



Authority and Meaning-Making in the Digital Era

by Barbara Cohen-Stratyner

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What are the connections among current discussions on museum authority, the concept of meaning-making, and the impact that new technologies have on individual and institutional authority? This article will begin with a look at traditional narratives and meaning-making and then examine current museum practices that are similar to player-determined on-line experiences. It will analyze those practices in two recent art exhibitions with popular narrative structures that claim institutional authority. All were viewed in New York, but are scheduled to travel and have substantive on-line representation.

The Authority of the Familiar Narrative

Nineteenth and early 20th century museums developed exhibition structures based on narrative forms with which their audiences were familiar. The audiences were able to self-construct meaning from their experience with novels, biographies, plotted songs, and films; they anticipated—in exhibitions, as in fiction—introductions, conflict, reconciliation, and catharsis. These types of familiar narratives can be viewed as “scaffolding,” a term used by early 20th century learning theorist Lev Vygotsky to refer to strategies provided to a less experienced learner by a more experienced one. Scaffolding helps bring the learner to a comfort level at which s/he can understand and use new information. (Day, French, and Hall, 1985). Constructivist museum education uses this theory to develop interpretation strategies. In Vygotskian terms, the narrative format or structure of an exhibition, if well developed, can serve as scaffolding and facilitate “making sense of things” (Chiodo and Rupp, 1999, p.20).

By using these familiar narrative forms, as well as other artistic/popular genres, museums enable the visitor to make meaning from artifacts and gallery texts. Many are still using the traditional narrative forms; biographical loops are thriving, especially in art and history museums.

In the 1999 Meaning-Making issue of *Exhibitionist* two articles foreshadowed this discussion of the significance of scaffolding. The opening article by Jay Rounds in 1999 asked: is meaning-making an esoteric or everyday activity? (Rounds, 1999). My contention is that meaning-making is and should be everyday, but the lack of scaffolding can make meaning-making esoteric and difficult. A second article, by John Chiodo and Alissa Rupp, “Setting the Stage for Meaningful Exhibits,” (1999 p.18) was aimed at designers, proposing “techniques for enabling visitors to extract meaning...” and describing designers’ roles in scaffolding. Narratives were unmentioned but, I believe, inherent in points 1: “Help visitors make sense of things” and 5: “Connect to the visitor’s points of reference,” citing Falk and Dierking (1992) that visitors determine whether an exhibition “accommodates their ability to engage in it.”

Museums are still developing exhibitions that mimic popular literary and media genres, but those genres are themselves in the process of rapid change. With multi-participant, player-determined and DIY books, games, media, and technology, the audience has growing expectations of sharing or usurping authority from the hosting institutions. Research in art education, which has studied the

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personalities constructed by teens for presentation through social media, needs to be expanded to non-classroom settings, such as museums (Cress, 2013, p.41). In addition, today's technologically savvy visitors have become expert at long-term, simultaneous role playing and may not respond to narratives in ways expected by the museum.

The Changing Nature of Scaffolding and Meaning-Making in a Non-Linear Culture

The Fall 1999 issue of *Exhibitionist* raised the issue of meaning-making in galleries for exhibition developers/designers, rather than educators, reflecting the field's move toward staff teams and collaborations among museum professions. At that point, museums were beginning to offer experiences not provided by home or school technology. Now, 14 years later, visitors' everyday technology has outstripped much of what is available even in museums that offer experiential content. In addition, technologically adept visitors are used to instant access on their hand-held personal devices to information not provided by the museum. Google and Wikipedia are also available to assist visitors in making sense of things and connecting to their points of reference without any intervention or guidance by the museum itself. With technology improving and changing constantly, new player behaviors are generated; visitors can attend your exhibitions, but be paying attention somewhere completely different. It seems reasonable to assume that visitor behavior and processes of meaning-making reflect these imbalances in what is offered in the museum and what visitors can find digitally.

Researchers Zahavah Doering and

Andrew Pekarik have published studies on visitors' "entrance narrative" that may be helpful in examining the impact of newer exhibition design on meaning-making. Doering and Pekarik posit that

The internal story line that visitors enter with, which we can call their "entrance narrative," has three distinct components:

- A basic framework, i.e. the fundamental way that individuals construe and contemplate the world.
- Information about the given topic, organized according to that basic framework.
- Personal experiences, emotions and memories that verify and support this understanding.

This model suggests that the most satisfying exhibitions for visitors will be those that resonate with their experience and provide information in ways that confirm and enrich their view of the world. (1996)

Their thesis can be expanded to suggest that visitors' comfort level with the structure of an exhibition can be as important as their prior information about the topic. One of the standard narrative structures that exhibitions share with popular literature (in any media) is the single biographical loop. It begins with a statement/artifact of importance, birth and/or training, start of interest in specialty (art, science, or political cause), chronological steps in progress towards the goal with occasional stops for contextualization, end, and impact

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statement. You can refer to Dickens novels, corridos, or *It's a Wonderful Life*.

A Traditional Museum-Imposed Narrative

The Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition on American painter George Bellows (November 15, 2012–February 2, 2013) followed this form. The on-line description begins with the concise “George Bellows (1882-1925) was regarded as one of America’s greatest artists when he died at the age of forty-two from a ruptured appendix.” The Museum uses its authority to benefit the artist’s reputation, as if MMA is saying that Bellows is a major artist because it has given him a career retrospective. The statement also sets up the expectation of a biographical narrative. Beginning and ending with his famous boxing scenes, its gallery/chapters are organized primarily by the subjects of his art (New York, Maine, sea costs, boxing, portraits of the working poor, World War I, etc.) or by process (comparing paintings with lithographs), but are perceived to be in chronological order because this is inherent in biographical narratives. There are no visitor-determined elements in the exhibition, although one gallery invites direct comparisons between art works with the same subjects or views.

Examples of Increased Visitor Impact on the Narrative

Visitor meaning making, linear or non-linear, is dependent on visitor attention. But it is a mistake to think that visitors have a binary choice. The opposite of player (visitor)-directed is not player (visitor) following the museum’s narrative. There are multiple grey areas since visitors can participate in or opt out of museum experiences at will. In fact, visitors have

always had options for participating in the narrative structure. They view or not, follow ordered progress or not, begin with established starting point or not, and read texts or not. Without visitor evaluation of each individual decision, it is difficult to determine whether there is a rejection of institutional authority or of material. Some old and new examples of visitor participation in the narrative structure follow:

- One of the most “retro” museum narrative experiences draws close to player-directed. Responding to costumed/characterized interpreters in historic sites requires visitors to accept institutional authority disguised by interpreters’ active participation. Visitors can choose to interact or not, and can choose characters (usually within pre-set parameters) and level of connection. They let themselves become the institutions’ avatars.
- Audio tours, an early example of personal media still in use in many museums, impose a greater level of institutional authority. Since tours moderate the visitor’s visual input, audio input, and movement pace and patterns, they constrain the attentive user to make only the institution’s meaning.
- Touch-screens are easy to self-author/adapt for a gallery visitor. Ambient media is curated for passive participation, but touch-screens remain curated only if un-touched. Visitors can select content and order of content, though only from pre-curated content.

One significant difference between visitors who participate regularly in player-determined games and visitors who are just software-friendly is that many gamers are used to responding to the narrative through a player-determined avatar.

- Cell-phone based interactives for extra content are managed by visitors using numbers or codes assigned by the institution. Again, the content is curated, but the institution has fragile authority. The visitor determines any connections, requiring action (and possible cost). This format allows for additional narrative or content chosen by the visitor. In addition, the order and cohesion of the narrative can be interrupted.
- More recently museums have been establishing cell-phone based interactives for extra content via QR code leading to web sites or apps. This is the easiest and least expensive method for most institutions. Museums can provide or limit the connections, but content reveals curatorial authority only if the curator also controls the external web site. The self-determined connection by visitors can require action (and possible cost) and adds a possible time lag to the interrupted cohesion.

As Doering and Pekarik's research has shown, the personal construction of the framework is important for an exhibition's impact. One significant difference between visitors who participate regularly in player-determined games and visitors who are just software-friendly is that many gamers are used to responding to the narrative through a player-determined avatar. The entrance narrative, constructed framework, and visitor's points of reference may well be the avatar's. In these situations, museum authority aiming at a visitor's pre-

existing experience base has to aim at an unknown, scripted narrative in which the visitor has chosen to actively participate

Exhibitions Most Like the Player-Determined World

The museum experience that is most like the player-determined world may be that for which artists select work from the institution's permanent collection. Many museums provide this option on their web sites, allowing visitors to assemble their own virtual galleries. Bricks-and-mortar museums offer the gallery visitor a chance to view the artist-determined exhibition as if s/he was playing or watching a "be the curator" on-line game with the artist as avatar. Although the authority is transferred (or temporarily lent) from the institution to the selected artist/curator, the emphasis is on the collection and what the artist rather than the institution is saying about the collection. These kinds of exhibitions can be liberating, as was Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* for the Maryland Historical Society (1992-1993) or just a way to see someone else's choices, as with the Cooper-Hewitt Museum's series of 11 Artist Selections. The re-contextualizing of the artifacts requires revisions in meaning-making by the visitor and the institution.

Come Closer: Art Around the Bowery, 1969-1989 was an archival exhibition (September 19, 2012–December 30, 2012) at the New Museum that was both non-narrative and non-linear. This institution for contemporary art sits on the Bowery within view of many of the lofts, performance spaces, and bars being celebrated. The artifacts ranged from an actual apartment door decorated by Keith Haring to t-shirts, to a hallway (leading

Exhibitions Cited:

Metropolitan Museum of Art
(November 15, 2012–February 2, 2013)
<http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/bellows>

Come Closer: Art Around the Bowery, 1969-1989
New Museum (September 9–December 30, 2012)
<http://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/come-closer-art-around-the-Bowery-1969-1>

Museums need to adapt or invent new strategies or tools of narrative development.

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to a working bathroom) which had been plastered with bills and fliers for performance and meetings. These objects and texts were informative but could be viewed in almost any order. This was perhaps an effort by the designers to give everything equal weight. The hallway display, especially, had no chronology; all of those bills may have been posted on the same day or over 20 years. The institutional authority here backed the general artistic aims of the period. The exhibition was actively neutral, as if to ignore the fact that certain artists, musicians and clubs are more widely known to the visiting public. By refusing to privilege those artists, musicians, or clubs, the exhibition denied the visitors a possible source of scaffolding. The exhibition developers and designers had an additional unusual challenge—how to use available technology for the gallery that enlivened art in a period that saw the beginnings of hand-held video art and personal computers. Their solution was inconsistent. Most of the videos/films were shown on deep box monitors that look like old technology. One video was shown on an iPad in an exhibition artifact case, with additional Macs in the resource room nearby. The place of gallery technology in the meaning-making process is evolving and needs to be studied. Many developers/designers treat play-back equipment as neutral, the equivalent of Plexiglas cases. In my media-rich institution, we use current technology for play-back, but often rig it to “play” from period artifacts, currently an Mp3s hidden in a 1923

RCA Victor radio console.

New Visitor Experiences Require New Strategies for Narrative Development of Exhibitions

Museums need to adapt or invent new strategies or tools of narrative development. In the 2009 *Exhibitionist* issue on Visitor Generated Content and Design, Daniel Spock correlated “more complex narratives” with content and authority sharing.

[Museums have been striving] ...for more complex narratives, putting public participation, inclusion and varying perspectives ahead of owning the last word... Decades ago, museum thinkers were already talking about a continuum of evolving practice from museums as private collections, to museums where visitors are tolerated, to paternalistic museums that try to elevate novice learners, to museums where authority and content creation is shared with the public in a dialogical process of civic engagement. (2009, p. 8)

This may be the eventual result, but the default structures seem still to be prevalent. Research has shown that traditional narrative structures can aid meaning-making by raising the visitors' comfort level, but these findings hold only if the visitors continue to be comfortable with simple structures rather than complex, multi role playing, non-linear narratives. Are they? How long will that continue?