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# Mass Violence and Memory in the Digital Age Memorialization Unmoored

Edited by  
Eve Monique Zucker  
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# Mass Violence and Memory in the Digital Age

Memorialization Unmoored

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# Teaching and Learning in Virtual Places of Exception: Gone GITMO and the Guantánamo Bay Museum of Art and History

*Cathlin Goulding*

## INTRODUCTION: THE FIRST GLIMPSE

In January 2002, the first photographs of the Guantánamo Bay detention camp were released for public viewing. Taken by US Navy photographer Shane T. McCoy and released by the Pentagon, the photos showed the newly constructed Camp X-Ray, a makeshift prison designed to hold suspected terrorists rounded up in some of the first military campaigns in Afghanistan. In them, the world saw Guantánamo's new arrivals for the first time: orange uniform-clad prisoners, arms shackled, and blindfolded, kneeling in the gravel as U.S. soldiers hovered above their bent bodies. One photograph showed a prisoner being dragged toward a staunch line of waiting soldiers. Behind the prisoners, the camp was gridded by chain-linked fences, rocky pathways, and spiky coils of barbed wire. With the release of these images, Guantánamo was no longer simply a geographic

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locale or a noun in a White House press release. It became a symbol of the confusion and panic of our post-9/11 world, embodying both dismay for the treatment of the prisoners and relief at a seemingly quarantined threat. It was a place where our political leanings and anxieties played out contradictorily and without remittance.

These early photographs of Guantánamo were among the most prominent visual renderings of the extensions of state power in a post-9/11 world. But while these extensions played out trenchantly in the treatment of Guantánamo's detainees, they also, often invisibly, exerted effects on the daily lives of the American public. Increased surveillance of those suspected of terrorist activities, close monitoring of telephone calls and emails, and the creation of new bureaucratic bodies to manage airport and border security were among the multitude of policies and practices created under the Bush administration and rationalized in the name of a seeming national emergency. For the most part, public debate was silenced in the name of acting swiftly for the sake of public safety. In the post-9/11 climate of widespread panic and fear, the argument that we needed to take immediate and aggressive action was one easily made. Secrecy and tightly controlled decision-making processes replaced open deliberation. Soon such measures which were once abnormal and temporary became "part of the taken-for-granted world of 'how things are'... influencing how we perceive and talk about everyday life, including mundane as well as significant events" (Linke and Smith 2009, 64). In the 13 years since 9/11, as Mark Danner (2011) writes in *The New York Review of Books*, we have existed in a "subtly different country, and though we have grown accustomed to these changes and think little of them now, certain words still appear often enough in the news—Guantánamo, indefinite detention, torture—to remind us that ours remains a strange America" (para. 2). The normalization and broad acceptance of such mechanisms poses a real challenge and mandate to create forums that stimulate a public response, one that, like the release of Camp X-Ray's photos, works as a kind of "shock" to public consciousness and provides a jolting reminder that we do in fact live in a "strange America."

A number of individuals and organizations have provoked these jolts of consciousness through their engagements with heightened national security post-9/11, many of which have had a significant impact on public consciousness. Journalists, filmmakers, activists, and artists have created forums and works of art that subvert the argument that extralegal practices during times of heightened national security are necessary and lawful.

Films like *Taxi to the Dark Side* (Blumenthal and Gibney 2007), WikiLeaks' (2011) release of classified documents on Guantánamo's detainees, and former National Security Administration (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden's revelations about the NSA's telephone and internet surveillance programs (Gellman 2013) are but a few examples of the potent efforts to defy the much-propagated image of post-9/11 security initiatives as safeguards that are limited in scope and "clean" (Van Veen 2013). These mediums and media appear to effectively foment public outrage and awareness. However, it is unclear whether these forums, despite their availability, push the US public to wrestle with our vulnerability to the same extralegalities to which Guantánamo's prisoners are bound. How do we, then, process and think through the notion that Guantánamo is not an instance of *things that happen to other people* but is one mechanism of a larger structure of state power that increasingly exerts its effects on us all?

### LOCATING GUANTÁNAMO IN VIRTUAL PLACE

Located on a 45-square mile spread in Cuba, the site has operated as a US naval base since 1903, when Cuba and the United States entered into a perpetual lease agreement that permitted its sole jurisdiction and control over the area. The base was subsequently converted into a detention camp for Haitians and Cubans seeking asylum in the 1990s, which prepared the space for its present function as a repository for "unlawful combatants," most held without charge or trial (Johns 2005; "Reporter reflects On Obama's stalled effort to close Guantánamo" 2014). Soon after September 11, 2001, inmates—persons suspected of terrorist activity and arrested in military campaigns in Afghanistan—were brought to Guantánamo's Camp X-Ray, the temporary outdoor prison space that soon gave way to a "state of the art" prison facility named Camp Delta.

At the time of this writing, GITMO holds 40 detainees, with approximately 780 persons detained over the course of its operations. Despite promises from the Obama administration, GITMO remained open. The complicated process of repatriation to their former home countries has slowed the transfer of "low-threat" prisoners. In January 2018, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to maintain the prison's operations, later asking Congress in his State of the Union address "to continue to have all necessary power to detain terrorists" (Neuman 2018, para 3).

Guantánamo's critics consider the prison as indicative of a "state of exception," or a legal climate put into effect when the normal legal order is suspended, and new policies, practices, and structures are folded into the legal order by an executive body, often in the name of national security or emergency (Danner 2011; Hussain 2007). This broad outline of the state of exception originates with the German political philosopher and jurist Carl Schmitt (1922), who argued the survival of the state depends on its capacity to target and eliminate an "enemy" who poses a threat to the state's territories. In cases of "extreme peril, [which constitute] a danger to the existence of the state" (Schmitt 1922, 6), the state's sovereign power puts the existing legal order aside and institutes a state of exception. The theory of a state of exception was expansively reconsidered by the continental political philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998, 1999, 2005). In Agamben's formulation, an executive authority determines whose life is worth living and who will be abandoned by the polity, left to persist in a suspended state between life and death, inclusion and exclusion.

The state of exception is, however, more than a legal concept or analytic construct. It materializes in the concentration camp, in prisons, or in other kinds of buildings that exclude and hold persons during times when exceptional laws and practices become the norm. What happens when these places of exception become places for teaching and learning? When visitors enter and walk through these places, they take in the outlines and shape of the landscape, the architectures, and constraints of the built environment. They immerse in the palpable sensations of a prison camp, exposed to the stories and memories of those who were incarcerated while being in the actual site.

As Guantánamo stretches the limitations of intelligibility, so does the pedagogical challenge it poses in representing the "bare lives" (Agamben 1998) that inhabit its environs. Deborah Britzman (1998) describes a "difficult knowledge" in which the learner must "engage in the limit of thought—where thought stops, what it cannot bear to know, what it must shut out to think as it does" (156). In yet another line of thinking, Elizabeth Ellsworth's (2005) body of work on outside-of-school pedagogy instructively posits structures of thinking and feeling that allow learning the unbearable. According to Ellsworth, "anomalous" places for learning—such as public art, memorial sites, and museums—"invite sensations of being somewhere in between thinking and feeling, of being in motion through the space and time of learning as a lived experience with an open, unforeseeable future" (Ellsworth 2005, 17).

In this chapter, I examine two virtual materializations of the prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba: *Gone Gitmo* and the *Guantánamo Bay Museum of Art and History*. In 2007, journalist and filmmaker Nonny de la Peña and the media artist Peggy Weil created *Gone Gitmo*, a virtual re-creation of Guantánamo in a platform called Second Life. In this blazingly colorful digital replica of Guantánamo, visitors could experience the prison “first-hand” on the web. A few years later, in 2012, the *Guantánamo Bay Museum of Art and History*, a web-based art museum premised on the imaginary closure of the prison, opened its digital doors. The website features the work of several artists who respond to the prison via mixed-media, photography, and art installations. It also provides articles and other educational materials, as well as detailing a speculative history of Guantánamo’s closure and the museum’s creation and construction.

As outlier, “anomalous” places of learning, these digital Guantánamos are designed to render the unthinkable (and unfeeling) possible through visualities, digital simulacrum, narrative, and satire. The designers of these two digital Guantánamos tinkered with and hacked (Lewis and Friedrich 2016) notions of place, upending phenomenological conceptions of place as concrete, material, or bound to human memory and histories. Not encumbered by human and geographical concerns, the designers envisioned and fabricated the place of exception *as it might be* to educate public audiences, promote civic engagement, and stimulate dialogue about the imprisonment of suspected terrorists at Guantánamo Bay Prison.<sup>1</sup>

### GONE GITMO: IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES IN A DIGITAL PLACE OF EXCEPTION

In 2007, five years after the first prisoners were brought to Guantánamo, the journalist and filmmaker Nonny de la Peña came across a grant opportunity on the MacArthur Foundation website for documentary-related media. De la Peña had made a documentary, *Unconstitutional* (De la Peña 2004), about the post-9/11 extensions of executive power. She contacted Peggy Weil, a digital game designer, and proposed collaborating on what she called a “Guantánamo Game.” Weil was interested—but not in making a game. The word “game,” she commented, “chafes” (Weil 2007a, February 12, para 2). Prevailing attitudes about video games insinuated that they were an ineffective and inappropriate form of media to take on social issues. But Weil, who worked at the Interactive Media Division of

the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, a center dedicated to, as she put it, the "so-called Serious Games Movement" (ibid.), was attempting to do exactly that. At the time, she was working on a game sponsored by the Annenberg Foundation called *The Redistricting Game*, an educational video game that allows players to take on the role of redistricting consultants and manipulate district lines to ensure a fairer election process.

The pair was awarded a MacArthur-funded residency at the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC). Over ten days in June 2007, with the assistance of BAVC developers, De la Peña and Weil conceived and designed the first iteration of *Gone GITMO*. At the time of the project's conception, De la Peña and Weil were interested in generating a response to the practices and politics of the Bush administration's "global war on terror." Both designers were already committed to social justice-oriented work. As mentioned, De la Peña had made a documentary about the Patriot Act; similarly, Weil worked on games that critiqued abuses of power by governmental authorities. On a blog documenting their design process, Weil described joining a protest in which activists donned the orange jumpsuits of Guantánamo's prisoners. "It was a reminder that the fundamental purpose of this project has nothing to do with virtual worlds or second life (sic) or technology," she wrote, "but instead aims to remind citizens, wherever they live their lives, that Guantánamo Prison is a disgrace to our nation" (Weil 2008, January 12, para 1). De la Peña shared these sentiments. On the project's blog, she described "one of those mornings when I really hate Guantánamo Bay Prison. In fact, it is anger I feel. How did the government get away with destroying habeas corpus rights in this country...in MY country?" (De la Peña 2007, February 12, para 1). Political outrage appeared to unite these two designers and spurred their work of creating the digital place of exception as a place of learning.

### *Guantánamo on Second Life*

De la Peña and Weil decided that Second Life, the online role-playing community in which video game developers and laypeople alike buy digital acreage and create landscapes in which users explore and interact, was a fitting and affordable forum for their project. Free for users and accessed through a web browser, in gamer vernacular Second Life<sup>2</sup> is akin to a "massively multiplayer online role-playing game" (MMORPG). An MMORPG is a gaming environment in which many users develop online

personas and interact synchronously within a virtual world, such as the superlatively popular *The World of Warcraft*. Within the platform—or using a game developer application like *Unity* or *Open Simulator*—users construct 3-D buildings, landscapes, and elaborate, textured environments. In Second Life, users take the form of avatars, or virtual transmutations of human beings with user-designed clothing, skin colors, hair, and body types. Directed by the mouse, an avatar walks, runs, or, in the most efficacious form of travel, flies to different worlds within the platform. Different lands and areas also have a unique Second Life URL, making it possible for avatars to access specific areas without traveling long distances. At its peak in 2008, the platform had up to 15 million registered users (Morbey and Steele 2013). However, interest in the site—which some have seen as clunky and excessively commercially minded—has flagged (Young 2010). The platform had become a “magnate for mockery” (Jamison 2017, para 6) or, worse, “the thing you haven’t bothered to joke about for years” (Jamison 2017, para 6). As of 2016, 600,000 users login regularly in a month and 300,000 first-time users login and do not return (Maiberg 2016).

*Gone GITMO* was built on “Kula Island,” a piece of land donated to the project. Avatars enter the prison through a URL link, searching for the location on the platform, or, in the rarer case, simply wandering (or flying) onto the island. The entrance is a gleaming portal that deposits avatars into a cage in Guantánamo’s Camp X-Ray. Like the real GITMO, the chain-link grid is desolate and bare; the guard towers rise above it menacingly. Meanwhile, the sky is light blue, and clouds dissipate across the horizon. Beyond the barbed wire, the ocean is visible and palm trees dot a beach. Avatars can move outside the cages, where they stumble across various embedded documentary clips about Guantánamo. Avatars can also venture through a simulacrum of Camp Delta, the permanent prison facility at Guantánamo, where scenarios are staged inside of cells on torture and the withholding of due process of law. During *Gone GITMO*’s active presence on Second Life, De la Peña and Weil constructed and added large-scale forums and galleries for avatars to gather, hear lectures, listen to the latest news reports, and peruse literary responses to GITMO.

### *Immersive Journalism*

As “serious” game designers, Weil and De la Peña capitalized on Second Life’s simulated environment not as entertainment, but as a pedagogical

opening for the public to virtually experience a fully operating but inaccessible prison. The rationale behind *Gone GITMO* rests on the educative value of proximity, of creating a confinement-like experience for visitors. The challenge, according to De la Peña and Weil, was to “communicate a gravely serious matter in a medium known for games and entertainment” (Weil 2008, January 11, para 5). The designers’ goals in designing the virtual prison were threefold. One, they wanted to raise awareness among the public about the denial of basic constitutional rights at the prison; two, they wanted to expose the conditions and abusive practices to public audiences; and three, they wanted to create a dialogue over social policy and cultivate advocacy in support of Guantánamo’s closure.

To undertake these aims, the designers drew on theories and research in digital media and neuroscience that posited a relation between virtual simulations and ethical engagement (Sanchez-Vives and Slater 2005; Slater and Wilbur 1997). De la Peña coined the term “immersive journalism” to describe virtual environments in which individuals can view and inhabit news stories through 3-D goggles and other apparatuses (De la Peña et al. 2010). The idea behind immersive journalism is to recondition media consumers into active *participants*, mitigating the complacency and passivity that often characterizes the act of news viewership. Users often wear Oculus Rift-type goggles, an audiovisual headset in which the visual field is 110 degrees, and they view a news story in 3-D animation or photographic form. The scenes mimic real incidents, portraying people at the scene or utilizing real sounds from the event. The viewer’s body movements are responsive in real time, cued by sensors placed around the room.

De la Peña’s company—the Emblematic Group—has developed other projects that engage with contentious social issues through 3-D visualizations and virtual reality (VR) equipment. Based on an actual event, *Hunger in Los Angeles* places viewers in the role of spectators as a man with diabetes faints while waiting in line at a food bank in Downtown Los Angeles (*Hunger in Los Angeles – Immersive Journalism* 2013). In *Use of Force*, viewers witness US border police beat to death Anastasio Hernandez Rojas, a Mexican national who attempted to recross the border after deportation. These immersive 3-D audiovisual environments aim to position users as quasi-firsthand witnesses to police violence, abuses of the state, terrorism, and poverty. In a dim mobilization of Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) notion of “witnessing,” participants are placed proximally to disturbing scenes and thereby implicated as moral actors.

In November 2016, I attended StoryNext, a conference in New York City on virtual reality and journalism, where De la Peña was speaking on a panel. Several media companies had VR setups in the lobby. I tried the Discovery Channel's VR goggles for a new initiative aimed at plunging their viewers in environments as diverse as "spooky castles" to American Civil War battlefields. Initially skeptical about the claims of VR to transport users into other "worlds," I was surprised by the total disorientation experienced after putting on the goggles. White polka-dotted sharks swerved by me through the water. When I looked upward or side to side, my field of vision shifted, enabling a view of a whale shark's white underbelly. Audio captured the fins maneuvering in the water and the muted sounds of underwater submersion. Minus the diver gear, the sensations of cold and pressure, and, of course, the specter of mortality, I was engaging in a form of "swimming." I also experienced a certain measure of fear while wearing the goggles, cautiously moving so as not to stumble into objects and people. There is a split consciousness involved in virtual reality—the body coexists in the virtual and the real environment, rendering full presence in either difficult to achieve.

### *Sensations of Confinement*

*Gone GITMO* is designed to be an immersive learning experience, one in which the user inhabits the body of the prisoner and makes quasi-agentive moves within the zone of the prison camp. The experience of visiting GITMO on Second Life is not intended to be a realistic facsimile of Guantánamo. Rather, it is a "hyperreal" (Eco 1990) place in which architectures and experiences of incarceration are heightened and reconfigured to create a narrative path for the avatar. Mel Slater, a collaborator of Weil and De la Peña, researches "place illusion" (Slater 2009) and "presence" (Slater and Wilbur 1997) in VR environments. Slater found that when VR systems offer bodily senses and movements akin to those found in real life, a sense of "placeness" (De la Peña et al. 2010) is lent to the virtual surroundings. In other words, if a virtual hand or leg moves in correspondence to one's actual body parts, then the illusion of *being* in place becomes possible. While *Gone GITMO* does not offer the total immersion offered by VR goggles and audio, it does permit correspondences between the physical body and the virtual one (De la Peña 2013). Under the user's direction, an avatar can pick objects up, move, slow down, or turn, permitting—as Slater's research argues—an illusory sense of place.

At the game's virtual Guantánamo, the virtual-body/real-body alignments are shaped and sometimes constrained by architectures of confinement and scenarios of punishment and torture. The educational experience offered by *Gone GITMO* counters some of the assumptions of other types of place-based pedagogy. The learning self, these digital projects argue, need not experience a direct sensorial encounter; learning does not just occur under conditions of bodily presence in real space and time.

*Arriving at GITMO* The experience of being a prisoner in *Gone GITMO* starts in a digital replica of a C-17 transport plane like those that transferred Guantánamo's prisoners from US military campaigns in the Middle East to Cuba (De la Peña 2008). Avatars walk into the plane and, once inside, are strapped down and can no longer control their virtual bodies. According to the game's blog, De la Peña wanted visitors to be "stripped of rights and orientation and to experience a sense of the violence and despair of being hooded and herded into a cage" (Weil 2007a, June 8, para 2). There was one technicality, however, in trying to forcibly remove avatars into this digital GITMO. Avatars in Second Life are agents of their own bodies and movements; consequently, to carry out this entrapment, De la Peña and Weil had to build in a device called a "Heads Up Display" (HUD). To enter GITMO on Second Life, the visitor must click on an agreement to relinquish control and submit to their own incarceration. The HUD was a necessary compromise to achieve a forceful introduction to the place of exception.

Once inside the plane, visitors watch helplessly as their avatar is strapped down by invisible forces. The point of view of the game changes dramatically from the third person to the first. A hood is forced down over users' heads, and only glimpses of light can be seen through the cloth. There are loud, cacophonous sounds of the plane landing, heavy breathing, and a male voice that shouts, "Shut Up!" Gravel crunches. Suddenly, the hood is lifted. The perspective shifts to the usual third-person point of view in Second Life. Avatars arrive at Camp X-Ray shackled and bent down in a cage. There are no soldiers or guards in *Gone GITMO*, a purposive design decision. De la Peña felt allowing avatars to take on the role of soldiers would result in an ethically suspect Stanford Prison Experiment-type scenario (Priego 2011). As a result, the aggression experienced when the avatar arrives seems to be the result of magical wizardry. For example, the avatar is strapped down by an invisible force in the C-17 plane. Nonetheless,

the cinematic entrance into GITMO is designed to simulate sensations of claustrophobia and disorientation within the avatar. Part of the pedagogy of this game, then, is related to the cultivation of affective states of being; the avatar-as-learner is transposed—if only faintly—into the prisoner’s body.

*Cagey Sensations* In Second Life, digital “building blocks” (called primes) are used to construct buildings. *Gone GITMO*’s designers created customized building blocks to build Camp X-Ray in the platform. From a Google image, they duplicated the razor wire at GITMO and stacked these virtual blocks of wire to create a series of cages. These cages, while appearing somewhat cartoonish (as do all buildings, objects, and people on Second Life), still carry a certain affective power. Most penal architecture is intended, as David Welch (2015) writes, “to say something bold about itself” (79), relying on an “audience capable of being startled at the sight of the prison” (79). On the game’s blog, Weil gives a telling example of the sensations of incarceration that can be felt even when one is a virtual prisoner. While the team was building out the prison on Second Life during their residency at BAVC, De la Peña logged into Second Life and found her avatar inside of one of the cages. However, simultaneously, a developer at BAVC had “sealed off” all the cages while making alterations to the game’s design. Given this interference, De la Peña’s avatar was trapped, “virtually frantic, trying to get out” (Weil 2007c, June 9, para 1). Reflecting on the experience of being entrapped in a digital cage at GITMO, De la Peña wrote:

[We] have the inevitable discussion about how real and unreal the whole thing is. How “I” felt imprisoned. How such feelings were nonsense, especially given the truth of the prison. But it was effective—and maybe it can work as a teaching tool and help raise awareness about it what means to lose *habeas corpus* rights. (Weil 2007c, June 9, para 3)

The designers, then, acknowledge the partiality—and some of the absurdity—in aiming to simulate a “real” prison experience onto visitors. And yet, even in virtual form, the caged environment provokes some feelings of anxiety—a provocation that the designers, as I read it, broached as a worthy pedagogical venture.

In *Gone GITMO*, the illusion of place and bodily presence is both vividly realized and not realized, a space of tension in which the designers

knowingly sit (Peggy Weil, personal communication, 8/5/2015). Some of the soberness is, of course, lost due to digitization and the hyperreality of Second Life. For all its plays on the senses, it cannot entirely capitalize on real proximity to achieve an educative effect. In a study of the US Holocaust Museum's *Kristallnacht* on Second Life, Bryoni Trezise (2012) argues that the embodied experiences of the avatar, and its subjection to digital "pain," places undue emphasis on the "moral certitude" (393) of the spectator. Digital embodiment positions spectators to the ethically advantageous feeling of their "*own capacity for feeling the feelings of others, more than (feeling) anything in particular*" (Trezise 2012, 393).

Lieutenant Commander Charlie Swift, a lawyer to Guantánamo's detainees who visited the prison over the course of several years, commented on *Gone GITMO*'s design, saying, "I applaud [the designers'] efforts...The irony is it's the lack of senses that is the real hell [at the real GITMO], not any particular thing that happens...You're strapped down, can't see or hear, can't move, your muscles are cramping" (Sancton 2008, para 9). Swift's comments on the day-to-day isolation and immobility of prisoners—a situation that cannot be captured by *Gone GITMO*, as the designers acknowledge—speaks to the limitations of such simulations in providing a truly immersive and educative experience for visitors. Still, in being constrained within the digital place of exception—especially in the cages of Camp X-Ray—there is "something personal, something that is a part of the user over which he or she has lost control, offering perhaps the shadow of the type of feeling that might be associated with real events" (De la Peña et al. 2010, p. 293). The loss of control, even if temporary and inconsequential, is part of how *Gone GITMO* shapes the learning self. These are, indeed, "shadowy" places of pedagogy, wherein the learner experiences captivity dimly, at a distance. This shadow place, though, holds possibilities of re-attunement for the learner, an opening to, as the designers aim, ally with the grievous physical and psychological conditions of GITMO's prisoners.

### *Classrooms at GITMO*

One of the earliest conversations between the designers about *Gone GITMO*'s design was related to the work of classroom teachers. In 2007, Weil queried De la Peña about the basic concept she wanted to convey with their prospective game. De la Peña replied, "*Habeas corpus*. Our nation is denying the basic right of *habeas corpus* to detainees" (Weil

2007a, February 12, para 3). Weil asked her to imagine how such a concept would be communicated *without* the use of technology. De la Peña said that she wanted to build a kit for classroom teachers where students could build a prison, “inhabit it,” and then “tear it down” (Weil 2007a, February 12, para 3). Since the project originated with pointedly educational aims, it is not surprising that university professors eventually used the game as a classroom space and, moreover, that classrooms were added to the prison’s build for lectures and teach-ins.

The design of the classroom spaces at *Gone GITMO* are intended to accommodate freedom of movement and seeing. Traditional brick and mortar spaces “don’t really make sense where students can, say, fly” (Weil 2007d, August 17, para 2). *Gone GITMO*’s classrooms are more like amphitheatres in which imagery and film are projected into the open air. In September 2007, Seton Hall, a law school in Newark, New Jersey, hosted a conference on Constitution Day which involved law school students, professors, and others in a discussion on post-9/11 intelligence gathering and surveillance. *Gone GITMO*’s designers asked Mark Denbeaux, the conference chair, if he might consider simulcasting the conference at their digital Guantánamo. “I’m 64 years old, I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about but it sounds good,” he responded in an email (Weil 2007d, August 15, para 2).

To accommodate the crowd of avatar-attendees, *Gone GITMO* moved off its original island to a new piece of real estate lent to the project by USC’s Interactive Media Division. They constructed an amphitheater called *Habeas Commons*, a “classroom for the disembodied” (Weil 2007e, August 17, para 2) where avatars could be seated, view the simulcast of the conference on a projected screen, and participate in dialogue. Over the course of *Gone GITMO*’s operations, the amphitheater was reused for events cosponsored by the ACLU and the Culture Project. Another space for learning at *Gone GITMO* is a decidedly unprison-like series of galleries, which serve as a kind of respite from the repressive digital Camp X-Ray and Camp Delta. One gallery has chairs for avatars to sit and listen to a recorded reading of classified documents released under the Freedom of Information Act; another posts poetry written by GITMO detainees.

*Gone GITMO* is not alone in mobilizing Second Life as a virtual classroom. York University in Toronto ran a course on disaster management on Second Life. Students took up roles as paramedics, fire chiefs, and city mayors and responded to disaster scenes within the platform (Morbey and Steele 2013). Second Life offers instructors the ability to expose learners

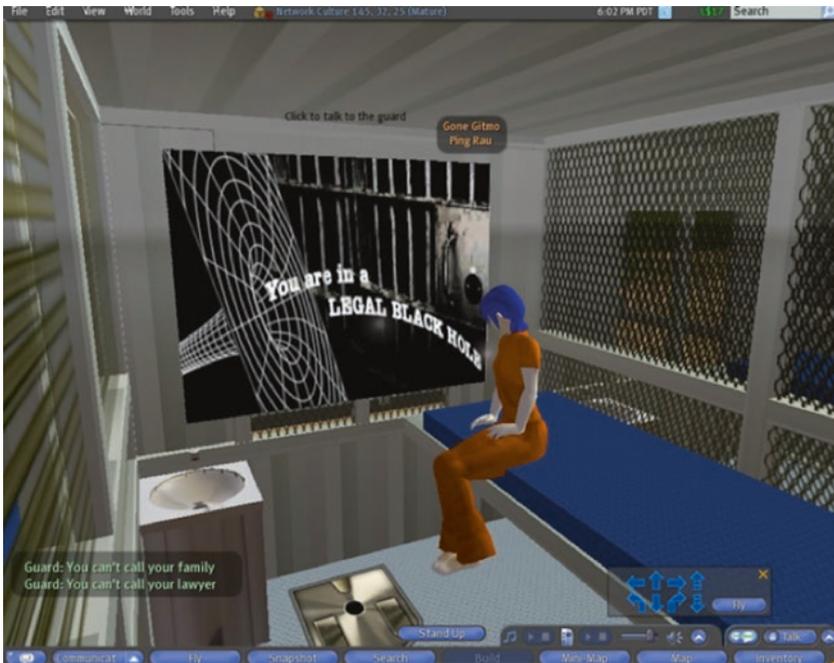
to scenarios impossible in a brick-and-mortar classroom, and for learners to take responsive actions when confronted with conditions of emergency, confinement, and commerce. It also permits a wide range of learners across geographic locations to participate.

Like most technologies, Second Life poses limitations. Jeffrey Young (2010), a technology reporter for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, describes his forays into Second Life's educational spaces. "I regularly get stuck between pieces of virtual furniture, wander around aimlessly looking for the person I'm trying to meet up with," he observed, "or lose patience as I wait for my online avatar to walk between virtual classrooms" (para. 4). *Gone GITMO* and other Second Life educational ventures seem most promising when creatively deployed as immersive simulations and sensation-driven places rather than as simply virtual versions of the lecture hall, classroom, or discussion area. As Young notes, "If all you need to do is chat with far-flung students, there are many easier ways to do it" (para. 4).

### *The Pain of Others: Bridging the Epistemological Gap*

In *Gone GITMO*, the designers intended to bring avatars virtually "close" to the bodily pain experienced by prisoners. The game is designed to expose the avatar-as-learner to a virtual mimicry of torture. Consequently, the knowledge acquisition at work in the game is, in part, related to comprehending the psychic relationship between interrogator and prisoner. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry (1987) argues that it is difficult to find precise language to describe one's physical pain to another. Pain is so often expressed through utterances like gasps, exhortations, and screams—and even in these expressions, no one can truly come to "know" the pain of another. An "epistemological" gap exists between the person who experiences pain and the one who does not. Scarry explains that one of the reasons interrogators at prisons like Guantánamo can conduct acts of torture is because of this knowledge gap: "The pain is hugely present to the prisoners and absent to the torturer" (Scarry 1987, 46). Attempts by organizations like Amnesty International to convey the pain experienced by political prisoners in their publications and outreach efforts is to "restore to each person tortured his or her voice" (p. 50) and "[give] the pain a place in the world" (50). Similarly, through first-person testimony and replications of the psychic conditions of torture, De la Peña and Weil aimed to give the body in pain a "place" in a virtual reality.

The question of how to represent torture was a thorny one for the designers. De la Peña and Weil were clear on the point that avatars would not be tortured in their prison. They elected not to “trivialize torture or imprisonment by torturing an avatar,” recognizing that “imprisoning an avatar is not the same experience as the real thing” (Weil 2007b, June 8, para. 2). Rather than directly submitting to torture, avatars experience a “hands off” approach to it. When avatars enter cells at *Gone GITMO*’s replica of Camp Delta, audio transcripts of interrogation sessions play. While in a solitary confinement chamber, an avatar is prompted to ask questions of out-of-view guards about the length of detainment or request to call a lawyer. The answer, however, is always negative (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** A torture chamber in *Gone Gitmo* (Weil 2008c, May 2). (Images related to *Gone GITMO* on Second Life and the Guantánamo Bay Museum of Art and History are used with the consent of the project’s designers. See referenced citations for image source)

Visitors to the site can also enter into a white paneled “Chamber of Contemplation”—another design choice that sidesteps creating an actual torture chamber—which allows for visitors to see RSS feeds of news developments on the prison and read prisoners’ testimonies. The pedagogical challenge faced by the designers was the impossibility of representing the torture experience and the undesirability of a kind of “hyper-visibility” that may be dangerously enticing or gratifying for certain audiences.

*Testimony in Tandem* One of the other attempts by the designers to ally visitors with the suffering of prisoners is to strategically place documentary film footage throughout the prison’s digital architecture. Movements of the avatar in Camp X-Ray trigger projections of films, such as emotional footage of detainee Mozaam Begg’s father reading from his son’s letters. “The film clips serve to authenticate our depiction, and as moving, rather than still, images, they serve to immerse the viewer in a cinematic experience,” explained Weil (Weil 2007b, June 9, para. 1). The designers brought their technical savvy to bear in creating these documentary encounters in the game. The 3-D features of the prison—the cages, the pathways, and buildings—are augmented with 2-D footage of prisoners. Avatars begin the *Gone GITMO* experience in a cage; once they stand, a real-life image of prisoners in a similar cage appears. Walking in the path between cages precipitates a film of prisoners making that same journey embedded in the pathway. These embedded videos were intended to “evoke a strangely effective ‘mirror’ effect” (Weil 2007b, June 9, para. 2). Such designs make possible a kind of witnessing that has been made near-impossible by official photographs released by the US government. Michelle Brown (2009) explains that prisons are “fundamentally directed at a kind of erasure—through the prohibition and suspension of the social—of human interaction and communication” (14). The design of the game includes testimony and news footage to undo this erasure of bodily pain and suffering of prisoners and so prompt empathy from visitors.

*Stress Positions* *Gone GITMO* was an early iteration of “immersive journalism,” and the project’s collaborators were continually experimenting with virtual techniques to bridge the epistemological gap between the pain experienced by prisoners and a complacent, unknowing public. In July 2009, De la Peña and Weil joined Dr. Mel Slater, a researcher of virtual environments, at his lab in Barcelona, Spain to collaborate on an

experiment in virtual reality and torture. They constructed a virtual environment that simulated the “stress position” that Guantánamo’s prisoners were forced into by interrogators. As a method of torture, prisoners stood for extended periods on the balls of their feet on top of a chair (De la Peña 2009).

In this experiment at Slater’s Barcelona lab, research participants were asked to sit—not stand—on a chair. A headset was placed their heads and a sensor band around their waists. Participants held their hands behind their backs and closed their eyes. When prompted, participants opened their eyes and, through the goggles, viewed a strange figure: A man in an orange bodysuit standing with his hands behind his back, crouched on a wooden box in a dark room. The audio was muffled and strident, as though coming through the wall. Suddenly, the visual perspective through the headset shifted to the first person. If participants looked to one side of the room, they saw a “virtual mirror” of themselves (as the orange-suited figure) in the stress position. The audio continued with an interrogator singing “God Bless America” along with loud, crashing noises.

Interviewed at the end of the experiment, participants explained that they distinctively felt “you cannot control things. You are helpless” (De la Peña 2009, n.p.) and, after staying in the scenario, reported “you start to believe that you are him” (De la Peña 2009, n.p.). While *Gone GITMO* did not include these same kinds of learning activities, the experiment speaks broadly to the approach that De la Peña and Weil took in their project. They aimed for those same identifications between the prisoner and visitor, utilizing technology to enmesh visitors into uncomfortable, if not terrifying, worlds. These kinds of laboratory experiments attempt to prove that virtual reality can, in fact, replicate conditions and sensations of torture without torturing participants. VR torture permits a transmission of “just enough” discomfort so that the faint whiff of prisoners’ experiences can be passed on to the learner. Elaine Scarry (1987) writes that “torture consists of acts that magnify the way in which pain destroys a person’s world, self, and voice.” But political and educational interventions can “become not only a denunciation of the pain but almost a diminution of the pain; a partial reversal of the process of torture itself” (Scarry 1987, 50). The intriguing proposition of immersive experiences like *Gone GITMO* is that learners’ willingness to engage in simulations of confinement could, somehow, be one small move in “reversing” the pain of others.

THE GUANTÁNAMO BAY MUSEUM OF ART AND HISTORY:  
 “DISTURBING” THE NARRATIVE OF THE PLACE  
 OF EXCEPTION

At first glance, the homepage for the Guantánamo Bay Museum of Art and History looks like a typical museum’s website: it contains a Visitor’s Guide. The museum hours are listed (it is closed on Mondays). There is information on becoming a member and links to the permanent exhibitions. The structure, layout, navigation, and rhetoric are familiar and straightforward. A splintering from this familiarity, however, is achieved in a single sentence. The website explains that the museum is located on the “*former site* of the Guantánamo Bay Detention Camp in Cuba” (Guantánamo Bay Art and History Museum 2012, emphasis added) and is “dedicated to remembering the U.S. Prison which was active between 2002 and 2012” (Guantánamo Bay Art and History Museum 2012d). There is an image of President Obama as he soberly signs the order to close the prison. The conceit of the Guantánamo Bay Museum of Art and History emerges in its viewer’s double take. Premised on an imaginary closure of Guantánamo, the museum is a sham, a playful inversion of history.

Differently from *Gone GITMO*’s hyperreal simulacra and immersive approaches, the Guantánamo Bay Museum of Art and History opts to represent Guantánamo through speculative narration and a satiric remaking of the prison’s present. In 2012, the museum was conceived and created by Ian Allen Paul, an artist, activist, and doctoral student at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The museum is hosted online at [www.guantanamobaymuseum.org](http://www.guantanamobaymuseum.org). Its current exhibitions feature seven artists whose work ranges from photography to video installation and mixed-media pieces. On the website, *The Jumah al-Dossari Center for Critical Studies* offers several academic articles, including an essay by Judith Butler and two articles about the state of exception. The museum also has an active social media presence. Its Twitter feed and Facebook page give updates about the weather conditions in Cuba, educational resources, and enticements to view the art exhibits. Occasionally, the museum’s holdings are exhibited in brick-and-mortar art spaces. Playing the role of curator, Ian Allen Paul, the site’s creator, gives lectures and participates in Q&A sessions. So far, the museum has exhibited at Brown University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of California at San Diego.

The approach of the museum is situated in the work of an activist-artist-scholar collective called the Electronic Disturbance Theater (Ensemble 1993, 1996). Ricardo Domínguez, a professor at the University of California at San Diego, is one of the group's founding members and is a frequent collaborator with Paul, the museum's coordinator. The group turns a focus on "cyberactivism," producing various tools to stage virtual sit-ins and organize protests. One of their most noted efforts was a web tool called FloodNet, which directed protesters onto specific servers at the same time, which "flooded" websites with auto-reload requests. During the 1990s, in support of the Zapatista movement, the group used FloodNet on the president of Mexico's website and that of the US Defense Department (Lane 2003). The philosophy of the group, which very much informed the design and approach of the Guantánamo Bay Museum of Art and History, is to shake web users out of complacent internet surfing: "Its actions transform the passive use of an electronic tool—obedient clicking—into an active disruption of the quiescence of the screen that imposes itself into the heart of power structures" (Bernard 2000). The project of both the Theater and the museum was to creatively deploy the internet to stir political engagement.

### *Minor Hacks*

The idea for the museum started in the quintessential repository of contemporary geographic knowledge, Google Maps. While pursuing the application, Paul noticed that certain places were censored and marked as having "no data," like military bases and federal buildings in Washington, DC. The military base and prison complex at Guantánamo was also one of these data-less places. While satellite photos of the area were visible, roads and buildings were not. For Paul, these absences from the maps were a "space to start thinking about the relationship between the state, secrecy, and the military" (personal communication, 6/21/2015). Shortly, Paul decided to enact a "minor hack" (personal communication, 6/21/2015) of the maps. The application permits users to submit edits; therefore, restaurants, organizations, businesses, and the like get added to Google Maps by suggestion. A network of volunteers manages Google Maps and, to post an entry, they only require some proof that the place exists, such as a website or photograph. Paul thought, "If they're not going to list [the prison at Guantánamo] here, then let's just replace it with something else that we want there instead" (personal communication, 6/21/2015). That

“something else,” he decided, would be a museum. When people searched for the prison at Guantánamo on Google Maps, Paul anticipated, they would find a museum instead, provoking a “minor cognitive dissonance” (personal communication, 6/21/2015) in the seeker. Considering what evidence he would need to get approval from Google, Paul enlisted the help of artists and friends and developed a fully formed museum website. The origin of the Guantánamo Bay Museum of Art and History, then, began with the desire to upend blank, security-protected geographies with another kind of mapping. Once the site was created and added to the web, it was submitted—and accepted—into Google Maps (Guantánamo Bay Art and History Museum 2012d).

Occasionally, the museum is taken off Google Maps. But the museum is then resubmitted for entry—sometimes by cyber activists unknown to Paul—and once again appears on the map. The cycle of deletion and reemergence becomes a meta-commentary about the secretive and occlusive nature of Guantánamo. As Paul explained it, the hacking of Google Maps and the insertion of the museum into the virtual geography of the most frequently used map on the planet, “[acknowledges] certain kinds of history” (personal communication, 1/14/2016).

### *Disturbance and Re-Storying*

The state of exception, as Giorgio Agamben (2005) reminds us, was originally intended to be a temporary extension of state power in times of national crisis or war. But it has, especially in a post-9/11 world, become a permanent fixture of governance. What made the so-called “war on terror” so egregious was not the proliferation of surveillance and controls exerted on day-to-day life, but the American public’s complacent acceptance of them. Part of the underlying design philosophy behind the Guantánamo Museum of Art and History involves creating a “disturbance” that unseats the normalization of the state of exception. The museum is a move to, as Paul explained, “[disturb] those kinds of normative ways of thinking about the world” and “[create] things that appear normal and making them very strange and worthy of re-inspection” (personal communication, 6/21/2015).

Guantánamo exists in a limbo-like state. It was illegal to open it, and is now nearly impossible to shutter, given all the legal complexities of transferring prisoners. “It occupies that intersection between inevitability and impossibility—it’s a very strange place,” said Paul (personal communication,

6/21/2015). According to Paul, they wanted to “create this dissonance, this disturbance, and reaffirm the possibility and the necessity of closing Guantánamo—but at the same time [they] wanted to complicate the notion that that would be the end of the struggle” (personal communication, 6/21/2015). The museum’s designers and artists, then, did not want to make the mistake of offering a utopian vision of the future, one that projected an image of a “perfect world” where Guantánamo did not exist. Instead, the museum was intended to be a kind of meta-commentary on issues of commemoration and how institutions participate in public memory. The museum’s designer and collaborators wanted to investigate this “strange” contemporary moment in which Guantánamo holds both the possibility of staying open interminably or closing.

*Fictional Closure* Paul and his collaborators wanted to define a speculative future for GITMO, in which the prison would be shuttered and a museum would take its place. In this version of the future, “[if] the museum is there, that means the prison can’t be there” (Ian Allen Paul, personal communication, 6/21/2015). Such purposeful inversion is foregrounded on the homepage for the museum, on which the tagline, “Collectively Remembering a Passed Future” appears. This oxymoronic line is indicative of the larger aims of this faux-museum—we cannot “remember” the future, nor can a future be “passed.” There is an inversion of logic here, an upside-down-ness in the phrase, one that communicates a bending and reshaping of time. Guantánamo, in our lived reality, has not closed, so the play on words here operate both as observation and a kind of forewarning. Have we or will we, intimates the phrase, pass on this opportunity to act? To close Guantánamo for good?

The imaginary premise of the museum is communicated through a graphic timeline of the unwieldy process of closing Guantánamo. In this fictional narrative, Congress halted the closure and an international campaign ensued with protests and blockages that, ultimately, ensured that Guantánamo shuttered its doors in 2010. The timeline itself—which satirically mimics the formality of history textbooks and other official documents—argues for a future that has not yet arrived, suggesting that the closure of the prison will only occur if the will of leadership and pressures from international community and the American public are in place. The speculative history presented here acts as a history lesson—one in which political complacency and the evasion of executive promises should be met

with political urgency and public outcry. This message is further enforced in the stated mission of the museum, which posits that in “highlighting the diversity of practices and discourse which forced the closure of the prison that others will be able to draw from our praxis in future struggles for social justice” (Guantánamo Bay Art and History Museum 2012b). Through the conceit of the prison’s closure, the museum proposes an activation of public critique and protest.

### *Aesthetic Responses to the State of Exception*

The museum contains a series of online exhibits by (real) visual and mixed-media artists from Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area. These artists contributed pieces that consider a range of issues at stake. Installations address issues from the employment of torture and interrogation practices at Guantánamo to more abstract commentaries on space, confinement, and the American political landscape. The artists confront the problem of representing the unthinkable, such as violence against bodies and “strangers” and the physical and psychic distance of the American public to the prison.

*Breaking through the Quotidian* In one installation at the museum, the video artist Adam Harms (2012) explores some of the psychological torture techniques deployed at Guantánamo. His “Performing the Torture Playlist” is based on the CIA documentation of the pop music used on torture detainees, along with strobe lights and sleep deprivation. The piece is a video installation of various footage found of Americans singing karaoke to these songs (which include, ironically, “Hit Me Baby One More Time” by Britney Spears and “I Love You” from the young children’s television show *Barney*). The effect of the video, which is exceedingly grainy, loud, and jarring, is meant to mimic the ruthlessness and excruciating psychic effect of such sounds on Guantánamo’s prisoners. Viewing the playlist, which is 59 minutes in length, a strangeness emerges. Harm’s use of “ordinary” Americans singing songs used to keep Guantánamo’s detainees awake and delirious reinforces the American public’s complicity with their plight. According to Paul, this installation provokes some of the strongest responses from visitors because of its familiarity: “It really tries to think about something that couldn’t be more everyday—pop music and what is considered essential to American culture

and the fact that it's being weaponized very intensely" (personal communication, 6/21/2015).

*Connections to Histories and Architectures of Mass Incarceration* Some of the exhibits at the museum address the long-standing history of American carceralities. One of the museum's permanent exhibits is a visual installation by Jenny Odell (2012) that uses satellite images from Google Earth of various prisons across the United States. Odell erases all landscape features in the satellite photographs and leaves only the pixelated images of prisoners' bodies, prompting the viewer to consider the vast white space juxtaposed against clusters of prisoners, the boldness of their colored uniforms, and their shadows. Odell explains in her artist's commentary that in these images "prison becomes not an abstract hole into which people disappear as statistics, but a physically real, organized space inside which people are partitioned into groups and different colored uniforms" (Guantánamo Bay Art and History Museum 2012a). Odell's art employs an apparatus of surveillance in its creation, one which stands in contrast to the "clean" images of the prison that are packaged for public relations purposes. Guantánamo's visual field is controlled and aligned with official rhetoric and, in photographs, prisoners are obscured and anonymous (but sufficiently restrained and controlled), and the physical plant appears to be state-of-the-art, lawful, and, most confounding, humane. Almost counter-intuitively, the absence of direct representation of suffering and physical pain in these satellite portraits forces audiences to consider what remains: the lived but bare existences of prisoners. In a sense, by leaving representations of detainment and confinement abstract and open, between absent and present, Odell permits visitors a space beyond cognition, one that allows for a range of emotional responses.

### *"Playing Along" in Imaginary Geographies*

One of the key features of this project's pedagogy is the unusual relationship it establishes between visitors and the museum as a figure of institutional authority. Much of the "learning" in traversing this digital place of exception relies on the extent to which visitors interpret and respond to the institution's farcical nature. In other words, do visitors "read" the museum as a fake? Do they align a factual knowledge of Guantánamo's status with the fiction the museum presents? The fiction of the museum relies chiefly on establishing and performing an "institutional" voice. Paul

explained to me that there are visitors to the website and attendees to the museum's in-person events who believe the narrative that Guantánamo is closed, and the museum has been constructed in its place. "There's always a certain number of people that will just buy into the fiction," he said, which is understandable because the museum is so convincingly designed (personal communication, 6/21/2015). The authority is achieved through a series of methods, including, as Paul said, "using a certain kind of language, dressing a certain way, having a certain kind of quality in exhibition, having a website that has quite a bit of material on it, having an actual place on Google Maps" (personal communication, 6/21/2015). The pedagogy of this project lies in those possible moments of recognition, when the visitor does an anticipated double take, and conducts a critical reading and rejection of this institutional voice. "If you're not careful and you're not approaching it critically, it's very easy to buy into," said Paul, commenting on how visitors read the website (personal communication, 6/21/2015). The pedagogical address (Ellsworth 2005) of this museum lies in its double bind of truth-telling and lying. Guantánamo is closed, the museum tells us. But we, the visitor, know that this is not the case. In this fictive space, other kinds of truths are illuminated: *Why isn't Guantánamo closed? When will it close? What kind of political conditions have kept it open for so many years?*

The museum is not the first to deploy tactics of lying and truth-elision. The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Culver City, California, for instance, is a modern-day "wonder cabinet" of curiosities, from micro-miniature sculptures perched on needlepoints to elegant portraits of canines launched into space during the Soviet Space Program. The museum's austere atmosphere and erudite placard texts communicate "authenticity," while its drawn-out, comical specificity and haphazard selection of objects suggest otherwise. The museum, as journalist Lawrence Weschler (1996) observes, positions visitors as "shimmering between wondering *at* (the marvels of nature) and wondering whether (any of this could possibly be true)" (p. 60). The attempt to keep visitors guessing at the real and the fake is part of its radical subversiveness. Along with the Museum of Jurassic Technology, the Staten Island Ferry Disaster (Hider 2017), a memorial established to commemorate a fictitious sinking of a ferry by a monstrous sea creature, and the Hokes Archive (Lyons 1994), a fabrication of entire ancient societies, the Aazudians and the Apasht, through lithographs and artifacts, are elaborate efforts to broadcast fake histories in the public sphere. Beauvais Lyons (1994), who created the Hokes Archive, explains

that these faux-museums cultivate a “critical awareness” (72) that emerges out of the “tension that exists between our scoffing common sense and our liberating imagination” (72). Faux museums operate skillfully in this zone of perpetrated confusion, unsettling audiences’ trust in institutional expertise, knowledge production, and historiography.

Geography is playfully engaged on the museum’s website, another tool of the museum’s pedagogy. On the bottom of the homepage, there is a link to a “Plan Your Visit” page. On this page, there is a Google Map with a red drop-pin indicating the location of the museum in Cuba. The page humorously reminds visitors that because the “museum is located at the former site of the Guantánamo Bay Detention Facility in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, making travel arrangements to visit the museum can be difficult” (Guantánamo Bay Art and History Museum 2012c). Given this predicament, the museum invites visitors to take advantage of the museum’s organized flights and boat service, as well as arrange for school and ecological tours. The conceit at work here, of course, is that the prison is not accessible to the public and that very few people—beyond certain public officials, lawyers, translators, prison guards, and other administrators/workers—have been able to see and traverse the site. The detention camp is intentionally shrouded from media and public oversight. The openness and invitational quality demonstrated on this visitor’s page lampoons and subverts Guantánamo’s secrecy.

*Sustaining the Farce* Humor plays a complex role in presenting the institutional voice and sustaining the fiction of the museum. In 2016, the museum had a brick and mortar exhibition at the University of California, San Diego, where Ricardo Dominguez, one of the founders of The Electronic Disturbance Theater, is a professor. Both men gave a lecture about the museum and spoke in broader terms about the security state and surveillance. During these in-person events, according to Paul, there are typically three kinds of responses to the fictional narrative being presented. Some audience members, as mentioned above, trust the story that Guantánamo has closed and a museum has opened in its place. Others recognize the falsity of the narrative but “go along with it,” interacting with the curators in a tonally ironic manner. The final kind of response is a critical one, in which audience members want to engage the museum as a political or aesthetic project. The performance is continually contingent on audience members’ interpretative modes. When I asked Paul to tell me more about his performances as curator, he said:

It's always very awkward—no one really knows where it's going and everyone is a little nervous and no one is quite sure whether they're being ethical or unethical about participating. It's most strange when I get public talks about the project and then there's a questions-and-answer period. During the public talks, I was going to talk as the curator, and that's all within the fiction and I never hint it's anything but real. So, it's totally performative and it's always the question of 'will the questions be about as our project or as the actual museum?' (Personal communication, 6/21/2015)

There is, as might be expected, a range of affective responses to the performance. As Paul explained:

People would get aggravated and want to talk about it as our project. Sometimes people would come up to me and say, 'Wow, it's so great prison's been closed' and that's also an awkward relationship, because you don't want to trick people necessarily, but also you don't want to deceive people rather, but that's the way the project operates and you also have to let that run its course as well. (Personal communication, 6/21/2015)

Regardless of the audience members' stances, the curators "try to make the fiction last as long as [they] can until it breaks down" (Ian Allen Paul, personal communication, 6/21/2015).

The question of "lying" to visitors who buy into the fiction presents certain ethical dilemmas for the museum's designers. Paul receives requests from educators to bring school groups to the museum. Sometimes these emails will be inquiries about the resources available at the museum, which Paul responds to in a straightforward manner. However, when teachers seem as though they really might bring their students to Cuba, the museum's response is more evasive. "Sometimes I talk about how the military has temporarily closed access to the roads leading to the museum and so we're temporarily closed, but we'll get back to you when it's available—stuff like this," said Paul (personal communication, 6/21/2015). The educative value of the museum, in part, rests on an "ironic relation" (Ian Allen Paul, personal communication, 6/21/2015) between the visitor and website and the prompting of the visitor's interpretative savvy and re-reading of the text offered on the site.

In the era of fake news, the museum is a salient meta-commentary on the urgency of critically reading and interpreting online media. The Stanford History Education Group (2016) administered a series of 56 tasks to 7804 high school, middle school, and college students to assess

their ability to distinguish fake news from legitimate news sources, differentiate between advertisements and news articles, and analyze the trustworthiness of claims on social media, among other “civic online reasoning” skills. More than 80% of the students in the study believed that content labeled “sponsored content” was an actual news story and less than 20% of the students questioned the legitimacy of a fake photograph. The researchers did not mince words about today’s “digital natives”, saying: “Overall, young people’s ability to reason about information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: *bleak*” (Stanford History Education Group 2016, 4). Given these observations, then, the Guantánamo Bay Museum of Art and History sits in a pedagogically fragile position, the learner potentially entrapped in a ceaseless fiction.

### VIRTUAL LINKAGES TO SUFFERING

What does it mean to grapple with and learn from the detainees’ experiences at Guantánamo within these digital spaces? Do they permit us, as Susan Sontag (2003) wrote in her examination of war photography, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, to locate ourselves “on the same map as their suffering, [and]—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering”? (104). Similarly, Butler (2004) argues that “mourning” is a necessary part of a public response to Guantánamo and explains that only in grief does a collective responsibility emerge.

The transitory quality of these sites may demonstrate the limitations of virtual spaces for grief and mourning. In 2010, *Gone GITMO*’s digital world was taken off of *Second Life* due to lack of funding, and was archived at Edgelab at Ryerson University in Canada. In 2013, it became an installation at the Museum of Modern Art in Moscow. Like its larger platform, *Gone GITMO* has fallen into a kind of digital ruin, an forestallment of its fictionalized, aspirational world in which a prison becomes a place of learning. So what does our “participation” in them, ultimately, indicate if we are to experience them solely as digital tourists who can enter and leave as we please, or if the sites themselves effectively disappear from the virtual landscape?

*Gone GITMO* and the *Guantánamo Bay Museum of Art and History* rely on users’ willingness to immerse in a simulated carceral experience. In one case, visitors are tricked (or tickled) by the authenticity of its museological rhetoric. In another, visitors take on a digital body that submits to detainment and torture as a kind of empathic exercise. Both projects

aimed to bridge the cognitive and affective gap between prisoners and those on the outside. Yet, like many memory-related initiatives wherein a public is exposed to “difficult” history, the witness to violence remains at a temporary, safe, and intellectual distance. Within digital environments, the gestural nature of witnessing is exacerbated by the digital format, often inducing a kind of self-consciousness among visitors at the performativity of their engagement. Bryoni Trezise (2012), writing of her experience of traversing a digital Kristallnacht in *Second Life*, explained, “My avatar – as distinct from my own bodily ‘self’ – does not experience a corporeal affinity with the historical specificities of traumatic loss, it does not materially feel nor cannot materially ‘die’” (405). These digital simulations, as Trezise observes, have little to do with users’ actual feelings and more to do with putting them in touch with a capability for feeling.

There may be, however, room for these kinds of modest effects. These two digital projects incite puzzlement, anxiety, and amusement and offer a fruitful beginning for the kinds of robust critique, considerations, and emotionality to which Sontag and Butler refer. There is and should be room within an education in the times of exception that allows for a subtle multiplicity of responses, be they “serious” or “humorous” in nature. In Kathleen Stewart’s (2007) unusual ethnographic research, *Ordinary Affects*, she writes of the more ordinary persuasions and forces that work on us intellectually and emotionally, arguing that confronting widespread social injustices and despair requires “not of a challenge to be achieved or an ideal to be realized, but a mode of attunement, a continuous responding to something not quite already given and yet somehow happening” (127). She describes the daily knowledge and learning in which we engage and suggests that these “ordinary affects” are a more quotidian form of encountering injustice. “Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected,” she writes, “that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergencies” (Stewart, 12–13). These projects prompt a range of ordinary affective states, ones that reflect the various kinds of attunement necessary for thinking within the exceptional state. The inchoate nature of the “public” requires diversity in the mechanisms and spaces within which thinking—in all its forms and arrivals—is made possible. However, further research is needed on design thinking, modalities, and audience responses, as well as how such designs can be further refined to provoke responsive attunement within the state of exception. These virtual places of exception are meant to “galvanize” political responses, as Paul told me in our interview and,

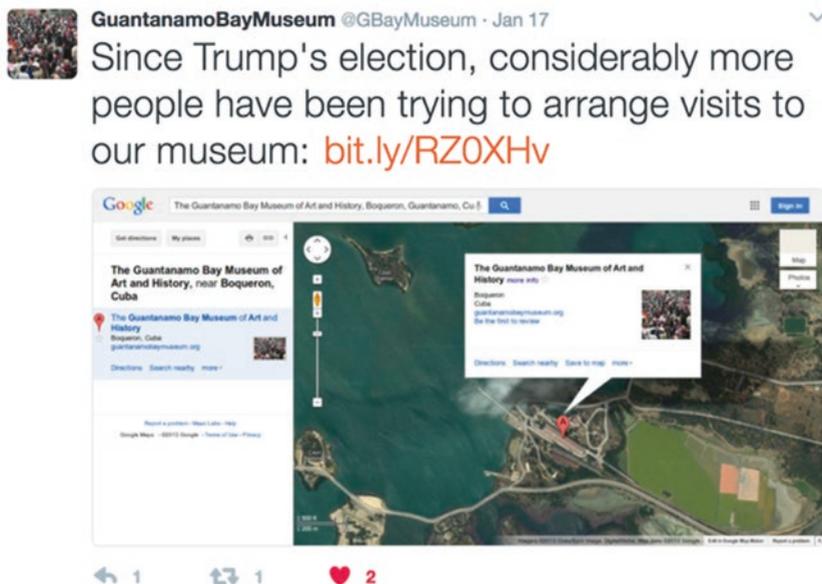


Fig. 2 A portentous tweet on the museum's Twitter account. (GuantanamoBayMuseum 2017)

like most social justice-minded educational interventions, the impact on political action—the failure to close GITMO—will remain a murkier question. But, in the meantime, perhaps the most telling evidence of the verve and deftness of these sites' pedagogy is the curiosity and searches of their visitors (Fig. 2).

## NOTES

1. To study *GITMO* and The Guantánamo Museum of Art and History, I interviewed the projects' design leads, a total of three people. In addition to interview data, I drew on public talks and exhibitions on the projects that I either attended in person or viewed online. Extant documents, articles, and published research on the theories that underlie these virtual projects were also examined.
2. For a detailed account of Second Life's populaces, social practices, and economics, see Boellstorff's (2015) ethnographic study of the platform.

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