

# A Critical Examination of Presence Applied to Cultural Heritage

Laia Pujol Tost, Erik Malcolm Champion

CEPAP, Autonomous University of Barcelona; Media Arts, COFA, University of New South Wales  
{Laia.Pujol@uab.cat, e.champion@unsw.edu.au}

## Abstract

*This paper surveys current notions of social and cultural presence as they may help the evaluation of cultural heritage projects. We argue that cultural heritage requires specialized evaluation, as key issues both connect and separate the aims of presence researchers and cultural heritage experts. To support this argument, three case studies of virtual heritage evaluations are summarized, and recommendations made as to how experimental design and evaluation may be improved for future projects.*

**Keywords** Cultural presence, social presence, evaluation, virtual heritage.

## 1. Introduction

Defining cultural presence as it relates to virtual heritage is of fundamental importance to cultural heritage professionals, because the underlying concepts determine the goals, design, evaluation, and level of success of the final project. And on initial examination it may appear that as presence research [16] has typically evaluated the sense of ‘being there’, cultural heritage researchers can adopt the methods of the presence research community.

However, there are arguably several distinctions between the traditional or “technological” definition of presence research per se, and the one used in cultural heritage and museum studies. Firstly, cultural heritage cannot accept a definition of presence as simply “being there”. For “being” and “there” are problematic terms if the life-experiences of the locals are different to ours [4] and if the “there” is not ostensive (that is to say, we cannot understand a local cultural notion of another place just by pointing to it). Culture is understood by ongoing usage rather than by instantaneous depiction. So at best, there is some potential confusion in terms of terminology; but there are also perhaps different goals and needs between the two academic fields.

Secondly, in order for virtual technology to be accepted and spread commercially, we need to not only evaluate presence in specifically conditioned environments, we also need to evaluate the usefulness of virtual environments *in situ*. And for cultural environments that means replicating, reproducing or evoking responses to experiences that are deemed culturally significant. Such an approach immediately

raises an issue in terms of presence research, as a virtual heritage evaluation is thus not of perceived reality, but of perceived *culturally encapsulated* forms of *culturally significant* reality.

For example, Riva et al. [27] suggested that reality is not the only component of experiencing the real-world, and therefore non-real experiences should be included in virtual environments. Further on, Riva et al. defend the premise (on page 307) that cultural presence involves a “cultural framework” and “the possibility of negotiation.” For them this must include recognition that the experience is mediated by digital technology, immersed in a social context, and that it allows for ambiguity.

These claims sound reasonable to the authors, but they create a third problem (at least in terms of virtual heritage environments). For in Riva et al’s paper, cultural presence is not clearly distinguished from social presence, and there is room to reinterpret the simulated and collaborative knowledge according to the spontaneous whims of visitors. Is cultural presence possible in a virtual heritage environment where people can meet and greet each other in it without cultural constraints and where visitors have full freedom to interpret, decide, or reconfigure the virtual heritage environment as they wish?

A fourth problem is the extent to which a definition of cultural presence can be usefully applied across varying depictions of content, genres, interaction metaphors, interfaces, audiences, and hardware / software configurations. For example, a paper by MacIntyre et al [21] explains the divergence between traditional presence research and cultural heritage using mixed reality in real places; however, it is still not clear if a standard definition of cultural presence is applicable to cultural heritage using stand-alone virtual environments.

## 2. Defining Virtual Heritage

What is virtual heritage? Do we consider it to have a clear definition and purpose? It is not well established in many academic papers what virtual heritage is, and therefore how evaluation can determine whether its goals have been met. In a special issue of virtual heritage for presence [1], the term is not defined by any of the papers, user trials are not clearly explained, and what is being measured is assumed to be understood. For example, an article on page 291 [30]