
FOREWORD

Major Themes in Multimedia and Museums

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The International Conference on Hypermedia and Interactivity in Museums was conceived in order to provide museum professionals and interactive multimedia designers and producers with an opportunity to move beyond the occasional show-and-tell sessions provided by other professional conferences or the gee-whiz articles which appear in popular journals. The organisers believe that we need critical reviews of the state of the art and realistic assessments of opportunities and barriers, in addition to the chance to examine developments in hardware and software platforms, see recent museum products, and meet other players in the field. The opening technical session of the conference is, therefore, designed to provide an overview of the three major themes of the proceedings: applications of interactive multimedia by museums, system design and development issues, and the impact and implications of interactive multimedia for museums as institutions.

In the spirit of the meeting, the authors have taken an objective and critical perspective on the subject of their assignments. They have looked through the smoke and mirrors, the baubles and flash that so often distracts us or creates the illusions we want to experience, to expose the state of the art. They have not done so in order to discourage us, although what they found is often discouraging, but in order to prepare us to enter the fray. After all, the participants in this conference are devoted to developing and implementing interactive multimedia. We do not need to preach to the converted but rather to distinguish between glitz and substance, to learn to recognise areas in which hard work and good planning will be essential, and to think about the strategic issues raised by the use of these technologies.

We need to confront why it is that the applications which we see in museums are so similar to the exhibit diorama's or directional signage they replace. There is no question that we will continue to see the individual kiosk application inside museums for the next decade and beyond; almost every museum I visit these days has one running somewhere and more in-house authoring capabilities are being developed every day. But are such computer-based interactives in a kiosk effective? Museum and software professionals both need to understand what makes such programs work well. As Xavier Perrot makes clear, we need to identify the concrete reasons why the larger promises of interactive applications are not being fulfilled in museums today. After decades of talking about multimedia collections management and interactive multimedia research tools, why are these not playing a role in museum work? Is it because we have failed to envision what the actual applications would be, or could be, and have only visualised what user interfaces would look like and what data would be available? How can we move beyond this to the analysis of complete applications and how they might be made viable, and to define what conditions would need to be satisfied for them to be needed? What critical

standards, evaluation techniques, and methods of testing can we bring to analysis of applications for museums and what mechanisms does the community require in order to monitor the applications it has developed, document their successes and failures, and build on what it learns?

When we have a clear grasp of the applications we want for museums, we will still confront a host of systems engineering issues, most of which are not specific to the museum application context. James Hemsley begins, in his paper for this session, to provide us a map to this strange land and to help us identify the long-term trends that are discernible beneath a current of constant change. In addition to the methodological protections that he recommends, the subsequent sessions on design principles, user interfaces, standards, and information retrieval provide useful guidelines for success. Architectures and tools to achieve the objectives we establish for museum applications are still immature, as is the ability of our public to employ the new media, so knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of specific approaches is absolutely critical to achieve the kinds of radically new experiences that these technologies make possible.

What kinds of new experiences are these? How will they transform our institutions and in what ways do they depend on our cooperation with each other, with new technological and commercial forces, and with other social institutions such as schools, universities, and governments? How will we train for the new roles we will need to play and what roles are appropriate for each of the many players that will be needed on the teams that design and develop these applications? These and many more questions confront our institutions as the opportunities presented by a digital technology delivering remote multi-sensory experiences is explored. The public programs, curatorial functions, job responsibilities and relationships that have defined museums for over a hundred years will be subjected to strains as museums evolve, along with other cultural institutions in the twenty-first century.