




RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Playful images: Visual Holocaust memory, digital media, and the visual walkthrough method

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### Abstract

This article presents a conceptual and methodological framework that focuses on the interactivity, creativity, and variability of Holocaust images in digital media. Our argument unfolds in three stages. First, we introduce the concept of playful images: historical images that undergo recontextualisation, serving memetic, personal, and interactive engagements in and by digital media. Secondly, drawing on pivotal scholarship in digital methods, anthropology, sociology, and visual analysis, we identify a lacuna in contemporary methodologies and provide a rationale for an innovative approach to visual memory analysis in digital media that considers both digital media affordances and the appropriation of visual and historical materials in digital media. For that purpose, we thirdly outline a visual walkthrough method (VWM), a pragmatic performance of our approach tailored for analysing interactive digital experiences featuring playful images. By examining the playful appropriation of historical images in the video game *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017), we demonstrate how the interactive experience of playful images can be analysed with the help of the VWM. We conclude by discussing the position of our proposed conceptual and methodological framework within media and memory studies in the digital age.

**Keywords:** historical images; digital methods; playfulness; Holocaust; memory work; playfulness; play

### Introduction

In 2017, the Israeli-German artist Shahak Shapira launched the online project *YOLOCAUST*. As its primary source, the project manipulated photographs taken by visitors at Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, capturing instances of joyful behaviour often considered inappropriate at a memorial. Shapira selected a dozen publicly accessible visitor selfies and other photographs uploaded to various social media platforms and digitally juxtaposed them with a significantly different type of image: archival photographs from the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, originally captured at different sites (such as Buchenwald or Ohrdruf), and recontextualised on the project's website.<sup>1</sup> By aggregating self-photography taken at the memorial and visual documents of Nazi atrocities, Shapira intertwined two temporalities (past and present) and image types into digital composites. When users hovered their mouse over the photograph, they could transition from the present picture taken at the memorial to the digitally manipulated

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see: <https://yolocaust.de/> (accessed 1 January 2024)

image (Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Henig 2021, 216). Thus, the project encouraged users to playfully interact with the new composite images and engage with their different layers, revealing the ‘reality’ behind the memorial site that now also serves as a ‘playground’ for visitors. As such, Shapira delineated a new limit to user engagement on-site and online when it comes to Holocaust memory work, one which criticises joyful behaviour in memorials but also applies a playful attitude for creating a visual and symbolic relation between the memorial site and the historical event through a digital image.

*YOLOCAUST* illustrates the focus of this article: the ways users personally interact with historical images in varied digital environments through editing, sharing, and creating and how such images can be critically analysed. This article offers a conceptual and methodological framework that centres on the interactivity, creativity, and variability of Holocaust images in digital media. We explore how digital media influences contemporary Holocaust memory work through digital engagement with Holocaust imagery and offer a way to analyse user interactions with digitised imagery. Prompted by extensive research on visual media and game studies, we introduce the concept of ‘playful images’: digital images embodying a recontextualisation of historical images employed for memetic, personal, and interactive user engagements in and by digital media. By emphasising play as the driving force behind such memory work, playful images shift the focus from solely the historical event and its cultural interpretation to performing a playful exploration of the past through interactive engagement with visual imagery.

We also argue that to understand the contemporary appropriation of Holocaust images, a new approach is needed for their visual analysis. For that purpose, we draw on seminal scholarship in digital methods, anthropology, sociology, and visual analysis and provide a rationale for a methodological approach to the visual analysis of such images that considers both digital media affordances and the appropriation of visual and historical materials in digital media. For that purpose, we delineate the ‘visual walkthrough method’ (VWM), a visual analysis-oriented method tailored for analysing the use of historical images in digital media environments. The VWM is a pragmatic performance of our approach. It addresses extensive engagement contexts and user interface experience (how users technically and visually engage with the mediated experience). It pays close attention to how images are presented and interacted during interactive experiences. Illustrating our methodology, we focus on playful renditions of historical photographs taken after the liberation of the Buchenwald and Ohrdruf concentration camps, portrayed in the epilogue mission in the popular video game *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017).

Our work refers to both commemorative and non-commemorative works (Neiger *et al.* 2023). The former refers to works intended for and focused on commemorating the past, and the latter refers to works that portray a contemporary perspective that, in some manner, pertains to the past and influences our apprehension of current events (222). Following Neiger *et al.* (2023), we show that the contemporary use of historical images in commemorative and non-commemorative works is nuanced and varied, revealing new contours of use and representation of visual Holocaust imagery. In our conclusion, we reflect on the position of our conceptual and methodological framework within the evolving landscape of digital Holocaust memory.

## Holocaust memory in the digital age

Over the past decade, considerable attention has been directed towards developing and using new practices for Holocaust commemoration in the digital age. Prominent areas include augmented and virtual reality simulations (De Jong 2023; Marrison 2021; Walden 2023), social media platforms (Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Divon 2022; Manca 2021), and new digital archives and infrastructures (Ebbrecht-Hartmann *et al.* 2023). In

light of these changes, scholarly discussions have notably centred on users' roles and positions in digital media projects, emphasising the opportunities afforded to them. Participation, creation, co-creation, and user engagement are regarded as central characteristics in contemporary commemoration practices (Garde-Hansen 2011; Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2022), as users are perceived as essential actors in creating, shaping, and preserving Holocaust memories (Hogervorst 2020).

In this context, interactivity deserves special emphasis. Essentially, interactivity empowers users to engage with digital content actively (Pinchevski 2019), granting them some autonomy and control in constructing meaning (Walden 2021). Walden argues that by fostering a personal engagement of users with intricate historical narratives, digital media should allow a confrontation with history. Nevertheless, she also emphasises the 'limits of interactivity' in digital media, which replace previous debates about the 'limits of representation' in Holocaust commemoration. According to Walden, there is still hesitation, particularly among memorials and educational institutions, about expanding the agency granted to non-expert users in their engagement with simulated historical scenarios in interactive spaces such as video games (Walden 2023, 3–4). However, while institutions still debate the interactive use of digital media for commemoration, the shift to the digital age is already influencing media use and the authorial powers that control, shape, and monitor the norms and practices prevalent in contemporary Holocaust memory work. Hoskins characterised this social change as a 'connective turn,' which drifts from individual and collective remembering and shifts towards a dynamic, connective presence of memories, bringing together subjects and machines in new ways (Hoskins 2011, 2017). This turn also contributes to the constitution of a new social multitude and, consequently, to 'the memory of the multitude,' made from human-archival interaction through the digital (Hoskins 2017, 86). As the multitude gains a stronger position from previous collectives, it reduces the agency and authorial power of traditional gatekeepers of memory.

Digitisation stimulates this shift in power relations also in the context of Holocaust memory. Drawing on Wieviorka (2006), Hogervorst (2020) has described this change as a shift from the 'era of witness' to the 'era of the user.' According to her, users of online repositories with survivor testimonies have gained a much more 'active position' (5). However, while much attention was given to new media platforms, changing power structures and new forms of commemoration, including digital and virtual forms of witnessing, little attention was directed towards the remediation and representation of historical materials – such as archival photography and film footage – and their impact on meaning-making during the mediated experience. Paying attention to the appropriation and use of these visual traces can shed light on how they contribute to outlining the contemporary 'limits of interactivity' (Walden 2021) of Holocaust memory.

From social media projects to video games, Holocaust images have migrated extensively to digital media. Primarily originating from the photographic and filmed records taken during the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, Holocaust images epitomise what Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg define as 'media memory': 'the systematic exploration of collective pasts that are narrated by the media, through the use of the media and about the media' (2011, 1). According to Brink (2000), 'the photographs of the liberation have long become part of the Western countries' collective visual memory' (135). Through constant circulation and remediation, they became 'secular icons,' easily recognisable with implied meanings and emotional effects (142). Throughout the years, the integration of those images into popular culture and their appropriation in numerous works and media, such as films, graphic novels, and artworks, enabled individuals and collectives to engage in diverse forms of memory work (Ebbrecht 2010; Erll 2012; Hirsch 2001; Zelizer 2001).

Appropriated in digital media, Holocaust images can be encountered in different ways. By scrolling, clicking, or touching a screen, moving a mouse or a joystick, these images become subject to (sometimes creative) user engagement through the interface. As they are manipulated and disseminated across various contexts, such images can be perceived as memetic photographs, as described by Shifman (2014). They emerge as dynamic, living objects suited for change, variability, and multiple creations. Shifman also emphasises that digital media offers ‘playful’ settings for multiple image manipulations (2014, 371). Understanding these images from the perspective of commemoration, such appropriation of historical images not only indicates the participatory nature inherent in a wide variety of contemporary commemoration projects but also tells of a new way to appropriate images and create new related memories through individual and playful interactions.

Over the past decade, there has been increasing focus on the significance of play and playfulness in reinvigorating Holocaust memory work. Kansteiner (2017) argues that Holocaust commemoration can revitalise itself by utilising the affordances of digital media. He specifically stresses the importance of play and video games for this shift, as play and games also possess the ability to constitute counterfactual memories of the Holocaust (315–317). In practice, play and playfulness have become part of contemporary Holocaust memory work. The playful transformation of historical images into digital memes (González-Aguilar and Makhortykh 2022; Shifman 2014), as well as playful expressions about the Holocaust on social media (Neiger *et al.* 2023) have gained some scholarly attention. Holocaust-related video games, a niche genre in itself, are also explored, mainly with regard to their representation of history (Denning 2021), the narratives they convey (Salvati and Bullinger 2013) or how players construct meanings through play in these Holocaust-related environments (Van den Heede 2023). Nevertheless, recent scholarship pays minor consideration to how such games construct the relation to the Holocaust through visual and historical means, particularly concerning historical Holocaust images. In the following, we argue that through the appropriation and use of such images in various media, historical images became playful images. Acting as a central tool in contemporary memory work of the Holocaust, playful images show that playfulness is not a taboo concept when it comes to the Holocaust. Instead, it is a productive attitude that is widely accepted and applied in various kinds of memory work, both commemorative and non-commemorative (Neiger *et al.* 2023).

### **Playful images**

While play has long been considered a fundamental phenomenon in various cultural practices (Huizinga 1955 [1938]), several theorists argue that due to the rise of mobile media technologies, we are currently facing a playful turn in everyday social and media practices (Richardson and Hjorth 2019; Sicart 2014). Game scholar Miguel Sicart delineates play as an activity and playfulness as an attitude. He defines playfulness as ‘the capacity to use play outside the context of play’ and ‘to appropriate a context that is not created or intended for play’ (Sicart 2014, 21, 27). Sicart further posits that appropriation finds its purest expression in playfulness, wherein individuals reinterpret a situation ‘to perceive it differently, letting play be the interpretive power of that context’ (Sicart 2014, 27). While scholars explore the everyday uses of mobile media through the lens of playfulness (Hjorth and Richardson 2020), we argue that within Holocaust commemoration, the interactive and participatory use of digital technologies imbues both the media and the mediated content with a playful essence. Play becomes a real driving force behind contemporary engagement with Holocaust commemoration.

In this context, we define playful images as historical images recontextualised in digital infrastructures and set for user engagement, participation, and creativity. Consequently, the images' focal point shifts: from focusing on representing a historical event and its cultural perception, playful images offer users an interactive experience with historical images. One defining aspect of playful behaviour is its ability to integrate content as part of a personal experience (Sicart 2014, 30). Playful images embody how users personally and constructively interact with historical images as part of contemporary memory work. This implies both a creative-emotional as well as a cognitive-reflexive dimension. In this light, playful images can be regarded as a further development of earlier concepts of mediated memory work involving Holocaust imagery, such as 'postmemory' (Hirsch 2001) and 'migrating images' (Ebbrecht 2010).

Analysing the repetitive circulation of Holocaust images in the twentieth century, Marianne Hirsch defined post-memory as part of 'a work of formulation and attempted repair' (Hirsch 2001, 13) of traumatic memories of Holocaust survivors by their (actual or mental) second-generation children. Through recontextualising historical images into their families' traumatic pasts, the second generation creates new memories from those recollections of repressed memories. This form of memory is potent because its relation to the original source is not achieved through direct recollection but through new forms of mediation and appropriation, gained through 'representation, projection and creation' (Hirsch 2001, 9). Drawing on Hirsch and referring to cinematic memory, Ebbrecht introduces the concept of 'migrating images' to describe how Holocaust images are detached from their original contexts to serve as 'memory cues' (Ebbrecht 2010, 91), predominantly aiming to convey a universal moral paradigm (Ebbrecht 2010, 103).

In their contemporary use and as a further development of Hirsch's and Ebbrecht's concepts, Holocaust images in the digital age gain a constant productive stance that transforms them into playful images. Their contemporary incarnation does not necessarily entail trauma processing or a trans-cultural or historical projection. They also do not convey a universal moral paradigm. Instead, playful images are introduced and utilised within the larger historical context of visual Holocaust memory. Though actually further dematerialised through digitisation, Holocaust images re-materialise into digital objects of creative endeavours (Hui 2016), not only for authorised creators like artists, historians, or curators but specifically for any user engaging with digital infrastructures. Playful images are crafted to offer an engaging experience, inviting users to interact and partake in creating or disseminating their new adaptations. By doing so, users actively contribute to preserving Holocaust memories and delineating the contemporary contours of the use of Holocaust representation in the digital age.

While playful images do not necessarily have to be digitally born, their creation, circulation, or dissemination must occur in or by digital media and offer an engagement with historical imagery – such as Holocaust images. In this instance, the image composites showcased in *YOLOCAUST* epitomise playful images. These visuals were generated, circulated, and disseminated in digital media. Nevertheless, their origins are rooted in historical photography taken during the liberation of Nazi concentration camps. Through a collaborative co-creation of the artist, Shapira, and the users, the historical images became playful through digitisation and recontextualisation. *YOLOCAUST* facilitated playful interactions with these images through concrete digital practices such as hovering, sharing, or commenting. As such, playful images exhibit a close connection to relational and co-creative contexts in digital memory work (Ebbrecht-Hartmann *et al.* 2023). Consequently, playful images transcend their role as evidence of a distant historical event and become part of the user's personal recollections of a playful, historically inspired, interactive experience.

### From playfulness to visual analysis: outlining a methodological rationale

Playful images stem from an interaction that alters historical images. As such, their analysis should consider a variety of different aggregations of such images and contemplate the distribution of creative agency among producers, creators, users, and technology. Therefore, analysing playful images cannot solely centre on a single image. It has to regard the playful image as an integral part of a distinct interactive digital experience. Thus, the analysis of playful images necessitates acknowledging the fragile and transient nature of digital experiences and their connection to specific interactive practices, requiring the integration of a user-centric perspective. This inherently involves considering the role of the researcher as a user who interacts or partakes in an interaction with such images. In his work ‘Outline of a Theory of Practice’ (1977 [1972]), Bourdieu critically examines the foundations of anthropology and sociology and argues that researchers should avoid the position of external observers and instead acknowledge the limits of their alleged objectivism. Correspondingly, Bourdieu’s theory of practice induces anthropologists to embrace ‘the unceasing vigilance one needs to exert so as to be “carried along” by the game, without being “carried away” beyond the game’ (Bourdieu 1977 [1972], 10). Such practice took a contemporary turn as, in recent years, ethnographers increasingly grappled with the ubiquitous integration of digital media in life and research.

Digital ethnography was developed as an approach to address the integration of the ‘digital into our material, sensory, and social realms, exploring the implications for ethnographic research practice’ (Pink *et al.* 2016, 7). Methodologically, digital ethnography does not prescribe a set of pre-determined tools; rather, research methods are dependent and adjusted according to the specific subject explored. This approach advocates preserving traditional anthropological methodological principles while engaging with digital culture and technology (Pink, 2016, 163). Researchers have recently developed rich and complex methods and concepts that deal with analysing digital, online and offline spaces, experiences, social forms, and cultures while building on traditional anthropological principles (Atay 2020; Hine 2015; Kozinets 2002). Moreover, recent studies have also performed visual analysis of engagements in digital media, exemplified by Tiidenberg’s (2014) visual narrative analysis of cyber ethnographic materials. We find digital ethnography instrumental in analysing playful images as we avoid a distanced observer’s standpoint during analysis. However, recent methodological developments pay limited attention to the engagement of researchers and users with historical and visual materials appropriated in and through digital media. We are particularly interested in performing a visual analysis which focuses on the mediation and interaction with such material traces in a digital experience.

In the past, traditional methods of visual analysis mostly focused on still and sequential images in old media, such as photography (Barthes 1977), graphic novels (Eisner 1985), and films (Giannetti 2001). Recently, much attention has been paid to the study of digital environments with digital methods such as visual platform and cross-platform analysis, image-textual network analysis (Pearce *et al.* 2020) and multimodal methods of analysis (Kress 2000; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Van Leeuwen 2014). Notably, a growing interest in digital methods as an approach is characterised by Burgess as ‘hybrid digital methods’ (2021). Burgess and Bruns underscore the potency of such methods in analysing digital media, emphasising their hybrid nature. According to the two, ‘such “hybrid digital methods” are vitally important for engaging with digital cultures and the platforms that mediate them’ (2020, 17).

Offering a different kind of hybridity in her influential work on film and memory, Walden (2019) introduced the concept of ‘cinematic intermedialities.’ This approach methodologically focuses on ‘the *inter* and things-in-relation’ (Walden 2019, 5, emphasis



in the original). It positions spectators as active agents in their engagements with media and memory production. It emphasises the interconnectedness between spectator/user, aesthetic forms, and technology as a holistic experience, which influences and intertwines all three variables. However, while Walden emphasises visual narratives as comprehensive experiences encompassing analysis, engagement and media, there is less focus on how historical images are influenced by such interaction and how those can be analysed as part of a digital experience.

While recent studies have employed multimodal and digital methods to analyse Holocaust commemoration projects (Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2022), these studies mainly focus on the digital platforms and user interaction, side-lining the historical and visual materials mediated in these projects. In this light, we offer a heightened focus on meditating visual historical materials. For this, we introduce a VWM, a pragmatic performance of our approach that merges traditional visual analysis methods with a contemporary digital methodology. This method is a practical combination of existing methods for the analysis of playful images. It is designed for a context-driven digital and visual analysis, emphasising the interactions afforded to the user within digital media, visual analysis of digital representations of the past, and the variability of such interactions in a digital experience.

### The visual walkthrough method (VWM)

Drawing on the walkthrough method developed by Light *et al.* (2018), we configure a VWM for a visual-centred analysis of interactive experiences in digital environments. Originally, the walkthrough method is a pragmatic tool for the economic, sociocultural, and technical analysis of multi-layered, interactive user interface experiences of app use. Described as a ‘step-by-step documentation of an app’s use’ (Light *et al.* 2018, 882), the two-step walkthrough method involves closely examining and documenting digital applications. The first step guides researchers in analysing the app’s intended use, business strategy, and user activity regulation. The second step consists of three stages addressing the actual use of applications: registration and entry to the app, its everyday use, and app suspension, closure, and leaving (Light *et al.* 2018, 892–895).

The VWM builds on the walkthrough method by offering a constructed set of tools for analysing interactive digital experiences and, within so, playful images and user interactions with them. The VWM offers three steps for the analysis that consider both the app’s contextual information and the walkthrough: walkthrough sample, analysis, and aftermath. The first step of the VWM, the ‘walkthrough sample,’ centres on depicting contextual information and creating a personal representation of the virtual experience. At this stage, we advocate gathering contextual information most relevant to the analysis of the examined playful images. Significant information at this point can be the genre of the interactive experience, the narrative framing, the virtual experience, preceding events within the interactive experience, the protagonists involved, the user’s position within the experience, and the affordances – tools and powers – provided to the user. After gathering contextual information, we focus on sampling the virtual experience by capturing a recorded and screenshotted walkthrough video. We suggest focusing this walkthrough on the interaction with playful images and the media environment in which they appear.

As its name implies, the second stage of the method, ‘the walkthrough analysis,’ focuses on analysing the walkthrough from a primary visual perspective. By paying close attention to user interactions with images, we provide an in-depth visual analysis that considers how users interact with images and interfaces. To facilitate this, we propose two modes of analysis drawn from traditional modes of image analysis: the ‘still image mode’ and the ‘sequential image mode’. The ‘still image mode’, inspired by the

logic of still photography, prompts examining a single and still image (akin to analysing a film frame) and a comparative exploration of its visual relations with historical images. This exploration encompasses visual elements such as composition, objects, and clothes, as well as camera angles, points of view, and types of shots (Giannetti 2001). On the other hand, the sequential image mode draws inspiration from comics and sequential art. It encourages focusing on unravelling the visual relations among sequences of images seen as interdependent for narrative progression (Eisner 1985). In this mode, the analysis extends beyond a single image to encompass a sequence of images and their visual relations with historical images (akin to analysing a shot or a sequence of shots in film studies (Giannetti 2001)). The two methods are not mutually exclusive and can be employed simultaneously during analysis.

With both modes of analysis, we reflect not only on the visual aspect but also on the interface and its relationship with the scrutinised images as an integral part of the playful image. Additionally, the VWM, as a hybrid method, is not sound-dependent but still pays attention to synchronic and a-synchronic sounds during the analysis. Focusing mainly on visuals, its key objective is to identify and analyse playful images that might go unnoticed during an interactive experience. Therefore, it primarily emphasises and encourages the creation of walkthroughs for a thorough visual analysis. Finally, the third step of our method, ‘the walkthrough aftermath,’ centres on describing what happens after the sampled walkthrough. This step does not necessarily describe the end of the interactive experience but focuses on the interaction subsequent to the sampled walkthrough chosen for analysis. In this manner, we can understand what happens after interacting with the playful image and how it impacts the rest of the interactive experience.

The VWM incorporates narrative, context, and technical information, thereby deepening the analysis of interactive experiences involving playful images. Given that each medium affords different interactions, we offer to tailor the method for each test case and regard the VWM as a set of tools that can be used for analysing various interactive experiences involving interaction with playful images. In the following, we illustrate the VWM by analysing the epilogue mission from *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017), showcasing an interaction with three playful images.

### **Call of Duty: WWII and the VWM**

The epilogue of *Call of Duty: WWII* focuses on the discovery of an abandoned prisoner-of-war camp and the rescue of Robert Zussman, a Jewish-American private serving in the first infantry division of the US military forces during the invasion of Europe. Zussman was captured by the Nazis, and the player, controlling American soldier protagonist Ronald ‘Red’ Daniels, together with his troops, is in charge of finding Zussman. Daniels searches for him in the ruins of Berga, a forced labour camp located in Germany.<sup>2</sup> As he walks through the camp, Daniels enters a deserted barrack with his fellow soldier, Stiles, who wishes to become a photographer for *Life* magazine. Daniels asks Stiles to photograph the barracks because ‘the world has got to know.’ While taking the photo, the point of view shifts from that of Daniels to that of Stiles’s camera, showing a black-and-white photograph of the barracks, emphasising its status as a historical document (Figure 1). After a brief moment, the perspective reverts to Daniels’s in-colour point of view, allowing the player to continue touring the camp. While encountering other harrowing sights in the camp – gallows and defaced corpses – the perspective shifts once

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<sup>2</sup> Berga was a subcamp of Buchenwald. For more information, see: <https://youtu.be/7QpbCZDYfoo> (accessed 1 January 2024)





**Figure 1.** Screenshot captured from a *Call of Duty WWII* Walkthrough courtesy of Alon Ventura.

again to Stiles's camera, showcasing black-and-white photographs of the depicted atrocities (Figures 2 and 3).

Although only a few images from the historical camp are available, the depiction of Berga in *Call of Duty: WWII* inevitably shares significant visual resemblance to historical photographs and footage taken during and after the liberation of Nazi concentration camps and thereby relies heavily on the visual memory of the camps (Wildmann and

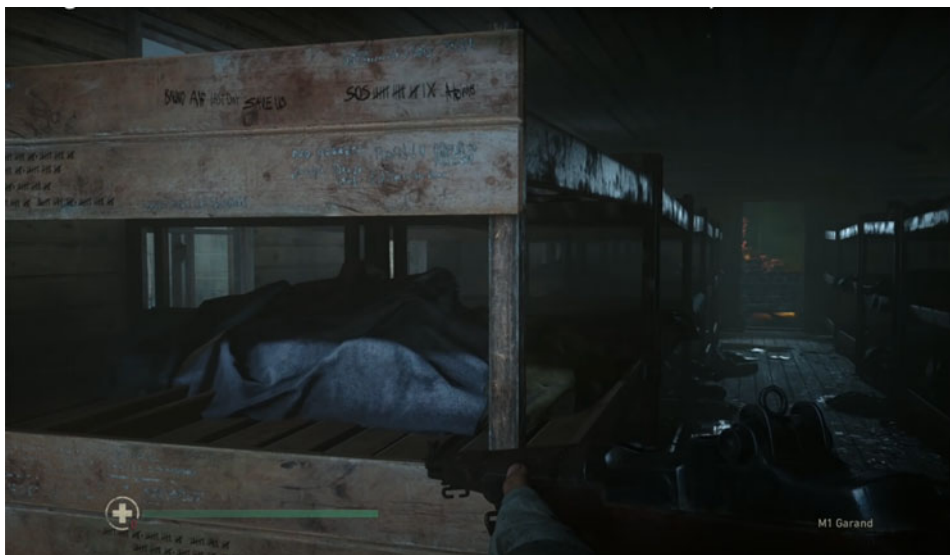


**Figure 2.** Screenshot captured from a *Call of Duty WWII* Walkthrough courtesy of Alon Ventura.

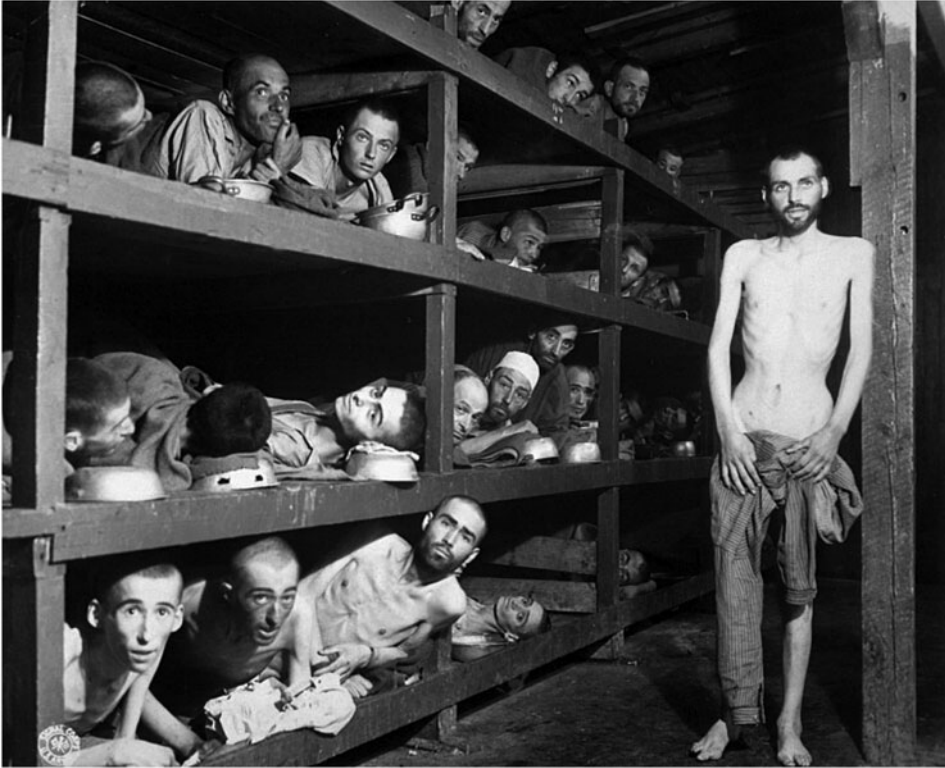


**Figure 3.** Screenshot captured from a *Call of Duty WW2* Walkthrough courtesy of Alon Ventura.

Honke, 2020: 124); Stiles's black-and-white photographs of the gallows, deserted barracks, and hanged corpses evoke historical images of Nazi concentration camps (Figures 4 and 5). As players are immersed in the game, these playful images might easily be overlooked. We applied the VWM to take a step back from the immersive game to closely inspect the



**Figure 4.** Screenshot captured from a *Call of Duty WW2* Walkthrough courtesy of Alon Ventura.



**Figure 5.** Buchenwald slave labourers liberation. Courtesy of © NARA image ARC #535561, file #208-AA-206K (31), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Buchenwald\\_Slave\\_Laborers\\_Liberation.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Buchenwald_Slave_Laborers_Liberation.jpg) (accessed 21 January 2024)

visualisation of this epilogue and, in particular, the references evoked by the closing episode of this game.

For the first part of the analysis, we focused on depicting contextual information. *Call of Duty* is a popular first-person shooter video game that debuted in 2003. In its first years, the game series focused on plots set during World War II, but over the years, it expanded to include versions set in the Cold War, futuristic worlds, and outer space. Released in 2017, *Call of Duty: WWII* portrays a US-focused history of the war. Even though the game predominantly revolves around WWII battles, including the Normandy landings and the liberation of France (Rosenberg 2017), our focus is primarily on playful images and their form and function in the epilogue, and we thus chose to record a walkthrough of the concluding mission of the game, which spans about ten minutes. We recorded a concise walkthrough video of the epilogue with the assistance of a skilled player. Our decision to seek assistance from a savvy player stems from his ability to reach the game's final mission with ease and play it like in any other mission. Given his innate familiarity with the gaming experience (and that we, as researchers, are not regular players of the game), getting help from such a player allowed us to adopt a more authentic engagement with the material, assuming the perspective of a proficient player and yet still influencing the walkthrough and its course. As such, the recording of the walkthrough was instrumental to the analysis of the playful images. While recording the walkthrough, we directed the player, asking him to navigate the camp slowly and linger next to details often neglected

in regular pre-recorded game walkthroughs. In the walkthrough analysis, we identified three playful images portraying the inside of an empty barrack, the gallows, and the hanged victims (Figures 1–3).

In the second step, we carried out a detailed visual analysis that mostly focused on the playful images and the player's interactions with them. Initially, we applied the still mode of analysis to the playful images. In the first instance, the player enters the camp's gate with the overlay title 'Objective Update: Find Zussman.' While walking through the camp, the bottom part of the screen indicates the player's lifespan and orientation, placing the mission on 4 April 1945, in Berga, Germany. Although the historical context of his mission is accurate – indeed, Berga was a prisoner of war (POW) camp – the visual representation of Berga in the game is a mesh of iconic Holocaust imagery and American drama representations of POW camps. Walking through the barrack, the player discovers jail-like inscriptions on the wooden frames of the inmates' bunk beds, featuring tallies of days imprisoned engraved on the wooden beds next to cries for help (Figure 4). Similar representations of such inscriptions were also evident in early American films about prisoner-of-war camps, such as in Billy Wilder's *Stalag 17* (1953 USA). Such inscriptions resonate much more with American jail iconography than iconic Holocaust imagery.

Walking through the camp, the player is oriented towards participating in the simulation of capturing the images and is equipped with a camera for this interaction. During the mission, fellow soldiers direct the player's moves, orienting him vocally by saying in voice-over that 'there are some barracks over there,' directing him towards the barrack and capturing a photo inside it, and then calling 'over here' to orient the player to approach the tied corpses. As part of the tools afforded in the game, the player in this mission is armed with a gun. After the player is asked to photograph the bed, the gun suddenly disappears and is replaced with a still black-and-white photograph of the deserted barracks, as if the player transitions roles and becomes the photographer capturing the image. Through the same objects – the bunk beds and similar compositional means of expression – a depiction of a mid-low angle long shot and black-and-white colouring, the playful image references a historical photograph taken during the liberation of Buchenwald (Figure 5). This act of simulated photography is performed twice again as the player tours the camp: when he encounters two murdered victims and when he walks by the camp's gallows. In the first instance, two victims are photographed bent over, with their hands tied to their backs, from a long-medium shot. Their faces cannot be seen. As Stiles says, they are presumed to be 'our boys,' but they are portrayed as anonymous victims. Such an image widely references historical images capturing corpses found in the concentration camps in the aftermath of liberation. In the second instance, the gallows are depicted in a close-up from a low angle, resembling other historical photographs of gallows from the liberated camps, such as Ohrdruf (Figure 6). In both cases, the player's gun disappears and is replaced by a camera.

Applying the sequential analysis mode, the three images in the epilogue share several similarities. Since the synchronic clicking sound of the camera that is heard in all three instances may suggest the production of photographs as tangible evidence, the images serve as playful images, allowing the player to engage with them through a playfully performed act of simulated photography. The player has to visit the barrack and tour the camp to produce these playful images. Thereby, the game enables players to interact with images in order to learn about the atrocities that the game references. Moreover, in all three cases, the images serve as symbols of Holocaust horrors, yet we argue they also fail in their purpose as they actually veil some horrors of the Holocaust. The playful images in *Call of Duty: WWII* share apparent similarities with the historical photographs from Buchenwald and Ohrdruf. Nevertheless, they are 'drained' of some of their original content – and are primarily detached from the survivors originally present in such





**Figure 6.** A photograph of the gallows taken during an official tour of the newly liberated Ohrdruf concentration camp of General Dwight Eisenhower. Courtesy of © National Archives and Records Administration, College Park/ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

images. These playful images mainly serve as abstract visualisations of typical horrors of a concentration camp, entrenched in popular visual memory. Though resulting from the individual player's creative play, they limit the possibilities of playful interaction, such as exploring the historical originals or learning more about concrete incidents or the provenance of the pictures.

However, these playful images greatly impact the player's position. Sontag argues that 'photography is essentially an art of non-intervention. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene' (Sontag 2005 [1977], 8). It is evident that in *Call of Duty: WWII*, the player is stated in an abstained position, as both photographer and actor, shooter, and spectator. Through interacting but not intervening, these playful images can also be seen as a response to Hirsch's concept of postmemory: the game leads to questioning the future of such historical images, especially the ethical responsibility users have when they play with such a 'digestible' version of the traumatic history of the Holocaust. If the player fails to rescue Zussman and the mission is repeated, this function of the game's imagery is even more evident. Walking yet again near these 'photographed' images, they are objects for performance, not reflection.

The last step of the analysis, the walkthrough aftermath, focuses on what happens after the walkthrough. Leaving the camp to find Zussman, the player runs through the woods. Upon encountering the Nazi abductor, Daniels is instructed to kill him to liberate Zussman. In contrast to shooting the photographs, here, outside the camp, the player is tasked to shoot the Nazi soldier to rescue Zussman. After completing the task, Stiles takes a photograph of Zussman. Following the mission, the game ends with the platoon returning to the US.

Despite using World War II as a historical frame, *Call of Duty: WWII* manifests its own story of salvation. A hierarchy within the liberators' actions is established by segregating the tour in the abandoned camp from the mission of rescuing Zussman, resulting in a catharsis from shooting the Nazi and saving a fellow soldier. By considering Berga as a site to walk through and offering the player more liberty in rescuing Zussman, *Call of Duty: WWII* enables players to playfully interact with an American version of Holocaust images using the characteristic act of visual commemoration: photography, but most certainly not play.

### **Walking through memory: conclusion**

By refraining from mere observation during the interaction and, instead, focusing on the identification, recontextualisation, and analysis of playful images, the VWM provides researchers with a fruitful and detailed ground for analysing and understanding playful images. In particular, it enables an exploration of how Holocaust images are employed in contemporary commemorative and non-commemorative works.

The VWM enhances our understanding of the contemporary sociocultural dynamics of engagement with the Holocaust through playful interactions with visual memory and reveals some contemporary limits of interaction. In *YOLOCAUST*, for example, playful images are employed by a non-commemorative project to delineate how visitors should (or should not) behave in memorial sites. Through this, the project underscores that even playful engagements with history have their own limitations. *Call of Duty* shares some similar aspects. Being a non-commemorative game mostly focusing on war battles, the game concludes with exploring the horrors in a deserted camp, enabling the player to engage with its visuals in a limited way. In doing so, Holocaust memory work is also evident in the game's epilogue, as it preserves and presents the existing limits of interaction regarding the visual memory of the Holocaust.

While user interaction with and digital manipulation of historical images gains a growing interest in memory and media studies, it is essential to note that the VWM has clear methodological limitations. The VWM does not encompass a comprehensive methodology suited for reception studies and does not provide extensive insights into user experiences. It is also not oriented towards a comprehensive phenomenology of user experience. Instead, the VWM addresses how media affords interaction to users, how this interaction is expressed visually, and which meanings and values are embedded in such interactions.

Based on the performance of our pragmatic approach to analysing visual memory in digital media with the help of the VWM, future research should provide further and more grounded methodological elaboration of this approach. As digital experiences make growing use of historical images, future methodological research should explore the potential integration of this visual approach into reception studies. Furthermore, a more comprehensive and systematically derived methodology, based on our conceptualisation of the VWM, can be used for future visual and digital analysis. Such methodology can elaborate on the relationship between user experience, media affordances, and the "observer" role in playful interaction. Another future avenue for developing the VWM would be to record in situ descriptions of the experiences or conduct post-play interviews with the creators of the walkthrough, be it the researchers, and or the experienced players, to learn about their thoughts on their engagement with playful images during playing. Such interviews can provide insights into how players and researchers perceive their interaction with playful images and explore the understandings and experiences achieved through this kind of interaction concerning the entire game. It can also be comparatively analysed in relation to the game developer's aspirations (if mentioned).



As demonstrated in this article, play and playfulness have some limitations when it comes to Holocaust memory work. While many institutions are still hesitant about utilising play for remembering and learning about the Holocaust, some researchers see play as a potentially beneficial component for revitalising active Holocaust commemoration in the digital age. A prominent advocate of this viewpoint is Kansteiner (2017), who assumes that video games and play can foster empathy with victims and actively imbue players with “self-critical” perspectives of bystanders or perpetrators of the Holocaust (2017: 315). Kansteiner endorses that Holocaust commemoration institutions will create Holocaust commemoration games that are meticulous, nuanced, and deal with complex and complicated processes of decision-making, stating players as decision makers that influence the course of a (simulated) history.

However, in contemporary practice, it seems that both commemorative and non-commemorative projects tend to adopt a playful attitude in Holocaust representations rather than enabling playing with the horrors of the past. As Kansteiner argues, a variety of initiatives that aspired to create Holocaust-related games have failed and proved continuous hesitation to use play for Holocaust commemoration. In particular, the debates about the risks of “gamification” are part of a long tradition of debate about the (limits of) representation of the Holocaust. While play is increasingly acknowledged as an activity border-crossing the ‘limits of interactivity’ (Walden 2021), playfulness is widely employed in contemporary Holocaust memory work to generate new memories among users. Consequently, playfulness also adds new parameters to Holocaust memory work – particularly determining what could be approached through playfulness and what is removed from user interaction by adopting a playful attitude. For example, through playfulness, players in *Call of Duty: WWII* can engage with playful images and learn more about the referenced past; however, such playful behaviour also establishes a line between what *can* be played with (outside of the camp), and where users can only interact in playful ways (the camp, playful images), what can users decide to do (save Zussman), and what they cannot do (make any active decision during their prisoner of war tour).

Playful images are not only a phenomenon of the contemporary memory work of the Holocaust. They also reflect the larger transformation in this field, connecting historical sources to present engagements while focusing more on movement and creation. Playful images can also be detected in other cultural domains that involve digital manipulations of historical images. Such is the case with the *MyHeritage* ‘deep nostalgia: animate your family photos’ project.<sup>3</sup> Using deep fake technology to facilitate a ‘digital resurrection’ of photographs of deceased persons (Kopelman and Frosh, 2023), this project enables users to upload still photographs that are then imbued with a motion of mostly facial expressions. Becoming versatile in form and set for personal user interactions, these animated images can be considered playful images. Applying the VWM to the user experience of creating such animated photographs can promote the understanding of the meanings and goals set behind this project and the limits of interaction with such acts of resurrection.

Playful images mark, trace, and interrelate digital and analogue objects, media and users, memory, and interaction. Made for contemporary engagements in and by digital media, they are complex visualisations of the past made for an engaging user experience. Playful images are not only a phenomenon of the contemporary memory work of the Holocaust. They also reflect a larger transformation in the fields of media and memory as they connect historical sources to present interactions. This change focuses more on digital, algorithmic visualisations, movement, and creation and less on actual

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.myheritage.com/deep-nostalgia> (accessed 20 January 2024)

preservation. As such, it offers an alternative ground for active, creative memory work gained through a new form of playfulness.

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