Doing History on Screens
Sarah Bay-Cheng / Teacher's column

As a scholar working in theatre, performance, and digital media, my research asks two basic questions: 1) how do digital media and technologies change performance practices; and 2) what can the study of theatre and performance tell us about our evolving digital culture? As part of my Fulbright study here in Utrecht, I've been looking predominantly at the intersection among digital technologies (e.g., interactive screens, mobile phones, and video), history, and performance.

We have many examples of work that looks at connections between history and performance (e.g., Peter Wiess's *Marat/Sade*) as well as the history of performance. There are also many examples of digital technology used in performance (such as those described in Steve Dixon's book: *Digital Performance*). Artists such as Dries Verhoeven and the company Berlin sometimes combine digital technology and performance to comment on current events and in the process create new alternative histories of events all around us. Verhoeven's *Niemandsland* (2008) and Berlin's current project on Chernobyl offer alternative perspectives on historical events through both staging and technology.

More recently (and by 'recently', I mean starting in the early 1990s, which for the sake of argument I will pretend was not that long ago), researchers like Lynn Nelson and Dan Cohen began promoting the use of digital technologies in historical studies. Nelson's World History Index and History Central Catalogue created an important online database for world history by linking other databases together and introducing ways to navigations that were not previously possible from a single research site, such as a library. This kind of work has in turn facilitated greater public access to history since via the web, encouraging amateur historians and non-academics to access historical materials and make their own contributions.

At the same time, however, digital technologies

also make our experience of history more performative. History museums, for example, are increasingly using interactive displays that make history 'come alive' for its visitors and cultural heritage sites are integrating digital role-playing into their presentations. Video games, such as EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR (2009), invite players to revisit and rewrite historical battles and events of the past. Even social media sites, like Facebook, play to people's sense of personal history by representing our own personal events on a 'timeline'.

What I'm doing, then, is trying to make sense of new historical writing (i.e., historiography) happening through digital media and performance. In a variety of examples both in the US and the Netherlands, there are a striking number of changes such technologies affect in historiography. The first is that digital media often reshapes historical timelines. Events may become ordered by theme or visual and spatial proximity or according to the logic of the hypertext. Such historiographies may also be shaped by personal experience or contact, particularly in performative settings. Dries Verhoeven's *Niemandsland*, for instance, extrapolates the personal narrative of a single person in a one-on-one experience as metonymic for a larger historical phenomenon (in this case, immigration in the Netherlands). Similarly, the Royal Maritime Museum in London recently commissioned the performance group Punchdrunk to create an interactive exploration through the museum for children. Using theatre and interactive displays throughout the museum, the young visitors had the opportunity to construct their own historical narratives as performance in and with the museum's collections. In both scenarios, the encounter with history – mediated by technology and generated as a performance – is driven by personal interest and motivation (say, for personal connection, following the 'rules' of the scenario, or simple curiosity).

Such alterations of historiography and historical narratives have much to offer as they break down traditional barriers to historical knowledge (e.g., online archives are available to experts and interested amateurs alike), but they may have other effects as

well. The George W. Bush Museum in Dallas, Texas, for instance, has at its centre the Decision Points Theater, an interactive exhibit in which users can replay key decisions from the Bush presidency in a kind of group role-playing experience where information is received and a collective decision is made. Such an environment creates the illusion of participation and agency in a historical event, even when clearly none exists. And, more troublingly, the exercise itself may serve to create the conditions that Noam Chomsky referred to as "manufactured consent." That is, over time, participation in the Decision Points Theater may lead to more sympathetic and less critical analyses of the Bush presidency. As in any archive, who controls the collection and the interface (whether the language in the written history or kinds of digital access) largely determines the historical narrative constructed by it. In some forms of digital historiography, however, the interface and the performative aspects can create the illusion that the user or visitor is in control; that we are writing our own historical narratives for ourselves. This is why critical performances that challenge dominant historical narratives – both within and outside technology – become essential as testing grounds for the emerging media in history. **«**

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