

# the COMPUTER VANISHES

The Issues Tables at the new WWI Museum in Kansas City provide the platform for an entirely new type of social interactive experience.

By Martha Jackson

In the heart of the newly opened National World War I Museum in Kansas City, a pair of exquisite wooden tables commands visitors' attention. There, they can sit to address the same issues faced by presidents, politicians and field marshals - to discuss the plans of a nation, every hour on the hour. Each of these interactive tables glows with battle maps and messages of peace and war from opposing nations, displaying information and reacting to user input across its entire 32-foot long, five-foot wide surface. Yet there are no touchscreens, no keyboards. In fact, no standard computer hardware of any kind is visible.

These are the Issues Tables, where school groups, families, and individuals gather to explore the story of World War I together. Created, designed and installed by Potion, a technology design firm based in New York City, with content created by Second Story Interactive, the tables provide the platform for an entirely new type of social interactive experience.

The directors of the museum, which opened in 2006 at the site of the Liberty Memorial, sought to create an interactive experience that would absorb visitors in the causes and effects of what many consider the world's first modern conflict. Ralph Applebaum Associates (RAA) had been commissioned in 2002 to design the exhibition spaces. RAA met with Potion to explore using Potion's proprietary interactive table technology. In collaboration with RAA, Potion drew up a custom design for a pair of interactive tables and presented the idea to the museum and the content developer, Second Story Interactive Studios. Shortly thereafter, production of the Issues Tables began.

Potion's interactive table technology uses two proprietary components: a sensing system integrated into the table itself, and a pushbutton-activated "Light Wand" that takes the place of a mouse (without any clicking) to select items video-projected onto the tables from above. Pushing the button on the wand shines a light onto the surface. The sensing system registers the light and relays the information to a computer, which responds and drives the interaction and content display. The technology can be integrated into tables of varying shapes and sizes. Visitors may sit or stand while participating.

The content plays out on the tables in two modes of operation: Group and Individual. In Group Mode, a museum staff member leads visitors in a turn-based sequence in which all workstations along the entire table blend into a single, unified group experience. At the "Making War" table, visitors in Group Mode are called on to make the decisions for a nation on the brink of war. Enacting historical scenarios, they inevitably bring about the start of World War I. In the same way, the "Making Peace" table experience ends with the Treaty of Versailles.

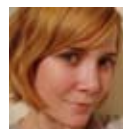


Individual Mode divides each table into 12 separate stations for working singly or in groups of two to three. It lets visitors participate in a variety of creative activities that include creating propaganda posters, exploring the mechanical action of a WWI-era machine gun, and identifying WWI aircraft.

A primary challenge was ensuring the state-of-the-art system would be simple for the museum to operate and maintain. From the early planning stages, Potion worked with the museum to determine the workflow and maintenance requirements, and with the AV integrator on the project, Electrosonic Systems Inc., to incorporate the operation of the tables into the master AV control system. Because different elements of the interactive system - computers, projectors, lighting - were located in separate areas of the museum, Potion also needed to coordinate carefully with the architects, electrical contractors, and other members of the building team.

The museum itself is an ingenious use of excavated space underneath the original Liberty Memorial tower. It came about through a restoration and repair project. The excavated area was converted into a full-fledged museum space, encircling the foundations of the tower and preserving the original monument above. The tables conform by wrapping around the columns.

Advanced technology in and of itself is not the point. The sophisticated sensing system of the Issues Tables is more compelling and effective because it is transparent and no one gives it a thought - it frees the visitor to focus on the content without consciousness of the interface, effectively making the computer vanish. In fact, when the projectors are turned off, the tables are simply tables. "We create all our interactive systems with this in mind," says Potion partner Philip Tiongson, "...that the system must let the content shine - that the technology must be a compelling tool for telling stories of all types." • • •



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