What We Ought to Know: How Digital Museums Can Facilitate Reflection and Discourse of The Nigerian Civil War

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Abstract: The Nigerian Civil War is a key that is often unspoken of in public or taught in schools, despite its aftermath still being felt decades later in Nigerian society. In this paper, we make a case for how a digital museum offers room to reflect, discuss and remember this important part of the country's history. We use design-based research to develop a digital museum to improve access to this history through a diversity of voices.

Introduction

The Nigerian Civil War (NCW), also referred to as the Biafran War, took place from 1967-1970 when Nigerians from the Eastern part of the country made a secession attempt. The number of lives lost are estimated to be between 500,000 to 3 million people (Anthony, 2014). As important and definitive as this event is in Nigerian history and current life, this war has received little productive discourse or reflection in schools and public spaces.

Recent technological advancements in culture and history preservation such as digital museums have provided an opportunity to curate cultures and histories, some of which are controversial, in a low-pressure environment while engaging directly with the public and those impacted by it.

Objectives

With this study, we seek to understand how Nigerians currently learn about the civil war, the role technology can play in this learning process and the importance of spaces of memory in the preservation of history, through the design of a digital museum. As virtual museum spaces are often a replica of physical museum structures inspired by architectural designs, we aim to design a space that is informed primarily by the needs of visitors and those affected by the war, and allow those needs drive the interaction with the exhibition. We also seek to generate more conversations and research on providing more accessible learning materials for learners using virtual reality tools.

Background

There are multiple accounts of the NCW across academia, literature, and media (Dalley, 2013; Omaka, 2014). The digital museum is drawing from these multiple accounts, as well as interviews with a diverse group of Nigerians, to paint a bigger picture in one space where they can be analyzed and studied side-by-side to construct a better understanding of the war and facilitate critical exploration of its different parts.

Virtual museums, offer ideal spaces for cognitive actions of critical thinking, and reflection on some of the more devastating effects of war—like destruction and death—can take place safely with the support, guidance, and scaffolding for the learning. They also provide an environment for a community of learners to develop where meaning can be constructed and mediated.

Methodology

The paper presents the first iteration of a design-based research project. This first step of this iteration involved carrying out a needs analysis to identify the current issues in the learning about the NCW within Nigeria. This was achieved through interviews with nine Nigerians (between the ages of 18 and 65). The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol designed to elicit personal understanding and experience of the war and individual narratives about the war. These interviews were thematically coded, and the emergent codes allowed us to build a framework to guide our design for a virtual museum focused on the NCW. The framework to understand the learning needs was patterned in the following order: 1) Identifying the current understanding and gaps, 2) uncovering hidden stories and alternative narratives, and 3) highlighting the goals of the study with evidenced-based research, all these with the overall outcome of a richer and more nuanced understanding of the war.

Before describing the design, we first present a summary of the interview responses and analysis.

Interview Results and Analysis

The responses showed a wide range of understanding of the war and how it should be addressed. Some responses evidenced a parallel in thoughts and opinions, while others showed a divergence in opinions and may provide a

clue as to why even today, this topic remains divisive. We discuss a few of the responses below to highlight particularly important themes:

- *Knowledge of the war.* Most of the participants showed a comparable understanding of basic information around the war and revealed parents and books are the recurring primary sources of information.

- *Silencing of war narratives.* Silencing of historical trauma and personal narratives has been identified as being a prominent outcome in areas with a history of conflict (Liem, 2007). Participants discussed why they thought the war wasn't being discussed enough as a country, an explained the existence of the culture of silencing people they believe has been adopted with regards to the war.

- *Monuments and memorials.* Participants expressed the importance of informal spaces, monuments, and memorials about the war. Many comments referred to them as symbols of remembrance, to honour victims and a part of national memory.

- *Future of history Education.* Participants also suggested digital materials and informal spaces such as a digital museum as an ideal platform to present a history of the war, as its controversial nature could make it unsuitable for the formal structure of a classroom, a concern identified by Lindquist (2010).

Design of the Digital Museum

The museum design is guided by the themes that emerged from the interview analysis and the framework of understanding the learning needs referred to in the methodology. Below we describe our first iteration of the design, which can be viewed at www.nigeriancivilwarmuseum.com

Poor knowledge of the war and its impact on the availability of learning resources and spaces was frequently alluded to during the study. To bridge this knowledge gap, the museum is curating learning resources and instructional materials for students and for teachers to incorporate into their lesson plans for use within and outside the classroom. As respondents identified, this digital representation places a low demand on the educational resources available.

The discussion forum in the museum facilitates constructive interaction and fulfils the vital and enriching social aspect of learning. Here, visitors can engage in detailed analysis and productive conversations drawing from the various resources located in different parts of the digital museum space. These interactions also promote varied opinions in the dissection of the history and give strength to minority accounts that often get drowned out. The exchanges are characteristic of a community of learners and the kind of activities that improve the scholarship of the community.

Conclusion

The history of a nation to her people is of great importance, and the education of same is vital. This study proposes a non-traditional approach to achieving this and implementing it within and beyond the classroom and school structure. This digital support of history pedagogy seeks to concretize learning, improve understanding, and provide a more inclusive approach to education using the history of the Nigerian Civil War as an example. Future design iterations will review a more robust curriculum, include more minority voices, engage public and private stakeholders, and aim for integration into the traditional school structure. Through these future iterations we hope to truly impact people's understanding of the Nigerian Civil War and unsilenced the important stories and lessons it's history can teach the world.

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