Fantastic Beasts and the Wonder of Nature juxtaposes imaginary specimens, like this Erumpent horn, with fantastic stories from the animal kingdom.

NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM LONDON PHOTO UNIT/LUCIE GOODAYLE

Fun with Purpose

A Framework for Sparking Behavioral Change in Exhibit Audiences

Christina Joy Ferwerda, Helen Divjak

Museum professionals are increasingly sensitive to visitors' varying motivations, expectations, and perspectives. Our improved awareness is the first step to creating visitor experiences that are more impactful and more enjoyable. Free-choice learning scholar John Falk and consulting agency Morris Hargreaves McIntyre are among those who have contributed to our improved understanding of museum audiences, carving out "visitor identities" and "cultural segments," respectively, which recognize a range of reasons people seek out, engage with, and return to cultural institutions.[1] Among the visitor motivations both acknowledge – but which is often undervalued by our colleagues in the field – is the powerful quest to have fun.

In 2017, the strategic consulting agency LaPlaca Cohen found in its tracking study, Culture Track (the largest tracking survey focused exclusively on the attitudes and behaviors of U.S. cultural consumers) that "having fun" is the single most significant factor motivating American consumers to visit cultural events and institutions, including museums.[2] In a follow-up study published in July of this year, which focuses specifically on how cultural consumers are responding to the COVID-19 crisis, LaPlaca Cohen and Slover Linett, an audience research and evaluation firm, found that respondents "seek a variety of qualities from different cultural experiences, but activities that are fun, lighthearted, and beautiful appeal most."[3]

Yet the 21st-century museum, committed to empowering or engaging its audiences, rarely employs fun in exhibitions – at least intentionally – to meet its core mission. Rather, based on a review of current scholarship, published visitor studies, and our own conversations with colleagues in the field, there appears to be an industry-wide disregard for fun as a legitimate strategy for communicating and connecting with audiences.

Eager to bridge the gap between what visitors want and what museums think visitors want and need, we explored how fun can be applied to exhibitions, particularly those addressing challenging topics that aim to affect visitor behavior. We spoke to colleagues in the United States and the United Kingdom, researched visitor attractions, and combed through 15 years of user studies and white papers published across adjacent fields. While more audience research is required, initial findings and observations suggest that fun reliably provokes visitor responses and can lead to positive associations with

Fig. 1.

The underwater tunnels in the *Sharks!* exhibition at the New York Aquarium transport visitors to the underwater realm.

exhibition content. Furthermore, when used purposefully and sensitively, fun opens a portal for emotional and intellectual engagement that may shift attitudes and even influence behaviors over time. Our "Framework for Fun" outlines what we've learned so far and offers strategies for purposefully injecting fun into exhibits.

Fun's Potential and Possibilities

Fun, of course, is highly subjective. One person's idea of fun is another's purgatory. In his 2016 book *FUN! What Entertainment Tells Us About Living a Good Life*, entertainment scholar Alan McKee defines fun in the broadest way possible: "pleasure without purpose."[4] Pleasure, according to McKee, is anything you desire doing – whether examining stamps under a microscope or playing an arcade game. While we agree that fun is necessarily pleasurable, we challenge McKee's assertion that fun is "without purpose." Rather, our decades of experience indicate that fun not only has purpose, but, when used intentionally, can also be one of the most rewarding experiences museums can facilitate for the public.

Our observations are supported by the work of Jan Packer, a research fellow and associate professor at University of Queensland, who focuses on motivations for learning in educational leisure settings. In her article "Learning for Fun," she argues that certain museum visitors purposefully seek out free-choice learning as a form of fun. She identifies four conditions that support this kind of learning: a sense of discovery, an appeal to the senses, the appearance of effortlessness, and choice.[5] Sociologists Gary Alan Fine and Ugo Corte use a similar "cluster concept" to define fun, characterizing it with several elements: humor, games, teasing, play, and adventure.[6] Their research also shows that small group bonds are reinforced by sharing a fun experience.

Building on their conclusions, we propose that social bonding through fun opens us up to others' ideas; being open to others' ideas is the first step in shifting mindsets and eventually behavior. However, behavioral change as a result of having fun in a museum is gradual; it doesn't always result in the kind of immediate visitor feedback we crave when trying to demonstrate impact and relevance. In his article "Doing Identity Work in Museums," museum studies scholar Jay Rounds proposes that "transformative" experiences in museums are exceedingly rare, and that visitors are building capacity for future identity (and therefore behavioral) shifts, which are incremental.[7] If we accept that changes in visitor behavior will take time, we can better harness fun's potential, in exhibitions as well as in programming.

Audiences Want Fun. Museums Want Impact. Who is Delivering Both?

Zoos, aquariums, and to some extent, natural history museums, have long promoted themselves as a "fun day out." But the climate crisis, among other environmental threats, has prompted these institutions to double-down on their missions; they are not only experts on wildlife and nature, but advocates for wildlife and nature. Their role now extends beyond the display and study of nature to influencing human attitudes and behaviors that will favorably impact wildlife and the environment. The Association of Zoos & Aquariums specifically calls out a commitment to "advancing animal welfare, public engagement and the conservation of wildlife" in its mission statement.[8]

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY/JULIE LARSEN MAHER

Taking an intentional approach to investigating fun and its connection to exhibitions and conservation, Chicago's Brookfield Zoo conducted an exit study in 2013 that included questions to gauge visitors' perceptions of fun.[9] Visitors reported "fun" as the excitement and enjoyment of being with live animals. The zoo's report cites earlier studies that show viewing animals results in positive emotional responses, along with feelings of connectedness to nature; connectedness to nature is correlated to concern for the natural world. This was the only published audience research we encountered that attempted to document what modern zoos seek to provide: fun for visitors and impact for wildlife.

Sarah Hezel, Vice President of Design & Exhibits at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, posited in a conversation with us that to be effective, exhibition design has to be relevant and meaningful. Fun, she noted, is a "by-product," rather than the outright driver, of exhibitions that open our minds and hearts to the natural world. She cited the two tunnels in the New York Aquarium's exhibition, *Ocean Wonders: Sharks!*, which she worked on while at the Wildlife Conservation Society, as both an effective and fun exhibit (fig. 1). It succeeds in connecting people to nature but is also fun because its beauty transports visitors to the underwater realm.[10]

Marie Hobson, Audience Research & Insight Manager at London's Natural History Museum (NHM), spoke with us about how her institution is deliberately embracing fun.[11] Their 2020 "Advocate Engagement Model" defines a new approach that specifically identifies "fun social learning" as a way to connect visitors with nature.[12] The model, which aims to empower audiences to become advocates for the planet, was influenced by biodiversity loss communication literature, including *Behavior Change for Nature*, a 2019 report produced by Rare's Center for Behavior & the Environment and grounded in behavioral economics and psychology. The report suggests focusing on nonconscious drivers of behavior, such as emotion and social context, to protect the planet. The first step in their toolkit of success strategies: "harness positive emotions."[13] By creating fun spaces for visitors to enjoy themselves, the NHM hopes to trigger positive emotions that inspire people to care for the natural world and act on its behalf.

THE LIMINAL SPACE/ASHLEY BINGHAM

Fig. 2. *The Departure Lounge* took over an empty shopfront at London's Lewisham Shopping Centre.

THE LIMINAL SPACE/ASHLEY BINGHAM

Fig. 3. *The Departure Lounge* posters introduced facts about death and dying using playful text and imagery.

Hobson cited the NHM's exhibition *Fantastic Beasts and the Wonder of Nature* (due to open in May 2020, but postponed due to COVID-19) as their first installation to incorporate elements of this new, fun-forward approach. The exhibition, a play on J. K. Rowling's popular 2001 guidebook and 2016 Warner Bros. film, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, playfully compares the imaginary Erumpent's elaborate mating dance to that of the peacock spider, highlighting the spectacular qualities found in our natural environment. This alignment of J. K. Rowling's magical realm with information about real-world extraordinary creatures culminates with a clear call to action, along with information about the positive impact that action will have on the natural world (intro image).

The NHM's recognition that fun sits at the intersection of worthiness and experience, and that it has the potential to transform passive observers into active

advocates, illustrates our earlier point: fun is a motivator. Instead of a by-product of effective design for families, fun can be an intentional strategy employed to attract visitors of all ages, hold their attention, and urge them to think and act differently.

Using fun in exhibitions to showcase our natural world and motivate people to preserve it is one thing. Using fun as an intentional strategy to tackle sensitive or controversial content is quite another. "Fun is always a dirty word," said Amanda Gore, director at The Liminal Space, a British firm that specializes in designing experiences around challenging issues like aging, abortion, and death.[14] In our interview with her, she commented that the use of the word "fun" to describe an exhibition's interpretive design and user experience can imply lack of regard for a controversial topic; "it's about maintaining respect. Fun sounds frivolous." Yet, she conceded, "we would be stupid to ignore that it is what people want."

In 2019, The Liminal Space, along with London's Academy of Medical Sciences, created *The Departure Lounge*, a pop-up exhibition intended to empower people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to talk about end-of-life care. Recognizing that a somber approach to death – drab colors, timid innuendo – wouldn't attract the intended audience, the design team took another direction. They selected London's lively Lewisham Shopping Centre as the venue; used bright, bold colors; and employed the intrepid metaphor of a holiday departure lounge, a place most people associate with a sunny vacation (fig. 2).

Gore was clear that creating a "fun" space was not the design team's goal. However, the exhibition was intentionally upbeat. It placed playful euphemisms for death (like "kicked the bucket" and "pushing up daisies") against cheerful, travel-inspired photography (fig. 3). Visitors said the aesthetic had a positive impact on their experience. "It's kind of got a happy feel to it because of the color and the design," commented one visitor. Another noted, "I expected it to be sadder, but there were many happy endings." According to the summative evaluation, the cheery look-and-feel not only got people in the door but also increased dwell times and extended exposure to the exhibition's core messages.[15]

Equally important was the design team's attention to its target audience: local shoppers who had little familiarity with end-of-life care. Nick Hillier, Director of Communications at the Academy of Medical Sciences, explained that they wanted to stage the exhibition where "people are busy living their lives," and "draw them in, and give them the facts."[16] On-site facilitators were trained to converse with visitors and develop interpersonal connections. Due partly to the connections fostered by the guides, the evaluation concluded, *The Departure Lounge* "succeeded in engaging a diverse audience in talking about death and dying."[17] The Liminal Space's attention to audience motivations in a busy commercial space, reliance on facilitated interpersonal connection, and light-hearted aesthetic turned what could have been a dour exhibition attended by few into an popular pop-up that cracked open crucial conversations around death and dying.

A Framework for Fun with Purpose

Whether creating advocates for our planet or inspiring shoppers to improve end-of-life care, fun has the potential to provide visitors with enjoyment and shift their mindsets.

Fun is the "hook" that attracts visitors, the "cushion" that softens challenging topics, and the "glue" that increases dwell times and repeat visits. The following Framework for Fun outlines critical elements that make fun a successful tool for motivating change, however incremental.

1. **Fun begets fun.** Model the fun you want others to have. A sense of humor and a smile soften tension and bond the design team together. Nick Hillier offered that the design process with The Liminal Space had been undeniably fun and seeped into the end result. "There were a lot of smiles," he recalled. Design teams – clients and consultants alike – must make a concerted effort to face their shared task with optimism and humor, especially when tough topics and challenging circumstances can weigh us down with anxiety and stress. This is not to say that the design process will be all fun all of the time – blood, sweat, and sometimes tears still required!

2. **Prototype, prototype, prototype.** Know your audience; create an experience that is culturally specific and age appropriate. One person's idea of fun is not like another's, and familiarity with our audiences' needs, preferences, and boundaries allows us to employ humor, metaphor, play, and adventure without crossing a line. As with any exhibition, understanding your target audience is the key to creating fun experiences that are specific and meaningful to their lived experience.

3. **Provide a safety belt.** Fun captures the sense of adventure that comes with not knowing the outcome: the thrill of spontaneity, but only in an environment that is safe, physically and ideologically, where visitors can surrender to that joy. Strolling through *Sharks!* at the New York Aquarium, for example, offers the thrill of being close to feared predators in a safe and trustworthy setting. Therefore, when creating experiences that feel welcoming, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements and inclusive language are a baseline. We must strive for exhibitions that create a feeling of trust – and in particular, we must consider the needs of communities who have been marginalized and even harmed by museums. Bungee jumping may be fun, but only within trusted safety regulations and with a reputable company.

4. **Make it human.** Provide opportunities for visitors to connect with their fellow humans. Use compassionate, confident, and fun-at-heart explainers to support the fun, and to energize and humanize the experience. Curate content that focuses on human stories. Create opportunities for person-to-person exchange. Fun brings people together, but the human connection is what holds their attention and provides necessary depth of information.

5. **Fuel fun with facts.** Build the experience around facts. While fun is fun, authentic content, like

the peacock spider's mating dance or the personal story of losing a parent, provides revelatory moments of depth and understanding. We, museums, have the "stuff" – the objects, the knowledge, the venue, the credibility – that is the evidence to motivate change. Fun, alone, is not enough.

Conclusion

Fun can be a powerful motivator for audiences and an effective conduit for museums to communicate complex topics and ideas, but it is one strategy among many. While most visitors to cultural attractions – as LaPlaca Cohen's studies assert – may be looking for fun, not all visitors want or expect fun, and they certainly don't want it all of the time. Moreover, fun may not be applicable to all contexts and all stories. For example, memorials like New York's National September 11 Memorial and Museum or Alabama's Memorial to Peace and Justice are sacred spaces for collective mourning and reflection. Humorous or playful exhibits might not only be distasteful in these contexts, but could distract from those institutions' core purpose.

However, our research indicates that fun can be an effective strategy for engaging visitors with tough topics, and it warrants more consideration within the field. Exhibitions can provide the fun we crave in our lives, and its presence does not diminish our capacity to think seriously and deeply about the troubling issues of our day. On the contrary, fun is a valuable outlet for the stress and anxiety these issues produce. Fun triggers creativity, unexpected solutions, and unanticipated breakthroughs. Now, more than ever, when providing a "fun day out" feels like a mission all its own, we shouldn't underestimate fun's power to uplift and to inspire action.

Christina Joy Ferwerda is an independent museum consultant.
christina.ferwerda@gmail.com
Helen Divjak is Interpretive Planner at Thinc Design in New York City.
hdivjak@gmail.com

1 John Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, Left Coast Press, 2009), 50–51; "Cultural Segments," Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, accessed July 28, 2020, https://mhminsight.com/culture-segments.
2 *Culture Track '17*, LaPlaca Cohen and Kelton Global, accessed July 29, 2020, https://2017study.culturetrack.com/home.
3 *Culture + Community in a Time of Crisis*, LaPlaca Cohen and Slover Linett, July 7, 2020, 23, https://culturetrack.com/research/covidstudy/. N.B. We recognize the limitation of this study, and the fact that respondents tended to be older, white, and affluent, and therefore not representational of the general American public.
4 Alan McKee, *FUN! What Entertainment Tells Us About Living a Good Life* (London: Pelgrave McMillan, 2016): chap. 3, Kindle.
5 Jan Packer, "Learning for Fun: The Unique Contribution of Educational Leisure Experiences," *Curator* 49, no. 3 (2006): 329–344.
6 Gary Alan Fine and Ugo Corte, "Group Pleasures: Collaborative Commitments, Shared Narrative, and the Sociology of Fun," *Sociological Theory* 35, no. 1 (March 2017): 64–86.
7 Jay Rounds, "Doing Identity Work in Museums," *Curator* 49, no. 2 (2006), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.2006.tb00208.x.
8 "Strategic Plan," Association of Zoos & Aquariums, accessed July 29, 2020, https://www.aza.org/strategic-plan.
9 Jerry F. Luebke and Jennifer Matiasek, "An Exploratory Study of Zoo Visitors' Exhibit Experiences and Reactions," *Zoo Biology* 32, no. 4, https://doi.org/10.1002/zoo.21071.
10 Sarah Hezel, email interview with authors, April 6, 2020.
11 Marie Hobson, Zoom interview with authors, April 2, 2020.
12 Natural History Museum, London, "Advocate Engagement Model" (unpublished study, 2020).
13 "Behavior Change for Nature: A Behavioral Science Toolkit for Practitioners," *Behavioral Insights and Rare*, April 4, 2019, https://www.bi.team/publications/behavior-change-for-nature-a-behavioral-science-toolkit-for-practitioners/.
14 Amanda Gore, Zoom interview with authors, April 3, 2020.
15 Emily Scott-Dearing and Emma Pegram, *The Departure Lounge, 11th May–7th June 2019 Evaluation Report* (London: Academy of Medical Sciences, 2019): 27–35, https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/43672742.
16 Nick Hillier and Emma Pegram, Zoom interview with authors, March 26, 2020.
17 Scott-Dearing and Pegram interview, 15.