

The virtual museum

In the past ten years or so, museums have been learning how to respond effectively to the developments and trends in the communication of the cultural and natural heritage using modern interactive computing technologies. Technical advance has been remarkably rapid, but mirroring this has been an equally intense debate at international level as to how museums can best put the emerging new interactive multimedia and dissemination technologies to use in supporting their mission and objectives. Here, **Timothy Ambrose** considers the role, aims and possibilities of the virtual museum.

First port of call

On the one hand, museums have seen the new technologies such as the internet as ways to disseminate information about their services and collections, and to support their marketing endeavours. Many existing websites bear witness to this approach, and there are many which are doing this extremely well, such as MoMA (www.moma.org) and the Exploratorium (www.exploratorium.edu). On the other hand, museums are now rapidly recognising the enormous potential that the new interactive technologies provide for engaging public audiences with their primary heritage resources and helping them to explore and contextualise these in myriad ways – the Museum of Gold in Bogota, the National Maritime Museum in London, for example. The focus is thus shifting more and more to empowering the individual and developing the opportunities that the new technologies provide to give them a wholly individualised experience in line with their personal needs. At the same time, museums are increasingly recognising that they can create communication channels with individuals to allow them to make a direct contribution to the Museum's work, for example through research data, heritage information, and creative product for re-presentation.

Individuality

In successful museum destinations, real and virtual, the product on offer is not the display or exhibition, but is now increasingly recognised to be experience itself. Committing time to that experience must be rewarding for the visitor or user, spending money on that experience must be worthwhile. Every destination is experienced on the smallest possible scale – by an individual visitor making an individual choice. In this new Experience Economy, where real and virtual destinations must constantly reinvent themselves to survive, new forms of

experience are emerging through the use of interactive technologies that allow destinations not only to reinvent themselves, but critically also allow destinations to be reinvented for visitors themselves. Opening up opportunities through new technologies to provide greater choice allows the destination to meet the needs of its users in wholly new ways and provide them with the incentives to return again and again.

Common concerns

In professional terms, museums are also concerned not only with questions about how to capture, store and present the virtual, but critically how to present it in ways that enhance rather than supplant the authority of the real. At the same time, concerns relating to heritage data management and presentation have been paralleled by concerns relating to heritage access and interpretation – issues in the virtual world are also live in the real world. Market demand analysis and the identification of audience requirements for interactive multimedia, whether this is on-site in the museum or on-line on the Web, must play an important part in considering how virtual museums and services can best ensure that they match product to market.

There are many opportunities to develop interactive multimedia products and systems that can service user needs within the museum environment as well as remotely on-line. In terms of museum planning, two questions need to be answered – does the museum know what is to be communicated, and how will the museum assess its effectiveness?

These are important questions because they both need to be explored from a number of vantage points. The first question, for example, raises issues around objectives, research and prioritisation, while the second question raises issues around access and, critically, from a resource perspective, the cost-effective use of virtual product and

representation in a range of different contexts for different users.

The virtual museum is opening up a rich seam of new thinking in museum work – thinking about the nature of authenticity, approaches to the presentation and interpretation of heritage resources, accessibility in physical, intellectual and cultural terms and empowerment of the individual visitor.

Aims

The aims of the virtual museum fall into two areas, each relating to the status of the project as a whole. During the (re)development of a major museum, the aims of the virtual museum will be to:

- ensure that the mission and objectives of the museum are clearly explained and described for the visitor and user;
- reinforce the brand identity of the museum;
- enhance potential visitors' understanding of the museum by providing virtual surrogate visit experiences;
- help potential visitors and the community keep up to date with the museum's progress;
- provide a community forum for the generation, discussion and exchange of ideas relating to the development, content and future use of the museum, thereby creating a sense of ownership;
- serve as an effective marketing tool for the museum, helping create a committed user and visitor base in advance of the opening date.

At the time of the (re)opening of the museum and beyond, the aims of the virtual museum will be to:

- continue the above functions, but with an emphasis on complementing the visit experience rather than providing replacement or surrogate experiences;
- exploit and provide access to the results of digital content development projects currently being undertaken;
- establish the site as a provider of unique, high-quality content and integrate it into the array of resources being developed across specific subject areas and across different sectors;
- develop added-value access layers designed to create a premier life-long learning resource and a trusted source of formal education resources.

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Website reviews

Anna Brown,
Senior Researcher with
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on-line presence of three
destinations who are
getting it right.

brand, or brands a destination that doesn't (yet) have a geographically-located presence, it must aspire to become a successful virtual destination in its own right. In web parlance, a winning www address is 'sticky' – meaning that it inspires a long dwell-time and a high repeat visit rate (criteria not unfamiliar to the managers of physical destinations).



Creating a successful on-line destination poses a set of challenges not unlike those involved in the creation of a physical destination. Developing a website is an exercise in brand-building, first and foremost. The 'look and feel' of the website convey a great deal of information about the brand and the nature of its product offer, both on-site and on-line. As a marketing tool, a website is crucial but relatively superficial: it should look good, move quickly, offer basic information directly and help the user find what he or she is looking for.

Whether a website relates entirely to one physical destination, combines a number of physical locations under one

www.exploratorium.edu (Exploratorium, San Francisco)

The Exploratorium – a hands-on science centre in San Francisco – has developed an excellent on-line destination that can serve as a model for any virtual museum. The home page is packed with links into the site, encouraging users to visit the exhibition that most interests them, to read about the history of the museum and its buildings, or to visit the museum shop on-line.

Housed within the walls of San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts, the Exploratorium is a collage of over 650 science, art, and human perception exhibits. The Exploratorium, founded in 1969, is a leader in the movement

to promote the museum as an educational center. The Exploratorium's mission is 'to create a culture of learning through innovative environments, programs, and tools that help people to nurture their curiosity about the world around them'.

Supporting the museum's mission is a key part of its on-line strategy – the depth and breadth of data available, including web-casts and discussion groups, encourage the user to become an explorer.

In addition to presenting practical information about the physical destination's programme and facilities, www.exploratorium.edu offers visitors the opportunity to dig deeper into background material than they might on-site. Profiles of the people who participated in creating the exhibitions, anecdotes about the development of exhibition ideas, and creative material gathered from guest artists in response to the science-oriented displays are all available on-line. This approach personalises the presentation of science, and immediately involves the visitor in a story about that presentation.

The digital library accessible from the website gives access to an archive of 10,000 pages – from Bubbles (everything you wanted to know about bubbles but were afraid to ask!) to the Complexity Site (an introduction to the mathematical concept of complexity) to Cow Eye Dissection (a step-by-step how-to guide).

Two webcams situate the site, and the visitor, in the physical destination in San Francisco. One looks outwards, over the marina towards the Golden Gate Bridge; the other focuses on an exhibit inside the museum, giving viewers from around the world a sense of real-time visitation.

The home page also provides access to the on-line shop, stocked with a full range of merchandise. There is practical

information about visiting the museum, and about facilities available for corporate hire. Education programmes and special events are featured on-line, although of course the educational mission pervades the website as it does the museum.

One of the strategic choices that makes this website work so well as an on-line destination is that, while navigation around the site is quite straightforward, there are always more internal links appearing as the user travels around the site. Each exhibition or strand of on-line content has a distinctive design, so that the user who spends time navigating the site simply by jumping from one interesting link to the next will feel that he or she has been to a number of different 'places', all of which are part of a coherent destination. This site sticks.

www.emplive.com (Experience Music Project, Seattle)

Visitors to emplive.com are immediately invited to 'embark on a unique new musical landscape'. Emplive.com qualifies as a virtual museum, in that it relates directly to the recently opened Experience Music Project in Seattle, whilst at the same time, it is an engaging, exciting on-line destination in its own right. The site is divided into four main areas where users 'unearth the power of music' as well as learning about the building, collections, activities, commercial offer and membership scheme of its parent EMP.

In Explore, visitors see showcased artefacts and listen to music clips and oral histories. Changing 'features' range from *Hip-Hop Chronology* to *Hendrix and the Press*. Most surprising, and encouraging, is the sophistication of the visual, audio and textual presentation of these featured topics. Consider an excerpt from the opening page of the *Riot Grrrl Retrospective*:



Because of the media distortion, the history of the riot grrrl movement has remained unclear, its goals and accomplishments left unexamined. The aim of the Experience Music Project's 'Riot Grrrl Retrospective' project is to document and clarify that history. EMP's archives house a wide array of artifacts from the riot grrrl era: recordings, posters, photographs, fanzines. But behind every artifact is a story, a piece of living history. In the interest of exploring that history, EMP organized a gathering of riot grrrls in December of 1999, bringing key players from the riot grrrl movement to Olympia for three days of interviews, a panel discussion, and performances. What came out of the gathering was a remarkable living history of the riot grrrl era, as experienced by the women involved in it, and those who were inspired by it. This presentation aims to offer new insight and a fresh perspective on this musical movement.

Accessible from throughout the site, EMP Digital Collection invites you to browse through hundreds of artefacts from the Experience Music Project collection, including rare instruments, sound recordings, costumes, photographs, posters and song lyrics. It is the virtual place to go to learn more about the artefacts in the EMP collection, whether you've seen the exhibits in Seattle or not. Designed to go beyond the boundaries of the museum experience, EMP Digital

Collection showcases more objects, includes more details, and explores connections between related objects, artists, topics and musical styles with a click of a mouse. Definitely a site to spend time on.

www.edenproject.com (Eden Project, Cornwall)

What about a destination in the development phase? Without a 30-year history to draw on, can a new destination create something that qualifies as a virtual museum?

The Eden Project in Cornwall, currently open to limited numbers of visitors during its construction phase, has a fully-fledged on-line presence promoting the physical destination. The opening page of www.edenproject.com sets the stage:

Plants are the Life Support System of our Planet - the fabric of the stage on which we, and all living things, act out our lives. They are the most vital ingredients of that which we call the Environment.

In a vast china clay pit in Cornwall, the Eden Project is building a living theatre to tell the stories of plants and people.

The stage is nearing completion. The visitor centre, on the lip of the crater, looks down onto a secret landscape heaving with activity. Two giant conservatories are being constructed to nurture plants from the steamy rainforests and from the warm temperate regions



of the world. These covered biomes will create a majestic backdrop to the 'roofless' biome, home to the plants of the temperate regions, from Britain to Chile and beyond...

Plants set the stage but Eden Project is more than a global garden. A door into the world in microcosm, Eden is about communication, theatre, science, art, education, entertainment, plants, people, places, communities, resources, food, life, projects, partnerships... Eden Project enables you to discover what is going on in the world in order to look forward to a sustainable future.

Eden is real as well as virtual...

The site is strong in a number of ways: it serves as excellent marketing for the physical destination, appealing to both adults and children. It generates excitement about the project, and gives a potted history of its development. But it does not – or not yet – present on-line content sufficient to create a virtual destination, a website worth a visit in its own right.

One of the many facets of destination-creation is the development of a virtual analog with a mix of on-line content. A website that feels like a 'place to be' in cyberspace – encouraging the visitor to stay longer and come back for more – can achieve the goals set out for a virtual museum.