

PRESERVING HISTORY WITH NFTS AMIDST THE THREAT OF DIGITAL COLONIALISM

Today, around 75% of IT executives use blockchain in their operations, at least to a certain extent. Blockchain initiatives across vertical industries are growing, and implementing blockchain technology is part of an organisation's transformational journey to create a better world for our society.

This article discusses artefacts on non-fungible tokens (NFTs) as a potential tool for preserving culture and history, even though they are considered a risk for digital colonialism.

The COVID-19 pandemic involuntarily accelerated the digital transformation process in the Creative and Cultural Industry (CCI). Museums and other cultural institutions increasingly needed to adapt to uncertainty, pushing for alternative and future-oriented ways of experiencing culture and cultural assets, providing museums and their stakeholders with a fulfilling cultural experience and a novel revenue source through blockchain.

Before the existence of blockchain, we didn't own something that was fully digital, as we see with NFTs today. We passed around images, motion graphics, and videos, even editing and reposting them, but the current NFT opportunity enables owners to automatically undertake complete ownership over a digital artwork, file, or physical object.

In many cases, NFTs are used to link physical assets with digital ones, intertwining the physical and digital realms and serving as a unique identifier and proof of ownership over real-world assets. NFTs are connected with or attached to their physical counterparts, such as real estate, artwork, collectables, jewellery, toys, fashion merchandise, tickets, coins, and other high-value physical assets that high-profile investors spend millions to own.

To make our shared culture preservable, we need to make it shareable, and NFTs give us this ability. Moreover, NFTs can be used in preserving physical objects if the originals were stolen or lost, and since museums hold thousands of works in their collections, of which many are too fragile to display for the public, the NFTs can be a way to present works that cannot be displayed in the physical world, offering individuals a way to interact with them.

As with all new technological advancements, blockchain has undeniably brought a paradigm shift in terms of working methodology and organisation-wise. The narratives and discourses around blockchain technologies, non-fungible tokens (NFTs), cryptocurrencies, and decentralised web frameworks are still shaped by criticism, bias, or hype by the various actors. Even though the NFT sector has many internal and external challenges such as regulation, environmental issues, technological immaturity, scalability, transaction speed, safety, user adoption, etc., the world of NFTs is here to stay.

For those who have reservations about the value of creating NFTs from museum assets, a prime example that can be pointed out happened in Italy. The Italian government has stopped the sale of NFTs of Italian Renaissance paintings. After several museums, including the Uffizi Galleries, made limited profits from NFT sales and some controversies around legal ownership, the government called a halt to any further NFT sales until the metaverse landscape and the role of NFTs became clearer.

In the context of legal ownership of bringing cultural heritage and historical artefacts to NFTs, there is clearly a demand for and a controversial issue regarding the restitution of cultural property looted during the colonial era. The growing outrage over the continued stewardship of artefacts acquired through nefarious means has compelled cultural institutions to explore their role in marginalising cultures through misrepresentation. It is irresponsible and offensive to accept that many artefacts in Western museums will not return to their country of origin, and many may never see them.

The looting of sacred objects left serious and enduring damage on Indigenous populations, including loss of dignity, difficulty carrying out spiritual practices without the necessary artefact, and the inability to honour cultural obligations to the dead and ceremonial objects (UNHRC 2020). Whether institutions or individuals are influenced by external, political, social, and fiduciary factors that obstruct repatriation, for many Indigenous peoples, the ongoing presence of such material in storage rooms of museum collections is offensive to spiritual beliefs and serves as a constant reminder that little has changed (Simkin 2020).

In an attempt to challenge museums and other institutions who refuse to return these looted works, a Nigerian man launched a project called "Looty" to reclaim African artefacts by creating 3-D images of them, selling them as non-fungible tokens (NFTs), and using the proceeds to fund young African artists. Digital avenues like NFTs certainly do not replace the physical artefact, but they can offer paths for communities to assert authority over their cultural heritage and make a strong statement about the perpetual occupation of their sacred objects.

Aside from the particular importance of shifting the focus toward relational approaches to the production, promotion, dissemination, and consumption of digital artefacts, thereby avoiding extractive approaches that have been normalised over the centuries, it is essential to promote self-determination of non-Western cultures, avoiding the two extremes of enforcement and exclusion.

Technology will continue to spawn innovative and efficient ways to do things, creating exciting ways for humans to step into new worlds that people from previous decades could have never imagined. Yet, all too often, it is created without proper thought and consideration for those it directly impacts, putting the most marginalised groups of people in dangerous situations that have been either excluded from traditional markets or exploited by them.

We tend to overlook the potential unintended consequences of NFT technologies and their appropriation for malicious purposes. For instance, the union between NFTs and DeFi means NFTs can only be traded using cryptocurrencies. Therefore, anyone who wishes to release their cultural heritage as an NFT must become involved in crypto finance. But, if NFTs are simply a digital mechanism to register ownership of an asset (digital or physical), then there is no requirement to link this ownership to crypto trade or any other financial market.

Even decentralised systems are predisposed toward digital colonisation through their algorithms, a truly decentralised system favours consensus over regulation. Therefore, if an ecosystem is then “colonised” by exploitative actors, the consensus reached may actually only benefit Big Tech players with outsized voting power. Likewise, without regulation, nothing prevents cultural assets from being stolen and listed as NFTs on multiple marketplaces. How might accountability for cultural abuses be ensured? How can we create value for the community of creators, providing them with real rather than merely aesthetic autonomy?

Moreover, we argue that a mechanism such as the NFT should be considered with, for, and from the perspectives of the groups involved to create a better cycle. Indeed, such mechanisms should amplify the otherwise unheard voices of marginalised communities to integrate their values and needs into developing technologies rather than expand the legacy of digital colonialism by continuing to mute unheard voices.

Digital colonialism is rooted in the domination of the digital world that forms the means of computation—software, hardware, network connectivity, and data. Big Tech American firms dominate global technology supply chains as intellectual monopolies, undermining the data sovereignty of non-American nations. By monopolising the core components of the digital ecosystem, pushing their tech in the educational curriculum and skills training programmes, and partnering with corporate and state elites, Big Tech is capturing emerging markets, particularly African nations.

Most Africans are essentially stuck with low-level technology and features with platforms like Facebook as “the internet,” while data about Africans is being consumed. Those who have more, and better data can create the best services and solutions, attracting more users, which gives them even more data to constantly make the service better. Much like classic colonialism, data has been ingested as raw materials where data is processed to manufacture services back to the global public, which further strengthens their domination and puts everyone else in a subordinate situation of dependency.

We live in a world where digital colonialism is as far-reaching a threat to Africa as classic colonialism was in previous centuries. Digital colonialism entrenches an unequal division of labour, where the dominant powers have used their ownership of digital infrastructure, knowledge, and their control of the means of computation to keep Africa in a situation of permanent dependency, in which the Big Tech firms are firmly in charge. This hinders global economies developing their digital economies, manufacturing capabilities, and other domestic industries. Many inspiring examples exist of communities and governments employing data to advance sustainability, but if left unchecked, digital colonialism will threaten this mission.

Big Tech are reinventing colonialism through their ownership and control of means of computation and digital intelligence backed up by intellectual property writes. Most of the core infrastructure, industries, and functions performed by computers are the private property of American corporations, which are overwhelmingly dominant outside US borders, and are the subject of numerous critical analyses, yet their global reach is a fact seldom discussed.

Fighting digital colonialism is important from the privacy and individual user rights perspective. We must ensure that technology will serve the world’s people and avoid the further concentration of wealth and power on the one per cent. It’s time to talk about Silicon Valley and take seriously the fundamental changes needed to stop digital colonialism.

When systems are designed for exploitation and control, they need to be stamped out by redesigning these systems. There is a need for a different conceptual framework for developing and underdeveloped countries to invest in research and development (R&D) and foster a culture of innovation to participate in technological enhancements and its intellectual supporters. Consequently,

governments and citizens must establish a shared understanding of the benefits and risks of their rapidly digitising world and the power of data through investing in domestic data-driven initiatives for the CCI in the African way.

Marcus Deiss is a consultant focused on building best practices knowledge covering technological, cultural, environmental, and social topics.