Survivors: Testimonies of the Holocaust
Educational CD Rom Curriculum Review

“I don’t know how I’m alive. I don’t know how much time I have left. But I feel there is a need to tell, to yell as loud as I can, to tell what they did…” ~Sol

Survivors: Testimonies of the Holocaust is an interactive CD Rom, which uses the narratives of four individual holocaust survivors as the base for learning about one of the darkest periods in history. The personal stories of Sol, Paula, Bert and Sylvia document the rise of the Nazi party, increasing discrimination and oppression of Jews, removal to concentration and work camps, mass extermination, and finally liberation from the death camps. These accounts reflect not only their individual experiences, but weave together to tell the collective history of one of the most devastating and definitive events of the 20th century.

Using the power of documentary filmmaking combined with the ability of multimedia to present information in a variety of modalities, the software offers new opportunities to explore the history of the holocaust. Music, photographs, video, and layers of text information are organized to give the learner control over the material through choices in the direction of inquiry. Beginning with documentary style narratives the learner takes a chronological journey with the storyteller from 1939 thru to 1945 and the end of the war. Each vignette is linked to a number of interactive tools for further information, including yearly historical overviews, a reference library, detailed information about people, places or events that were mentioned, maps of the area discussed and a timeline that links the four stories to larger historical events. The stories are the “thread”, the human element
that draws the learner in, puts a face to the events and ties them to the bigger picture. For example, when Sylvia, then just seven years old, emerges from her hiding place after a “selection” in the Osterweitz ghetto, she remembers the empty street, quiet and peaceful with the freshly fallen snow, no longer white but pink and red with blood. This image - this story - stays vividly in the mind and helps to build a deeper understanding of life and death in the ghettos.

The Shoah foundation, which recorded the testimonies and laid out the curricular plan for the software, believes that the testimonials have the potential to promote a comprehensive understanding of the holocaust, to effectively combat racism and anti-Semitism, and to teach the values of tolerance and pluralism. With its emphasis on first hand accounts and primary documents the curricular ideology for the software seems most closely tied to rational humanism. By using the CD Rom students no longer read about the holocaust in a textbook, but experience it directly from the mouths of survivors through the drama of their words and stories. In order to build a humanistic understanding of history actual photographs, documents, and video are presented to the learner. This content is not adaptable, but concrete, signifying a belief that what they are presenting is what is important to be learned about the holocaust. They believe the human stories should be remembered in order to keep the event “living”. But there is another message from the curriculum, which they may or may not have intended. The stories and content of the CD Rom focus on the Jewish victims, the mention of other victims – gypsies, homosexuals, the disabled and others is missing from the content. This content is the null curriculum and without its inclusion in the software could give the mistaken message that the only victims of the holocaust were Jewish.
Implicitly the software assumes that the audience is older children and young adults. This choice of audience is revealed in the selection of Leonardo DiCaprio and Winona Ryder as narrators and in the selection of the stories that are told. The selected stories of the survivors tend to focus on family and stories of life as a child during the holocaust. Instead of telling stories of horrific events or gruesome details the stories revolve around the life of a child and issues important to children. One survivors talks about making friends in the camp, another about the feeling of safety she felt in the course of the madness because she still had her parents, a third recounts wetting the floor while in hiding and nearly tipping off the Nazis to their hiding place. The choices of which stories are told imply a desire to avoid sensationalism and to make a personal connection between the learner (children) and the survivor.

As a stand-alone curricular piece the design assumes that students learn by exposure. There is no interaction that requires the learner to give input other than clicking and therefore the experience of working with the software is primarily passive. Additionally, the software content is organized by events rather than concepts or ideas. The fundamental themes surrounding history and the holocaust are presented in the content but are not used to organize the content. While survivors mention concepts like the use of propaganda for dehumanization, the content stays in its chronological form.

The learning activities that are part of the software have the student listening, watching and reading. While much of the material is compelling and rich in its narrative, it is difficult to see how the activities will meet the lofty goals set by the designers. The intended goals for the software: building a comprehensive understanding of the holocaust, combating racism and teaching tolerance are more complex than what can be
taught in a primarily passive medium. The rationale behind the software activities is that through the use of personal story and multimedia, the learner will become engaged in and explore history connecting the stories they hear to the moral choices they make each day. The pieces of history are there, but it is left to the audience to formulate questions, seek answers and make connections. The software curriculum does not scaffold this process for the learner. For example, when Burt talks about how his family was forced to sell their farm and business to the Nazis for a price chosen by the party, the injustice of the story calls for reflection and discussion. These pedagogical techniques are not built into the software and so the story progresses without stopping to build connections.

Additionally, there is no means for assessment built into the product. While the designers have stated very clear and powerful goals there is no way to judge whether the design is successful. These two factors demonstrate the need for supplemental activities to enhance the effectiveness of the software curriculum.

Steven Spielberg, producer and creative force behind Survivors succinctly sums up the aim of the project when he states, “It is essential that we see their faces, hear their voices and understand that the horrors of the holocaust happened to people like us.” In using this CD Rom the learner definitely sees the faces and hear the voices of the survivors, but the understanding and the connection is harder to build. Ideally, this software should be used to supplement a curriculum that seeks to challenge students beliefs and assumptions, and forces them to ask difficult questions and seek their own answers. Survivors can play an important part in the process, but it seems unlikely that it can do the job alone. The addition of a series of activities that scaffold the learner to an understanding of the connections between history and the moral choices each one of us confronts everyday would greatly enhance the learning opportunities afforded by the software. Survivors:
testimonies of the holocaust is a powerful piece of multimedia, but its learning potential could be greatly increased by involving learners in interactions not just with the computer but each other and with their own beliefs.