

Abstract

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The Virtual (Re)Construction of History: Some Epistemological Questions

In recent years, some historians started to experiment with computer-generated virtual environments as a new medium for representing spatial history beyond the written language unfolding new potentials for understanding and representing history. The new medium introduces often neglected sensory modalities and the exposition of some aspects of history that may otherwise go unnoticed. It affords the use of phenomenology and semiotics as theoretical lenses for interpreting the past in ways not possible in traditional media. It also often employs symbolic realism (the use of perspectival constructions that emulate everyday experience) to enable new forms of individual and social engagements with the past. In doing so, it raises new epistemological questions not typically encountered by historians using traditional media. This paper aims to clarify some of the assumptions and premises at work in reconstructing the past using computer-generated virtual environments. It examines some epistemological concerns with the use of phenomenology and semiotics as theoretical lenses. It also explores the potentials and limitations of symbolic realism and its offshoots: the suspension of disbelief and the suspension of imagination.