

With New Eyes I See: Writing fact/fiction in digital heritage experiences

Dr. Jenny Kidd

Abstract: With New Eyes I See (WNEIS) was an itinerant documentary experience exploring the tensions between the mythic objective and authentic presentation of fact, and the exploitation of engaging heritage experience. Located ‘in the wild’, and timed to coincide with the 2014 Centenary of World War One, WNEIS transformed Cardiff’s civic centre as previously hidden stories and archival materials were physically projected onto, and playfully manipulated by, buildings and the natural environment. The research that underpinned the documentary experience unearthed a hitherto untold story about the experiences – and fates – of those who left their posts at the National Museum of Wales to go and fight. Focusing on the story of the botanist Cyril Mortimer Green, and moving between the past and the present, known and unknown, presence and absence, audience members encountered a re-scripting and multiple layering of the cityscape, and an uneasy archaeology of the museological endeavor.

This paper uses focus group materials in order to explore the liminal space between fact and fiction that was opened up in the *WNEIS* experience. Rather than feeling tied to an authentic portrayal of this possibly sensitive material, it was surprising to us as curators of the project how relaxed those working in the museum, and those who experienced the event, were about the potentially fictionalizing elements of the form. *WNEIS* demonstrates an emergent potential for the playful projection of challenging pasts within our present.

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*Biog: Jenny Kidd is a Lecturer in Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University. Her research interests include digital media, participation, museums and affect. Publications include *Museums in the New Mediascape* (2014), *Challenging History in the Museum* (co-editor, 2014) and *Performing Heritage* (co-editor, 2011).*

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INTRO

1. Overview of project

With *New Eyes I See* was a site-specific documentary that took people on a physical journey through Cathays Park in Cardiff revealing previously hidden stories of WW1. It was a partnership between Cardiff University and yello brick (a creative marketing agency based in Cardiff), in collaboration with Amgueddfa Cymru - the National Museum Wales. It was funded with a REACT feasibility fund award and was an endeavor of research, documentation, curation and creation.

The project piloted and user-tested an event wherein members of the public accessed audio-visual resources through physical exploration and a combination of handheld projection techniques (in the form of a torch) and intertwined RFID technologies. The documentary allowed them to move between the past and the present and attempted to redefine documentary as an active multi-sensory experience instead of one that is viewed through a television set, cinema screen or computer.

This project explored how locative documentary techniques and gaming architectures might be combined to reach new audiences for archival materials and heritage organisations. It was hoped this experience-based documentary format could inspire participation and therefore extend learning and understanding in that kind of context.

The focus of the documentary was on telling the story of Cyril Mortimer Green, a botanist at the National Museum in Cardiff, who left for war in 1915 and would never return. A story that was unearthed within these pages [see slide], a story full of holes, and of potential.

2. The Event

Groups of participants gathered at dusk and were given maps and a torch which housed the technology. They navigated their way around Cathays Park in the centre of the City accessing documentary fragments through the projector at a number of sites including the WW1 memorial, museum, and the Temple of Peace (which houses the currently inaccessible book of Wales' fallen).

Participants were asked to think through Cyril's experience; to 'follow in his footsteps'; to France in 1915 where he was wounded and came home to recuperate, only to return to the Front and later travel to Israel where he died following the Third Battle of Gaza in 1917. He was 29. Two years previously his brother Thomas had also fallen in battle.¹

They were asked purposefully and vividly to empathise, to make the journey and uncover information which was scattered and hidden, as it had been in actuality; untold and unconsidered before 2014, an arbitrary moment of commemoration. There were projections; old photographs, documents, animations. A voiceover. The sound of footsteps that could be followed between locations. A series of botanical samples pinned to a tree. A telegram. Found objects (not 'artefacts'); a first aid box for participants to open and explore, a white lab coat upon which one of the animations was projected.

Much of the story was collated from war records and the museum's annual reports from the time. In WNEIS, audience members encountered a re-scripting and multiple layering of the cityscape, the (literally and metaphorically) projected a new narrative onto the spaces they often encountered in their every day navigation of the city.

¹ **Cyril Mortimer Green**, Captain, Royal Sussex Regiment. Son of Thomas Mortimer Green and Catherine Green, of Aberystwyth, and the husband of Gwendoline Mortimer Green, of 23, Southwood Court, Golder's Green, London. Cyril was a native of Denbigh, and had been educated at the University Colleges of Exeter, Carmarthen and Aberystwyth, along with his brother Hugh (see below), before being gazetted as Second Lieutenant into the 2nd Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment in October 1914. Cyril was an eminent and brilliant plant ecologist at University College London. He undertook a detailed survey of Borth bog near Aberystwyth and pursued his interest in Palestine sending back details of plants in that part of the world. Cyril served in France until he was severely wounded at Festubert on 9 May 1915, and returned home for treatment. Returning to the front, he was attached to the 16th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment, who were attached to 230 Brigade, 74th Division. The Division was taking part in the advance into Palestine, and had just successfully fought in the Third Battle of Gaza, when Cyril was killed in action on 6 November 1917. He was 29 years old, and is buried at Beersheba War Cemetery, Israel.

Hugh Mortimer Green, Captain, Welsh Regiment. Son of Thomas Mortimer Green and Catherine Green, of Aberystwyth. Brother of Cyril Mortimer Green, above. Hugh was educated at Carmarthen university college along with Cyril, and was gazetted into the Welsh Regiment. He was posted to the 1/4th Battalion, Welsh Regiment, the local Territorial Battalion, attached to 159 Brigade, 53rd (Welsh) Division. The Division landed at Cape Helles, Gallipoli, on 9 August 1915, and Hugh was killed in action the next day, aged 32, at the Battle of Sari Bair. He is remembered on the Helles Memorial, Gallipoli.

The tool for navigating through the narrative and accessing content was a mock up of an old military torch encasing the technology. It was hoped the apparent simplicity of the torch would allow them to engage not only with the content but with the magic and sociality of the experience, without the tech becoming in any way a barrier to access or a distraction.

3. The Experience

And so the experience begins on the outer steps of the Museum...

The participants are handed a letter and a map [see slide]...

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 thumbed page are shared; a common feature between then and now and is 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]

4. The Inquiry

[CLICK] Six test audiences were taken through the experience in its current form in order to feed back on its impact both emotionally and as a concept. Following the experience, each group took part in a focus group where they were asked to reflect on the spaces, the format, Cyril's 'story', and how it had made them feel.

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 members of the digital team.

I was interested in exploring a number of aspects of the experience as identified above, not least learning outcomes, gaming architectures and their appropriation for digital heritage initiatives. One of my main interests was in how our various manipulations of emotion were responded to by participants.

Here though I want to explore the liminal space between fact and fiction that was opened up during the encounters – its challenges, and its affordances. And here I am going to turn to discourses about 'authenticity' - a conflicted and difficult term, not least within heritage contexts where it's 'sale' has become a core component of the packaging of 'the past' (Waitt 1999: 836).

Authenticity is of course socially constructed (Cohen), yet seeking it is a condition of modern society and of tourism. It is, according to Cohen, a way of reconciling the relationship between self, and an inherently inauthentic modern society. One place people seek such 'authenticity' is 'the past'.

Historically however, visitors to historic sites and museums tend to be reasonably comfortable with a 'true-false continuum' wherein they can seek – and find – 'accuracy' of interpretation (Waitt). This would accord with Selwyn's concept of 'authenticity as knowledge', a 'cool' authenticity that can be distinguished from 'hot' 'authenticity of feeling' which is of course more complex. This distinction will be a fruitful one in this analysis.

In my research I have seen museums almost fetishized for their associations with the authentic. Authenticity is seen as an innate quality of museums' various practices; not least classification, conservation, archival, display and interpretation. Object authenticity is seminal to their continued existence. These are of course problematic readings for any number of reasons. Documentary too is of course deeply ensnared in debates about authenticity and truth, not least when it comes to issues of

representation. Documentaries, like museum interpretations, are seen as having a high degree of verisimilitude.

But in our discussions, once we moved past initially rather superficial appraisals of authenticity (mostly related to reasonably cosmetic assessments), interesting things began to happen. Our respondents were universally supportive of liberating the museum's stories, of letting them run wild 'in' the wild:

'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.'

'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 you had to listen more intently, whereas in an exhibition you read sections in a linear manner'

'it was kind of spilling out of the museum. It was part of the museum but not.'

'Links back to the idea of this being secret information that you are the only group of people who are getting to know this and that in itself is more rewarding.'

it makes this familiar space not familiar... takes you more out of yourself. Very different to being in a museum'

People wanted those stories to be playful, to embrace the 'enticing' 'mystery' and darkness of the park at night. To work with the elements of discomfort and risk that the environment introduced. To make 'this familiar space not familiar... to take you more out of yourself.' They wanted to feel stuff. They were not put off by the impending 'sense of doom' that the experience pivoted around. People evidenced a desire to embrace and experience the personal narrative, a narrative of absence, loss and eventual forgetting. They did not want to feel 'safe'.

The spaces and their affordances, ambience and quirks enabled multiple possibilities for 'serendipity'. Where possible, 'our' narrative was closely scripted onto the physicality of the location and the surfaces for projection available to us. Such connections were often rather ambiguous to our participants, with certain of the 'surfaces' causing confusion - why, for example were particular memorials, or the Temple of Peace, relevant to the story? Such connections were obvious to us, but less obvious to others. Whether a more detailed map or other framing mechanism making such connections would have been appropriate or a successful conduit would be an

interesting avenue for further exploration. Or perhaps it would be an unnecessary nod to authorial control and sense-making/place-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 November 11 which still surrounded the WW1 memorial. These become ‘a constant visual reminder that he [Cyril] was at war’ and provided ‘two depths of information’.

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. One participant also 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.’ Time began to distort ‘[we were] displaced... you are in a little pocket...[of time] ... you are not in any time’.

This ‘doubleness’, to borrow a term from performance studies, (Carlson 1996: 80) helps 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 engaged 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. These memories often acted as hooks upon which other, more factual, information hung.

The park was of course only temporarily 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.

What we learned is that all of this is not at odds with authenticity – or with a respectful interpretation of a challenging heritage. What it enables is a move from cool authenticity of knowledge, to a hotter authenticity; the capacity to be and feel your real self in the encounter. According to Handler and Saxton it is this that enables genuinely authentic experiences to occur; where ‘individuals feel themselves to be in touch with both the real world and with their real selves’ (1988: 243) A useful reminder that our realities are all ‘negotiated’ (Smith and Duffy 2003: 133).

In such moments, the ‘totalising narratives’ (Hutcheon, 2002) of past interpretations began to give way to an intricate exploration of the composition of heritage.

6. Conclusion

Regina Bendix said in 1997 that: ‘The crucial questions to be answered are not “What is authenticity?” but “who needs authenticity and why?” and “how has authenticity been used?”’ (Bendix 1997, p. 21)

Participants in WNEIS used authenticity as a tool and a vocabulary for making sense of their encounters with the past, but also to articulate ways in which they increasingly want those encounters to depart from tradition.

Hints at fictionality allowed them – indeed gave them permission – to engage in more nuanced and complicated appraisals of the past on offer.

It turned out that we were far more concerned about those fictionalizing elements – and conservative in our approach – than either the participants, or the Museum, thought was appropriate in the final analysis. We let our own prejudices about museums and assumptions about how risk-averse they are drown out the very potential for playfulness the gaming architecture we employed should have allowed for.

‘because it is seen as a haughty subject that is all the more reason to play around with it... if you make it more creative and playful it opens it up to more people.’

‘colour it a bit to make it more appealing to a broader spectrum of people’

‘it can be tastefully done’

WNEIS as a potential ‘playframe’ for museum narratives emerged as a real possibility, but one we ultimately failed to capitalize on. In the next iteration of the project [due for release 2016], we aim to do this more comprehensively.