

# White Paper Report

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## **DRAMA IN THE DELTA:**

### **Digitally Reenacting Civil Rights Performances at Arkansas' Wartime Camps for Japanese Americans**

Project Director, Dr. Emily Roxworthy, University of California, San Diego

NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up Award Level I **White Paper**

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## **1. Introduction**

“Why don’t you just stage a play about it?” This was the first question that my new San Diego Supercomputer Center (SDSC) collaborator, Amit Chourasia, asked me after I explained the intended scope of the 3D video role-playing game (video-RPG) project DRAMA IN THE DELTA (hereafter: DiD). My original collaborator, Steve Cutchin, had departed the SDSC for a position at the new graduate-level research center at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Saudi Arabia. (This was the first hard-earned lesson of DiD’s start-up phase: visualization scientists from the United States are in high demand for research positions at top universities abroad, particularly in developing nations such as Saudi Arabia.) New to the project and replacing Steve, Amit wondered why I wanted to reenact historic (ca. 1944) performances from the Arkansas Delta Japanese American internment camps of Rohwer and Jerome, when the 3D modeling and animation process was so costly, time-consuming, and labor-intensive.

I explained to Amit that, unlike the darkened audience area that characterized theatre architecture—where the spectator remains passive and separated from the action performed onstage—the DiD concept hinged on activating its audience, allowing users to explore its reconstructions of the Rohwer and Jerome camps, interact with its historic actors, and experience the culture of Japanese American internees, African American laborers, and white American administrators *in the first person*, from the perspective of a range of diverse avatars. Such a dynamic digital model of the World War II internment and the Jim Crow segregation of the wartime Delta was necessitated by the overwhelming indifference that most Americans, particularly the Web 2.0 generations, have about this history. While this explanation temporarily satisfied Amit (who is now my co-project director), his initial question was one we would return to throughout the 18-month start-up period funded by this NEH Digital Humanities Level I grant. As of this writing, the DiD project team has accomplished enough of the digital environments infrastructure and enough of the game prototyping to conclude that 3D RPG technology is the most effective method for telling the DiD story. This white paper will describe this and other conclusions yielded during the start-up period, the progress made to date on this project, and the future of DiD.

## **2. Project description**

In 2009 at the University of California, we launched DRAMA IN THE DELTA (DiD) to analyze these questions in the form of a freely available interactive three-dimensional (3D) digital simulation of key historic sites from the World War II Arkansas Delta that interprets the systems of racial segregation that governed home-front life when black-white Jim Crow laws

intersected with the policies of two local internment camps for Americans of Japanese descent. The U.S. government called these camps Rohwer and Jerome Relocation Centers; each imprisoned a peak wartime population of 8,500. While some Californians are aware of the two Japanese American internment camps that were in our state (Manzanar and Tule Lake), broad segments of the American population have little knowledge that camps existed around the country and little-to-no knowledge that two of these camps operated in southeast Arkansas, situating anti-Japanese policies alongside Jim Crow laws. Our project's goal is to create a historical reenactment of activities that took place at these sites in 1944, using 3D video game technology as an accessible and appealing medium to engage the curiosity of the general public. With the funding provided by an NEH Digital Humanities Level I Start-Up Award for the period April 1, 2009 through August 31, 2010, the DiD team launched the project through research and conversations with humanities scholars and through laying digital groundwork including storyboard, concept drawings, a project website, and 3D modeling of game characters and architecture. The conclusions and progress yielded during this start-up period are described in white paper.

### **3. Justification**

Unlike traditional “living history” projects at sites such as Colonial Williamsburg, where museum professionals provide first-person interpretation that positions the audience as spectators to the reenactment, 3D video-RPG technology will enable our project's audiences to actively role-play as historic actors and experience their social, political, and emotional struggles through virtual embodiment. Gamers' deep engagement with the avatars they manipulate in-game has been well documented by scholars,<sup>1</sup> and sound humanities scholarship suggests that this methodology particularly suits internment history (and U.S. race relations in general). Our project director Emily Roxworthy is a humanities scholar and respected internment historian who is intimately involved in all phases of DiD's development and implementation; in her book *The Spectacle of Japanese American Trauma: Racial Performativity and World War II*, Roxworthy argues that the unconstitutional internment policy came to pass because the American public was positioned as passive spectators to the mass evacuation and imprisonment of their neighbors of Japanese descent. Rather than empathizing with these neighbors as individuals suffering a great hardship or injustice, most Americans took their cue from media and government accounts that depicted Japanese Americans en masse—regardless of citizenship or birthplace—as inscrutable and unfeeling, happily submitting to their forced exile from society.<sup>2</sup> Leading digital media scholar Henry Jenkins characterizes interactive games as “ethical testing grounds” that disallow users from

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Zach Waggoner, *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games* (McFarland, 2009). John Suler argues that when 3D digital environments allow the user to navigate in first person, “you live ‘inside’ your avatar, looking out into the world much as you do in real life, without seeing your own avatar (body). You have to move through the graphical space in order to see other avatars and objects that may be hidden from view. 3D advocates like the feeling of ‘immersion’ that such worlds create. You feel like you are really there, in the environment. Some advocates claim that this 3D living creates heightened emotional reactions because it mimics the sensory experience of the real world.” Suler, “The Psychology of Avatars and Graphical Space in Multimedia Chat Communities: A Study of The Palace.” Jan. 2007. *The Psychology of Cyberspace* 2.7 <<http://www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/psyber/psyav.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Roxworthy, *The Spectacle of Japanese American Trauma: Racial Performativity and World War II* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

passively experiencing events, as in cinema.<sup>3</sup> An immersive 3D environment allows a fuller view of internment history because the donning of avatar personas provide “player-controlled surrogates”<sup>4</sup> that allow Americans to finally experience the internment not as spectators but as engaged participants, thus deepening the public’s understanding of significant humanities questions—questions just as relevant today as they were in the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

#### **4. Content and creative approach**

Our project’s title hinges on a pun: the intersection of the internment policy and Jim Crow laws in the Arkansas Delta produced highly dramatic race relations, and some of the richest sites where these relations played out were dramatic productions and other instances of performance culture, broadly construed. The title was the brainchild of public historian and DiD collaborator Johanna Miller Lewis, a University of Arkansas professor who directed the landmark *Life Interrupted* project, which was the first large-scale interpretation of the Rohwer and Jerome camp experiences (<http://ualr.edu/lifeinterrupted/>). Americans’ historical ambivalence about the treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II stems from difficult questions at the heart of citizenship and democracy:

- In a time of war, can we question the loyalty of Americans with the “face of the enemy”? Is racial profiling ever justified?
- If the treatment is humane, can we consider the wholesale evacuation and internment of a minority group to be patently different than Nazi-style persecution?
- How has America most effectively managed the inevitable clash of cultural differences in a “nation of immigrants”?
- Can Americans see beyond racial differences, particularly during national crisis?
- Is a “post-racial” America something that is possible or even desirable?

When most people hear that Japanese American internees at Rohwer, Jerome, and the U.S. government camps actively engaged in cultural performances and recreational activities such as Kabuki theatre, variety shows, and baseball games, they assume that the wartime internment must not have been so bad. In her book *In Defense of Internment: The Case for Racial Profiling in World War II and the War on Terror*, political pundit Michelle Malkin defends the Japanese American internment policy by dismantling what she dubs “The Myth of the American ‘Concentration Camp’” in a point-by-point fashion that includes a cryptic reference to the performance of traditional Japanese Kabuki theatre by internees as proof of the camps’ benign playfulness (and the internees’ loyalty to Japan).<sup>5</sup> Such an argument stems from a limited understanding of culture as merely frivolous and escapist entertainment, when in fact cultural performance and recreational activities historically have been an important

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Jenkins, “Reality Bytes: Eight Myths About Video Games Debunked,” *The Video Game Revolution*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2009 <<http://www.pbs.org/kcts/videogamerevolution/impact/myths.html>>

<sup>4</sup> Mark J. P. Wolf quoted by Waggoner, *My Avatar, My Self*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> This sentence excerpted from Roxworthy, *The Spectacle of Japanese American Trauma*, 180n.13. Michelle Malkin, *In Defense of Internment: The Case for Racial Profiling in World War II and the War on Terror* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2004), 105.

means of political expression, mobilization, and resistance—both in the internment camps and at many other sites of conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Humanities scholarship reveals that cultural activities were performed at Rohwer and Jerome as a means of at least temporarily circumventing segregation systems and imagining a world beyond discrimination.<sup>7</sup> A deeper understanding of internee culture—and of human culture generally as a means of engaging in sociopolitical conflict—can only be achieved by placing these recreational activities back into their original historical contexts. DiD does just that, by reconstructing the Rohwer and Jerome camps using 3D digital modeling so that users can experience the contexts in which these activities took place: for instance, users only enter the theatre to participate in an internee Kabuki performance after navigating row-upon-row of barracks and witnessing armed guardtowers circled by barbed-wire fencing. From within the camp auditorium where many of these performances took place, users have a full perspective not only of the stage but also the building's windows, through which the internment context of barbed wire and barracks is constantly present. Users thus develop a more inclusive perspective and more contextual understanding of this history and the role culture might have played for the people who lived it.

Moreover, DiD users will experience these inclusive perspectives not from a passive audience position but from first-person points of view (POV) enabled by “player-controlled surrogates”<sup>8</sup> representing the diverse historical actors from Rohwer and Jerome as a cast of Japanese American, African American, and Caucasian avatars (detailed below). Users navigate the game's 3D models of Jerome, Rohwer, and the surrounding Arkansas Delta from any one of these diverse perspectives; the historical avatars they select will not only circumscribe their movements in these segregated spaces but will also allow them to embody these diverse perspectives and thus empathize with them. A recent psychological study headed by Dr. Sara Konrath at the University of Michigan found that 21<sup>st</sup>-century college students are 40% less empathetic than their predecessors, and attributed this precipitous decline in empathy at least in part to this generation's immersion in video games and social media (e.g. Facebook and related website communities). In particular, Konrath found that today's students exhibit the most dramatic decline in the two most important indices of empathy: “Empathic concern, or sympathy, over the misfortunes of others [48% decline]; [and] perspective taking, an intellectual capacity to imagine other people's points of view [34% decline].”<sup>9</sup> Whether or not this deterioration can be attributed to video games and

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Catherine Cole, *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre* (Indiana University Press, 2001); Alicia Arrizon, *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Jill Lane, *Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> See Emily Roxworthy, “Nisei Girls' Kabuki in Wartime Arkansas: Cultural Segregation and Cross-Dressing at Rohwer and Jerome,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 20.2 (July 2010): 185–203; John Howard, *Concentration Camps on the Home Front: Japanese Americans in the House of Jim Crow* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Mark J. P. Wolf, “Abstraction in the Video Game,” in Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, *The Video Game Theory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 50.

<sup>9</sup> Pamela Paul, “From Students, Less Kindness for Strangers?” *New York Times*, 25 June 2010; Edward H. O'Brien, Courtney Hsing, and Sara Konrath, “Changes in Dispositional Empathy Over Time in American College Students: A Meta-Analysis” (Association for Psychological Science paper, 2010).

other digital media, it is clear that the humanities can offer gaming technology important insights for enhancing audiences' empathetic experience toward social and historical others—and that the type of alliance between the humanities and video gaming that DiD represents might prove a necessary corrective to deteriorating empathic concern and perspective taking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Content:*

The Rohwer and Jerome Relocation Centers imprisoned Japanese Americans who were evacuated mostly from California but also from Hawaii—making these under-documented camps unique (Hawaiians of Japanese descent were not interned en masse as they were on the mainland). These camps were also unique because they were the only ones located in a former state of the Confederacy, and therefore the only sites at which Japanese-American segregation occurred within the context of black-white segregation. While African Americans experienced brutal oppression throughout the United States since the era of slavery, and this treatment continued in subtler but still insidious forms during the Jim Crow era—particularly in former Confederate states like Arkansas—Japanese and other Asian Americans experienced intense discrimination and persecution on the West Coast since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Anti-Japanese policies were crystallized in the wholesale evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor, but this wartime policy was by no means an isolated case. Rather, the unusual situating of two internment camps in the Arkansas Delta made clear how much the Japanese American and African American experiences had in common, although later the postwar experiences of each ethnic group would diverge widely.

Rohwer and Jerome were linked by 30 miles of rail line; DiD recreates both camp sites as they existed in 1944 as well as selected topography of the Delta and the segregated military training facility at Camp Shelby in nearby Hattiesburg, Mississippi (to and from which Nisei<sup>10</sup> soldiers and Nisei women traveled for cultural exchanges). These historic sites are selected based on notable interracial performances that took place there. Although two systems of segregation rigidly scripted the interactions between African Americans, white Americans, and Japanese Americans, historical records demonstrate that interracial encounters were often allowed in the ostensibly “recreational” realm of live performances, ranging from baseball games and judo tournaments to blues concerts and Kabuki. While considered apolitical “entertainment” by many, these performances should be reinterpreted not as mere aesthetic activity but rather as meaningful sociopolitical coalitions made between performers and audiences, many of which actually undercut official segregation policies.

(For more information on our project's content, please visit the Background page of the project website at [http://dramainthedelta.com/research/.](http://dramainthedelta.com/research/))

*Research:*

DiD draws on humanities scholarship conducted by our project team members, including the landmark partnership of Advisory Board member Johanna Miller Lewis's UALR Public History Program and the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) entitled *Life Interrupted: The Japanese American Experience in World War II Arkansas*

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<sup>10</sup> “Nisei” refers to second-generation Japanese Americans, born with U.S. citizenship. “Issei” refers to the immigrant generation, designated as aliens ineligible to citizenship through naturalization.

(<http://www.ualr.edu/lifeinterrupted/>). This UALR-JANM project produced a major traveling exhibit in 2004–05 and an acclaimed PBS documentary entitled *Time of Fear* (2005), both of which argued for the uniqueness of the Arkansas camps where—unlike the other WRA camps that imprisoned Japanese Americans—the impoverished conditions of life just outside the barbed wire fences often made camp life seem luxurious. Prior to embarking on this award-winning research about Rohwer and Jerome, Dr. Miller Lewis established her career as a public historian by studying civil rights issues in Arkansas and documenting the African American experience there. As a result, she comes at the internment experience from a different perspective than other historians, and the controversial nature of Dr. Miller Lewis’s findings have sometimes made the *Life Interrupted* study unpopular with other internment scholars and community partners such as the Japanese American National Museum. Such regional and sociopolitical dissent in the historical record makes Dr. Miller Lewis an essential partner in our project’s efforts to incorporate multiple perspectives.

Another important perspective and angle of expertise is provided by Advisory Board member John Howard, who recently published his long-awaited history of the under-documented Arkansas camps, called *Concentration Camps on the Home Front: Japanese Americans in the House of Jim Crow* (2008), from which DiD draws most of its examples of African Americans and Japanese Americans experiencing structurally similar racial treatment in wartime Arkansas and forming some tentative affective coalitions. As previously mentioned, DiD is also an extension of Project Director Emily Roxworthy’s book *The Spectacle of Japanese Trauma* (2008), which in part examines cultural performances by Japanese Americans in the Manzanar and Tule Lake camps and argues that internee culture was often a means of resisting official government policies and mainstream media treatment.

Finally, Professor Emeritus and Advisory Board member Roger Daniels is the foremost scholar of the internment (which he prefers to call “incarceration”) as well as an expert on Asian American studies and immigration history, and his decades of research on the U.S. “concentration camps” (his preferred term) undergird every aspect of our project. At the same time, DiD does not incorporate all of Dr. Daniels’s perspective wholesale, for instance avoiding the use of the term “concentration camp” in order to avoid alienating large segments of the American public who feel that Japanese Americans were not persecuted in any way resembling Nazi wartime policies. These four historians each bring different perspectives on and interpretations of the internment era and the Arkansas context to this newest project and allow us to make strategic interpretive decisions that render this history as accessible and meaningful as possible for our public audience.

*Creative approach:*

Drawing from this extensive scholarship and various archival repositories, DiD will introduce its audience to Rohwer, Jerome, and the surrounding Arkansas Delta first with an opening bird’s eye tour of the site model, which users watch as a cinematic experience that includes voiceover narration and soundtrack. The voiceover narration and musical accompaniment will correspond to the historically based character that the user has selected as his/her avatar for the gameplay. Each character is a composite of actual historical figures that have been fictionalized to protect the anonymity of individuals and their families. Here is the **cast of historical avatars** (more information available on the Avatars page of the project website <http://dramainthedelta.com/design/>):

- **Jane, Michiko, Takayo, and Akiko** are four Nisei teenagers evacuated from

their California homes and interned in camps in the exotic Arkansas Delta; they perform together in the Rohwer auditorium in the kabuki play *Chūshingura (The 47 Rōnin)*, traditionally acted by mature Japanese men

- **Willie and John** are both African American laborers in the late-30s; both are professional musicians who play in the Helena Blues band
- **Kenji and Danny** are Nisei soldiers in their early 20s from Hawaii stationed at nearby Camp Shelby; they are both amateur musicians in the Shelby Hawaiians band
- **Frank, Richard, Earl, and Mike** are white Arkansans in their late 30s and 40s hired by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to administer various departments at the Rohwer camp; they stage a traditional local “Womanless Wedding” ritual for the internees
- **Rose** is a white Arkansan in her 40s who teaches the arts curriculum at Rohwer High School; four of her female Nisei students invite her to watch them perform Kabuki
- **Toshi and Iri** are a married Issei (Japanese immigrant) couple interned at Jerome, whose only son Tak is fighting the Nazis in the European theater of war; Iri plays on an all-Issei baseball team (the Old Man’s League) and Toshi accompanies her girlfriend Emiko to watch Emiko’s son compete in a judo tournament held in a recreational barrack

DiD’s story structure consists of problem-solving missions that each character must complete; all these missions are designed according to the sociopolitically realistic conditions that these diverse historical actors would have experienced at these sites in 1944 and all are based on documented historical cases. Here is a **sampling of characters’ missions** (more information available on the Missions page of the project website at <http://dramainthedelta.com/story/>):

- **Takayo’s mission:** Takayo, a young Nisei girl, secretly leaves her family’s barracks to sneak out of Rohwer. In broad daylight, Takayo must search the camp’s barbed-wire perimeter to find a place where she can crawl under the fence without drawing the attention of the Military Police with machine guns stationed in the camp’s guard towers. If Takayo is successful, she comes upon a shack no bigger than her family outhouse back home on their California farm—the shack is actually an African American family’s grocery store, with even worse conditions than her family’s barrack at Rohwer...
- **Kenji’s mission:** Kenji is a U.S. soldier from Hawaii, serving in the all-Nisei 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team that trains at a nearby military base, Camp Shelby. Like the other Japanese American soldiers, he is barred from attending the United Service Organization (USO) dance being held tonight at the base. Instead, the Nisei soldiers are told to go to Jerome for some rest and relaxation (R&R) at the camp’s USO show. In order to get from Camp Shelby to Jerome, Kenji must ride a segregated bus—he must decide whether he will sit at the front of the bus with the white passengers, or at the back with the African American passengers...
- **Willie’s mission:** Willie, an African American drummer in the band “Helena Blues,” picks cotton on a farm just outside the Jerome camp. His band plans to



play an unofficial after-hours set at Jerome once the USO show finishes. In order to get into the camp to play with his band, Willie must convince the gate guard that he is employed at the camp as a laborer. If Willie is successful, he will encounter his friend and bandmate John, who works as a laborer at Jerome...

- **Frank’s mission:** Frank is a Caucasian WRA employee working as the Rohwer cook, a position that puts him in close contact with many of the internees as well as some African American labor at the camp. As a burly but friendly figure at Rohwer, Frank is called upon to help prevent public hysteria—inside and outside the camp—after two rival Nisei gangs get into a fight at Block 27’s mess hall. Frank must protect public safety by breaking up the fight and delivering messages to various constituents, then still get to the Rohwer auditorium in time to perform a goodwill skit with fellow WRA officials for a potentially restless internee audience...
- **Jane’s mission:** Jane, a teenage Nisei girl, is starring tonight as a samurai in the all-girls’ kabuki play *The 47 Rōnin*, being performed at the Rohwer auditorium. However, Jane leaves the mess hall—where she’s been eating dinner and gossiping with her friends—too late, and must run to the theatre to get into her costume and makeup for the play...
- **Rose’s mission:** The older brother of one of Rose’s internee students was recently shot by a local hunter who thought that the Nisei internee was attempting to escape Rohwer, while in reality the youth was engaged on official work detail in the woods surrounding the camp. Despite being a judo champ at Rohwer, Rose’s student has not competed in his beloved martial art since his brother’s death—until this evening, when he asks Rose to chaperone a practice session in the Block 15 recreation building. But when another judo student is unexpectedly injured during practice, Rose must help get him to the camp hospital for treatment in time to take her seat in the Rohwer auditorium to watch her other student, Jane, take her star turn as Kampei in an all-girls’ Kabuki performance...

Throughout these missions, pop-up text bubbles will appear to provide the audience with background stories and contextual information not otherwise available through real-time gameplay.

At the successful completion of each mission, the user is rewarded with a 3D cinematic vignette that is customized from their chosen character’s point of view; instead of dialogue boxes, these cinematic elements will include theatrically designed voiceover narration that provides background stories and contextual information. Navigation through the site model includes pop-up text bubbles explaining the history and function of various camp buildings and other architectural elements. Here are some of the **cinematic vignettes** that compensate innovative problem solving by DiD users (more information available on the Scenes page of the project website at <http://dramainthedelta.com/storyboards/>):

- **“Jerome Closes Its Doors”:** Internee train departs from Jerome for the last time
- **“Kampei’s Suicide Scene”:** the all-female cast of *Chūshingura* performs the climactic *hara-kiri* act for a mixed Issei-Nisei audience in the Rohwer auditorium

- **“Delta Blues”**: the Shelby Hawaiians complete their jazz set at the Jerome USO and welcome the Helena Blues as special guests for an unofficial after-hours set
- **“Camp Drag”**: four WRA administrators entertain an internee audience at a Rohwer recreational barrack with a rendition of a traditional Southern “Womanless Wedding” parody, including a burly bride (Earl in drag), a puny groom, and a “colored” nurse

The interactive historical simulation does not have a defined endpoint that would imply mastery of this difficult history of civil rights struggles. Instead, DiD users are encouraged to continue playing the game from the perspectives of the full range of historical characters and see firsthand how the 3D environment is experienced differently depending on the age, race, and gender of the avatars they select. Through the accumulation of these diverse perspectives and the fuller understanding of the internment and segregation history available from background stories and contextual information, this video-RPG will contribute to an empathetic discourse around the Japanese American camp experience and around U.S. racial struggles generally.

## **5. Audience**

The DiD premise began with the spectre of technologically savvy young adults that are apathetic (if not wholly ignorant) about the history of Japanese American internment and the overall context of civil rights struggles in the United States. While our project aims to engage these young people as gameplayers and pursue a humanities-technology alliance as an experiment in stemming the decline in empathy that Dr. Konrath noted among this demographic, we have also expanded our focus from a youth/student audience to include older/adult Americans (30-80 years old) on the Internet that more likely possess either historical memory of World War II or preexisting biases about the internment policy. In other words, these older Americans are already invested in this period in American history, although they likely view events such as the evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans through a passive, distanced, and limited perspective. The average age of video game players has risen to 35, with diverse representation in terms of race, class, and gender,<sup>11</sup> but the majority of our expanded audience demographic would not classify themselves as “gamers.” However, this same demographic is the fastest growing group using Internet-based digital technology: according to a 2009 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, 38% of Americans over 65 are online; Americans over 55 are the fastest growing demographic on Facebook (up 35% in 2010) and are quick adopters of other social media.<sup>12</sup>

Since these older Americans are neither “gamers” nor “digital natives” (not having grown up online), the accessibility of DiD —freely available as a web download, requiring no special software or hardware (e.g. game system), and easily navigable—will suit their technology needs. These technologies have made the NEH goal of lifelong learning extremely accessible as well as engaging and inexpensive for audience members; at the same time, digital projects can target broad audiences with lifelong learning themes in the humanities, reaching a very

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<sup>11</sup> ESA survey, July 2008. Also see Jeff Klein, “Gaming Goes Broad,” *Adweek* 15 June 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Matt Rocheleau, “Seniors Carve Their Own Niche With Laptops and Facebook,” *Christian Science Monitor* 24 July 2010.

inclusive audience like the one our project envisions. Thus, we have designed and are producing this project with a mature audience in mind—for instance, our story structure emphasizes social conflict and psychologically driven narrative rather than combat and explosions.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, we will distribute the final game to every possible audience member ages 13-80 using the niche marketing possible on the Internet as well as more traditional community outlets (discussed in the “Distribution plan,” below).

DiD’s audience will learn about the virtually unknown Rohwer and Jerome camps that operated in segregated Arkansas and about the role of culture in these moments of national crisis; in so doing, they will gain a more context-driven understanding of this history from a very inclusive perspective on the events depicted in the game. Likewise, through the embodied experience of identifying with diverse avatars that diverge from their own social identities, this audience will exercise empathic skills that are central to important questions of citizenship, democracy, and civil society.

## **6. Format**

Our project’s chosen format of 3D interactive simulation takes advantage of the characterization, improvisation, and immersion that are hallmarks of the video role-playing game (video-RPG) in order to foreground social identity and racial (as well as gender and generational) difference and thereby deepen public understanding of these identity positions. While DiD certainly seeks to capitalize on the accessibility and engaging quality of this technology, the project will also challenge users to engage significant questions related to these sociopolitical differences and overcome the digital disengagement suggested by studies linking this media to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century deterioration of empathy (especially a decline in users’ abilities to have concern for others or take on other perspectives).

The proposed interactivity allows—indeed, requires—the audience to navigate the 3D digital model by donning a historically based, racially specific avatar from whose perspective they will experience the game’s historical events. Embodied in these avatars, users will witness cultural performances as tools of survival but also pursue problem-solving missions that impact the virtual world around them, thus learning about internment and segregation history in a highly interactive way. Moreover, as they navigate the space, their movements and interactions will be circumscribed depending on the social identity of their chosen avatar, and pop-up text bubbles will explain the significance of the environment they traverse. The 3D cinematic vignettes that culminate the successful completion of each avatar’s mission will reinforce the contextual understanding and perspective-taking of the preceding interactivity by allowing users to watch (and even enact) culturally important scenes from the POV of their historical character.

One of the strengths of interactive gaming is that it accommodates multiple and often contradictory perspectives on issues central to our society today—we hope to bring this contentiousness into the spirit of the final product as well as the vetting process with which

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<sup>13</sup> Seth Schiesel calls these more mature game themes “the future of interactive entertainment” in his review of the psychologically realistic, noir videogame *Heavy Rain*: “Murderer’s Young Prey; A Father’s Torment,” *New York Times* 26 February 2010.

the project first took form. Wide-ranging feedback is necessary for DiD because of the inherent risks involved in virtual interracial role-playing including the potential pitfalls of racial stereotyping (particularly salient in the realistic characters that populate the virtual environment) and the undesirable trivialization of traumatic historical events (seen in *Grand Theft Auto's* and other commercial videogames' glorified treatment of racialized and sexual violence), and other controversial issues that might arise in this innovative application of gaming technology to humanities scholarship. This project aims to reflect a range of humanities expertise and accommodate the ideologies of a range of community groups, such that our work process mirrors the methodology of interactive, perspective-taking video RPGs.

DiD utilizes proprietary modeling, animation, and game-engine software (namely Maya and Torque) because these solutions offer a sophisticated feature set, ease of training and use, excellent documentation, and large community support. Learning these tools is beneficial for student interns who volunteer their time in order to gain skills necessary for embarking on careers in 3D graphics and game design. Even though we use proprietary tools, the end results of the project will be made freely available through the project website (<http://dramainthedelta.com>), which will be maintained indefinitely (for an extended period) by the San Diego Supercomputer Center's high-quality servers.

## **7. Distribution and Evaluation**

The eventual finished game will be distributed at no cost through the project website (<http://www.dramainthedelta.com>) with links through community partners and social media. DiD will also be distributed to approximately 100 high school teachers through the San Diego Supercomputer Center's TeacherTech workshop program (<http://education.sdsc.edu/teachertech>) and to other educational venues through the K-12 outreach programs at the University of California, San Diego. The project's main audience of adult Americans (lifelong learners) will be reached through the aforementioned links with community partners and social media, as well as through a series of low-cost exhibits at museums and related sites. By displaying the finished game and showcasing the project's evolution (as we currently do online) in donated exhibits at humanities and technology institutions such as the Reuben H. Fleet Science Center, the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology (Calit2), and the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center (to name just a few), we plan to create word-of-mouth traffic to the project website to download DiD to personal computers. In addition, we will promote the plan to humanities and technology scholars with presentations at relevant conference like the American Studies Association (ASA), the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and SIGGRAPH.

Indeed, the project directors have already been actively presenting this research at relevant conferences and invited lectures to gather feedback and evaluation, including at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, the University of California at Santa Barbara, the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR), and TeraGrid. The public response and evaluation at these presentations has been highly positive: the public seems to be interested in the subject being presented in this manner and excited about the ways in which video game technology can open up the possibilities of this history. On January 13, 2010, the Rohwer Relocation Camp Interpretive Project (funded by a Japanese American Confinement

Sites grant from the National Park Service) will host a workshop to present their draft interpretive plan and gather community feedback in McGehee, Arkansas. DiD's progress will be presented at this workshop and the project team will be able to assess the public evaluation of our website and an early game prototype posted on the site's Samples page (<http://dramainthedelta.com/samples/>). We also plan to publish this digital research through traditional publications in academic journals such as *American Quarterly* where historians and other humanities scholars will learn about our game.

## **8. Progress**

In 2009-10, DiD's project team concentrated its start-up phase on research and data sourcing, storyboarding the cinematic elements, designing and modeling the characters, writing the most pedagogically effective game missions, and developing the most historically accurate 3D digital assets for an early video-RPG video-RPG prototype.

The project team completed four sets of storyboards for two-minute cinematic vignettes to be built in DiD's 3D digital environment. The NEH grant supported UC San Diego Graduate Student Researcher (GSR) Sohhee Han in the summer of 2009 as she hand-drew, computer-drew, and even painted storyboards for four historical scenarios that involve cultural performance (many of these images are posted on our website, discussed below). This GSR also created detailed 3D renderings of the main characters (avatars) based on historical composites, which were then digitally modeled to populate the game environment.

At the midpoint of this grant period, we also launched a project website (<http://dramainthedelta.com>), to which we have since added content. The NEH grant supported another GSR, Laura Brueckner, in creating this website, which involved strategic design, research, and writing. Likewise, the NEH grant supported University of Arkansas–Little Rock (UALR) archivist Jennifer McCarty in identifying, scanning, and uploading data (archival images of the camps) that were sourced in building the game environment. Our UALR collaborator, historian Johanna Miller Lewis, was also supported in the summer of 2009 in overseeing this data collection. Finally, the grant supported project director Emily Roxworthy's travel to the Digital Humanities Start-Up meeting at NEH headquarters in Washington, D.C., in September 2009 where DiD gave a "lightning round" presentation and received valuable feedback from fellow project directors and NEH staff members.

Two tasks from our original grant application proved unnecessary in the digital work environment in which we pursue this project. After several physical visits to the archives and historic sites in Arkansas, further travel to the Delta has not been necessary because of the uploading and vetting of documents capable through the Internet. Likewise, we have been able to solicit feedback from our Advisory Board members by directing them to the project website (<http://www.dramainthedelta.com>) where we post our most recent progress, rather than physically traveling to meet in person. The time and cost savings have resulted in extra funds not charged to the NEH grant.

We have successfully recruited a series of undergraduate student computer programmers to animate the storyboards and build the environment based on the copious historical data gathered to date. After encountering significant difficulties recruiting programmers in Southern California last year, the SDSC has rebounded with a string of talented student

interns who are contributing to building the environment (in Maya) and the game itself (in Torque) while also learning new skills for their future careers. We believe these student interns, most from the Department of Computer Science, are also expanding their educations through their exposure to this project because DiD demonstrates how 3D animation and gaming technology can be applied to critical work in the humanities and to explore issues significant to civil society (rather than just science and entertainment).

Despite a steady stream of talented college students (and one brilliant high school senior), we encountered a major delay that required a no-cost extension through August 2010 because of the dearth of appropriately skilled, professional programmers interested in applying their talents to a non-profit, educational game project rather than a commercial entertainment game. After a nationwide search, we finally identified the ideal candidate in Ben Loggins of Tauro AV, Inc., who has been working on the project since March 2010. As lead artist and animator on DiD, Ben modeled the four female Nisei game characters and animated the “Jerome Closes Its Doors” vignette; samples from all of this progress can be found on the project website.

The momentum we have attained through a now-robust project team is threatened, however, by the impending departure of Ben from the project. As a non-profit project, we were only able to afford a skilled 3D digital artist like Ben because he agreed to receive a below-market wage in exchange for working on a socially meaningful project and also gaining experience in video game animation. This salary concession has proved to be unsustainable, though, and this issue has no obvious solution. The oxymoron of a non-profit, educational 3D video-RPG will need to be resolved if socially responsible, humanistically innovative applications of gaming technology are to become a norm rather than an exception. The humanities cannot afford to miss the video game wave, but we also cannot truly afford to ride it.