

DOING ARCHAEOLOGY, DIGITALLY

June 29, 2012 Ethan Watrall Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2012, Digital Archaeology Alberta, and Social Sciences Online, android, Anthropology, apocalyptic server, archaeologist, Archaeology, Artificial intelligence, Assistant Professor, baby administrator, Center for Humane Arts, Cognitive science, communication technology, Computer science education, Computing, cross disciplinary, cultural heritage informatics, Culture, Department of Anthropology, digital archaeologist, digital archaeology, director, Director of the Cultural Heritage Informatics Initiative, Egypt, financial management, Fred Wendorf, History Through Game, Illinois, Indiana, Informatics, IPod, Letters, Manitoba, MATRIX, Michigan State University, Montana, Museum Studies, North Dakota, online classes, online courses, Saskatchewan, student community coordinator



This Day of Archaeology doesn't see me out surveying or excavating, nor in a lab. Instead, it finds me sitting at my desk at [MATRIX: The Center for Humane Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences Online](#) at Michigan State University in front of my Mac Book Pro, two large Apple Cinema Displays (powered by an old,

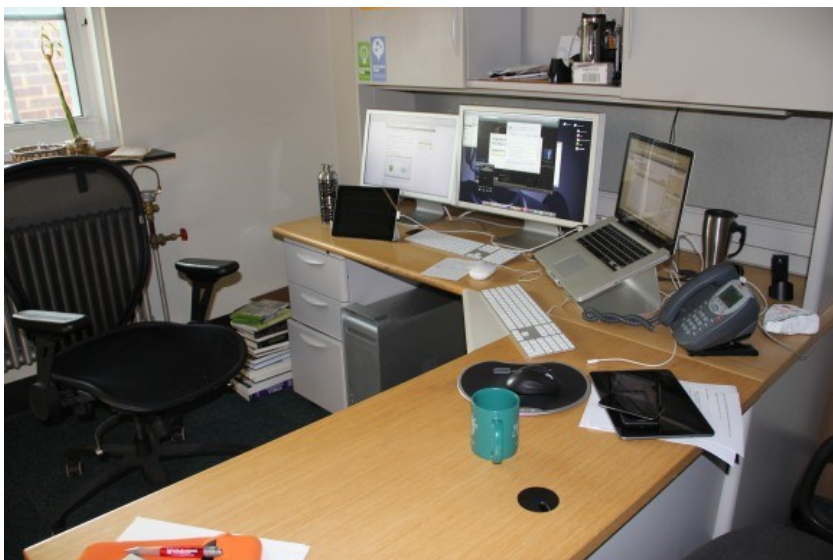
yet remarkably reliable, Mac Pro), an iPad, an iPod, an Android handset (Droid X2 if you are interested), and a Galaxy Tab 10.1. This (extremely technological) state of affairs results from the fact that its been a long time since I've actually stuck a trowel in the ground. Don't get me wrong, I've got a great field archaeology pedigree. I spent my elementary, highschool, and undergrad years (my father is an archaeologist as well) working on sites in the Northern Plains (mostly Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta – and a little bit in Montana and North Dakota). As a graduate student, I worked in Indiana and Illinois. My primary area of research as a graduate student (as well as my archaeological heart), however, rested in Egypt – Predynastic Egypt to be precise. I worked several seasons with Fred Wendorf and the Combined Prehistoric Expedition at

Nabta Playa. The bulk of my work in Egypt, however, was at Hierakonpolis, where I excavated a variety of Predynastic household sites and did research into Predynastic household economy.

As a graduate student (and even as an undergrad, to be quite honest), I found myself increasingly interested in how information, computing, and communication technology could be applied to archaeology for teaching, research, outreach, and scholarly communication. Fast forward several years and I find myself sitting at my desk at MATRIX in front of a dizzying array of devices. My transformation from a “traditional” archaeologist (if you will – though, to be honest, is there really such thing as a “traditional” archaeologist) to a digital archaeologist is complete.

So, what exactly do I do?
Well...lots (probably too much given the little amount of sleep I get – but such is the life an academic). The first hat I wear is that of Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Michigan State, where I teach your usual variety of

archaeology classes – including [Intro to Archaeology](#), [Archaeology of Ancient Egypt](#) (which I also teach as an online – and completely open access – class), [Rise of Civilization](#), and [Pseudoarchaeology: Temples, Tombs, and Spaceships](#). I also teach the [Cultural Heritage Informatics Fieldschool](#), which dovetails with the next hat I wear – the Director of the [Cultural Heritage Informatics Initiative](#) at MSU. Hosted by the Department of Anthropology in partnership MATRIX, the Cultural Heritage Informatics Initiative is a platform for interdisciplinary scholarly collaboration and communication in the domain of Cultural Heritage Informatics at MSU. In addition, the initiative strives to equip students (both graduate and undergraduate) in the many cultural heritage focused disciplines at MSU (Anthropology, History, Art History, Classics, Museum Studies, Historical & Cultural Geography, etc.) with the practical and analytical skills necessary creatively to apply information, communication, and computing technologies to cultural heritage materials, influence the current state of cultural heritage



My office at MATRIX: The Center for Humane Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences Online at Michigan State University

informatics, and become thought leaders for the future of cultural heritage informatics. The second aspect (building capacity among students) occupies most of my time. It includes organizing and running the Cultural Heritage Informatics Fieldschool (which isn't being offered this summer, but will be offered next summer) and directing the [Cultural Heritage Informatics Graduate Fellowship Program](#). The third hat I wear is that of Associate Director of [MATRIX: The Center for Humane Arts, Letters, and Social Sciences Online](#) – MSU's Digital Humanities center. As Associate Director, I'm responsible for a crazy variety of things (MATRIX is a pretty democratic place in which everyone works on whatever needs to get done, regardless of whether it is "officially" within their bailiwick or not). When I'm wearing my MATRIX hat (I don't really ever take it off) I manage projects, develop grants, write grants, develop strategic partnerships (both inside and outside the university), manage our human resources, and clean up the conference room as needed (like I said, we all do what needs to get done around here)



So, what am I actually doing on this Day of Archaeology? Well, I'm preparing [msu.seum](#) (the mobile app developed during the Cultural Heritage Informatics Fieldschool last summer) for official release (which basically means I'm spending a lot of time working in XCode), finishing up the narrative on two NEH Preservation and Access grants that MATRIX is working on with faculty from Art History and History, working on several of my "own" digital archaeology projects (including an open access, born digital annual publication on digital archaeology), finishing up the report on my NEH funded *Red Land/Black Land: Teaching Ancient Egyptian History Through Game-Based Learning* project, making sure all of the Department of Anthropology summer online courses are ready to launch (did I also mention that I manage the department's online classes as well?), working with a MATRIX's new student community coordinator on revising the documentation

for [KORA](#) (MATRIX's open source digital repository platform) and dealing with the day to day minutia (human resources, strategic planning, financial management & budgeting, apocalyptic server crashes – that sort of thing) of being a baby administrator as well as an academic.

So, at the end of the day (well, the day is far from done), I'm still doing archaeology...I'm just doing it digitally.