

## CSI: The Experience at Discovery Times Square

by Eva Sandler, Ellen Snyder-Grenier, and David Wells

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CSI: The Experience was developed by the Ft. Worth Museum of Science and History with support from CBS Consumer Products and The National Science Foundation. A traveling version is touring science centers in the United States. Two other versions, called “semi permanent” by the museum, are managed by a private company, Event Marketing Services, and will not travel in this country. One of these is at the MGM in Las Vegas and the other is at Discovery Times Square. Ft. Worth Museum sources informed us that the content and exhibits of all three versions are identical with the only differences being in lighting, wall covering, and other non-substantive design elements. The version critiqued here is the one in New York City. The Editor.

### Un-Discovery Learning at Discovery Times Square: An Exhibition Critique of CSI: The Experience by Eva Sandler

Entering the doors of Discovery Times Square and ushered through a dark maze of conjoining Hollywood-esque studios, I found myself at the center of crime and intrigue: *CSI: The Experience*, an exhibition based on the hit “Crime Scene Investigation” television series. After having a photograph taken of myself in a faux bulletproof CSI vest, I was led to yet another room, where I watched a video briefing from Gil Grissom, the fictional former head of the Las Vegas CSI unit. Addressing his guests, Mr. Grissom explained the intended goal for this commercialized effort: to “excite you

about the way that science and the law come together—and maybe even inspire you to become a professional in the field.” Unfortunately, this message felt more like indoctrination than an invitation for meaningful exploration. With a degree of healthy skepticism, I wondered if *CSI: The Experience* would provide the visceral or intellectual excitement that might inspire me to pursue a career that involves working intimately with dead bodies.

Though the video briefing and additional screen-based components may have been intended to encourage a deeper form of engagement beyond that of a TV show spectator, they did not provide fodder for an inquiring mind. Rather, at times it seemed that the exhibition’s attempt at a do-it-yourself learning approach had been sidelined in favor of showcasing the advertised “dazzling special effects.” The interactive technology did not place me in the analytical mindset of a forensic scientist; but what did compel my investigation were the exhibition’s less complicated, object-based components, which evoked a sense of mystery.

After receiving my assignment to one of three crime scene scenarios, “A House Collided,” I was handed a CSI Report sheet and led to the scene of the injury, where I found the victim (a.k.a. “Vincent Lansing”), a blonde mannequin, hunched over the wheel of a Ford that had crashed into a living room. Though, thankfully, the scene was far from authentic and amusingly reminiscent of a wax museum installation, I was immediately drawn in to the case because I was actually given something to do. Looking around the sad tableau I noted the upturned, framed

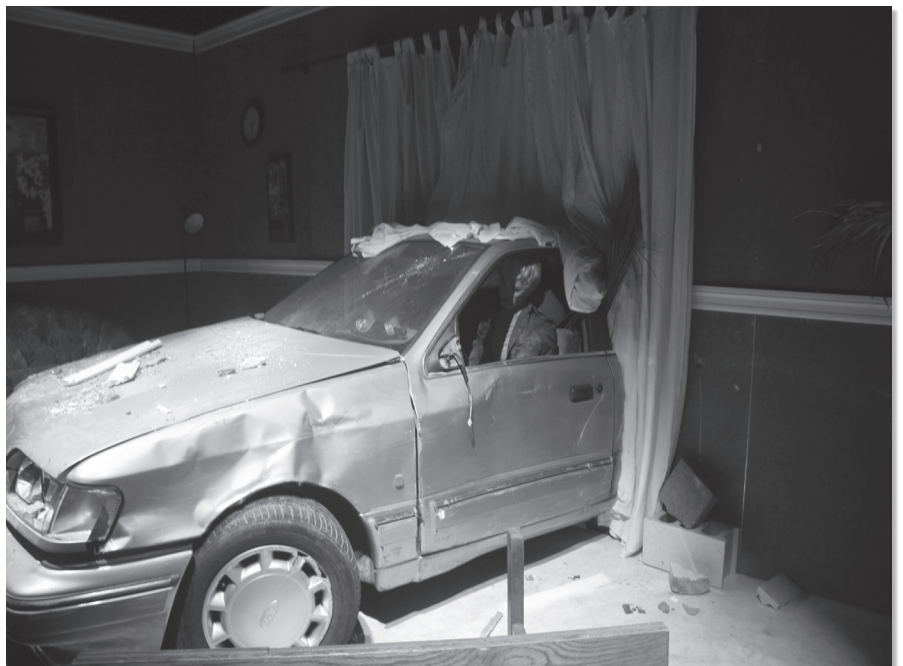
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family photographs on the media console, the shabby, bloodstained couch, and the plastic, partially consumed pizza. In a diagram on the CSI Report, I mapped the pieces of information that were beginning to present themselves, and as I probed for clues my imagination naturally worked to bring the scenario to life.

As I continued my investigation at the successive forensic lab stations, the series of computer activities did not further this sense of curiosity. While these tools offered a glimpse into the technology currently utilized by real-life scientists, they did not invite the visitor to look critically at the presented data. For example, at the Fingerprint Lab I was merely required to compare digitized fingerprints to find a match for those found at the scene of the crime. As an adult for whom most exhibitions are experienced in a rigidly prescribed manner, any opportunity for self-guided discovery is a welcome novelty, but this was denied to me. These exhibition features merely offered the “illusion” of inviting visitors to form their own conclusions.

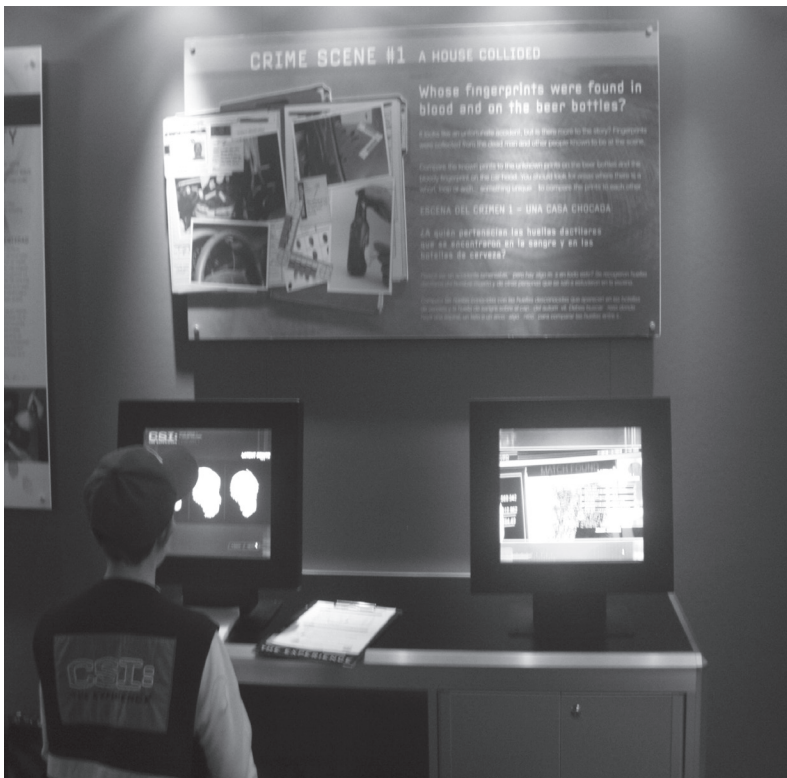
Following the paper trail in my role as Crime Scene Investigator, each new piece of evidence did not create a visceral picture of the scene of the crime, but taken together they did begin to assume other meanings. The combination of displayed photographs and fabricated artifacts was used to convey a story about each character, but these objects acquired a deeper significance for me because of their familiarity: from a well-worn New Balance sneaker to an overstuffed wallet, each object reminded me of the symbolic artifacts of my own life. What intrigued

me was the idea of examining my own personal belongings in this manner, through an unspoken process of listening to the stories that they might tell me about myself.



*Car crash crime scene. Photo by David Wells.*

The exhibition media also attempted a dramaturgical breaking of the fourth wall, offering visitors an illusory sense of observing the clues left by others alongside “direct” interactions with the characters themselves. In the autopsy room, where images of organs were projected on a mannequin laid on an “examination table,” a doctor on a screen explained how the autopsy revealed the grisly cause of Vincent’s death: a blow to the head. I was frustrated when this information was fed to me, not only because I felt that my own investigative abilities had been undermined, but



Trying to figure out whose finger prints were at the scene of the crime proved to be easier than expected. Photo by David Wells.

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What intrigued me was the idea of examining my own personal belongings ... through an unspoken process of listening to the stories that they might tell me about myself.

because I knew the answer could not be self-constructed anyway. Albeit friendly in their demeanor, these on-screen professionals who addressed me throughout my investigation had merely emphasized a false sense of transparency between those behind the exhibition and the visitor.

The concluding stations further reinforced a forced attempt to offer visitors an impression of relating to real-world crime solvers. At Grissom's "office," which was lined with Frankensteinian glass cases displaying detective chotchkies, I was invited to pose for a photo behind Grissom's desk. This role-play could have feasibly offered a fun, hands-on educational opportunity if the supervising staff member had prompted a conversation about my investigation, but instead the aim for this station was simply to offer visitors another souvenir of their visit (for a mere \$20). Leaving the office, a final computer interactive asked that I identify the obvious instigator, subsequently congratulating me as "Rookie of the year." Though bestowed the title of Rookie Investigator, I had merely been positioned in the role of a

student who ineffectually attempts to unearth some hidden curriculum.

While many visitors may have found the exhibition's media appealing because of their prior familiarity with technology, being continuously spoken to through screens did not automatically promote a sense of relatedness. I did not leave *The Experience* feeling inspired to "become a professional in the field," but I did find true inspiration in the exhibition's effortless, material elements that offered an experience of my own reality.

## TV, Science, and Commercialism: *CSI: The Experience* By Ellen M. Snyder-Grenier

It was crazily crowded at Discovery Times Square, New York City. After waiting in a long line to buy tickets, I was in another long line waiting to enter *CSI: The Experience*, an exhibition based on the popular CBS TV franchise. (Interestingly, the line was far longer than the one for *Dead Sea Scrolls: Life & Faith*, which promised a view of the Ten Commandments.) After about 45 minutes, a group of us were handed clipboards with blank crime reports, and ushered in—to another line, where a photographer took pictures of each "agent team."

After the photo op, we were led into a darkened room to watch a video introduction. As the *Who's Who Are You* played (a great way to get the adrenalin pumping), the TV show's creator, Anthony E. Zuiker, appeared on a screen to welcome us. Then a real-life forensic scientist briefly explained the science behind CSI, and actor William

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Petersen, in the guise of the show's lead investigator, Gil Grissom, laid out the premise. We'd see one of three crime scenes, then use clues in the scene to solve the crime. "Keep an open mind," he warned; "remember, the dead can't speak for themselves. Listen to what the evidence is saying."

As we entered "our" crime scene, we saw the lifeless body of a waitress named Penny, sprawled out in an alley. There was a tire tread across her torso. A ripped photo of her and baggie with white powder lay beside her. You could have heard a pin drop as we all recorded the scene on our crime reports.

#### **Popular Culture as Entry Point**

People seemed genuinely engaged, and it's not surprising. Developed as a traveling show by the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History along with CBS Consumer Products, CSI, and the National Science Foundation, *CSI: The Experience* is just what its promotional material promises: "an immersive, interactive forensic science exhibit related to the hit TV series that invites people to use real science to solve hypothetical crimes." I'm a firm believer in using popular culture to engage audiences with big ideas, and I think that using a hit television series as an entry point is brilliant. It means that there is a huge,



A close look at some of the tools used by a CSI investigator. Photo by David Wells.



The autopsy exhibit, in which the victim's organs are projected onto a mannequin. Photo by David Wells.

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existing audience (57 million viewers a week, according to the show) with a built-in sense of the subject matter and an affinity for the series' characters.

"I wanted people to feel like they took the next step from television, which is having a hands-on experience," series creator Zuiker explained in an interview. "It far surpasses just one medium, into an educational medium. If TV can do that, then we've done something special" (DeLeon, 2007).

Although I am not a scientist, it seemed to me that popular-TV-show-as-inspiration did not mean science light. Looking at the related website ([csiexhibit.com](http://csiexhibit.com)), it is clear that the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History put serious thought into the exhibition. It has a clearly articulated target audience (age 12 to adult), mission, and goals (chief among them advancing "critical thinking skills through forensic investigation, scientific inquiry, and technology" and promoting "public awareness of modern advances in

forensic science"), as well as an impressive group of scholarly advisors. The end product is a great blend of science with intriguing stories (the three different forensic scenarios), practiced storytellers (the TV show cast), an engaging approach (working through a puzzle), and big payoff (solving a crime).

### Testing the Evidence

After visiting the crime scene, we were sent into two main areas (more later), which were divided into smaller "labs": digital evidence; latent prints; impression evidence; toxicology; forensic entomology; and forensic biology/DNA. The labs (large, black cubicles, sometimes divided by shelving with unidentified bottles and equipment) generally featured: 1) an activity paired with a large text panel, which provided the actual information needed to fill out your crime report; 2) an informational video about the general subject, presented by real-life scientists and show cast members; and 3) a variety of informational, bilingual (English/

Perhaps most jarring was the recurring reminder of the experience's commercial aspect: not just the pricey ticket cost, but the moneymaking opportunities that were squeezed in at every turn....

Spanish) text panels that addressed related topics.

Perhaps not surprisingly, visitors focused almost exclusively on the activities that would give them answers for their crime reports, bypassing the videos and informational text panels. In many ways, that was a shame; they provided a wealth of information about forensic science. However, the activities—some were computer-based, others were tactile and mechanical—did provide solid opportunities for learning. They also seemed appropriate for a target audience of those 12 and up: not too hard, and not too easy (at least not for me!). And, as we tested assumptions—for example, did the tire tread across Penny's torso *really* mean she'd been killed when she was run over by a car?—we exercised our critical thinking skills.

After visiting the labs, there was a trip to the medical examiner (including an autopsy, in which the victim's organs are projected onto a prostrate mannequin—very clever) and to lead investigator Gil Grissom's office to review the case and form a hypothesis. Lastly, you answer a series of multiple-choice questions, based on your findings, at touch screens. Feedback tells you where you were wrong and right, and the science behind the solutions.

### **The Challenges of a Commercial Venue**

As an observer, the best thing for me about *CSI: The Experience* was the sense of excitement and discovery visitors seemed to have as they followed clues, participated in activities, filled out crime reports, looked and compared,

and talked to each other about what they were seeing and what it might mean. Arguably, given the extent of video, computer interaction, and text, much of it could easily have been developed as an online exhibition (and in fact, the website features an online counterpart). But what would have been missing was the real sense of engagement and collaboration, and the all-important conversation.

To me, the downside of the experience has less to do with the exhibition than the challenges of installing shows at varied sites, and in particular, the New York City venue: Discovery Times Square, which bills itself as “More Than a Museum.” (I'm not exactly sure what they mean by the tagline, but I think I get it; located in New York City's entertainment hub—Times Square—where it must compete with myriad attractions for visitors' leisure dollars, it needs to banish any thought that this might be traditional or static.)

Discovery Times Square is extremely crowded. True, I was there Christmas week, when schools are closed and tourists are in town, but long lines, if Yelp reviews can be believed, are commonplace. Although they are arguably good advertising, and it can be fun to talk with your fellow line-mates, it can be frustrating to wait, especially with children in tow. (My ticket guaranteed entrance into the exhibition within thirty minutes of its stamped time; while I realize that is not a guarantee of a half-hour window, I ended up waiting almost an hour to get into the experience.)

Among all the text panels that elaborated on forensic science, certainly there was room for some critical self-examination: how closely does the show itself represent real forensic work?

## What's "real"? What's for sale?

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### References:

De Leon, K. (July 25, 2007). Show creator talks about the 'CSI' experience. BuddyTV. Retrieved December 27, 2011 from <http://www.buddytv.com/articles/csi/show-creator-talks-about-the-c-8633.aspx>.

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Another problem is the physical space and arrangement. The exhibition was extremely dark (perhaps an effort to mask the warehouse feel of the space?) which often made it difficult to read signage and text. And although the crime report prompts helped me to understand what "order" I should pursue, the darkness, along with a warren-like spatial arrangement, made it hard to get oriented.

Perhaps most jarring was the recurring reminder of the experience's commercial aspect: not just the pricey ticket cost, but the moneymaking opportunities that were squeezed in at every turn, the kind that are commonly found at theme parks, themed restaurants—or just blocks away at Madame Tussauds' wax museum: taking your photograph when you enter; again in Grissom's office; getting a certificate of completion—all available for purchase. At the end of the experience, you find yourself in a gift shop filled with CSI merchandise, with Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition souvenirs and the Cake Boss Café (a tie-in to another popular TV show) just beyond.

What's "real"? What's for sale? I realize that museum photo ops and merchandise sales are not all that unusual, but I think I was more sensitive to the hard sell because of the nature of the exhibition itself, which uses a fictional, for-profit, multimillion-dollar television franchise to deliver a message. It reminded me that nowhere in the exhibition had there been any exploration of the line between television and real life. As Robert Shaler, director of the forensic science program at Pennsylvania State University points out, "The inaccuracies in these shows have to do with stretching the science beyond

what normally occurs, or taking computer graphics and making science do something it can't" (Stanton, 2009). It seemed to me that establishing the veracity of the science presented on the show was pretty key. Among all the text panels that elaborated on forensic science, certainly there was room for some critical self-examination: how closely does the show itself represent real forensic work?

All in all, though, the exhibition did a great job of doing what the museum set out to do: use a popular TV show to engage in real science, encourage critical thinking, and promote awareness of advances in forensics. Although I am not a CSI fan, I found myself fascinated by the advances in "reading" the dead (and I don't think I'll ever look at flies in quite the same way). Did the things that I noticed—the venue's crowding, darkness, spatial arrangement, and overt pitches to buy things—matter to other visitors? It's hard to say. Perhaps, in the end, it only reinforced the "experience" aspect, making it fit more seamlessly into the bustling, commercial nature of New York City's Times Square.

### **CSI: The Experience—Agent J8UTM6 Reporting for Duty By David Wells**

CSI is one of the most popular shows on television. With millions of viewers each week, it dominates its time slot and shows no sign of waning. I am not one of those viewers, but I am an educator at the New York Hall of Science, which recently developed a forensic science kit for schools to use in their classrooms. I'm also a big fan of CSI's



Taking a look inside the victim at the autopsy table and learning what really happened. Photo by David Wells.

theme song, *Who Are You*, the title track off the Who's 1978 release. For these reasons, I decided to check out *CSI: The Experience* at the Discovery Center Times Square.

Before my visit, I investigated the Discovery Center website, which featured a video compilation and a brief description of the exhibition. I was delighted at the prospect of playing the role of a crime scene investigator. Upon entering the building on 226 West 44th Street, the former home of the *New York Times*, I instantly felt the history. The space was wide open, and the walls were covered by larger than life graphic images of the exhibitions on view. With my ticket in hand, I approached the "More Than A Museum" employee dressed as a CSI agent and received my assignment: "Crime Scene #1: A House Collided."

My excitement was palpable as they asked me—the latest recruitment in the world of forensic science—to take my agent ID

photo and gave me a CSI vest and crime report. Then, I was led into a briefing room and greeted by a video hosted by Gil Grissom, a forensic entomologist character from *CSI: Las Vegas*. He explained that forensic science is where science meets the law, and his desire was to inspire me to join his profession. He described crime scenes as puzzles while emphasizing that, "If it's not in the report, it didn't happen!"

His statements rang in my head as I entered the crime scene and saw a beige Ford that had smashed through a living room wall. The person in the driver's seat was dead, and the room was in disarray. Unfortunately, I couldn't get too close to the crime scene because of a barrier. How was I supposed to put together the puzzle when I couldn't access all the pieces? Still, I walked back and forth observing as much as I could, and started jotting notes all over the crime report.

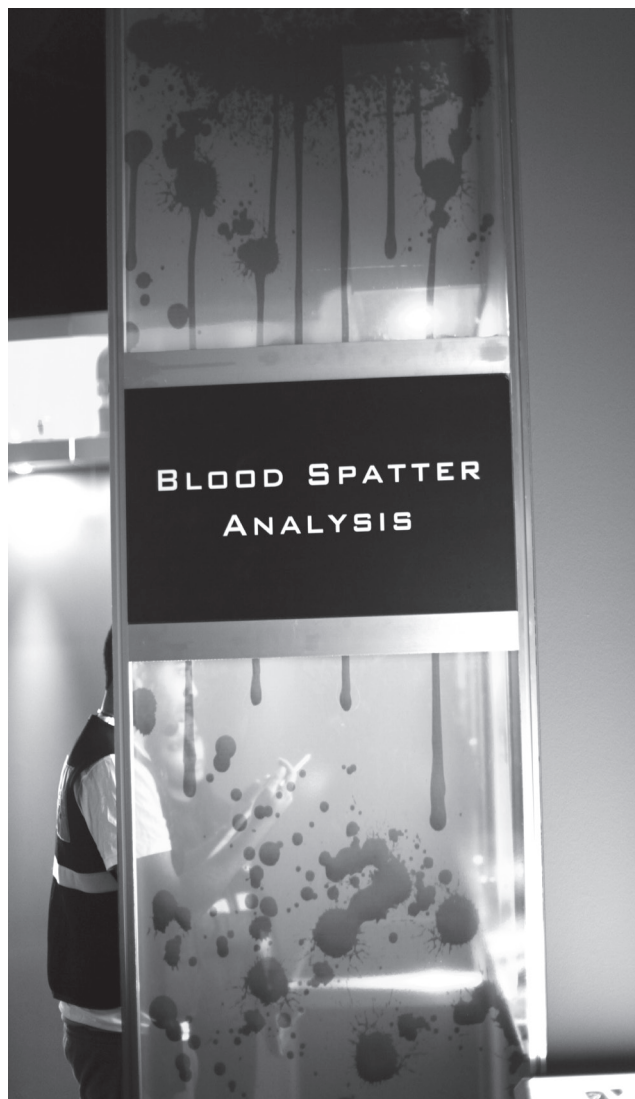
Next, I headed into Lab 1, focused on

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*Visitors watch a video and discover the process behind blood spatter from a forensic scientist. Photo by David Wells.*

fingerprinting. I sat down at the computer to process the fingerprints from the crime scene and was impressed by the eight language options it offered. I quickly discovered that the set of fingerprints I had didn't match those of anyone known to be at the crime scene. As I continued through the next two areas, "Impression Evidence" and "Trace Evidence," I noticed a theme emerging in the exhibits: graphically pleasing, easily navigable computer interactives that guided me down a path that required no thought and yielded only one possible result.

I started asking myself, "Could forensic science really be this easy? Is this close to an experience I would have as a forensic scientist?" My intuition told me no. Originally, my excitement was fueled

by the challenge of putting the pieces of the puzzle together and nailing the perpetrator, but the more I interacted with the exhibits the more I realized that a lot of the work would be done for me.

When I entered Lab 2, the first stop was Toxicology where I would find out if there were any toxins in the victim's blood. I was asked to perform a simple image matching activity by sliding a piece of plexi-glass underneath other toxicology reports until I found its match. Wow!

Forensic toxicology was revolutionized in the 1830s when James Marsh developed a test that could identify traces of arsenic, a popular poison at the time, in the blood of a victim. I am pretty certain when I sat down at the toxicology desk and

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accomplished this too-simple task, I heard James Marsh moaning in his grave.

After that, the Forensic Biology station provided me with the name and DNA of the victim's brother and informed me that he was driving drunk, smashed through the wall of his brother's house and killed him. Then he placed his dead brother in the driver's seat hoping to get away scot-free. Little did he know, an omniscient computer would reveal everything he had done.

Just as I was writing the soon-to-be convicted murderer's name on my report I heard a voice say, "This is awesome!" I followed the voice to the Medical Examiners station and watched as a projection on a mannequin's chest displayed steps in the autopsy of the victim, while a doctor explained all the revealing details. This was the most visually successful and interesting exhibit in the show.

Throughout the exhibition, I found the signage to be well written, engaging and informational. I learned about Edmond

Locard, the godfather of forensic science. He developed the Locard Exchange Principle stating that the criminal always leaves something behind and takes something away from the scene of a crime—a principle that no doubt changed the world of crime investigation. I also read about different kinds of blood splatter and about the FBI's Integrated Automated Finger Print Identification System (IAFIS), which has the criminal history of millions of individuals.

In the last room, I sat down at the computer and entered my report. Gil Grissom congratulated me, and the CSI team emailed my official *CSI: The Experience* diploma, accrediting me—Agent J8UTM6—as a Crime Scene Investigator. As I stood up to leave, I heard a fellow investigator in his mid 40's say, "I admit, it was worth paying the 60 bucks to get in." While I found it to be an intriguing experience, I didn't agree with him. *CSI: The Experience* is more a promotion for the show than a peek into the field of forensic science, and as a result it fell short of my expectations. ✨