

# The Ethics of Engagement: Designing for Augmented Reality Experiences at Sites of Dark Tourism<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Various augmented reality (AR) experiences are located in or connected to places of anguish, pain, and death. The existing AR scholarship has not addressed the ethical design, development, and facilitation of these encounters. This study offers fundamental guidelines for how AR might be ethically constructed to promote a respectful experience to close this knowledge gap.

Dark tourism is a subfield of tourism studies that refers to any form of travel that involves tragedy, horror, misery, or murder. Based on this research, the report makes several recommendations for developing moral AR experiences at dark tourist destinations before, during, and after a visit. AR can become a moral and practical extension of contemplating mortality if spectacle is controlled in these unsettling locations. The study offers design recommendations for morally acceptable AR experiences for dark tourism destinations already involved in the marketing and consumption of the macabre.

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## INTRODUCTION

Tourism is the deliberate taking of spectacle—the spectacle of distant locations, other cultures, and other ways of life. The massive commercial tourism sector would inevitably package the spectacle for travellers. The spectacle is generally calm in many, if not most, popular tourist destinations, such as the CN Tower in Toronto or the Redwood Forests in California. Other places attract tourists associated with crime, brutality, tragedy, or death. These locations are known as dark tourism sites in tourism studies. Dark tourism destinations include the Auschwitz concentration camp, New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, Brazil's favelas, and Russia's Chornobyl. The complex and challenging nature of leading tours in these places has long been a source of contention for the tourism industry.

For such dark locales, several augmented reality (AR) visitor experiences have been developed over the past ten years, and here, the relevance of ethical issues cannot be overstated. However, the moral conception, design, and impact of these dark AR experiences have not been given significant consideration. Frequently, a dark site greets visitors. In a world without morality, with their mortality. It can be a problematic experience, both intellectually and emotionally. We suggest that such morally dubious websites demand AR experiences that they must temper their spectacle to engage in ethical behaviour. With the ability of AR to foreground certain information while hiding others, the design of the digital medium is intended to facilitate experiences that have moral repercussions.

The ethical design practice advocated in this research does not heighten the spectacle of the apparent consumption of conflict and suffering at these locations. The article instead aims to establish moral design standards that prevent these gloomy sites from becoming trivialised and kitsch.

Only two other articles have specifically addressed how to simulate these dark site locations. One involved a scrolling-based virtual tour of Auschwitz, a concentration camp where visitors could navigate [1]. The second examines how the creation or memory of a dark site could benefit a visitor, whether they arrive in person or via a

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media platform, using Deleuze and Guattari's aesthetics work as a starting point [2].

Another series of studies [3, 4, 5] has been done on AR encounters at places like cemeteries, concentration camps, and gloomy cultural sites. These pieces, however, hardly ever address the site's ethical representation of tragedy or death directly. This study initiates a new debate by explicitly analysing the ethical implications of current AR experiences associated with dark sites.

## **IMPLEMENTING AR IN STAGES FOR DARK TOURISM SITES**

Finding a way to manage the development of an AR experience requires care given the cultural and political sensitivity of these sites. To this end, providing support for the emotional state of visitors through spectacle so that they may have an instructive heritage experience is critical. The best way to achieve such support, from the perspective of the AR experience designer, is to consider the emotional state of their visitor before, during, and after their visit to the dark tourism site along with the aura of that site.

### **The Emotional State of Visitors**

Visitors' emotions are deeply affected by such dark places [26]. In a study of over 1000 Dutch citizens, the most prevalent feelings were, "afraid, awe, compassion, contempt, despair, disgust, fascination, fear, gratitude, hope, pride, sadness, and shame." [26]. The researchers grouped these feelings into clusters of misery, sympathy, and positivity [26]. Further, they found that feelings of misery sanitized the violent past; whereas feelings of sympathy and positivity led to altruistic actions [26]. These might be achieved through volunteer work around the site or monetary donations [26] [27]. Finding ways to promote these feelings of sympathy and positivity through the design of the AR experiences' spectacle is a priority.

Perhaps the easiest way these goals might be achieved is through the participatory affordances of multi-user AR experiences. Dark tourism scholars suggest that one of the ways in which the myriad relationships to a historical trauma might be mediated is through an egalitarian public space [8] where individuals could freely share their perspectives [8]. A call for collective identity making is a recurring theme in heritage scholarship [7]. By promoting participatory and reflective experiences at dark sites, then, AR applications can help support the emotional state of visitors.

### **Facilitating AR for the Dark Tourist**

Dark tourism scholars have suggested that such practices date back at least to medieval pilgrimages [9]. Analogously, a visit to a contemporary dark tourism site might be considered a form of social passage. It's a journey to a site in which the relationships of death, commercialism, politics, and cultural institutions are combined. And, as with all journeys it is best to be prepared. There is scant literature on how to construct or plan a visit to a dark tourism site, but what is available suggests managing the experience through three stages [7].

#### ***AR Before the Visit***

Before the visit, AR can be used to scaffold anticipation and mediate expectations. For many tourists, sites may be only partially understood or even known about. A visitor's first interaction with an AR experience may be its advertisement among a stream of others related to the macabre at the site [27]. Situated within the commodification of death, an AR experience might seek to highlight its pedagogical or cultural goals instead of its spectacle. Transparency in regard to the intention of the application is also critical. Though the intent to entertain as the ultimate goal is not appropriate, so too is a lack of transparency in regards to the educational or persuasive intent of the AR. For a user to maintain their autonomy, they need to know the aims of the experience in order for their choice to participate in it to be ethical. Sensational graphics or advertising may not set appropriate expectations for a respectful visit. There are a number of cases in which products have been placed at scenes of suffering to attract additional visitors [7]. It may be more ethical than to avoid AR for the sake of AR at these dark sites. There is, however, some agreement that commercial activity around and within the site that contributes to the local economy and benefits its citizens is acceptable [7]. The approach to the site should be scaffolded [8]. Visitors should not be dropped into an AR experience without being primed about the site and how to act within it. This is as much about the protection of the visitors as it is AR developers being accountable and respectful to the local heritage and history they're working

within.

During this phase, a multimedia representation of archival materials representing multiple voices might be implemented. This is a representational strategy of hypermediation. Media is used to establish an egalitarian foundation upon which to reflect upon the site. At the same time, it opens a space for the visitor to reflect and potentially critique the experience's messages. It facilitates a greater opportunity to inform the visitor of the history, culture, customs, and rituals surrounding the site before they arrive.

### *AR During the Visit*

The literature suggests that motivations for visiting dark sites are varied. Visitors journey to these sites to foster a deep emotional connection with the place and with one another [7]. They go to learn, connect with the place itself, empathize with and among others, and to stand witness. In any case, the sites are or should be visited for more than mere voyeurism. AR experiences should be designed to facilitate and achieve various visitor intentions.

As has been discussed, location-based AR can be a powerful placemaking tool [28]. Furthermore, it can be used toward political ends [29] and is not neutral [30]. Dark tourism studies suggest that media not make the experience kitsch [9], which trivializes the site or leads to its "disneyfication" [9]. Considering how the spectacle associated with experiences might be perceived by visitors as being disrespectful, kitsch, or too playful should inform the design. Kitsch experiences ignore the intentions of visitors to connect more deeply with the site of trauma. For example, when PokemonGO's Koffing, a Pokémon associated with gas, appeared at the D.C.

Holocaust museum there was outrage [31]. Contemporary AR experiences at dark tourism sites often take their user's perception and engagement with the site for granted. There is a greater focus on how well the app achieves its technical goals. Developers should instead recognize their visitor's critical stance in relation to the site and the AR experience [7]. They should recognize that the visitor is a performative agent capable of negotiating and rejecting messages at the site and those delivered through the application. AR developers designing for these sites should then consider the ways in which such critiques or comments might be composed into a digital collective memory. Such an experience would help to facilitate an open space for the free exchange of emotional perspectives at the site. Current rituals and practices have proven to be effective at encouraging altruistic behavior [9]. Whether or not they will have the same effect in AR requires further evaluation.

When multiple visitors to the dark tourism sites engage in acts of remembrance together through the medium of AR, their contributions may persist and be built upon one another. Sandra Gaudenzi has referred to such projects as living documentaries [32]. They are collective memory memorials to an event or space that grow over time through community participation. They reflect the journey and growth of the community in which they are situated. Existing ceremonies of remembrance, such as lighting candles or leaving flowers, provide a model for such AR applications.

In contrast to the pre-visit experience, a representational strategy of transparency might be the most ethical for the visit itself. Many dark tourism sites are in various states of disrepair. Tours must already take care to not trespass upon the sanctity of these sites. In keeping with the "hands off" approach discussed earlier in this paper, finding ways to create AR experiences that do not interrupt the aura of a dark site is important. For example, AR experiences that turn gravesites into play spaces for cultural heritage games dramatically alter the aura of the space. In such an instance, the educational game may be better suited for when the visit to the dark tourism site is complete. For this reason, the absence of spectacle may facilitate an engaged reverence that makes room for reflection.

Lastly, special attention should be given to accessibility since AR is still a privileged media technology. Darker tourism sites are often in areas that have been ravaged by catastrophe. They may be in poor areas of the world. While tourism sites increasingly provide access to the internet via wifi, the communities in which they are situated may not. Further, the kinds of mobile devices capable of running contemporary AR may be beyond the means of those in the local community. It behooves an AR developer to consider not just the foreign tourists who come to the site with the latest devices, but those who live in the local communities and what devices they use in their daily lives. Facilitating access to the AR experience for locals encourages the open dialog necessary for the reification, sanctification, or designation of a site [33].

### *AR After the Visit*

AR after the visit should facilitate reflection and remembrance. Generally speaking, existing AR experiences at dark tourism sites do not even move to this phase. They focus on how a user encounters their experience and then how they move through it.

Future experiences might consider how AR can foster feelings of sympathy and positivity after the experience to encourage altruistic behavior. Encouraging hope through dialog and restoration through participation seems the most ethical. To this end, developers might look to design AR remembrances similar to the post-mortem photography of the 19th century. These are not memento mori in AR, in which the spectacle facilitates a reflection on death itself, but instead on the tragic history and aura of the visited site.

### **Ethical Standards for AR at Dark Tourism Sites**

A number of observations have been made about the ethical development of AR experiences at dark tourism sites. These have been developed by engaging with the two-decade-long history of dark tourism studies. In an effort to make this knowledge accessible to future AR developers working at dark tourism sites, five suggestions have been outlined below.

1. AR experiences at dark tourism sites must strive to be more than voyeuristic additions of spectacle in order to connect with visitors' varied intentions, the physicality of the site itself, and its aura.
2. AR experiences should take a broad approach to the design of their spectacle and address the user before, during, and after the site visit. This means adequately scaffolding the user experience to prepare them for a respectful and emotionally engaging tour while maintaining or enhancing the aura of the site through representational strategies of hypermediation and transparency.
3. AR for the sake of AR spectacle in regard to marketing or engaging with a dark tourism site as a destination should be avoided unless such commercial or performative engagement directly benefits the local community or survivors of the tragedy.
4. These AR experiences should foster an open space in which a user's critical stance, emotional perspectives, and stories should be shared as part of a collective memory-making process. This means addressing differences of digital accessibility between tourists and locals at dark heritage sites to provide equitable access to the experiences.
5. While not entirely responsible for the emotional state of visitors to dark tourism sites, AR experiences may enhance the emotionality of the experience and so must be designed to support users instead of confronting them with sorrow and misery. Designers must strive to encourage sympathy and positivity.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

As tools for the development of AR move into the mainstream, more experiences will be created in relation to dark tourism sites. Each new experience will require a critical stance and an ethical deliberation. This paper serves as a foundation for existing and future discussions on the utility of AR in humanity's dark heritage. There is still much work to be done. As a new generation of AR experiences create unique opportunities for tourists to engage in and learn about these painful sites, it is our hope that our guidelines provide an ethical way forward.

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