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IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS OF MULTIMEDIA

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As one of the main themes, our task is to divide the subject, "Museums and Interactive Multimedia," into its constituent elements so that we can concentrate on learning from one another. Having surveyed the exciting projects that are underway across the globe ("application"), and having broached the critical subject of production ("design and development"), we turn now to an assessment of "impact" and "implications" - two broad topics indeed. The title "Impact and Implications of Multimedia" sounds so grand, even vague, the realm of the software evangelist.

But impact and implication are what the game is all about, especially at a time when interactive multimedia are no longer mere possibilities but realities in museum after museum. It is true that market forces have yet to define completely the economic parameters for interactive multimedia as either "goods" or "services" in classic economic terms; we can't talk realistically about mass markets yet. And it is true that the legal issues of copyright and intellectual property are a quagmire, as anyone who has had to write or review an interactive multimedia contract knows. But strictly technological issues may be settling down temporarily with the advent of massive internal memories, off-the-shelf authoring programs, and ready access to vast amounts of digital data via CD-ROM. All this allows the fusion of textual, visual, and audio data, what we call, for lack of a simpler term "interactive multimedia." Where the technology leads, the law and economics will follow.

Museums are in the riptide of these developments, both because they may use interactive multimedia technologies and because they provide grist for the interactive multimedia mill. Museums are the stewards for culturally significant material held, presumably, in trust for all. Because so much of that material is visual, for example, paintings, drawings, artefacts of every description and because interactive multimedia are about the integration of visual and alphanumeric data, museums are being drawn into the electronic maelstrom as never before.

I would like to make some half-dozen observations this morning; two can loosely be considered under the rubric "impact" because they focus on things that are currently happening in museum circles, and four are more generally in the realm of "implications" because they touch on adjustments that museums must make in the near future.

First, the advent of interactive multimedia is changing the nature of the physical and conceptual environment encountered by visitors who come to museums. Increasingly, our galleries contain kiosks, electronic information systems, computer rooms, and the like. There are too many examples to be enumerated in detail. Perhaps it is more useful to

outline a few categories, such as the *installation-specific* piece built into exhibitions (e.g., the Getty Museum installations on Greek pots and Medieveal manuscripts); the *global* piece that may present an electronic mini-catalogue of a collection (e.g., The National Gallery's Micro gallery), or the *stand-alone* application intended to have utility outside of the museum environment (e.g., Perseus project). These phenomena are even more pronounced in science, history, or natural history museums, museums that are making a major investment in enlivening their displays.

It is interesting to look to the forces that drive these developments. One is the sincere desire of museum professionals to provide more and richer interpretive data for museum visitors. Poll after poll over the past twenty years reveals that visitors really want to know more - or at least they say they do - and interactive multimedia can put a veritable encyclopaedia at a visitor's fingertips. Another current sweeping interactive multimedia into our museums is the desire to make the museum experience somehow more palatable - more entertaining - thereby engaging the visitor's attention and winning his or her approval. True Aristotelians, we want our educational work to delight as well as instruct.

Issues of trend and fashion also shape the information matrix that modern museum visitors encounter, further stimulating the integration of interactive multimedia into museums. On the one hand, current educational thought emphasises the beneficial effects of activities that are "hands-on," "active" (rather than "hands-off," "passive"); it is not sufficient just to look, read, or listen. On the other hand, current fashion among scholars (especially in the humanities) demands more data about "interpretive context" - the social and political circumstances, the voice of contemporary witnesses, and so on. It is not enough for a living visitor to merely perceive the object or artefact by itself (and in fact it is often said to be impossible to do so). We must bring in appropriate extrinsic information, which interactive multimedia are ideally equipped to provide for us. Interactive multimedia are wonderful vehicles for putting visitors in touch, literally, with all this learning and lore, and according to the best educational thinking of the moment.

It would be naive not to record two other forces pushing museums and interactive multimedia together: the desire for prestige - to be first, to be "on the cutting edge," - and the desire for profit. The interests of educators, funders, and trustees are at work, and the visibility of interactive multimedia technologies in the world's museums contributes to the success of entrepreneurs who are betting on the emergence of vast markets for interactive multimedia. Another further economic nuance can be noted, too. At a time when a *mass* market for interactive multimedia does not yet exist, but is universally predicted, a *specialised* market for interactive multimedia productions has already emerged in showcase situations. Thus, interactive multimedia may be not be in your home or school, yet, but they are very much in evidence in the world fair, trade show, historic site, or, yes, the museum.

Thus, museums leap, step, or are pushed into the interactive multimedia arena. Hard-boiled museum watchers might reasonably wonder whether anything substantial accrues to the visitor from all these electronic efforts; there are no studies yet to prove tangible benefits. We can reasonably ask whether these projects are just the current trend in museum display, the dioramas of our day, or are they something more?

Interactive multimedia are reshaping the idea of a museum; indeed, some museums have even been conceived around these technologies alone, rather than around the traditional notion of a collection. Yet we have so much to learn. For instance, placing interactive multimedia in museums requires the attentions of architects or space planners. Remarkably, museum planners have not always been quick to understand the problem, especially when they place an information-rich interactive multimedia project that is best consulted at leisure in an inappropriate space, such as an entry hall thronged with crowds.

My **second** observation about the impact of interactive multimedia is that for all the uncertainty, these technologies are beginning to prompt basic changes in museum organisation. Just as the issues raised by computerised collection management forces the registrar, curator, and photographic department to act in new ways, interactive multimedia demand fusion of many traditionally differentiated museum specialties. We discover that worthwhile interactive multimedia projects tap into the photolibrary's riches, the curator's content knowledge, the educator's teaching skill, the designer's creativity. Inevitably, this stimulates interchange among museum professionals, which I take to be a good thing.

These changes are beneficial because they push traditional museum professionals to the centre of electronic environment issues, and thereby prompt transgression between the realms of the "computer people" and the "museum people." When so much electronic power can be placed in the hands of staff trained in other areas, interactive multimedia becomes a tool rather than an end in itself. That is exciting. As a sign of these changes, we can look to the decline, or at least the redefinition, of old-style electronic data processing departments, with their mainframes and blackbox approaches.

We can only expect this trend to continue as younger generations of computer-literate curators and teachers come into the field (and into schools and universities, too). Just as the concept of note-taking changed fundamentally with the advent of the copy machine, and just as the act of writing is now most frequently done "on the Mac" rather than with the old "system Bic" (or, if you prefer, "system Montblanc", that is, pen and paper), this aspiring generation of professionals can be relied on to exploit opportunities to reorganise text, image, and sound for their own purposes. Inevitably, concepts of "design" and "product", not to mention exploitation, will evolve.

A corollary point here may be the displacement of turnkey service providers. The day is passing when electronic project production could only be done by outside "experts." Instead, almost anyone: curator, teacher, student, can organise a body of visual, audio, and textual data according to his or her own likes. Indeed, I think museum people should encourage this process because it heightens the authenticity of the interactive multimedia environment. A do-it-yourself approach sometimes produces results that are more in touch with the museum's intellectual centre than the polished results of media professionals.

My **third** observation leads into musings about "implications." As a museum professional concerned with the public work of a large art museum, I am of the opinion that the electronic environment and interactive multimedia stimulate fundamental rethinking about a museum's work as an educational institution. Educational work is often defined narrowly as the range of real- time services provided to visitors, for example, lectures, tours, labels and handouts, school and teacher activities, concerts, etc. Defined more broadly, "education" entails the published results of museum work that is, catalogues, monographs, bulletins, journals, and the like. Clearly, the electronic revolution poses new challenges and opportunities, pushing these two realms of activity together.

From one point of view, interactive multimedia push traditional "educators" to accomplish their ends by new means. Moreover, these media open up an entirely new field within museum education, especially when self-authoring systems, scanners, and the other electronic tools are available at modest cost. (A parallel phenonemonon for printed materials is desk-top publishing.) From the other point of view, interactive multimedia stimulate content experts to present their insights in new ways. All in all, this amounts to exploiting the educational potential of the electronic environment. Rethinking the museum's educational work so as to exploit the potential of interactive multimedia also entails coming to terms with developments in the larger world of education. That is,

interactive multimedia make college and school lecture halls, classrooms, and seminars as important a place for encountering visual materials as museum galleries. Of course the electronic image is only a memorandum for an original object, but some encounter, any encounter, with visual materials is an improvement.

It is a fact easily overlooked, but a sea change is occurring with respect to the materials teachers use in classrooms. A wide variety of resource materials are displacing the authoritative textbook. And original texts, diaries, comments, photographs, films, and audio and visual materials of every sort are the stuff of interactive multimedia. In the US, several private schools and public school districts are making a major commitment toward redefining the school environment electronically, and the resources contained in museums have a major role to play in this.

These observations lead to my **fourth** point, which can be sketched in quickly: the electronic environment and the advent of interactive multimedia require that we think more elastically about the concept of publication. Of course this is the hot subject in the publishing industry, which must reposition itself for an era in which electronically accessible data compete with, or more reasonably co-exist with, traditional printed formats. It is an open question whether the electronic publications of the future will be made and distributed by the publishers we know today, or whether they will be displaced by competition from the software, entertainment, or other sectors of our economies.

The subjects of educational work and publication should be approached with some humility by museum professionals. The reality is that museums will always be limited in what they can do by way of providing "definitive" or "model" programs or publications. It is well to remember that, like librarians, museum professionals are in large measure only stewards of primary cultural materials, the materials that are the real precondition for educational uses that we cannot always predict or control. To the extent that we establish the preconditions for educational use by making our collections accessible in the electronic environment, we perform a fundamental educational service that benefits our public.

This brings me to my **fifth** and perhaps the most important point for those who must set museum policies: interactive multimedia require more rigorous thinking about "terms of access." This means dealing with issues of money and the law, and the fact is that interactive multimedia raises vastly difficult policy and procedural issues for museums.

This is not so much a matter of *how* museums use or might use interactive multimedia for their own purposes. It is instead a matter of responding to *others* who want to use, via interactive multimedia, images of and information about the things that museums hold in trust for all. I think it is fair to say that image-use practice for traditional publications, books and magazines, as well as film and video, has been fairly well defined. Most museums stand ready to rent or permit the use of copyrighted photographs of art for a book, article, film or video. By and large, we know what we are talking about when we use the nouns "book," "periodical," or "film," "broadcast" (and, for the past decade, "video") and are reassured by the conventional meaning of terms such as, say, "edition." (The rights to permit use of images of recently produced materials for which the artist retains an interest makes the situation more confusing, but let me leave that thorny matter aside in this contribution.) Interactive multimedia are turning conventional assumptions about access and use upside down. For example, the concept of "product" or "production" dissolves before our eyes. A new term has entered our vocabulary, "repurposing", to capture the universe of ways in which visual and textual material can be reshaped in the electronic environment. The means by which users have access to these electronic materials, whether from a CD-ROM, an on-line service, or some other systems, are up in the air. These uncertainties and the absence of a mass market make the ephemeral but highly visible projects in our museums that much more important.

It is therefore critical that museums act responsibly when they grant electronic access to their collections. Whenever possible at a time of so much uncertainty, it is prudent to define projects and the products that flow from them very specifically. It is reasonable to impose time limits on access and use of museum materials. It is reasonable to foresee and perhaps limit repurposing. It is realistic to anticipate that other entities will buy or sell today's interactive multimedia producers and their work. It is wise to preserve an institution's freedom to use its material for its own purposes, and probably wise to avoid exclusive relationships. It is good business to know what is going on generally in the field. And it is sensible to acknowledge the real costs and benefits, short and long term.

Museum professionals would be wise to ponder these business- school platitudes when the subject of interactive multimedia comes up. As these technologies become ubiquitous, inexpensive, and familiar, museum people must establish sound guiding principles that are in harmony with the museum's role as a cultural touchstone.

Of course, these matters will eventually work themselves out, for better or for worse, as individual deals are struck. It might even be argued that museums have less of a role to play in defining the terms of electronic access to images than artists, especially photographers, who have an acute financial interest in what they make. Nevertheless, museums should not underestimate their importance of their collections and experts as they enter the electronic arena, or overestimate the benefits that others stand ready to provide.

This observation leads me to my sixth and final point about the implications of interactive multimedia for museums. What will museum professionals do with interactive multimedia when they begin to be understood as art forms in their own right? If the cultural currents of our century-to-date are any clue, the human mind will push the potential and edges of all media, tinkering with new forms of cultural or aesthetic expression. It may not be going too far to assert that interactive multimedia pose new opportunities for literature, the visual arts, music, and the other performing arts, even as they are becoming a part of today's museums. Interactive multimedia will therefore become a cultural or artistic entity of its own, requiring preservation and study. Perhaps there can only be one result, and I suspect that you may have already guessed it: create a museum, but what form that museum might take I cannot venture to guess.