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# *With New Eyes I See*: embodiment, empathy and silence in digital heritage interpretation

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## ABSTRACT

*With New Eyes I See* (WNEIS) was an immersive and itinerant digital heritage encounter exploring the exploitation of empathy made possible in such emergent formats. Located ‘in the wild’, and timed to coincide with the 2014 Centenary of the First World War, WNEIS transformed Cardiff’s civic centre as previously inaccessible stories and archival materials were projected onto, and playfully manipulated by, buildings and the natural environment. The research that underpinned the project unearthed a hitherto untold story about the experiences and fates of those who left their posts at Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales to go and fight in WW1. Focusing on the story of Botanist Cyril Mortimer Green, and moving between past and present, known and unknown, presence and absence, participants encountered a re-scripting and multiple layering of the cityscape, and an uneasy archaeology of the museological endeavour. WNEIS foregrounded opportunities for touching, listening and feeling; as such it was a multimodal form of investigation for participants. This article uses focus group materials to explore the intersecting themes of ‘embodiment’, ‘empathy’ and ‘silence’ that emerged in reflections. It reveals an audience ready for digital cultural heritage that embraces ambiguity in the examination and negotiation of meaning.

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## Introduction

*With New Eyes I See* (WNEIS) was an itinerant digital heritage encounter funded by the REACT Knowledge Exchange Hub for the Creative Economy.<sup>1</sup> It was an experiment in taking narrative beyond the screen or the interpretation panel, working with archival materials to tell stories ‘in the wild’.<sup>2</sup> Timed to coincide with the 2014 Centenary of the First World War, WNEIS transformed the civic centre of Cardiff, Wales’ capital city, as previously inaccessible archival materials were physically projected onto, and playfully manipulated by, buildings and the natural environment. WNEIS took place after dark in the Grade 1 listed Cathays Park, part of Cardiff’s Civic Centre, adjacent to National Museum Cardiff, Cardiff University and the City Hall.

Groups of participants, given only a map and a mocked up old military torch/flashlight (a prototype encasing a projector, speaker and smartphone which interfaced with RFID<sup>3</sup>), worked together to cohere a narrative. Some of that narrative was scripted by us as curators of the project, the rest was a product of their individual and collective encounters within that environment. Their sense-making was informed by the ways space was experienced through the body; in walking, talking, listening,

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touching and through what might be termed the physiology of affect. It was also negotiated through different kinds and degrees of silence, some of which had been crafted, and others created as responses to the moment of the event.

The project was a partnership between Cardiff University and yello brick (a creative marketing and street gaming company based in the city), in collaboration with Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales (AC-NMW). The narrative pivoted around the hitherto untold story of Cyril Mortimer Green, a Botanist at the National Museum in Cardiff, who left for war in 1915 and never returned to his post.<sup>4</sup> This was a story that had been unearthed within the pages of the Museum's annual reports and various war records. As such, it was also one characterised by fragmentation.

The goal of WNEIS was to explore how locative documentary techniques and gaming architectures could be combined to interpret museum content for a new audience. Given the increased emphasis on the digital in cultural heritage work, such projects, and their study, are both intriguing and increasingly important. WNEIS was designed to create a uniquely social, immersive, temporal and emotive ludic space within the urban landscape that created new possibilities for remembrance; the narrative was one that pivoted around one man's experience of World War One. We wanted to know how compelling that would be, and how convincing.

This article begins by offering an overview of recent literature on digital heritage interpretation, before providing an account of the WNEIS user experience. It then uses focus group materials to explore the intersecting themes of empathy, embodiment and silence that emerged in reflections. Investigation into new modes of digital cultural heritage interpretation is now global, with many and much invested in its progress, and the discussions presented here reveal an audience ready for increasingly sophisticated digital encounters that don't shy away from ambiguity in their examination and negotiation of the past.

## Digital cultural heritage research

Doing things digitally is often an attempt to do things differently. Sarah Kenderdine notes that 'Museum visitors gaze through lenses that have been refined over many centuries' (2016, 22), but we have seen moves across heritage institutions to embrace disruption and to encourage visitors to adopt a new set of lenses that might seed different perspectives. Indeed, in our project this was inscribed in the title of the piece; 'With New Eyes I See'. This sector-wide shift has not been solely a digital endeavour, and we should be careful not to overplay technology itself as a catalyst for such shifts in agenda; across museum learning programmes, outreach activities and professional forums there has been a not insignificant shift in perspective on visitors and visiting (Black 2005; Lang, Reeve, and Woollard 2006; Stogner 2009; Simon 2010; Ballantyne and Uzzell 2011; Grewcock 2014). Samis noted in 2008 that the museum had been 'exploded' and Cameron and Kelly (2010) characterise it as increasingly 'inclusivist'. The visitor is now often understood as very much an embodied and active agent, whether online, offline, or moving between the two (Drotner and Schröder 2013; Parry 2013; Kidd 2014).<sup>5</sup> We have seen the very notion of the museum embracing 'plasticity' and 'flexibility' (Woodward 2012, 15), not least in the many manifestations of the online museum, and beyond institutions also in what has been termed the 'virtual contact zone' (Purkis 2016).

Within that context our understanding of what can be achieved through immersive digital heritage programmes is still partial at best, as is our understanding of how 'affect' can be seen to operate within such encounters (Kidd 2015a). As Damala et al. note 'we know surprisingly little about interactive Cultural Heritage experiences intending to promote a positive emotional reaction' (2013, 124). Nevertheless there are claims that they might be able to heighten visitors' emotional engagement with heritage, and that this is in and of itself a good thing (Martina et al. 2015). Such claims have been explored and problematized in, for example, Mazel et al. 2012 and Galani et al. 2013.

The focus of the investigation into immersive digital heritage has shifted in recent years to the capacities of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies (Yoon et al. 2012; Keil et al. 2013; Petrelli et al. 2013; Woolford and Dunn 2013; Schraffenberger and van der Heide 2014; Martina

et al. 2015). Findings about these platforms are tentative, making this exciting but daunting terrain, not least in terms of methodologies for evaluation and research.

WNEIS was not a VR experience, but is reminiscent of AR where AR is ‘understood as an environment in which virtual and real elements appear to coexist’ (Schraffenberger and van der Heide 2014, 17). To Hanna Schraffenberger and Edwin van der Heide it is the relationship between the virtual and the real that is the ‘decisive factor’ in AR (2014, 18); there should be a symbiosis between the space and the content which enables a new kind of experience or knowledge to emerge. Such spatial and content-based relationships were crucial to WNEIS, but it is Schraffenberger and van der Heide’s concept of ‘Multimodal AR’ which is the most intriguing for this analysis. They stress that we are in the habit of overlooking the ways in which our experiences of AR are (already) multimodal because they are layered onto ‘real’ environments which are themselves constituted of all kinds of other stimuli; smells, sounds and temperature for example. As such, ‘the *real* component of AR often stimulates more than one sensory modality’ (2014, 26 *my italics*) and is ‘usually multimodal’ (2014, 27). The trick is then, to come up with ways to make the virtual layer respond to these stimuli. Such seamless merging of the physical and the digital would enable what Damala et al. call ‘a truly multisensory, embodied, and tangible museum visiting experience’ (Damala et al. 2016, unpagged).

Damala et al. observe the importance of monitoring multimodal interaction and what they call the ‘specificities of the acoustic environment’ (2013, 123) on users’ experiences, whether within AR or other digital heritage projects. They refer to distractions in the environment, including the noises of other visitors, and are seeking ways of monitoring and adapting the narrative based on those stimuli (2013, 124). Sarah Kenderdine also notes the multimodal ‘real’ in her analysis of embodiment in digital heritage work: ‘embodiment is multisensory and results from effects of visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory cues. Embodiment is entanglement through, and with, context and environment’ (2016, 29). Kenderdine posits that cognition itself can be embodied ‘when it is dependent upon features of the physical body – that is, when aspects of the person’s body beyond the brain play a significant causal or physically constitutive role in processing’ (2016, 36). Luigina Ciolfi documents the emergence of human-centred computing for museums that includes ‘a consideration for the body and the senses, the physical environment, and the social world’, where visitors might be considered ‘active agents in the process of interaction’, ‘embodied and situated’ (2015, 420).

This was the kind of embodiment we were keen to facilitate in WNEIS. It was important to us that participants were able to negotiate their own path through the narrative, to hold the torch themselves, and to be given an opportunity to explore with their hands. Our ambition to secrete the technology within a mocked up old military torch mirrored that of Halina Gottlieb in her attempt to transition from traditional guides to ‘interactive adventures’, including in the use of a modified flashlight (2008).<sup>6</sup> Here human-centred computing principles are foregrounded, seeking ‘to establish a dialogue between products, people, and physical contexts’ (2008, 16). Interestingly, in Gottlieb’s fieldwork, those who used such guides were seen to show more interest and remember more facts about exhibitions than those who participated in traditional guided tours. Of course, such outcomes are not inevitable consequences of these approaches.

As part of the ‘dialogue’ we were setting up in WNEIS, the physical context was key, and we were keen that participants should be able to fully experience the ‘sense-scape’ of the park after dark (Young 2007 in Kenderdine 2016). This park was an important link to the past, and a more fitting context than the internal of the museum, especially given that the museum itself was still being built in 1915 when our storytelling was (notionally at least) set. Martina et al. note that such original spatial and historical context is ‘often undisclosed to the general public’ (2015), but has a real use value where it can be built into heritage encounters. The example they use is the VR refashioning of The Sands in Las Vegas, an application that proposed to ‘rekindle the magical atmosphere of The Sands Hotel’ through an emphasis on place as well as space (Martina et al. 2015, 3, 4). As such, the cultural significance of place might be transferred in ways that are more nuanced, visceral and ‘felt’ than in more traditional forms of heritage interpretation. Indeed, as Ciolfi proposes, it is possible that ‘technology design can be a way of maintaining rootedness to a place and ... making the heritage value of a place more

visible and accessible' (2015, 423). This was a proposition we explored in WNEIS and the discussions that surrounded it, an investigation of 'outdoor heritage' that is rare in human computer interaction design (Ciolfi 2015, 423).

Research into embodiment and place has gained traction in digital heritage research, but investigation into the ways they intersect with debates about 'empathy' and 'silence' is less well established although both have now become areas of concern for heritage and memory scholars (see Arnold-de Simine 2013; Gokcigdem 2016).

That museums might be well-placed to cultivate empathy, that is 'our inherent ability to perceive and share the feelings of another', has become a seductive logic (Gokcigdem 2016). Yet we should be reminded that other-oriented feelings are only one of a range of possible responses to museological representations. Trying to instil feelings of empathy in museum users is inexact and perhaps even ethically contentious, and this was something we were acutely aware of in the concept and design stages of WNEIS. Within *digital* heritage scholarship, examination of the exploitation of empathy is still emergent. In previous research I have noted the 'affective turn' across the Humanities (Kidd 2015a), and explored the varied uses of 'affective design' that can be found within museum online games in particular (Johnson and Wiles 2003). Galani et al. (2013) reference the potentials of mobile applications to facilitate empathy, and Bryoni Trezise writes about the ways in which Second Life has been used as a site of 'virtual trauma' for some museums (2012, 394).

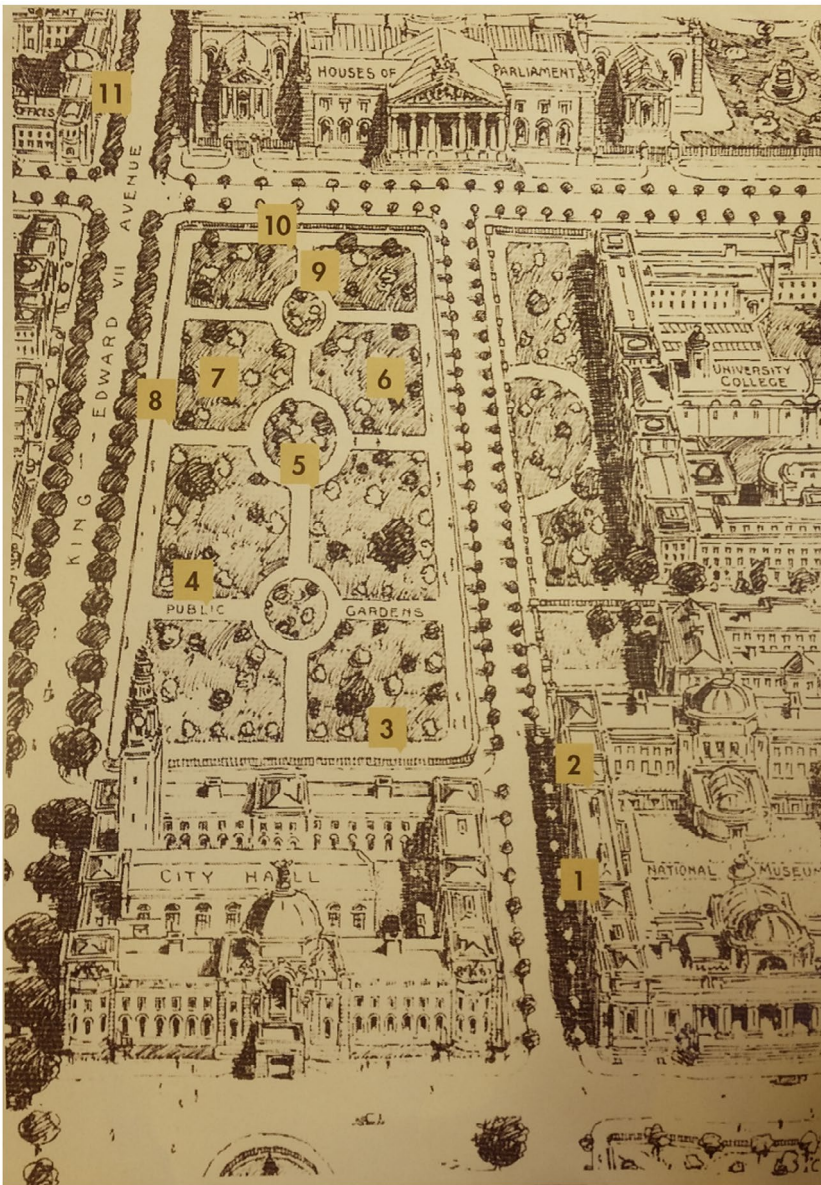
The theme of 'silence' has not been a real feature of the debate about digital possibility either within or beyond the museums and heritage scholarly community. Traditionally, according to Saville-Troike, silence has been ignored 'except for its boundary-marking function, delimiting the beginning and ending of utterances' (Saville-Troike 1985, 3). As such, the tendency has been to 'define it negatively', as merely an absence of speech (Saville-Troike 1985, 3). There have been moves to explore, challenge and politicise silence in recent years, and to make sense of silences as interventions of sorts, whether positive or negative (Kidd 2015b). Jen Webb has said that 'pure silence, or pure unmediated experience, is not a function of living human beings' (Webb 2009, 11). This was also a focus of our explorations in WNEIS; might silences be made active constituents within the narrative? And how might they play out within what was designed to be a social encounter?

The following section gives an introduction to the WNEIS user experience, with the remainder of the article then exploring how the above themes intersected in participant responses. It is informed by data from participant-observation with six groups of 4/5 participants each (totaling 28 individuals), and from focus group discussions held with those same participants after the event. The groups met and took part in WNEIS at approximately 5 pm which meant that, in November, it was dusk and getting darker throughout their journey. The overall journey time varied between 25 and 40 min. Our focus groups took place at the University afterwards (located adjacent to the park), and were facilitated by the author.<sup>7</sup> These took 40 min to an hour each, after which the audio recordings were transcribed and analysed. Focus groups were recruited primarily from existing audiences for yello brick's work. This perhaps meant that respondents were predisposed to respond more positively to this new kind of museum encounter than the average visitor might. This is an important limitation, but a useful one given AC-NMW's interest in broadening experiences for young 'explorers' who are interested in 'finding something new and/or novel' to do on a museum visit (Falk, *undated*, 119). It might be interesting in future research to explore the extent to which those preconceptions stand up to scrutiny.<sup>8</sup>

### ***With New Eyes I See***

Groups of participants gathered at dusk and were given maps and the mocked up military torch which housed the technology (see Figures 1 and 2). They navigated their way around Cathays Park accessing narrative fragments through the projector at a number of sites including the National War Memorial, other memorials, and the outer walls of the Museum and the Temple of Peace (significant because it houses the Welsh National Book of Remembrance).





**Figure 1.** Map of WNEIS.

Participants were asked purposefully and vividly to empathise. Cyril became their conduit as they traced his footsteps in a dramatic present tense to France in 1915 where he was wounded, then later to Israel. It was here that he died at the age of 29 following the Third Battle of Gaza (1917). Participants moved from 'scene' to 'scene' at their own pace, taking time to feel what he might have felt, or to situate themselves within the larger story about War that was unfolding, as it were, around them (as Cyril might himself have done). Participants discovered that Cyril had a brother, Hugh, who had two years earlier also died in battle. This was a story about the tragic, but of course continuing, impacts of war on individuals, families and communities.

There were projections; old photographs, documents, animations. A voiceover. The sound of (Cyril's?) footsteps that could be followed between locations. There were silences; some poignant,



**Figure 2.** A participant uses the torch/projector on the side of the Museum.

some awkward. Found objects; a first aid box for participants to open and explore, a white lab coat upon which one of the animations was projected. Participants literally and metaphorically projected a new narrative within sites they often navigated in their everyday use of the city. It was a narrative that in subtle and not so subtle ways intended to move participants to imagine themselves into the situation of this Other from the past.

Cyril, a skilled Botanist employed by the Museum, displayed a clear love for his subject, sending botanical samples back to the Museum as he travelled with his regiment. Such materials became a focal point; a way for participants to share in something quite unique to Cyril's footing in that war. Time-lapse footage of plants germinating, growing and decaying was projected onto a polished memorial stone. In another moment a series of botanical images was pinned haphazardly to a tree alongside a telegram announcing Cyril's death. As curators we made decisions about how best to bring what were clearly quite emotionally charged events into proximity with the environment, and with the character development. It was our goal to encourage participants to 'feel' themselves 'into the consciousness' of Cyril himself (Wispé 1987). This of course raises ethical questions as will be discussed later in this article.

The tool for accessing the curated content was a mocked up old military torch encasing the technology. It was hoped the simplicity of the interaction (triggered via RFID) would allow for heightened sociality of experience, avoiding the hardware becoming in any way a barrier to access or a distraction in the moment; we felt it was a reasonable assumption that most people turning up for such an event would know how to use a torch.

And so WNEIS began on the outer steps of the Museum, with the participants being handed a letter:

To whom it may concern ...

Buildings like books hold the traces of things that have passed, the voices of those who have gone before us and the echo of times that may or may not be too dissimilar to yours. The worn step and the thumbled page are shared; a common feature between then and now and one that inextricably links us. These things I have collected between the pages of many scrap books, every meeting minute and every newspaper cutting dutifully noted and recorded ... for preservation and for memory of the people and the times of this magnificent building that stands before you. A secretary's dream of uniformity and order of information, satisfying our human need to document. No doubt my records have been hidden for some time, growing mold and collecting dust. But now here you are. There are so many stories to tell that's it's difficult to know where to begin – but I have decided to start with this one ...

XXXXXX (name)

Secretary [WNEIS script, copyright: yello brick]

Invariably one participant would self-select to read the letter to the group before they huddled around the map and together arrived at a consensus about how to way-find and where their exploration should begin. The points on the map were numbered, but there was no suggestion that groups had to follow that numbering. The RFID triggered the content to be delivered at each stop, and we had placed a number of other items for groups to interact with whilst on their journey. There were of course an unlimited number of other stimuli in the environment for participants to pull into the narrative as will be demonstrated, and these became significant – although unanticipated – arbitrators of experience.

As previously noted, WNEIS embraced the fragmentation that we found in the archival recounting of this story; there was much we did not know about this history as it had played out both on the battlefield, and at the Museum. Cyril's story, as detailed in the annual reports, press reports and military documentation (archived at Kew) was partial at best. Rather than gloss over the cracks in the story, WNEIS made room for gappage and for silence. The walks between sites on the map meant time for participants to speculate, to question, and to draw on the other resources in the environment to try and cohere a narrative. Muntean et al. talk about the tension between fragmentation and continuity in cultural heritage work and how digital heritage can help to explore or be inspired by that tension (2015, 61). WNEIS was grounded in that tension and made it manifest in ways that, in the final analysis, proved productive.

It was important to us in our design of WNEIS and the data collection that went alongside it that we considered the ethical ramifications of our practice. In digital heritage work debate about ethics is often lacking, with a few notable exceptions.<sup>9</sup> We were of the opinion that our direct appeals to empathetic engagement were not inconsequential, and that their use-value might turn out to be ambiguous at best. Ours was an attempt to explore that ambiguity and to discuss with participants any unsettlement (positive or negative) that the intervention might have facilitated.

## **WNEIS: embodiment, silence and empathy**

The research discussions were focused on a number of aspects of WNEIS, not least gaming architectures and their appropriation for heritage encounters; especially ones that might be characterised as 'difficult'. Conflict is a challenging subject matter for heritage institutions, and perhaps unsurprisingly this tends to mean approaches that might be deemed 'safe' becoming the standard (Cameron and Kelly 2010; Kidd 2011; Kidd et al. 2014). This project was thus unusual for so explicitly courting risk, not least in its direct embrace of empathy as a pathway to engagement as previously outlined.

### ***Courting empathy: 'you felt a lot more involved in his story' (FG4)***

Most respondents were of the opinion that WNEIS helped them to connect empathetically with Cyril's story, and that it gave them 'more of an attachment to it' (FG2). As one participant noted; 'you can kind of get lost when you talk about war and the massive numbers who died; you can't comprehend a personal journey, a person's life. [This] makes it more personal' (FG2). Another reflected: '... and then I got it. It's about following this personal story which is amazing' (FG3). This was in all instances seen as a positive:

I loved how you got involved in the story and sort of wanted to know the outcome. You felt like ... at one point when the bandage was there I knew instantly that something was wrong ... you become very involved in the character and the story. (FG1)

It makes it more real. You have the connection to that person's story and you care about that person and that puts everything into context. (FG2)

For me there was an impending sense of doom right from the start ... You've got a sense that this person that you are introduced to might not be a part of the story in a live way at the end ... so poignant I suppose. (FG4)

Nevertheless empathetic engagement itself was not inevitable, and there were three participants who found that perspective-taking difficult. Such struggles tended to be linked to the extent to which Cyril was a known entity in the narrative:



I struggled. It wasn't until I asked the question 'Is he real' and someone said 'yes' that I went 'oh right'. (FG5)

Participant 1: 'I felt as if I should have more empathy for the character but I actually didn't ...'

Participant 2: 'I think it was because we didn't know enough about him at the beginning'

Participant 1: '... I felt quite guilty about that at the end'

Participant 2: 'You needed to care about him'. (FG6)

This link to an authentic historical persona and real world events was something that other respondents too reflected was important. In the same focus group, one participant said that had she 'found out it was all made up [she] would have been distraught' (FG5). Authenticity emerged as a significant point of discussion in our focus groups, and may have refracted our own anxieties about the fictionalising potentials of our form. Nonetheless, participants evidenced a desire to embrace and experience the personal narrative, a narrative of absence, loss and eventual forgetting. They noted 'depth' as a characteristic of such 'involvement' and immersion; that it 'draws you in' (FG3) and creates a 'stor[y] to be a part of' (FG3).

The admission of guilt from Participant 1 in the above quote is an interesting one, raising questions about what the negative implications of 'failed' empathy might be (if any). We had made a decision in our curation that Cyril was somebody who *could* be empathised with, and that that empathy would be in some way useful to participants' understanding of this period. Yet empathy does not always come easily, and our assessments of those worthy of it may not be universal. Might such approaches in time be utilised to interpret the stories of those we deem *unworthy* of empathy? Such questions did not occur to our participants, but have become a feature of discussions about the uses of empathy in heritage work revealing an anxiety about the broader applications of such approaches (Kidd 2011; Kidd et al. 2014).

What did emerge was a correlation between empathy and cognition. Participants had learnt something about the story of Cyril, but perhaps more so, about the fragmented nature of history-making and the museological endeavour: 'what I liked was that I was kind of on the backfoot and I had to piece it together. I really liked that element. By the end I felt I had filled in the gaps' (FG2). In all focus groups the encounter was characterised (unprompted, and repeatedly) as one of 'discovery'. To one participant it was reminiscent of the spirit of adventure found in Alice's 'Wonderland' (FG2) and many noted it was far 'less passive' (FG3) than they were used to when it came to engaging with history. Another noted that 'the pace is set by you, and you are in charge of it, and because of that you are really listening and taking things on board' (FG5).

Time seemed to distort for people: '[we were] displaced ... you are in a little pocket [of time] ... you are not in any time' (FG1). This 'doubleness', to borrow a term from performance studies, (Carlson 1996, 80) helped enable 'two contradictory realities' to be 'simultaneously in play' (Schechner 2002, 124; see also Jackson 2000). Our respondents evidenced a willingness to suspend their disbelief and engage playfully with the 'past' on offer. Respondents were under no illusions that what they saw was a dramatic presentation of sorts, but felt it uniquely enabled them to mentally inhabit, in the moment at least, another temporal location. Memories of such moments often acted as hooks upon which other, more factual, information hung.

### **Story in place: 'I love the magic when stuff that is stationary then moves' (FG1)**

The wider environment of the park as context enabled multiple unanticipated possibilities for 'serendipity' according to the Head of Digital Media at AC-NMW in an interview after the event. Where possible, 'our' narrative was closely scripted to the physicality of the location and the surfaces for projection available to us. Where this worked the responses were positive:

Against the backdrop of memorials a sense of sincere reverence was established. It allowed for a deeper connection to the stories than in a museum, maybe because the locations in which the stories were projected were part of everyday scenery and may be overlooked and ignored by many on a day to day basis, but this activity

forced you to acknowledge them within the framework of some historical storytelling and therefore recognise their importance. (FG6)

For others, the connections were rather ambiguous, with certain of the projection surfaces causing confusion – why, for example were particular memorials relevant to the story? Such connections seemed obvious to us in curating the project, but less obvious to our participants. Whether a more detailed map or other framing mechanism making such connections would have been appropriate or successful would be an interesting avenue for further exploration. Or perhaps it would be an unnecessary nod to authorial control and sense-making.

In actual fact, as a result of that ambiguity individuals scripted other aspects of the landscape into the story, such as the poppy wreaths from Armistice Day (November 11 in the UK) that surrounded the WW1 memorial, and that became a part of their physical experience of those spaces even though we had not anticipated their presence. Of course they would not be there for others participating in WNEIS at other times of the year. These become ‘a constant visual reminder that he [Cyril] was at war’ and provided ‘two depths of information’ (FG1) and ‘a nice link’ (FG3). For one participant, this represented a coming together of ‘the strongest bit of architecture and the strongest bit of story’ (FG1). For some, the wider array of sound inputs to be found in the park and surroundings (including helicopters, traffic, other people) also offered opportunities to engage with the narrative; ‘you chose sometimes to watch something else, but always to listen’ (FG1). There was in fact no opportunity for silence in the park if silence is defined traditionally as the complete absence of sound (Saville-Troike 1985). The silences of WNEIS were interpreted as more active and purposeful components of the narrative, whether by accident or design.

Another participant commented on the heightening of their sense of smell in the park: ‘you can actually smell the blossom. You don’t notice it in the day. But your senses have been all muddled up’ (FG4). Engagement of the senses was a common theme hinting at the kind of multimodal augmentation of reality Schraffenberger and van der Heide reference (2014):

It’s not just blank walls and spaces, lots of imagery and depth, and waking up different senses I suppose. (FG3)

there is an openness and a sensual awareness that makes some of the spots even more emotionally impactful. (FG5)

the sounds were really interesting, and then you were hearing the external sounds as well. I really picked up on that. (FG6)

As in the last quotation here, participants were quick to comment on the ways the real and the virtual intersected: ‘I love the magic when stuff that is stationary then moves’ (FG1). The technology employed, and in particular the torch as a conduit, helped this to be rather more seamless than is often the case with, for example, audio guides and many mobile applications which require holding a device throughout and interacting with it directly. That the device instead enclosed the technology (in essence making it invisible) and had the straightforward use-value of a torch was appealing to our participants:

I thought it worked really lovely. One thing I liked was that it was useful [the torch] ... it was useful as well for finding your way on the floor, pointing at the map. A device with a purpose that people gathered around. (FG5)

the actual trigger system, you are not even distracted by the technology. The technology is at its heart but you have nothing to do with it. It leaves you free to focus on the story, the explanation, and enjoy it rather than be concerned about how it is actually working ... key to any worthwhile experience with technology. (FG6)

This echoes what Halina Gottlieb says about the interactions she strives for in her own research; ‘camouflaging the technology behind familiar objects and symbols’ (2008, 175). This needs to be managed carefully though since, as Gottlieb notes, if the users’ experience of the device deviates ‘too far’ from expectations, ‘an unwanted conceptual barrier’ can result (2008, 175). This does not seem to have been the case with WNEIS where the torch also facilitated and encouraged the capacity to travel: ‘It was nice that it involved movement rather than a lot of technology you use just sitting’ (FG6).

People wanted WNEIS to embrace the ‘enticing’ ‘mystery’ and darkness of the park at night; ‘darkness is a bit more interesting [and] more mysterious’ commented one participant (FG1). In the park where much of the encounter was set, the lack of lights was ‘quite weird’ but at the same time made

for ‘a good location’ (FG2). Participants were very aware of this as a live space of possibility; ‘It felt like people might intrude on our experience, or we might intrude on theirs’ (FG3). They wanted WNEIS to work *with* the elements of discomfort and risk that the environment inevitably introduced and not to find ways of containing them, evidencing a desire to make ‘this familiar space not familiar ... to take you more out of yourself’ (FG4). They were not put off by the impending ‘sense of doom’ that WNEIS pivoted around. They did not want to feel ‘safe’.

One group demonstrated a desire for further risk, and for more dramatic kinds of silence. What would happen, they wondered, if the torch were just to cut out and they had to find a way to deal with that scenario within the narrative (or indeed outside of it). Silence was an important component of WNEIS; of creating atmosphere, room to empathise, and to reflect. For one participant, it was a key component of the interaction with and in the space itself; ‘It’s all quiet and you feel like that space is yours. In the dark you claim it’ (FG5). The interplay between silence and darkness is an intriguing one, creating new possibilities for presencing and agency. These were different kinds of silences to those that typify the traditional museum visit. They were more active and urgent silences, against which people were encouraged to ‘listen more intently’ (FG1).

### ***Disrupting museological norms: ‘it keeps your attention and it’s not, like, yawny’ (FG3)***

As is demonstrated above, participants were keen to reflect upon the ways in which this heritage encounter diverged from their normal expectations of a museum visit; it was ‘the kind of thing [that] can take you off the natural path the museum dictates you should do’ (FG1) and ‘very different to being in a museum’ (FG4), a site which is, rightly or wrongly, typified as being a ‘safe space’. This understanding of the museum is being questioned in twenty-first Century museums’ practice, and it is now widely (although not universally) accepted that museums are not neutral or apolitical. Nevertheless, it was an understanding of the museum that our (almost exclusively under-40 year old) participants were comfortable articulating, right down to the ‘squeaky shoes’ of the ever-watchful museum assistants that amplify the silences museums try so hard to construct (FG3). One participant offered a salient critique of the museological endeavour:

Everything is becoming more physical, interactive, mobile, rich and deep and [in a museum] you have an image and a bit of text and are like how can that possibly sum up what that thing is? (FG1)

Participants were universally supportive of liberating the museum’s stories, of letting them run wild ‘in’ the wild in this way:

You feel quite empowered because you are the one triggering it. Not just in a museum with four walls being told information. You are finding it yourself. (FG4)

I felt more engaged ... I liked the fact that it was completely different ... I was more engaged because you don’t know what will happen next ... whereas in an exhibition you read sections in a linear manner. (FG1)

It was good fun, a totally new approach and a lot more enjoyable way of learning something historical than other formats. (FG6)

The park was of course only temporarily mediatised and theatricalised through WNEIS, and its quick return to normality helped to highlight the transience of history and the impermanence of the people and stories that constitute it. The fact that the event might be considered ‘post-screen’ was important in this respect (Ferreira and Vicente 2014); that no traditional screen could be located, and that the projector itself was hidden from sight. The story literally and metaphorically moved on.

## **Conclusion**

Three findings emerged powerfully from the discussions we had around WNEIS. Firstly, that ambiguity is not at odds with a respectful and engaging interpretation of a challenging heritage. Indeed,

ambiguity itself was found to have great potential.<sup>10</sup> Secondly it was found that – at least temporarily – WNEIS altered relationships between participants and the physical spaces they navigated. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, in WNEIS participants found themselves having to re-appraise their prior assumptions about what museums themselves are and what they stand for. Empathetic engagement, embodiment and silence were all key catalysts in those shifts, and in engendering a sense of autonomy.

WNEIS demonstrates that embodied and tangible digital heritage encounters can be created from loose fragments and in outdoor environments that might themselves be considered challenging. This study reminds us that, as Luigina Ciolfi has said, ‘interactive technology for outdoor heritage has the potential to support truly innovative forms and narratives of interaction’ (Ciolfi 2015, 424). One of our participants intriguingly responded that the narrative felt as if ‘it was kind of spilling out of the museum. It was part of the museum but not’ (FG1). In such reflections WNEIS as a potential playframe for museum narratives emerged as an enticing reality. It liberated a story from the archive without having to rely on an existing digital heritage format or exhibition. It implicated participants in the narrative in ways not typical to heritage work, and it embraced risk in the process.

But many questions remain for further research, and for us in the next phase of our project<sup>11</sup>: Which voices, spaces, or other prompts best facilitate empathetic engagement? Have we got an adequate lexicon for asking about and articulating empathy within digital heritage research; most crucially here within live and immersive events? How important is the ‘closure’ of empathetic engagement? And to what degree is the manipulation of empathy ethically defensible? Although such ethical considerations seem not to have troubled our research participants, it is important that they are foregrounded within digital heritage research in the future.

## Notes

1. For more about the REACT project visit <http://www.react-hub.org.uk/>.
2. It was ‘post-screen’ to use a term coined by Ferreira and Vicente 2014.
3. A Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tag in the torch meant content would be automatically triggered once it was in a particular location, and that content could be tailored to that location.
4. Credit is due here to Heidi Evans, AC-NMW and John Kenyan, Former Head Librarian AC-NMW for drawing our attention to this particular history.
5. We might however be wise to question the extent to which this has become a normative understanding of ‘visiting’.
6. Other researchers within Human Computer Interaction Design have also explored torches for their potential to interface between digitised cultural heritage content and non-virtual contexts, including Ridet et al. 2014.
7. There were 9 questions for focus groups that reflect the themes being explored in this paper, and the broader remit of the REACT project investigating creative economy themes. (1) Tell me a little about your immediate responses to the event you just took part in. What did you like/ dislike? (2) Was the narrative presented a coherent one? [Was there a sense of beginning/middle/end?] (3) Was there anything that surprised you? (4) Can you describe what it felt like to access those stories in those particular locations? [Would it have felt different in, say, a museum or a school?] (5) Could you reflect on the event as a social experience? (6) If I called the experience a documentary, would you agree/disagree? Do you have thoughts on how authentic a narrative was presented here? (7) What can you tell me about Cyril? Did you feel you were able to understand his point of view? Was that a positive or a negative experience for you [given the outcome]? (8) Do you think it is appropriate that museums employ such techniques? (9) Would you pay to take part in such an event?
8. There were also a number of preparatory and follow up discussions with staff at AC-NMW; in the library (where we researched Cyril’s story), with the events team, and with members of the digital team. This included an interview with the Head of Digital Media at AC-NMW.
9. Including the work of Germark et al. (2015); on robots in heritage environments. See also Kidd (2014) and Kidd and Cardiff (2017).
10. This echoes the findings of Mazel et al. (2012) in their study of open and participatory approaches to designing digital heritage.
11. The second phase of the project ‘Traces/Olion’ has now launched at St Fagans National Museum of History, part of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales (Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales 2017). This extension of the project has been supported by a Impact Acceleration Award from the UK’s ESRC, and is a full partnership between Cardiff University, yellow brick and AC-NMW.

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