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Multimedia in Interpretation

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We have collected papers that remind us that hypermedia play many roles in the museum experience. It is architecture and theatre, as Larry Friedlander reminds us. It is information and orientation and an ongoing negotiation between practical limits and intellectual needs, as Nikos Dessipris explains; and it is one more tool in a long term commitment to educating and enhancing the relationship between a museum's collections and its many, and varied, visitors, as Ruth Perlin demonstrates. The application of hypermedia to museum needs has, in a very short time, begun to seem indispensable to creating an effective museum experience. Yet, hypermedia (in any of its manifestations) remains secondary to the primary museum experience and that role was made clear to me recently when I hosted a Russian colleague who came to visit me in Washington, D.C.

She is an educated woman who teaches American literature at a provincial university. In her first trip to the United States she visited Orlando, Florida, home of Epcot Centre and Disney World, and Washington, D.C. Both cities welcome tourists, though each offers a fairly unique experience to them. In Washington for only one day, she declined to visit the Smithsonian museums and went, instead, to the National Gallery of Art. When I met her at the Gallery she told me, with delight, that she had seen "the da Vinci, the Botticelli, rooms full of American naive paintings" and more. She was thrilled to see the real paintings which she had known only in photographs. How did she find her way? She asked for, and was given, a paper map of the Gallery's two buildings, and she followed that map to the collections that she wanted to see.

This was a representative visitor, a cultured and educated woman who knew that she might never have another chance to visit Washington. She didn't want to see pictures of anything: she wanted to see real paintings and real works of art. This is a humbling realisation for a producer of multimedia programs, especially one who specialises in museum exhibitions. Hypermedia programs are not the primary museum experience and will never substitute for the original artefact. But they can reinforce, enhance, animate those artefacts; or, as Ruth Perlin suggests, they can render accessible the seemingly inaccessible.

All three papers in this session recognise both the limits and the promise of hypermedia applications. The Department of Education Resources at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, developed a videodisc on American art. This disc was designed for use in classrooms, to help teachers develop their own programs on the subject. Unlike the program developed for the Museum of Dion, the videodisc on American art will not be seen inside the Gallery. Instead, it will be used extensively in classrooms across the country and the producers, knowing their users, made many decisions that mirror the kinds of decisions made by producers whose products go into public spaces. In fact, the videodisc on American art, along with the Museum of Dion's electronic guide, illustrate many of Larry Friedlander's comments on the use of multimedia.

The videodisc on American art will be used by teachers across the United States. They will teach first graders, teenagers, and university students. They will teach in rural Mississippi districts which do not provide computers to their teachers; and they will instruct undergraduates in university art history departments. All of these teachers will have equal access to a major resource, images from the NGA collection. Does the videodisc duplicate the experience of exploring real works of art? No, nor does it pretend to do so. Rather, it allows the remote student to study American art; and it allows the isolated teacher to develop an educational program suitable for multiple grade levels.

There are similarities and differences between this program and that developed as an electronic guide to the Museum of Dion. Both programs acknowledge that they are based on authentic works of art. Both the videodisc and the POI guide introduce these works in two ways: with an image and with minimal text. The NGA disc indexes works of art by category (Paintings, Sculpture, etc.); each work of art is first identified by author, then title. Dimensions and dates are also provided. Likewise, the POI guide to Dion identifies each work of art by its title, dimension and date. It also locates the item within the archeological site. But, unlike the NGA disc, the guide to Dion offers only one program. This is a program that was designed to provide orientation and access: it does not support the multiple platforms and levels that the NGA disc (designed for classroom use) must acknowledge. Both programs are based on the museum's collections but they serve different users and different user needs.

At the same time, each recognises that there are other encounters, other sources of information, for their users. The NGA disc will be introduced by a teacher; students will have reference books. They will be viewing the disc as part of a lesson. In other words, there is contextual information available in the classroom and the disc is used to introduce the primary resource. The guide to Dion is a more complete program and one that provides the contextual information for the user. This will complement the visitor's later tour of the museum itself where she or he will see the artefacts themselves.

Neither program is a definitive introduction to the work of art. Rather, each acknowledges, in its interface, in its index, in its very concept, that this is a reference to something more substantial. Each gives access to that substance and each allows users to read works of art, at their own pace. Both programs acknowledge that they are not the only sources of information about those works of art, although each is designed as a different kind of supplement to the already available information, available through the teacher or the museum visit. In doing so, both programs pay homage to the original work of art on which they are based. This deference is critical to the successful development of hypermedia applications for museums. It is particularly critical, as Larry Friedlander reminds us, inside the actual museum exhibition.

If museum exhibitions are part theatre, then each player must be well directed. Hypermedia programs designed specifically for installation inside a museum exhibition must be both clear and transparent. Like the POI guide to Dion these programs are fixed: they are not as flexible as those designed for classroom use. But, like the videodisc on American art, they must also acknowledge that there are other sources of information and those sources are original artefacts, the very draw that brings most visitors to the museum. The proximity of these artefacts to the media raises issues that are unique to installations. Hypermedia programs designed for such installations are site-specific. In fact, it is this specificity that makes them unique. They are specific to the exhibition space, whether that is a space of 2,000 square feet or 10,000 square feet. They are specific to an institution and they must address that institution's audience: whether it is a national gallery of art or a provincial children's museum. They are specific to the content of the show, whether it is a show about German Expressionism or a show about 19th-century farming techniques. In their specificity they display a deference to the surrounding space and the surrounding

artefacts. If the museum experience is part theatre, then the hypermedia program is, for the most part, a character actor, one whose role is direct and recognisable, but also clearly supporting of a larger principle.

This focused role demands of the producer both restraint and originality. Restraint presumes a respect for the dimensions and nature of the space: the discreet interface that is appropriate to an historic house is, likewise, inappropriate to the high energy of the Exploratorium. Originality presumes an attention to the content of the exhibition: the fluid, inventive installations at the Musée de la Civilisation's exhibition "Vrai ou faux?" reflect, and support, the questioning mood of that show. A multimedia program on the history of computers designed for use in the National Museum of American History's "Information Age" is out of place, and out of context, in the Children's Museum of Boston. The two institutions have different audiences. Moreover, the visitor experience in each institution is unique and, as Larry Friedlander might remind us, the visitor experience is an unfolding, dramatic encounter, one that reflects the nature of the institution, one that is designed to support the purpose of the exhibition.

Part of the drama inherent in these programs depends on their placement inside an exhibition space. But the most critical dramatic element remains the screen and the images that we design for the actual program. Here, again, the best hypermedia display a deference to the content, visual and conceptual, of the exhibition. In fact, any good hypermedia program begins with the content and the content experts. It is they who will answer the first serious of questions: why are we producing this program? What will it bring to the user? What information/experience is unique within this program? How does this information relation to that which is inherent in the collections? But, as all of our papers acknowledge, the answers to these, and other, questions must be addressed by a team of professionals who share (in the words of Mr. Dessipris) "a clear and honest relationship, good will in resolving delicate issues, and respect of the work of all parties."

The three papers collected here reflect the elements of an effective team. Ruth Perlin outlines the educational mission of her department and she makes it clear that the videodisc on American art is one of many programs developed in an ongoing commitment to her diverse audience. Nikos Dessipris demonstrates the process by which a thoughtful designer will interpret the educational material selected by project archaeologists (in the case of the Museum of Dion). Larry Friedlander reminds us of both the larger environment of the museum space and the smaller environment of the monitor. Both of these worlds require attention, invention and coordination if we are to create a seamless, integrated program one that can enhance the user's understanding of and access to the primary museum experience.

Finally, it is important to remember that there is much freedom in being the secondary museum experience. The burden of the primary document (whether work of art or historical artefact) is heavy: these documents must be preserved and displayed without artifice. The media that interprets and complements these documents, however, can be, indeed, must be, reflective and inventive. At its best, hypermedia demands a new vocabulary, both visual and conceptual, from its practitioners. Though we come from many different disciplines, with backgrounds in computers, film, museums, theatre, we must all learn to speak the same language so that we can combine our varied talents and create multimedia programs that reflect the best of all those combined disciplines.