Digital Media and Holocaust Museums in a Post-Survivor Era

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Abstract

Holocaust survivors are an integral part to Holocaust and genocide commemoration in museums. Seventy-two years after the end of World War II, however, many remaining survivors are either experiencing mobility issues or have passed away. Institutions are now faced with functioning in a post-survivor era, prompting a re-evaluation and a reflection on the appropriate approaches needed to communicate and connect with their audiences without trivializing Holocaust history. This paper critically examines the use of digital media by Holocaust institutions as one of these approaches. Incorporating personal experiences and scholarly sources, the following explores two case studies in the use of digital applications: the “New Dimensions in Testimony” interactive interviews prepared by the USC Shoah Foundation and the USC Institute for Creative Technologies, as well as the Second Life: Kristallnacht exhibition, created in collaboration with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The critical analysis of these cases can help professionals confront the challenges in representing difficult knowledge in their own museums.

Keywords: Digital media, Holocaust, museums, memory

Both scholars and survivors have commented on our inability – and impossibility – to fully represent the Holocaust (Salvo, 1999). Holocaust museums, in their role of facilitating and constructing collective memory, also encounter the task of capturing the ‘unspeakability’ of this genocide. Nevertheless, Holocaust memory has been shaped by generations of people who have experienced the genocide and World War II violence firsthand (Kansteiner, 2014). The foundational ‘never forget’ mandate of Holocaust museums and institutions, for instance, has been effectively supported by survivors’ contributions. Through the ambitious efforts of institutions such as the USC Shoah Foundation, which has collected and recorded over 54,000 testimonies from survivors and witnesses of genocide in its Visual History Archive (VHA, n.d.), recording and preserving survivor testimony in a mass database is not at issue. Instead, the challenge for Holocaust museums is how to effectively utilize a significantly
documented past to educate present and future generations.

People with an “autobiographical investment in World War II,” Holocaust scholar Wulf Kansteiner (2014) explains, are quickly disappearing, prompting a re-evaluation of the “contents and structures of our collective memories” (p. 403). The absence of survivors likewise introduces a new reality for Holocaust museums, one which does not diminish a museum’s capacity to continue strongly supporting its purpose, but necessitates a different set of tools and approaches. Digital media can be a valuable method to communicate, connect, and remain relevant in a post-survivor era, bringing an already distant past closer for younger generations. The post-survivor era requires museum professionals to not only adopt digital media practices, but also explore new approaches that enhance the visitor’s educational experience and stimulate memory, while not trivializing Holocaust history. Museums then, must re-evaluate and reflect on the function of existing and future digital media applications through a post-survivor lens. The following essay is an examination of the strengths and shortcomings of existing digital media applications by Holocaust museums, focusing on holograms and the Second Life: Kristallnacht program respectively. While scholars have examined the teaching of difficult knowledge in museums through the medium of digital media, very few have considered its application and ramifications in a post-survivor era. This paper will thus end with a necessary discussion of where the future of Holocaust memory in museums is – and perhaps should be – heading.

**Hologram Technology in Museums**

Resulting from collaboration between the USC Shoah Foundation and the USC Institute for Creative Technologies, the “New Dimensions in Testimony (NDT)” is a three-dimensional audio and video recording of survivors responding to questions in real time (New Dimensions in Testimony, Neuberger Holocaust Centre, n.d.). The initiative attempts not only to prolong and preserve survivor testimonies, but also to provide an interactive experience for and with its users, even if the interviewee has since passed away. Survivors are first interviewed in front of numerous cameras in a ‘dome’ that captures three-dimensional recording (New Dimensions in Testimony, USC Shoah Foundation, n.d.). Although still in development, the interactive interview utilizes “Natural Language Understanding” software that recognizes keywords from the interviewer’s questions and matches them with an appropriate response from the survivor based on keywords recorded in their initial interview, creating an interactive dialogue in either 2-D or 3-D screens (Gray, 2014). As scholars Elisa Giaccardi and Leysia Palen (2008) describe when speaking of cross-media interaction in heritage practice, active promotions of social interaction are “vital steps to support the tensional relationships between past, present and future, so that people can remember, perceive, and imagine encounters with the heritage” (p. 284). The hologram offers a social and collaborative experience, one in which the user takes an active role in their interpretation and construction of Holocaust history.
In opposition to this embracing of digital technologies, Holocaust education scholars such as Michael Gray (2014) have pointed to the unlikeliness that students will “feel the same connection” as meeting a “survivor in the flesh” (p. 109). Similarly, Kansteiner (2014) believes that the aura commonly associated with survivors relies on the visitor’s assumption that they could potentially meet the survivor in the near future (p. 404). The “digital ghosts,” as Kansteiner (2014) refers to the holograms, are merely “clever simulations of true digital interactivity” that provide “no real interactive power” for the user to challenge memory (p. 404). Representing a Holocaust survivor and their experiences through a hologram also risks trivializing the events – which perhaps explains why the NDT team prefers the term ‘interactive interview’ to ‘hologram’ (New Dimensions in Testimony, USC Shoah Foundation, n.d.). During Holocaust Education Week 2016, The Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre offered a demonstration of NDT at “The Future of Holocaust Memory” event. I personally had the opportunity to visit this demonstration and in my brief experience there, I encountered the unavoidable glitches that often accompany technology and the prospect of trivialization via the ‘crowd-gazing’ at ‘new’ technology.
Nevertheless, these issues did not cause Pinchas Gutter’s support for the program to waver as he spoke during the event. Pinchas Gutter, a Polish-born Holocaust survivor selected for the demonstration (New Dimensions in Testimony, Neuberger Holocaust Centre, n.d.), proclaimed his determination to not only tell the story of his experiences, but also the stories of those who did not survive and of the pre-war Polish-Jewish history that he admired. For Gutter, the NDT is a way to secure the life of his story after he is gone. In this way, collective memory can thus still function beyond the physical survivor’s existence. When the critical actors of a traumatic history have died, it becomes the visitor’s responsibility “to perform acts of reinterpretation” (Trezise, 2011, p. 398). As visitors can ask their own questions, make eye contact with the survivor, and view body language, the hologram offers a social interaction that stimulates the user and provides an opportunity to create a personal connection with their simulated ‘real-life’ experience. During my second interaction with the NDT program, I had the opportunity to witness the high-quality holographic video that projects Pinchas’ captivating story to the extent that it felt like he was really there. Despite Gray and Kansteiner’s hesitations, the NDT program provides an important interactive audio and video application that serves as an effective learning tool for Holocaust museum visitors in a post-survivor era.

Second Life: Kristallnacht

Admittedly, unlike NDT, Second Life: Kristallnacht, an online virtual world, was not created with the intention of filling in a post-survivor gap. Its examination, however, should be considered a necessary learning tool for museum professionals looking towards the future of digital media in Holocaust museums. Also, the powerful features of NDT are further highlighted in relation to the less successful encounter with the Second Life program. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in collaboration with the online virtual reality platform Second Life, launched an online ‘exhibit’ about Kristallnacht. Users are invited to choose an avatar – from a limited selection of predefined options – to embark on a ‘journalistic’ mission to discover the after-effects of Kristallnacht. The avatar, distinct from the user, is not equipped to feel or “die” (Trezise, 2011, p. 405): there is both the avatar ‘self’ and the biological counterpart – the user. Reflecting on her experience with Second Life, performance studies scholar Bryoni Trezise (2011) describes the “oversaturated cartoonness” of her avatar, “making [her] look like a silly animation” (p. 401). Similarly, as I used the program in October, my avatar’s ‘costume’ included a witch’s hat with a cat on her shoulder as the attire for learning about an event that became a catalyst for genocide. Against a backdrop of broken shop windows, vandalized synagogues, and personal belongings littered on the streets, the avatar can run through water, fly, and walk through walls, adding to the trivialization of the space.

Although Second Life is interactive in the sense that the user controls the avatar, interaction is ineffective if it lacks meaning. The user can click certain objects or scenes, such as graffiti on a wall to receive information, but, in this space, looking becomes more dominant than meaning-making. It is not enough for curators to stimulate spectatorship alone; they must also encourage meaningful
participation (Haskins, 2007). In one instance, as the avatar approaches a broken shop window of a Jewish-owned business while German citizens pass by, the avatar also passes by, merely looking. As Trezise (2011) describes, it is the script of the program “that permits the perfunctory, unemotional breaking of glass” (p. 405). It raises further issue when considering the controversial role that bystanders played during WWII and the Holocaust. Furthermore, Second Life portrays Kristallnacht as completely devoid of living beings and emotions. The user can explore private homes, for example, an experience which attempts to reflect authenticity by displaying family photographs and bowls of fruit. The house, absent of its inhabitants, grants users access into the private sphere and intends to invoke a sense of feeling through the subtle clues of authenticity and the inhabitants’ fate. However, the program’s attempt to materialize “virtual trauma,” without the most vital material – the family – fetishizes the family’s absence (Trezise, 2011, p. 407). The encounter becomes claustrophobic – not providing much room for the avatar to explore – and offers limited information and personal connection, perpetuating the act of looking instead of feeling. Museum visitors need more than mere observation if Holocaust memory and education are to be preserved and flourish in a post-survivor era.

The audio survivor testimonies, played during Second Life: Kristallnacht while users walk the streets, look at objects, and explore which buildings to enter, becomes more of a distraction than a learning tool. The testimonies are also inserted into the experience without the necessary context of the speaker, representing “disembodied” voices (Trezise, 2011, p. 404). Although the testimonies can be played in full in the final annex, the initial experience lacks interaction and meaning, especially as contrasted against the NDT interviews. This criticism points to the program’s lack of a thematic or chronological guideline: there is a fine line between invoking a sense of chaos to stimulate emotion,
such as the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, and providing an unwarranted chaotic environment, due to a disjointed functionality. Although the information provided in Second Life: Kristallnacht is valuable, without context or interpretation, the program is not conducive to the visitor’s learning experience. In-house and online museum programs have the responsibility to provide more than merely sharing information. Although well intended, the Kristallnacht exhibition on Second Life exemplifies the consequences of a digital media application that trivializes its subject and inadequately enhances the visitor experience. In the Second Life application, the empty and solemn streets intended to provoke contemplation are instead juxtaposed with a supernatural avatar and one-way interactions, and do not provide much awareness on what to contemplate, if at all.

**The Responsibilities and Future of Holocaust Museums**

In addition to creating adequate learning experiences for their users, there is a cross-disciplinary responsibility to educate the professionals creating the digital media programs for Holocaust museums. The application of digital media is not solely an academic or technician’s responsibility, but a responsibility for all those involved with preserving the memory of its subject. As Gray (2014) describes, scientific developments involved with Holocaust education are often led by specialists in technology, instead of those “sensitive to the historical and pedagogic issues ... central to Holocaust education” (p. 111). Additionally, visitors must also be educated on their responsibility to realize technology’s educational potential. Advanced digital skills are common in contemporary society, but the challenge lies with seeing beyond the entertainment value of digital media (Gray, 2014).

The use of digital media in Holocaust museums in a post-survivor era is becoming increasingly prevalent yet also more complex. Anna Reading (2003) touches upon the use of games to make relating a child’s experience of the Holocaust practicable for younger museum visitors. Video game culture can provide the technologies and skills necessary to develop “fully interactive and self-reflexive historical worlds” (Kansteiner, 2014, p. 406). Kansteiner (2014) hypothesizes that reception studies for such a game would reveal its potential for human rights education, similar to the unexpected facilitation of genocide education in the late 1970s prompted by the TV series *Holocaust* (p. 407). At the same time, the utilization of games in a Holocaust museum understandably raises hesitations and concerns about trivialization and disrespect of the space, as we saw with the Second Life: Kristallnacht example.

Augmented- and virtual reality technologies share similar potential. The NDT interviews offer a strong foundation for Holocaust museums to build upon, pointing to the potential for an AR/VR application that would simulate a similar experience to visiting a Holocaust memorial or site. Kansteiner (2014) agrees that museums must embark on the “frightening experiment of developing fully interactive [three or four-dimensional] historical worlds of large-scale persecution, ethnic cleansing, and forced migration,” according to the user’s “narrative preferences in the roles of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders” (p. 406). On the one hand, the biological self becoming physically involved in the digitally created historical world could facilitate powerful mental and emotional engagement.
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On the other hand, the application must address the representational issues evident in the Second Life: Kristallnacht exhibit. Museums dedicated to traumatic histories undoubtedly encounter numerous obstacles when representing their subject, particularly with digital media in a post-survivor era. This new reality for Holocaust museums has been anticipated through efforts such as the NDT interviews. The future of Holocaust museums certainly faces a great challenge, but is heading towards a promising and multifaceted path.

References


