

# Immersive Monuments

## Social Memory and Trauma Processing in Video Games and Virtual Reality\*

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Par monument, nous entendons dans ce texte un artefact narratif et spatialisé qui permet la réactivation du passé. À cet égard, nous considérerons comme des monuments les expérimentations rendues possibles par les nouvelles technologies numériques interactives telles que les jeux vidéo et les réalités virtuelle et augmentée (RV et RA). En suivant la perspective ouverte par les études les plus récentes sur la mémoire, nous questionnerons les processus contemporains de compréhension des événements historiques qui passent aujourd'hui nécessairement par un repositionnement médiatisé du point de vue et des émotions personnels.

Mots-clés : jeux vidéos, monuments immersifs, réalité virtuelle, réalité augmentée, monuments virtuels, journalisme immersif, machine à empathie.



his essay considers how social memory could be built, shared and performed through immersive and interactive digital media such as video games, Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR). We will address these as immersive monuments underlining their ability

to evoke memory by placing the user at the centre of an emotional experience.

Our intention is not to analyse the presence in video games of digital artefacts which imitate existing monuments or reproduce their traditional style, and neither is it to look for the reconstruction of these in virtual reality, but rather to consider some video games and immersive experiences as new forms of monument. For this reason, we have chosen to analyse cases related to historical events rather than games and immersive experiences that privilege individual memories.

We are talking about immersive monuments, being aware of using multifaceted and historically stratified

terms. We will use the concept of *monument* not in the broad sense, but as a memorial, starting from the definition recently given by Andrea Pinotti:

The monument is the remembrance device *par excellence*. It is conceived and erected in order to *monere*, to remind (but also to make you think, to advise, to admonish, to recommend, to counsel, to exhort, to inspire, to predict and to announce): its agency is therefore pontifical, i.e. literally it bridges; in being a concretion of retention and protention, set upright in the present of a *hic et nunc*, the monument convokes the past, makes it present and projects it towards the future (Pinotti, 2015, p. 73).

The monument—which the 21<sup>st</sup> century has widely questioned, for instance in the field of contemporary art (Cavallucci; Flood, Hoptman, Gioni & al.)—would therefore be a *device*. This instrument positions its contents in a set place with a specifically commemorative and admonitory purpose. Moreover, it is intrinsically narrative in joining past and present, and it condenses within itself an essential story for certain communities.

The idea of immersion is an equally complex topic, increasingly used to describe any media activity, even for watching a film or reading a book (Wolf, Bernhart, Mahler). However, the original meaning of the term, which refers to immersing a body in water, infers a physical and spatial dimension. In recent years, the return of VR has stimulated

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debate on a more precise definition of *immersion*. Thanks to the start-up Oculus – and then to other companies such as HTC, Valve and Sony – since 2014 cheap VR headsets have been available to a wider audience than in the nineties and earlier in the late sixties, when VR was invented. Immersion has been compared to other concepts that are often used interchangeably such as *flow* (Csíkszentmihályi; Michailidis, Balaguer-Ballester & Xun), *presence* (Wiesing) or *incorporation* (Calleja). Here we will consider immersion as a condition present in every media experience (Eugeni) but involving a physical relationship with space. Immersion can occur through a screen thanks to the proprioceptive control of the avatar (in the video game), enveloping the user in a 360° image-world and isolating her inside an acoustic sphere (such as in VR installations). We could also talk about immersion in AR, which adds digital layers of meaning to the physical environment.

In this sense, therefore, the video game as a spatial object, VR and AR experience lend themselves to a playful use and tools suitable for interpreting contents of various kinds and, therefore, also to tell an event and pass on its memory.

This process of virtual *monumentalisation* in video games and immersive installations will be read in the frame of memory studies and their relationship with digital media. The development of new archiving possibilities, which meet increasingly faster strategies of connection and sharing of social memories, has radically changed the ways collective events and traumas are elaborated by individuals and communities (Cati). In this perspective, memory studies, embracing sociology, philosophy, literature, psychology, political sciences, visual culture and media studies, provide new tools to produce a collective acknowledgement of the present, informed by the integration of past traumas with a possible agency in the future.

## CONVOKING THE PAST TO REMEMBER

### PLAYING WITH HISTORY

Should video games such as serious games and documentary games be considered as a form of monument? Do they contribute to shaping a social memory of historical traumas? Should they also stimulate a discussion about history and collective memories?

Occasionally considered a dangerous medium thanks to its ability to put the user at the centre of the experience (even a violent one), the video game is today a mature medium also used in the educational field (Gee). As the name suggests, a serious game is a game that has a purpose that goes beyond pure entertainment. Simultaneously, the docu-game is considered an interactive documentary whose main prerogative is to inform on a specific topic.

The examples proposed here belong to a single possible point of view, among others. We could choose many different perspectives, such as to analyse the monuments in video games –think of those represented as remnants

from a lost civilisation, such as in the *Half-Life* saga (Valve Corporation 1998 - 2020) or *The Last of Us* series (Naughty Dog, 2013-2020).

The virtual monuments we are going to analyse teleport the player into a historically meaningful time and space. This kind of digital project asks the visitor/player to interact: in doing this, her agency becomes part of the collective process of remembering tragedies such as genocides, historical events, and disasters.

*Darfur is Dying* (interFUEL, LLC, 2006) is one of the first video games of this type. Specifically, this game, produced by a group of students at the University of Southern California, aims to raise awareness of the Darfur Genocide. The proposed narrative solution is to place the player in the refugees' shoes and make her experience first-hand the difficulties of their everyday life, such as finding water in a country racked by violent drought. You can choose to be an adult or child character, male or female. The game also allows you to visit a refugee camp, a checkerboard of huts and makeshift shelters similar to real ones. In a classic management game system, you have access to available resources, occasionally prey to unexpected attacks and looting by the Janjawid militias. The elementary gaming experience continually puts the player in a frustrating and precarious condition, helping her learn about refugees' difficult living conditions. The game aims to represent an activist and viral memorial: from the game interface it was possible, at the time, to send an email to the White House to request intervention or support for the population. The game, therefore, does not limit itself to documenting the situation. Even more, it takes a stand and admonishes.

A different way of being present in the narrative is offered by *The Cat and the Coup* (Brinson & ValaNejad, 2011). In the game, often defined as a documentary, the user interprets the cat of Mohammed Mossadegh, Iranian Prime Minister for the first time democratically elected and deposed in the summer of 1953 by the CIA through a coup. We witness powerless the events of Mossadegh's life, interacting as we can with the environment, jumping on his knees, scratching him or solving puzzles that make the short game experience (about ten minutes) proceed. With great care for the image and the soundtrack, the game immerses the user in the climate and colours of 1950's Iran, full of carpets, arabesques and colours inlays. The scenes are like miniatures that follow one at a time, like blocks of memory and give away one after the other, to a series of unchangeable events. The precarious balance of objects, plans and surfaces represents a central metaphor for the political circumstances described here<sup>1</sup>.

(1) Other experiences of this kind can be found in the archive given by the non-profit company *Games for Change* founded in 2004, a relevant example of an initiative that aims to help game creators to drive real-world impact through games and immersive media. <https://www.gamesforchange.org/> [20/04/2021].



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*Progetto Ustica* (2017), screenshot from the game.

### CROSS-MEDIA MEMORIALS

A second kind of approach is that of *Progetto Ustica* (IV Productions, 2017), a serious game that aims to keep alive the memory of a tragic event in recent Italian history (fig. 1). The game, which does not aspire to be a philologically perfect reconstruction, designed initially to be played on PC and MAC, is nowadays available in VR. The player lives the experience of flying on the DC9 downed on June 27th 1980; he/she can move and interact with objects until the tragic impact. The game came from an idea of Ivan Venturi's, in collaboration with Mauro Salvador and thanks to the Association of relatives of the victims of Ustica.

What is relevant to us is that *Progetto Ustica* is part of a broader strategy to keep the memory of the event alive: in 2007, the Museum for the Memory of Ustica was opened in Bologna, and consists of a permanent installation by Christian Boltanski around the remains of the DC9 shot down while flying towards Palermo. The 81 victims are evoked by an equal number of light bulbs which pulsate intermittently in the centre of the room. Visitors move along the walkway that goes all around the aircraft and hear the voices coming from speakers behind 81 black mirrors, evoking thoughts and memories hypothetically attributed to the victims. Next to the wreck, nine black

boxes contain their personal possessions, listed and represented in detail in a publication edited by Boltanski himself (2007). On the museum website, it is also possible to take a virtual tour and manipulate the installation space through 360 degrees<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, it is a narrative ecosystem, a sort of “cross-media memorial”, which develops on multiple platforms and devices, from the museum to the video game as an expression of the will of a community united by a personal, historical and political trauma.

A similar and equally impressive case is that of the Anne Frank House. *Anne Frank House VR* was released in 2018 and supported by Gear Vr and Oculus Go. The immersive experience transports the user to Amsterdam inside the house where the Jewish girl hid with her family, writing the famous diary whose reading constitutes the primary source of information to tell her story. The visitor experiences the narrow spaces forcibly shared with other people, the noises coming from the other rooms and from the street, forbidden to the Jewish teenager. Inside the house, which was digitally reconstructed as it was when she lived there, the visitor is also able to interact with her personal objects. The

(2) <https://www.museomemoriaustica.it/il-museo/> (last accessed on the 20th of April 2021)

experience also appears useful to describe the difference between the documentary and the monument: in the first part, the viewer is made aware of contemporary events through documents and historical information; in the second part, she becomes a visitor to Anne's house-museum, a monument both to personal and collective memories.

### INTERACTIVE MONUMENTS

Some objections may be raised to our thesis, to our purpose of considering these digital objects as contemporary memorials. The first one is that these games and experiences could be regarded as interactive documentaries rather than memorials. In our opinion, however, there are many differences, starting from the specific historical reconstructive function of the documentary, which differs from the admonitory mission of monuments erected to convey the memory shared and celebrated by a particular community. The authors of these immersive monuments take a stand on the fate of an entire population (*Darfur is Dying*; *Anne Frank House VR*), the reputation of a prime minister and an international political season (*The Cat and the Coup*), and the victims of a tragedy often described still today as an inexplicable accident (*Progetto Ustica*). The aim is, therefore, explicitly commemorative since the player performs and re-enacts the historical events during the game session. In doing this, she adds her personal memory to the narrative simulation of the past. The second objection could be the lack of materiality and monumentality (in the sense of grandeur) of these monuments. It is easy to answer this by referring to the different materiality of these pixel objects, whose grandeur has to be found precisely in their ability to be ubiquitous both culturally and geographically. Finally, the last objection lies in the specifically playful and interactive nature of these products, which could be an excellent critical tool in the hands of an apocalyptic criticism (Eco); however, some scholars have already highlighted the usefulness of the game as an educational and productive device (Gee).

Among the many possible ones, these games and experiences condense some fundamental characteristics of the monument, such as its meaningful spatial location and the commemorative and celebratory nature shared by a community of people. Furthermore, in doing so, they also add something to the traditional idea of a monument. They lead the player directly to the places where the events happened and therefore maintain an idea of the erection of a tribute in a precise geographical context, albeit digitally (the desert of Darfur; the rooms of the Iranian presidential palace; the skies above the sea between the Italian islands of Ponza and Ustica and the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam). They are also configured as a modern form of monument in that they express the values and interests of a community of people, following a bottom-up model that arises from the creative processes of students, independent developers or culturally diverse groups united by biographical events. In addition,

they dissolve the narrative nature already intrinsically frozen in the fixed time of the monument into interactive storytelling that enhances our agency and our ability to identify with the lives of the people at the centre of the commemoration itself. Finally, as with any monument, the experience does not constitute complete knowledge of an event but it is the first step towards keeping the memory alive and stimulating further exploration.

### IMMERSIVE TRAUMAS, SHARED MEMORIES

#### MONUMENTAL AND NON-MONUMENTAL IMMERSIVITY

As we already mentioned, the spatial-narrative identity of the monument may also be experienced in several VR and AR installations. In immersive experiences that represent historical traumas, the image-environment surrounding the user stands as a *narrative space* where she can re-enact a real event in a "direct" and "unmediated" way. In this sense, her emotional and intellectual response to the event's digital reproduction becomes crucial in fulfilling the admonishing, exhorting and emulative goals of the monument. Accordingly, we must distinguish some immersive experiences with a true monumental identity from others that perform only a narrative documentary function.

An example is *Omni* (Acute Art, 2019), by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. The experience fuses two films (*Displaced Working Elephants in Myanmar* and *Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*) he made focusing on the immigrant crisis in Myanmar, presenting them in the immersive format of a 360° digital image. The first part is devoted to the elephants of Myanmar, once used for dragging logs from the jungle, and their attempt to return to the wild after the prohibition of their exploitation. The second part portrays the daily activities in the Rohingya migrant camp known as Cox's Bazaar, over the border of Rakhine, in the North-West of Myanmar, where the ethnic minority has fled from persecution. The two conditions represented help reflect the stateless situation and the existential conflict between dwelling and loss, natural rights and positive laws. Despite the 360° format, Ai Weiwei's *Omni* remains a documentary narrative experience, but not a monumental one. The user is addressed as a passive target of narration and not as an active source from which a direct emotional experience is translated into a shared narrative. This second process may be found in installations which exploit specific aspects of VR that previous media cannot present. We will distinguish different fields in which these properties can be met: the first is represented by the *immersive journalism* paradigm, the second by the *empathy machine* paradigm, and the third by the *performative* paradigm.

#### THE MONUMENTAL FUNCTION OF IMMERSIVE JOURNALISM

One of the major theorists of immersive journalism is Nonny de la Peña. The main goal of the practice she advocates is to remove the mediation of the reporter, teleporting

the audience directly into the centre of the collective trauma (de la Peña). This operation is simultaneously journalistic and anti-journalistic. Its principle communicative and informative goal is accompanied by the radical removal of the event's journalistic narration. An example of this approach is *Project Syria* (2014), commissioned by the World Economic Forum with the precise task of creating an immersive journalism experience devoted to the Syrian civil war which exploded in March 2011 and to the consequent plight of refugees leaving the state. In the first scene, the user finds herself immersed in an ordinary day in a crowded corner of Aleppo. In the background, she can hear children's voices and a song, suddenly muted by the explosion of a bomb which makes debris fly everywhere. At this precise moment, a fade lets the scenario change, with the user's point of view repositioned in the middle of a migrant camp. In both scenes, the user becomes part of an everyday situation, detached from any narrative organisation or synthesis. If, in the first part, she can feel the sense of precariousness caused by the civil war, in the second, her emotional comprehension is mostly related to the radical displacement which the condition of homeless migrants implies. What, in concrete terms, can be the testimonial value of an immersive experience mediated by poorly mimetic CGI graphics such as *Project Syria*'s? De la Peña claims that every scene of the immersive experience contains photos and videos taken from the real scene of the trauma. The audio itself is original, coming as it does from archival recordings of the explosion. Is it, therefore, possible to have a direct contact of this kind of digital image with the historical event, which inherits the testimonial function often attributed to analogical photography and documentary movies? In de la Peña's intentions, immersive digital media are considered a privileged tool to achieve transparency by eliminating any form of mediation in witnessing collective traumas. In this sense, she attributes her work an indexical relationship with the real (in Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic conception, when the sign is produced by the referent). This aspect is quite problematic for digital images since their function is ontologically more *productive* than *reproductive*. The immersive digital picture is indeed traced upon a photographic relation to the real more than the real itself. In this sense, immersive journalism follows the aesthetics of what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call "transparent immediacy", a condition in which the viewer is asked to forget the medium and believe to be in the presence of the represented world (Bolter & Grusin). Consequently, this work more than being a transparent approach to historical events appears to be the ultimate effect of the ideology of transparency. Simultaneously, the monumental aspects of these conditions become evident: through the coincidence of the logics of narration and spatialization, the user's emotional response requires processes of elaboration and comprehension.

### THE EMPATHY MACHINE

Monumental immersive journalism strategies differ from those elicited by another paradigm of VR experiences, the *empathy machine*. The concept of the "ultimate empathy machine" comes from immersive artist Chris Milk's 2015 TED talk, devoted to the possibility of VR producing virtuous and socially adaptive forms of emulation.

This process is especially visible in the immersive work *Clouds over Sidra* (2015), co-directed with Gabo Arora and once more devoted to the conditions of refugees in Syria. In this experience, the user is led by a twelve-year-old girl, who talks to her as they are concretely co-present in visiting the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. It is then possible to witness the daily life in the vast city of tents set in the desert: lunch, school, video-games and also the gym, which only males can access, but which is shown and described by Sidra without any particular complications. The heart of the experience lies in the encounter between the immersive cinematic technique of interpellation – the ability to break the fourth wall that activates a fictional dialogue between the protagonists of the movie and the viewer – and the immersion of VR that effectively places the user inside Sidra's world. In this way, VR becomes an empathy machine itself, able to put the viewer directly in the shoes and in the situation of the person who interacts with her. The monumental and memorial functions are then presented in the form of a dialogue: for the collective event to be elaborated and made object of social memory, the viewer is not only put inside a narrative space representing the trauma but also involved in the dialogic interaction with a reliable narrator who lives inside the trauma and can escort her in the process of comprehension. But, as Andrea Pinotti stressed (Pinotti, 2019), this dialogue is only simulated since, despite Sidra's interpellation and its effect of presence, she is concretely absent, and her interaction merely pre-recorded, resulting in an almost post-mortem effect. Accordingly, the immersive experience addresses a non-rigorous idea of empathy itself, which seems to correspond to a vague sympathy for the poorest and most deprived human beings more than to a real possibility to experience the other's inner condition.

### PERFORMING THE MEMORY IN IMMERSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

In the final paradigm, the immersive installation is not conceived so as to force the user into another's shoes but to bring her personal experience and performative choice inside a narrative frame whose link with the collective trauma is not grounded on its realistic representation, but on its emotional resonance. An example of this paradigm is given by a recent installation which puts together immersive theatre and VR: *The Key* (2019) by Céline Tricart (Fig. 2). Devoted to the plight of refugees fleeing Iraq, this experience does not portray a realistic environment but a dreamlike world. Before putting on the VR helmet, the user encounters a female performer who asks her to search



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*The Key* (2019), by Celine Tricart.

inside her own dreams for the forgotten memories of her childhood and to hold a metal key. Once this deal has been accepted the visitor can wear the helmet and be catapulted into a dreamlike environment. This space is represented as a fantasy city suspended upon the clouds. In one of the city’s magic houses, the user is asked to protect three animated spheres – with which it is possible to interact – from a series of dangers. In fact, the house is bombed shortly afterwards, and it becomes almost impossible to hold onto the spheres. They are suddenly lost, and the user herself falls into terrible hell-like scenarios, ending up following a line of strange creatures towards a horrible monster. In a sudden passage from the dreamlike CGI environment to an almost photographic image, the user recognises the traumatic events recounted by the dream; she finds herself in a bomb blasted home in Iraq, and all the previous scenes turn out to be related to the trauma of migration: the loss of home and loved ones, the long journey through dangers and suffering, the lack of hospitality in the promised land. At this moment, one can recognise the identity of the key itself: that of the lost home every refugee carries with her during her flight.

Seen in this way, the mimetic and realistic relationship between immersive monument and collective memory falls away. In *The Key*, the recollection of the trauma is condensed and displaced in the form of a dream. Accordingly, the sense of the trauma does not rise from the identification of the user with the life of another but from her own experience carried inside the immersive representation. For this reason, Céline Tricart has underlined how her aesthetic, far from following the paradigm of the empathy machine, aims to present virtual reality as a “first-person medium”, a medium able to join with the viewer’s personal experience and to connect it with a social comprehension of historical reality (Tricart; Grossi).

Lastly, collective memories can be rewritten in forms that differ from official history through strategies in which virtual monuments overlap the public space of physical monuments. These operations are possible, especially in AR, in which the virtual environment does not split the viewer off from the real but appears as deeply intertwined with it. An instance of this practice took place in Milan, where on October 18th, 2020, the community centre Cantiere placed the statue of Thomas Sankara, the President of

Burkina Faso in 1983, in The Montanelli Garden without authorisation. After its removal by the civil authorities, the activists replaced it with a virtual statue in AR, the *Statua che non c'è*, accessible via mobile phone app. Through these tactics, AR acquired the political power to overturn the colonisation of public spaces by official history, contrasting it with its creative actions of sharing and revising collective memory (Modena, Pinotti & Pirandello).

In conclusion, the process of participation in social memory and elaboration of historical traumas is, nowadays, mediated by the experiential and emotional process of re-enactment and sharing allowed by digital media. Acknowledging this function lets us distinguish two forms of media experience: a purely documentary one, where the user is addressed as a mere spectator of a narrative linked to a historical event, and one that we have defined “monumental”, by virtue of a relationship with the user that is not only narrative but also spatialised and interactive. The monumentality of virtual space has been analysed starting from the interactive potential of the video game, which establishes an action-driven consonance between user and picture in a shared space and time, and secondly in those immersive installations which carry her to the centre of a historical simulation. Moreover, different paradigms have been the object of analysis: that of immersive journalism with its claim to offer access to trauma without the mediation of the reporter; the empathy machine, with its radical identification with the victims of social injustice; finally, the idea, which emerged from Céline Tricart’s dreamlike approach, of a first-person medium in which the user brings her own experience into the installation and in this way can access its historical significance. Following the path of VR interactivity-immersivity, it has been possible to recognise other cases in which the digital image assumes a monumental value. The first is that of cross-media experiences, in which the union and hybridisation between digital media and museums envelop the user in a narrative space; the second is that of performances that exploit AR to oppose a virtual counter-history to the monuments of official history. AR monuments overlap the existing reality, keeping it concretely unaltered.

These strategies express how memories are nowadays produced and consumed: an integration between the personal and emotional experience of the individual with a collective conscience constituted by digital connections and virtual archives. The benefits of pixel monuments are numerous: they are ubiquitous places since they are technically reproducible and therefore reachable by enlarged communities of users, albeit geographically distant. The historical approach of the future will have to consider the new ways memory lives today, in order not to forget past traumas and restore their memory to successive generations. /

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