

# Giving Voices (Without Words) to Prehistoric People: Glimpses into an Archaeologist's Imagination

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*This article describes a path to addressing the discomfort that I and many of my braver colleagues have had, when putting words into the mouths and heads of prehistoric actors, knowing that these words say more about us than they do about prehistory. Yet without such speech, how are we archaeologists and the broader public to imagine the intangibles of the deep past (emotions, affect, gender, senses)? Moreover, such words create a misleading certainty that conceals the ambiguities of the archaeological data. Are there alternative options to verbal and vocal clarity when creating imagined fictive narratives about the past? With inspiration from composer Györgi Ligeti, from linguists and experimental psychologists, and from ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) performers, I explore the emotive power of vocal non-verbal interjections and utterances that have more universality and less cultural baggage, using them in three diverse re-mediations of digital media from three prehistoric archaeological contexts in Europe and Anatolia.*

**Keywords:** non-verbal vocalization, digital storytelling, Neolithic, narrative, fiction, emotion

## INTRODUCTION

I and many of my braver colleagues have attempted to put words into the mouths of prehistoric (and historic) actors, knowing that these words say more about us than they do about prehistory. Yet such imagined voices enhance the emotive power of stories about the past. Without speech, how are we archaeologists and the broader public to imagine the intangibles of the deep past (emotions, affect, gender, senses)? Nevertheless, such words present a challenge that has long preoccupied me about on- and off-screen interpretations of archaeological data of the deep and shallow past. Moreover, I believe that such words create a misleading certainty that conceals the ambiguities of archaeological data. This presentation is about an

exploration of alternative options to verbal and vocal clarity when creating imagined narratives about the past. The key, I found, is to think laterally from the apparently straightforward arrow of archaeological investigation.

## THE EMOTIVE POWER OF STORYTELLING

The argument that storytelling enhances the emotive engagement of audiences in their installations has become increasingly popular in heritage sites—parks, museums since the early 2000s—as well as excavations. At the same time, creatively imagined narratives are becoming more mainstream in the interpretation of archaeological material remains (Joyce, 2002; Van Dyke & Bernbeck, 2015). Coupled

with this is the power of such stories to enable a larger audience to encounter the intangibles of human life in the past: emotions, affect, gender, senses, queerness, and so on. Such intangibles have become legitimate subjects of investigation alongside the tangibles of archaeological empirical data (Tarlow, 2012; Hamilakis, 2013; Tringham & Danis, *in press*).

Much storytelling of the past involves putting words into the mouths of long dead people—giving them a voice. Having been in the middle of such a practice, I would be the last to deny the emotive power of such stories, especially if the archaeological or documentary empirical sources that form their foundation are made transparent (Pollock, 2015). Nevertheless, I must confess that, whether they are having a conversation with me, or leading me to the interiors of their heads, or speaking through a third person, the ‘voices’ as represented on screen or in printed text have always been as deeply problematic as the clear visual representations of their faces. In my first attempt at creating prehistoric voices, *How to End the Use-life of a House* (Tringham, 1991), I liked that story but understood it as saying more about me than about Baba the Fire Setter. I felt its writing to be more as a creative poetic act than a conscious attempt to represent a woman burning a house. Roussou and colleagues from the EMOTIVE project have made an important point that ‘Storytelling can be a powerful tool but that not all stories are effective in communicating the messages they set out to convey and to grasp and hold their audience’s attention’ (Roussou et al., 2017: 407). This point is reiterated in some of the chapters in the edited collection *Subjects and Narratives* (Van Dyke & Bernbeck, 2015, e.g. Thomas, 2015), reminding us that because we are close to the material and events of the story does

not mean it will be well written, let alone affective or compelling.

### AMBIGUITY AND STORYTELLING

There are many expert practical guidelines on how to make a story more compelling. One of these is by Sheila Bernard (2007), whose words provide important recommendations for anyone creating stories about the past who wishes to make their audiences transparently aware of the ambiguity of archaeological data and their interpretation. She suggests (Bernard, 2007: chapter 4) that you allow the reader or audience to participate with their minds and keep exposition light and subtle, with room to think and imagine. In this way, the imagination of the audience (and therefore their emotive response) is not smothered, but is, rather, inspired. Most importantly, in such stories, space is provided for the enormous and wonderful ambiguity of archaeological data to enter into the narrative (Gero, 2007; Sørensen, 2016). To explore and share the ambiguity of the past means embracing comfortably a plurality of interpretations of the data, making transparent the workflow of data collection and documentation, making clear the path from data to interpretation, and recognizing a multitude of voices, emotions, and senses through which the past is experienced.

In listing some of the requirements of celebrating ambiguity, three aspects of the enterprise emerge as relevant to this article:

- First, in addition to the celebration of ambiguity being an underlying aspect of the feminist practice of archaeology (Wylie, 2007), it is also very much at the heart of a post-humanist and new-materialist attitude that blurs the conventional boundaries between real,

unreal, and virtual (Yalouri, 2018; Mol, *in prep*), between human and non-human species (Haraway, 2008), and between animate and inanimate subjects (Domanska, 2018; Yalouri, 2018; Mol, *in prep*) that releases us from the conventions of linear discursive text in order to encourage the representation of ambiguities in non-discursive multimodal formats (Barad 2003; Murray, 2009).

- Second, a certain playfulness (even irony) enters into the creation of post-humanist archaeological interpretations of the past that requires a willingness to accept this on the part of the audience and academic colleagues. This means that experiments in form and content need to be taken seriously as inspiring curiosity and creativity rather than as (or in addition to) steps in testing and evaluating hypotheses or scenarios. Non-linear lateral thinking and non-discursive symbolization, in challenging conventional 'scientifically' logical paths of investigation, are not wild speculation; they can inspire alternative scenarios, provide a portal to many different (prehistoric) ways of sensing the world (such as enabling people to become animals, baskets to vocalize, and houses to feel pain and euphoria, see below) (Haraway, 2008; Domanska, 2018).
- Third, I have recognized since the 1990s (and as others have elegantly pointed out: Landow, 1992; Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Douglas, 2001) that the greatest potential of digital screen-based technology in publication is not as a replacement or simulacrum of printed and analogue publication, but as a way of producing quite different forms of knowledge and quite different ways of sharing. This is multimodal, involving any combination, as equal partners, of visual and audio exhibits, storytelling through videos, presentations, blogs,

databases, gamification, live performance, and text, in what have been referred to as multimodal compositions (Murray, 2012), database narratives (Manovich, 2001; Luers, 2013), recombinant histories (Anderson, 2011), and even serious games (Champion, 2015). What characterizes these digital publication formats is that they are immediately accessible to a public beyond the world of academia, can be shared and commented on according to the authors' sharing protocols, are open-ended and modifiable, and none of them can be reproduced in print format. It is an ideal medium for the representation of the ambiguous nature of archaeological data. The technology allows archaeological practitioners to demystify the process of archaeological interpretation by embedding both source data and knowledge-production process in (or linked to) the interpretive representation. In creating my own database narrative or recombinant history (Joyce & Tringham, 2007; Tringham, 2015a), I have essentially used the technology to mediate the raw data of my research, to guide readers through the morass of my own imagination and its sources to reach my interpretations. In this way, the path to my imagination is not ambiguous (if my memory is clear). What *is* ambiguous is the nature of the quest for the unresolvable resolution of the interpretation as some kind of reality or truth about the past.

#### SPEECH, SURREALITY, AND THE SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

Digital formats of the kind listed above are the only way to represent our interpretations of the world, dreams, memories, emotions, and senses as experienced in the

‘dark phenomenology’ (Mol, [in prep](#)) of prehistory. In spite of this, as Erik Champion notes, ‘Many virtual environments have aimed for realism rather than for meaningful interaction. Yet this may not be the most effective means of educating and engaging the public’ (Champion, 2011: 131).

One way to achieve the suspension of disbelief is to envision the past as remembered by the various actors, rather than trying to envisage their past as lived:

‘If we do this, then we have a very different aim in our imaging of the past. Instead of presenting the past as a real (or Virtually Real) lived-in linear past that is experienced normatively by all actors, we can present a past that is a dream or memory, remembered piecemeal, selectively, and uniquely by the different actors. In this way the prehistory that we construct and the multiple histories that we express, through computer-generated imagery and other media, can be regarded as more surreal than virtually real.’ (Joyce & Tringham 2007: 341)

Surreality is achieved through surprises, such as unexpected juxtapositioning; or by fragmentation, whereby, for example, a complete room is only seen through the lens of its corner or a piece of furniture; or a person or animal is seen as a single eye; or a sound emerges out of an apparently inanimate object, and a story that is more poem than narrative. In writing this I have echoed the sentiments of Steve Anderson:

‘Put bluntly, the most interesting histories are those in which the past is fundamentally understood as a field of discursive struggle – a text that is open to revision and debate rather than one delivering safe narrative closure... Under certain circumstances, historiography also offers a means of escape into fantasy, an alternate form of mythology or the

expression of cultural needs and desires.’ (Anderson, 2011: 15)

There have been a few experimental digital visualizations that explore archaeological interpretations and achieve a certain suspension of disbelief with the help of visual effects (see, for example, Alice Watterson’s *Digital Dwelling* described below, and the very interesting projects described in Yalouri, 2018). Despite visual effects, there is something that still prevents the full suspension of disbelief in the fictionally constructed narratives of the past, even by commercial film-makers. I think that much of the problem in creating compelling and emotive stories for both archaeologists and full-time professional authors lies with the prehistoric voices themselves, with their conversations or thoughts. With *speech* there has been virtually no experimentation (but see Simon Thorne’s soundscape, *Neanderthal*, or William Golding’s 1955 novel, *The Inheritors*). Communication is represented in familiar (to us) patterns of discursive speech, in structured sentences that make their meaning clear and unambiguous. Being mostly plot-focused rather than focused on the development of characters, conversation revolves around events and information rather than idle banter or fillers—what have been called ‘empty speech’ and ‘speech disfluencies’—that fill most everyday conversations and pass commentary on sensorial experiences of everyday life in non-discursive rhetoric (Murray, 2009).

Are there alternative options to giving voices to the past actors that do not involve clear speech with all its presentist implications, options that involve less clear, more ambiguous vocalizations but can nevertheless be emotionally compelling and meaningful? Joddy Murray has suggested that the evolution of the privileged status of discursive rhetoric was closely associated with

the development of printed text and logical positivism, pushing the more affective, non-discursive rhetoric into the shadows (Murray, 2009: 12). His ‘view of meaning-making necessitates and values all that our symbols—though especially image [Murray’s preference, not mine]—can do: affectivity, circularity, ambiguity, incongruity, and ineffability’, in other words that non-discursive rhetoric is to be given equal opportunity in our representational systems. I can add, moreover, that, on the one hand, non-discursive rhetoric is allowed to reach its full potential through nurturing the possibilities of digital technologies, and, on the other hand, that the current increase in the primacy of non-discursive rhetoric has been a direct result of the increased role of digital formats of publication in our world, along with a parallel trend against modernity, especially since the early 1990s. Murray’s view of a more comprehensive attention to the way we communicate and make meaning is mirrored in his idea of ‘composing’ multimodal digital and performance works that break down the traditional boundaries between archaeology and art (Murray, 2012). The idea of moving away from textual representation to a more performative, practice-based, entangled storytelling resonates, I believe, quite strongly with what I propose below.

When I first started to struggle with the problem of prehistoric speech (1994: Baba in the *Chimera Web*, now sadly in the Dead Web, but see Joyce & Tringham, 2007), I thought of trying to fill Baba’s head with the earliest ‘colloquial speech’ that I knew about in south-eastern Europe, using the argot of Aristophanes’ plays that he created in the fifth century BC as a model; but I rejected that idea since there was still a distance of five thousand years separating the historic from the prehistoric residents. And there I accepted the problem and continued to

put English words into the mouths and heads of prehistoric people; until I heard György Ligeti’s *Aventures* as a live performance at Sound Box in San Francisco on 6 April 2018 (see notes at <http://sfsoundbox.com/notes-on-the-music-at-euphoria/#Ligeti2>).

### INSPIRATION 1: THE POSSIBILITIES OF SPEECH DISFLUENCIES

*Aventures* is an 11-minute opera without words; scored for a few instrumentalists and three singers, each of whom plays five roles simultaneously, acting out a scenario involving five emotional states—in which they shriek, grunt, laugh, breathe loudly, whisper, murmur, and otherwise create all sorts of curious sounds along with an extraordinary text. Ligeti ‘wants to write for voices without having to subordinate himself to a pre-existing text ... By his own account, he attempts to create a text in an imaginary language ... he lets the syllables fall apart in separate vowels or consonants ... until every reminiscence of words is entirely lost’ (Beyst, 2003). His singers accompany the vocals with physical gestures that endorse and emphasize the sounds, enhancing the emotional power of the piece when seen in live or on-screen performance.<sup>1</sup>

Most attention to non-verbal emotional expressions have focused on facial expression, starting with Darwin’s (1872) study. But, as was pointed out by Emiliana Simon-Thomas and colleagues (2009: 838), ‘Nearly half of Darwin’s descriptions of the nonverbal correlates of over 40 emotion-related states include references to specific para-linguistic vocalizations—“snorts” of

1 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nso8hPgjB\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nso8hPgjB_E) or watch the film 2001: A Space Odyssey for which Stanley Kubrick used Ligeti’s music (including a modified version of *Aventures*) all without Ligeti’s knowledge or permission.



contempt, “little coughs” of embarrassment, “air sucks” of high spirits, and “deep sighs” of grief.

At the heart of Ligeti’s work is his focus on what the structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure termed *parole*, the utterances of everyday speech. For de Saussure and other structuralists such utterances ‘were not part of the system of meaningful sounds by which substantive information is conveyed ... they count as marginal features of language and might affect the expressive (emotional) quality of a message but not its basic meaning’ (Gumperz, 1982: 12). Which is precisely why linguistic anthropologist John Gumperz, composer Ligeti, and I (for my experiments below) are interested in them. Included in the *parole* list are the intonation and rhythm of speech (prosody), as well as ‘empty speech’,<sup>2</sup> ‘throwaway comments (Lovely weather today)’, ‘speech fillers (know what I mean?)’, ‘speech disfluencies (right, right; really; oooh, I know)’, and wordless emotional vocalizations (laughter, aaagh, eeek, ooo, oooh).

Beyond John Gumperz, an interest in non-verbal interjections was not empirically investigated until taken up in experiments by linguists and psychologists in the 1990s (Ameka, 1992). In an introduction to a special issue on linguistic interjections in the *Journal of Pragmatics* published in 1992, linguist Felix Ameka defined interjections as vocal gestures ‘which express a speaker’s mental state, action or attitude or reaction to a situation’ (Ameka, 1992: 104). He categorized interjections based on the specific communicative functions they fulfill (Ameka, 1992: 113): 1) expressive, focusing on the speaker’s mental state (emotive or cognitive); 2) conative, expressing the speaker’s wishes vis-à-vis a

listener; and 3) phatic, which maintain or establish connection with other speakers/listeners (see Figure 1). The linguist Cliff Goddard (2014: fig. 1), on the other hand, categorized such interjections on the basis of their proximity to clear text (‘identical to words’, e.g. ‘shit!’; or ‘word-like’, e.g. ‘Wow!’, ‘Yuck’) or distance from it (‘noise-like’, e.g. ‘Ugh’, ‘Sh’). Either way, such interjections are clearly likely to be culturally specific and therefore not entirely devoid of the same problems of presentism as the clearer text, but, I believe, to a much less disturbing degree, since the words themselves are not supposed to make any sense, but meaning is conveyed by their rhythm and tone (prosody).

Experimental psychologists from the early 2000s focused on non-verbal vocalized utterances (including Goddard’s ‘noise-like interjections’ and ‘vocal bursts’ such as laughter, sighs, and screams) that signalled emotional status, thus moving away from linguistics and semantics towards the vocal mirror of facial expression of emotions, as started by Darwin (Simon-Thomas et al., 2009; Sauter et al., 2010a). Researchers in a recent study of this genre have created an interactive acoustic map visualizing human vocalization of emotions that is based on a systematically collected set of recordings of *English* speakers (Cowen et al., 2018; his interactive map is available at <https://s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/vocs/map.html#>). Sauter and colleagues (2010b) also report on a study of the significance of acoustic properties of different emotional utterances that facilitate their identification by listeners. Their study, however, was based on a globally diverse set of language speakers. What this team has explicitly shown (Sauter et al., 2010a), and which is significant for this article, is that some of these vocal bursts (e.g. laughter, screams) can be shown empirically to be more basic

<sup>2</sup> A great example is British comedian Stanley Unwin, the Gobbledegook person: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UJZF5iRhNg>

Basic Category	Category Description	Sub-Category	Sub-Category Description	Interjection Examples
Expressive	focus on the speaker's state, vocal gestures which are symptoms of the speaker's mental state			
		Emotive	with respect to the emotions and sensations they have at the time	Yuk! Wow! Ouch! Hah!
		Cognitive	pertain to the state of knowledge and thoughts at the time of utterance	Aha!
Conative	directed at an auditor, aim at getting attention or demand an action or response			Shhh! Eh?
Phatic	has to do with the establishment of contact			
		Feedback	express a speaker's mental attitude towards and maintenance of the on-going discourse	Mhm , uh-uh, yeah, right
		Communication	goodbyes, greetings, welcoming	Hello! Bye! Ciao! Servus!

**Figure 1.** A categorization of vocal interjections, based on 'a speaker's mental state, action or attitude or reaction to a situation' (after Ameke, 1992: 113).

evolutionarily, or cross-culturally universal, than others which are more variable and culture- (or language-) specific (such as utterances resulting from achievement or sensual pleasure). Sauter and team do not go so far as to suggest that the same acoustic properties would also affect prehistoric listeners, but it does give food for thought. This gives me the cue to (almost legitimately) use some of the more universal vocal bursts in the mouths of prehistoric actors in on-screen (digital) constructions of the past that could inspire empathetic emotive responses in a modern audience. If it can be done with Neanderthals (Simon Thorne, <https://player.vimeo.com/video/10229282>; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=\\_MVN9FnOsE4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=_MVN9FnOsE4); Broughton, 2009), why not with the Neolithic (Mithen, 2006)?

The performance artist, Lucy Clout, echoes this focus when she confesses that her 'interest in speech disfluencies isn't necessarily because of their opposition to literal meaning but because they are a

different part of language, one which acts as context, intimacy and also, importantly, as an assertion of subjective presence ... this kind of "empty" speech still performs a function ... It isn't about creating a text but about another effect' (interview of Lucy Clout by the editor of *Frieze* magazine, Amy Sherlock: <https://frieze.com/article/focus-interview-lucy-clout>). Lucy Clout's videos lead into the idea of this 'different part of language' as being tactile speech; her interviewer, Amy Sherlock, describes it as 'speech as a gesture, as something embodied, which is sensed or felt as well as literally understood .... Tactile speech is the basis of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (or ASMR)'.

## INSPIRATION 2: ASMR AND THE MULTISENSORIAL, EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT OF AUDIENCES

A second source of inspiration for this article is Autonomous Sensory Meridian

Response (ASMR) to audio-visual on-screen performances, as a means to evoke an emotive response of audiences to our constructions of the past and interpretations of archaeological and heritage places.

The passionate and adrenaline-laced emotional responses that are evoked by on-screen and live performances of music, video games, and theatre are global and familiar phenomena. For example, some music (for me, the final *'Aufstehen'* in Mahler's Symphony no. 2) and some environmental events (such as witnessing a bubble-net feed by a pod of humpback whales) will trigger an emotion of awe and high excitement, accompanied by physiological auto-responses such as 'aesthetic chills' (goose-bumps), tears, increased heart rate, breathing rate, and skin conductance (blushing). But triggering such responses are generally not explicitly part of the repertoire of interpretive installations in museum and heritage digital or analogue contexts. Nor for that matter are they expected as a result of reading stories about prehistoric events.

Attempts at manipulating emotional responses are, however, already incorporated into heritage and archaeological on-screen and live installations. For example, background music is added to videos (Watterson, 2014), video games, and 3D virtual worlds that bears no direct relation to the content of the installation but is created to trigger emotions. More recently, the triggering of an emotional response has formed the backbone of the serious design of heritage and museum installations, for example through the CHESS project (Katifori et al., 2016) and the Storytelling for Cultural Heritage (EMOTIVE, <https://emotiveproject.eu/>) project (Perry, 2019). In the latter project, Sara Perry asks such questions as: What kind of emotional response to our stories are we, as creators, hoping for? Are we hoping for a feeling of satisfaction, even

enchantment, or are we hoping for discomfort, even anger, or a desire to question authority? Although I am sure there are exceptions, prehistoric and historic narratives do not generally cause their audiences to leave their emotional comfort zone. But why would passionate, intense, emotional engagement in a story about the past and archaeology *not* be beneficial in these or other contexts? I was interested in exploring this possibility by putting aside background music and dramatized acting and, instead, exploring whether the image and sound from the archaeological and heritage data themselves could be used to create such emotional triggers.

ASMR is a warm, tingling, and pleasant sensation accompanied by feelings of calm and well-being. It is triggered by a combination of close encounters with whisperings in your ear (through binaural recording), close-up visuals, and sounds of slow, repetitive contact of hands with materials (including tapping and scratching) and an intense, close attention on the viewer. Many thousands of videos are made and watched on the Internet, used as calming- and sleep-aids (e.g. work by the ASMR artist/performer RED: <https://www.youtube.com/user/WhispersRedASMR>). Scientific studies show that the body does respond to them physiologically with both calming and high excitement emotions (Poerio, 2018).

Although not everyone responds in this way to ASMR triggers, there are some aspects of ASMR videos that I wanted to experimentally hijack in order to enhance the multisensorial and emotive content of my wordless digital and multimodal stories. Amongst these are the sounds and visuals of repetitive tasks and movements of archaeology and the prehistoric household, the viewpoint of close proximity that creates a virtual sense of touch, and the intimacy of (in my preference and unlike 'classic' ASMR) unclear, disfluent, low-





**Figure 2.** Screenshot of Digital Dwelling 'Ligetized' (re-mediated by Ruth Tringham from A. Watterson et al., Digital Dwelling at Skara Brae, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/66396373>).

volume sounds of social communication created by in-ear binaural recordings. Each of these aspects can make a significant contribution to a narrative of ambiguity to evoke the multisensorial experience of the prehistoric world of the archaeologists' imaginations.

### THREE EXPERIMENTS

So how do we put these multisensorial emotive evocations into practice? After my feminist archaeology awakening with the 'faceless blobs' episode in 1988 (Tringham, 1991) that coincided with a certain amount of creative empowerment in the development of consumer software, I was eager to explore the potential of digital technologies to make transparent how we, as archaeologists, construct a past from our empirical data and from our imaginations that is full of dynamic human beings going about their daily and sometimes extraordinary tasks, moving constantly, conversing, thinking, dreaming, having lives, emotions, and personalities. I immersed myself in the possibilities of digital formats, such as hypermedia (in

1994), in order to ease the constraints of publication as printed long-form text.

However, what I imagined could be done with digital resources did not always coincide with what could actually be done at the time, either because the technology was not yet accessible to a consumer, or because I did not have the technological skills to make it happen, or, as was more frequent, both. The three short experimental demonstrations that follow, to a large extent, have their origins in those 'early adopter' trials (e.g. the Chimera Web). I use various non-discursive, multi-modal, electronic tricks to express ambiguity and (I hope) engender an emotional, even multisensorial, response, such as focusing on a close-up view, but fogging the specifics and clarity of both visuals and words; by embodying the verbal narrative so that meaning, emotion and message is expressed by gesture, rhythm, and tone of voice rather than clear words and sentence structure; and by introducing constant repetitive, archaeologically repetitive, sounds in the background, which may be annoying at first, but which are eventually rendered inaudible and ultimately subversively comforting through habituation.



**Figure 3.** Screenshot of mini-movies *Opovo Fire Story* (©Ruth Tringham 2018).

### 1) Alice Watterson's *Digital Dwelling* 'Ligetized' (see [Figure 2](#))

Because Alice Watterson has been thinking critically about the ambiguity of archaeological data and visualization of their interpretation (Watterson, 2015), I feel comfortable in taking the liberty of manipulating her own video that is based on her project *Digital Dwelling at Skara Brae* (Watterson, 2014). I very much appreciate Alice's willingness to allow the publication of this 're-mediated' version of hers and Kieran Baxter's original work. The video comprises part of her tour through the underground prehistoric village of Skara Brae on Orkney, where we begin to pass through an ambiguous cave-like sequence and end up in what is visually almost an ASMR video (*Digital Dwelling at Skara Brae*: <https://vimeo.com/66396373>). The foggy visuals are accompanied by a music score that does not (for me) enhance the presentation. So,

I have added a rather different soundtrack inspired by Györgi Ligeti's *Aventures* (*Digital Dwelling at Skara Brae Ligetized*: <https://vimeo.com/303781956>). Having read the original feedback from viewers of *Digital Dwelling* (Watterson, 2014), it would be interesting to compare it with feedback from the 'Ligetized' version.

### 2) Elaborating my earliest prehistoric story (see [Figure 3](#))

*How to End the Use-life of a House* was my first adventure into the world of fictionalized prehistoric narrative (Tringham, 1991). It is based on an interpretation of the burned houses excavated in the 1980s at the 6000-year old Neolithic site of Opovo-Ugar Bajbuk in Serbia, as having been intentionally burned down in a ritualized house or household end-of-life ceremony. I wrote the story in a burst of words as I crossed the Bay Bridge in San Francisco, as a series of

## THEN

### Ghosts

I am a ghost. I am a shadow of my former self. I have almost no substance. Amazingly, I am still with Dido. She is also a ghost, but more corporeal than I, being made of bones. I have been resurrected as ghostly fragments, some by her ankles, some above her knees. How did that happen? Why am I here? Did she climb inside me? Or was I placed next to her in this cave? I can't remember yet. Maybe later. But I do know how I was born in the grassy fields.

### My Life as a Basket

I am going to speak as this basket or rather this basket will speak through me. This is not unusual here. Every thing here and every place has a life and a voice. So, "I am made as an entry basket; the first and smallest basket a girl will make while she is still very young. She is guided along every step of making me. This is an important step in a girl's life. I am never used for cooking or storage. I live with my creator, holding her most precious and secret things. Dido is old now, she has had a long and eventful life and has put many secret and wonderful things in me". I cannot tell you what they are because the basket's voice is silent on those details, but they are not heavy and they do not rattle around. I know this because when Dido died, I was the one who held her entry basket and placed it just under the lid that would close her in. That way, she knows where to find her special things when she wakes, which is often, I can tell you that.

## NOW

### Basketry at Çatalhöyük

"Basketry at Çatalhöyük is preserved as phytolith remains, impressions in the soil and on other objects..... Extant phytolith basketry remains occur mostly in relation to burials. During excavation these basketry ... remains are usually discovered when the adhering upper soil layer is peeled back, thus resulting in a 'split' basket with a fragmentary top layer and an often complete bottom layer..(that).. appears as a white, spirally shaped deposit of phytoliths. .... Coiled basketry thus appears .....as white coloured spirals with soil lines visible in between. ...A curved patch of phytolith remains indicates that the basket was damaged before deposition. When the 'winders', the sewing strip that connects the bundles, has worn off, the bundle material is not held together and forms an ongoing patch of plant fibres."(Wendrich, 2005:333)

### Discovering Dido

As I gazed at Lori Hager excavating the layer of bones under the basket, I became aware of a face gazing at me from the ground, the skull of the burial pit Feature 634. Camcorder in hand I recorded the emergence of a Munsch-like "Scream" from the dark soil of the pit fill. Later, in an emotional trance, I extracted the background sound from the video and replaced it with a recording of Janet Murray singing Dido's lament from Purcell's opera Dido and Aeneas with its poignant words "Remember me but forget my fate". Why "Dido", a mature woman, when a skull can give you no such information? I don't know, but it was proved a female skeleton when we excavated the post-cranial bones the following season. And Dido she remained.

The power of accompanying music!

### Things as Actors

Outrageous anthropomorphizing!  
Baskets don't have voices!  
- But they do have life-

histories. A basket experienced many events, many places, many hands during its life. Could one voice tell the story of one basket? I don't think so. If Dido held the basket from its beginning to her end, she could tell most of its story, but only the parts that she remembered. Others would have to tell of its burial in her grave. And yet others of its resurrection nine thousand years later.

*Figure 4. Excerpted textual narrative of Dido and the Basket (Tringham, 2015b).*

thoughts inside the head of the woman burning her house down; she is not really thinking about the burning task, but laterally about other small things and annoying family members. In this multimodal on-screen version, as an alternative to the written words of the original story

representing her thoughts, I have provided a non-musical, non-verbal, but vocalized soundtrack. This is not a substitute for the original text, but it is composed from a different perspective on the same story, the viewpoint of the house itself that is being burned. Three tiny films can be viewed in





**Figure 5.** Screenshots of the 3-mini-movie series *Dido and the Basket* (©Ruth Tringham 2018). a: Basket discovered. b: Basket constructed. c: Basket revealed.

any sequence, each of which might evoke a different response intellectually and/or emotionally: *House Burning* (<https://vimeo.com/305896243>) tells of the burning of the house itself, which appears not to feel pain but is delighted by the event and attempts to communicate this to the people outside who are setting it alight; in *From Fire To Sleep* (<https://vimeo.com/312615656>) the burned and collapsed house is being helped to prepare for its 6000-year sleep; and *Rebirth and Afterlife after 6000 years* (<https://vimeo.com/312622169>) evokes the house being awoken, reborn, after 6000 years by archaeologists excavating the burned remains; after a short, exciting, and pleasurable participation in excavation and examination of its burned rubble remains, the awoken house goes back to sleep (and a different afterlife). In these movies (as in the original Chimera Web), I have used computerized imagery not to reconstruct what I think Opovo 'looked like' in its original form, but to construct 'multiple realities of Opovo's past, all of which are explicit illusions, but all of which are based on the material parameters that are founded empirically in the archaeological, architectural and other data' (Joyce & Tringham, 2007: 342).

### 3) 'Dido and the Basket'

This experimental project is an adaptation of a recent chapter in an edited print book, *Object Stories* (Tringham, 2015b). The

chapter is titled 'Dido and the Basket' and comprises the story of a basket found in the burial pit (F.634) of a 45-year-old woman in Building 3 laid down 9000 years ago at Çatalhöyük in Turkey. The final section of this short article juxtaposes textual fragments; some (now) are taken directly from observations embedded in the official project report, *Last House on the Hill* (Tringham & Stevanovic, 2012); others (then) are interpretations wrapped in the enticing clothing of imagined narratives of Neolithic events (see Figure 4). The three tiny films that constitute this experimental version follow the structure and sequence of the printed chapter: *Discovery* (<https://vimeo.com/305390297>; see Figure 5a); *(Re-)Construction* (<https://vimeo.com/305390397>; see Figure 5b); *Basket's story* (<https://vimeo.com/305390583>; see Figure 5c), but the digital on-screen format allows me to go way beyond the print version in terms of affect; the third mini-film, for example, is designed as an ASMR movie in which the persona of the basket takes centre-stage. Moreover, the basket participates throughout all three mini-movies (including the 'documentary' footage of Figure 5a) with commentary, which, unlike the printed version, is entirely non-verbal.

### WHY AM I DOING THIS?

If I was to respond to the question above, I would say that these experiments are to

make sure that what we do *not* know is not smothered by the enticement of ‘certitude’, even when we create fictional stories. By replacing clear text and/or audible words of a story with the non-verbal vocalizations of language, and likewise rendering clear visuals of reconstruction as surreal images, I am reminding others that we do not have either a clear visualization of past lives or any idea of the words in their mouths or their heads. Moreover, it is possible that removing spoken content that has obvious meaning (to us) and focusing the story on the utterances makes us more aware of the powerful emotional evocation that is contributed by these ‘marginal’ aspects of speech. We cannot see or hear their details, but we can get very close to them in order to conjure up their emotions, without having to think in terms of clear textual content. The close proximity that is a characteristic of my quasi-ASMR videos creates a feeling of almost touching the past.

What I have written here should be taken in the spirit of playfulness, subversion, and participatory exploration. I have come to the conclusion that there are still many ways in which the ambiguity of archaeological data could be celebrated and a dynamic human-scale past expressed that have yet to be explored creatively with digital formats. I welcome the fact that now, some, at least, of the creators of primary archaeological data and heritage and museum installations—the *content* of things digital—are willing to take the risk or make the time to try.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep appreciation to the organizers of the original conference at EAA 2018 in Barcelona: Marta Diaz-Guardamino Uribe, Colleen Morgan, and Catherine Frieman. I would also like to thank Sara Perry for some very valuable

commentary, and Alice Watterson for being so gracious to allow me to go ahead with my re-mediation of her gorgeous video. I also greatly appreciate the very helpful comments of the anonymous reviewers who prompted me to make some quite substantial changes to this manuscript. There were several people (both archaeologists and ‘normal people’) on whom I tried out the movies and who gave me feedback; I don’t have space here to thank you individually, except for Annie Danis, who, as always, gave invaluable commentary.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Ruth Tringham is a professor of the Graduate School (Anthropology) at UC Berkeley, meaning she has retired from teaching but is actively engaged in research on digital technologies applied to the afterlives of archaeological projects in a variety of formats. She has directed archaeological projects at Çatalhöyük, Turkey, and in south-eastern Europe, focusing on the life-histories of Neolithic people, places, and things from a feminist and multisensorial perspective.

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## Redonner une voix (sans paroles) aux peuples préhistoriques : un aperçu tiré de l'imagination d'une archéologue

*Le chemin parcouru pour surmonter la gêne ressentie par moi-même et maints collègues plus courageux quand il s'agit de mettre des mots dans la bouche et la tête de personnages préhistoriques, sachant bien que ces mots en disent plus sur nous que sur la préhistoire, forme le sujet de cet article. Mais s'ils restent muets, comment les archéologues et le grand public peuvent-ils imaginer les aspects intangibles d'un passé très ancien (sentiments, émotions, genre, sens) ? En outre, ces mots créent un climat de certitude trompeuse qui masque les ambiguïtés des données archéologiques. Existe-t-il des alternatives aux paroles trop précises quand on tente d'imaginer des récits fictifs situés dans le passé ? En m'inspirant du compositeur Györgi Ligeti, des travaux de linguistes et de chercheurs en psychologie expérimentale, et de praticiens de l'ASMR (Réponse Automatique des Méridiens Sensoriels), j'examine ici le pouvoir émotionnel de la voix dans ses interjections et expressions non verbales de caractère plus universel et moins chargées de bagage culturel. Je présente ainsi trois essais de re-création numérique illustrant trois situations préhistoriques provenant de contextes archéologiques en Europe et en Anatolie. Translation by Madeleine Hummler*

*Mots-clés:* communication non verbale, narration numérique, Néolithique, récits, fiction, émotion

## Die Verleihung einer Stimme (ohne Worte) an den urgeschichtlichen Menschen. Ein Einblick in die Vorstellungen einer Archäologin

*In diesem Artikel beschreibe ich den Weg zur Überwindung der Unzufriedenheit, die ich und manche mutigere Kollegen empfinden, wenn es darum geht, Worte in den Mund oder Kopf von urgeschichtlichen Personen zu stecken, in dem Bewusstsein, dass diese Worte mehr über uns als über die Urgeschichte erkennen lassen. Aber wie können sich die Archäologen und die breite Öffentlichkeit die immateriellen Aspekte der tiefen Vergangenheit (wie Gefühle, Gemütsbewegungen, Geschlecht oder die Sinne) ohne Sprache vorstellen? Darüber hinaus geben solche Aussagen einen falschen Eindruck, der klarer als die unbestimmten Angaben der archäologischen Daten ist. Gibt es alternative Möglichkeiten, die sprachliche Äußerungen ausschließen und die es ermöglichen, fiktive Erzählungen über die Vergangenheit aufzubauen? Vom Komponisten Györgi Ligeti inspiriert und von den Arbeiten von Sprachwissenschaftler und experimenteller Psychologen sowie Praktikern der sogenannten Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) angeregt, untersuche ich die emotionale Kraft von nonverbalen Ausrufen und Äußerungen, die eher einen allgemeingültigen Charakter haben und weniger kulturell geprägt sind. Ich stelle hier drei verschiedene Versuche vor, die durch den Einsatz digitaler Medien entstanden sind und drei urgeschichtliche Situationen in Europa und Anatolien schildern. Translation by Madeleine Hummler*

*Stichworte:* nonverbale Kommunikation, digitale Erzählungen, Neolithikum, Schilderungen, Fiktion, Gefühl