

Museums need visitors. They exist to serve the public, to educate and inform, and yes, sometimes even to entertain. As knowledge becomes easier to obtain by electronic means, museums must devise new ways to draw patrons through their doors. According to the introductory sentence of one of the two user studies articles I am reviewing, “Museums are transitioning from repositories of artifacts and knowledge to centers for individuals to have interactive experiences with authentic artifacts and to negotiate their own knowledge.”¹ The two articles I have chosen discuss two different ways cultural institutions are addressing this shift of the public to demanding a more interactive museum experience.

The first article, “Incorporating Handheld Computers Into a Public Science Center: A Design Research Study”, does not bury the lead with its title. It presents the findings of a study conducted at Oregon State University’s Hatfield Marine Science Visitor Center on the effectiveness of augmenting the visitor experience of exhibits with handheld computers (namely video iPods, the classic click-wheel model).

Phipps, Rowe and Cone first discuss the purpose for the study, framing their experiment within the larger trend of “mass-customization” that has become prevalent in other areas of our society, using Starbucks as an example. To keep up with the times, museums need to acknowledge this transition and respond accordingly. Due to the pervasiveness of handheld computer and communication technology, Phipps, Rowe and Cone felt that these technologies are ideal for incorporation into the museum visitor

¹ Molly Phipps, Shawn Rowe, and Joseph Cone, “Incorporating Handheld Computers into a Public Science Center: A Design Research Study,” *Visitor Studies* 11 no. 2 (1 July 2008): 123.

experience. They offer an easy avenue to bring customized contents to the patrons' fingertips by allowing the user to make selections of content independently.

The study looked at the willingness of patrons to use a video iPod during their visit to the marine center and their subsequent satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the content and how it affected their experience of the exhibits. Patrons who chose to participate checked out an iPod on a lanyard and headset and could use the iPod to access audio and video content that pertained to different exhibits in the center. Initially very little guidance was given to participants about which items correlated to which exhibits as a way to put as much of the customization power in the hands of the user. A majority of the users commented that the lack of guidance inhibited their desire to access content. Being a "design research study", the researchers took the feedback and added a map of the facility with references to relevant content on the iPod for each of the exhibits and noticed an immediate increase in positive responses from participants about the enhancement of their visits with the iPods.

Over the course of the study the researchers found that the refusal rate to participate in the study was abnormally high and attributed many of the reasons to the iPod acting as a barrier between the patron and the exhibit content, stating they were missing parts of the actual exhibit due to the device or that between the device and the exhibit they were feeling overwhelmed. For those with families or in other types of groups, the iPod acted as an isolator. Parents were most likely to refuse to participate in order to watch over their children during the visit.

Of those who used the iPod, over three-quarters responded positively, stating their experience was enhanced by the content and was more meaningful because of it. 80% of

the users were comfortable with the interface of the iPod and navigated the content easily. Though both audio and video content was included on the iPods for the study, users accessed the videos much more than the audio content. The researchers provide a couple of different reasons for this, from the confusing nature of the audio section label as “songs” to the fact that the video content was created specifically for the study and the Center whereas the audio content existed prior to the inception of the study and was not associated to the Center exclusively.

This study is just the beginning of pilot programs in cultural institutions like this utilizing popular commercial handheld computer technology to augment the visitor experience. As this technology develops and progresses and pervades our everyday life, its incorporation into the museum and library will become more and more likely and necessary. The study was done in the summer of 2006 and since then Apple has introduced the iPhone and iPod Touch, devices, with their wireless capabilities and built in GPS, that make custom content studies like Phipps, Rowe and Cone’s more feasible and present the opportunity for increasingly sophisticated interactivity.

While the possibility of a virtual museum tour guide iPhone App is a few years away, there are other, less technologically dependant, ways of getting those “occasionals”, as Megan Axelsen refers to people who frequent cultural institutions sporadically, to the museum: Special Events. Just as people like customization, we also like a little something special. To understand the appeal of the art museum special event to both frequent and occasional museum patrons, Axelsen conducted in-depth interviews with a small set of special event attendees from two different events at two different Australian art museum: “Nature Machine Summer Children’s Festival” at the Queensland

Art Gallery, and “International Women’s Day at the National Gallery” at the National Gallery of Australia.²

After analyzing the responses of her participants and grouping the motivations for attendance into broader categories, education was the number two motivator for both types of visitors. In addition to “Learning”, both visitor types had two other motivation categories in common: “Social Interaction” and “Experience-seeking”. While the frequent visitors included “Novelty” and “Professional interest” as motivators with “Novelty” in the number one spot, occasional visitors rounded out their top five motivators with “Family” and “Recommendations”.

Though it may not be apparent at first, this study and the iPod study are both reactions to the shift of museums to a more interactive environment stated earlier. The iPods with supplemental content let the visitor customize and augment (or at time diminish) their interactions with the exhibits. The special events create an environment for interaction with visitors who share similar interests. Though content was one of the motivators via “Learning”, most of the other motivators were tied into the interactive opportunities of the event, not just with other attendees, but with contributors to the events like artists and curators. This shift is not a new one and museums have been developing systems to allow for more visitor interaction. The new developments in consumer electronics and communication devices are opening up dozens of new avenues for interactivity. Institutions that may not have the development resources for such programs should not feel that without the incorporation of those technologies into their visitor experience the opportunity for interactivity is lessened. Axelsen offers low-tech

² Megan Axelsen, “Visitors’ Motivations to Attend Special Events at Art Galleries: An Exploratory Study,” *Visitor Studies* 10 no.2 (1 October 2007): 194.

solutions in the form of special events as a way to create interaction between not only patrons and collections but also patrons and staff, patrons and content creators, and patrons and other patrons. As enticing and sexy as the possibility of a completely customizable application for your iPhone that creates a holographic tour guide that stands in your palm and comments on the works in the particular gallery you are standing in using built-in GPS, it is still a long way away from beating human to human real time interface.

Bibliography

Axelsen, Megan. "Visitors' Motivations to Attend Special Events at Art Galleries: An Exploratory Study." *Visitor Studies* 10 no. 2 (1 October 2007): 192-204.

Phipp, Molly, Shawn Rowe, and Jason Cone. "Incorporating Handheld Computers into a Public Science Center: A Design Research Study." *Visitor Studies* 11 no 2 (1 July 2008): 123-138.