



Digital Historicity: Reconfiguring Relations with the Past in the Digital Age

DIGHT-Net research seminar in memory of
Wulf Kansteiner (1964–2025)

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Abstracts

Vanessa Agnew (Technische Universität Dortmund)

What is the point of a virtual forest?

The digital reconstruction of forests has become an important research tool in fields ranging from ecology, conservation, and forest management to landscape architecture and environmental education, useful for analysing and predicting the changing character of forests in the future. The environmental applications of digital reconstructions include, for example, using the 3D-constructed forest to gauge biomass, radiation absorption, and primary productivity with relevance for a range of ecosystem processes (Liu et al. 2023). Research into the digital reconstruction of forests is also being embraced within the health professions, with the study of the psychosocial benefits of what has come to be known as ‘forest bathing’ (shinrin-yoku) being extended to the virtual realm (Hejtmánek et al. 2022), as researchers begin to ask whether the VR experience of a digital twin forest can confer cognitive, emotional, and stress-reducing benefits comparable to that of an actual forest.

For all the usefulness of digital forests in furthering research into human beings' relation to the natural world, this talk argues that virtual forests have the potential to change our understanding not only of what the forest is and may become under the impact of climate change and societal pressure but also our understanding of what the forest was in the past, and hence our understanding of the historicity of the forest. Digital reconstructions of forests such as the Minecraft (Mojang 2011) rendering of the Białowieża Forest on the Poland-Belarus border and Greenpeace Poland's 'To The Last Tree Standing' campaign have been effective tools for raising awareness about forest loss and the need for public support for conservation (Amadori 2020). The talk analyses the benefits and limitations of such digital reconstructions and the potential for circular reasoning in evidence-based research on virtual forests. Further, the talk shows how digitally reconstructed forests may be predicated on models of past forests that uphold uninterrogated assumptions about naturalness, invasiveness, and the pristine and static past.

Following Ackermann and colleagues' emphasis on the need for holistic and interdisciplinary approaches to visualizing forests (2024), the talk concludes by detailing a project to plant a Miyawaki mini-forest called Garden(s) of Refuge in Dortmund, Germany, and to create a digital twin to promote broad-based engagement in a project linking forced migration, climate change, the environment, and commemoration.

Sebastian Graf (Lund University)

War, memorialisation, and digitality: Affective encounters in Ukrainian virtual museums

This talk explores the nexus of war, memory, and digitality in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The unfolding Russian war against Ukraine epitomizes how rapid technological developments have profoundly altered the ways warfare is depicted, perceived, and waged. These transformations have enabled new forms of engagement with war, including shaping immediate war memories in digital spaces. Engagements with war include the establishment of Ukrainian Virtual War Museums. Founded as a direct response to the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022, these virtual museums not only memorialize the war but also seek to affect visitors and ultimately make them act.

Drawing on concepts from (digital) memory studies, cultural studies, and digital ethnography, I examine visits conducted with research participants to three Ukrainian Virtual War Museums: *Meta History: Museum of War*, *War Fragments Museum*, and *Virtual Museum of War Memory*. The study focuses on how digitality and the displayed digital war artifacts affect the museum's visitors. I investigate the ways in which the mediated materials exhibited by the virtual museums impact visitors, and how they engage with the museums. To this end, I explore how affective encounters unfold within the museum assemblage. Consisting of exhibitions, digital technologies, research participants, and researchers, these assemblages shed light on the entanglement of digital spaces, memory, and affect in times of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. Deepening our understanding of virtual museums and the processes that shape the becoming of digital mnemonic practices, the analysis of Ukrainian virtual war museums adds insights to the interplay between the content of mnemonic practices, their texture, as well as their formation and perception by visitors, thus going beyond the discursive representations of the unfolding war.

Rūta Kazlauskaitė (University of Helsinki)

Reconfiguring relations with the past in virtual reality

In 1922, Walter Lippmann warned that media put “pictures in our heads”, or “pseudo-environments”, that can distort how people perceive themselves and others, what issues they deem important, and whom they vote for. Immersive extended reality (XR) technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), provide a new form of such pseudo-environments. In 2021, Meta, the company most invested in advancing XR, presented its vision for “an embodied internet where you’re in the experience, not just looking at it.” What happens when media technologies no longer merely transmit images, but instead offer an embodied, multisensory experience, allowing users to touch, move, and interact within an immersive environment? VR allows meaning to be *lived* – or *storylived* and felt through one’s body. Users are not merely watching a scene; they are present in a place and remember *being there*. Immersion collapses spatial, temporal, and psychological distance, blurring the boundary between past and history. A story about the past is transformed into a user’s *storylived* experience in the virtual present.

Authoritarian and illiberal regimes are increasingly exploiting XR in memory politics. In China, immersive “red culture” education pavilions allow users to experience, with full-sensory stimulation, the history of the Communist Party. In Russia, RT has produced a VR experience that repurposes Holocaust memory to reinforce the narrative of the “Great Patriotic War.” I argue that VR functions as a tool of affective engineering, deployed by populist and authoritarian regimes to propagate national myths, cultivate historical grievances, and shape public perception through immersive narratives.

To illustrate my argument, I draw on the case of Poland, where state-funded VR productions on Polish history invite citizens to “relive” immersive stories of national heroism and martyrdom. Designed to elicit feelings of victimhood, pride, and belonging, Polish VR experiences simulate hostile encounters with enemies in past conflicts and encourage users to align themselves with their in-group. VR transforms how history is remembered, experienced, and felt, exemplifying the political stakes of digital historicity.

Oliver Laas (Tallinn University) and Marek Tamm (Tallinn University)

Playing history: Reconfiguring relations with the past in historical video games

In this presentation, we explore how digital historical games have become a central medium through which contemporary societies engage with, experience, and reimagine the past. Over the last three decades, video games have evolved into one of the world’s largest entertainment industries, increasingly shaping public understandings of history. We argue that this transformation marks the emergence of a new digital historicity – a mode of being in time where history is encountered through immersive, interactive, and procedural forms of engagement rather than through traditional narrative or representational means.

We identify a key dynamic of this digital condition: the *spatialisation of time* – where pastness becomes associated with virtual place rather than linear chronology. Through the lens of procedural rhetoric, we argue that video games “argue” historical meaning not through words or images but through rule-based systems that model causality, responsibility, and moral choice. The ludic structure of games thus mediates history as a field of possible actions,

inviting players to co-author historical narratives and to experience the past as a dynamic and participatory process within algorithmic environments.

The second part of our presentation illustrates these arguments through case studies of major historical franchises such as *Assassin's Creed*, *Medal of Honor* and *Age of Empires*. The first is a historical third-person action-adventure video game series, the second a first-person shooter series, and the third a historical real-time strategy series. Our goal in choosing these three franchises is to show that our thesis of the spatialisation of time applies to different genres of video games with diverse game mechanics, narratives and visual styles.

We conclude that historical video games are not merely entertainment products or visualisations of history; they constitute a distinct mode of historical mediation that blurs the boundaries between representation, simulation, and participation. By analysing these games as dynamic systems of historical meaning-making, we propose that to “play history” is to inhabit the past as an unfolding process rather than as a fixed narrative – an activity that profoundly reconfigures how historical knowledge is produced, circulated, and experienced in the digital age.

Martin Pogačar (Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts)

Memory escalation: Mnemonic agency in time of AI

Human communication of past couple of hundred years is viscerally entangled with the development of media technologies as central means of exteriorisation. This entanglement is conditioned by, and is itself co-driving systemic escalation that fuels a detachment between lived realities and technological advancements. These processes critically affect how humans remember and make sense of memories, and lead to a specific set of conditions framed in and by digital/social media and increasingly so in the AI-affected media ecologies: this is framed as escalating memories.

From this vantage, the presentation first asks: What are the effects of escalation on memory and memorialisation? In this part it assess the technical conditions of exteriorisation as the basis of communication, with particular focus on digital media and AI as the prime technologies of social escalation that structure both the present understanding of the ‘accelerated production of the past’. It then zooms in on the question: If mnemonic function is relegated to AI, what are the implications for the remembering (and forgetting) subject and human mnemonic agency? In this part it discusses the combined effects of escalation and the question of exteriorisation of memory, and explores the uneasy relationship between the relegation of cognitive and mnemonic function to human-AI interaction and the future of mnemonic agency.

Victoria Grace Richardson-Walden (University of Sussex)

Building a living database: Archive of digital Holocaust memory

Collective Holocaust memory has always been a complex object of study – where does one memory practice related to this global event begin or end? Who defines the ‘collective’, and is there really any sense of a homogenous ‘collective’ memory anyway (Gensburger 2016)? Nevertheless, this complexity expands further as this memoryscape becomes increasingly digital. Digital Holocaust memory – as a phenomenon – features an array of actants: heritage,

memory, educational organisations, and the individual professionals that inform their work, alongside new actors in the field – programmers, developers, digital producers, social media influencers and managers, as well as non-human hardware, software, protocols, systems and infrastructure. Furthermore, the extensiveness of its digitality is ever-expanding, with new projects and campaigns launching more and more frequently, from video games to interactive testimonies, portals and data spaces, and digitised collections, XR experiences and mobile apps.

How then, can we attempt to study this phenomenon? At the Landecker Digital Memory Lab, University of Sussex, we are building the first living database-archive of global digital Holocaust memory practice in an attempt to both answer this question for ourselves and to provide a resource for other researchers and practitioners. This talk will introduce the database's theoretical influences: the post-humanist work of Karen Barad (2007), media archaeology (particularly the work of Strauven 2013), and Georges Didi-Huberman's conceptualisation of 'montage' (2008, 2018). It will then present the different data collection elements of our project: surveying global digital Holocaust memory practice, and recording walkthroughs and interviews, then it will present the platform itself and talk through the various technical challenges we have been working through over the past 18 months or so.

The database-archive Digital Memory Database will publicly launch in January 2026. Its design aims to recognise the entanglement of human and non-human actants in the production of digital memory, both in terms of how content is recorded and indexed, but also in continuing to be a *living* space of memory production, where users have various interactive tools to allow them to create narratives from its content.

Hannu Salmi (University of Turku)

Computer vision, AI tools and the sense of the past

The presentation focuses on the significance of computer-assisted image analysis and digital image production in terms of historical understanding. The problem includes many aspects that need to be considered in connection to each other. On the one hand, historical images, drawings, paintings and photos have been extensively digitized, and these resources can be employed for the analysis and interpretation of visual material. On the other hand, digitized material can be used to produce new images, to modify, retouch and transform old images, or produce completely new images with a historical impact or sense, in which case the digitized material serves as training material. The production and consumption of digitized and digitally created historical images have been going on already for some time, for example in film, television, and advertising. Likewise, genealogy services have introduced tools for colouring historical photographs and animating still images. The purpose of this presentation is to deconstruct and analyse the ways in which digital tools construct the experience of the past and the sense of visual historicity in which the digitized and born-digital content merge into one another. The aim is to track down modes of digital historicity on the basis of recent developments in computer vision and AI tools.