

## Comment on Gabriel Moshenska: Reverse engineering and the archaeology of the modern world

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## Comment on Gabriel Moshenska: Reverse engineering and the archaeology of the modern world

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The author's summarised definition of reverse engineering, "the process of reasoning backwards from a technological artifact to the initial problem or design specification it was designed to solve or fulfill," brings to mind an example from the Old World, and what might be described as the old way of doing archaeology. But one which, more recently, has been interpreted by artists.

The example is from Sir Leonard Woolley's excavation at Ur, Mesopotamia. I quote it from the account published online at <https://archive.org/details/urexcavations186385join>, a process which is, in itself, one of recovery prompted by the paper's suggestion to reason backwards.

Woolley's access to lost artifacts, in this case a lyre, came from his reasoning that the absence of the object defined its presence.

*The Plaster Lyre, U. 12351, from PG/1151 [...]*

*The manner in which a plaster cast was made of this instrument, of which the woodwork had completely disappeared, has been described [before]; only the copper calf's head and shell plaque ... are original, all the rest being the modern plaster.... In the photograph ..., taken while the cast still rested in the ground against the cut face of the soil, the outline is less distinct because (a) large lumps of plaster remain at the tops of the uprights where it was poured in and the superfluous plaster congealed; (b) when the earth on the near side was cut away in order to expose the cast it was found that the plaster had not quite filled up the channel representing the cross-bar or the sound-box....*

*Taking the better preserved side..., it will be seen that the uprights are particularly slender; they are mortised into the sound-box presumably by tenons, and the lines of the joints are clearly visible. The sound-box has a flat top for about half of its length which definitely overhangs the table, but this is less evident at the back where the strings were. ... At the back end of the sound-box there is a raised ridge which may possibly be the bridge. When the soil between the uprights was cut back we were astonished to see very thin lines...of very light white fibrous dust which were the remains of the actual strings; judging from the texture of the dust they had been of gut or sinew. There were ten of these.*

And so it was, with the recovered artifact being rendered well enough that 20th century copies could be made, the music the lyre made brought to life through this re-fitting and further articulated into the digital age (I made a BBC Radio 4 programme, "Ghost Music", about this in 2011, still online [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b010dp0s](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b010dp0s)).

The recognition of the lyre - or rather the space it represented - as an instrument which could be re-animated links to the tacit knowledge discussed in Gabriel Moshenska's paper. Hearing a lecturer describe the process Woolley used, my undergraduate response was not about the evidence of the culture per se, but the ingenious way he had brought the various sensations back to life. The material science evoking, later, the haunting sound, one still recognisable as the lyre is still played as a musical instrument. By a similar process of recovery, the artist Rachel Whiteread made her name as an artist working with spaces, where the abutting of material defines not just the lost object, but how the fit works.<sup>1</sup> It is a retro-fit of sorts, which is also a form of salvage.

<sup>1</sup> [www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/rachel-whiteread-2319](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/rachel-whiteread-2319)

The author's description of reverse engineering as applied to contemporary technology - "a frankly terrifying daily reality" - chimes with my earliest (and ongoing) excavations in Silicon Valley (Finn 2001), which illuminated, in a more positive way, the place of tacit knowledge. The accelerating rate of change means that artifacts in the technology museums have a bonus source of tacit knowledge, from the researchers, developers, makers, and early adopters who are still - on the whole - around to put story and object together. One of my first interviewees was a man I traced from a note he wrote to go with a small detail from chip manufacture, a piece of metal accessioned into Intel's in-house museum. It was gratifying that this link in the evolution of smaller, faster, cheaper memory was not in any fragile digital format, but a note written by hand on a piece of paper, placed with the object, detailing what it was, and what it did.

### **Bibliography**

Finn, Christine. 2001. *Artifacts: An Archaeologist's Year in Silicon Valley*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.