

From Gettysburg to the Cuban Missile Crisis: Designing for Historical Reenactments with *Twitter*

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Abstract: TwHistory is a project designed to organize and promote a variety of historical reenactments using Twitter as a tool for computer mediated communication of historical events. Thus far, volunteers and educators have organized reenactments of the Battle of Gettysburg and the Cuban Missile Crisis while other efforts are underway. This poster will share an iteration of design and development for historical reenactments using Twitter and examine the initial feedback within the paradigm of design-based research.

Introduction

The issues surrounding historical thinking and reasoning have drawn a great deal of attention in recent years; with special attention as to the role technology has played in this endeavor (Wineburg, 2001). Few students have a deep understanding of the processes by which historical accounts are constructed or the perspectives that are brought to bear on the interpretation of historical events. Questions have arisen concerning the possible benefits of learning from original sources and resources. In other words, what affects students' thinking when experiencing accounts from other people who have access to the original sources? It is worth considering that future-oriented technologies may enable new means to improve how one relates to the past. This idea has been illustrated, for example, by research centered on computer games that show re-enactments of historical events, how they can promote student engagement, and how they can help to initiate reflection related to historical events (Squire, 2003). This poster presents the preliminary results of the design, development, and implementation a project involving historical re-enactments through the use of the *Twitter* Microblogging system.

Project History: *Twitter* and Microblogging

Twitter is a relatively well-known microblogging technology and used by those who comprise the “digital youth” generation (Ito et al., 2008). *Twitter* messages, or *tweets*, are sent and received from these profiles through varying protocols, mostly obtained through computers and hand-held devices. The 140 character constraint of tweets had been set as part of an effort to ensure compatibility with Simple Message Syndication (SMS) texting systems, and has remained even though texting technologies have advanced such that that limit is no longer necessary. As with other types of microblogs, tweets are often of a personal nature, involving commentary or description of one's activities and one's opinions about some current state of affairs (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). Increasingly, *Twitter* is being used for marketing purposes and in the political arena (Comm, 2009). Thus far, research regarding the potential of texting systems within education has yet to be fully explored.

Simulations, and in particular, participatory simulations have shown tremendous promise in supporting learning (Colella, 2000). With that in mind, the TwHistory project began in early 2009 with a participatory reenactment of the Battle of Gettysburg that took place over a period of two months. TwHistory is based on the idea that historical reenactments can take place online and have the same positive effects for volunteer participants and virtual onlookers. *Twitter* provides many of the necessary elements for a recreating a historical event: actors, communication, and relationships. Followers of *Twitter* reenactments receive tweets in real-time as the characters of a particular historical event communicate report from their perspective what is happening. In the original Gettysburg reenactment, generals, citizens, soldiers, and even Abraham Lincoln had profiles from which tweets reporting the events of the battle were sent out. A sample set of tweets is shown in Figure 1a.



Figure 1. Screenshots of *Twitter* feeds from (a) Gettysburg reenactment and (b) the Cuban Missile Crisis reenactment, as they appear in reverse-chronological order from within *Twitter*.

The initial instance of Gettysburg, once public, drew a diverse set of followers who subscribed to the *Twitter* feeds. One of the Gettysburg followers was a high school teacher in the American Midwest. With assistance, she adapted the Gettysburg model as part of her Cold War History course. Students played the role of President Kennedy, Nikita Khrushchev, Robert MacNamara, and others in a reenactment of the Cuban Missile crisis (Figure 1b). While this reenactment took place prior to any planned research studies, it is motivating new work to research the learning gains for K-12 students who perform the reenactments as part of formal history instruction.

Data Sources and Implications

Data sources to inform design decisions include usage data obtained through the Twitter service, feedback messages from followers, and firsthand reports from volunteers who participated directly as actors in the historical reenactments. These sources are used to report on the geographic spread of TwHistory and provide accounts regarding the use of primary sources and subsequent learning gains of reenactment actors. Data from a new reenactment the Pioneer Trek of 1848 comprises one case analyzed from beginning to end presented in the poster. While still largely an exploratory report, researchers are observing that for volunteer actors, the synthesis of historical documents and accounts is leading to knowledge gains reflected in lesson plan goals. For example, in volunteer message boards, a reenactment author asks about references to markers that were used every ten miles along the trail and mentions the use of an odometer. Another author adds that it was Appleton Harmon who created a type of wagon wheel odometer during the pioneer trek. Currently, the researchers are preparing for classroom-based reenactments from which more systematic data collection and analysis allows for deeper examination of how students and teachers use primary sources as part of their research. Findings report what changes occur, both in individuals' knowledge and affective stances toward history, through use of TwHistory.

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