Julie Fix

The Civil War Explorer
A Multimedia Exhibit

The challenge for an interpreter of history is to make connections. Interpreters need to show visitors the relationship not only between the events of the past and the processes that shaped them, but also between the past and its relevance to their own lives. It is particularly vital to make these links when interpreting the Civil War. There is a phenomenon common at Civil War battlefields that historian Edward T. Linenthal calls the "golden mist of American valor."* This phenomenon, which began immediately after the Civil War, is the idea that both sides, North and South, were composed of brave Americans fighting honorably for their separate visions of freedom. Divisive issues such as slavery and states' rights are pushed to the side; battlefields become places to honor American courage and dedication to duty. There is a darker side to this phenomenon: a tendency to glorify war and to celebrate violence. Monuments erected to honor only battlefield soldiers tend to ignore the history of those people equally affected by war: women, civilians, and minorities. Education and interpretation programs can mitigate this effect and tell the rest of the story.

The best interpretive tools are the ones that engage the visitor as an active participant in the learning process. This is where new technology

Multimedia programs offer much information and require little floor space. This screen capture from the Civil War Explorer shows only a few of the many subjects included on the program.
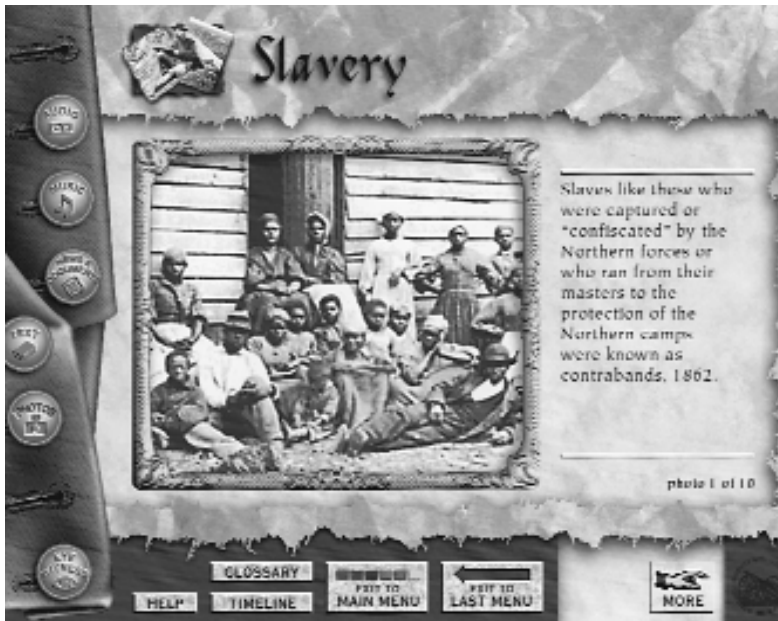

enters the picture. While interactive, multimedia exhibits cannot replace human interpreters, they are perfect supplements to traditional museum exhibits. Instead of a passive experience of viewing artifacts in glass cases, multimedia programs such as The Civil War Trust's Civil War Explorer allow the visitor to interact with the exhibit. Visitors can decide what subjects interest them and then bring the past to life by choosing video clips of battle re-enactments, period music, historic and modern photographs, original documents, or animated maps and graphs.

Interactive multimedia programs not only stimulate the senses to increase a visitor's enjoyment of the subject, they can also be extremely effective in interpreting to visitors with varying levels of knowledge. The Explorer, for example, uses the advantages of multimedia to illustrate concepts that are difficult to understand; animated graphics show a bullet's path through the barrel of a musket to easily explain how rifling the barrel drastically improves the musket's accuracy. A time line and glossary are available from buttons at the base of every screen. A visitor who is unfamiliar with the Civil War might have difficulty tracking the different sides. However, via the computer screen, the visitor can go to the glossary to see that "Federal" troops are also known as "Union, Yankee, or Northern," while "Confederate" troops are also referred to as "Southern" or "Rebel."

Computer exhibits and advanced technology are particularly beneficial in helping small museums and sites meet visitor needs. Like the Civil War Explorer, they are often designed to be accessible by visitors with varying levels of computer experience. On the Explorer, written captions accompany audio materials on the program for hearing-impaired visitors. For visitors in wheelchairs, the kiosk is designed to be a comfortable height from the floor. For visitors who have trouble with fine motor skills, such as young children and older adults, buttons on the screen are large and prominent; they change color when pressed successfully. Voice-overs assist vision-impaired visitors.

Context is vital in every history exhibit, yet there is never enough space in a museum to cover everything. One of the most convenient features of computer exhibits is that they can present large amounts of information in a small space. For example, at a small site like Prairie Grove State Battlefield Park, traditional museum displays focus closely on the clash between Confederate and Union generals. The Civil War Explorer enhances the visitor's experience by providing background material on such topics as causes of the war and effects on civilian life. In addition to providing information, a computer exhibit can serve as a vir-

Slavery

Slaves like those who were captured or "confiscated" by the Northern forces or who ran from their masters to the protection of the Northern camps were known as contrabands. 1862.

photo 1 of 10

"Coat buttons" on the left and navigation buttons on the bottom of the screen make it easy for visitors to find information on the Civil War Explorer program.

Screen captures courtesy The Civil War Trust.

tual gallery: museums and sites can now showcase their most fragile or bulky artifacts by including them on the program. While nothing can truly replace the visceral experience of standing in the presence of an actual piece of the past, visitors can still learn from and enjoy images of artifacts when the real thing is too frail or costly to display.

Of course, like any exhibit, it takes organization and planning to ensure that visitors can find interesting material quickly and easily on a computer. Since visitors will not have access to a manual, the computer interface must be simple and self-explanatory. The following is the basic organizational structure of material on the Civil War Explorer accessed via six options appearing on the Main Menu screen:

1. "The Big Picture" provides a general introduction to the Civil War and its causes; it provides a historical framework for the rest of the Explorer.
2. "The Civil War World," as its name suggests, includes interrelated sections on military, social, political, and cultural aspects of 19th-century America.
3. "On This Date" is a calendar detailing significant events, relative to the Civil War, that occurred on a particular day. When the screen appears, the calendar is set to the current date—a visitor can then choose any date such as a birthday or wedding anniversary to see what events happened on that day.
4. "Specific Site" showcases the historic site or battlefield where the Explorer is located. Visitors can access information about the site they are visiting.
5. "Soldier Records" is a searchable database that, upon completion, will include the records of all soldiers who fought during the Civil War.
6. "Preserving Battlefields" discusses the important issue of battlefield preservation.

Organization is vital since hyperlinks enable each visitor to experience the Explorer in a different way. A visitor investigating "Battles" might read that "slavery and states' rights were causes of the Civil War." Touching the underlined hyperlink for "slavery" would access the slavery section—including audio interviews with ex-slaves, spiritual music, and historic photographs. Other hyperlinks take visitors to more divergent paths further into the program. To keep visitors oriented, an icon appears at the top of each screen corresponding to the categories on the Main Menu. As visitors use hyperlinks to move through the program, visual clues help them keep their bearings.

Ultimately, the goal of any exhibit is to educate and inform; multimedia exhibits like the Explorer can also entice and entertain. The Civil War Trust believes that people will not contribute to a cause they know little about—they must be given a compelling reason to support battlefield preservation. The Trust designed the Explorer to draw visitors into the subject and to let them find their own reasons to care. While conducting evaluations of the program at Gettysburg National Military Park, I witnessed a bored 11-year old boy as he first spied the computer. His immediate reaction was excitement at the technology: running to the kiosk, he used the touch screen to move the cursor. Accidentally, he touched a button on the screen and accessed the "On This Date" calendar. Out of curiosity, he looked up his birthday, April 12. When he discovered that he had been born on the same day that the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, he became very interested and began looking up other dates. Soon, he called his family over to look at the video clips, photos, and maps found on the program. When the family finally left the Visitor Center, he was chattering enthusiastically about all the things he had learned. The connection had been made.

————————

Note

* Edward T. Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

————————

Julie Fix <jfix@civilwar.org> is Civil War Explorer Coordinator, The Civil War Trust.