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High tech or high touch? Heritage encounters and the power of presence

Katherine Burlingame ^{a,b}

^aDepartment of Human Geography, Lund University, Lund, Sweden; ^bDepartment of Archaeology, Conservation, and History, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

In this article, I challenge the increasing emphasis on digital technologies to enhance encounters with the past in heritage landscapes. Beginning with a memory from my childhood, I conceptualise presence as *being there* and review recent approaches in heritage studies that highlight the wide range of benefits derived from embodied experiences in heritage places including reinforcing feelings of wellbeing and ontological security. Outlining enduring limitations of high-tech digital heritage tools, particularly the lack of critical perspectives assessing the ethical and methodological challenges of employing them in heritage landscapes, I argue there is a recurring theme of *grasping for presence*. Drawing on fieldwork in four heritage sites associated with the Viking Age in Sweden and Germany, I suggest a renewed focus on ‘high touch’ will encourage more meaningful, multisensory encounters within the fabric of the heritage landscape. As our lives become increasingly high tech, I return to the foundational values and motivations of *being there* in heritage places, concluding that heritage landscapes serve as important spaces of interaction where past, present, and future imaginaries can be negotiated beyond the reach of the digital world.

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Introduction

Scholars have long discussed the ‘digital turn’ (Costopoulos 2016; Petersson 2018) or even the ‘digital leap’ (Gunnarsson 2018) made in archaeology and heritage studies in recent decades. Particularly through the introduction of virtual, augmented, and mixed reality technologies in excavations, museums, and heritage sites, there are increasingly sophisticated, enhanced, and immersive digital techniques employed to enliven the past. Digitalisation has also been more widely emphasised for its essential contribution to knowledge production, as an educational tool in the wider humanities, and as an effective pathway to public dissemination, engagement, and co-creation (Hansson and Svensson 2020). The pressure to follow the trend of digitalisation and digital content creation has therefore led museums and heritage sites alike to explore more interactive technologies to keep up within the competitive realm of heritage experience (ICOM 2021).

With this article, however, I aim to challenge the growing emphasis on digital technologies to enhance encounters with the past in heritage landscapes. While digital tools are increasingly highlighted for their importance in museum settings to break down barriers of static exhibitions and to increase accessibility, recent research in heritage landscapes has challenged whether visitors actually utilise – or benefit from – them (Daugbjerg 2017; Burlingame 2020; Petersson et al. 2020).

CONTACT Katherine Burlingame  katherine.burlingame@iakh.uio.no  Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, PO Box 1008 Blindern, N-0315 Oslo Norway

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Instead, research points to the desire of visitors to disconnect from technology and have more hands-on encounters with the past through a feeling of ‘time travel’ (Holtorf 2017) and other multisensory experiences that evoke a strong feeling of presence (Burlingame 2022).

Following the growing trend of using storytelling to explore ‘more-than-representational’ themes while reflecting the researcher’s own emotional entanglements with their work (Carolan 2008; Cameron 2012; Lorimer and Parr 2014; Pocock 2015; Burlingame 2019), I begin with a memory from my childhood in order to conceptualise presence as *being there*. I then review recent approaches in heritage studies that highlight the wide range of benefits derived from embodied experiences in heritage places including reinforcing feelings of wellbeing and ontological security. ‘High touch’ is therefore presented as a method to evoke the past while fostering feelings of stability and belonging through embodied, multisensory encounters in the contemporary landscape.

Outlining recent high-tech digital heritage approaches, I argue there is a recurring theme of *grasping for presence*, in part due to a lack of critical perspectives on the ethical and methodological challenges of employing digital tools in outdoor heritage spaces. Results from fieldwork in four heritage sites associated with the Viking Age in Germany and Sweden are then presented to reveal how a renewed focus on ‘high touch’ encourages more meaningful, multisensory encounters within the fabric of the heritage landscape. As our lives become increasingly high tech, I return to the foundational values and motivations of *being there* in heritage places, concluding that heritage landscapes serve as important spaces of interaction where past, present, and future imaginaries can be negotiated beyond the reach of the digital world.

A memory of presence

I was 13 years old when I first visited the site of one of the deadliest battles of the American Civil War in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where my three-times great grandfather was injured fighting for the Union Army. Accompanied by my parents and brother on a self-guided tour, I walked through the battlefields with the basic level of engagement a young teenager might have in what are now seemingly well-kept fields. I read the names on the monuments, I climbed through the boulders of Devil’s Den where Confederate sharpshooters took cover killing countless unsuspecting Union soldiers, and I picked daisies in the endless fields not so long ago stained with the blood of men. My interaction with the past was superficial. I knew what had happened, I could see its remnants in the contemporary landscape, but I couldn’t *feel* it.

Recognising this lack of engagement, my ‘history buff’ father drove to another open field with a few cannons placed close to the parking lot. Leaning against one of the cannons and pointing to the battlefield in front of us, he recounted the story of the ill-fated ‘Pickett’s Charge’—named after one of the generals who led the assault (see [Figure 1](#)). On this infamous last day of the Battle of Gettysburg, on 3 July 1863, nearly 13,000 Confederate soldiers were ordered to advance over open fields for nearly a mile (1.5 km) under heavy return fire from the well-positioned Union army. While the Union army lost around 1,500 men, Confederate casualties amounted to over 6,500 (Trudeau 2002). With such a chilling number in mind, I looked out across the battlefield and imagined the chaos, the noise, the fear, and the *death*. After a brief explanation of artillery logistics, my father placed a large stick in my hands and told me it was my rifle, while my brother held the ‘flag’. I pretended to affix my bayonet and was overcome by the gruesome reality of the moments before hand-to-hand combat. Suddenly, a loud call of ‘CHARGE!’ set us off running, trampling the daisies in our path, and shattering any sense of the field’s previous tranquillity.

It was hot and difficult to run holding a cumbersome ‘weapon’, and seconds turned into hours as the battlefield came to life around me. We dodged incoming artillery fire, leapt over men who had fallen before, and protected our heads and shielded our eyes from the shrapnel of explosions all around us. ‘There is no going back’, my father shouted, ‘because deserters would be shot’. Finally, we stopped in the middle of the field, and the modern world slowly came back into focus. I dropped



Figure 1. Contemporary battlefield of Pickett's Charge in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Source: *Wilson44691, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.*

my 'rifle' onto the ground that I now knew had once been littered with the bodies of the dead who never escaped the path we just took – young and old, sons, husbands, *brothers*, and *fathers* like mine beside me. *This isn't a field*, I thought, *this is a grave*. Slowly walking back to the car, while I learned of the failures in leadership and how the Union's victory was a major turning point for the remainder of the war, I wasn't really listening. Though there was no authenticity to our game beyond following the steps of a brutally defeated military assault, my heart was pounding, my legs were aching, and just for a moment, I had a sublime sense of *being there*.¹

Presence as *being there*

With roots in phenomenology, presence has been defined through relational terms, produced through the interaction between bodies and objects in space (Gumbrecht 2004). Linked with discussions of 'thing-power' (Bennett 2010), 'life awake' (Tuan 1986), 'mindfulness' (Harris 2014), and 'atmospheres' (McCormack 2013), a sense of presence emerges through an awareness of the fleeting, affective power of the present moment. Within heritage studies, *presence* has been described as an active force that we seek due to a fascination with memory because, as argued by historian Eelco Runia, 'We *want* to be affected. We go to great lengths, and are willing to spend huge amounts of money, to *have* ourselves affected by the past' (Runia 2006, 309, original emphasis). Heritage scholar Laurajane Smith has also demonstrated that beyond educational or leisurely motivations, visitors go to heritage sites because they want 'to feel, to be emotional' (Smith 2014, 125). The notion that there is something about *being* in a heritage place that evokes a stronger connection has therefore been explored through an extensive body of research, outlining the wide range of benefits derived from physical visits to heritage places including offering restorative qualities and enhanced wellbeing (Packer and Bond 2010; Heaslip et al. 2020; Sofaer et al. 2021), encouraging mindfulness (Picard 2012; Moscardo 2017; Chan 2019; Perry 2019), establishing ontological security (Nolan 2019; Sofaer et al. 2021), and developing emotional and affective connections (Smith 2014; Servidio and Ruffolo 2016; Shea 2018; Burlingame 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many museums and heritage sites turned to digital solutions, including co-creation initiatives, to engage with the public (Burke, Jørgensen, and Arne Jørgensen 2020). However, given the complexity and expense of digital heritage tools, most museums and heritage sites continue to rely on the support of in-person visitors (ICOM 2021). Once sites began to re-open, a study conducted by Sofaer et al. (2021) also revealed the public's sustained desire to visit heritage places in person because they help to reinforce a sense of order, continuity, and ontological security – defined as the 'existential anchorings of reality' (Giddens 1991, 38).

As presence has been described as the 'living on of the past in the here and now' (Runia 2006, 310), heritage places demonstrate continuity between the past and present, allowing visitors to locate themselves in the *longue durée* (Rico 2020). Through heritage sites, visitors actively seek a direct connection with a physical, familiar place because 'the tangibility of the past simultaneously means it is a place of presence, is known and can be revisited' (Sofaer et al. 2021, 1125). *Being there* therefore does not only mean feeling the presence of the past, but also involves being present and engaged within the *more*, the *other*, and the *in-between* spaces of the contemporary heritage landscape. Situating themselves at the nexus between past and present thus allows visitors to reflect on who they are and where they have come from while feeling a sense of stability when looking ahead to an uncertain future. Interactive, embodied heritage experiences therefore help to facilitate unique, dialogic relationships that instil a sense of comfort, belonging, and permanence (Sofaer et al. 2021) out of reach of digital encounters as visitors are entangled in a world that is alive, filled with unprogrammed, vibrant *others* (Bennett 2010).

It is through this immersion in the heritage landscape that I situate the concept of 'high touch', defined as a method to evoke the past through multisensory encounters in the contemporary landscape. While high touch encounters can create a sublime sense of *being there* through a 'period rush' (Daugbjerg 2017, 161) or feeling of 'time travel' (Holtorf 2017) described through my childhood story, high touch is also about snapping the present moment into focus, allowing visitors to explore the affective dimensions of heritage landscapes – often through non-verbal and non-narrative ways. For example, during a re-enactment event at the Dybbøl Battlefield Centre in southern Denmark, four historical cannons were fired for ten minutes at maximum frequency. Visitors described the 'physically felt thumps of the big guns ... and the confusion and lack of orientation brought about by the thick cover of the resulting smoke' (Daugbjerg 2017, 166). While 'museum academics' were sceptical at first, they were just as captivated alongside the visitors when faced with the 'horrible realities [of war] that are hard to communicate conventionally' (Daugbjerg 2017, 166). High touch encounters can therefore also challenge 'the authorised definitions and the existing perceptions held at museums and within other value hierarchies' of how the past should be presented and encountered (Mathiesen Hjemdahl 2002, 106).

In the following section, I begin with an overview of different applications of digital heritage tools both within and outside of heritage landscapes, outlining enduring challenges and limitations that leave them *grasping for presence* and making room for a revival of high-touch heritage encounters.

Grasping for presence in the digital leap

In the digital cultural heritage field, presence has been used to describe the creation of meaningful interactive experiences in virtual environments (Pujol-Tost 2017). Through a *3D telepresence*, immersive environments combine both visual and sound elements with embodied interactions (Gunnarsson 2018) in order to combat traditional representations of the past where museum objects are 'mute' (Samida 2017) or archaeological landscapes are 'dead' (Burlingame 2020). However, as Eelco Runia has argued, 'Most makers of "experience museums" grope in the dark as to the nature of presence' (Runia 2006, 316) because it has an ephemeral quality that is difficult to measure (Zahorik and Jenison 1998; Bille, Bjerregaard, and Flohr Sørensen 2015).

Despite advances in technology, virtual environments have been criticised for lacking user interaction, struggling to tell compelling stories, and an inability to replicate the same level of engagement when visitors are placed within the actual heritage landscape (Gunnarsson 2018). A demo virtual reality experience undertaken by the Kalmar County Museum in Sweden, for example, explored the range of feelings evoked when visitors were presented with the late fifth-century massacre at the Sandby borg ringfort on the island of Öland (Gunnarsson, Kusoffsky, and Sellin 2018). While the creators argued that VR experiences have the potential to change how visitors will later encounter the physical landscape, further research revealed that visitors with no prior exposure to digital interpretations experienced more powerful emotional connections to the past when confronted with the actual landscape where the massacre occurred (Wollentz 2017).

For digital solutions employed out in the heritage landscape to be effective, research suggests that digital design requires a more mindful approach to embodiment and place (Giannachi and Kaye 2011; Giannachi, Kaye, and Shanks 2012; Ciolfi 2015). Recent initiatives have therefore intertwined the multisensory experience, the physical landscape, and the value of *being there* with participatory elements that are guided by the visitor's own spontaneous intentions and choices outside of a more restricted virtual reality sequence (Ciolfi 2015; Ljungar-Chapelon 2017; Galani and Kidd 2019). Incorporating digital elements through performative engagement in the sculpture garden of a country estate in England, for example, highlighted the possibility of 'establishing mood, engaging the senses and the imagination [and] openly inviting sense making' before providing visitors with more formal interpretation (Fosh et al. 2013, 157).

Nevertheless, digital tools out in the heritage landscape continue to face a range of challenges including weather, internet access, cellular service, and participation from visitors. A project undertaken at Çatalhöyük in Turkey, for example, developed a mobile app where visitors use their own devices to access interactive, digital storytelling experiences (Roussou et al. 2015; Katifori et al. 2020). Visitors reacted negatively, however, to being forced into social interactions (Katifori et al. 2020), and the team also faced technical issues because there were too many inconsistencies between the digital imagery and the physical site, leading to a confusing visitor experience. As argued by human-centred computing scholar Ciolfi (2015), embodiment and sensory immersion can be disrupted when digital information is brought in where it is not wanted. For example, while augmented and mixed realities can be overlaid on the landscape and are less distracting than virtual reality experiences, sometimes even placing QR codes around an open-air museum can disrupt the sense of historical authenticity or 'time travel' that experience museums often strive to create (Ciolfi 2015).

Another challenge for museums and heritage sites is how to reach out to younger audiences who have an entirely different way of encountering the world and interpreting and communicating their experiences within it. The usual assumption is that because they have grown up in the digital world, younger visitors must be engaged through digital means. However, since their lives are so tethered to digital experiences, a more unique, enjoyable, and effective learning approach may arise from high-touch encounters. A study conducted at an archaeological site in Budaörs, Hungary with school children between the ages of 9–11, for example, revealed that children demonstrated more learning comprehension when they were immersed in a hands-on live interpretation activity (Vasszi 2018). It therefore remains vitally important to take a more ethical and critical approach assessing the efficacy of both high-tech and high-touch strategies in different heritage spaces.

An authorised digital heritage discourse?

Despite the now widespread use of digital heritage tools, there continues to be a lack of critical perspectives investigating the use of interactive tools that span the intersections between digital and material heritage spaces. Heritage scholars Areti Galani and Jenny Kidd, for example, are wary of the lack of research that questions the ethical implications that emerge when employing digital heritage tools 'in the wild' (Galani and Kidd 2019). They argue that visitors experience a range of

‘unpredictable affective resonances’ (Galani and Kidd 2019, 1) that often extend beyond the traditional evaluative competencies of heritage researchers; or, they lack the necessary time and resources to meaningfully explore them. Recognising the wide range of ‘ethical challenges associated with methods that aim to capture fleeting, visceral, and self-reflective encounters’, they question how this may conflict with the ‘traditional claims of generalisability and reproducibility often associated with both digital technology evaluations and social science approaches’ (Galani and Kidd 2019, 14). They therefore argue for new hybrid methodologies that will ‘enable researchers to understand technology use in actual practice while affording participants the capacity to exercise their agency over their experience’ (Galani and Kidd 2019, 12).

The use of digital tools, however, always involves some form of authorised way of seeing and encountering heritage. Drawing from Smith’s ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’ (Smith 2006), there is a risk that an *Authorised Digital Heritage Discourse* arises when developing digital heritage experiences. This is perhaps most evident in efforts to standardise digital experiences (such as the ‘narrative’ tool [Vrettakis et al. 2019]) that strip sites of their unique character in favour of a more generalised visitor experience model based on expert interpretation. Through this method, there is also a danger in relying too much on ‘expensive equipment and bespoke or proprietary software’ (Perry 2018, 219) that consolidates the interpretive process and perpetuates authorised ways of encountering heritage.

Site managers and researchers must therefore consider the enduring limitations of digital tools while developing the proper competencies to critically assess the ethical and methodological challenges of employing them. In general, there is a need for more nuanced understandings of the value of digital cultural resources and whether the heritage landscape experience is necessarily enhanced through their application. Similarly, digital tools will continue to *grasp for presence* if they are unable to move away from the assumption that visitors to a museum or site will develop a sense of presence and belonging based on the authorised interpretation and representation of the past. Extending beyond an assumed universal sense of presence informed by expert knowledge will enable unique encounters with the *more*, the *other*, and the *in-between* spaces of museums and heritage sites, where a broader spectrum of emotions are considered and where ‘negative felt responses’ (Waterton 2013, 78) are no longer neglected. It is therefore crucial to acknowledge the layers of heritage experience that are negotiated beyond the reach of those responsible for defining it – particularly outside of the parameters set when employing interactive digital tools.

I therefore shift to an alternative approach, arguing that instead of more high-tech options to enhance the heritage landscape experience, there is a demand for *high-touch* encounters where visitors can temporarily disconnect from the digital world and experience the wide-ranging benefits of *being there*.

Method

In this section, I present some of the findings connected to the theme of ‘high touch’ derived from fieldwork conducted between 2016–2019 in four different landscapes associated with the Viking Age. These include two UNESCO World Heritage sites: Birka in Sweden and Hedeby (or, *Haithabu*) in Germany and two open-air museums in southern Sweden: Foteviken and VikingaTider (or, *VikingTimes*). This research was part of a larger project investigating how to counteract certain ‘deadening’ forces such as ‘disneyfication’ and ‘museumisation’ that diminish and delimit visitors’ experiences and their possibility to connect with the past and present within heritage landscapes (Burlingame 2020).

Given the lack of a concise methodology to study the complex layers of heritage landscapes and how they are experienced, I developed the *Triangle of Landscape Engagement* (hereafter, the TRIOLE model). Divided into the themes of *Locale*, *Story*, and *Presence*, the TRIOLE model assesses the material, symbolic, and affective dimensions of heritage landscapes and landscape encounters.² Recognising the difficulty in translating theoretical discussions about presence into practice,

I additionally developed a methodology to study presence through three stages: (1) embodied, (2) observational, and (3) collaborative.³ The embodied evaluation of the landscape assesses multi-sensory possibilities, the observational stage investigates how the landscape is encountered by, and presented to, visitors, and these are both interspersed with collaborative work with site managers and employees to explore new forms of engagement and how these might be implemented and measured.

Several daytrips or extended visits (up to 10 consecutive days) to each site were made each year during the high tourism season with specific events and during the low season to understand the different dynamics of the site and visitor behaviours when there were different possibilities of interaction. Specific methods included participant observations, photography, 31 unstructured interviews lasting 30 minutes on average (not recorded and kept anonymous), and informal focus groups held during breaks in the day with low tourist numbers or after-hours during shared meals (not recorded and kept anonymous). In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers from each site lasting approximately one hour. Three of these were conducted in person (two of which were recorded with verbal informed consent in advance) and two were conducted via email using a questionnaire with an informed consent statement.⁴ The primary language used was English with occasional instances of German and Swedish. In addition, 5,203 reviews from *Google* and *TripAdvisor* were collected and analysed for each site to connect fieldwork with more nuanced tourist impressions and experiences. Comments were anonymised and further reduced based on repetition or relevance. All data was coded based on the different components of the TRIOLE model to reveal similarities and differences between the sites and further analysed to identify significant ideas and themes—one of which was ‘high touch’.

High touch in the Viking world

One evening after a long day spent roaming around Foteviken’s ‘Viking Week’, I was sitting around a campfire with the ‘King’ of Foteviken at the time. After decades of observations, he is filled with stories and ideas about how visitors can encounter the past in experience museums. Connected to the TRIOLE model’s theme of *Presence*, he discussed how signs that say ‘don’t touch’ everywhere in traditional museums have too much control over the visitor, which diminishes their experience and prevents them from making a deeper personal connection. At Foteviken, visitors are instead invited to try a wide range of activities including churning butter, grinding flour, and baking bread that they can eat themselves (see [Figure 2](#)).

Foteviken also employs teenagers (between 16–18) from the local region, forcing them, as the ‘King’ noted, to put their phones away and learn how to do traditional crafts, gardening, and cooking. However, in each of the sites, particularly during markets or in the reconstructed ‘living’ villages with re-enactors, it was not always clear that visitors were welcome to touch different objects or to try a different craft or historical activity. He discussed how experience museums require visitors to believe that ‘1 + 1 = 3’ in order to use their imaginations and seek out unique encounters with the past based on their own interests. Yet, highlighted under the TRIOLE model’s theme of *Story*, it became clear that participation is still dependent on effective communication to visitors that helps guide and encourage them to engage more actively in performing and enlivening the past. For a meaningful experience, he noted, it is important to get visitors to imagine and experience the place for themselves and follow their own impulses to find what they’re interested in. As one visitor noted, ‘They have deliberately chosen playfulness and accessibility over a perhaps more authentic Viking period, due to more focus on the actual experience’. As a locality of high-touch encounters, the landscape of both the past and present is brought to life as the visitor plays, interacts, experiences, and engages with their senses.

The freedom to try different activities with fewer restrictions on how visitors move through the landscape also contributed to a feeling of time travel. As one visitor noted, ‘No one get their paws beaten [and] everything can be touched’. At VikingaTider, visitors can pet pigs, grind their own



Figure 2. Freshly baked bread and churned butter at Foteviken. Source: *Author*.

grain, make their own nails at the smithy, and learn to shoot a bow and arrow. Emphasising the importance of the educational component in hands-on encounters, the site manager at the time described how he gives the visitor a hammer and says, ‘Don’t look at the blacksmith working, do the blacksmithing’. Noting that some authenticity may be sacrificed with hands-on encounters, he nevertheless prefers that people learn for themselves what it might have been like. While creating a sense of time travel is always somewhat flawed in experience museums as it can mislead visitors about what the past was actually like and further endorses the appropriation of history for present use (Holtorf 2017), if necessary precautions are taken, more dynamic, interactive heritage encounters can play a crucial role in the proper education and engagement of visitors (Niklas and Gustafsson 2017). Similarly, as argued by heritage scholar Cornelius Holtorf, if every representation of the past is inherently skewed, ‘Why not use embodied experiences and the imagination to satisfy our historical curiosity?’ (Holtorf 2017, 15).

The desire for more tactile experiences to engage with the past was also noted by a visitor to Birka who expressed wanting more examples of actual things like, ‘Here are the swords they would use . . . See if you can pick it up – see how heavy it is’. At Foteviken, the battle re-enactment ensures this dimension of *Presence* when, at the end of the battle, the re-enactors all line up, raise their shields and weapons, begin to yell a battle cry, and run directly at onlookers. After the initial shock wears off, the ‘warriors’ are then surrounded by visitors eager to try on armour and hold weapons.

Offering multisensory activities, however, is not the only way to encourage a deeper sense of presence in visitors. With the interactive atmosphere extending across the landscape, connected to the TRIOLE model’s theme of *Locale*, the beauty of the surrounding nature was frequently mentioned, allowing visitors to ‘get lost in the experience’ and get ‘a little preview what it was like to live back then’. The rural, secluded locations of the sites therefore engender a sense of immersion in nature, contributing to feelings of wellbeing and the possibility to disconnect from everyday life while spending quality time with friends and family. One visitor to Birka, for example,

mentioned escaping the ‘hustle and bustle of Stockholm into the Swedish wilderness ... so alive with life, particularly birds and insects [that] you can practically hear the island humming’.

The awareness of nature in the surrounding landscape suggests there is a different rhythm and sense of presence that emerges in places without technology. In Birka, several re-enactors noted that it has an eerily ‘magic’ quality, and there is something special about having ‘no phone, nothing – just being here’. In this sense, while the historical landscape hums with what one re-enactor described as ‘ancient knowledge underneath your feet’, enjoying the slower pace and natural environment of the contemporary landscape also plays a significant role in developing a sense of presence and connection with the past. Visitors who explored the sites during the low season also tended to reflect more on the natural surroundings and the possibility to disconnect, while visitors during the high season more frequently highlighted their interactions with re-enactors and participatory activities.

Helping visitors establish a sense of presence, however, continues to pose a challenge for sites with limited access. As Birka is only accessible by boat, for example, visitors have a narrow window to explore the landscape, and their time and attention are further controlled by a guided tour. While some staff suggest that offering an audio guide would help visitors become more independent and find their own way into the landscape, the site manager questioned whether a digital tool would further distract the visitor from experiencing the landscape up close. She noted that the pull between high tech and high touch is a common dilemma for sites without digital tools. However, she suggests that with high tech increasingly infiltrating our everyday lives, offering high-touch experiences will become even more appealing and unique.

These dimensions, however, can often be out of reach for certain visitors who require more specific information to help them imagine the past landscape or connect with the present one. Sites with more fragile archaeological landscapes, strict protections, and disagreeing stakeholders can also have significant limitations on how much can be reconstructed or developed for tourism purposes. Within Birka, for example, explored through the theme of *Story*, the museum and guided tour are essential in helping visitors imagine a once busy settlement within the contemporary landscape that one visitor described as a ‘countryside littered with animal poop and a lot of burial mounds’ (see [Figure 3](#)). Digital tools within the associated museum are therefore often important for bringing the landscape to life in a virtual context to communicate the information a visitor needs before going out into the landscape. In such cases, the use of digital tools in museums can also help ‘bring’ visitors with different impairments and disabilities into a virtual landscape who are unable to visit the physical one.

Despite the benefits of employing digital interactive tools within museums, all the site managers disagreed with bringing more technology out into the archaeological landscape or open-air museum spaces. As Hedeby’s site manager at the time noted, ‘I do not deem a technical overkill in different formats particularly useful’. While Hedeby may shift from an audio guide to a more interactive app in the future, she notes that the most important goal is to continue ‘to leave enough space for the visitor’s own imagination, let them ask questions, and if possible, let them develop their own picture of what life was like 1000 years ago’. Similarly, high-touch encounters led by the visitor’s own interests and curiosities are also far simpler and more cost-effective than high-tech solutions for communicating the site to visitors.

Given that even UNESCO World Heritage site managers remain hesitant to implement digital heritage tools, perhaps there is an unspoken understanding that heritage landscapes should remain places where visitors can reach out to real people and share real experiences without something talking in their ears, placed in front of their eyes, or downloaded onto their phones or other digital devices. Through the application of the TRIOLE model, high touch emerged as a significant theme contributing to the quality of the visitor experience in each site, indicating that heritage landscapes continue to be meaningful because they remind visitors of days gone by and of all the different connections they miss out on if they forget to look up, listen, touch, smell, taste, and live in the present moment. Ultimately, we will never be able to completely banish technology, but we must



Figure 3. Birka's contemporary landscape. Source: Author.

strike a balance between high tech and high touch. This begins with a more critical eye to determine where digital tools can be the most useful, and where it is best to just *be there*.

The future of high tech and high touch

As technology slowly seeps deeper into our lives, with threats of an impending *Metaverse* where digital life becomes life itself, we must take stock of what really matters and gives value to people's lives. According to a *BBC News* article from 12 May 2022, even the creator of the Apple iPod warned of losing 'real humanistic ways of connecting', arguing 'we don't need more technology between us'. The return of visitors to heritage sites in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has also helped reinforce the importance of physical, interactive visits outdoors to engender feelings of wellbeing and stability, demonstrating the enduring value of heritage to society and its ability to influence a wide range of contemporary issues (Nolan 2019; Huijbens 2021; Sofaer et al. 2021; Burlingame and Pappmehl-Dufay 2022). Given the myriad benefits derived from embodied heritage encounters, research that questions and challenges the implications of high-tech heritage encounters thus carries a much more significant purpose and responsibility in informing such discussions.

Using the concept of *presence* to outline the benefits of *being there* within heritage landscapes, I have challenged the increasing emphasis on digital technologies to enhance encounters with the past in outdoor heritage spaces. Reviewing recent digital heritage approaches, I argued that there is a recurring theme of *grasping for presence* as well as other limitations that challenge their efficacy within heritage landscapes. Though the examples outlined indicate that interactive technologies can help to bridge the divide between the material and digital worlds and are often essential for visitors with different impairments and disabilities, digital tools continue to work most effectively in museum spaces when they are understated and discrete and used as a way to "nudge" visitors' attention to the physical space' (Ciolfi 2015, 441). The goal is to 'use a little technology well, not a lot

of technology poorly' (Wyman et al. 2011, 465). Yet, employing digital tools always risks the development of an 'authorised digital heritage discourse' where digital heritage interpretation falls into the hands of specialists who may not yet have the necessary knowledge or skills to address the ethical and methodological challenges of employing them in heritage landscapes.

Drawing on results from my research applying the TRIOLE model in four heritage landscapes associated with the Viking Age, I have shown that through a renewed focus on *presence* enacted through 'high-touch' instead of high-tech encounters, visitors can be encouraged to find their own ways into the landscape, to tell their own stories, and to use their own imaginations to envision past, present, and future imaginaries. My research also indicated that visitors have certain expectations, values, and motivations associated with, and generated through, visiting heritage landscapes including the opportunity to escape, follow their own impulses, have unique encounters, spend time with their friends and family, play, reconnect with nature, and most importantly, disconnect from technology. Heritage landscapes therefore continue to provide more flexible, spontaneous realms through which new forms of high-touch encounters can emerge that reinforce feelings of wellbeing and ontological security beyond the reach of the digital world.

While high-tech approaches will inevitably continue to emerge in heritage landscapes, it is essential to develop new pathways to both assess and explore how these new techniques will affect the way that heritage is encountered, performed, and negotiated in both material and digital spaces. It remains imperative, however, to recognise the enduring values and benefits that emerge from unique, *lived* encounters in heritage landscapes. If the power of presence continues to elude the virtual world, I hope the uncertainty provides a chance to take a step back and reassess the value of *being there*, entangled within a landscape that tingles the senses and forces us to look back, consider our own place in the world, and face the uncertain future with a stronger sense of meaning, belonging, and continuity. In those moments, as I experienced on the battlefield in Gettysburg as a child, we are reminded that very little is needed to bring the landscape to life: just a strong imagination and a stick.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this story appeared in my doctoral dissertation (Burlingame 2020).
2. For an extended description of the TRIOLE model and its application and results from each site, see (Burlingame 2020).
3. For an extended description of methods involved in studying presence, see (Burlingame 2020, 2022).
4. According to the conditions outlined by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, the research project was not required to undergo a formal ethical review. However, following ethical research practices, site managers were contacted via email to gain permission for on-site research and to receive consent for interviews, and all research participants were informed of the research project and were read a consent statement that they verbally agreed to before research was conducted. To ensure research transparency, site managers were contacted after the research was conducted for follow-up reflections and were provided a formal report of research findings.

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Notes on contributor

Katherine Burlingame is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Oslo on the project *Relics of Nature: An Archaeology of Natural Heritage in the High North* funded by the Research Council of Norway. Situated within landscape geography and heritage studies, her research interests include nature/culture and more-than-human entanglements and the (re)production and management of heritagescapes in a changing climate.

ORCID

Katherine Burlingame  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1152-0189>

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