate of materiality and immateriality, followed by objects or themes that are currently part of the museum's collections which can be compared to digital objects or digitality as a theme.

Although, this quantitative approach seems to provide me with useful information, I am still a little sceptical. Yes, the results of these numbers add up with my qualitative analysis concerning the main considerations within the ethnographic museum, but this might also be influenced by the main topic of my interview, namely defining what digital objects might be from the museum's perspective. I should stress that, the most discussed topics during the interviews, would not immediately be the most important ones. Therefore, I have used this quantitative approach of my data-set mainly as a second orientation on the discourse, rather than a main guideline. In this way, my discourse analysis will be mainly based on a qualitative approach of the created data-set, which fits perfectly with the ethnographic nature and speculative character of this multidisciplinary research.

4. Research analysis

Discussing digital cultural heritage in practice

In this chapter, I will discuss and analyse the scope of different ideas and opinions about the possibilities and obstacles of digital cultural heritage within the ethnographic museum. As described in the previous chapters, I obtained this information during the research period at the *National Museum of World Cultures* in The Netherlands. The data-set I created is mainly based upon the interviews in which I discussed the considerations about this topic with curators, exhibition makers and employees at the collections department of *Museum Volkenkunde* in Leiden and the *Tropenmuseum* in Amsterdam. During these semi-structured interviews my respondents and I discussed the possibilities of digital cultural heritage regarding three practical stages within the ethnographic museum, namely in the first place defining the digital, then collecting it and finally presenting it either online or in a physical exhibition. By doing so, I could compare and analyse the different insights of my respondents in the end, based on these three stages. Besides these three stages, I used two case studies as keys to open the discussion on digital objects within the museum. In the next two paragraphs, I will discuss and analyse my research data in relation to the examples of semi- and born digital objects that I used as my case studies.

4.1 Semi-digital objects

The main semi-digital object that I used as a case study during my research was the Japanese robot, named *Pepper*.¹⁰ This robot is bought by the *National Museum of World Cultures* to become part of the *COOL JAPAN* exhibition in which the worldwide fascination for Japan is portrayed. Japanese robotics can be seen as an important part of Japanese culture, both in reality as in comics, films and games (Museum Volkenkunde 2017). Therefore, it was essential for the museum to include an actual robot like *Pepper* in their exhibition in order to tell the story about this aspect of Japanese cultural heritage in an accessible and interactive way: he can see, hear, talk and move and by doing so interact with the museum visitor. In that way, *Pepper* is not only a physical object with cultural meaning, but is also used as a technological tool which is programmed by the museum. Especially this combination of materiality, cultural meaning and digitality, made *Pepper* into a useful case study for my research. By using this well-known object as an example in my interviews, I was able to trigger my respondents to think about digital objects in a new way and immediately discuss their first thoughts and ideas.

¹⁰ See *Appendix: case studies*.

One of the things that the majority agreed on, was the idea that *Pepper* should be seen as two separate objects, namely a material and an immaterial object, which are both cultural heritage in a different way. To explain this, I will again refer to the comparison between digitality and music, as described in my theoretical framework.¹¹ Just like a musical instrument, *Pepper* can be seen as an instrument which can interact with people in a certain way, depending on the digital input it receives from the programmer, whose role can be compared to a music composer that determines the type of music that will be played on a musical instrument. Therefore, the ethnographic museum should not only look at the physical form and cultural context of *Pepper*, as it usually does with its material objects, but also analyse the digital input as a relevant cultural object. On the long term, this data will provide us with a lot of valuable cultural information about our views on robotics and how we think that they should act or move. It then might be very interesting to analyse whether the input depends on the cultural background of the programmers or not.

Besides *Pepper's* input, it is also very interesting to look at its output, meaning the interactions that occur between people, both visitors and museum professionals, and robots. As one of my respondents describes, *'Some people fear Pepper, some people think Pepper is unbelievably cute and some of them are annoyed by him. Pepper evokes emotions and that's exactly why he is developed. Those interactions are probably even more interesting than the robot itself'*. This is of course a very specific example of a semi-digital object, and I therefore have to stress that not all of its described characteristics, such as the relatively high level of interactivity, would apply to every other form of semi-digitality. Nevertheless, during my research, it has proven itself to be a very useful example, particularly within the ethnographic museum. By using *Pepper* as a case study, I was able to bridge the gap between materiality and digitality, which is still an uncommon combination within a museum that is still prominently based upon its material collection. Where some of my respondents initially only imagined the digital in relation to digitization or digital media as technological tools within exhibitions, I was able to broaden their view in such a way that the digital aspects of *Pepper* could be understood as cultural heritage as well as its physical form. This was not the case with all of my respondents. Especially the younger generations were already quite familiar with this way of thinking or immediately came up with different examples of semi-digital objects, which they reckoned to be just as worthy to be part of the museum as *Pepper* is.

¹¹ See 2.3 *Heritage and the ethnographic museum*.

So, besides *Pepper*, I discussed a couple of other potential semi-digital objects, in order to collect more information about my respondents' views on these sorts of objects. One of these new objects that came up was the mobile phone as a cultural object. Some of my respondents could not immediately see this as an object that should become part of the ethnographic museum's collection, because according to them, those objects belonged in a museum about computers, design or technology. So, unlike *Pepper's* case, the mobile phone's physical form did not possess enough cultural meaning to be considered a worthy ethnographic object. Nevertheless, when I continued asking about the way that a mobile phone could influence people's everyday lives in different ways, some of them started rethinking how different a mobile phone actually was from the utensils and tableware from all over the world that were currently part of the collection: *'A mobile phone is off course, just like a pan or plate, indispensable for our everyday lives, so I guess that those things really belong to the idea of being human nowadays.'*

This redirects me to the earlier mentioned question: where do we draw the line between the sorts of cultural heritage which are deemed worthy of collecting and showing in a museum and which are not?¹² By looking at this question again in this phase of my research, it became clear to me that, according to the majority of my respondents, not the physical object necessarily needs to be something special or ethnographically meaningful in terms of authenticity or unicity, but the underlying cultural story it will be able to tell about a certain society or community. In most cases the objects are only used as the dots that are connected by the story and context of a certain culture. This does not mean that the objects are not important, on the contrary, as one of my respondents mentioned: *'especially within a globalised world with mainly mass produced products, the object itself has become the least interesting part of the story. But they still are the keys which we use in order to tell those stories'*.

4.2 Born digital objects

So, what does the ethnographic museum do when their objects, or so-called keys to tell cultural stories, only exist in a digital form? I discussed this question with my respondents using video games and their online communities as the main food for thought. I thereby used a Photoshop file from the developers of the Japanese role-playing game (RPG) called *Final Fantasy XV*, which includes an original digital sketch of one of the enemy creatures in the game, as my main case study. This born digital object turned out to be a useful example of a culturally relevant digital object that might even answer to the current requirements to become part of the official museum's collection.¹³ But before I delve further

¹² See 2.3 *Heritage and the ethnographic museum*.

¹³ See 1.2 *Research material*

into this particular case study, I will analyse the general idea of born digital objects, such as video games, and their online communities as an example of digital culture.

For some of my respondents, this idea that born digital objects could become part of the ethnographic museum, was something they have never thought about before. However, this did not mean that they were not interested in the matter. Some of them simply could not imagine how this, especially from a more practical perspective, could be realised within the museum. They spoke of obstacles such as copyrights, property, technological infrastructure, unicity, authenticity and again the selection criteria that would need to change in order to include these objects in the collection. Besides, some of them, even though they agreed that the digital could be seen as an important aspect of contemporary culture, did not believe in the priority of this topic compared to other themes that are currently under-represented or understaffed. According to them, it would still take a while before born digital objects will be considered to be a common part of the ethnographic museum.

On the other hand, there were a couple of, mostly younger, respondents who did not think that the introduction of more digital objects, such as games, would ask that much time or that many adaptations within the current museum practice. As one of these respondents said: *'the fact that an objects is digital is only a circumstance, but apart from that it is just as much an object as any other part of the collection'*. Another respondent even compared the digital with materials such as wood, metal or textile, which are basically used to express and visualise cultural practices just as much as the digital does. Therefore, they deemed it to be illogical to ignore the digital aspects of culture, which would result in a lot of blank spots in the way that the ethnographic museum would represent the cultural world as it is today.

This is especially the case when it comes to the topic of video games. Wayne Modest (2015), the head of the RCMC, puts this in perspective by looking into the museums relationship with the study of play in general. He compares video games to other sorts of games that are part of ethnographic collections: *'Ask any ethnographic museum about the concept of play within their collections and they will tell you that they have significant holdings of games from across the world, from the Mayan ballgame to games from different parts of Africa, as well as Asia and the Pacific. Ask any of these museums how many digital games they have in their collections and many of them would say none.'* (Modest 2015: 2). It is interesting that since gaming has become digital, the idea of games as a focus of study for ethnographic museums have diminished. Nevertheless, in the last couple of years a lot has changed within the field of digital and media related anthropology. An increasing number of universities and research institutions from all around the world is developing programmes and research projects on the digital

and its communities, such as Second Life, World of Warcraft and the effects of social media in general (Boellstroff 2010 and Golub 2014). In this way, more people within the field of anthropology and ethnography become aware of the relevance and importance of the digital in everyday life.

During my research, some of my younger respondents already showed their awareness of this relevance by bringing up some interesting examples. According to them, the reason why the digital is not a full-grown collection field yet, is because of the ignorance of the older generations. One of my respondents explained that this is not immediately their fault, but they are just not familiar with the real-life consequences of video games: *'if you provide them [the older generations] with examples, such as the illegal industry of in-game items, that forces Chinese boys to play World of Warcraft to earn these items and sell them for real money, like in a sweatshop situation. If you can show the real-life consequences, the relevance of digital culture will eventually sink in.'* In other words, the more of these examples we can bring to their attention, the easier it will get to introduce digitality as an official collection field within the ethnographic museum.

Therefore, I will delve further into the earlier mentioned case study of a born digital object: the Photoshop document of *Final Fantasy XV*.¹⁴ This object, which is a digital sketch of one of the enemy creatures in the game, is currently presented in the same temporary exhibition as *Pepper*, named *COOL JAPAN* in *Museum Volkenkunde*.¹⁵ Although, this object is shown in a printed form within the exhibition, it is originally a born digital object, which is directly given to the museum by the artistic director of the game. Therefore, arguments regarding the absence of authenticity within born digital object, are not relevant, because in this case the object is unique, in such a way that it is coming from the main source, the artist himself, and is not produced or shared online on a massive scale, which would indeed harm its unicity and authenticity. The fact that it is even sent to the museum in its original form, namely, a Photoshop document, which makes it even possible to alter the creature's appearance or look into the different layers out of which the final sketch is built up, provides this object with a new level of materiality. As one of my respondents said: *'this is a sign of unbelievable trust. The museum received these sketches in their original digital form. We have printed them to put them in a frame, which turned them into something tangible, but they have always been digital.'*

Besides these more practical aspects of the object, it also holds a lot of contextual and cultural meaning. It is an excellent portrayal of the Japanese tradition of graphical illustration and age-old

¹⁴ See *Appendix: case studies*.

¹⁵ See *4.1 Semi-digital objects*.

craftsmanship in a new, digital form: *'this is not any different from the prints which are part of the museum's collection, the information it contains says a lot about contemporary Japan; its export products, the main objects Japan is known for on an international level and the Japanese views on what monsters would look like'*. By looking at the similarities, such as cultural relevance, context and meaning within a particular society, instead of the differences between material museum objects and born digital objects, this Photoshop document might have the potential of becoming the first piece of digital cultural heritage to earn the official title of object within the collection of the National Museum of World Cultures.

In this way, the museum might want to approach these *Final Fantasy* sketches like Lehmann (2012) does in her analysis of the materiality of digital objects, using the *Utah Teapot*¹⁶. By looking into the different layers within the Photoshop document, we are able to analyse the decisions that are made during the creation of this particular game character, which can be traced back to the context of classical Japanese art and the similarities between traditional visualisation of monsters and the appearance of these in-game creatures. This is in line with Lehmann's idea about the material aspects of making a digital objects: *'In the beginning however, Martin Newell [the developer of the Utah Teapot] had to draw the teapot on paper. He then plotted a number of dots to describe the different parts of the pot. So before there was code, there was direct engagement with analogue materials.'* (Lehmann 2012: 178). In other words, the materiality of a digital objects, such as the *Final Fantasy* document, will always be strongly connected to the material objects and cultural background that inspired its construction.

By pointing out this interaction between analogue and digital culture, I again want to highlight that the digital cannot exist apart from the non-digital and vice versa. Therefore, digital objects should always be analysed in relation to human interactivity. In this way, we might even speak of a digital form of authenticity, which will always be variable, depending on the way people are able to interact with or change it. This does not mean that it has no value in terms of heritage. As one of my respondents describes: *'It all depends on the question. What do you want to know? What is the knowledge you want to collect in terms of content? Take for example certain caricatures or pictures of injustice which people use online and change by adding their own texts. If you want to analyse these online expressions and collect them as examples of how people express themselves within certain conflict, then it does not really matter whether you collect it in a material or digital form.'*

¹⁶ See 2.1 Digitality

4.3 Mindset: the key to digitality

Now that I have taken a closer look at two specific forms of digital cultural heritage, I will further analyse my findings and try to create an overview of the most important issues concerning the future of digital objects within the ethnographic museum, as described by my respondents. In this process, I will follow the earlier described interview structure of defining, collecting and presenting the digital.¹⁷ By doing so, I am able to analyse the different opinions and views towards this topic from multiple perspectives, which provides me with an overview of the central considerations about the future of digital cultural heritage in the ethnographic museum.

One of my main goals at the beginning of my research was to define the meaning of digitality within the museum from the perspective of my respondents. This meaning turned out to depend mostly on the field or department of every particular respondent. For example, the people at the collections department saw the digital primarily as a tool to digitize the collection, while exhibition makers were more concerned about the way digital media could be equipped within their exhibitions in order to tell the story of the material objects in a more interactive way. Therefore, it sometimes took me a while before my respondents understood what I meant by the terms digital objects and digital cultural heritage. On this matter, my two case studies have proven themselves to be very useful as existing examples of semi- and born digital objects in order to give my respondents something to work with during the interviews. This helped them to think about the relatively vague topic of digitality in a new way.

A lot of them thereby mentioned that it would take a different mindset within the museum to introduce these objects as digital form of heritage that would be parts of the official museum's collections.¹⁸ But this change of mind was not by all of them considered to be something impossible. They compared it with the introduction of photography into the ethnographic museum, which also encountered a lot of criticism in its early ages. Back then, it was considered to be impossible that these artificial images would become cultural objects on their own, rather than only tools of documentation. With this comparison in mind, one of my respondents described that transitions such as these are a normal practice within an ethnographic museum, which has the most variable topic in the world: people and their cultural behaviour. So, it is only logical that the digital, which plays a huge role in people's daily lives all around the world, should become part of this particular museum. Just like photography once did.

¹⁷ See 3.3 *Creating a data set*.

¹⁸ See 1.2 *Research material*.

With this idea in mind, it should be necessary to find new ways to store and preserve cultural digital data, like *Pepper's* software, video games or online social media content, in such a way that within hundred years, we will still be able to use it just like we do today. This might be one of the most challenging parts of collecting digital objects in the museum, but it is definitely not a unsolvable problem. According to some of my respondents, there are already a lot of institutions and organisations who are in the possession of the technological means to fulfil this job. So, the actual question might be, with whom the ethnographic museum should work together on this topic. I will not be able to answer this question based on my research findings, but in agreement with some of my respondents, I would recommend cooperating with those institutions and organisations, rather than building a new, complex and extra expensive digital collection and preservation system that can only be used within the walls of one particular museum. This would also mean that the curators, exhibition makers and employees at the collections department of the ethnographic museum, should rethink their collection criteria. Even though a lot of the current criteria might even apply to digital objects, there are probably some obstacles, especially on the topics of unicity, authenticity and property, that should be adjusted to the idea of digital cultural heritage within the collections.

The interesting thing over here, is that multiple forms of digital cultural heritage are already on display in the current temporary exhibition of *Museum Volkenkunde, COOL JAPAN*. Not only are both the objects that I used as my case studies, *Pepper* and the *Final Fantasy* sketch, part of this exhibition, it also uses a lot of different popular born digital content such as video games, cartoons and music videos in its presentation. Even though these objects are currently only considered to be props or parts of documentation, they add significant value to the exhibition on the same level as the museum objects that are considered to be part of the official collection. For example, in one of the rooms, the visitor can look at footage of multiple different Japanese horror games. Within this setting, it tells the story of the understanding of Japanese horror from a cultural perspective, just as much as the other physical objects that are shown in the same room. Nevertheless, it is hard to compare digital objects such as these to physical objects in terms of unicity and authenticity, but this does not mean that museums should not think about new ways of approaching these relatively old-fashioned terms in their collections and representations of contemporary culture, both on- and offline.

Looking back at my two case studies of digital objects, which are of course very different, there are already some recognisable similarities in their level of unicity and authenticity. For example, both *Pepper* and the *Final Fantasy* document are to some extent mass produced objects; there are millions of *Peppers* all around the world and if you just google the words *Mesmerize* and *Final Fantasy*, you will

easily find a similar picture as the museum has on display in their exhibition. Nevertheless, both of these objects are unique and authentic in their own way. By looking at their cultural background and digital content, such as *Peppers* input or the different layers of the Photoshop document of *Final Fantasy*, it is important to point out that their value in terms of heritage is mainly an interactive one. In this way, their interactivity determines their level of unicity and authenticity, meaning that they deserve just as much to be part of the museum's collections as a musical instrument does. Unfortunately, the unicity and authenticity of these objects will probably not be discussed until the museum decided to create a full-fledged collections policy on digitality.

In order to handle dilemmas such as these, I brought up the idea of introducing a curator digitality as a possible solution. By and large, this resulted two different responses. At one side, there were people who thought that this would indeed be a positive development, mainly because of the fact that there would be someone who would take on the pioneering role on this matter, actively change the course of the museum towards the digital and could collaborate with the other regional curators on the creation of new exhibitions and events, just like it is currently done within the field of popular culture and fashion. On the other hand, there were people who, for multiple different reasons, did not believe that a curator digitality would be such a good idea. Some of them compared this with the idea of adding a curator on globalisation to the museum. According to them, this did not turn out to be very useful, because the theme was just too broad to be handled by only one person, which would also be the case with a worldwide theme such as digitality. Therefore, they argued that it would be a better idea to, from now on, include digitality as a new focus in the fields of the already existing curators. Of course, this transition will take a little while, but in the long run, it might be more efficient than installing only one expert on the matter. Because in the end, digitality is a worldwide phenomenon that every curator of the ethnographic museum has to include in their representation of culture.

5. Conclusion

The future of digital cultural heritage

5.1 Reviewing my research approach

Now that I have finished my analysis, I am able to look back upon the past few months of research and reflect upon the methodology I initially chose and the decisions and changes I made along the way. I will discuss the aspects of my research approach which influenced the final outcome of this thesis the most and will thereby include suggestions for future research on this topic. But first of all, I need to mention that this research would not have been possible if I would not have worked alongside my key informant, Liza Swaving, who enabled me to go behind the scenes of the *National Museum of World Cultures* to analyse my research material from the inside out. She also introduced me to some of the central museum practices, such as the collection requirements and curatorial meetings. Thanks to this unique research position I could easily contact my respondents in a relatively informal way, because during my research I became part of the *RCMC*.

It was only until I started having my interviews, that I noticed some difficulties in discussing the idea of digital cultural heritage. This had a lot to do with the multidisciplinary character of my respondents, because it seemed like everyone had a slightly different idea of what I meant. For example, some of the curators initially thought that I was researching digitized objects, instead of digital ones, which resulted in interviews that were mainly focussed on discussing the differences between an originally digital object and a material objects that is later digitized in order to preserve it or return it to its original owners in a digital form. Therefore, after a couple of these interviews, I intensified my search for useful case studies, which I could use to discuss my research topic in a less abstract way. Eventually, I found both a semi- and a born digital object to use as my case studies, the robot *Pepper* and the *Final Fantasy* Photoshop document. I wanted to include this diversity of digital objects in order to broaden the scope of my topic in such a way that I was able to cover as much space as I could during my interviews. Therefore, the interviews that took place in the final months of my research provided me with more useful information, because at that point I was able to bring more ideas to the table and ask more direct questions about the specific things I wanted to know.

In other words, during my ethnographic fieldwork I started to feel more comfortable as a participant among my research material. I became familiar with the museum practices and slowly started to tend more and more towards a more speculative approach about the future of digital objects within this particular field. This was not necessarily a bad thing, because as long as I based my speculations on the

ideas of my respondents I would still be able to create a relatively objective overview on the matter. But the longer I worked on analysing my research data, the more I got absorbed in it and was no longer able to look at it from a relatively neutral perspective. Therefore, on the advice of my supervisor, I decided to take a break after the actual fieldwork period was over. This turned out to be a good discussion, because after the break, I could start analysing my data from a more independent perspective.

For future research on digital cultural heritage within ethnographic museums, I would advise to collect a more diverse set of case studies at the beginning of the research. Within my own research, I used two digital objects, which were part of the same exhibition, within the same ethnographic museum and originated from the same country. This was not really a problem, because I mainly used them as examples for my respondents to talk about their ideas on digital objects in general. But if I would have put more effort in finding a broader and multicultural collection of digital cultural objects to work with, I would probably be able to present a more diverse set of considerations towards the possible addition of these object to the museum's collection. In that case, I could have focussed more on an in-depth analysis of online communities and the cultural effects of social media as parts of digital objects.

5.2 Answering my research questions

As described in the introduction of this thesis, I have used three sub-questions in addition to my main research question, through which I explored the different considerations towards digitality within the museum even further. In this paragraph, I will give a detailed explanation of the answers to these questions, followed by the main conclusion of my research, namely the answer to the central research question: *What are the considerations of ethnographic museums on adding digital cultural objects to their collections?*

Sub-question 1: *How is digital cultural heritage currently represented in the ethnographic museum?*

During my research, this question helped me to create a starting point from which I was able to discuss the different considerations on the topic of digital cultural heritage in the ethnographic museum. It turned out that there are three different starting points when it comes to the current representation of the digital, namely from the curator's, the exhibition maker's and the collections department's point of view. In order to formulate a proper answer on this sub-question, it is therefore necessary to describe the current representation of digital cultural heritage from the perspective of each of these three respondent groups. I thereby need to mention that there are of course different opinions and

ideas within every group as well, but for the sake of formulating a general answer to this question, I will use the most common examples of digital cultural heritage in the museum.

Starting with the curator's perspective, I found out that the word digitality, as one of the research themes within the RCMC, has more of a conceptual meaning within the curatorial department. There is no policy on collecting digital material yet, therefore most of the curators I have spoken to could not provide me with any examples of digital cultural heritage, except from digitized material heritage. Nevertheless, it was interesting to hear how the term digitality was represented in different ways in their vision on what the ethnographic museum actually stands for: a museum about people. Thereby, their conceptualisation varied from international communication tools and interactive forms of entertainment to an understanding of the digital as a new way to express cultural meaning, *'just like wood, metal or textile'*, and the idea that *'the digital can be seen as a second world, in which culture and everything that is tangible in the real world exists as well'*. It is interesting to see that most of these understandings of digitality make use of existing frames and museum practices in order to understand the digital, either as a new raw material or as a new regional collection field, but instead of Africa or Oceania curators will look at a digital area. So, in short, this means that from the curator's perspective, even though they are searching for ways to deal with the digital in a more practical way, digital cultural heritage is currently only represented in a conceptual form, which can probably be used in formulating a future policy on digitality within the collections.

This brings me to the perspective of the collections department on digital cultural heritage. Like the curators, they confirmed that there currently are no digital objects in the official collections. However, the employees of the collections department approach this topic in a more practical and technological way than the curators do. This might be caused by their main focus on preservation and digitalisation of the material objects that are currently part of the collection. The only digital objects that can currently be found in the museum are digital exhibition tools, such as educational screens or games, or digital material that is used as documentation and objects that are no part of the collection but instead are only used as props in certain exhibitions. Both the objects that I used as case studies in my research were part of this last category. In the long run, these objects might 'earn' their place within the official collection, but in some cases this would require a couple of changes in the current collection criteria.

The last group's view on digital objects, that of the exhibition makers, seem to be depending mostly on the future policies and collection criteria of the other two groups, while they also experience a relatively large amount of freedom in their approach towards digital objects, thanks to the distinction

between props and official objects. As long as this distinction will be maintained, exhibition makers will be free to experiment with the presentation of digital cultural objects, such as Pepper. This experimenting might eventually lead to new insights on the cultural meaning of these objects within the museum, which can provide both the curators and the collections department with information that might be useful in their process of changing their policies and collection criteria regarding the inclusion of digital cultural heritage in the museum.

Sub-question 2: *How should digital cultural heritage be represented within the ethnographic museum according to the curators, exhibition makers and employees of the collections department of the ethnographic museum?*

At the beginning of my research, I was not sure whether the majority of my respondents would think that digital cultural heritage, should become part of their work. Although, some of them found it hard to imagine the digital as a potential collection field and needed some help in conceptualising this idea during the interviews; *'By asking those questions, you make me think about stuff which I have never thought about before. You have really opened my eyes to the idea of digitality as a cultural field'*, all of them eventually agreed on the fact that digitality should indeed be part of the ethnographic museum. This common view was mostly based on the idea that most digital objects should not be that different from the material objects which are currently part of the museum's collections: *'I think that they [digital objects] belong in the museum just as much as non-digital ones. If they answer to the policy and requirements of our collections, the distinction between digital and non-digital does not matter. If we can present it in the museum or online and we are able to store it in a proper way, then I would say: just collect it!'*

Although my respondents agreed on the idea that including digital cultural heritage in the museum would be a positive development, they did not always agree on the way this should be done. As one of my respondents points out: *'The question is not whether we should collect it [digital objects] or not, the question is: how should we do it? And what should be collected exactly?'* I will not be able to answer these questions right away, but by looking at the different responses of the museum professionals I interviewed, I will give an overview of the most discussed ideas on this topic.

Starting with the idea that museum objects in general are currently presented in exhibitions in order to tell a certain cultural story. In the case of digital objects, this would be no different from the material objects that the museum currently uses to explain certain social or cultural phenomena. According to one of my respondents, *'This should not be a technical story, but a story about human experiences that*

are connected to digitality. So yes, I think that we, as National Museum of World Cultures, should tell the human aspect of the story.' The level of interactivity, the cultural background and the context of these digital objects would provide the museum with new opportunities of representing contemporary societies in a more diverse way: *'I think this [context] is important in the case of many different objects. It should not be only a lifeless thing, but we should bring the actual people into the story. The same would be the case if I look at a vase or statue, it can be very beautiful, but when you add a personal story, it would mean a lot more to me.'* In other words, it seems like, in terms of content, the representation of digital cultural heritage should not be that much of a problem.

Nevertheless, most of my respondents also admitted that it would still take a while before digital culture would get much attention within the museum practices, such as collecting and exhibition making. This would mainly be caused by the fact that the digital would receive less priority compared to other themes that are currently under-represented or understaffed. Therefore, some of my respondents argued that it would not be wise to start collecting digital material right away, before there is any policy on the matter: *'This would be such a big and technically difficult project. It might sound nice and modern, but I have worked with digital collections and I know how much work it would be to build such a digital depot.'* In line with this idea, some of my respondents argued that it might be smarter to start curating digital objects without adding them to your own collections: *'In that way you would be able to add cultural value and context, without investing too much money.'*

By analysing these different ideas about the future of digital objects in the museum, it also stood out that most of my respondents had more questions than answers concerning the possible ways in which digitality should be represented. But this did not mean that they were not eager to start experimenting: *'It fascinates me to work together on this topic and experiment in order to later look back and ask ourselves: is this what we want?'*

Sub-question 3: *What are the possible changes that must be made within the museum in order to add digital cultural objects to the collections?*

As I already briefly mentioned by answering the first two sub-questions of my research, the biggest and probably the most effective change that needs to happen within the ethnographic museum in order to make an increase in digital objects within the collection possible, is a significant change in the mindset of museum employees who are involved in the collection and presentation of museum objects. According to some of my respondents, this mindset is already slowly changing, both by the appointment of new younger staff members, who might shed a different light on the relationship

between digitality and material culture from their own experience with the digital, but also by organising event, such as the *Virtual Horizons, Digital Selves* conference (2016), to trigger people to think about the digital cultural heritage in a new way. But the question then is, will this be enough? People need to understand the significance and cultural relevance of these digital objects, especially by hearing examples which they can connect to certain aspects of their personal expertise. In order to do so, the museum might think about appointing a pioneer, either in the form of a curator digitality or another type of museum professional, who is able to bridge the conceptual gap between material and digital culture by cooperating with the current museum staff and creating a policy on the collection of digital objects. Only then will digital culture eventually become a full-fledged collection field within ethnographic museum practices.

Apart from this change of mind, some practical changes would also be necessary, such as the creation of a solid policy concerning the selection of digital objects or the implementation of a documentation system to store the digital parts of these objects, such as Pepper's software or born digital objects like games or social media content. In line with the ideas of some of my respondents on this last topic, the new documentation system, I would suggest to cooperate with organisations or institutions which already have experience with storing vast amounts of interactive digital data. This might not only be more efficient, but also less complicated when it comes to staying up to date with the newest hard- and software of certain digital platforms. By doing so, the museum might be able to preserve the data that is now encoded into objects like *Pepper* and still be able to use and analyse it after hundreds of years.

These practical and technological changes might sound somewhat problematic to the people who already work in the museum for several years now, but according to some of my respondents, most of the digital objects that the museum might want to collect in the future do not even require that many changes, because they might already answer to the current requirements or selection criteria of the museum. This redirects me to the necessary change of mind that needs to take place, because for example in the case of the Photoshop document of *Final Fantasy XV*, people just assume that, because of its born digital form or mass media character, it might now answer to the current collection criteria. But when you actually take a closer look at those criteria, you might find out that objects such as these are already 'worthy' to become part of the official collection. So actually, the main thing that really needs to change is the mindset of the museum employees in order to really start working on new ways of collecting and presenting digital cultural objects.

Main question: *What are the considerations of ethnographic museums on adding digital cultural objects to their collections?*

Now that I have answered the sub-questions of my research, I will combine all this information and formulate an answer to my main question: *What are the considerations of ethnographic museums on adding digital cultural objects to their collections?* I thereby need to stress, that I only mention the most discussed considerations in my answer, because it would be impossible to include every single opinion or idea from my respondents and every aspect of my own experiences during my field work. In order to structure my answer in such a way that it leads to a coherent story, I will again split up my findings into three topics, namely defining, collecting and presenting the digital, like I did in both my interviews and research analysis.

At the beginning of my research it was hard to explain the exact topic of my research to my respondents at the museum. This was mainly caused by the fact that digitality within the museum can be defined in very different ways, varying from technological communication and information tools to the digitization of cultural objects. Within this field, the idea of digital objects, with their own value in terms of cultural heritage, was relatively new to most of my respondents. This immediately brought me to the starting point of my research: defining the digital in collaboration with the museum itself. In this process, a lot of interesting considerations were discussed, for example how the digital is related to different cultures, societies and communities, both on- and offline, and what an ethnographic approach of digitality could add to the way that the ethnographic museum currently represents people in their everyday life.

In order to discuss these ideas in a more practical way, I used two museum objects, a semi-digital and a born digital one, as my case studies. This enabled me to ask specific questions about why these objects should or should not be cultural heritage and whether they should deserve a place in the official museum's collections. In general, most of my respondents were positive about the idea that these types of digital objects indeed possessed enough cultural value to be part of the museum and its exhibitions, but in order to become part of the official collection, they should answer to the current collection criteria. In some cases, this would not be a problem. As a lot of my respondents mentioned, if the main focus is on the cultural content, it does not matter whether the object itself has a digital or a physical form. But in terms of unicity and authenticity, there might be some obstacles. Especially, when it concerns digital objects, such as games or memes, that are either mass produced or can be found in countless different versions online. This on its own, might be an interesting ethnographic

research topic for a museum such as the *National Museum of World Cultures*, but before this can become part of the museum practices, they should rethink their collection policy.

This brings me to the considerations towards the actual process of collecting digital cultural heritage in the museum. As I just mentioned, one of the main obstacles on this topic might be the current collection criteria, but the museum also needs to think about a new way of storing the digital data that comes with the collection of digital objects. For example, when they might want to collect certain games or specific types of interactive software, they need to make sure that there will be enough digital storage space. They also need to find ways to sustain the quality of the data and keep it available regardless of the introduction of new technologies. In order to do so, some of my respondents suggested to cooperate with other museums or institutes who already have the infrastructure to make this possible. Otherwise they would invest a lot of money in developing something new, while the necessary technology might already be at hand.

But what sorts of digital culture should the ethnographic museum collect? This is a question which is not only difficult to answer in the case of digital culture, but also for cultural objects in general. The museum no longer wants to be only a showcase of rarities from all around the world, but it wants to provide its visitors with a proper representation of contemporary cultures and people. This representation should include the cultural background and context of each object in the story it tells about a certain ethnographic topic. From this perspective, digital objects would not differ that much from the material objects that are currently shown in the museum. My respondents brought up comparisons to already existing aspects of the collections, such as fashion, photography and musical instruments. Especially this last one turned out to be very relevant in relation to digital objects, because music and digitality both have a similar level of materiality. Therefore, this comparison might serve as a useful example to introduce museum professionals to the idea of collecting digital objects, just like they already collect musical instruments as parts of cultural heritage.

Right now, digital objects only become part of the museum as props in exhibitions, that include certain cultural aspects which happen to be (partly) digital, such as the popular Japanese culture represented in *COOL JAPAN*, but apart from these exhibitions, curators have no incentive to collect cultural digital objects to become part of the collection only. In order to change this, the museum needs to find ways in which the relevance of digital cultural heritage for ethnographic museums is made clear to their employees. Within my own research, I have created an overview of the current practices, ideas and opinions regarding digital objects, but in the process of doing so, I already noticed a transition in the way my respondents thought about this topic. By asking them about the possibilities and cultural value

of these objects, I forced them to think about the digital in a new way. By pointing this out, I argue that the more museum professionals start discussing and thinking about the digital as a potential collection field, it might eventually turn into the change of mind that is necessary to really make the addition of cultural digital heritage to the ethnographic museum a normality.

In order to eventually accomplish this more digital-friendly mindset and collection approach within the museum, they might need more examples, such as the distinction between semi- and born digital objects that I used in this research, and the possible addition of a curator or specialist on digital cultural heritage who take on the role of pioneer within this new field. In this way, the museum will be able to experiment and develop a solid collection policy on digital objects. In the long run, this will most likely result in a situation in which curators, exhibition makers and employees of the collection department of the museum will see digital culture as a usual aspect of the collection practices. In this situation, the specialist on digital culture might no longer be necessary, because the digital as a collection topic will be integrated in the fields of the curators that were already there. This will also mean that the distinction between semi- and born digital objects, which I used in order to bridge the gap between material and digital culture in the minds of my respondents, will most likely not be that important anymore. Because, the gap between materiality and digitality will already be bridged by the recognition of materiality within all sorts of digital objects.

So, at last, there might be a bright future ahead of digital cultural heritage within the ethnographic museum. But, based on the discussed considerations towards this relatively new field in relation to the current museum practices, I must state that will probably take a while before the digital will be a full-fledged collection topic. Until then, the museum should keep an eye out for potential digital objects during the construction of their future exhibitions. Because, according to my respondents, when it comes to the introduction of new approaches or fields within the museum, only practice makes perfect.

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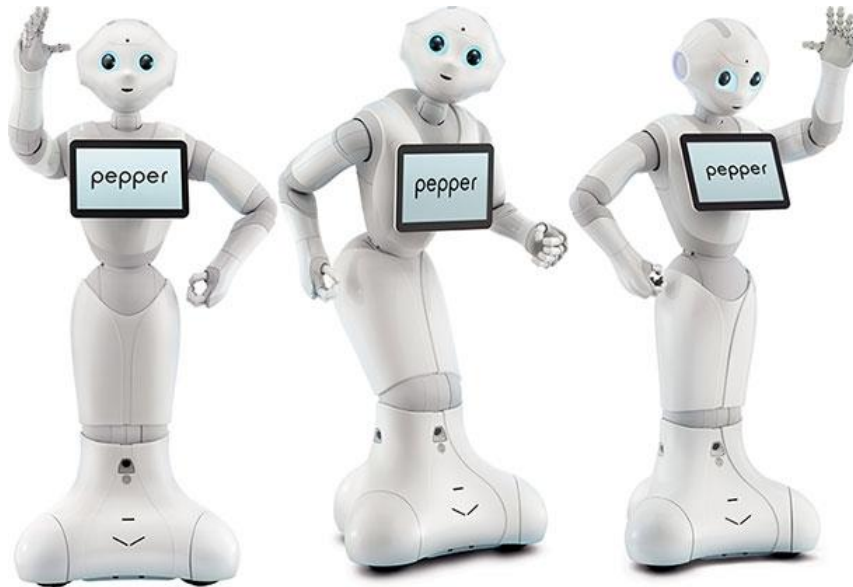
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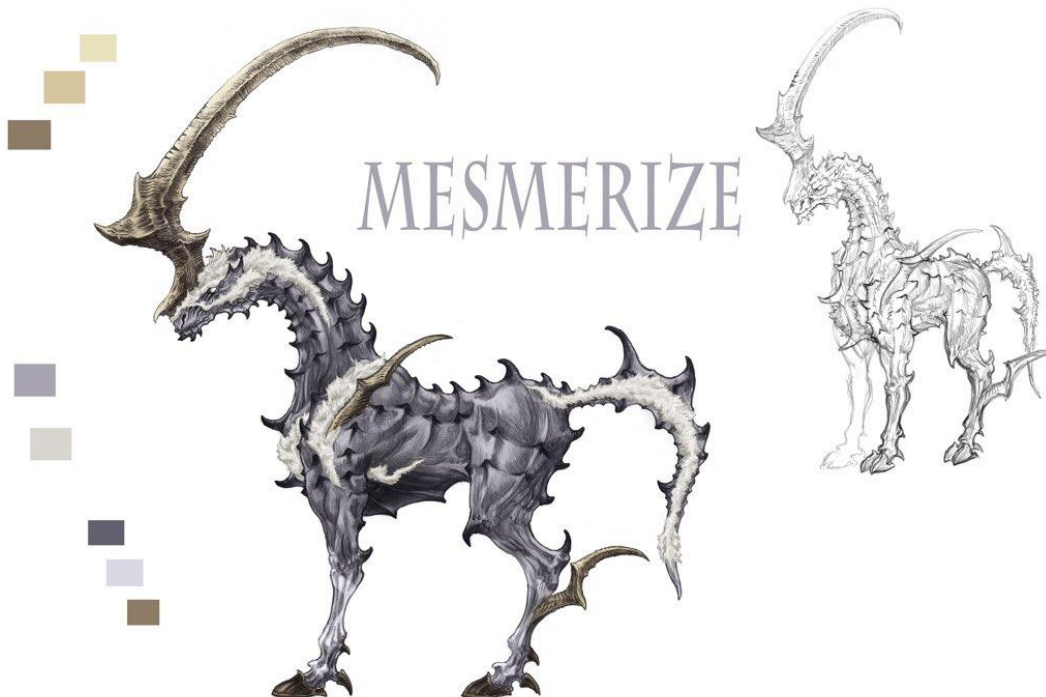
Appendix

A. Case studies

1. Semi-digital: Pepper the Japanese robot.¹⁹



2. Born digital: digital sketches of Mesmerize/Mesmenir, one of the enemy creatures of the Japanese video-game *Final Fantasy XV*.²⁰



¹⁹ Image retrieved on the 10th of august 2017 from www.wired.com.

²⁰ Image retrieved on the 10th of august 2017 from www.finalfantasy.wikia.com.

B. Informed consent form



Universiteit Utrecht

TOESTEMMINGSVERKLARING

Titel onderzoek: *Digitale objecten binnen het etnografisch museum*

Verantwoordelijke onderzoeker: *Lyonne van Gaalen*

In te vullen door de deelnemer

Ik verklaar op een voor mij duidelijke wijze te zijn ingelicht over de aard, methode, doel en de mogelijke risico's van het onderzoek.

Ik weet dat mijn uitspraken verwerkt kunnen worden in het uiteindelijk onderzoeksrapport dat wordt opgeslagen in de database van Universiteit Utrecht.

Ik ben mij ervan bewust dat mijn anonimiteit niet volledig kan worden gegarandeerd, aangezien de groep respondenten binnen dit onderzoek relatief klein is en het via de specialistische kennis die besproken wordt relatief gemakkelijk is om uitspraken te herleiden naar één persoon.

Ik stem geheel vrijwillig in met deelname aan dit onderzoek. Ik behoud me daarbij het recht voor om op elk moment zonder opgave van redenen mijn deelname aan dit onderzoek te beëindigen.

Naam deelnemer:

Datum:

Handtekening deelnemer:

In te vullen door de uitvoerende onderzoeker

Ik heb een toelichting gegeven op het onderzoek. Ik zal resterende vragen over het onderzoek naar vermogen beantwoorden. De deelnemer zal van een eventuele voortijdige beëindiging van deelname aan dit onderzoek geen nadelige gevolgen ondervinden.

Naam onderzoeker:

.....

Datum:

Handtekening onderzoeker: