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Transmedia Story Telling and Alternate Reality Games in Museums – Promising Novelties or Unsuitable Gimmicks?

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Before the appearance of a virtual cyber world it could be said that our life, the connection of individuals and of the society to the world of things, occurred in *three closely intertwined, constantly changing realities* that are determined by place and time: the primary real everyday one, the secondary fictional one recombining elements (mainly physically) from the former (for instance in a museum), and the secondary personal recombining elements (intellectually) from the two others. We constantly move between those realities (Schärer, 2003, pp. 31-35).

Things as signs can be a sort of bridge between the realities. They always belong to more than one world, and in this light, museums themselves house realities other than those to which they themselves belong.

Davallon (1999), too, distinguishes between three realities in regard to the object on display: the real world it comes from, the synthetic world to which it belongs, and the utopian world it opens:

L'objet exposé se trouve à l'articulation de ces trois mondes: le monde réel d'où il vient, l'espace synthétique auquel il appartient et le monde utopique sur lequel il ouvre. D'où son statut paradoxal. Objet du monde réel, il réfère à ce qui se déroule dans ce monde (tout objet exposé [...] renvoie toujours à un usage dans son monde d'origine); il possède ainsi toujours une certaine profondeur pratique. Objet d'exposition, il est marqué de la raison de sa présence ici et participe à la création du monde utopique. La visite, à sa manière, répond aux gestes de séparation et de mise en scène: elle feuillette l'objet, elle le prend dans son réseau de langage; en constituant le monde utopique, elle en fait un matériau de langage et pose hors-champs et hors-langage le monde réel d'où venait l'objet (pp. 170-171).

In all three realities, the *man-thing relationship* is often determined by patterns of perception and interpretation; these patterns are influenced by language and by an unconscious and emotional dominance, especially in the absence of discourse and debate.

The overall real reality is the entire world of things; in the individual and societal man-thing relationship, the utilitarian function plays the major role.

The real (primary) reality as such cannot be musealized. The de-contextualization as an effect of the musealization process renders the utilitarian function of an object latent and changes its ascribed values; the object undergoes a re-evaluation.

The specific fictional reality refers to the state where things are musealized and re-contextualized, that is, they are physically and/or intellectually removed from the primary context of the real reality.

“Fictional” refers to an arrangement other than the primary context, although the location can be identical, as, for instance, with a restored Old Town. Of course, visitors will nonetheless experience this secondary reality as “real” (hence the term). It does not just refer to the museum as an institution (a part of the social real reality), but to the process of musealization in general.

Fictional reality is created through personal imagination that is through a personal reality and it in turn creates new personal realities. The museum visitor constantly measures the fictional reality found in the museum against the real world and the personal world.

The specific personal reality refers to the state where, based on individual biographies and social environments, people have a personal and unique relationship to objects which have been physically and/or intellectually removed from the primary (real reality) and secondary (fictional reality) context; ideal (especially emotional) values dominate.

The creation of a personal reality can be the result of a communication process (denotation) with objects as sign or, more often, a connotation outside the intended communication process, a kind of inner dialogue. The experience factor while visiting an exhibition is important in this regard.

Things can spark emotions (pleasure, worry, etc.), awaken memories, evoke knowledge and provoke thought; in doing so, they acquire a new dimension.

This refers to the individual and cultural/biographical aspect of the man-thing relationship; that is, what objects can “do” to people (move, activate) and what they cannot “do”, and not what they embody and communicate to people – something they could not achieve as mute, material entities.

The personal reality is the most open of the three realities as a person can act outside of all conventional rules; this reality therefore contains the most creative potential.

Transmedia Story Telling (TMS)

If we consider that the real and the fictional realities are both physical (things, people) and that the personal reality is virtual, we could, by adding the newly established cyber reality, create a *dichotomy physical/virtual*. *Transmedia Story Telling (TMS)* and Alternate Reality Games use our permanent and very often unconscious shift between the two realities to augment museum experience. They are interactive and try to combine the real and the virtual world (blurring the line between them), taking place in real-time (not like console games), and evolve according to the participants’ responses. Traditionally, there exists online information on an exhibition in the real museum world or a completely virtual “exhibition” on the screen only. Furthermore, virtual means are used to convey information in exhibitions.

What is exactly meant by TMS – a term created in the nineties? Henry Jenkins (2006), who popularised transmedia, writes:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story may be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction (pp. 97-98).

It is important to distinguish between the story itself and the media, taking into account that each medium has its specificities which influence the story.

It goes without saying that the museum can be integrated without any difficulty.

Other authors introduce different terms, such as

Digital Cultural Communication [for] the framework within which a cultural institution can engage in audience connection through community cocreation using new media platforms. [...] By drawing communities into the consumption and creation of digital content, cultural institutions [such as museums!] can take a proactive role in developing new literacy [i.e. digital skills] by enabling direct experience of content production and creating environments for community engagement (Russo & Watkins, 2007, p. 149).

It could be very interesting to invent TMS programmes and actions promoting a museum! They combine information and entertainment and correspond in this way to the modern museum visitor and his short attention span, who wants to be more active and to have more pleasure.

Phillips (2012) observes two different approaches to TMS in (American) transmedia: A West-Coast-style consisting of multiple big pieces of media: feature films, video games etc. where the stories are lightly interwoven. In contrast, East-Coast transmedia tend to be more interactive, more web-centric and make heavy use of social media; the plot is tightly woven between media (pp. 13-14).

She mentions similar terms that cannot be used in place of “transmedia” because their meaning is different. (Phillips, 2012, pp. 18-19) “Multimedia” refers to different media delivered together through computer (CD-ROMs). “Cross-media” means releasing the same content over multiple platforms. “Interactive fiction” describes text adventure and purely fictitious computer games. And finally, “Alternate Reality Games” is a subset of transmedia including direct communication with characters and other players or puzzles to solve problems collectively and to achieve a specific goal, using in some way the real world to interact with a fictional world and thus mixing up different realities. Since the whole action is a process, the authors never know where the story ends!

Although Transmedia Storytelling describes the phenomenon quite well, I would prefer a similar term: *Alternate Reality Narratives (ARN)*, since the fact of permanent alternation of realities is better expressed.

I don't deal with the commercial, advertising or charitable aspects of TMS/ARN or with their use as pedagogical tools in learning environments. I am concerned with the eventual profit museums could make from such new tendencies and how these approaches could be integrated into our museological theories.

But let's first look at two concrete examples! Since 2008 several projects of TMS have been launched in museums.

I don't consider pure entertainment and adventure games like "Who stole the Greek amphora?" where players receive hints through different media (web, mobile phones, newspapers etc.) and where they have to collaborate to be successful.

"Ghosts of a chance" (more linked to the museum life) was the first Alternate Reality Game hosted by a museum. It was created in 2008 in the context of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington (Ghosts of a chance, 2014).

The game offered both new and existing museum audiences in a novel way of engaging with the collection in its Luce Foundation Center for American Art, a visible storage facility that displays more than 3,300 artworks in floor-to-ceiling glass cases (Ghosts report, 2014).

The goal was to get people talking about the museum, to bring new audiences to it, and to encourage discovery.

The premise is that some of the artworks in the Luce Center collection have become haunted. Players have to find out who the ghosts are, which artworks are infected, and how to thwart the undead scourge and save the collection. Along the way, players will influence the story itself (Smithsonian, 2014).

They were also invited to create relevant artefacts dedicated later on to an exhibition.

The game was a success and the goals were achieved: We want to create a memorable experience that will make participants realize that art museums don't have to be quiet, passive experiences; they can be interactive, social and fun (Bath Goodlander, 2009, p. 17). Would the American Art Museum do another ARG? Definitely! It was incredibly fun – an interesting, challenging, and bizarre project to work on and I enjoyed every minute. The museum received great press around the event, both during and after it, our collections reached a wider audience, and our staff and visitors saw the museum in a new light (Bath Goodlander, 2009, p. 18).

Another example, just to mention it briefly, is "The Jewel of the Valleys", hosted by the National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and specially designed for schools. It aims to link history and technology and takes place in a past reality (Jewel of the valleys, 2014).

The game will revolve around a mysterious document discovered in the Museum's vaults, and will prompt students to analyze primary documents, as well as introduce them to Civil War-era communications technology. The game involves the invasion of Pennsylvania in 1863, but also many of the larger issues and experiences of the war, so it

fits well in many curricula, both PA and nationwide (Acwarproject, 2014).

“Transmedia Story Telling and Alternate Reality Games in Museums – Promising Novelties or Unsuitable Gimmicks?”

Our answer is – summarized – critically positive. But let’s have a more detailed approach from the viewpoint of the visitors, of the collection, of the institution, and with respect to the theme and to museology.

Visitors

The visitors, especially the younger ones, will highly appreciate such initiatives corresponding fully to their lifestyle, which is characterized by rapidity, virtuality, and playfulness. They are very familiar with social media. And even if they have never been in a museum, they will participate actively – if the story is good and if the museum offers specially trained collaborators for a personal follow-up! With such an experience, they may find out that the museum is not as boring as they imagined before. Since ARN do not affect or even transform the museum physically (apart from – maybe – some information in the entrance hall), traditional museum visitors are not disturbed and they can visit their museum as usual. For those who participate, ARN represent a real enrichment of museum experience. It is much more than a simple game for youngsters or Americans!

Do ARN represent a danger for the objects or the **collection** task of the museum? I don’t think so! The game may include specific observations of objects. Or visitors are asked to bring objects that can be shown in a specific exhibition or even be integrated into the museum’s collection. In any way the object orientation of the museum is reinforced.

Institution

Concerning the institution itself, it could be argued that the excellent reputation of – let’s say – a renowned National Fine Arts Museum could be affected, and that the museum may lose its credibility through the fact that it organizes a common game not deemed adequate for an upright and high-quality institution. That’s why the term “serious games” was created. (Falk Anderson, 2010)

To avert the risk of a bad reputation and to separate things well, the Smithsonian American Art Museum mentioned above decided to brand everything related to the “Ghosts of a Chance” game with the specific game logo:

This did not spoil the fiction for the players, but allowed us to let everybody know after the game exactly what museum-created content was ‘fake’.
(Bath Goodlander, 2009, p. 2)

This shows clearly that the positive effects largely prevailed. And not to forget the staff of the museum, ARN represent a new collective experience also for the collaborators, comparable in some way to the museum nights.

Theme

Concerning the theme, it is absolutely crucial to choose one that is closely linked with the museum and its mission. The main goal of ARN must be the promotion of the museum and its objects. I argue that it would not be adequate just to organize a game – as attractive (and serious) as it may be – that is not linked with the museum or at least with the local/regional “museums world” in a common activity. I defend the idea that it should not be possible to use ARN separately from the museum and that a museum visit must always be integrated. If well done, ARN are much more than a vogue; they can really contribute to a better promotion of the museum and its duties. Cybernetics don’t threaten the museum if they are adopted and integrated with intelligence, that means they should be exclusively in its service and never dominate it by gathering momentum.

How can ARN be interpreted museologically?

It is a new way to attract visitors, especially the younger generation. Is it really so different from older activities “exporting” the museum, too? There are many out-of-the-museum activities: Any museum publication allows strolling through the exhibitions at home; any film on an exhibition presents it at any time outside the museum; any virtual visit on the web offers direct access to the exhibition halls wherever you are, in real time, but also when the museum is closed.

What is then really new with ARN?

First, the story may go far beyond the usual information level in an exhibition. In this context, it is important to repeat what I just said before: The story should never become autonomous and separated from the museum’s topics. Second, the very active role of participants who integrate much more than when just reading a book or watching a film or when using the web just as a consumer. Third, the open ended action. Since “visitors” participate actively, nobody can foresee the evolution of the event. Every participant adds new elements influencing the ongoing story that is linear. Fourth, everything happens in real time only. Hence it is not possible to go back or to “correct” an issue.

And fifth – certainly the most important new issue – the complete blending of reality and fiction. It is simply no more possible to distinguish the two elements sharply. Participants/visitors are real persons acting in real time on a fictitious story happening in a real museum with invented actors – and so on!

Are reality and fiction really so clearly separated in a traditional museum?

At this point, an interesting (and provoking) question may arise: Are reality and fiction really so clearly separated in a traditional museum? Does it show any past reality? I think a majority of museum visitors believe so, since the objects are real; hence the story must be real, too! But it isn’t! The exhibition presents a fictitious world invented by the curator. I don’t neglect the importance of historical research at all, but nobody can prove the ultimate truth of its findings. That’s not a pity at all! It allows interesting discussions and controversial exhibitions.

And finally: Why not communicate such facts to our visitors? Alternate Reality Narratives could offer an excellent opportunity to do so!

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Abstract

Alternate Reality Games try to combine the real and the virtual world by interactive Transmedia Story Telling/Transmedia Narrative taking place in real-time and evolve according to the participants' responses. Traditionally, there is only online information on an exhibition in the real museum world or a completely virtual "exhibition" on the screen only. **Alternate Reality Narratives (ARN)** shift between the two realities. Since 2008 several projects have been launched in museums. Before the appearance of a virtual cyber world, it could be said that our lives took place in three different realities: the primary real everyday one, the secondary fictitious one recombining elements (mainly physically) from the former (for instance in a museum), and the secondary personal recombining elements (intellectually or physically) from the two others. We constantly move between those realities. If we consider that the real and fictitious realities are both physical (things, people) and that the personal reality is virtual, we could, by adding the cyber reality, create a dichotomy physical/virtual. Alternate Reality Narratives use our permanent and very often unconscious shift between the two realities to augment the museum experience. We discuss the title question in a museological context including theoretical considerations as well as practical aspects.

Résumé

Alternate Reality Games (des jeux alternant les réalités) combinent le monde réel et le monde virtuel par des narrations interactives utilisant différents médias. Ils se situent en temps réel et évoluent selon les réponses des participants. Traditionnellement il n'existe que des informations en ligne sur des expositions dans le monde réel des musées ou des « expositions » complètement virtuelles sur l'écran. *Alternate Reality Narratives (ARN)* bougent entre les deux réalités. Depuis 2008 plusieurs projets furent lancés dans des musées. Avant l'arrivée du cybermonde virtuel, on pouvait dire que la vie se passait dans trois réalités différentes : la réalité primaire quotidienne, la deuxième fictive recombinaut des éléments essentiellement physiques de la première (par exemple dans un musée), et la troisième, personnelle, recombinaut intellectuellement ou physiquement des éléments des deux autres. Nous bougeons constamment entre ces réalités. Considérant que les réalités réelle et fictive sont physiques (objets, personnes) et que la réalité personnelle est virtuelle nous pourrions créer, en ajoutant la cyber-réalité, une dichotomie physique/virtuelle. ARN utilisent notre va-et-vient permanent et très souvent inconscient entre les deux réalités pour augmenter l'expérience muséale. Nous discutons la question du titre dans un contexte muséologique incluant des considérations théoriques aussi bien que des aspects pratiques.