

Exhibition Walkthrough
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“Drills, Disease, Distractions: The Daily Lives of Civil War Soldiers”
Collaborative exhibition design, 2013

Pre-Show

The visitor first encounters the exhibition *Drills, Disease, Distractions: The Daily Life of a Civil War Soldier* in the subway on the way home from an event in Philadelphia with her family. They pass an ad that shows a video game controller with the words “You Play” beneath, juxtaposed with what looks like an antique deck of cards accompanied by the words “We Play.” It’s for an exhibition about the Civil War at the National Constitution Center, but it doesn’t seem like a typical exhibition about that topic. Instead of showing generals and maps, the games make her think it’s geared more toward her own age group. Since her dad is a Civil War buff, they make plans to go see the exhibition together.

Museum

As the visitor enters the National Constitution Center with her father, the first thing she is struck by is the spacious and bright feeling of the museum. It echoes with voices, and makes her feel as though she is a part of something very large and important. She remembers coming here with school trips when she was younger, and how much fun she had. Now that she’s about to graduate from high school, going to the museum with her dad to see an exhibition about the Civil War makes her feel like an adult, and she is excited about getting to the exhibition.

Threshold

As they approach the entrance to the exhibition, the visitor first notices that the wall to her right has turned to brick. She reaches out to touch the rough texture, and she is reminded of Philadelphia’s Old City, where all the buildings are made of brick. On the wall facing her at the end of the wide hallway leading to the entrance, the exhibition title looms large in glowing red letters: *Drills, Disease, Distraction: The Daily Lives of Civil War Soldiers*. As she and her father near the entrance, the wall becomes plastered with Civil War propaganda posters calling men to arms. Some of the posters look newer than others, and they are layered on top of each other. The posters are bold and catchy, and the visitor appreciates the competing graphics and typefaces. Her father stops to read an introductory panel about Civil War facts, and she glances at it but doesn’t read too much. Dramatic spotlights shine on the posters, and she can now hear a song coming from within the exhibition - it is upbeat and lively, and reminds her of songs she has played in marching band. She approaches the threshold and sees a long ramp heading toward a bright light.

Introduction, Part 1

The visitor follows her father down the ramp as he explains what he read on the introductory text panel about how the Civil War was the deadliest war in the history of the country. Large banners hang from the beams above the ramp, and each has a propaganda slogan on it. To her

left, the entire wall is covered in an engraving from a newspaper of a street scene. In the image, people lean out of windows waving handkerchiefs at ranks of soldiers marching down the street. The uplifting and invigorating music, combined with the sound of people cheering happily, fill the visitor with a feeling of excitement and anticipation. To her right, along a narrow walkway that spans the space through which the ramp descends, are life-size cutout photographs of more people waving. The size of the cutouts immerse the visitor in the scene, and she feels almost like she is a soldier going off to war, thinking how proud and heroic they must have felt to be protecting their values, whichever side they were on. She reads a large quote on the wall on her way down that says, "It seems very patriotic and grand for one's country to die. A lot of us girls went down to the train and took flowers to the soldiers as they were passing through and they cut buttons from their coats and gave them to us as souvenirs." Although the visitor doesn't support any kind of war herself, and doesn't consider herself patriotic, she feels touched by this display of admiration for the soldiers. She is absorbed in the feeling of valor and glory as she approaches the bright daylight at the end of the ramp, stopping to look at a Union uniform and a Confederate uniform in cases hung on the walls at eye level on either side.

Introduction, Part 2

From the landing of this section of the ramp, the visitor can look down into a glass-walled area of the exhibition. Daylight pours through the atrium-like space, illuminating the canopy of a tent. Someone in a Civil War uniform is playing a card game with other visitors, and she is excited to get down there and see what's going on. As she and her father move into the next section of the ramp, the visitor notices that the lighting has dimmed noticeably, and gets dimmer the farther down the ramp she goes. Now she sees a large photograph of soldiers marching in formation to her left, and to her right are life-size photographic cutouts of more soldiers marching. Passing through these marching soldiers on her way down the long ramp makes her feel like she is also marching. The visitor reads a large quote on the wall that says, "We'll fight them, sir, 'til hell freezes over, and then, sir, we will fight them on the ice." This quote makes the visitor realize that she is following these soldiers on their march into battle. In fact, she suddenly hears the sound of a distant gun shot up ahead, but she can still hear the patriotic music from the first ramp, which make her feel both the thrill and apprehension of battle. She is excited about what is ahead, wondering how the museum has decided to portray a Civil War battle. As she passes the marching soldier cutouts to her right, she can see through the gaps in between them into the exhibition below. She sees more tent canopies, and also the glow of what looks like a fire. She is eager to get into the heart of the exhibition.

Introduction, Part 3

The visitor and her father approach the turn in the ramp. She makes note of a glimmer of red light, and reads the beginning of a quote. The only part that is visible says, "The terror of battle is not an abiding impression..." As they round the corner, the rest of the quote is revealed, saying, "...but comes and goes like throbs of pain." This ramp is dramatically lit with red spotlights that pool on the floor along either wall, leading her down toward the brighter light at the bottom. As she and her father continue down the ramp, she hears more gunfire, louder this time. Some shots seem closer than others, heightening the feeling of being in a battle. Her

father explains as they walk that warfare at this time was not nearly as sophisticated as it is now. The guns did not have nearly as much range, so soldiers often ended up fighting in hand-to-hand combat. The visitor marvels at how intense and horrible that must have been. This section of the ramp is shorter, and they are soon out of the thick of the battle, leaving the gunshots behind them.

Introduction, Part 4

The visitor finds herself standing in a more brightly-lit area, at the top of a broader ramp leading down to what looks like a canvas tent. Before her is a photograph that takes up the entire left-hand wall of this section of ramp, and at first it just looks like a field surrounded by boulders and trees. It is a reproduction of an old photograph from that time period, and it's kind of grainy and unfocused. But as she examines it, the visitor begins to make out vague forms that look like bodies lying on the ground. She realizes that this is a photograph of the aftermath of a battle. The reality of the battle is slowly revealed by this image, as if she herself is coming out of the daze experienced by surviving soldiers. This area has a soft, ambient lighting, which is soothing compared to the stark red lighting from the battle scene. On the wall to her right, the visitor reads a quote: "When our great victory was just over the exultation was so great that one didn't think of our fearful losses, but now I can't help feeling a great weight at my heart." The visitor feels sad for this soldier who was clearly affected by the loss of his fellow soldiers. She likes how this area is quiet compared to the prior section and feels like she can really sympathize with the soldier with the heavy heart. The visitor and her father head toward the opening in the tent, through which she can see a warm, welcoming glow.

Orientation, Campfire

As the visitor enters the exhibition from the tent, the first thing that captures her attention is what looks like a campfire in the middle of the room. Other visitors are gathered around it, either standing and examining reader rails or seated on rustic-looking benches and stools. The fire casts a warm glow on the surrounding environment, and the ambient lighting is low, so it really takes center stage. The visitor feels as if she has stepped into a Civil War encampment, and this is enhanced by the photomural of a group of reclining soldiers on the wall behind the fire. They look quite serious, and the visitor wonders what they were doing when the photographer asked them to gather for a portrait. To her left, the visitor sees a wall that has a series of cases embedded in it, and they glow from within, further creating the feeling that this is an intimate setting. This area of the exhibition is relatively quiet, but as she approaches the camp fire, she hears the sound of wood burning and the quiet strains of a wistful song played on a guitar. She also smells the faintest odor of campfire. The sounds do not compete but blend into the overall environment. After coming from the heavy feeling of the battle, she is relieved to have a moment to breathe before engaging with the rest of the exhibition.

First the visitor checks out an introductory text panel to her right. It explains that soldiers had many ways of coping with the boredom of camp life and the anxiety of waiting for battle. Next, the visitor walks up to the fire to look at it more closely. She's really impressed that it's a real fire, and wonders how it is fueled. There doesn't seem to be anything burning, as there is no

smoke. But the flickering of the flames are enough to mesmerize her as she contemplates Civil War camp life. She reads on the reader rail in front of her about how soldiers distracted themselves from the difficult emotions experienced at camp, from boredom to anxiety to loneliness. The reader rails are attached to wooden planks that look cobbled together in a way that makes her think of makeshift, temporary buildings, and yet together they form a sturdy, solid base for the text panel. >>*Rephrase these in terms of type of distraction.*<< She reads a little bit about music, letter-writing and games, and this makes her think about how the ways people distract themselves from difficult situations haven't changed much over time. The text refers to objects in the wall of cases behind her, as well as to the audio devices embedded in the benches around the fire.

The visitor takes a seat on one of the benches made from a hewn log. From a seated position, nothing is blocking her view of the fire, and she can almost imagine she is not in a museum. On either end of her bench is a small screen set into the wood, with a pair of headphones attached. She puts on the headphones and taps the screen to find out what her options are. The touch screen gives her a list of songs to listen to, and she chooses one that Federal troops enjoyed singing, and then one favored by Confederate troops. She likes the different points of view they portray, but she also appreciates how they convey the same emotions of longing and coping with hardships. She also listens to a letter being read aloud that was written by a young Federal soldier after his first battle. The emotion in the letter immediately places the visitor in the soldier's shoes, and she can really empathize with him.

After listening for a bit and gazing at the fire, the visitor gets up and peruses the wall of cases. It is painted black, with a large quote written above the cases that describes camp life. The cases are arranged in a row at eye level, and with the low ambient lighting, the glow from within the cases makes her want to peer into each one. She reads on a text panel about the how the campfire was an important place to gather for soldiers of the Civil War. The visitor peruses the cases embedded in the wall, and sees a pen and inkwell that would have been used to write letters, as well as a group of brightly-colored marbles that share the same case as a group of musket balls. She also examines a Civil War uniform with a bullet hole through the chest. There is no explanation of the object, only small labels explaining what they are and what materials they are made of. Despite the lack of written information with the objects, she can imagine the significance each holds, having just been through a "battle" and learned around the campfire about the ways soldiers distracted themselves from boredom and anxiety. She is beginning to piece together a vision of what camp life was like for soldiers.

The visitor wanders to the other side of the fire, where she learns from the reader rails about the food soldiers would have eaten around the fire, and how all they had to eat was often spoiled or infested with bugs. But the story that she reads is a humorous one about soldiers making up songs about the quality of the food. In fact, most of the stories she reads around the campfire are somewhat uplifting, despite the fact that this is a war encampment. The visitor is able to move on to the next exhibit feeling like she can relate to Civil War soldiers, even though she has never experienced such hardships.

Along the wall where she sees the photomural is a digital interactive where the visitor gets to create her own Nom de Guerre. It's a fun way to connect a serious topic to social media memes that the visitor is familiar with, and she feels more comfortable engaging with the exhibition.