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Toward a Framework for Immersive Counter-Storytelling in Contested Heritage

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Abstract

This work proposes an integrated framework—counter-narratives, participant agency, co-creation, and sensory engagement—to challenge Authorized Heritage Discourse at sites of conflict, using Thailand's People's Party monuments as a focal case. By leveraging IDN structures and AR/VR, it aims to foster emotional connection, youth participation, and critical reinterpretation of politically sensitive histories. The model emphasizes collaborative authorship and embodied, spatial storytelling over static, top-down interpretation. It anticipates site-based interventions and educational programs, with transferability to postcolonial and volatile contexts.

Keywords: Contested Heritage, Counter-Narratives, Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, Co-creation, Agency, Sensory Engagement, Youth Participation

1. Introduction

Contested heritage sites are often embedded with dominant narratives that silence alternative or marginalized perspectives. In the Thai context, the legacy of the People's Party—who led the transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional governance in 1932—has become a flashpoint of heritage conflict. Monuments representing this revolutionary period have been physically neglected, politically erased, or reframed through state-endorsed heritage discourses. This study addresses the critical gap between youth engagement and these contentious heritage narratives, questioning how digital and immersive media might foster awareness and advocacy among younger generations.

Existing scholarship in critical heritage studies problematizes the dominance of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), which privileges elite, state-sanctioned interpretations of cultural memory (Harrison, 2012; Smith, 2006). These dominant framings often overlook or suppress counter-histories, particularly in politically sensitive contexts. Simultaneously, new narrative modes such as Interactive Digital Narratives

(IDNs) offer tools for participatory engagement, challenging linear storytelling structures and enabling audience agency (Koenitz, 2023). Immersive storytelling—particularly when situated in physical space—has the potential to reframe how individuals experience, interpret, and respond to contested heritage (Gröppel

2. Framework and Methodological Basis

The proposed framework combines co-creation, user agency, sensory engagement, and counter-narratives into an interconnected model for heritage conservation and storytelling. It builds on the strengths of the Layers of Experience, adding specific mechanisms for emotional engagement and advocacy. The framework's central focus is the Counter-Narrative (Story Layer), which challenges the Authorized Heritage Discourse by presenting alternative perspectives through storytelling (Smith, 2006). These narratives are dynamically constructed through the interplay of co-creation, agency, and sensory design. User Agency (Participant Layer) allows participants to shape their own experiences, a concept from Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs) (Koenitz, 2023). This empowers them to critically engage with contested heritage. Co-Creation (Process Layer), rooted in participatory design and counter-narrative studies, ensures inclusivity and representation through collaborative narrative creation (Hammami & Uzer, 2018; Yenjela, 2020). This process transforms participants into stakeholders who feel a sense of ownership. Finally, Sensory Engagement (Creation Layer) uses immersive technologies like Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) to create multisensory environments that heighten emotional connection and presence (Sterling, 2020). By simulating contested sites and incorporating spatial audio, this layer ensures participants experience counter-narratives in a memorable and impactful way.

3. Discussion

This framework builds upon and extends current models of interactive heritage interpretation by emphasizing narrative multiplicity, participatory design, and immersive spatial storytelling. It aligns with recent calls in heritage studies and interaction design to move beyond representation and toward engagement, dialogue, and co-creation (Gröppel-Wegener & Kidd, 2019). By merging the conceptual tools of AHD critique, IDN structures, and embodied storytelling, the framework advances a model where heritage is not merely preserved, but actively reimagined.

While still in the prototype development phase, the framework lays the foundation for future empirical work. Potential applications include site-based interventions, educational programs, and participatory heritage workshops. The approach is particularly suited for younger audiences who are already fluent in digital and mobile media, and who may be seeking new ways to connect with histories that are otherwise inaccessible, erased, or politicized.

Moreover, the framework offers a transferable model for other contexts where heritage is contested—particularly in postcolonial or politically volatile settings. It contributes to broader conversations on how immersive storytelling can serve as a method of resistance, recovery, and reinterpretation within cultural heritage discourse.

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