

Is the nature of storytelling changing as digital platforms become more prevalent?

Museums seek to tell stories that intrigue and inspire audiences to explore ideas further once they have left the museum. These experiences are carefully planned around one over-arching theme broken down into thematic threads. Planning starts and ends with the theme. It is THE driver of the visitor's experience. The goal is for every visitor to walk away from their experience with a sense of connection to the message. Great exhibits are not didactic. The visitor experience is carefully crafted to the smallest detail; the lighting, graphic design, and exhibit's physical design create a mood. They layout coaxes the visitor to move through the space in a particular order. Notions are built upon as the visitor progresses through the exhibit. Text is written to capture the visitor's attention, entice him, and then lead him to more profound information. Interactive installations break down complex concepts into chunks that, when fully experienced, solidify visitor learning. This planning is conscious and systematic. The theme is framed in such a way that each fact leads to the revelation of something new for the visitor.

Cultural institutions however, are experiencing a decided shift in how visitors access learning. Smart phones are ubiquitous and visitors' attention is divided between multiple apps and the crafted experience of the museum, often to the detriment of the exhibit. Furthermore, there is an expectation on the visitor's part to be entertained, sometimes above all. The challenge museums face then is how to fulfill their mandates as stewards of information when neither the audience nor the digital medium is inclined to indulge them? In other words, is it possible to both educate *and* entertain and does it matter?

In 2018, Canadian Heritage began developing gamified mobile apps of Canada's Capital Region to test this very question. The apps are intended for discrete audiences, have specific themes, and have varied thematic approaches. They take advantage of certain features inherent to the smart phone – GPS, weather data, compass, clock – as well as features developed by Motive.io, the Vancouver gaming company with whom Canadian Heritage is collaborating. The games range from the simple to the complex. The audio tour of the National Holocaust Monument has a simple structure, akin to standard Tour Mate tours of an historic site. *By's House* is intended for families with children aged 7. The game assumes that children will lead the experience with some adult guidance. The premise is that Colonel By has completed the Rideau Canal, he must now build a house for his family. With the help of his two daughters, players follow geo-located clues to find the tools they need to build a house. Collecting all of the augmented reality tools – fully-researched and true to the period – leads players to the ruins of By's house in Majors

Hill Park in Ottawa. Once in the correct geolocation, players assemble the house to move in. Is Canadian Heritage fulfilling its mandate to have Canadians experience culture in this simple way? It is only through testing with the public and conducting audience research that one can know. One thing is certain however, *By's House* uses a similar interface to Pokemon Go and entices visitors to sites that might otherwise pass under their radar. It takes advantage of the players drive to collect items but does so with a purpose, to pay attention to an historic site.

Another app – *Prohibition* – is more ambitious in its storytelling and has presented a wide range of challenges to overcome including how to tell a story that takes place over many years, how to find a neutral character (neither criminal nor police), and how to avoid tarnishing any reputations. The game casts the user as a young journalist cutting his teeth on the local beat. The City Editor assigns him his first story – to report on the impact on Hull of prohibition in Ottawa. As the player follows leads triggered by geo-located clues, he collects facts for his story. Once sufficient facts have been collected, he files the story and gains experience points. He is promoted to more and more complicated stories with each one he files. While this game presents the obvious challenge of why would Canadian Heritage be telling a prohibition story, the benefits are significant. Through a digital platform, the game brings visitors to places they might not otherwise have visited but more importantly, permits the recreation of sites that no longer exist. Soundscapes, music, and voice actors create a mood that immerses the visitor in a time and place where only some physical vestiges remain. The medium permits the authoring of “personal stories” capturing the general experiences of Hull residents. The characters are fictionalized but the story is true. That the stories are reported by a gender-neutral journalist, who uncovers both salacious and socially relevant stories seems a small victory for the team developing the apps. Will the user be intrigued to learn more on the topic? Visitor testing will tell.

These apps are Canadian Heritage's first foray down this storytelling path. It may be the last. The team is hopeful however, that the lessons learned will not be lost. Visitors are intrigued by the stories. They are tickled by the use of AR and they appear to like the idea of learning in a more playful way. Striking the balance between education and entertainment is certainly tricky but if this is the direction visitors' interest is taking, then there is value in going along for the journey.

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