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PLAYING WITH AESTHETICS IN ART MUSEUMS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

Susan M Glasser,
Bachelor of Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1978

Director: Dr. Margaret Lindauer
Associate Professor & Museum Studies Coordinator, Department of Art History

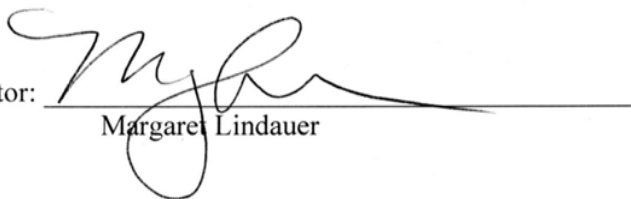
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
April, 2011

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Dissertation Director:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Lindauer', is written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter 'M' being particularly large and stylized. The line extends to the right of the signature.

Margaret Lindauer

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One of the surprising discoveries for me in the process of writing this dissertation was what a communal affair it turned out to be. There are numerous people without whom I could not have begun, persevered or finished this project. I want to thank my former colleagues at the North Carolina Museum of Art, including the director Lawrence Wheeler who gave me the freedom to experiment, and educators Ashley Weinard, Diana Phillips, Angela Falk, and Deborah Reid Murphy who were game to try new things. A special thanks goes to educator Camille Tewell who was the first to read what would eventually become the introduction and chapter five—her challenging questions and encouragement served as a key motivator in the early days of my writing. Donald Palmer read multiple versions of chapter five. The envelope of confetti (a cut-up version of the chapter with all his notes) that he mailed from France helped clarify important missteps I had taken in deciphering Kant. If more remain I have only myself to fault. Thanks go to Dewey Blanton for a fine editing job that surely doubled the number of commas, which now makes for an easier reading experience. Myron Helfgott who has read multiple chapters, multiple times, helped me to be mindful of the artist's perspective in all matters aesthetic. Now that the dissertation is finished, we'll need to find a new topic for our picnics by the river. Howard Risatti helped me fall in love with art history more than three decades ago and has been an indefatigable supporter of my on-again-off-again

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Abstract

PLAYING WITH AESTHETICS IN ART MUSEUMS

By Susan M. Glasser, Ph.D

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

Major Director: Dr. Margaret Lindauer, Associate Professor & Museum Studies
Coordinator, Department of Art History

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to address the real-world challenge faced by all museums of art: how to maximize opportunities for engrossing art experiences for casual adult visitors possessing little knowledge of art history. It defines a typology of aesthetic theories—what the study refers to as “*Realaesthetik*”—that emphasizes the most utilitarian characteristics of a variety of philosophical aesthetic concepts. Using design thinking, it then asserts that the structuring principles of game design can be used in conjunction with the typology to create a toolkit that museum staff can use for engaging the archetypical museum visitor in engrossing art experiences.

The interdisciplinary approach used is intended to replace the singular methodologies (whether art historical, pedagogical or aesthetic) that have informed museum practice in the United States since the late nineteenth century. The *Realaesthetik* toolkit synthesizes a psychographic portrait of the archetypal museum visitor, the most salient characteristics of an engrossing art encounter, the family resemblance between play and art experiences, the most germane tenets of game design, and a typology of

aesthetic experiences in order to create a practical framework for delivering engrossing art experiences for museum visitors. The applicability of the toolkit is analyzed using four gallery experiences designed at the North Carolina Museum of Art.

As the fields of game design, video gaming, serious games, educational games, and game studies continue to grow, more and more museums are entering into this domain to try engaging their visitors. Because game design is such a specialized field, museum staff will likely cede control of the design process to contracted game designers, running the risk of developing experiences that are more game than art encounter. If museums are to profit from the many advantages that game design thinking can lend to the creation of engrossing art experiences, they must be able to talk the language of game design while helping game designers understand the real work of museums. The *Realaesthetik* toolkit is a first attempt to create a common language and robust design framework that can be used by museum educators, curators, information technology specialists, game designers, and experience designers.

Introduction

OPTIMIZING ENGROSSING ART EXPERIENCES IN MUSEUMS

Strolling through the galleries of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts at any time during the first decades of the twentieth century a visitor may have, on occasion, spied a tall gaunt man standing before a work of art with a shoebox-like contraption raised in front of his eyes. The man was Benjamin Ives Gilman, secretary of the Museum from 1893 to 1925, and the contraption was of his own invention: a skiascope. Inspired by the tubular eye shades that visitors were given to view masterpieces in European museums, Gilman's more elaborate, folding eye shade had "at once practical and theoretical value."¹ Its practical purpose was to reduce the glare from ambient light in the gallery. Its theoretical value was to help users focus their field of vision to appreciate better a work of art's aesthetic value. Eliminating all distractions and focusing the eye solely on a single work of art, the skiascope was "an aid to good seeing."²

The kind of experience museum visitors have corresponds, in part, to the type of attention museums encourage visitors to bring to their encounters with art. Gilman's skiascope was meant to assist visitors in having engrossing art viewing experiences as

1. Benjamin Ives Gilman, *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), 238.

2. Ibid., 240. Gilman even published detailed instructions on how to make a folding skiascope at home (ibid., 241-248). While he admitted that most people were not likely to carry such a device around with them (even one that folded), he thought museums could provide such devices by hanging them in the doorways of galleries for visitors' use.

solitary individuals focused intently on a single work of art. Different museums implicitly or explicitly support myriad types of art experiences. For example, the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis and the Brooklyn Museum represent two extremes in the types of art experiences museums might encourage their visitors to undergo. The Pulitzer Foundation, which opened in 2001, strives to elicit an art experience in a vein similar to that which Gilman encouraged with his skiascope. This is apparent in both its architecture and its installation methods. The Pulitzer's founder, Emily Rauh Pulitzer, has stated, "I think that looking at works of art takes solitude and quiet and contemplation and concentration," and that architect Tadao Ando's building "seemed to me very congenial with the spirit of art."³ According to the Foundation, Ando's building—described as a “meditative space”—is an ascetic container for art.⁴ All ornamentation, anything that might serve as a distraction, is eliminated. The white walls, concrete floors, and natural light (artificial light is not used, even in dark corners) provide a neutral backdrop for the sparingly hung art, without the distraction of labels. To help ensure the contemplative aura of the space, visitation is limited to fifty people per day. The Pulitzer Foundation's approach assumes that a quiet, meditative environment for art installed devoid of distractions is necessary and sufficient to produce an engrossing art experience. Implicit in the strategy is the concept of an art experience as a contemplative and/or intuitive response to beautiful stimuli. Nothing is allowed to stand between the viewer and the work of art—no art historical contextualizing, no curatorial interpretation, no

3. Julie Lasky, “A Prize-Winning Japanese Architect Casts a St. Louis Museum in Concrete,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2001.

4. The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts official Web site, <http://www.pulitzerarts.org/>.

educational directives. The experience ostensibly originates with the art and is informed by the life experiences and knowledge the viewer brings with her into the museum.

Visiting the Pulitzer does provide an ideal environment in which to have an engrossing art experience—if one has the skills and knowledge to approach art independently. What the Pulitzer fails to take into account is that “an art object is an art experience only potentially.”⁵ For the majority of museum visitors who come to museums with limited knowledge or experience of looking at art, such an approach can be intimidating. Based on his research for the J. Paul Getty Museum, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has noted that “most potential museum visitors just do not know what they are suppose to do in front of a work of art” without some direction. As a result, such visitors have only superficial encounters with art; it “remains on the mundane level of everyday life experience.”⁶ By failing to take into account the lack of art-viewing skills and knowledge that most people enter museums with, the Pulitzer limits the potential for many of its patrons to have an engrossing art encounter.

In contrast to the Pulitzer’s strategy is “American Identities: a New Look,” the 2007 reinstallation of the American art collection at the Brooklyn Museum. The installation includes more than three-hundred-fifty objects including paintings, sculpture, silver, furniture, ceramics, and textiles from the museum’s American art collection as well as its Native American and Spanish Colonial art collections. Unlike the Pulitzer’s

5. John T. Murphey, “What You Can Do with Your Education Department,” *Museum News* 49, no. 2 (October 1970): 14.

6. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Notes on Art Museum Experiences,” in *Readings in Discipline-Based Art Education: A Literature of Educational Reform*, ed. Ralph A. Smith (Reston, VA: National Art Education Association, 2000), 403.

approach, the Brooklyn Museum's installation is didactically organized around eight themes. Visitors explore the collection within its art historical context ("Making Art" and "Inventing American Landscape"), its social context ("Expanding Horizons," "The Centennial Era, 1876-1900: Tradition and Innovation," "Everyday Life," and "Modern Life"), and its political context ("From Colony to Nation" and "A Nation Divided: The Civil War Era"). Information on all eight themes is transmitted through an audio guide, elaborate text panels, individual object labels, four video stations, and four seating areas that offer additional reading materials. Implicit in this approach is the belief that an engrossing art experience involves knowing *about* the art including the social and political context in which it was made. The assumption is that such experiences are essential to understanding a work of art. Hence the importance of providing historically accurate information supplied, in whole or in part, by the museum. Many visitors may appreciate the opportunity to absorb this kind of information in the presence of original works of art. The risk in this approach, however, is that viewers may spend more time looking at the didactic materials than looking at the art and end up having an art history lesson rather than an art experience.

While some applaud Brooklyn's earnest interest in educating visitors about art history, others resent what they see as the heavy-handed didactics that conflate knowing about art with experiencing art. The reinstallation has been criticized as being "intrusive, controlling, [and] textbooky."⁷ More generally, *New Yorker* art critic Peter Schjeldahl has

7 . Daniel Grant, "Rescuing Brooklyn: Controversy from the Ground Floor up," *Museum News*, 86, no. 3 (May/June 2007): 73.

complained that, “Wall texts are a bane of late-twentieth-century museology, turning art shows into walk-in brochures. We can’t help but read them . . . and thus are jerked from silent reverie into nattering pedagogy. Art and education . . . make for bad sex in the head.”⁸ In his book, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Cried in Front of Paintings*, James Elkins takes the argument a step further. He posits that a deep knowledge of art history can actually suppress our ability to have some kinds of art experiences. While art-historical knowledge is “safe,” “calming,” and “pleasureful”—like a drug or a cigarette as he notes—it can also be narcotizing to an art encounter. His conclusions are shared by a wide spectrum of intellectuals. The artist and art historian Walter Pach lamented the “information capsule[s]” that museums provide visitors, contending that they interfere with the close study of a work of art; John Walsh, the late director emeritus of the J. Paul Getty Museum, insisted that “historical knowledge undermines passion”; and Peter de Bolla, a Fellow at Kings College, University of Cambridge, has observed, “very often, in fact, knowledge of this kind [art historical] may block or prevent an affective experience, stifle or stunt the emergence of art’s low, whispering voice.”⁹

Each of the two extremes embodied by the Pulitzer’s and Brooklyn’s strategies encourages a single kind of art encounter while potentially interfering with another; the lack of contextualization at the Pulitzer does not support an art historically rich

8 . Peter Schjeldahl, “Springtime for Keifer,” *New Yorker*, (January 18, 1999): 83.

9. Walter Pach, *The Art Museum in America* (NY: Pantheon, 1948), 204-206; John Walsh, “Pictures, Tears, Lights, and Seats,” in *Whose Muse?: Art Museums and the Public Trust*, ed. James Cuno (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 85; Peter de Bolla, *Art Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 28.

experience for the average visitor unfamiliar with the history of art. However, the abundance of information at the Brooklyn Museum may actually distract some visitors from an affective art encounter. Apparently the Pulitzer presumes visitors do not need contextual knowledge to appreciate art or they believe their visitors already possess such knowledge. Counter to this somewhat elite view of museum visitors, the Brooklyn Museum presumes visitors do need such information and the average visitor does not already possess such knowledge.

Each approach may work well for some visitors, but may be ineffectual and potentially intrusive for others. What these two examples suggest is that there may not be one right way to help a broad cross-section of visitors have engrossing art encounters and that some of the strategies currently being used by many museums may actually be counter-productive in helping visitors have an engrossing engagement with art.

In this study, I explore the application of design thinking on crafting museum experiences. More specifically, I assert that the structuring principles of game design can be used in conjunction with a typology of theories of aesthetic experience to create a toolkit that museum staff can use for optimizing engrossing art experiences for the archetypal museum visitor.¹⁰ For the purposes of this study, I am using the term “engrossing” to refer to an art encounter that can be described as an intense, absorbing mental episode—phenomenological or cognitive—in front of a work of art, one that produces a sense of deep satisfaction or pleasure that is self-defined by each viewer. It is,

10. Chapter one provides a fuller discussion of the archetypal visitor. Suffice it to say at this point that multiple visitor studies have identified key traits of a majority portion of museum visitors. I am calling the psychographic profile that has emerged for this majority of visitors the “archetypal museum visitor.”

in effect, an aesthetic experience broadly defined. I have opted to use the word “engrossing” rather than “aesthetic” to describe the desired experience in order to accommodate both an aesthetic approach such as that used at the Pulitzer and an art historical and pedagogical approach such as that used at the Brooklyn Museum. I attempt to construct a capacious definition of aesthetic experience, one grounded in aesthetic theories but also having practical implications for museum practice. The desirability of such an approach has two things to recommend it: first, such a strategy provides museums with a theoretical foundation for engaging visitors that goes beyond the singularly applied aesthetic, art historical, and pedagogical strategies that have shaped museum practice since the nineteenth century; and second, it accommodates the knowledge, interests, and skills of the archetypal visitor in ways that most current museum practice does not.

From the outset, I conceived of this study as an interdisciplinary research project drawing on multiple fields including art history, aesthetic theory, game design, visitors’ studies, and education theory in varying degrees. Readers looking to find a rigorous use of the historical methods of art history, the necessary and sufficient arguments of a philosophical treatise, an application of the “mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics” methodology of game design,¹¹ the scientific strategies of visitors’ studies or the inquiry methods employed in pedagogical research, will be disappointed. Interdisciplinary research, such as that attempted here, does not require that the full weight of the

11. Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, Robert Zubek, “MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research,” Northwestern University, Department of Computer Science, <http://www.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/pubs/MDA.pdf>.

knowledge or methodologies of each discipline be brought into play. Nor does it entail that multiple perspectives from various disciplines be brought together around a common theme while still allowing each discipline to maintain the full integrity of its own academic traditions (its theories, content, and scholarly practice). Rather, interdisciplinary research aims to cull from select disciplines those pieces of pertinent information and modes of thought that can be synthesized to address a broader question than can be answered by any one discipline, as Julie Thompson Klein has argued.¹² Such an approach is gaining momentum in the academy as witnessed by the growing number of interdisciplinary programs that have sprung up at universities around the country in recent years. It also has precedents within the field of art history as seen, for example, in Mieke Bal's *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities* that traces the way concepts such as narrative and myth "travel" across disciplines as diverse as literary criticism, art history, and visual studies.¹³ As Bal argues throughout her book, interdisciplinarity "must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in concepts rather than in methods." The concept at play in this study is the family resemblance among engrossing experiences as they manifest themselves in museums, aesthetics, games, and learning.

Art history asks questions about the historical and visual evidence that locates works of art within the larger story of art and culture. Aesthetic theory explores questions such as what is art and what makes an aesthetic experience different from other kinds of experiences. Visitor studies searches for answers to how people experience informal

12. Julie Thompson Klein, "A Taxonomy of Interdisciplinarity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, ed. Robert Frodeman (NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 18-20.

13. Mieke Bal, *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

learning environments. Game design addresses the challenges facing designers of immersive, interactive experiences. Pedagogy examines questions about what it means to teach and how people learn. My research, while it benefits from the knowledge base in each of these disciplines, asks a question that has not been adequately answered in any one of them: how can museums help intelligent, curious adult visitors who typically lack any measurable art historical acumen have engrossing art experiences within the context of a leisure-time visit to a museum?

I explore this question by first defining the archetypal museum visitor. Chapter one presents a psychographic profile of museum visitors culled from more than three decades of visitor studies and developmental psychology. It explores why people visit museums and what they expect from their museum visit. It also presents a summary of the most common art viewing habits of the majority of museum visitors. The conclusion drawn from this summary is that, if a museum is to increase the odds that its visitors will have engrossing art experiences, it must make multiple forms of experiences available. Neither the contemplative space of the Pulitzer nor the educational directives of the Brooklyn Museum offer enough variety to meet the needs, expectations, and interests of the majority of visitors to their museums. I will not argue for one type of engrossing art experience over another, but rather that for museums to succeed in facilitating such experiences for archetypal visitors, museum staff must possess an understanding of the characteristics of engrossing experiences in general. Chapter two begins with four distinct art experiences and identifies their most common characteristics; it then suggests that these characteristics, when viewed in total, have a remarkable family resemblance to play

experiences. Although the historical discussion about the relationship between art and play has been a contentious one, there is much that museums can learn from understanding the similarities between these two activities.

To examine the art/play relationship within the context of a museum, chapter three introduces two case studies. Case Study One presents an exhibition specifically built around the concept of play. In 1997, the French philosopher and art historian Hubert Damisch was commissioned by the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam to curate an exhibition, drawn from the Museum's permanent collection. The ensuing exhibition, "Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum," consisted of four sections, a chess section, a card section, a time/place section, and an iconoclasm section. Damisch's approach acknowledges and embraces the similarities between art and play experiences. Yet when the exhibition is measured against the psychographic profile of the typical museum visitor, it, too, as it will be argued, lacks the necessary structure to help visitors have engrossing art encounters based on their skills, knowledge, and interests. In particular, the exhibition fails to provide sufficient direction to most potential visitors—who, research shows, do not know what to do in front of a work of art. The similarities between art and play experiences suggest that game design might be applicable to structuring museum visits as well. The burgeoning field of game design studies has made significant strides in recent years developing a theoretical model for understanding how games work. Game design, in essence, functions as a structuring process for creating engrossing interactive encounters between players and the gameplay, and players with each other. Among the many tasks involved in game design are: creating ways to induct

the player into an appropriate and receptive frame-of-mind, supplying instructions that focus the player's attention, setting up prescribed activities that allow the player to participate actively in the experience, incorporating guidelines that help the player accomplish the activities, and providing opportunities for players to make choices and devise their own strategies about what course of action to take and what information to use. Effective game design results in an engrossing experience for the player. Replace the word "player" with "visitor" in that sentence and what emerges is the applicability of game design concepts for creating engrossing experiences for museum visitors.

Museums are already beginning to recognize the potential of game design in structuring visitor experiences. Case Study Two presents the Smithsonian American Art Museum's 2008, "Ghosts of a Chance" project, the first alternate reality game (ARG) ever hosted by a museum. ARGs are highly structured interactive narratives that let participants direct aspects of an unfolding story using real-world devices like cell phones and the internet. "Ghosts of a Chance" was a complex, interactive experience extending over three months that challenged participants with a variety of real and virtual tasks in order to solve the mystery of who the ghosts are that have been haunting several works of art in the Luce Center collection. The "Ghosts of a Chance" project has much to recommend it and visitors' responses were laudatory.¹⁴ It provides clearly defined tasks, encourages visitors to tour galleries they might otherwise have avoided, is highly participatory, and is structured yet allows participants freedom to individualize their

14. Georgina Bath, *Ghost of a Chance Final Report*, Smithsonian American Art Museum, http://ghostsofchance.com/GhostsofaChance_Report2.pdf.

involvement. However, as the case study demonstrates, “Ghosts of a Chance” delivers a play experience rather than an art experience.

The objective of interjecting the concept of play into the discussion about engrossing art encounters is not to make museum visits about entertainment, which, as Glen Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art, has rightly observed serves only to “distract and provide an antidote to boredom.”¹⁵ Neither is it to use play as a gilded teaching strategy to fulfill museums’ traditional function as educational institutions. Rather, the intent is to incorporate recent advances in game design studies into a practical toolkit for museum staff creating initiatives to foster engrossing art encounters for their visitors. Building on the case studies, chapter four delves deeper into the structuring principles of game design to provide an even broader picture of the potential of this type of design thinking for museums. Game designers often start with a problem that they then translate into a measurable goal. In this study, the problem I pose centers on the fact that most archetypal visitors do not have engrossing art experiences during their museum visit because they do not know what to do in front of a work of art (as chapter one suggests). In the parlance of game design, this problem can be translated into a measurable goal: getting people to look longer at a work of art. At its most basic level, an engrossing art experience takes time, the kind of time that visitors do not know how to expend on the activity of looking at art. The structuring principles of game design can provide an interactive context in which visitors can extend their art viewing time and thereby

15. Glen Lowry, “A Deontological Approach to Art Museums and the Public Trust,” in *Whose Muse?: Art Museums and the Public Trust*, ed. James Cuno (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 139.

increase the potential of an engrossing art encounter.

“Ghosts of a Chance” provides a cautionary tale about using the structuring principles of game design. Where it errs is that it privileges entertainment over art and reduces the museum’s collections to a game prop. With its focus on solving a mystery about a haunted museum, it loses any semblance of an art experience. Game design should not be used at the expense of making art experiences specious. It is not enough then, to merely adopt the structuring processes of game design. If museums want to use game design to structure engrossing *art* experiences, they need a theoretical basis on which to build. Chapter five revisits the four engrossing art experiences discussed in chapter two and examines how these encounters correspond to the philosophical literature on aesthetic experience. What results is a capacious definition of aesthetic experience that has practical implications for museum practice.

Despite the contributions that such an approach might make in optimizing engrossing art encounters in museums, a concerted effort to foster such experiences has not had a high profile in recent museum practice. The possible reasons for why a rigorous application of theories of aesthetic experience has not occurred within museums are various. James Elkins in his book, *Pictures and Tears*, Peter de Bolla in his book, *Art Matters*, and David Freedberg in his book, *The Power of Images*, have all used some form of the word “embarrassment” in describing how many art history scholars react when faced with discussions of aesthetic experiences.¹⁶ In addition, for much of the

16. James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (NY: Routledge, 2001), 102; de Bolla, *Art Matters*, 14; David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), xx.

second half of the twentieth century, the idea of aesthetic experience has been associated with ideas of elitism that, according to the late Sherman Lee, former director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, has given museums “a guilt complex about art as a product of a prosperous high culture which battens on a poor, low culture.”¹⁷ In a published roundtable discussion with fellow art museum directors, John Walsh has asked,

What would it take to create a belief strong enough to have us invest a great deal of money and ingenuity to increase the power of those relatively solitary experiences of individual works of art? I think directors have to *believe* in those solitary experiences, and with more than a sort of regretful fatalism. . . . They have to take the time and trouble to encourage trustees to evaluate the museum on the basis of the kinds of experiences that are much more difficult to quantify or to judge.¹⁸

Such an approach requires synthesizing the philosophical challenges of aesthetics with the practical realities of museums. That this has not occurred to date is due, in part, to the historical gulf that separates art historians and philosophers of aesthetics. They speak a different language, go to different conferences, and read different journals.¹⁹ The only thing they seem to share is a mutual indifference toward each other’s disciplines.

Even as early as 1946, Thomas Munro, one of the founders of the American

17. Sherman E. Lee, *Past, Present, East and West* (NY: George Braziller, Inc., 1983), 32-3.

18. James Cuno, ed., “Round Table Discussion,” in *Whose Muse?: Art Museums and the Public Trust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 183.

19. James Elkins, “Why Don’t Art Historians Attend Aesthetics Conferences?” in *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, ed. James Elkins (NY: Routledge, 2006), 39-49.

Society of Aesthetics and long-time educator at the Cleveland Museum of Art, wrote in the *College Art Journal* criticizing many museum professionals' lack of knowledge about aesthetics, noting that they can be "extremely voluble and confident in dogmatizing about artistic values, and at the same time naively unacquainted with the theoretical difficulties involved, or with what previous thinkers have said."²⁰ In a companion article, Daniel Catton Rich, chief curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, criticized philosophers who seem "all too often completely divorced from [museum] problems." Their failure to test "aesthetic propositions" on actual works of art "has sometimes led to mere verbalism, vagueness or that pseudo-scientific 'jargon' which seems to exist for the delight of the professional philosopher alone."²¹

Such disjunctions between art historians and philosophers have persisted. In 2006, a scholarly group consisting of thirteen philosophers, fourteen academic art historians, three museum art historians, one political scientist, one psychologist, and one literature professor came together over the course of several days to talk about the relationship between aesthetics and art history. The resulting publication, *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, provides a concise summary of the present-day gulf between aesthetic theory and art history (and by extension, museum practice, since many museum professionals are art historically trained).²² In an essay distributed to all participants prior to the

20. Thomas Munro, "Place of Aesthetics in the Art Museum," *College Art Journal* 6, no. 3 (1947): 174.

21. Daniel Catton Rich, "Aesthetic Theory for Museum Curators," *College Art Journal* 6, no. 3 (1947): 172.

22. James Elkins, ed., *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, (NY: Routledge, 2006).

seminar, Robert Gero presents a description of contemporary philosophers' assorted discourses on aesthetic experience: it is a sensual pleasure/it is an intellectual pleasure; it is only relevant to art/it is relevant to art and non-art; aesthetic experiences occur in all art/occur only in some art; aesthetic properties originate in the object under consideration/reside in the mind of the person perceiving; art has to be experienced firsthand to generate an aesthetic response/an aesthetic response is possible from just the description of a work of art.²³ Art historians at the seminar were in general agreement that they do not find these nuanced philosophical arguments particularly germane to their art historical interests or endeavors. According to Jay Bernstein, a philosophy professor at the New School for Social Research, there is a "pervasive sense of the obsolescence of aesthetics."²⁴ David Raskin, an associate professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, embodies what Bernstein terms the "obsolete perspective," writing, "[Aesthetics is useful] solely as a kind of private practice for the scholar."²⁵ Harry Cooper, curator of modern art at the Fogg Art Museum, falls into the category of reductive Kantian aesthetics, asking, "What is the interest or utility of aesthetics for art historians? Specifically, what use do we have for the concept of beauty?" and answered himself, "As for b - - - y, I prefer to keep a respectful (or is it an *embarrassed?*) silence."²⁶

23. Robert Gero, "The Border of the Aesthetic," in *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, ed. James Elkins (NY: Routledge, 2006), 3-18.

24. Jay M. Bernstein, "Modernism as Aesthetics and Art History," in *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, ed. James Elkins (NY: Routledge, 2006), 248.

25. David Raskin, "Dead and Deader," in *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, ed. James Elkins (NY: Routledge, 2006), 102-103.

26. Harry Cooper, "Ugly Beauty (with Apologies to T. Monk)," in *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, ed. James Elkins (NY: Routledge, 2006), 185-186. (emphasis added)

Although some museum professionals trained as art historians see little use for aesthetics in their work, museums have historically been acknowledged as venues for aesthetic experiences. Unfortunately, the aesthetic mission of museums is often narrowly defined as nurturing an affective response to the beautiful. As early as 1916, the president of the Art Institute of Chicago, speaking at the dedication of the Cleveland Museum of Art, stated, “The principal function of an Art museum is the cultivation and appreciation of the beautiful.”²⁷ Such attitudes persist in the twenty-first century. In 2004, Philippe de Montebello, director emeritus of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, wrote that museums should make “possible that state of pure reverie that an unencumbered aesthetic experience can inspire,”²⁸ and Glen Lowry has noted, “We want our museums to be places of repose and contemplation, venues of discovery and learning, awe and wonder, where we can become absorbed in the power and beauty of art.”²⁹

Many current-day philosophers, on the other hand, would likely take issue with such statements because, implicit in these directors’ word choices—“pure reverie,” “repose and contemplation,” “awe and wonder,” and absorption “in the power and beauty of art”—is an early twentieth-century concept of a phenomenological aesthetic experience. Richard Shusterman has defined this as “something vividly felt and subjectively savored, affectively absorbing us and focusing our attention on its immediate

27. Terry Zeller, “The Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Art Museum Education in America,” in *Museum Education, History, Theory, and Practice*, ed. Nancy Berry and Susan Mayer (Reston, VA: the National Art Education Association, 1989), 24.

28. Philippe de Montebello, “Art Museums, Inspiring Public Trust,” in *Whose Muse?: Art Museums and the Public Trust*, ed. James Cuno (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 155.

29. Glen Lowry, “A Deontological Approach,” 134.

presence and thus standing out from the ordinary flow of routine experience.”³⁰ More recently, this concept has been contrasted to an epistemic understanding of aesthetic experience that emphasizes intellectual over affective responses to art.³¹ Monroe Beardsley has made this a key tenet of his (late) aesthetic theory:

One of the central components in art experience must be the experience of discovery, of insight into connections and organizations—the elation that comes from the apparent opening up of intelligibility. I call this ‘active discovery’ to draw attention to the excitement of meeting a cognitive challenge, of flexing one’s powers to make [art] *intelligible*.³²

In my twenty-six years in the museum field, I have found this epistemic concept of aesthetic experience to be disappointingly missing in the discourse of many museum practitioners. Lowry’s use of the phrase “venues for discovery and learning” should not be construed as a reference to such an aesthetic theory. Instead, the inclusion of this idea within the sentence quoted above reflects his belief that museums ought to provide both aesthetic and educational experiences. Lowry states elsewhere in his essay, “Like other institutions of the Enlightenment, the museum was construed to be fundamentally educational, a venue for the systematic organization and presentation of artistic, natural,

30. Richard Shusterman, “The End of Aesthetic Experience,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 30.

31. Gary Iseminger, “Aesthetic Experience,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., ed. Jerrold Levinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 100.

32. Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, ed. Michael J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 292.

and scientific phenomena. . . . a public space dedicated to the diffusion of knowledge.”³³

A working vocabulary of key concepts of aesthetic experience that provides more direction than the vagaries of “that state of pure reverie,” “awe and wonder,” and “repose and contemplation” might help museums improve the way they attempt to mediate aesthetic experiences. This refined vocabulary must also incorporate an understanding of contemporary philosophical notions of epistemic aesthetic experiences—not with the aim of rejecting phenomenological definitions but with the intention of embracing a more comprehensive and complex understanding of all the potential forms an aesthetic experience might take. In chapter five, a systematic framework that identifies and consolidates the key ingredients of aesthetic experiences is developed. This framework provides a typology for organizing aesthetic experiences built on key presuppositions that undergird the aesthetic theories of noted philosophers. Four distinct paths to an aesthetic experience are presented, each designed to accommodate different viewer predispositions associated with looking at art. The term presupposition describes those belief systems, based on epistemological assumptions, which undergird many theories of aesthetic experience. Predispositions are those belief systems that visitors bring to an art viewing experience, consciously or not, based on their inclination to privilege emotional or cognitive responses to art.

Philosophers have not agreed on a single definition of aesthetic experience, and it is not my intent to untangle the Gordian knot of aesthetic theories. I do not presume to

33 . Glen Lowry, “A Deontological Approach,” 139-40.

present an historical evolution of aesthetic theory nor do I aspire to reconcile the disparities that exist amongst various theories. Rather, I am attempting to utilize select philosophical concepts for practical results. The typology developed in chapter five aims to extract and weave together those threads from the philosophical debate that hold the greatest potential for museum practice, to produce what I will refer to as *Realaesthetik* (as in Realpolitik) to differentiate it from philosophical aesthetics. Realpolitik, which inspired the term *Realaesthetik*, has certain negative connotations (self-interested motivations that dismiss all other motivations as mere conceits), nevertheless, *Realaesthetik* has in common with Realpolitik a prudent and efficacious strategy for achieving results without distractions into philosophical dead-ends, and it looks for results that can be empirically tested. In my conception, *Realaesthetik* differs methodologically from philosophical aesthetics, which involves posing a hypothesis and presenting rational arguments (justified beliefs) that support it. Inherent in the philosophical process is the development of some ideas and the rejection of others with an end goal of identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions that define aesthetic experiences as distinct from other types of experiences. *Realaesthetik*, on the other hand, accepts multiple concepts of aesthetic experience (even contradictory ones) eliminating elements and arguments from theory that hold no practical application to museum work. Most of the components eliminated are definitional concepts as discussed in analytic aesthetic theory. Arguments about the necessary and sufficient conditions for qualifying an object as art, whether or not aesthetic experiences of nature are comparable to those of art, or how aesthetic pleasure differs from sexual or narcotic pleasures, for example, are

beyond the bounds of the discussion, insofar as they have little relevance within the context of an art museum.

Realaesthetik accommodates the presupposition that an aesthetic experience can be phenomenological and/or epistemological. This is necessary because at least two sources of variation play an important role in determining the nature of a museum aesthetic experience: the viewers and the art being viewed. People enter museums with widely diverging skills, knowledge, and dispositions. They hold disparate beliefs—implicitly or explicitly—about what it means to view and experience art. Some equate experiencing art with learning art history, others seek beauty (however they might define that), and still others use art as a filter through which to examine their own life experiences.

It is also reasonable to expect that a one-size-fits-all theory of aesthetic experience will have little possibility of succeeding within museums whose collections often span centuries and continents. Experiencing an eighteenth-century Indian Bodhisattva sculpture has little in common with experiencing an installation by the contemporary artist Olafur Eliasson beyond its basis in sight. As David Carr has rightly noted, “A museum that uses only one context (art history, say) to explain objects with vast cultural implications disempowers the museum user.”³⁴ The challenge is to conceive of *Realaesthetik* in the broadest possible terms; this cannot happen if it dictates a narrow definition that alienates viewers holding different philosophical positions or only works of art from certain cultures or epochs. *Realaesthetik* provides a capacious but practical

34. David Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003), 31.

description of aesthetic experiences that museum staff can use for designing experiences that engage their visitors with art. It generalizes some philosophical concepts, allowing for multiple approaches to aesthetic experience, and eliminates those concepts from the philosophical discourse that are too theoretical, contentious or impractical for museum applications.

A concept for museum-friendly aesthetic experiences is only as good as it is useful. Chapter six begins to put the pieces of the interdisciplinary puzzle together to see how *Realaesthetik* might be used in conjunction with the structuring principles of game design to develop a toolkit for optimizing engrossing art experiences that meet the psychographic needs of archetypal museum visitors. The first two components of the *Realaesthetik* toolkit, the infrastructure tools and the design tools, are examined in light of four designed experiences that were developed under my supervision at the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA) as part of the interpretive plan for a reinstallation of the Museum's permanent collection. Chapter seven presents the third component of the *Realaesthetik* toolkit, the testing tools, to examine, in greater depth, one of the NCMA's designed experiences. The testing tools utilize the iterative process of game design and demonstrate how design thinking can improve the experiences museum staffs develop for facilitating engrossing experiences for their visitors.

Like the early case studies, the designed experiences developed by educators at the NCMA cannot be considered a complete success. Yet they provide valuable lessons for the potential of the *Realaesthetik* toolkit moving forward. This study then, is a beginning rather than a definitive solution to facilitating engrossing art experiences for

museum visitors. The *Realaesthetik* toolkit is a first attempt to provide museum educators, curators, information technology specialists, contracted game designers, and experience designers with a shared vocabulary and robust design framework that is simultaneously structured and malleable, and most importantly, germane to the work of art museums. The interdisciplinary approach used here is intended to replace the singular academic methodologies (whether aesthetic, art historical or pedagogical) that have informed museum practice in the United States since the late nineteenth century. The ultimate aim is to contribute a clarification of and appreciation for the complexity of providing museum visitors with engrossing art experiences that constitute, in part, the most valuable and *sui generis* cultural contribution that art museums can make.

Chapter One

THE ARCHETYPAL VISITOR

Decades of visitor studies provide a clear picture of a typical museum visit. Visitors likely arrive with a companion. Upon entering the building they are mildly intimidated or confused—they do not know how to start, where to go, what to do. They may head to the information or ticket desk and pick up a gallery map. Studying the map, they make a mental note of where the restrooms, gift shop, and café are, and discuss which galleries they want to visit, knowing what to expect in some like the perennially popular nineteenth-century French gallery, while being less clear as to what they might find in the Baroque gallery. Or they may just begin wandering. Most museum visitors are grazers, they will move from gallery to gallery until something catches their eye. Then they will stop, look at the work for less than thirty seconds and perhaps scan a label or two (without looking back at the work when they have finished) before moving on.¹

1. In a study conducted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art researchers found that the mean time spent viewing a work of art was 27.2 seconds, with a median time of 17.0 seconds. Jeffrey K. Smith and Lisa F. Smith, "Spending Time on Art," *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 19, no. 2 (2001): 229. The Denver Museum of Art found that over half of the visitors to their American and Asian collections spent a total of 10 minutes or less in each collection. Defining "looking" as spending 10 or more seconds with an object, they found that 64% of visitors to the American collection and 54% of the visitors to the Asian collection looked at a maximum number of 4 objects in each collection. Melora McDermott-Lewis, "Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs," in *The Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project*, ed. Steve Grinstead and Margaret Ritchie (Denver: Denver Museum of Art, 1990), 36, n. 14. A study of eleven museums conducted by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts and The J. Paul Getty Museum did not measure time spent in front of a painting, but during focus group discussions with visitors researchers heard comments that demonstrate the casual visitor's discomfort in front of a work of art: "I think they should have somebody that you go around with to show you and explain to you. I don't want to stand there by myself and feel lost just looking at a painting and not understanding." Amy Walsh, ed., *Insights, Museums*,

Along the way they have socialized with their companion, talking about many things, sometimes the art, but also about when to stop at the gift shop, whether to grab a bite to eat at the museum or go to a nearby restaurant, and just about any other topic that couples and friends discuss when they socialize together. Upon leaving the museum, these visitors (who make up the majority of any museum's patrons, as the studies discussed below substantiate) might have had an enjoyable social experience, they may have had a good eating or shopping experience, they may even have had a rewarding museum experience. But they have likely left without having had an art experience—a meaningful, sustained, engrossing encounter with a work of art.²

VISITOR EXPECTATIONS

While this scenario may be disheartening to the directors, curators, designers, and educators who spend their professional lives immersed in the study of art and the presentation of art-historical research (and likely tour museums in markedly different ways themselves), it is less surprising when museum visits are put into the appropriate frame of reference. In 1983, Marilyn Hood published her research into why people do or

Visitors, Attitudes, Expectations: A Focus Group Experiment, (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Trust, 1991), 18. As noted in the introduction, Csikszentmihalyi has observed in his own research that “most potential museum visitors just do not know what they are suppose to do in front of a work of art,” Csikszentmihalyi, “Notes on Art Museum,” 403 (see introduction, n. 6). For a list of studies documenting how much (or little) visitors read in an exhibition see Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1996), Chapter 12, n. 2.

2. Phillip de Montebello has lamented just this evolution in museum trends. “Art is first,” he has said, yet “institutions have embraced as a primary part of their mission the museum experience, in opposition to the experience of coming to look at a work of art.” Rachel Donadio, “What Awaits the Met,” *Week in Review*, *New York Times*, January 13, 2008. The conclusion of The Rand report, *Gifts of the Muse*, also urges a renewed emphasis on art experiences over other types of museum activities, “The key policy implication of this [report] is that greater attention should be directed to introducing more Americans to engaging art experiences.” Kevin F. McCarthy and others, *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts* (CA: Rand Corporation, 2004), 71.

do not visit museums. It was built on the premise that a museum visit is a leisure-time choice for most people and that such choices are made based on how people value different kinds of experiences. Hood found that 50 to 55 percent of all museum visitors are “occasional” visitors who go to museums once or twice a year. This group typically values and seeks out leisure-time activities that allow them to feel comfortable and at ease in their surroundings, that involve social interaction, and that include participatory activities.³ These correspond in interesting ways with Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs (Figure 1.1). In his 1943 paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” Maslow proposed that people are not motivated to pursue what he terms higher levels of human needs (such as self-esteem or self-expression) until lower-level needs have been met.⁴

Safety and freedom from fear are second only to physical needs such as food, clothing, and good health. Hood’s study showed that occasional visitors do not always perceive museums to be safe and comfortable places. This is not to say that they expect something harmful to happen to them, but rather that they find museums unfamiliar and intimidating, and therefore, potentially fearful places. This finding is substantiated by a study

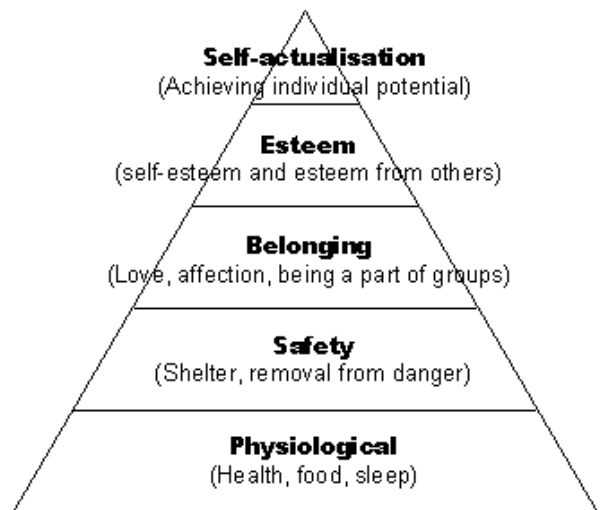


Figure 1.1: Maslow’s hierarchy

3. Marilyn G. Hood, “Staying Away: Why People Choose Not to Visit Museums,” *Museum News* 61, no. 4 (April 1983): 54-55.

4. Abraham H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation” (1943) Originally published in *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu, under 10.1.1.152.465.pdf>, 5.

conducted by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts and The J. Paul Getty Trust that found that visitor orientation was a problem in each of the eleven museums under study. Comments such as “I was kind of nervous because I really didn’t know where to go” were common.⁵ If museums are to meet visitors’ desires for participatory activities—which can be accomplished with engrossing art experiences and which fall within the upper levels of Maslow’s hierarchy—their fears of inadequacy or feeling of being out of place within the museum must be addressed. The value that visitors place on socializing reflects the third level of Maslow’s hierarchy dealing with fellowship. Again, if museums are to motivate visitors beyond this level, they need to include and support social interaction as part of the art experience.

In 1990 the Denver Museum of Art published the results of another study that complements Hood’s research. The Denver report quotes extensively from the transcripts of conversations with participants; their words are a gentle reminder that, although the study aims to identify the commonest denominators among museum patrons, visitors are unique people with their own ideas, beliefs, and values that museums should acknowledge, respect, and try to accommodate. This study grouped visitors as “art novices” who self-identified as having “moderate to high interest in art and low to moderate knowledge” and “advanced amateurs” identified as “knowledgeable visitors who pursue art as an avocation.”⁶ Based on several surveys, Denver estimates that 65-

5. Walsh, *Insights, Museums, Visitors, Attitudes*, 18.

6. McDermott-Lewis, “Through Their Eyes: Novices and Advanced Amateurs,” 7.

71% of their visitors fall into the first category of “art novices.”⁷ In addition to seeking a social experience, corroborating Hood’s research, the Denver study revealed that visitors want pleasant experiences that avoid negative feelings. One study participant put it this way: “Sometimes it’s the piece of art. Sometimes it’s just the pleasure of being there. Sometimes it’s the notion that you pass by eleven things you can’t remember, but, hey, the end result for you is that you’re just calm and at peace.”⁸ This finding also appears in attitudes about art in general. A 2001 Americans for the Arts survey reported that “over 75 percent of Americans agree that the arts “are a positive experience in a troubled world,” “give you pure pleasure,” and “give you an uplift from everyday experiences.”⁹

The Denver study also revealed that the majority of museum visitors want educative experiences. The report does not use the word “educative” but David Carr’s definition of this term as it relates to museums is apt: “*educative* means *tending to educate*, or tending to support the person inclined toward inquiry . . . any cultural institution is educative when it creates situations that invite, support, and expand independent inquiry without imposing the procedures, curricula, evaluations, or instructions of classrooms.”¹⁰ The Denver study discovered that when viewers talked about an “educational” experience it did not necessarily mean they wanted to be *taught* something. Rather, they wanted to learn something, which can be defined as broadly as

7. “Building a Framework,” in *The Denver Art Museum Interpretive Project*, ed. Steve Grinstead and Margaret Ritchie (Denver: Denver Museum of Art, 1990), 6, n. 5.

8. All Denver study participant quotes are attributed at the end of this section.

9. McCarthy, *Gifts of the Muse*, 71.

10. Carr, *Promise of Cultural*, 18 (see intro., n. 33).

encountering “something I haven’t seen before.” As one survey participant commented,

Oh no, [learning in a museum] is not information-related. [It’s] the sense of wonderment of how a person could think to create. It has something to do with the creativity of people, of human beings. . . . Although with the actual information that you give on each piece, who did it, what period of history it was—that’s very necessary to fill that out, you know—that completes it, but I don’t know if that’s the learning. [Pauses] That’s not it because, if that was it, then I could read a book. That’s very nice, but that’s not as nice as coming to a museum is.

Csikszentmihalyi observed similar sentiments in his study of flow as it corresponds to aesthetic experience in museums. He noted that “visitors do not expect intellectual thrills from attending a museum. They are, rather, hoping for surprise and excitement.”¹¹ This is in marked contrast to the emphasis most (but not all) museums place on transmitting art-historical information. There are some museum professionals who are questioning the role of museums as information dispensers. Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate Gallery, has asked whether museums should offer art experiences or curatorial interpretation and concluded, “Our aim must be to generate a condition in which visitors can experience a sense of discovery in looking at particular paintings, sculptures or installations in a particular room at a particular moment, rather than find themselves standing on the conveyor belt of history.”¹²

When visiting a museum, art novices like to react to art. They tend to wander through the galleries until something catches their attention or makes them smile. The process is often perceived to be a passive one.

11. Csikszentmihalyi, “Notes on Art,” 398 (see intro., n. 6).

12. Nicholas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation: the Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996), 55.

I think there's . . . less for you to do when you look at art because it's portrayed right there in front of you. And maybe it's because I know less about art than I do about music . . . but listening to music you have to use your mind and your feelings and your knowledge. . . . Art sort of jumps out at you, and you can enjoy it easier without putting as much of yourself into it.¹³

Art novices value the emotional responses that art generates. As a survey subject put it, "My experience with art is the feeling I get from looking at it. The overall effect." They like to make judgments about art and often conflate good with like and bad with dislike. For instance, if a painting is "well done" they like it and judge it good while things they do not like are deemed to be of lesser quality. Novice art viewers typically want to make personal connections to art, to relate it to things they have seen, done or felt: "I'm 29 years old and just had my first kid, so I enjoy looking at pictures of children right now, whereas I wouldn't have noticed them before." Art novices also look for human connections with the work of art which can take the form of expressing curiosity about the artist, the curator or a character depicted in a painting; they pose questions they would like to ask the artist or curator, or place themselves in a painting and create a story that connects them to the scene. They have limited perceptual skills and tend to focus on obvious components of a work: its colors, how "realistic" it appears, the subject matter, all the while looking for what is pleasing, "well done," and emotionally stimulating: "Well, the colors of it. That's a lot in the feeling. . . . The colors add a feel to it, the brightness of it. I don't know how else to put it." Finally, novice art viewers know there

13. Elsewhere, Hilde Hein has labeled this perception "the mythology of the museum." People (mis)perceive an aesthetic experience as an intuitive experience; if they do not have one they think something is wrong with them. "Visitors expect to sense aesthetic merit as they would perceive an object's shape or size, and traditional aesthetic theory gives them reason to think so." Hilde Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 132.

are more sophisticated ways to look at art; they may be uncomfortable about their knowledge level but are nonetheless protective of or even defensive about their own art viewing methods. One person in the study said, “You’re such a beginner that you don’t even know the terms. And I think that kind of scares people away a little. It kind of scares me a little.” Another study participant noted that: “If they [the people who work in the museum] don’t like something . . . they sit there and la-la-la-la [makes pompous-sounding noises] constantly. They don’t have an open mind to the fact that maybe somebody else likes it.”¹⁴

VISITOR BEHAVIORS

The two primary studies outlined above focus on the psychographic characteristics of the majority of art museum visitors from each study (50-55% from Hood’s study and 65-71% from Denver’s study) and provide insights into what these visitors look for and expect from a museum visit. This majority segment—what henceforth will be referred to as the “archetypal visitor”—is the target audience for this discussion. The other pertinent dimension to consider is how the archetypal visitor behaves in front of a work of art.

Building on earlier theories of developmental psychology, Abigail Housen has developed a five-stage theory of how people advance their art-viewing skills.¹⁵ Since the

14. Melora McDermott-Lewis, “Through Their Eyes,” 6-24 (all ellipses in the original).

15. Although other researchers have proposed staged theories of aesthetic development, Housen’s theory is used here for several reasons: (1) her research has persisted over years and now includes thousands of open-ended interviews with subjects; (2) the diversity of her sample size is arguably broader demographically than any other study; and (3) her study has been tested and generally validated by at least two other researchers: Carol A. Mockros and David Henry Feldman. See Carol A. Mockros, “Aesthetic Judgment: An Empirical Comparison of Two Stage Development Theories” (master’s thesis, Tufts

1970s she has interviewed more than six thousand people ranging in age from six to eighty and representing a broad demographic of social-economic, cultural, and educational levels. Having created a system for coding stream-of-consciousness conversations with these interviewees as they look at reproductions of art, Housen identified predictable patterns of thought that she divided into five progressive stages of aesthetic development.

At **Stage I, Accountive** viewers are storytellers. Using their senses and personal associations, they make concrete observations about the work of art that are woven into a narrative. . . . Here, judgments are based on what the viewers know and like. Emotions color the comments, as the viewers seem to enter the work of art and become part of an unfolding drama. . . .

At **Stage II, Constructive** viewers set about building a framework for looking at works of art, using . . . their own perceptions; their knowledge of the natural world; and the values of their social, moral and conventional world. . . . If the work does not look the way it is “supposed to”—if craft, skill, technique, hard work, utility, function are not evident . . . then, these viewers judge the work “weird,” lacking and of no value. . . .

At **Stage III, Classifying** viewers adopt the analytical and critical stance of the art historian. They want to identify the work as to place, school, style, time and provenance. They decode the surface of the canvas for clues, using their library of facts and figures which they are ready and eager to expand upon. This viewer believes that properly categorized, the work of art's meaning and message can be explained and rationalized. . . .

At **Stage IV, Interpretive** viewers seek a personal encounter with a work of art. . . . Now, critical skills are put in the service of feelings and intuitions, as these viewers let the meaning of the work—its symbols—emerge. . . . Each new encounter with a work of art presents a chance for new comparisons, insights, and experiences. Knowing that the work of art's identity and value are subject to re-interpretation, these viewers see their own processes subject to chance and change. . . .

University Eliot-Pearson Child Study Center, 1989); and David Henry Feldman, *Beyond Universals in Cognitive Development* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1994).

At **Stage V, Re-Creative** viewers, having established a long history of viewing and reflecting about works of art, now “willingly suspend disbelief.” A familiar painting is like an old friend who is known intimately. . . . Drawing on their own history with the work, in particular, and with viewing in general, these viewers combine a more personal contemplation with one which more broadly encompasses universal concerns. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the painting, intricately combining the personal and the universal. . . .¹⁶

The single greatest factor determining which stage a person falls into is the amount of art-viewing experience she or he has had; age, gender, education, and cultural differences play a much less significant role. Housen has found that “the predominance of adult viewers [are] at or near Stage II” and therefore might be considered most representative of the archetypal visitor’s aesthetic development level.¹⁷

Taken as a whole, this cognitive stage theory of aesthetic development is instructive with regard to how people look at art and what information they manipulate in the process. However, the present study will use Housen’s research only selectively. Housen, working with Philip Yenawine and their museum education initiative Visual Understanding in Education (VUE), use the theory as a basis for a curricular model meant to be utilized in classrooms over the course of a school semester or year. In fact, Housen’s longitudinal studies have demonstrated that advancing to higher level stages

16. Abigail Housen, “Eye of the Beholder: Research, Theory and Practice,” (paper presented at the conference “Aesthetic and Art Education: a Transdisciplinary Approach,” sponsored by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Service of Education, September 27-29, 1999, Lisbon, Portugal), 8-10. http://www.wolfsonian.org/education/litsymp/pdf/housen_research.pdf.

17. Ibid, 13. Housen has also observed that “it is possible for adults to show beginner Stage thinking that is indistinguishable from that of children” and “general education teachers . . . are most often at Stages that are roughly similar to their students.” Ibid, 21. Interestingly, Housen also found that most people working in museums typically fall within stage three, with a few mature staffers moving into the rarified world of stages four and five. Philip Yenawine, “Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design: Notes on Aesthetic Understanding and Its Development,” Victoria and Albert Museum, http://www.vam.ac.uk/files/file_upload/5756_file.pdf, 3.

takes a substantial amount of time and practice.¹⁸ Therefore, the progression from level to level outlined in this model has limited application for museums that have minutes rather than months to engage archetypal visitors with a work of art.

Also at issue is the assumption, implied by Housen's stages, that the ultimate aesthetic experience is hermeneutical—that is, that an engrossing art encounter equates with interpreting a work of art. While interpreting a work of art most definitely qualifies as an engrossing art encounter it is by no means the only way to achieve such experiences. It is also a path not necessarily available to the archetypal visitor who brings his or her own rich body of experiences, values, and beliefs to the museum but not necessarily art historical knowledge and skills needed to attempt such interpretations.

Finally, Housen's developmental theory is, by definition, hierarchal. This carries with it the suggestion that a stage I art encounter is inferior to or less sophisticated than later developmental stages. But as will be shown in the next chapter, even a viewer as experienced as the French philosopher and art critic Denis Diderot (1713-1784) can partake in art encounters that fit neatly within Housen's stage I category. The challenge is to define and provide multiple paths to engrossing art encounters that allow visitors to use their own complex, personal histories as a portal for them to enter the work in ways most engrossing and meaningful for them, even if they do not possess the knowledge or skills required for a hermeneutical encounter.

Where Housen's theory is most useful for the overarching question posed here is

18. Her research has determined that "aesthetic thinking is largely a stable trait, remaining the same over many years. Change in Stage happens slowly, at best over many months, but usually over years" and that "in our studies of beginner viewer aesthetic development, the average gain of experimental students is about 1/2 Stage per academic year." Housen, "Eye of the Beholder," 21-22.

in the identification of a plausible list of activities that people engage in while considering a work of art. Housen's cognitive stages of aesthetic development are, in effect, behavior patterns that she has identified based on the language people use to describe their reactions to works of art. These behaviors might be simplified as list-making, linking, creating meaning, and judging. These behaviors can be understood as the ways that visitors mentally manipulate information while standing in front of a work of art. Embedded in Housen's theory is also a wide assortment of information types that different viewers bring to their art-viewing experiences. This information includes idiosyncratic observations about a work of art, the work's visual relationship to things in the "real" world, the work's formal properties, as well as art-historical data, the viewer's life experiences, and their knowledge of philosophical ideas. Keeping in mind both the kinds of activities people initiate in front of a work of art and the types of information that they manipulate, other pathways to an engrossing art experience that reside outside of the Housen's stage boundaries can be imagined. For example, the appearance of philosophical ideas is found uniquely in the rarified world of stage V viewers. However, many people entering museums—stage I or II in their aesthetic development—are not devoid of philosophical knowledge. In fact, demographic studies show museums attract a disproportionate number of college-educated visitors who likely have at least a passing acquaintance with the history of ideas compared to the nation as a whole.¹⁹ What they

19. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, 45% of people "participating in programs about art, artists, and art museums" are college graduates compared to 27.4% within the general population. Sunil Iyengar, Tom Bradshaw, and Bonnie Nichols, *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Report #49), produced by the National Endowment for the Arts Office of Research & Analysis (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 25.

generally lack is skill in mining art for its philosophical implications, which is not to say that, presented with a pertinent philosophical concept, they could not associate it to their observations since “linking” is already a part of their art-viewing behavior. Stage I and II viewers are more likely to free-associate when looking at art, making intuitive leaps and linkages without a structured agenda. The benefit of this approach is that it allows viewers’ thoughts to follow ideas that matter to them and may lead to personal insights and meanings. Making available additional linkage options from which viewers can self-select (such as a philosophical idea or a piece of art-historical information) may contribute to an engrossing art experience that is still personally meaningful and remains within the capabilities of the viewer, yet enhances their art experience beyond what they might have achieved if left to their own behavioral patterns.

To be effective, any designed experience that a museum develops to optimize engrossing art encounters for the archetypal visitor should address the challenges presented by the psychographic profile that has emerged from decades of visitor studies and must accommodate the behavior patterns that inform visitors’ art-viewing habits. To recap, archetypal visitors:

- need to feel comfortable in the belief that the museum is a place where they belong, that this is a place that they and their family and friends fit in;
- want social experiences that provide opportunities for interacting with their companions;

- want participatory experiences but walk into a museum or stand in front of a work of art not knowing how to proceed; they feel they lack sufficient knowledge and skills for looking at art;
- want educative rather than educational experiences; they want to determine what they will learn or take away from the experience rather than being taught a lesson that the museum curator or educator wants to convey;
- like to react; they are list-makers and linkers, cataloging the things that they recognize in a work of art, inventing stories, making personal associations, passing emotional judgments, and/or matching elements of the work to what they know of the natural world;
- are curious about curatorial knowledge and judgments but are also suspicious or even resentful of museum authority;
- typically look at a work of art for less than thirty seconds (which is probably insufficient for them to have for an engrossing art encounter).

Traditional museum orientation and gallery didactics do not typically address these challenges and in some instances may even serve to undermine the chance that visitors will have an engrossing art experience. Gallery maps present the physical layout of the building but do not provide instructions on what to do within each gallery; the terminology used on many maps (e.g., Baroque Gallery) may actually reinforce visitors' insecurities about possessing adequate knowledge for visiting a museum. Audio tours isolate rather than encourage dialogue among visitors who are looking for a social experience. Gallery text panels, labels, and docent-led tours—that are there for people to

use or not use—tacitly suggest that people can only have an art experience if they possess sufficient art-historical knowledge.

With a few exceptions, most gallery didactics are conceived using a pedagogical model of expository teaching; content experts (in this case curators and educators) create “lessons” based on a sequence of information that are then transmitted or taught to the learner. It is the model most people think of when recalling their own formal education. Numerous studies suggest such a pedagogical strategy is inconsistent with museum visitors’ preferences for what has been termed educative rather than educational experiences. One way to solve these problems is the use of a constructivist approach. Constructivist learning theory emphasizes the learner’s role in constructing knowledge and may provide a more apt pedagogical model for helping to design engrossing art experiences.²⁰ The most germane characteristics of a constructivist learning experience for the purposes of this study are: (1) new knowledge is connected to *a priori* knowledge; learners are encouraged to *apply* knowledge learned from life experiences rather than merely *acquiring* rote information; (2) the instructor adopts a facilitator role rather than an authoritative role; (3) authentic tasks, such as real-world problems or projects, are utilized; and (4) it is an intrinsically satisfying activity that is an end in itself.²¹ Because it

20. For a comprehensive examination of a “constructivist museum” see George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (NY: Routledge, 1998).

21. See for example, John Dewey, *How We Think* (1910; repr. NY: Barnes and Noble, 2005); John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (NY: Capricorn Books, 1934); Donald L. Finkel, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 2000); George E. Hein and Mary Alexander, *Museums: Places of Learning* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1998); Carr, *Promise of Cultural*; Stephen E. Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002); Jerome S. Bruner, *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand* (NY: Atheneum, 1971); and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson, *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter* (CA: The J. Paul Getty Trust, 1990).

is visitor-centered rather than information-centered, it also accommodates the personal narratives that people bring with them to a museum.

The psychographic profile of an archetypal visitor outlined above is intended to ensure that any attempt to optimize engrossing art experiences within the context of museums meets the needs and interests of those visitors. It is a vain argument within the museum field that such accommodations must necessarily result in “dumbing down” the art experience. Implicit in this assertion is that the preferred ways to experience art are synonymous with those that professional art historians find meaningful. If, on the other hand, museum staff are willing to acknowledge that the acquisition and application of art-historical data is a sufficient but not *necessary* way to have an engrossing art encounter (as the long history of art and the brief tenure of art history bears witness), they are primed to begin facilitating other kinds of engrossing art experiences for the majority of visitors walking through their museums’ doors daily.

Chapter Two

ENGROSSING EXPERIENCES

Having sketched a profile of the archetypal visitor who is the intended beneficiary of this study, the next step is to define, in general terms at first, some fundamental characteristics of an engrossing art encounter. Given the pragmatic premise of the discussion, it is appropriate to start with “real-world” examples of a variety of art experiences. What follows are four documented accounts of engrossing encounters with works of art. These examples do not reflect rare and grand epiphanies; rather, they are humbler encounters that nonetheless were significant enough to warrant written memorialization by their authors. Although these examples are seemingly random, a few informal criteria did inform their selection. Collectively, they reflect different kinds of engrossing encounters with art. Within the selections are examples of some of the behaviors that mark a range of art experiences as outlined in chapter one. All of the viewers construed personal relevance and meaning to their art-viewing event and linked their observations to ideas outside of the frame of the painting. What information they chose to draw upon in their written accounts is also wide-ranging. It includes, in varying degrees, idiosyncratic observations about the art, the work’s visual relationship to things in the “real” world, the work’s formal properties, art-historical data, personal life experiences, and philosophical ideas. Not every category of activity or information identified in Housen’s research makes an appearance in these narratives, but enough of

them are present to substantiate the behaviors she identified while demonstrating how such behaviors can be understood and used outside of a novice/expert developmental model.

Encounter 1

Peter Schjeldahl, art critic for *The New Yorker*, claims to have the same experience each time he visits the Prado to see Velázquez's *Las Meninas*,

My first reaction is always disappointment at the course, almost drab, handmadeness of the big (but smaller than I thought) canvas, the absence of a glamour that I have cherished in memory. . . . Then, rather abruptly, I find myself under its spell . . . as if I had never been before—pity the fool that I must have been when I last viewed the work. This time I get it!

But it is a short-lived insight. Stepping back onto the streets of Madrid his “heart’s incorrigible partialities” will distort his memory so that some details are magnified and others disappear. His reaction is strongly felt and of limited duration. The magic of the picture casts a spell on him “rather abruptly” and while under its power, saturated in the moment, he possesses a kind of certain knowledge (“I get it!”). His pleasure derives from knowing “what a great painting looks like while [I am] looking at [it]” and the memory of “how [I] felt, looking.”¹

Schjeldahl’s Prado visit most certainly qualifies as an engrossing art encounter, a meaningful, sustained, immersive encounter with a work of art. But his is just one kind of engrossing experience marked by a powerful, seemingly intuitive response to a

1. Peter Schjeldahl, “Bearing Fruit,” *The New Yorker* LXXXV, no. 8 (April 6, 2009): 76.

recognized masterpiece. What do other immersive art encounters look like and are there any shared characteristics to be found in them?

Encounter 2

The French philosopher, Denis Diderot, ostensibly sitting by a window ruminating on a view of the countryside before him wrote,

I was mulling this over, nonchalantly stretched out in an armchair, allowing my mind to wander as it would, a delicious state in which the soul is unselfconsciously honest, the mind effortlessly precise and fastidious, in which ideas and feelings emerge naturally, as from some favorable soil; my eyes were fixed on an admirable landscape, and I said to myself: The Abbé is right, our artists understand nothing of all this, for the spectacle of their most beautiful productions has never stimulated in me the rapture that I feel now, the pleasure of belonging to myself, the pleasure of knowing myself to be as good as I am, the pleasure of examining and taking delight in myself, and the still sweeter pleasure of forgetting myself: Where am I at this moment? What is all this surrounding me? I don't know, I can't say. What's lacking? Nothing. What do I want? Nothing. If there's a God, his being must be like this, taking pleasure in himself.²

This account is actually a literary conceit. In reality, Diderot is recalling his experience of viewing a landscape painted by Horace Vernet on view in the Salon of 1767. While contemplating the painting, Diderot lets his aesthetic imagination transport him into the landscape, conversing with its residents, being distracted by the sounds of a far-off laundress, and so on (a behavior encapsulated by Housen's Stage I viewer). But the conceit describes more than just the painting, it also describes his experience of the painting.³ With art as catalyst, Diderot experienced self-abnegation and being present in a

2. Denis Diderot, *Diderot on Art II: The Salon of 1767*, Vol 2, trans. and ed. John Goodman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 97-98.

3. Thomas Crow points out that Diderot's Salon critiques were written away from the paintings using copious notes he took during multiple visits to each exhibition. Although they are after-the-fact accounts of

moment that is separate from everything that surrounds him outside of the painting. The pleasure he derives from the experience is its own reward and occurs in a moment without time. About another Vernet landscape painting at the same Salon, Diderot wrote of “the solitude of a place” that it evoked and the sensation that “time no longer exists, nothing measures it.”⁴

Encounter 3

Peter de Bolla, a Fellow of King’s College at Cambridge University, has written at length about his encounter with Barnett Newman’s *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* which hangs in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. He begins by recognizing the importance of the painting’s special place: “this canvas, this paint, this wall, this museum, this space.”⁵ Rather than traversing the nearly eight-foot long canvas to take it all in, de Bolla discovers that the painting turns his entire body into an eye as he “notices the fuller somatic presencing to vision.”⁶ The experience is one of nowness,

the ocular . . . [is] transformed into the ontological, as if one could see
with the eye of being. In this way the somatic fact of presence, being here,
at this moment in the look, comes to be overlaid on a metaphysical
sensation of being. The experience of Newman’s art makes me feel—both

his viewing experience, Crow contends that Diderot’s descriptions still grasp “in a profound way . . . how it is that one knows art.” Thomas Crow, “Diderot’s Salon,” in *Diderot on Art II: The Salon of 1767*, trans. and ed. John Goodman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), xvii.

4. Diderot, *Diderot on Art*, 92.

5. De Bolla, *Art Matters*, 26 (see intro., n. 9).

6. Ibid, 41.

affectively and cognitively—what it is like to be, or, perhaps more accurately, helps me feel being. . . .⁷

De Bolla's aesthetic encounter with Newman's painting actually transpires over many years. Throughout his struggle to put into words the effect that the painting has on him, de Bolla frequently interjects quotes from Newman's own writing. De Bolla does not specify if the art-historical documentation helped shape his experience of the painting or merely validated his own response to the work; whichever the case, a part of his experience is confirmed over the years by repeated readings of the artist's own ideas and therefore they might be considered a part of the behavior that informs de Bolla's experience of the work. In front of this work of art de Bolla stands apart from his daily life; what came before and what comes after are irrelevant. According to de Bolla, even his cognitive powers are different in the presence of this painting, "I know things differently when in this state; indeed, I recognize that I know things that in other states are not accessible to me as knowledge."⁸

It is a profound experience for de Bolla, one in which he finds himself "as deeply moved as I have ever been."⁹ It can be said that standing in front of the work is its own reward for de Bolla. "The strongest affect I have in front of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is composure; the image seems to compose me, to generate a sense of well-being, of being

7. Ibid, 48.

8. Ibid, 53.

9. Ibid, 55.

at one with myself.”¹⁰

Encounter 4

The writer Wilma Dykeman, writing about Jacob van Ruisdael’s painting *Wooded Landscape with Waterfall*, starts by imagining the artist speaking to her, “Come, enter my world for a little while” she hears him say. And then, describing the experience she notes, “I sit before his painting and discover an autobiographical encounter.” She taps into her childhood memories of living near a stream; her first words that, as it happens, were about the water in that stream; the first book she authored which was about a river near her adult home. She muses on the metaphorical significance of water in her life and in her writing. But her art experience does not stop there, as she writes, “and still I probe.”

Leaving the painting and the museum, she turns to art history where “the final piece of the puzzle” as to why this painting attracts her so strongly becomes apparent. In a book about the artist, Dykeman discovers that, in seventeenth-century Holland, a landscape was understood as “God’s second book.” It is this insight that illuminates for Dykeman “the stronger bond!” of the painting. In her words, “This is the kinship that art makes possible across time and space. It leads me back to my own, oldest place even as it sends me deeper into myself” and, she observes, the painting has the power to take people back “to experiences at once so private and so universal they challenge our understanding, our wonder.”¹¹

Dykeman’s experience is intense and absorbing. Like de Bolla’s, it is a start-and-

10. Ibid, 53.

11. Wilma Dykeman, “On Entering Jacob van Ruisdael’s *Wooded Landscape with Waterfall*,” in *The Store of Joys*, ed. Huston Paschal (Winston-Salem, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1997), 27-28.

stop experience, beginning at the museum, requiring reading and reflection, and culminating back at the painting where she comes to recognize her strong bond to it. In this experience, time itself does not stand still so much as the past and present merge while she feels simultaneously back in “her own oldest place” and also deep within herself during the time spent in front of the painting.

Although each of these encounters is unique, several key details can be generalized to build a preliminary description of an engrossing art encounter. At its most basic, such an encounter can be understood as an absorbing experience prompted by a work of art. It occurs in a specific place (a museum) during a particular interval of time. Its duration can vary from a moment to minutes to months (the latter consisting of a reoccurring engagement with a work not dissimilar to reading a book over time); more importantly, it has a beginning and an end. It is a special place/time event. It is an ecstatic experience in the original meaning of the term: *ex stasis*—a break from the *status quo*.¹² It stands apart from the business of daily life and the practical concerns of work, bills, and what’s for dinner.¹³ As one writer aptly observed, “there cannot be any experience of the ordinary. . . . The ordinary is what is there when there are no experiences going on.”¹⁴ Despite the fact that this special place/time event has duration, the sensation is more akin to timelessness: time itself seems to change or stop, one floats in a precious, insulated

12. James S. Hans, *The Play of the World* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1981), 30.

13. Being “marked out from what went before and what came after” is what makes experiences noteworthy according to John Dewey. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 36 (see chap. 1, n. 21).

14. Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 20.

bubble of nowness. During this heightened sense of being in the moment, the viewer's somatic self slips away—one loses oneself to the experience. It engenders deep personally defined satisfaction which is its own reason for being. Csikszentmihalyi refers to such experiences as autotelic: "The term 'autotelic' derives from two Greek words, *auto* meaning self and *telos* meaning goal [and] refers to a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward."¹⁵

It is not necessary to be dogmatic and insist that every art experience possess each of the characteristics described. Nonetheless, the four distinct ways of engaging with art described above all share multiple aspects of an engrossing art encounter. Each is an intense, absorbing, place/time event prompted by a work of art. Often time stands still; the past, the future, even one's own sense of self temporarily evaporate. All of them culminate in a mental episode—phenomenological or cognitive—that produces deep satisfaction or pleasure that is self-defined. It is the experience of art as an ontological event.

In what follows, Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois describe another kind of place/time event that is not associated with looking at art but that shares much with art experiences. Huizinga has written,

It [is] a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the [participant]

15. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (NY: Harper & Row, 1990), 67.

intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.

And Caillois describes the same kind of experience in markedly similar terms,

[It is] an activity which is

1. *Free*: in which [participation] is not obligatory . . . ;
2. *Separate*: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;
3. *Uncertain*: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result obtained beforehand, and some latitude for innovation being left to the [participant's] initiative;
4. *Unproductive*: creating neither goods nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the [participants], ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the [experience];
5. *Governed by rules*: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;
6. *Make-believe*: Accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life.

Both authors are describing the experience of play. The first quote comes from Huizinga's influential book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* and the second comes from Caillois's text, *Man, Play and Games*.¹⁶ The similarities between an art experience and Huizinga's and Caillois's descriptions of play experience reveal an intrinsic kinship:

16. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, [1950] 1955), 13; Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 9-10.

Table 2.1: Similarities between art and play experiences

ENGROSSING ART EXPERIENCE	HUIZINGA’S PLAY EXPERIENCE	CAILLOIS’S PLAY EXPERIENCE
a special place/time event	existing in defined time limits and spaces	with precise time-limits marked by a beginning and end, and occurring within a defined location
unessential to the business of living (e.g., securing food and shelter)	purposeless or pursued with disinterestedness	unproductive
an ex static event that stands apart from the everyday	happening outside of the realm of “ordinary life”	a second reality or a free unreality
produces deep satisfaction or pleasure (autotelic)	pleasure inducing; absorbing the participant intensely and utterly (autotelic)	
altered sense of time		

Of course, I am not the first person to suggest a strong corollary between an art experience and a play experience. Perhaps the most recent and extensive examination of the similarities can be found in *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter*, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson. The authors draw comparisons between flow experiences and the aesthetic theory of Monroe Beardsley. Csikszentmihalyi’s psychological state of “flow,” which he calls an “optimal experience,” is “a state of consciousness characterized by intense concentration bordering on oblivion, yet requiring complex mental or physical activity. Various art forms, games, sports, meditation, religious rituals, and mathematical and scientific investigations are among the activities that usually provide flow experiences.”¹⁷ Flow shares multiple characteristics with Beardsley’s criteria for aesthetic experiences, leading Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson to suggest that aesthetic experiences are a subset of flow

17. Csikszentmihalyi, “Notes on Art Museum Experiences,” 399 (see intro., n. 6.).

experiences.¹⁸ Several of the characteristics found in both Csikszentmihalyi's flow and Beardsley's aesthetic theory are, not surprisingly, also the traits found in play experiences as defined by Huizinga and Caillois, and summarized in the table above: attention focused on a specific activity, release from the concerns of the past or the future, and autotelic pleasure or contentment.¹⁹

Others have also suggested that museums might profit from an examination of play and its implications for engaging visitors. Jane McGonigal, director of game research and development for the Institute of the Future, presented a lecture "Gaming the Future of Museums" for the Center for the Future of Museums. Although not speaking specifically about art museums, McGonigal suggests that incorporating games into the museum experience is a way to give people things to do with the people they like while also letting them successfully accomplish a task, and feel part of something larger than themselves—that is, things that correspond to what archetypal visitors value in their leisure-time choices.²⁰ Foreshadowing McGonigal, the president of the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, Harold Skramstad, urges museums to design experiences for their visitors by "partnering with filmmakers, game creators, artists, poets, storytellers" in his outline for a twenty-first century museum agenda.²¹ Hilde Hein

18. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, *Art of Seeing*, 9 (see chap. 1, n. 21).

19. Ibid, 8. Beardsley's theory of aesthetic experience and Csikszentmihalyi's and Robinson's flow theory of aesthetic experience, are discussed at greater length in chapter five when philosophical aesthetics are examined.

20. Jane McGonigal, "Gaming the Future of Museums," webcast for the Center for the Future of Museums, January 8, 2009. <http://www.futureofmuseums.org/events/lecture/mcgonigal.cfm>.

21. Harold Skramstad, "An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century," *Dædalus* 128, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 123.

explored the topic more specifically pertinent to art museums in an essay entitled, “Play as an Aesthetic Concept,” and suggested that “our understanding of art and aesthetic experience might profit from an elaboration and clarification of the concept of play.”²² While Hein saw promise in exploring art through the lens of play theory, she was also stymied by the paucity of rigorous literature on the topic when she wrote the essay in 1968.

Often considered either too childish or too frivolous, play has received relatively little serious study. Historical scholarship has been limited to the work of anthropologists, sociologists, and education specialists whose focus concerns the function or purpose of play rather than its structure as a designed experience.²³ Even as recently as 1997, the play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith observed,

In scholarship the denigration of play in intellectual terms is shown by the absence of the key term *play* from the index of almost every book about the behavior of human beings. It is true that increased research attention has been given to play within psychology in recent decades, and within biology throughout this century, but there is still much more resistance to the subject than is justified, given its universal role in human behavior.²⁴

22. Hilde Hein, “Play as an Aesthetic Concept,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 27, no. 2 (Autumn, 1968): 71.

23. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 309.

24. Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 208.

Play is only now burgeoning into an independent intellectual discipline, due in large part to the advent, in recent years, of college degree programs in video gaming.²⁵ The time has never been more propitious for an exploration of how play might help shape art viewing experiences within the context of museums. A selective look back at the historical associations between art and play will be helpful in clarifying the most meaningful relationship upon which to build.

The similarities between play and art was recognized as early as the fifth century B.C.E. when Plato equated both with pleasure-inducing imitation. Plato, however, was more interested in the true and the ideal; art and play, as imitations, were deemed untruthful and therefore inferior to the ideal.²⁶ Aristotle was somewhat more sympathetic to the value of art and play, which both have the capacity to generate catharsis thereby allowing people a risk-free way to explore emotions of pleasure and pain. But like Plato, Aristotle had his turn at denigrating the importance of play and ultimately was only grudgingly tolerant of it in the *Poetics* as an acceptable amusement for the masses so long as it was not tainted by Dionysian impulses.²⁷ In a similar vein, Giambattista Vico, in the eighteenth century, joined art and play in an antithetical relationship with serious

25. Significant research has begun to appear as is evidenced by the plethora of books on game design theory published since 2000, the creation of numerous on-line research clearinghouses including The National Institute of Play (www.nifplay.org), the International Journal of Computer Game Research (www.gamestudies.org), and Ludology (ludology.org); annual international conferences such as the Game Developer's Conference; and initiatives such as Games for Change, which is using video games to address such important social issues as poverty, human rights, and climate change (<http://gamesforchange.org>).

26. Plato *Republic* X.602.

27. Mechthild Nagel, *Masking the Abject: A Genealogy of Play* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 56.

knowledge: metaphysics “purges the mind of childish prejudice” while poetry “drowns it in the same,” that is, art (in this instance, poetry) is a childish activity.²⁸

In the eighteenth century, Kant softened the antithetical approach by using play as a foil to art. He understood aesthetic experience to involve the mind in the free play of the imagination, unfettered by the *a priori* ordering systems that shape people’s rational faculties. However, while art and play both engage the imagination, Kant warned that art, like science, must still grapple with understanding and reason lest it devolve into “mere play.”²⁹ Herbert Spencer also used play as a foil to art in his evolutionary surplus-energy theory. In this theory, play is how animals expend energy once physical needs have been met. Art is a more sophisticated form of play that only makes its appearance in highly evolved animals.³⁰

In general, the Western intellectual tradition has not been kind to play, seldom allowing it to stand on its own. More typically, play is set off in opposition to some more admirable human endeavor. The ancient Greeks contrasted it to seriousness.³¹ In the middle ages, play was seen as the antithesis of work; it was the devil’s workshop and a prelude to sin.³² An ingrained puritanical bias still haunts the concept of play, which is

28. Giambattista Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, giusta l’edizione del 1744 a cura di Fausto Nicolini, (Scrittori d’Italia) Vol. 1, Bk.III, Ch. 26, quoted in Katharine Everett Gilbert and Helmut Kuhn, *A History of Esthetics* (NY: MacMillan Company, 1939), 273.

29. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publication Company, [1790] 1987), 171.

30. Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2 (1881; repr., Boston: Longwood Press, 1977), 626-632.

31. Nagel, *Masking the Abject*, 2.

32. Julius A. Elias, “Art and Play,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (Charlottesville, VA: The

frequently contrasted disadvantageously to work, with the concomitant dichotomies of the frivolous to the serious and the childish to the adult.

It is tempting, in a discussion that relies so heavily on the concept of play, to protest against this antagonistic contrast, insisting on a weightier understanding of the concept of play or at least setting up a different dichotomy.³³ Instead, I argue that museums might profit from a closer association with play that accepts its non-work credentials—after all, few people visit museums to work (as Hood’s study substantiates). To its practitioners, art is a serious, even a profound, human endeavor; for the archetypal visitor it is still a casual pastime. It is possible to be both, as Dave Hickey once provocatively asserted, when he claimed that the high seriousness given to art by the art world is a “political fiction,” and he suggested that a more accurate perspective might be to regard art like the culture regards sports—“as a wasteful, privileged endeavor through which very serious issues are sorted out.”³⁴

The association of art experiences to play need not be construed as trivializing such experiences. The twentieth-century Catholic theologian Romano Guardini, in his 1937 essay, “The Liturgy as Play,” presents a model for understanding serious play while

Electronic Text Center at the University of Virginia, 2003), <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-logical/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv1-17>.

33. Some writers, for example, have emphasized the make-believe character of play; seen as fiction, play’s opposite might be understood as the real or the everyday. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Some Paradoxes in the Definition of Play,” in *Play as Context*, ed. Alyce Taylor Cheska (West Point, NY: Leisure Press, 1981), 14; Hein, “Play as Aesthetic,” 70-71; John Schwartzman, “Play: Epistemology and Change,” in *Play as Context*, ed. Alyce Taylor Cheska (West Point, NY: Leisure Press, 1981), 55; Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), passim.

34. Dave Hickey, “Frivolity and Unction,” in *Drawing Us In: How We Experience Visual Art*, ed. Deborah Chasman and Edna Chiang (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 111-113.

accepting its antithesis in work.³⁵ Guardini contends that the liturgy, play, and art (both its creation and contemplation) are the three earthly phenomena that most closely mirror the experience of heaven. All three are to be cherished because they have “no purpose, but [are] full of profound meaning.” The liturgy “means foregoing maturity with all its purposefulness, and confining oneself to play.” Play, art, and the liturgy allow the soul to “have its existence and live its life.” Here play is assigned value as an ontological phenomenon; it is presented as serious without being somber. This ontological concept of play is central to the aesthetic theory of two philosophers: Friedrich Schiller in the eighteenth century and Hans-Georg Gadamer in the twentieth. It is within this ontological concept of play (described below) that a valid and meaningful relationship between art and play experiences can be found and it provides the intellectual foundation for using game design to optimize engrossing art experiences for the archetypal visitor.

Friedrich Schiller, in “Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man” (1795), describes play as the vehicle by which people harmonize different dispositions that, left unchecked, restrict one’s ability to live fully. According to Schiller, people have different “impulses” that affect how they perceive reality or know truth. On the one hand are the “idealists,” motivated by moral necessity, the laws of reason, and a conviction in universal truths that are forever and for everyone. They tend to value thinking over feeling. On the other hand are “realists,” motivated by physical necessity, the laws of nature, and personal interpretations of sensory experiences. They tend to privilege

35. Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lame (London: Sheed and Ward, 1937). Guardini is not the only person to equate play with religion. For instance, both Huizinga and Caillois understood play as a prelude to and the source of religious ritual.

emotions over intellect. But there is a third impulse according to Schiller, one that removes the limitations of the laws of reason and of nature, that does not allow a thinking or a sensuous response to dominate to the exclusion of the other, an impulse that lets people develop their full potential and possess “clarity of mind [and] liveliness of feeling.”³⁶ Schiller calls this the “play impulse.” “Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and *he is only fully a human being when he plays.*”³⁷ This is not the play of puppies or children. For Schiller, play is a very particular experience, a particular way of being: “we know that it is precisely play and play alone, which of all man’s states and conditions is the one that makes him whole and unfolds both sides of his nature at once.”³⁸ The state of play is a “state of supreme reality” which is the culmination of a person’s aesthetic education.³⁹ It is a mode of being in which a person oscillates between sensation and reason. Aesthetic contemplation is the highest form of play, such that “there results a momentary peace; time itself, the eternally moving, stands still.” It is simultaneously a “state of being” and an “activity.” In play, people create their own rules of the imagination, it is a “free activity,” “purposeless,” and “pleasure producing.”⁴⁰

36. Friedrich Schiller, “Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man,” trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkerson and L. A. Willoughby, in *Essays*, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (1795, repr., New York: Continuum, 1993), 111-112.

37. Ibid, 131.

38. Ibid, 130.

39. Ibid, 148.

40. Ibid, 147-175. Schiller, like most philosophers, conceives of a single path to aesthetic experience which involves reconciling a person’s conflicting impulses. This, however, is at odds with the intent of the current study which allows that an aesthetic experience can be emotional or intellectual, personal or

The concept of play as an ontological phenomenon was reasserted in the twentieth century by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his influential 1960 work [English translation, 1975], *Truth and Method*. Gadamer equates play with a “mode of being of the work of art.”⁴¹ According to Gadamer, there are ways of knowing “genuine truth” that cannot be achieved through science or the rational faculties. The concept of play explains how art embodies this different way of understanding truth which Gadamer recognized as knowledge of the essence of things. When absorbed in play we are not playing, we are being. Reality is always about becoming, according to Gadamer; it is oriented toward the future and so is always tinged with dissatisfaction and unfulfillment. Play, on the other hand, is a transformed mode of being that exists in the present. The transformation is not an “enchantment,” rather it is a “transformation back into true being” through which “what is emerges.” If reality is always tinged with the dissatisfaction of perpetual becoming, play involves “sheer fulfillment” in a state of pure being. “The player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him.”⁴²

Like Schiller, Huizinga, and Caillois, Gadamer identified several key characteristics of play which he also thought were present in aesthetic experience. Play is disinterested, which frees the player from “the actual strain of existence.” One engages in

universal, depending on the epistemological belief system of the viewer. To this end, this study does not presume to suggest that a meaningful encounter with a work of art will necessarily profoundly change a person’s epistemological beliefs. It is Schiller’s ontological concept of play that is of interest here, not his theory that aesthetic experience is a reconciliation of our rational and emotional predispositions.

41. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (1960; repr., London: Continuum, 2004), 102.

42. Ibid, 109-112.

it voluntarily for the “sheer fulfillment” it generates. Play occurs within “the field of the game” and exists within a “closed world.” It is without time or outside of time and requires being “purely present.” It is structured by rules and produces the effect of “self forgetfulness.”⁴³

In Gadamer’s theory, art is play transformed into structure, the consummation of an activity turned into a work of art. Art is ideal play. Art as play is transformative not altering: to transform means to change completely, while to alter means to change only in part. The play of art transforms, changing us completely during play; we become immersed in play to the point that, if we become aware of ourselves playing, the spell is broken and play stops. The play of art is neither subjective (about the player) nor objective (about the art); rather, the subject of the play of art is play itself. In this state of play “what represents itself . . . is the lasting and true.”⁴⁴

Although Schiller and Gadamer share a belief in the ontological nature of play, there is an important distinction to be made. For Schiller, play is predominately about self-actualization, while for Gadamer, play involves knowledge of the true. These disparate ideas of ontological play are reflected in the narratives that started this chapter. Schiller’s concept of play corresponds to Diderot’s experiences which gave the critic “the pleasure of examining and taking delight in myself,” and Dykeman’s experience that “leads me back to my own, oldest place even as it sends me deeper into myself.” Gadamer’s concept of play corresponds to Schjeldahl’s and de Bolla’s encounters which

43. Ibid, 103-22.

44. Ibid, 111.

culminate in a sense of certain knowledge—Schjeldahl’s “I get it!” and de Bolla’s contention “that I know things that in other states are not accessible to me as knowledge.”

The philosophical analogies between play and aesthetic experience presented by Schiller and Gadamer give credence to the strategy of linking these different kinds of experiences in positive and constructive ways. They re-conceive of play as a distinct mode of being that allows us to exist fully in the moment, immersed in a capsule of timelessness that serves no other purpose than the deep satisfaction that it generates. Predating Gadamer by seven years (1968), another German philosopher, Eugen Fink, wrote that “play resembles an oasis of happiness” where time is not experienced as a “rush of successive moments, but rather as the one full moment that is, so to speak, a glimpse of eternity.”⁴⁵

When the characteristics of art and play experiences are charted alongside Schiller’s and Gadamer’s ontological definition of aesthetic experience striking similarities begin to emerge:

45. Eugen Fink, “The Oasis of Happiness: Toward an Ontology of Play,” trans. Ute Saine and Thomas Saine, *Yale French Studies* 41 (1968): 21.

Table 2.2: Characteristics of art, play, and aesthetic experiences

ENGROSSING ART EXPERIENCE	HUIZINGA’S PLAY EXPERIENCE	CAILLOIS’S PLAY EXPERIENCE	SCHILLER’S AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AS PLAY	GADAMER’S AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AS PLAY
a special place/time event	existing in defined time limits and spaces	with precise time-limits marked by a beginning and end, and occurring within a defined location		field of the game
unessential to the business of living (e.g., securing food and shelter)	purposeless or pursued with disinterestedness	unproductive	purposeless	free from the strain of existence
an ex static event that stands apart from the everyday	happening outside of the realm of “ordinary life	a second reality or a free unreality	a supreme reality	transformation back into true being
produces deep satisfaction or pleasure (autotelic)	pleasure inducing; absorbing the participant intensely and utterly (autotelic)		momentary peace; pleasure producing	sheer fulfillment
altered sense of time			time stands still	purely present
	a voluntary activity that is self-motivating	a free and volunteer activity	free activity	voluntary
	rule bound	governed by rules	self-imposed rules	structured by rules
		uncertain/open ended		a closed world

Notice that Schiller’s and Gadamer’s theories substantiate the trait of an altered sense of time that was observed in several of the opening narratives but that did not have a corresponding role in Huizinga’s and Caillois’s play theories. The table also reveals a void in the concept of an engrossing art experience as it has been defined thus far. The bottom of the table includes three traits that have been absent in the discussion thus far: that such experiences are voluntary, rule-bound, and can be open-ended or closed. That an engrossing art encounter in a museum will be a voluntary experience goes without saying—no museum would impose a mandatory gallery experience on a visitor. Even if it

could, the freedom to participate voluntarily gives play its “indispensable motive power” according to Caillois.⁴⁶ The concept of rules and of an open-ended or closed experience, however, add important features to an understanding of an engrossing art experience.

Schiller posits that the “realist” and the “idealist” impulses are regulated by a set of externally imposed rules, which he calls “laws” (natural and rational laws respectively), while play is free from these outward limitations. Play is modeled on self-imposed rules selected by the player (artist) or as Schiller wrote, “before the imagination, in its productive capacity, can act according to its own laws, it must first . . . have freed itself from alien laws.”⁴⁷ Gadamer makes a distinction between play as an event in which rules regulate activity and games in which rules determine outcomes. In Gadamer’s theory, a game, as a subset of play, is “closed within itself.”⁴⁸ Caillois, on the other hand, sees play and games as opposite ends of a scale. On one side of the scale is *paidia*, the “spontaneous manifestation of the play impulse” and is understood as an open-ended experience with loose rules that grant the player great latitude in the activities undertaken. On the other end of the scale is *ludus*, or games which require skill, mastery, and explicit rules. Caillois considers these closed experiences because they are highly regulated by official rules and regulations.⁴⁹ Rules are what determine what is true within the world of

46. Caillois, *Man, Play*, 27.

47. Schiller, “Letters,” 173 n.

48. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 109.

49. Caillois, *Man, Play*, 27-33.

play according to Huizinga.⁵⁰ The implications of rules and open-ended and closed experiences will take on greater import when the discussion moves to the structuring principles of game design in chapter four. Suffice it to say at this juncture that games consist of a process and a structure. The process can be understood as the activity assigned to the player; as Jay Rounds says, play creates a “task environment.”⁵¹ It allows viewers to transition from on-looker to participant. A game’s structure determines how that activity is organized. Rules are an essential component of the structure of games and can provide visitors with clear expectations and guidelines for their foray into the galleries.

50. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11.

51. Jay Rounds, “Strategies for the Curiosity-Driven Museum Visitor,” *Curator* 47, no. 4 (October, 2004): 401.

Chapter Three

TWO CASE STUDIES

To begin envisioning what play might look like within the context of a museum and what forms it might take, the following two real-world examples will prove illuminating. Each case study provides an opportunity to examine different principles of game design and how museum professionals can use such principles for structuring experiences for their visitors. The case studies also provide cautionary lessons; in the first example, the complete disregard for the psychographic profile of archetypal visitors (who constitute the majority of museum visitors) results in an exhibition that would likely prove intellectually challenging, in the extreme, for most visitor. The second case study demonstrates that the application of the tenets of game design is insufficient by itself; without a theoretical underpinning based on the literature of aesthetic theory, the application of game design thinking can easily veer into mere entertainment.

Case Study #1: “Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum”

In 1997 the French philosopher and art historian Hubert Damisch curated an exhibition at the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam titled “Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum.” Using the museum’s permanent collection, Damisch created a series of curious installation arrangements intended as an experiment, one

meant to turn the museum into a “laboratory.”¹ The exhibition served as an exploration of art functioning in non-historical ways and as a critique of how standard museum exhibitions fail to engage visitors.

Damisch is a structuralist, more interested in relationships between ideas than in the historical significance of works of art. In fact, he has been called an anti-historian of art.² He objects to the “tyranny” of history in art history’s approach to looking at art to the exclusion of using art as a platform for thinking about transhistorical or Big Ideas.³ Rather than exploring what art has to say, he wants to explore what it makes *us* say.⁴ He refers to art historical conventions as a “ludic scheme”—the term ludic deriving from both the French *ludique* (playful) and the Latin *lūdus* (game). In the catalog to the exhibition Damisch writes, “We can no longer be satisfied with the model that still too often dictates the organization of museums, that of a great narrative reduced to a succession of images, and meaningful only if it can pretend to be encyclopedic and encompass the very limits of the world (which is enough to thwart the very aspiration).”⁵ One of his objectives in the “Moves” exhibition is to offer another strategy, another ludic scheme, for engaging viewers with art, positing that “an imperceptible warping of the

1. Hubert Damisch, “Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum,” in *Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum*, (Rotterdam: Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, 1997), 75.

2. Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Hubert Damisch, “A Conversation with Hubert Damisch,” *October* 85 (Summer 1998): 3.

3. Ernst van Alphen, “Moves of Hubert Damisch: Thinking about Art in History,” in *Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum*, (Rotterdam: Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, 1997), 99.

4. Bois, “Conversation,” 12.

5. Damisch, *Moves*, 94. This idea echos a quote in chapter one about museums that place their visitors “on the conveyor belt of history.” Serota, *Experience or Interpretation*, 55 (see chap. 1, n. 12).

museum's scheme will suffice to introduce a novel perspective.”⁶

In “Moves,” Damisch establishes a new “set of rules” that uses the works themselves “as guides in order to learn directly from them, and from them only, about the power of transformation that they possess.”⁷ Unlike exhibitions that limit themselves to using what he calls the “sad ideology” of art historical conventions that give a visitor “only limited freedom in selecting his or her moves,” Damisch’s ludic scheme for “Moves” is intended to place visitors in a task environment, one that gives them greater latitude in navigating through the exhibition and discerning connections between the works on view.⁸ Among his aspirations for the exhibition is “to measure the light that contemporary works can shed on works from the past and the illuminating effects one can expect of them.”⁹ According to Damisch, the exhibition was conceived with a “double notion of a *game* in which the rules have to be disentangled by the visitor, and a *position* which the latter will be free to study at leisure in order to assess the possibilities for further development.”¹⁰ To this end, the exhibition was organized into four distinct sections: a chess section, a card section, a time/place section, and an iconoclasm section.

The “play area” of the first gallery, the largest and most elaborate section of the exhibition, consisted of eight-by-eight alternating black and white squares laid out on the

6. Ibid, 91.

7. Ibid, 77.

8. Ibid, 88, 79.

9. Ibid, 83.

10. Ibid, 80.

floor to evoke a giant chess board that virtually filled the gallery.¹¹ Some of the squares were empty and others were occupied by a single work of art—sculptures were either free-standing or placed on pedestals, decorative arts were placed on vitrine-covered pedestals, and paintings were attached to shipping crates, the kind museums use to move art from one venue to another. Works were selected “for their relationship or their affinity with chessmen or the chessboard itself.”¹² For example, a castle was represented by Pieter Bruegel’s *The Tower of Babel*, a Wassily Kandinsky Blue Rider painting, *The Lyrical*, was meant to “remind us of the importance of the knight’s erratic movement in chess,”¹³ Man Ray’s *Venus Restored* represented the white queen, and Auguste Rodin’s *Pierre de Wissant (Bourgeois de Calais)* stood in for the black king. Pawns were represented by the (minor) decorative arts: glass and ceramics were used for one set and silver objects for the opposing set. Surrounding the chessboard, on the walls were “substitutes,” such as Jean Dubuffet’s *Stairs in Commemoration of Jacques Ulmann*, which Damisch considered “another kind of Tower of Babel.”¹⁴

Behind each row of pawns, the two opposing sets facing each other represented the themes of vision and narcissistic reflection. The vision set included such works as Pieter Saenredam’s *Interior of the Church of St. John in Utrecht* (pictorial perspective is an on-going interest of Damisch’s) and Gerhard Richter’s blurred *Chair*. Narcissism was

11. Ibid, 82.

12. Ibid, 80.

13. Ibid, 82.

14. Ibid, 84.

represented in the reflective surfaces of the silver “pawns” and in works such as René Magritte’s *Not to Be Reproduced*.¹⁵

Damisch contended that a work of art, like chess, is both “diachronic and synchronic, linear and simultaneous.” Observing a chess game in play, the player/spectator can consider the board as the culmination of the moves that came before (their history) and as a set of “possibilities for further development” (their future direction).¹⁶ In a comparable way, a work of art can be viewed through its history and provenance, and also as an object existing at this moment in time with all its contemporary implications. Game theory, a branch of mathematics that deals with optimal decision-making and probability (and is useful to but not the same as game studies), uses a decision-tree diagram to represent all of the possible choices available in a given situation. In effect it represents the diachronic and linear decision paths that a player can make. In chess, a grid of the chessboard is used to diagram a game at a particular moment, its synchronic and simultaneous possibilities moving forward. Damisch alluded to both of these diagrammatic conventions with his selection and juxtaposition of assorted arboreal and grid-like works of art. In his scheme, Man Ray’s *Obstruction*, a mobile consisting of carefully balanced wooden hangers that start at the top with one hanger and branch out exponentially with each new layer, and works by Dürer, Cézanne, and Fragonard all alluded to decision-tree diagrams. A cube sculpture by Sol Lewitt represented the grid diagram along with Mondrian’s *Composition with Color*

15. Ibid, 82.

16. Ibid, 80.

Plans 2 and Jacoba van Heemskerck's *Wood, Composition No. 6*.

The card section of the exhibition was inspired by Malraux's "Imaginary Museum." Malraux would sit on the floor with a stack of art reproductions that he would shuffle, cut, and then lay out in groups arranging, rearranging, removing some and adding substitutes until a satisfactory combination presented itself. In a similar vein, Damisch used drawings and prints from the museum's collection as a metaphorical deck of cards including such operations as "the deal, the trick, the cut, etc." in order to arrange the works in groups analogous to poker hands.¹⁷ After the prints were dealt randomly into groups, Damisch then substituted individual prints with others as he began to discover formal or thematic parallels among the works. His objective was to create a selection process "in which no *a priori* calculation based on a set of given rules would be possible" resulting in groupings that could be "analyzed and defined only in terms of its effects."¹⁸ Here he describes several of the groupings,

In one square a simple choreographic trump borrowed from Goya—an old woman dancing to the rhythm of castanets—will suffice to animate a series of ceiling figures by Tiepolo. Elsewhere, the image by Fra Bartolommeo of two outstretched arms on either side of a missing trunk, will give a full horizontal extension to a series of landscapes, a reading supported by the presence . . . in the *View of Reggio in Flames* by Bruegel, of a tiny figure with widely opened arms. Then will come (the list being in no way exhaustive) another series of landscapes treated in dark masses, from Claude to Seurat . . .¹⁹

The last two sections of the exhibition, though less relevant to the case study since

17. Ibid, 86.

18. Ibid, 88.

19. Ibid, 86.

they omit the game metaphor that Damisch used in the first two sections of the exhibition, are sketched out here to provide a complete picture. In section three, what might be referred to as the place/time section, Damisch explored museums as “a place of experimentation” about memory, which Damisch considers “the only form of ‘history’ recognized today.”²⁰ The section included photographs of the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum (a particularly noteworthy one being a 1940 picture of the museum silhouetted against the bombed city in flames), and architectural drawings of the museum’s various expansion projects—in effect, the memory of the museum itself. The last section acknowledged that what he was proposing with the schemes in this exhibition is iconoclastic—displaying works in ways that “depart from the norm.”²¹ He found this apt given Holland’s history of iconoclasm during the Reformation. The last section, then, included images that depict the destruction of idols. It also included two film excerpts—one showing the Joker vandalizing all the art in Gotham’s art museum save a work by Francis Bacon in the 1989 Tim Burton movie *Batman*, and the scene from Jean-Luc Godard’s *Bande à part* depicting a once record-breaking nine minute and forty-three second run through the Louvre.

“Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum” was not conceived as a structured game. Damisch used the concept of play and of games to allude to a different “ludic scheme” by which visitors could experience works of art. It is not surprising, then, that the exhibition did not reflect all of the major characteristics of play identified in the

20. Ibid, 89.

21. Ibid, 93.

previous chapter. Nonetheless, Damisch discussed the exhibition using language that suggests the importance of several of these characteristics in his experimental exhibition: it is a special space/time event separate from daily life, a time-altering event, a voluntary activity, rule-bound, and open-ended. Damisch conceived of a museum, in general, as a special place/time environment not dissimilar to a basketball court or game board, referring to it as “a ‘field’ . . . but less an open field than a terrain structured from the outset, informed, programmed by the various constructions that occupy it, and leav[ing] only a limited horizon and a narrow margin for movement to whoever might wander about it or inhabit it.”²²

Time within this field is both diachronic and synchronic. That is, it differs from time as it is understood and experienced day-to-day. Time, or in Damisch’s parlance, historical moments, are conflated into single moments where “man recognizes . . . his destiny, their autobiographical dimension or moment being an integral part of them”; in effect, all art becomes autobiographical and contemporary in his ludic scheme.²³

Wandering through the exhibition, visitors were “free to study at leisure” the various moves that they might perform and that the works of art, as chess pieces and cards, might make, thus forming new juxtapositions and relationships.²⁴ The exhibition was based on “rules” that are dictated by the art itself and the relationships that they suggest; its organization was “a *game* in which the rules have to be disentangled by the visitor.” He

22. Ibid, 74-75.

23. Ibid, 92-93.

24. Ibid, 80.

concluded his essay with the notion that play traditionally harkens back to divination (an idea also suggested by Huizinga and Caillois) and the human quest for large answers to big questions; “What sense is there in this staging, with its obvious analogy with divinatory practices, and what statement, or figures in its stead, does it aim to produce, assuming that in matters of oracularity, the form of the question invariably determines the content of the answer?”²⁵ The big question at the heart of the exhibition was how to define the meaning of history which includes “games that obstinately keep posing the question anew, because individuals, like human societies can survive as such only under the strict condition of respecting the question’s open-endedness.”²⁶

While the experience Damisch was attempting to construct for visitors was not a fully structured game, his concept for the experience is arguably game-like, making it an illuminating case study for considering the role of play in the context of museums. Viewed in light of the interests, expectations, and known behaviors of archetypal visitors, Damisch’s ludic scheme helps illuminate ways that a museum can begin to facilitate art experiences and also provides an important cautionary lesson. In the absence of a rigorous visitor study to assess the actual impact of the exhibition, the following observations are admittedly speculative but also reasonable given the established psychographic profile of archetypal visitors. It is known that visitors want to feel welcome and comfortable with any leisure choice they make. Although it remains an open question whether the first room of an exhibition set up like a giant chess board

25. Ibid, 92-93.

26. Ibid, 94.

would help to put visitors at ease, it is probably safe to assume that it encouraged social interaction, if only to comment on the unconventional exhibition layout and the familiar format of a chess board. The unexpectedness of prompting people to consider works of art as analogous to chess pieces and a deck of cards (a set of instructions that is succinctly accomplished with the simple eight-word title of the exhibition) might also generate conversation as visitors roam through the exhibition making associations with what *a priori* knowledge they have about chess and cards. It also provides some guidance as to what to do in front of a work of art that will likely have them looking longer because they are looking *for* something (chess/card associations) rather than merely *at* something.

Damisch's explicitly stated objective of giving visitors greater self-directed choices, the "moves" that they make through the exhibition or that they could imagine the works making is also in keeping with archetypal visitors' preferences for determining what they want to learn or take away from the experience. In effect, Damisch's structuralist predilections set up a task environment for visitors, one that allows them to interact with the art in ways that are ostensibly in keeping with their own known behaviors: linking, making personal associations, and matching elements of works to real-world ideas. Theirs is a synchronic task to create on-going relationships between the works (parts-to-parts and parts-to-whole) rather than a diachronic task of placing works in historical relationships. In particular, visitors are challenged to discern the rules of the game; i.e., why works are set next to other works. They might try linking the works to chess pieces or the process of shuffling cards and making "poker hands" that identify thematic or formal associations. As Yve-Alain Bois noted in his review of the exhibition,

“One need not be a chess adept to make sense of the game.”²⁷ Damisch downplays traditional art historical ordering systems, saying “It is such a game that this exhibition proposes to stage . . . which will systematically transgress the divisions that museology imposes between various periods and forms of art.”²⁸ Lessening the role of art history from the experience makes sense for archetypal visitors who do not necessarily possess this type of knowledge—the links Damisch is proposing are not contingent on historical relations but on immediately perceived or future potential “moves” that visitors make with the pieces.

The exhibition is iconoclastic in rejecting traditional art historical taxonomies but it seems that even Damisch is unaware that he is not jettisoning curatorial authority and herein lies the exhibition’s cautionary lesson. Visitors are not being invited to develop their own connections so much as guess the curator’s unconventional pairings; Damisch writes that the rules dictated by the works of art (i.e., all of their potential relational links to surrounding works) “have to be disentangled by the visitor.” That is, they are to decipher the connections that the curator discovered rather than draft their own—a daunting task for many visitors. Damisch aspired to produce “an exhibition in which the role assigned to words must be minimized” but it is an open question whether anyone but the most sophisticated of museum patrons could make the kinds of links Damisch suggests without reading his catalog essay.²⁹ Without at least a cursory knowledge of

27. Yve-Alain Bois, “Moves,” *Artforum* XXXVI, no. 4 (December 1997): 115.

28. Damisch, “Moves,” 85.

29. *Ibid*, 77.

game theory, the references to grid- and tree-decision diagrams are virtually undecipherable. It is unclear how many visitors could discern the theme of “vision” through the juxtaposition of Saenredam’s *Interior of the Church of St. John in Utrecht* and Richter’s blurred *Chair* or make connections between Magritte’s *Not to Be Reproduced* placed adjacent to several pedestals holding highly reflective silver decorative art objects and think of “narcissism.” Or this example: in the center of the first section, Damisch faces off Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel* with the Van Eyck brothers’ *The Three Marys at the Tomb* and describes his decision thus:

In the center of the chessboard, I will place two old masters paintings: one celebrates a heroic undertaking which ended in the confusion of all tongues . . . the other, a quest leading to the discovery of lack or absence, in the form of a missing body. . . . The emphasis falls simultaneously on both sides of the divide, on the double ground of the difference between idioms and the signifier zero, on the interval or void which allows for some “play” in the system, particularly as it occurs in language (Kafka used to say of the Tower of Babel that it was not built, but rather *dug out*, its erection corresponding to the excavation of the quarries and mines from which the building materials were extracted).³⁰

It is a fascinating association but one that assumes a knowledge of the story of Christ’s resurrection, the Tower of Babel, and Kafka’s interest in biblical stories, a rare trifecta, one whose scarcity is compounded by the visual acumen needed to discern such themes in art. In effect, although Damisch conceived of the exhibition as a way for visitors to participate in making and discovering unconventional links between disparate works of art, in the end, the real task assigned them is more one of observing how Damisch himself plays the game.

30. Ibid, 81.

In fairness, Damisch did not set out to create a game and this case study is not meant as a criticism of the experience Damisch was attempting to design for his visitors. “Moves” provides a striking example of how museums might begin to think about incorporating the concept of play into the visitor experience in serious, meaningful, and productive ways. To his credit, the title of the exhibition sets the stage for visitors to approach the exhibition with a ludic attitude, an essential first step in creating a new frame of reference within which to tour the exhibition. The title also succeeds in providing visitors with at least a cursory set of instructions on how to proceed—mentally moving works of art into new relationships—in a way that allows visitors to actively participate in the exhibition. The unusual juxtapositions in Damisch’s exhibition give visitors more linking options than a more traditionally conceived exhibition might present. The invitation to free associate does not do much, however, to challenge them to look beyond their own prosaic habits of thought. The exhibition still does not provide sufficient instruction, support or feedback to reassure visitors that their choices and ideas are valid and meaningful rather than gratuitous or arbitrary. Although he wanted to provide visitors with more things to do and think about, had the exhibition structured the experience to a greater extent, visitors might have had an engaging encounters with the works on view that fell more comfortably within their psychographic needs, interests, and abilities. A more rigorous understanding and application of the principles of game design as a structuring process can provide additional devices that a museum might employ for creating engrossing encounters between visitors and works of art.

Case Study #2: “Ghosts of a Chance”

On Saturday, July 19, 2008, award-winning bodybuilder Craig Torres crashed the eighth annual ARGFest-o-con in Boston and danced in his posing pouch as conference attendees snapped photographs of his muscle-bound and henna-tattooed body. Conference participants consisted of about one hundred hard-core alternate reality game (ARG) players, designers, and academicians—a group savvy enough in the ways of ARGs to recognize that something was afoot—only what? Hidden in Torres’s henna tattoos was a replica of an eye miniature from the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Luce Foundation Center along with the words “Luce’s Lover’s Eye.” (Miniature paintings of a lover’s eye set into a piece of jewelry or on the lid of a small box were popular in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and the Luce Foundation Center, a visual storage unit at the museum, has several examples on view). So began “Ghosts of a Chance” at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), the first ARG ever hosted by a museum.

ARGs are highly structured interactive narratives that let participants direct aspects of an unfolding story in response to prompts provided by the game designer (a.k.a. “puppet master”). Working with CityMystery, a San Francisco company that specializes in educational ARGs; the Anti-Boredom Playtime Society, a San-Francisco-based game design and consulting collective; and Guide by Cell, a company that helps museums create cell-phone tours of their collections; SAAM conceived of “Ghosts of a Chance” as a complex, interactive experience intended: (1) “to get people talking about [SAAM]”; (2) “to bring a new audience into the museum”; and (3) “to encourage

discovery.” Extending over three months, the project was structured into four distinct components: the “teaser” pre-game component which ran from July 19 through September 8, 2008; the web-based component running from September 8 through October 25; mini events on September 20 and October 4; and the final event which took place at SAAM on October 25. (The project has since been adapted for use by visitors and includes only the final-event component of the original game.) Throughout the project players could get involved in multiple ways: (1) by piecing together a story about four fictional ghosts threatening the museum using clues delivered via the internet, by phone, through the mail, etc.; (2) by contributing hand-made “artifacts” that were used in a one-day exhibition at the museum; (3) by attending mini events at several DC locations to collect additional clues and threads to the story; and (4) by solving a six-part scavenger hunt at the museum as the culminating phase of the project.

Pre-Game Component

Within hours of the appearance of the bodybuilding gate-crasher at ARGFest-o-con, email messages and questions began appearing on the forum section of the central community alternate reality gaming website Unfiction:

So uh, this stripper totally bogarted the end of Steve Peters' presentation by dancing into the main conference room and flexing his henna'd muscles for a while. He had some words written up near his left shoulder, so I did a bit of Googling and found something strange at this Smithsonian webpage: upside-down. To wit:

a choking gall and a preserving sweet
 what is it else? a madness most discreet,
 being vex'd a sea nourish'd with lovers' tears;
 being purged a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes;
 love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs;

As the gamers tried to decide what was happening, speculations mounted:

You know, in thinking about it, this doesn't make any sense Why
 would the **Smithsonian** send a *stripper* to a place like ARGFest to get this
 going? I mean, think about it, a borderline government agency sending a
 stripper to a convention in a hotel? That would be front page news on The
 Drudge Report!³¹

Once participants did an online search for “Luce’s Lover’s Eye,” they arrived at a
 page of SAAM’s online collections database which included a photo of the eye miniature
 and an explanation of what eye miniatures were. Embedded in the page was a link to the
 “Ghosts of a Chance” (GOAC) website. There they were invited to submit a picture of
 their or their lover’s eye to the webpage: one-hundred fifty images of eyes were
 submitted. Participants were also asked to call a number, listen to a recorded excerpt from
Macbeth, and record themselves reading the “Double double toil and trouble” incantation
 from the same play; the phone line received two-hundred fifty-six calls. Both activities
 were interesting ploys (not lost on the gamers) to get email addresses and phone numbers

31. Unfiction Alternate Reality Gaming Forum, <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=26261>. This link must be accessed through the Ghosts of a Chance website, by clicking on “unfiction.com player thread,” <http://www.ghostsofchance.com/>.

from the players. (The ongoing references to Shakespeare eventually become clear as it is discovered that the four ghosts haunting the museum were part of a touring theatrical group called The Immortal Bard Traveling Players.)

Over the next month-and-a-half, participants continued to speculate on what the nature of the game was and continued to try to decipher the few clues that had been intentionally leaked. The date, September 8, appeared on a countdown clock on the website (and was also mentioned on the phone message), and SAAM sent out additional teasers including an online article on ABC.com entitled “The Smithsonian’s Got Game” that included a buried clue, and an audio clue posted on the GOAC website. The gamers were spreading the word, posting images of the bodybuilder on Flickr, participating in the Unfiction forum, writing about the project on personal blogs, etc.

Web-Based Component

On Monday, September 8, the official GOAC website launched and began to present a series of challenges for participants: create a series of artifacts that will be displayed online with a few pieces being selected for inclusion in a one-day exhibition at the Luce Center. As submissions were received, they were mentioned on SAAM’s blog, Eye Level, along with additional clues. The artifacts included a “necklace for the subaltern betrayer,” a “predictor of imminent doom,” a “con artist’s replica,” a “diorama of a travesty,” a “memory vessel,” and an “escape quilt.” With the submission of each project (each of which were spaced out throughout the month of September) participants were given another piece of the story.

Concurrent with the artifact challenges, two SAAM “curators,” Daisy Fortunis

and Daniel Libbe, (actually hired actors) began posting videos on mySpace, Facebook, and YouTube. A participating gamer (someone who had submitted an eye photo to the site) was notified of the pages via an email asking for help by a real SAAM employee, Georgina Bath, Interpretive Programs Manager at the Luce Center, the instigator of the GOAC project. The communication was quickly shared with other players on the Unfiction forum:

Daniel & Daisy's Facebook has a slew of videos. The summary is: the two of them spend their evenings working, in the Luce Foundation at the Smithsonian Museum. The two of them dance pretty well, I should say (much to Georgina's chagrin)! Daisy has a Ghost she talks to, named Blanche. Daniel has a "secret friend" he talks to named McD. It turns out, the ghosts know each other.

These are probably the same Blanche and McD in the "Story" page, on ghostsofchance.com (<http://ghostsofchance.com/index.php?p=story>). Err, you have read the story, yeah? It's quite in the style of Early American Lit. Funny bit: Daniel gets all Macbethy.

Also, I have received a package at home, which I shall most definitely scan tonight. I can tell you it has to do with Blanche and McD.³²

The package (actually sent to two separate players) included a set of calligraphical letters between Blanche and the Reverend (a third ghost in the story). The letters quickly appeared on the forum and Flickr. Then, towards the end of September, SAAM invited online gamers unable to attend the denouement of the project at the Museum in Washington to contribute by designing an online quilt that museum visitors would use as a decoding device.

32. Ibid.

Mini-Events Component

SAAM invited gamers with easy access to Washington to participate in two tours, one a behind-the-scenes visit to the Anthropology Department of the National Museum of Natural History (another Smithsonian museum) and a visit to the Congressional Cemetery. At the Natural History Museum, participants met with Dr. David Hunt, a member of the Museum's Anthropology Department who discussed, among other things, forensic anthropology and nineteenth-century human remains, and challenged the group to determine the gender, sex, race, and cause of death of two unidentified skeletons. Upon leaving the Museum Dr. Hunt gave the eleven participants the "police reports" for the two sets of remains. These were quickly posted online by gamers. At the cemetery Patrick Crowley, Chair of its Board of Directors, provided a tour. During the visit, the fourteen participants witnessed two spectral figures apparently signaling the group from afar with flashlights. During the course of the tour, the participants found a flashlight, black-out paper, and a cipher in various locations around the cemetery. When the spectral figures returned, several participants used the cipher and flashlight to communicate with them,

Question: Who are you?

Answer: The unfulfilled

Question: Why?

Answer: Bad death

Question: What do you want?

Answer: Rest³³

Denouement Component

The project culminated at SAAM on Saturday, October 25, with a six-part quest that participants were asked to complete—one for each of the six characters in the story (Daisy, Daniel, Blanche, McD, the Reverend, and WhatFor [a fourth ghost in the story]). Upon completion, the spirits are put to rest and the Museum is ghost-free. Each quest started with an object from the collection, gave participants a task to do, directed them to another part of the Museum, and required that they get a manifest stamped to prove they completed the quest. Excerpts from the final report provide a sense of the quests participants were asked to undertake,

Tattoo

Starts at *Electrical Tattooing* (1986.65.379)—Players text [on their cell phones] “goac tattoo” to begin.—Response: “What sport do soldiers play?” Reply with “goac” then with the answer that you’ll find near the statue of *Cleopatra* on the 2nd floor in the Civil War section.—Players respond with “football” (or literally, “foot-ball”)—Response: “In the Folk Art section on the 1st floor find an appropriate place to play this sport. Reply with ‘goac’ and the name of the city in the artwork.”—Respond with “Columbus.”—Response: “Go to [the] Luce Center, find *Diana* near the entrance. Password: ‘Daisy’.”—Players go to [the] work in [the] Luce Center and tells [the] volunteer the password.—Volunteer at work tells players: “You can find Daisy by going . . .” and points to the stairwell. “Look down for further direction.”—Players go to [the] stairwell, look down and see [a] large arrow.—Players follow [the] arrow, find [a] nook in [the] basement where Daisy is hiding.—Daisy stamps the players (a tattoo) and their manifests.

Memory Quest

Starts at memory vessel in GOAC special exhibition.—Sign tells players to text “goac memory” to [GOAC number].—Response: “Find the biggest screen in the Luce Center.”—Players go to the video screen. Scrolling text

33. Bath, *Final Report*, 8 (see intro., n. 12).

at bottom reads: “Go to the coat room by the F Street entrance. Look in the pocket of the red, white and blue coat.”—Players go to the coat room. There is a volunteer stationed outside. Right as players enter, the volunteer calls the number of a cell phone hidden in the coat pocket.—Players answer the cell phone.—They are told: “A spectral presence has been spotted. Go to the Great Hall on the third floor and look out the middle window.”—Players go to [the] window. Outside they see a volunteer holding a sign that reads: “FACES IN THE COLOR FIELDS.”—Players go [to the] Color Field section of [the] contemporary wing. There is a number—202-747-3476—on a sign near *Faces*. Players call it, hear “Stare deep in the painting. Slowly try to follow the boundaries of the different colors of paint while you let your mind wander. When you have unearthed a distant memory, you may return to the Luce Center to write it down and place it in the memory vessel.”—Players write down a memory and put it in the memory vessel. Manifest signed.³⁴

The culminating event at SAAM attracted two hundred forty four players, seventy of whom completed all six quests; the first group completed the quests in two hours and forty minutes.³⁵

The final report on the project confirms that two of the Museum’s three goals (getting people to talk about SAAM and encouraging discovery) were successfully accomplished based on press coverage, website hits, and participant evaluations. SAAM felt that the second goal (bringing new audiences to the Museum) was only partially met: traffic to the museum’s website and online collections drew new audiences but the final weekend event generally drew regular museum visitors. It remains to be tested whether this was due to lack of motivation on the part of the online participants or the geographic obstacle of actually getting to Washington, D.C., from as far away as say Hawaii, as one

34. Ibid, 10-11. (Punctuation has been altered for consistency and easier reading.)

35. Ibid, 9.

Unfiction forum participant lamented.³⁶

GOAC might also be assessed as a success if measured against the interests and expectations of archetypal visitors. Like Damisch's ludic scheme, it helps illustrate ways that a museum can actively engage visitors and also provides an important cautionary lesson. SAAM included in the design of the project an assessment mechanism to gather feedback from participants (online and at the conclusion of the final event). Given that I am concerned specifically with people's experiences *in* museums (rather than online), it is participants' responses to the culminating event of this project that are of most significance. The museum experience was set up as a team/family effort which necessarily involved a good deal of social interaction; the social aspect was further enhanced by the fact that museum staff and volunteers also played an active role in visitors' quest experiences. One participant observed,

I loved interacting with the Museum and objects instead of just looking at things and observing and judging—it was tons of fun to feel a part of it all! . . . I really didn't know what to expect—it was so original and easy. . . .

I wish more visits could be this uniquely satisfying and multifaceted.³⁷

It is worth noting that virtually every visitor comment included in the final report includes the words “we” or “our,” underscoring the communal nature of the experience. Although most of the participants at the Museum were regular museum goers who, one would assume, are relatively comfortable visiting museums—that is, they already make it

36. Unfiction Forum.

37. Bath, *Final Report*, 13.

a leisure-time choice—the experience still had a positive effect on their visit and their perception of museums. As one participant noted,

I have spent quite some time in art museums and this is probably the first time that it felt like the museum was meant to be fun and interactive rather than more somber and pensive. It was really refreshing and definitely gave me a sense of community with the people who coordinated the event and the other people participating in it.³⁸

Archetypal visitors also want participatory experiences. One participant reported, “We definitely went to parts of the museum that we would not have gone to previously. It definitely made art more interactive.”³⁹ Another visitor was particularly laudatory,

My favorite part of GOAC was the atmosphere of excitement that the game created. It was very much inspired by DaVinci Code, or something—I loved the clandestine cell phone calls, the sign out the window, the codex—all of those little touches added mystery and suspense.⁴⁰

From visitors’ comments, clearly the GOAC project created an engaging museum experience for participants but it did not provide engrossing *art* experiences.

Inexplicably, prompting engrossing art encounters was not one of SAAM’s objectives for this project. That this was not one of the project’s goals suggests why the present study is

38. Ibid, 13.

39. Ibid, 12.

40. Ibid.

both timely and necessary—as more and more museums adopt gaming technologies as a means for engaging visitors, a theoretical model on which to premise such initiatives may help museums avoid “mission creep” into the realm of entertainment as happened at SAAM.⁴¹ Of the modified version of the game that was developed for use by groups visiting the Museum following the completion of the ARG, project director Bath remarked that,

The ongoing game is not directly educational in that it is not tied to any specific curricula. Its purpose is to get people looking and thinking about art and art museums in a new way. 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 FUN. The twenty-first-century audience has an increasingly short attention span, extremely high expectations when it comes to finding and engaging with information, the ability to communicate with friends and strangers quickly and on multiple platforms, and a very open approach to learning. The Ghosts of a Chance ongoing game meets the needs of this new visitor group, and opens up an important collection to people who might otherwise have left the building with a less than satisfying experience.⁴²

Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that at least one participant did comment on an art experience (one assumes it had to do with the “Memory” quest as that is the only one that encouraged participants to explicitly contemplate a work of art, Morris Louis’s 1959 painting *Faces*),

Even though we were ‘exposed’ to the whole museum, I also liked that there were a couple of pieces of art that we actually had to sit and ponder. .

41. The Smithsonian Institution currently has plans for developing at least four more museum games. Discussed at a meeting of the Smithsonian Council of Education Directors, March 1, 2011.

42. Georgina Bath Goodlander, “Fictional Press Releases and Fake Artifacts: How the Smithsonian American Art Museum is Letting Game Players Redefine the Rules,” *Archives & Museum Informatics: Museums and the Web 2009*, <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2009/papers/goodlander/goodlander.html#ixzz124fbpr4z>.

. . I never would have spent the time staring into [a] painting and trying to understand it if it weren't part of a task.⁴³

The quest that included Louis' painting was the only one that incorporated any of the known behaviors that archetypal visitors bring to their art-viewing experiences: free associating with personal memories (found in the behaviors of Housen's stage-one viewers).

As a first venture into using the structuring components of game design in shaping visitor experiences, GOAC is groundbreaking. Like any new venture, it also has lessons to share. Perhaps the greatest is the slippage from art experiences into entertainment. While each of the quests incorporated one or several works of art, visitors were not encouraged to engage with that art in any way that was meaningful outside of the game itself. The art was put in the service of the game rather than putting the game in the service of the art. The project gave gamers great latitude in how they might choose to participate in the activities (making artifacts, solving puzzles, going on mini events) yet it was still largely museum-driven. In important ways, the open-endedness of Damisch's approach actually gave participants greater freedom; while visitors to the "Moves" exhibition got to select which works of art they wanted to consider and what types of comparisons they wanted to pursue, GOAC dictated which works of art visitors were meant to encounter and how they were meant to use those encounters (most often as a non-art related activity that was more amusing than thoughtful). While Damisch relegated art history to a bit part, GOAC eliminated it almost completely.

43. Ibid.

Both of the previous two case studies involved museum projects that set up task environments for visitors. In “Moves,” the tasks were loosely defined and optional: seek out unusual juxtapositions or explore those set up by the exhibition layout; find your own associations or ferret out those intended by the curator. In GOAC, tasks were optional but were also rigidly defined—visitors could only choose to do them or not: make an object or not, participate in a mini-event or not, complete the quests or not. In both instances, visitors were also not encouraged or supported in moving beyond their own habits of viewing to delve deeper into individual works of art in ways that were personally meaningful to them.

“Moves” and GOAC point to the potential of using game design thinking for enhancing visitors’ experiences within an art museum while underscoring the importance of building such structures around a thoughtful theoretical framework. It is a Goldilocks affair at this point. “Moves” did not provide enough structure and GOAC employed tasks that were irrelevant to the activity of looking closely and thoughtfully at works of art. To determine a just-right solution, it is necessary to determine which structuring devices game designers have at their disposal when shaping immersive, interactive experiences for players that might have the most relevance to designing comparable experiences in a museum context. Furthermore, a capacious theoretical framework of what constitutes engrossing art experiences must be established. Chapter four establishes the most salient tenets of game design for the purposes of this study. Chapter five then develops a typology for engrossing art encounters built on theoretically grounded concepts as provided by the literature on aesthetic experiences—the premise being that aesthetic

experiences constitute the ultimate engrossing art encounters. The study culminates in chapters six and seven when the wants and needs of archetypal visitors are correlated to the most salient tenets of game design, and a typology of aesthetic experiences to create a toolkit that museums can use for optimizing engrossing art experiences for their visitors.

Chapter Four

GAME DESIGN AS A STRUCTURING PROCESS

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the study of play occurred mainly within the disciplines of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and education. Herbert Spencer, among others, studied the psychological and biological aspects of play in evolutionary terms: we play to expend surplus energy. Jean Piaget, a philosopher and educational psychologist, studied play in terms of the cognitive development in children. Huizinga, a cultural historian, analyzed play as the source of all human culture.¹ These concepts of play provide an inadequate cognitive frame for the purpose of optimizing art experiences because they focus on the function of play rather than its structure.

Game studies, on the other hand, which appeared as an independent academic discipline in the 1990s with the advent of video games, has greatly expanded our understanding of play as a dynamic structuring system. The family resemblance between art and play experiences charted in chapter two suggests that the design processes examined in game studies might also provide a practical guide for structuring experiences that help visitors have engrossing encounters with works of art.

The psychographic profile of archetypal museum visitors, who constitute the

1. Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, (see chap. 2, n. 30); Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation*, trans. by C. Gattegno and F. M. Hodgson (NY: Norton, 1962); Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (see chap. 2, n. 16).

largest majority of museum visitors, confirms that they are looking for leisure-time options that occur within a context that puts them at ease, that supports social interaction, and that provides participatory activities. Maslow's motivation hierarchies—comfortable, social, participatory—indicate that they need to be addressed in that order. Structuring a museum visit using the principles of game design holds the potential to accomplish all three. People understand games as a risk-free activity that allows for exploring ideas and practicing new skills without fear of real consequences, games are typically social (unless playing solo games like solitaire), and by nature participatory.

Game design can be divided into three broad phases: inviting players into the game (altering expectations by initiating new frames of reference); establishing a point of departure (what aspects of the “real” world will serve as inspiration); and designing a task environment (defining the activities that constitute gameplay).

PHASE ONE: INVITATION INTO THE MAGIC CIRCLE

Play experiences take place within a special place and time. Huizinga described it this way:

The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the state, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.²

The “magic circle” inscribes a particular situation that players inhabit psychologically

2. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10.

and, often times, physically. Caillois defined it as “a pure space” that is “restricted, closed, [and] protected.”³ To inhabit the magic circle is to enter into an implicit social contract whereby each player agrees to accept the rules and goals that define the magic circle as true within the world of play. How committed one is to this social contract determines if a person is a player, a “cheat” or a “spoil sport” according to Huizinga. A player abides by the rules that help define the magic circle. A cheat only “pretends to be playing the game” but “still acknowledges the magic circle.” A spoil sport, because he refuses to accept the authority of the magic circle as true, is despicable; he “shatters the play world” revealing its “relativity and fragility” which thereby “robs play of its *illusion*.”⁴

The magic circle defines the boundary separating play from the everyday world. Some writers, particularly those outside the field of game studies, consider this border to be impenetrable: inside the border is the “play” world and outside the border is not-play, also known as the “real” world. Play within the magic circle has been called its own ontological mode of being (Gadamer), “unreality” (Hein), its own “existential phenomenon” (Fink), and utopia (Suits).⁵ The distinction between play and daily life is so strong for Caillois that he contends that any intrusion of reality into the magic circle

3. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 7 (see chap. 3, n. 16).

4. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11.

5. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 102 (see chap. 2, no. 41); Hein, “Play as an Aesthetic Concept,” 71 (see chap. 2, n. 22); Fink, “Oasis of Happiness,” 22 (see chap. 2, n. 45.); Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper, Games, Life and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), *passim*.

“corrupts” play.⁶

However, the field of game studies generally rejects such sharp distinctions between the inside and outside of the magic circle. Play is separate from everyday life but it is also connected to it. The relationship between the “real” world and the “play” world is malleable and the border of the magic circle is porous rather than rigid. While in the magic circle, players possess a sort of double consciousness, simultaneously being absorbed in the game and also aware of themselves playing. The game designer Richard Garfield uses the term “metagame” to describe how “a game interfaces outside of itself.”⁷ He has identified four types of metagaming:

1. What a player brings to a game
2. What a player takes away from a game
3. What happens between games
4. What happens during a game other than the game itself.⁸

In chess, a player brings to a game all his past chess-playing experience, he might take from the game a new appreciation of his opponent’s strategic-thinking ability, between games he might research additional game strategies that will affect his next play experience, during the game he may psychologically step out of the magic circle because of a too cold room or a piece of gossip shared across the board. The concept of metagaming describes how the permeability of the magic circle affects the play

6. Callois, *Man, Play and Games*, 43.

7. Richard Garfield, “Metagames,” in *Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Essays on Roleplaying*, ed. Jim Dietz (Sigel, IL: Jolly Roger Games, 2000), p. 16.

8. Ibid, 17.

experience.

Every visitor comes to a museum with his or her own “metagame.” That is, personal narratives consisting of motivations for visiting, assorted beliefs and dispositions, and life-times of experiences. It would be advantageous for visitors if museums discovered ways to incorporate visitors’ personal narratives into art experiences, while also sending a signal to visitors that different frames of reference are at play in the museum. They need to unambiguously invite visitors to understand the museum as a magic circle. Museums ignore the invitation to the detriment of their visitors’ experience; without such an invitation, visitors will likely be confounded by the semiotic shifts that lie ahead (as the example below demonstrates). As in any play situation, the art world is its own magic circle in which things can have a different set of meanings—what something means in the world of art can vary from what it means in the world outside of art. This explains why an average museum visitor—someone who has not embraced the appropriate frame of reference—when confronted with the drips and splashes of some contemporary art, can become dismissive and even hostile to the artist’s efforts, charging him with being unskilled or even being disrespectful of the viewer.⁹ Within the context of the visitor’s own life, dripping paint means either the artist doesn’t know how to paint, he is being lazy, or he is being sloppy. Without the requisite frame of reference that understands that paint drips can have other kinds of meaning—a self-referential mark of the maker or a conscious attempt to disrupt pictorial illusion, for

9. This example is taken from personal experience. While leading a gallery talk at the North Carolina Museum of Art in the summer of 2008, I was confronted by a participant who aggressively denounced a painting by the artist David Salle with the charges included here.

instance—the viewer sits outside of the art’s magic circle. He has not been able to edit out other frames of reference, other kinds of life experiences, to accept the possibility that drips can have a meaning beyond that culled from personal experience. The invitation to play in a certain way can help visitors privilege one cognitive frame—that articulated by the work of art or the art world—over some other frame.

The invitation provides passage into the magic circle, aiding visitors in locating what one writer labeled a “lusory attitude.”¹⁰ Adopting a lusory attitude, visitors enter art’s magic circle consciously and voluntarily. Visitors with the appropriate mindset accept the authority of art’s magic circle and believe in the value of the fictional truths it encompasses. Without the correct attitude, visitors are spoilsports who shatter the magic circle by devaluing its fictional truths (refusing to accept that a paint drip can have other meanings). This is because the relative truth or value of art (like play) is not solely related to the encounter itself but also with the attitude one brings to it.

Even those who possess the appropriate frame of reference (e.g., curators) can stand outside of the magic circle and foil the possibility of an engrossing art encounter if they do not also possess the right state of mind. In their professional role, curators typically come to the process of looking at art with a purposeful attitude. Play is considered *purposeless* whether or not there is any kind of goal being sought since any goal is internal to the play itself. While there can always be extrinsic benefits that accompany play, these benefits are not the primary motivating factor in play. Play is self-motivating. One engages in it for the satisfactory experience of playing rather than

10. Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 38.

accomplishing some other purpose. Its inherent purposelessness draws attention to the attitudinal distinctions between amateur and professional players. Amateurs differ from professionals in that their lusory attitude motivates them to play the game above any other desire. For professionals, extra-game purposes—such as salary or recognition—instigate a different state of mind whose motivating factor may be greater than the game itself. These extra-game purposes typically have more to do with the business of living, that is, they are purposeful. As Steward Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play has observed, “if its purpose is more important than the act of doing it, it’s probably not play.”¹¹

The philosopher Kendall Walton in his book, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, which explores parallels between art viewing and make-believe, offers a slightly different though equally useful distinction: on-looker versus participant. Onlookers—even extremely invested ones like a coach or a game designer—may be highly interested in the game, but they are still outside the game. According to Walton,

They may study it and its props thoroughly . . . what principles of generation are operative, and in many ways analyzing and explaining the game and assessing its significance.¹²

But their relationship to play is different than that of a player who participates within the structure of the game by “*doing and experiencing things*.”¹³ Museum staff may be

11. Steward Brown, National Institute for Play, <http://www.nifplay.org>.

12. Walton, *Mimesis*, 209 (see chap. 2, n. 33).

13. *Ibid*, 212.

likened to coaches and game designers; in their professional capacity they are highly interested in their field of activity but lack, on a day-to-day basis at least, the necessary disinterest required for an engrossing art encounter because their focus tends to be on studying, analyzing, and assessing art rather than experiencing it. Theirs is a professional attitude having to do with the business of museums rather than a lusory attitude.

Although museum professionals certainly have engrossing art encounters, on a daily basis their states of mind are necessarily tempered by scholarly challenges, stewardship responsibilities, market values, and funding issues. When these issues preoccupy them, they are operating outside of the magic circle.

The philosopher Peter de Bolla has posed the question, “How can one prepare for art, make oneself ready to accept it? How does one prepare for the presence of painting?”¹⁴ The invitation into the magic circle serves as one potential method. Such an invitation presents an inciting incident or a call to action. In the case studies just presented, Damisch’s invitation took the form of the exhibition title. It serves as an advance indicator that gives visitors a heads-up about what to expect—this is not going to be a typical museum exhibition. “Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum” invited people to play by inventing new ways to move through the exhibition, introduced different sets of associations, and prompted visitors to imagine unconventional juxtapositions that served as a springboard for looking more closely at works of art. In GOAC the invitation to play was actually the henna tattoo on the bodybuilder at the ARG conference in Boston. ARG players are clue hunters by training who recognize an

14. De Bolla, *Art Matters*, 24 (see intro., n. 9).

incongruous event or piece of information as a potential prelude to play; in ARG parlance they see a “rabbit hole” (a rabbit hole is the teaser that gets an ARG started and refers to Alice’s journey down the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*). The difference in this instance is that what game is being played, who is serving as the puppet master, and where the play will lead is only revealed over time. What makes GOAC particularly interesting is that the invitation was extended in a context far removed from the museum itself, suggesting that there are ways to encourage and motivate participation even by people who might not ordinarily consider museums a comfortable or interesting leisure-time choice.

How far to take the notion of “invitation” or how unambiguous to make it remains to be investigated. Another example, albeit fictional, is suggested in the novel, *The Keep*, by National Book Award finalist Jennifer Egan. Upon making reservations to stay in a converted medieval castle resort guests receive, prior to their visit, a shallow vanilla-scented box with assorted, luxuriously textured cards (making it a multisensory invitation) that read,

Anticipation: You are almost here. Which means you’re on the verge of an experience that will send you home a slightly different person than the one you are right now. . . .

Another card:

The Keep [the name of the resort] is an electronics- and telecommunications-free environment. Close your eyes, breathe deeply: you can do it. We have a secure vault, where all your gadgetry may be stored when you arrive. This ritual of renunciation is important. If you feel the urge to thwart it, pay attention. You may not be ready.

And another:

Apart from the live medieval music at dinnertime in the Great Hall, we provide no formal entertainment at the Keep. That’s your job. Now trust

yourself.¹⁵

While perhaps extreme, this “invitation,” with minor adjustments, could equally apply to a museum visit. Such an invitation can slow down the entry process and call visitors’ attention to the fact that they are about to enter into a space apart, one that calls for a different pace, a different mindset, one that will make them “slightly different” than when they arrived if only they can locate the right frames of reference and lusory attitude.

PHASE TWO: POINT OF DEPARTURE

The German philosopher Eugen Fink has observed that, “[Play] has an absolute need of real things as a point of departure.”¹⁶ The game Monopoly is an abstraction of the real estate market, Sim City replicates aspects of urban planning, Diplomacy is based on the art of negotiation, and the board game Puerto Rico delves into the economics of colonialism. The “point of departure” is what gives each game its personality. The fictional truths of a game—the things that are “real” within the magic circle—typically have some grounding in a real-world phenomenon. The fictional truths of Rock/Paper/Scissors include the “fact” that a hand extended in a fist is defeated by a hand held out palm down which is beat by a hand gesture that resembles a peace sign held parallel to the floor; this truth, in effect, is a stylization of the relationship between (some of) the physical properties of a rock (fist) which can be covered by paper (open palm) which can be cut with scissors (reoriented peace sign). That games have the potential to represent or simulate the “real” world by abstracting an actual or plausible real situation

15. Jennifer Egan, *The Keep* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 232.

16. Fink, “Oasis of Happiness,” 24.

is not to say that the game necessarily needs to depict every aspect of a given situation. Rather, games abstract only those procedures, behaviors and/or forms of interaction that are essential to the play experience. In *Tulipmania 1637* (a board game that was, incidentally, inspired by a museum exhibition), players manipulate the seventeenth-century tulip-bulb market.¹⁷ The rules allow players to pass, purchase, speculate, purchase by proxy, or speculate by proxy on each turn—it is a historical game about bubble markets. In abstracting the tulip market of 1637, the rules of the game omit many facets of history, such as the plague which is thought to have inspired the fatalistic risk-taking that contributed to the market bubble or the complexities of tulip bulb cultivation. Instead, the rules of the game focus players' attention solely on playing the market with all the planning and manipulation that that entails. Abstracting real-world models allows the game designer to emphasize critical features while minimizing less important elements.

Game designer Warren Robinett describes four distinct steps involved in the abstraction process:

- identifying a phenomenon to simulate;
- determining the components that define that phenomenon;
- abstracting these components to maintain their most important properties for the purpose of play;

17. Scott Nicholson, "Board Games with Scott: Video Explorations and Reviews," <http://www.boardgameswithscott.com/?p=276>.

- understanding the relationship between the components and how they affect each other.¹⁸

The point of departure shapes the components of play: the objects, behaviors, and information that players encounter during gameplay. In Monopoly, for instance, objects include markers, houses, hotels, and deeds; behaviors include buying, selling, and bartering; and information includes property values, rental rates, and community chest cards. These game components are another way that the “real” world crosses the border into the magic circle to affect a play experience.

In light of the close associations between the “play” world and the “real” world, it will come as no surprise to learn that scholars have examined play as a form of text imbued with cultural values. In his book, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith attempts to define play in its broadest terms by grouping different theories of play, which he calls “rhetorics of play,” according to their underlying value systems. Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics reveal how the *functions* of play embody cultural ideologies. For example, the “rhetoric of play as fate” which refers to gambling and games of chance, exemplifies the belief that human life is “controlled by destiny, by the gods, by atoms or neurons, or by luck, but very little by ourselves”; and the “rhetoric of play as power” concerns competitive games and uses play “as the representation of conflict” and “fortifies those who hold the reins of power.”¹⁹ The *structure* of play can also be used to critique or transform cultural ideologies. Game designer Raph Koster notes that play has “the power

18. Warren Robinett, “Inventing the Adventure Game,” unpublished manuscript quoted in Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 439 (see chap. 2, n. 23).

19. Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play*, 9-11 (see chap. 2, n. 24).

to alter how people perceive the world around them”; when games are “thought provoking” and “revelatory” they “force us to reexamine assumptions.”²⁰ Play provides an opportunity for players to “reflect, replicate and promote” cultural values as well as “question, reverse, or undermine them.”²¹

To understand, in praxis, how real-world phenomena can be used as a point of departure for designing interactive experiences that also serve as a transforming critique of cultural values, it will be useful to return to the case studies. The point of departure in Damisch’s exhibition might be considered structuralism, the intellectual movement that argues that knowledge is to be found in the kinship between things rather than in the things themselves. The objects at play in Damisch’s exhibition are works of art metaphorically converted to chessmen and cards. The defining property of structuralism that Damisch abstracts and simplifies is the use of structures to produce meaning and new knowledge. Damisch’s structures establish unconventional groupings of works of art, thus promoting the structuralist behavior of building relationships between disparate objects. Visitors are encouraged to discern some of the same conceptual patterns that Damisch discovered as he explored the museum’s permanent collection for the exhibition (e.g., narcissism and reflections, chess metaphors, etc.). In addition to defining objects and behaviors, a point of departure is also used to determine what kinds of information are at play in a game. Damisch’s structuralist approach opens the door to any amount or kind of information that the works and their arrangement might elicit.

20. Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (Scottsdale, AZ: Paraglyph Press, Inc., 2005), 148-150.

21. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 522.

Damisch's exhibition uses the conventions of play as an effective vehicle for a potentially transformative experience; in this instance, Damisch's playful approach draws attention to what he calls the "tyranny" of traditional museological taxonomies. By creating a rule change that lets visitors take charge of how they move through the exhibition, deciding which works to compare with others and how—that is, what structure to impose—Damisch contends that they are given the opportunity to challenge the museum's authority as manifested in the control that curators typically exercise in shaping the organization of an exhibition. This simple strategy transforms the relationship between visitors and the art, changing visitors from exhibition grazers to personal curators, and (potentially) prompting them to question or at least become more mindful of the effect that context or installation design can have on one's experience of art.

In GOAC, the point of departure was inspired by a nineteenth-century eye miniature in SAAM's collection. Miniature paintings of a single eye were a way to keep an image of a covert lover close without revealing his or her identity. From this obsolete fashion trend, the game designers chose as their point of departure a secret love story. From a game-design perspective it is an intriguing conceit but inexplicably, GOAC missed an opportunity to give participants a related art experience—the final event at the Museum did not even have participants encounter the original object that served as the game's inspiration. The game designers determined that the most important components of a secret love story within the context of this game were a nineteenth-century couple, a twenty-first century Museum, and a series of clues that connect the two. One of the treats of ARG play is the permeability of the magic circle. As in a post-modern novel, the lines

between real and fictive are fluid. In GOAC, the objects—in the form of clues—evoke both nineteenth and twenty-first century characteristics: the former with the eye miniature (real) and a hand-written set of letters (fictive) sent via conventional mail; and the latter with cell phones (real), blogs (real), media releases (real), and multiple social networking sites (featuring fictive characters). In a similar vein, the behaviors that were elicited and the information that was manipulated blurred the lines between the real and make-believe. The initial clues that presented quotes from Shakespeare sent several gamers trolling the internet to find the original plays from which they were taken, others researched and shared the definition for “subaltern” which was a word used in the first artifact-making challenge; the behaviors called for were very real examples of research, analysis, and synthesis. Even the artifacts oscillated between authentic (the eye miniature) and artificial (the artifact challenges). The mini events at the Anthropology Department of the National Museum of Natural History and the National Congressional Cemetery were real and the information dispensed by the experts was real, but the “police reports” and flash-light conversation with spectral figures were fictive. What is noteworthy about all of this—leaving aside its irrelevance to an art experience—is that, real or fictive, the objects, behaviors, and information stayed germane to the original point of departure (a secret love story), thereby keeping the magic circle cohesive and believable, the experience immersive, and all of the components related and meaningful within the context of the game.

GOAC also aspired to throw into question the authority of the Museum. The (fake) curator, Daniel Libbe, is quoted in a SAAM press release announcing the game,

“We hijack the voice of the Museum with its timeless authority, demanding that participants create and then surrender precious artifacts to us. Our hope is to have people creating objects that embody histories.”²² However, the claim is somewhat disingenuous; while participants were invited to submit artifacts for display at the Museum, thereby sidestepping curatorial judgment and acquisition policies, the game rules clarified that “these artifacts will form part of the Ghosts of a Chance initiative, but will not become part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's permanent collection.”²³ Nonetheless, gamers seemed to appreciate this component of the game. Hard-core gamer Scott Myers provided SAAM with in-depth feedback following the game and observed that:

What Ghosts of a Chance did well was invite participants to take part in the exhibit—essentially becoming part of the exhibit themselves. [. . .] Sometimes a painting is just a painting. But more often, there is a story that is waiting to come out and be told. [. . .] People should be encouraged to discover these relationships, and see exhibits in a new light.²⁴

A more pervasive ideological transformation that occurred for participants in GOAC had less to do with art or curatorial authority than with art museums in general. Multiple evaluations at the end of the culminating event at the Museum documented a shift in attitude about the Museum as these comments by four participants reveal:

22. Smithsonian American Art Museum, “Smithsonian American Art Museum Announces *Ghosts Of A Chance*— A Creative Initiative at its Luce Foundation Center for American Art,” press release, Sept 8, 2080, http://ghostsofachance.com/main_site/GOAC_press_release.pdf.

23. Ghosts of a Chance rules, http://ghostsofachance.com/main_site/index.php?p=rules.

24. Goodlander, “Fictional Press Releases,” (see chap. 3, n. 43).

I was surprised to have such a fresh and enjoyable experience in a museum.

The game was SO much more than I expected. I thought that we'd come in for an hour or so and then leave bored. Instead, we completed all six scavenger hunts.

It was a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon, and turned an already interesting museum into an exciting place of wonder, where every question led to another new discovery.

I have spent quite some time in art museums and this is probably the first time that it felt like the museum was meant to be fun and interactive rather than more somber and pensive.

The comments mirror the psychographic profile of archetypal visitors who want engaging, participatory activities that are fun and social. Even for experienced museum visitors who fall outside of the archetypal visitor profile—that is, visitors who enter the museum with advanced art historical knowledge and developed art-viewing skills—the comments suggest that they might welcome and value this type of activity in a museum.

Once a game designer has selected a point of departure and has begun to identify the objects, behaviors, and information that will be at play, the next step in the design process is to determine how those game components will actually be used by the players. Choosing which strategies to offer viewers for manipulating the objects and information, and how the behaviors will shape the gameplay is determined in the third and most complex phase of game design: establishing a task environment.

PHASE THREE: DESIGNING A TASK ENVIRONMENT

The definition of play devised by game studies experts Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman encapsulates the verb/noun character of play: “play is free movement within a rigid structure.”²⁵ The structures that shape a game of chess, for example, include the rules that dictate, among other things, the unique moves of each piece on the game’s board, an eight-by-eight grid of alternating light and dark squares. Within this rigid structure however, players have great freedom: they can employ unlimited strategies; they can move pieces in whatever order they choose; they can take as much or as little time as they like (unless playing during timed tournaments); and they are even at liberty to design the look of individual chessmen so long as the resulting pieces can be clearly differentiated as the six required characters—free movement within a rigid structure. Salen and Zimmerman call their definition of play “design-centric” because its purpose is to help guide the design of play experiences.

The most engrossing game designs create opportunities that give a player “the capability to become an active and creative participant in the unfolding of an emotionally meaningful experience,” according to game designer Clint Hocking.²⁶ Game designers strive to create an “emotionally meaningful experience” by inventing task environments that include rigid structures (goals, feedback mechanisms, regulated information delivery, and rules) that shape the gameplay (the core mechanics and narrative integrity of the activities players undertake).

25. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 304.

26. Clint Hocking, “Designing to Promote Intentional Play” (paper, Game Developers Conference, San Jose, CA, March 2006), 6.

Structuring Tool #1: Goals

Goals are often used to distinguish play from games: play is goalless and games are goal-oriented. But this distinction is an oversimplification of both the relationship between play and games, and the complex concept of goals. There are actually three ways to understand the play/game relationship: 1) games as a subset of play, 2) play as a subset of games, and 3) play and games as opposite ends of an activity spectrum that moves from an informal to a formal structure. As a subset of play, games are a tightly controlled kind of play distinct from free-form activities such as tossing a Frisbee. As a subset of games, play describes a special type of activity that a player undertakes during a game as distinct from reading the instructions or setting up the field of play. The third relationship, that of a sliding scale between informally and formally structured activities, appears in Caillois's theories as *paidia* and *ludus*. *Paidia* is "spontaneous play," such as playing house. *Ludus* is his term for "regulated activity," such as the board game Life.²⁷ The structure in playing house is invented by each player; "Daddy, you can't sit there, that's the stove." In the board game Life, the structure is externally imposed by the board, the rules, and the dice. Yet in either activity participants are free to "get married," "have children," even "buy insurance" if they choose. Playing house is much more improvisational and informal while Life is controlled by the game's restricting goals and rules.

Caillois's idea of placing these two types of activities along a sliding scale becomes useful when considering a game like Sims 2. This is a computer game that

27. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 28.

simulates daily activities from eating and bathing to decorating a house, getting married, and having children. It has a regulated structure imposed by the computer program but within this structure the player has great latitude for improvisational play. Is Sims 2 an example of *paidia* or *ludus*? It actually fits comfortably in the middle of the scale incorporating a bit of both improvisation and externally controlled structure. It is this third concept of the relationship between play and games that provides the greatest latitude and validates the interchangeability of the terms play and game being used throughout this discussion. They are not considered different kinds of activities; rather, they are understood as the same type of activity only more or less formally structured.

Note that all three examples—playing house, Sims 2, and Life—can have goals: in playing house it might be “I want to create an opportunity to kiss Johnny”; in Sims 2 it might be “I want to build a mid-century modern house to live in”; and in Life it is “I want to get to the finish line first.” Goals can be short-term—“I want to kiss Johnny,” a goal that does not conclude play—or long-term—“I want to get to the finish line,” a goal that terminates play. Short- and long-term goals can be understood as observable outcomes that measure success (“I got a kiss” or “I just acquired enough money to buy the materials to build a house”).

The video game theorist Jesper Juul makes a useful distinction between games with obligatory goals, optional goals, and personal goals.²⁸ Games with obligatory goals define the gameplay experience within a structure rigid enough to significantly limit a

28. Jesper Juul, “Without a Goal: On Open and Expressive Games,” <http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/withoutagoal/>.

player's choices. Juul uses the example of the video game *Scramble*, in which a player has to lead his aircraft past a variety of obstacles in order to destroy the enemy's base. If the player does not engage with the obstacles and merely roams around space, the game will end—either the aircraft crashes or it runs out of fuel. Ignoring the obligatory goal is not an option for a player if she or he wants to stay engaged in the game. Games with optional goals provide a player with the challenges that a goal helps establish, but the player can choose to pursue the goal or not. As an example Juul cites the video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. The official goal of *San Andreas* is for the player to save his family and clean up the corruption and violence that is plaguing his old neighborhood. A player can attempt the goal but he can also ignore it, choosing instead to pursue a personal goal like exploring the neighborhood or mastering his “cycling skills.” The game designer offers a player enough choices that he can stay engrossed in the gameplay without pursuing the official goal. Juul's third category relates to games that *only* possess personal goals. In recent years a new genre of games has been designed as goalless, or perhaps more accurately, they are designed to allow the player to establish his/her own personal agendas. *Sims 2* is one such example. It allows a player to create a life: choose a place to live, attract a mate, raise a family, and acquire material goods all based on personal preferences. Juul calls this new genre of play “expressive games,” which he defines as those that “allow players to arrange and combine the elements in the game in a large number of different ways in a way that players interpret to have a wide range of meanings.”²⁹ Expressive games allow a player to pursue his own interests. The gameplay

29. Ibid.

is designed to give a player a maximum amount of self-defined free movement. But play requires a rigid structure that the player can operate within or against. In Sims 2, a player does not have complete autonomy. The game has built into it a rigid structure that puts limits on a player's actions and even initiates unexpected circumstances. Characters in Sims 2 may refuse to do as they are told because of their own moods and whims independent of the player. Juul recounts an episode of his own play session in which he instructed his character to eat seven times in a row. The game system countered Juul's command by starting a fire in the kitchen, causing his character to have a nervous breakdown which required a house call from a doctor. The rigid structure contributes to the gameplay experience even when a significant amount of expressive or improvisational play is accommodated.

Goals, whether official, optional or personal, are an important part of the gameplay design. Salen and Zimmerman suggest that goals are not the product of play. Rather, they are a mechanism to help structure game design.³⁰ They are also not the purpose of play; they are only important to the extent that they shape the gameplay experience.

In developing GOAC, the designers created an expressive game, making it a useful example of how the structuring tools of game design shape a player's gameplay. The game included a rigid structure in the form of a pre-written ghost story which needed to be resolved within a finite amount of time (extending over three months). The resolution of the haunted museum was the long-term formal goal. The game also included

30. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 258.

a series of short-term goals: upload a picture of your lover's eye onto the website, make an artifact, collect clues, complete the on-site scavenger hunt. Each of these short-term goals was optional. As in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, players could strive to solve the mystery but could also choose in which of these other tasks they wanted to participate. The design of the game also offered opportunities for personal goals—in particular, creative expression. Many of the uploaded eye images included computer manipulation and the artifact-making challenges were highly personal and inventive. By keeping the game's goals open-ended with all the parts related but not mandatory, the Museum was able to accommodate players in the Washington area as well as around the country.

Structuring Tool #2: Feedback Mechanisms

Goals (official, optional or personal) are a type of feedback mechanism. Feedback gives visitors a measurable sense of progress and accomplishment. In addition to goals, other feedback mechanisms can be incorporated into the structure of gameplay, thereby allowing participants to visualize and compare their progress such as connecting pieces of a real puzzle with the completion of each challenge or drawing pieces of a picture after each choice is made (as in *Hangman*). Another feedback mechanism is the game-design concept of “leveling up.” Leveling up involves being presented with and meeting a challenge, and then advancing on to a new challenge that requires more advanced skills or additional information.

GOAC provided a sense of progression through several vehicles. The home page of the game's official website was dominated by six squares, the first of which had the

title of the first artifact challenge, “necklace of the subaltern betrayer,” when the site launched. The introduction of each new artifact challenge was presented by filling the next square with the challenge’s title. Each time players logged onto the site, they had an immediate sense of what point they were at in the story and how much more was ahead. Each new challenge revealed another chapter of the story, allowing participants to learn incrementally about each of the four ghosts and how they related to each other. The culminating event at the Museum included another visualizing feedback strategy involving a stamped manifest; at the completion of each quest, the participants’ manifests received another stamp. The final event also included a leveling up feedback mechanism by making each of the six quests progressively more difficult (which is why less than a third of participants were able to complete all six quests) and gave those who completed it bragging rights (and a free t-shirt).

Structuring Tool #3: Information Dissemination

Controlling information is another powerful structuring tool that a game designer has at her disposal. How to deliver information, how much information to deliver, when to deliver it, and what information to disseminate are all important factors for a game designer to consider. It is perhaps here that museums might profit most from adapting the structuring devices of game designers. As the Pulitzer and Brooklyn Museum examples in the introduction demonstrated, museums can err on the side of insufficient or overabundant information. The psychographic profile of archetypal visitors suggests that they need help identifying what types of information are appropriate and applicable to use when looking at art, an approach that is absent in the Pulitzer’s display strategy. The

long-held belief in providing visitors with the option to access an abundance of information (that they can choose to utilize or not) has been contested in visitor studies. Such studies have shown that the availability of too much information often results in visitors accessing none of it because of a sense of information overload as demonstrated in the critiques of the Brooklyn's installation.³¹ Not only are the amount of information and the timing of its delivery important, so is how the information relates to a given situation. As constructivist learning models argue, decontextualized information is of limited value if a person cannot immediately apply it to *a priori* knowledge and to the present context. A game designer creates opportunities for a player to recognize or create relationships between the different kinds of information. In the board game Clue, a player moves around the board visiting various rooms of a mansion and interrogating the guests (animated by the other players). He must deduce connections between the rooms he chooses to visit, the objects he discovers, and the information he gathers from the guests he confronts. If the player connects the information correctly—the study, the candlestick, and Colonel Mustard—he arrives at the solution to the murder mystery and wins the game. Salen and Zimmerman have observed that game design is not fundamentally about creating an artifact—a board, card, or video game—rather, “the design of play is the design of an interactive context from which meaning can emerge.”³²

As a device to keep the internal logic of the experience intact, many games rely on accessing information through non-player characters (NPC). NPC's are used in role

31. Serrell, *Exhibit Labels*, chap. 12, n. 2 (see chap. 1, n. 1).

32. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 368.

playing games, ARGs, and some video games to dispense information or advance the story; e.g., in *Dungeons and Dragons*, the game master (a NPC), periodically introduces additional story elements (a new challenge, the sudden appearance of a dragon, a new level in the dungeon, etc.) to which the players then must respond.

Following the conventions of the ARG genre, the information disseminated in GOAC was an inventive and well-controlled mix of real and fictional elements. Using multiple artificial and real platforms—a hennaed bodybuilder, websites, social media, cell phones, snail mail, and NPCs (Georgiana Bath, the only real SAAM employee participating in the project, the experts who led the tours at real-time events, and the fake curators)—the game was able to deliver information in incremental ways that moved the story forward chapter by chapter. Inherent in ARGs is the role of participants as another important source of information. The strong sense of community that these games generate is a result of players sharing their online research with each other on sites such as the Unfiction forum. In GOAC, participants posted emails and snail mails sent to individual players so all could access the clues contained in them, and uploading images and information from real-time events to share with those who could not attend those events. By giving players an active role in information dissemination, the design of the game ensures players will not get bored by too little information too slowly delivered or the converse, too much information shared too quickly.

Structuring Tool #4: Rules

Rules provide the structure for attaining a game's goals. They can be explicit, like those written out in the instruction booklet, or implicit. Implicit rules are typically

unwritten and stem from more general social values including good sportsmanship, game etiquette, and the like. They are “meta rules” that embody largely accepted social conventions.³³ A distinction can also be made between explicit and modified rules, the latter consisting of those rules that are (re)written by individual play communities—“Billy’s little sister is allowed four strikes at bat because she’s only twelve.”

Rules are both prescriptive and proscriptive. They prescribe or describe a player’s choice options while also proscribing or limiting a player’s choices.³⁴ The rules of chess prescribe the types of moves that each piece can make. They also proscribe how the player can choose to act. A chess player cannot simply grab his opponent’s king and declare victory. He must capture it using one of his pieces. To the extent that rules define and restrict player choice, they form part of the rigid structure of play. But rules, like goals, can also contribute to the free movement within that structure depending on how open or closed they are. The degree to which play is open or closed is contingent on the nature of the rules, not the number of rules. A limited set of rules applied to a finite collection of objects can produce infinite variety as can be seen with the rules of grammar and the history of literature.³⁵

In a closed-play structure the rules tend to dictate a strong border around the magic circle. While the actions within the circle may be inspired by “real” world ideas, and metagaming is always occurring, the rules dictate specific and limited choices in

33. Walton, *Mimesis*, 52.

34. Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 37 and 95.

35. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 159.

which the player can engage. Many board and video games might be understood as a closed-play structure. In Monopoly, the player moves around a proscribed space and can choose to buy and sell property. His choice of play actions is dictated by the roll of the dice and his bank account. A player's knowledge of how the real estate market operates in the world outside of the magic circle provides no game advantage; it is not accommodated in the rules of play.

In an open-play structure, the rules invite the player to call on life experiences outside of the magic circle to help make choices in the game. A role playing game (RPG) is the most obvious form of an open-play structure; it is one in which players assume the role of a fictional character and undertake an adventure presented by the Game Master (e.g., slay the dragon or find the hidden chalice). The Game Master directs the narrative of the gameplay to a certain extent by concealing and dispensing information—such as the number of floors in the dungeon—as the play progresses. The actual play experience involves a great deal of improvisation on the part of the players—they have great latitude in how to go about killing the dragon or pursuing the treasure. As they improvise the drama, the outcome of battles and confrontations are decided by a chance mechanism (such as Rock/Paper/Scissors). Although the players are temporarily inhabiting a fictional world, the rules can dictate whether or not many of their action options can be informed by knowledge external to the game. For example, in Dungeons and Dragons, one of the best known RPGs, some play communities have a rule that the use of firearms as a weapon option is forbidden because such weapons did not appear with any regularity in Medieval Europe until the 1300s, later than the timeframe in which the action of

Dungeons and Dragons is considered to occur. The player with more knowledge of medieval military history has more information with which to improvise. That is just one instance of how the rules can control how much a player's knowledge external to the magic circle can become a part of the play action.

Rules that close the play structure tend to limit players' choices while rules that open the play structure grant greater latitude to the choices that a player can undertake. Closed structures place the shaping of the play experience in the hands of the game designer to a greater extent. Official goals take on more significance in this type of play. Open structures allow the player a much greater creative role in defining the play experience. In open-structured play, personal goals are more meaningful. This type of play is more typically measured by its sustainability than by the attainment of an obligatory goal.

The structure of GOAC illustrates an assortment of rule types. Different portions of the game had explicit rules such as time limits, size requirements, and mailing instructions for the artifact-making activities; the in-house scavenger hunt was particularly prescriptive, with directions to find this work of art, call this number, talk to this person, etc. Participants also followed implicit rules based on the conventions of ARGs: the identified clues and solved puzzles were shared on the Unfiction forum because playing is understood to be a community effort. Participants intuitively knew that emails and phone numbers found on different websites were meant to be used as clues; they did not need written instructions to recognize this. Most ARGs are designed as open structures which allow players to use real-world behaviors to interact with the fictional

world of the game. The rabbit hole of GOAC had the potential of leading participants in multiple directions; for example, “Luce’s lover’s eye” combined with the initial phone message led the play community to research Shakespeare, find information about Henry Luce, and try to make connections such as this one posted by a participant, “I tried doing a quick search to see if there was any major connection between Luce and Shakespeare, but the closest I got connection-wise was that there's a Nature Observatory named for Luce and a garden called Shakespeare Garden in Central Park.”³⁶

It appeared at the start that the game designers were planning on a very open structure for the game as noted in an article on the game in *Smithsonian* magazine:

Along the way, players will influence the story itself, either when [game designer] Maccabee changes it in response to their Unfiction comments or through two nonvirtual events at which gamers interact with hired actors.

"ARGs have beginnings, middles and ends, so they are real stories,"

Maccabee says. "But still the players are interacting with you and taking the game in a direction that they want to take it.”³⁷

Despite this aspiration for an open-ended approach, the final game play remained a fairly closed structure with a storyline that did not veer away from the designer’s original script.

Gameplay: Core Mechanics

A game designer prescribes certain kinds of activities—what the player actually

36. Unfiction Forum, <http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=26261&start=60>

37. Anika Gupta, “Get Your Game On,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2008, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/atm-game-200810.html>.

engages in from moment to moment. Fundamental to shaping the activity of gameplay is the selection of a core mechanic which can take many forms: in charades the core mechanic is acting, in Scrabble it is manipulating letters, in Pictionary it is drawing. Other types of core mechanics include pattern-building or recognition, simulation, cooperative play, line-drawing, role-playing, card-driven, and interactive fiction to name but a few. The core mechanic shapes the kinds of choices a player can make and defines the activities in which he is engaged. Games are particularly adept at focusing attention on underlying relationships and this process can help define a core mechanic.

We play games where things fit together not only physically but conceptually as well. By playing games of classification and taxonomy, we extend mental maps of relationships between objects. . . . Classifying, collating, and exercising power over the contents of a space is one of the fundamental lessons of all kinds of gameplay.”³⁸

In GOAC, like most ARGs, the core mechanic is searching for, sharing, and combining information to solve a fictional mystery. This process of trying to build relationships between potentially disparate things (e.g., the ultimately irrelevant connection between Henry Luce and Shakespeare) points to a telling parallel between play and life, as the philosopher James S. Hans argues in his book *The Play of the World*. Hans contends that life is illusory, composed of the human conventions that structure it. The illusory structures of play are comparable to “the illusory structures by which we

38. Koster, *A Theory of Fun*, 54.

order our lives.”³⁹ How we “graft” things together is what gives our world structure. He writes:

[Play] is a structuring activity, the activity out of which understanding comes. Play is at one and the same time the location where we question our structures of understanding and the location where we develop them.⁴⁰

The process of finding relationships or building connections between disparate ideas or between what we already know, what we almost already know, and what we don’t know is essential in all fields of human knowledge. The mathematician and physicist Henri Poincaré described the discovery methods of mathematics and science as finding “unsuspected kinship between . . . facts, long known, but wrongly believed to be strangers to one another.”⁴¹ When we are presented with information that challenges what we already believe to be true or correct, we are thrown into disequilibrium. We are motivated to acquire new information in order to regain our intellectual balance.⁴²

Play holds the potential of immersing a player in situations that require linking information together in unexpected ways in order to sustain the gameplay. In the process, the player’s habits of thought or scope of knowledge can be challenged and enhanced. This information-linking process forms the basis of the Glass Bead Game as described in Herman Hesse’s novel of the same name. The futuristic story centers around an order of

39. Hans, *Play of the World*, 5 (see chap. 2, n. 12).

40. Ibid, x.

41. Henri Poincaré, *The Foundations of Science: Science and Hypothesis, The Value of Science, Science and Method*, trans. George Bruce Halsted (NY: The Science Press, 1913), 386.

42. Finkel, *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut*, 87 (see chap. 1, n. 21).

intellectuals who are responsible for developing and playing the Glass Bead Game which involves stringing together diverse pieces of scholarship from music, art, science, cultural history, mathematics, and cosmology. The ambitious objective of the game is to synthesize all human knowledge.⁴³

The structuralist premise of Damisch's exhibition suggests one way that museums might begin to set up a scenario that invites this kind of synthesizing. A structuralist encounter with a work of art, by definition, suggests the potential use of a huge body of information: *a priori* knowledge, art history, life history, and cultural history, as well as metaphysical beliefs and philosophical ideas. However, this plethora of information can be overwhelming for all but the most practiced art viewers. "Moves" is an impressively open-ended exhibition that grants visitors great latitude in how they look at, compare, and contrast works of art using a visual *mélange* of *potential* information. Its conceptual flaw is that it assumed visitors brought to the experience knowledge and skills comparable to Damisch's own. Visitors could have been aided by applying the structuring tools of gameplay in order to create a more deliberate and staged process of information delivery, serving to direct their attention incrementally to different kinds of information that might otherwise have been overlooked (or unknown) while making other pieces of information less meaningful or valuable, and even potentially irrelevant. Their success in making connections that go beyond the most obvious and prosaic could also have been enhanced with a feedback mechanism that affirmed or challenged the visitors' connections to push

43. Herman Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 11-44.

them beyond their own habits of thought.

Gameplay: Narrative Integrity

Game design provides an additional strategy for guiding visitors and increasing the likelihood that their art experiences will progress beyond a quotidian encounter. To create a task environment, game designers ask themselves: what does the player actively do from moment to moment? How are these actions connected into a larger narrative? How are the actions made meaningful (given meaning within the context of the game)?⁴⁴ To be meaningful, the activities undertaken in a game should harken back to the point of departure and be stylized and simplified versions of the activities associated with that particular phenomenon. Take, for instance, the board game *Cranium*. Invented by a former Microsoft employee, Richard Tait, its point of departure is the theory of multiple intelligences developed by Howard Gardner, professor of cognition and education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.⁴⁵ The theory suggests that people innately possess different kinds and degrees of intellectual abilities like linguistic skills, spatial manipulation, and musical talent. In creating *Cranium*, Tait wanted a game that would allow everyone to have an opportunity to shine using the types of intelligence at which they are particularly adept. So the game includes activities like spelling a word "drawkcab" without writing it down first, a task requiring linguistic skills, using musical talent to hum a tune clearly enough that a partner can recognize the song or modeling an object out of clay in thirty seconds, which requires skill at spatial manipulation.

44. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 326

45. Clive Thompson, "The Play's the Thing," *New York Times Magazine*, November 28, 2004, 50.

The choice of actions that players in GOAC were asked to make—with the exception of the on-site scavenger hunt—retained a strong connection to the narrative, giving the activities internal meaning and logic within the game itself. “Luce’s Lover’s Eye” provided the clue to access the Luce Center’s collection database to learn about eye miniatures, setting the stage for the secret love story; in researching the plays of Shakespeare, players discerned a pattern of relationships between love, death, and ghosts, and discovered that the four ghosts were part of a nineteenth-century Shakespearean touring company; each of the artifact challenges related to one of the six characters in the story (the two “curators” and four ghosts) and reinforced the concept that museum artifacts have histories; the trip to the Anthropology Department showed participants how to read forensic evidence from real skeletal remains and tested their skills on two “unidentified victims” (which were real nineteenth-century skeletons) whose actual causes of death were identical to those of two of the characters (the white male skeleton was shot in the head and the black female skeleton had a crushed torso—in the GOAC story she was sucked under a train); the players’ efforts to communicate with the ghostly figures at the cemetery using Morse Code revealed the ghosts were undead because of their untimely demises; and the players’ discovery of the “curators’” FaceBook and mySpace entries and videos placed the game’s historical story into a contemporary context that showed the “curators” talking to the spirits and slowly going mad as the haunting continued. The types of searches players were invited to conduct, the kinds of information they discovered and shared with the play community all stayed germane to the secret love story, thus enhancing the fictional truth of the magic circle.

This chapter has provided an overview of some of the most relevant elements of game design for the purpose of facilitating engrossing art experiences in a museum setting. It has outlined the general concept of the magic circle, provided an introduction to the tools used to structure play, and described how the various components of gameplay can work together to engage participants in a meaningful experience. But my intent is not to design a game, rather it is to use applicable concepts from game design to conceptualize an experience aimed at helping visitors look more closely and thoughtfully at art. The following ten tenets of game design, adapted to a museum context, will be particularly useful moving forward:

1. point of departure: viewers need a rigid structure based on a real-world phenomenon that shapes their visit and freedom of movement within that rigid structure;
2. invitation into the magic circle: before encountering a work of art visitors should be explicitly encouraged to shift into a state of mind different from that with which they entered the museum;
3. goals: the rigid structure of a visit can be shaped, in part, by goals; whatever form the goals take (official, optional, and/or personal), they should present opportunities for increasing visitor satisfaction in the art viewing experience and provide a sense of accomplishment using appropriate feedback mechanisms;
4. rules: the rules, another tool for shaping the rigid structure, should be flexible enough to accommodate a closed activity for viewers wanting more guidance, and open-ended for viewers wanting greater latitude in shaping their art encounter;

5. task environment: presenting visitors with a call to action makes them aware that they are being asked to make choices and take actions in response to a clearly articulated task environment;
6. core mechanic: the types of activities that viewers will be engaged in from moment to moment should center on ways for viewers to build relationships between different kinds of information;
7. information types: art viewing uses a wide variety of information; this information might be museum-generated, visitor-generated or art-generated; the task environment should indicate what information visitors have available to them and what options they have for using that information;
8. information dissemination: the delivery of information must be controlled, ideally by visitors themselves;
9. integration: the relationship between the objects, information, choices, and actions with which a viewer engages in the task environment must have a consistent, discernable logic;
10. transformation: the process of manipulating and building connections should reinforce, alter or challenge visitors' attitudes or perceptions.

While the case studies provide examples of how some of these tenets of game design can be utilized in a museum setting, neither serves as an effective model for increasing the likelihood of visitors having an engrossing art encounter. Damisch's exhibition was an intellectually rigorous project with a relevant point of departure (i.e., structuralism is germane to the activity of looking at art) but lacked a clearly defined and

supported task environment. GOAC orchestrated a tightly controlled task environment but was built around a somewhat frivolous point of departure (despite originating from a work of art).

The point of departure, the aspect of the “real” world that serves as my inspirational foundation, is an engrossing encounter with a work of art. A preeminent engrossing art encounter might be understood as one that produces an aesthetic experience. Because I am proposing a practical model and not a philosophical theory, it is perhaps more accurate to say the resulting toolkit will help museums design experiences that strive to point visitors *toward* aesthetic experiences rather than having their encounter culminate *in* an aesthetic experience. To differentiate itself from traditional philosophical notions of aesthetic experience, the term “*Realaesthetik*” will be used moving forward to refer to the pragmatic toolkit under development. The next step is to define a typology of aesthetic experiences that will ensure that the *Realaesthetik* toolkit is theoretically grounded. To that end, the next chapter will explore those properties of aesthetic theory that have the most relevance to an art encounter in the context of a museum. It will also explore how those properties can be abstracted or stylized while maintaining their most salient characteristics—a process comparable to the four steps in abstracting a point of departure discussed above. Once fully developed, a *Realaesthetik* toolkit will merge the wants and needs of archetypal visitors with the structuring tenets of game design and the most practical elements of aesthetic theory to provide museums with a framework for optimizing engrossing art experiences for their visitors.

Chapter Five
FRAMING REALAESTHETIK

Realaesthetik classifies myriad characteristics of aesthetic theory in such a way that each resulting typological category (schema) describes a markedly different way in which people can engage with art. The selection of relevant characteristics is admittedly a-historical and a-contextual. The *Realaesthetik* typology is not intended to trace the historical evolution of Western aesthetics from Kant to Arthur Danto or to examine how one philosopher's ideas were influenced by another. Nor does it strive to keep individual aesthetic theories entirely intact and, in fact, rejects key elements of some theories. For instance, the typology does not accommodate the notion of a single kind of aesthetic experience such as that found in Schiller's theory that aesthetic experience occurs when the viewer is able to reconcile their rational and emotional impulses. Nor does it attempt to reconcile philosophical deadends such as the difference between Kant's concept of universal beauty and Hume's more relativist concept of a standard of taste that recognizes a "perfect and universal beauty" that is not absolute but rather defined by common consensus formed over centuries. Elements of individual theories are omitted either because (1) they serve no apparent utilitarian purpose within *Realaesthetik* (which attempts to use philosophical concepts for practical results); (2) they have little relevance within the context of a museum; or (3) they are at odds with the needs, interests, or skills of the archetypal visitor. *Realaesthetik* requires a typology that accommodates multiple

paths toward an aesthetic experience that can be emotional or intellectual, personal or universal, depending on the epistemological belief system of the viewer. As stated previously, my objective is not to untangle the Gordian knot of aesthetic theories. Rather, I have set as my challenge devising a typology of aesthetic experience that makes sense for museum practice.

Most theories of aesthetic experience embody presuppositions based on epistemological assumptions. For example, Kant's universal beauty and Hegel's ideal beauty, because of their absolutist nature, fall on the rationalist side of the epistemological spectrum while Dewey's and Hume's relativist notions of aesthetic experiences fall on the empirical side of the spectrum.¹ Aesthetic theories can also be shaped by predispositions about the human faculty believed to predominate in an aesthetic experience. Beardsley embraced both sides of this continuum at different times in his life; his early aesthetic theory championed a phenomenological approach to aesthetic experience while his later theory evolved into a cognitive understanding of aesthetics. Both presuppositions and predispositions can be charted on separate continua, each with opposing concepts anchoring either end.

1. I designate Kant as an exemplar of rationalist philosophy despite the fact that in his later and best-known works he saw his task as that of synthesizing the best of rationalism and empiricism, as demonstrated in his dictum, "thoughts without content are empty [a critique of rationalism], intuitions without concepts are blind [a critique of empiricism]." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, (NY: Humanities Press, 1950), 93. Later philosophical criticism has demonstrated that Kant is much closer to the essence of rationalism than he might have believed, especially in his claim that no knowledge of reality is possible without *a priori* principles such as time, space, and substance. Subsequent rationalist concepts of aesthetic experience have as their foundation the *a priori* universality of Kant's aesthetic philosophy. I am indebted to Donald Palmer for helping me navigate these important distinctions in Kant's writing.

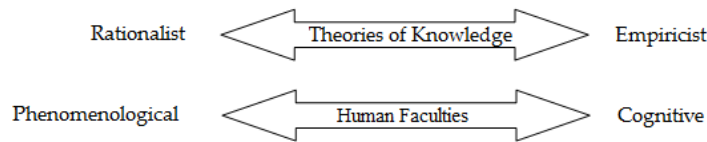


Figure 5.1: *Realaesthetik continua*

The poles of the epistemology continuum provide different answers to the question of where knowledge originates. Does it exist independent of experience (a rationalist position) or is it a product of experience (an empiricist position)?² The rationalist end of the spectrum encompasses the belief that reality is only knowable through our faculty of reason; that is, there reside in our minds innate concepts that are discernable through the analysis of mental activity—such concepts as quantity, quality, relations, and existence—and are independent of any sensory experience of it. Douglas Burnham provides this elucidating example: Burnham argues that to know what the simple statement “I see three horses” means involves visually registering horses and rationally possessing the innate concept of three.³ Immanuel Kant incorporated this epistemological belief into his aesthetic theory. In *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant introduced the idea of determinant judgment in which an immediate, sensible experience is matched to an *a priori* concept or purpose. According to Kant, *a priori* principles such as space, time, and substance are not derived from observation but are brought by the

2. Peter Markie, "Rationalism vs. Empiricism", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>. William James makes this succinct distinction: “ ‘empiricist’ meaning your lover of facts in all their crude variety, ‘rationalist’ meaning your devotee to abstract and eternal principles.” William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907; repr. NY: Barnes and Noble, 2003), 4. In other fields such as education and sociology, the two ends of the continuum are identified as “idealist” and “realist” respectively.

3. Douglas Burnham, “Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) Theory of Aesthetics and Teleology (*Critical Judgment*),” in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/k/kantaest.htm.

mind to observation as *a priori* categories of understanding. Knowledge arises when something is recognized as fulfilling this preordained purpose. In *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant introduced reflective judgments. A reflective judgment—such as the judgment of beauty in art—does not have a corresponding *a priori* concept or purpose, rather, it is “purposive”—it functions as though it had a purpose but does not. Instead, the mind engaged in an aesthetic experience is given to oscillating between immediate sensible experience and knowledge—what Kant calls the mental state where “imagination and understanding are in free play.”⁴ According to Kant, the effect produces pleasure, and it is this unique pleasure that Kant called beauty; following this idea, beauty resides in the oscillating mind not the object itself.⁵ An apt analogy is the phenomenon known as critical opalescence. When certain liquids are heated under pressure to a critical temperature, they fluctuate between gas and liquid, creating an opal-like effect. Kant’s objective experience of beauty is like a mental opalescence as the visual stimuli tries to correspond to an *a priori* concept that does not exist.

One of the key ingredients that rationalist thought contributes to theories of aesthetic experience is a conviction in their universality. For Kant, the sensory stimuli people absorb are made intelligible by innate structures which he calls “the categories of understanding.” These structures are said to preexist analysis in everyone’s mind in the

4. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 62 (see chap. 2, n. 29).

5. *Realaesthetik* incorporates Kant’s notion of the *pleasure* of an art viewing experience because it corresponds with the known interests of the archetypal visitor. It also accommodates the notion of *beauty* in art, but does not consider it as a necessary and sufficient condition for an aesthetic experience. Some visitors may seek encounters with art that they consider “universally” recognized as beautiful, others may be of a temperament to deem a work of art beautiful according to their own subjective criteria, while still others may find the notion of beauty in art irrelevant to their art encounter.

same way. For example, innate structures (such as space and time) provide the synthetic *a priori* foundation of knowledge; one cannot perceive space and time yet all perceptions must take place in terms of space and time.



Figure 5.2: Epistemological continuum

On the other end of the epistemological spectrum is the belief that knowledge is constructed in the mind through sensory (empirical) experiences. Because every person's experiences are different, and knowledge is informed by experience, knowledge is relative, not absolute. David Hume introduced this idea into his aesthetic theory in "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757).⁶ Hume believed that beauty, such as that found in art, exists only in the mind of the viewer and noted that "each mind perceives a different beauty."⁷ Not only is there no universal concept of beauty according to Hume's theory, even a single person's experience of beauty can fluctuate—the same person can respond to a work of art as beautiful one day but not the next. Time, place, personal disposition,

6. Writing in the eighteenth century, Hume's aesthetic theory, like Kant's, includes terms such as "taste" and "beauty" as they relate to a person's response to any type of sensory or mental stimuli—which, in Hume's essay are as wide-ranging as poetry, art, and ethics. The intent of presenting Hume's aesthetic theory is not to incorporate these somewhat anachronistic aesthetic concepts (which have limited practical value within the context of archetypal visitors' interests and skills as noted in note 5 above) into *Realaesthetik* but to provide an example of a philosopher whose epistemological beliefs fall on the empirical side of the continuum.

7. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Four Dissertations* (1757; repr. NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1970), 209.

and associations generated from day-to-day living all factor into how one engages with art, thereby making it impossible for such experiences to be “catholic and universal.”⁸

The other continuum upon which many aesthetic theories reside relates to the human faculty believed to predominate in an aesthetic experience: whether it is conceived as sensual (phenomenological) or intellectual (cognitive). As Jerrold Levinson has observed, the balance of feeling and thought in aesthetic theory “has been a prominent topic for critical discussion in the twentieth century.”⁹ The phenomenological concept of aesthetic experience can be summarized as “something vividly felt and subjectively savored, affectively absorbing us and focusing our attention on its immediate presence.”¹⁰ This belief, for example, is implicit in the word choices made by Glen Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art, in the passage quoted in the introduction; “repose,” “reverie,” “awe and wonder,” and immersion “in the power and beauty of art” reflect a phenomenological conception of aesthetic experience.

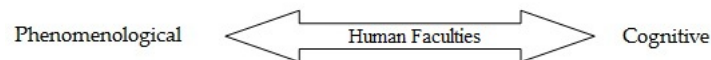


Figure 5.3: Human faculties continuum

The phenomenological concept of aesthetic experience can be contrasted with a

8. Ibid, 213. Nonetheless, Hume did believe that there was such a thing as a “standard of taste” which he understood as a consensus of critical acclaim that is developed over time, preferably centuries: “If . . . there be an entire or a considerable uniformity of sentiment among men, we may thence derive an idea of the perfect and universal beauty . . .” (ibid., 215). Interestingly, Hume thought such standards had a longer shelf-life than scientific, philosophical or theological ideas; belief in the Greek pantheon of gods has evaporated but Virgil still resonates (ibid., 231).

9. Jerrold Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 5.

10. Shusterman, “End of Aesthetic Experience,” 30 (see intro., n. 29).

cognitive understanding of aesthetic experience, that is, that aesthetic pleasure derives from responding to art intellectually as well through the senses.¹¹ Monroe Beardsley has made this a key tenet of his (late) aesthetic theory: “One of the central components in art experience must be the experience of discovery, of insight into connections and organizations—the elation that comes from the apparent opening up of intelligibility.” Beardsley calls this “active discovery,” which involves “meeting a cognitive challenge, of flexing one’s powers to make [art] *intelligible*.”¹²

The two continua, arranged perpendicular to each other, create quadrants that frame four schemata that constitute the typology of *Realaesthetik*: wonder, reverie, recovery, and discovery. The selected nomenclature emphasizes four ways that a person can have an engrossing encounter with art, thereby privileging the viewer (visitor) as the defining factor for where, in the typology, an experience is situated.

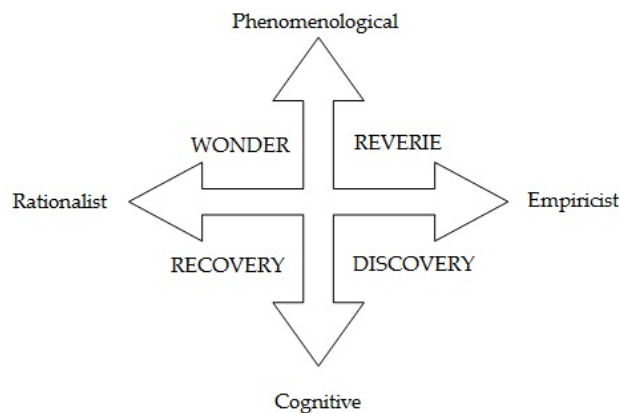


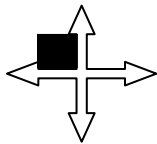
Figure 5.4: *Realaesthetik* framework

11. Iseminger, “Aesthetic Experience,” 100 (see intro., n. 30).

12. Beardsley, *Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, 292 (see intro., n. 31).

While existing theories of aesthetic experience can be roughly charted within the typology of *Realaesthetik*, the intent is not to advance any one philosopher's theory or to paint a comprehensive picture of all theories of aesthetic experience. Rather, the goal is to develop capacious and practical profiles of four different ways of engaging with art that are consistent within the framework of presuppositions that undergird most theories of aesthetic experience, avoiding the specific and unique distinctions that differentiate conflicting theories. To further define these four schemata it will be helpful to draw from an assortment of theories advanced by philosophers, extracting from each those ingredients that help define more clearly the distinctions between wonder, reverie, recovery, and discovery. It is hoped that what is lost in philosophical nuance is gained in practicality.

WONDER



Realaesthetik wonder occurs when the viewer is confronted with something new or unexpected. In *Passions of the Soul* (1649), René Descartes calls wonder “a sudden surprise of the soul,” bringing our attention to “those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary.”¹³ It can be spontaneous and typically involves a flash of insight that can be variously perceived as “knowing” or an encounter with the marvelous or the magical. Its pleasure takes the form of unexpected surprise and often includes a sense of connectedness to something greater than oneself.

I situate wonder within the rational side of epistemological theories because it is

13. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. by Stephen H. Voss (IN: Hackett Publishing, [1649] 1989), 56.

characterized by the quest for universal or certain knowledge. Wonder “is useful in making us learn and retain in our memory things we have previously been ignorant of,” according to Descartes, because it fixes our brain “in a particular [state of] attention and reflection.”¹⁴ Peter de Bolla calls wonder “knowing rather than knowledge since it is more like a state of mind than an item of knowledge.”¹⁵

Some philosophers hold to the belief that art produces deeply felt responses that have a universal character to them. De Bolla claims that the universal aspect of wonder in art is “necessitated by our belonging to a community” and that in aesthetic experiences “what is strong for me must be strong for you” which echoes Kant’s rationalist position.¹⁶ Other writers feel that the experience of wonder in art is a precursor to deeper knowledge: “Wonder is the beginning of knowledge because with intense urgency, it makes us want to know,” writes Hilde Hein, “it drives us from private experience to public understanding.”¹⁷ Leo Tolstoy points to this same communal aspect when he writes that art can contribute to “the brotherhood of man” by generating feelings of connectedness to other people and other times.¹⁸

This connectedness can manifest itself in a mystical or magical perception of

14. Ibid., 59, 19.

15. De Bolla, *Art Matters*, 134-5 (see intro., n. 9).

16. Ibid., 10.

17. Hilde Hein, *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently* (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2006), 149. Descartes, de Bolla, and Greenblatt also see wonder as the first step toward understanding.

18. “We know that the well-being of man lies in union with his fellowmen. . . . Art should transform this perception into feeling.” Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* trans. Aylmer Maude (NY: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1899), 183.

aesthetic experience, where viewers perceive themselves miraculously transported to a larger (sometimes spiritual) community or puts them face-to-face with what they perceive to be absolute truths. The Latin word for wonder is *mira*, also the root word for miracle.¹⁹ De Bolla goes so far as to describe art's power to generate wonder as a way of knowing that feels to him "like thaumatology: the science, or knowing of wonders and miracles."²⁰ Stephen Greenblatt, in his essay "Resonance and Wonder," argues that wonder is one of the two most meaningful experiences a museum can offer (the second being resonance). He describes wonder as "enchanted looking" and suggests it originates "in the cult of the marvelous." "Looking may be called enchanted," he writes, "when the act of attention draws a circle around itself from which everything but the object is excluded, when intensity of regard blocks out all circumambient images, stills all murmuring voices."²¹

What might *Realaesthetik* wonder look like in praxis? Many of the characteristics of wonder just presented can be found in Peter Schjeldahl's encounter with Velázquez's *Las Meninas* quoted in chapter two.

My first reaction is always disappointment at the course, almost drab,
handmadeness of the big (but smaller than I thought) canvas, the absence
of a glamour that I have cherished in memory. . . . Then, rather abruptly, I

19. Fisher, *Wonder, Rainbow*, 11 (see chap. 2, n. 14).

20. De Bolla, *Art Matters*, 143.

21. Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 49 and 53.

find myself under its spell . . . as if I had never been before—pity the fool

that I must have been when I last viewed the work. This time I get it!

His experience is intensely felt and deeply satisfying. His account records his emotional response to the work, the memory of “how [I] felt, looking.” He derives an instantaneous flash of insight (“I get it!”). The insight is more about being in a moment of certainty of “what a great painting looks like while [I am] looking at [it]”; it is about the moment of knowing (“while [I am] looking at [it]”) rather than knowledge itself. His word choices echo Greenblatt’s description of “enchanted looking” as the power of the encounter draws Schjeldahl into a closed circle occupied solely by the painting and himself, described in magical terms (“I find myself under its spell”).²²

An engrossing art experience marked by wonder begins with an encounter with a work of art that prompts a strong phenomenological response. Confronted with something new, unexpected or surprising, a visitor may experience a flash of insight that is perceived as a kind of ineffable communion with something greater than oneself. Though rare, such experiences do occur and because this type of art experience corresponds so strongly to the expectations of many visitors who think that this is what constitutes a genuine art experience, it is an important schema to include within *Realaesthetik*.

In practical terms however, because it is premised on encounters that are profound and unexpected, wonder presents unique challenges within *Realaesthetik*. It is belief-based rather than activity-based; viewers who are open to wonder anticipate that a work

22. Schjeldahl, “Bearing Fruit,” 76 (see chap. 2, n. 1).

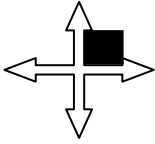
of art will surprise them in penetrating ways without much effort on their part. While the other schemata allow for a task environment that directs the viewer to take some action, wonder requires minimal effort on the part of the visitor, the experience happens to them rather than because of them. But as Jerome Bruner has observed, “surprise favors the well-prepared mind”; with the appropriate invitation into the magic circle, visitors can be primed for wonder.²³

Being on the rationalist end of the epistemological continuum, wonder embodies a belief in ideas that are valued by common consensus. In theory, not just any kind of information can generate wonder. It typically involves information of a kind that has real personal or communal value for its spiritual, metaphysical or cultural qualities. Presenting this kind of information for visitors to utilize is all but impossible for museums, as such information will vary so dramatically from visitor to visitor. But it is important to remember that the schemata are points of departure, each of which requires abstraction and stylization of a theoretical model. In the design process of abstracting out the most salient properties of each schema that have applicability within a museum setting, *Realaesthetik* wonder might realistically confine itself to the objective of presenting visitors with vivid and out-of-the-ordinary information links that surprise and delight them with the unexpected (rather than the universal or spiritual). The information that a museum puts into play in wonder then will rely strongly on information that presents unexpected juxtapositions that produce what Descartes described as “a sudden

23. Bruner, *On Knowing*, 82 (see chap. 1, n. 21).

surprise of the soul.”²⁴

REVERIE



Realaesthetik reverie is primarily an imaginative activity that can involve both serendipitous mental meandering and conscious thinking. It can start with spontaneous imaginings that set the mind randomly straying without conscious control. The viewer’s imagination takes center stage as the mind is set adrift with conjuring. Once the mind begins to take control of the imagination, thinking becomes more deliberate. Imagining in this way lets a person try out new ideas.

Reverie describes the kind of dreamy meditation that can happen in the secular temple of the Muses, for a museum is the home of the Muses, the daughters of Memory. The presence of memory—a personal account of a subjective experience—distinguishes reverie from wonder. Reverie involves musing over a work of art, as in focused daydreaming. While pondering a work of art the propensity to engage the imagination and draw associations from personal life experiences has free rein. The information used for musing in reverie comes from two sources, the art and the viewer’s life history. The information contained within the work might include its subject matter and its formal properties. Viewers’ life histories include their accumulated knowledge of the world, their beliefs, their life experiences, and their memories.

This is the kind of art encounter Denis Diderot describes in his account of viewing the paintings of Horace Vernet in the Salon of 1767. He immerses himself in the paintings walking along a dirt path, observing the weather, imagining meeting the people

24. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 56.

in the distance, “allowing my mind to wander as it would, a delicious state in which the soul is unselfconsciously honest, the mind effortlessly precise and fastidious, in which ideas and feelings emerge naturally, as from some favorable soil; my eyes were fixed on an admirable landscape.”²⁵ The pleasure of *Realaesthetik* reverie is in the imaginative journey undertaken; it is the pleasure of “make-believe” (imagination focused by the prop of art) which allows viewers to participate in the art rather than merely observe it.²⁶

While wonder is a spontaneous flash of insight that often carries with it implications of universal connectedness or certain knowledge (a rationalist presupposition), reverie unfolds over a somewhat longer period of time as the mind imagines and produces a deeply felt response to the art marked by pronounced personal associations. Reverie appears on the empirical side of the epistemological continuum because it is a way of engaging with art that loses the element of the certainty or universality found in rationalist aesthetic experiences. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes introduces the concept of “*punctum*.” Resulting from reverie, *punctum* describes his strongly felt emotional response to a photograph that is highly personal since it depicts his mother.²⁷ Barthes contrasts *punctum* with “*studium*,” the meaning of the photograph that grows out of a collective cultural knowledge. *Punctum* engages the mind with personal associations, *studium* engages the mind with larger bodies of culturally

25. Diderot, *Diderot on Art*, 97-98 (see chap. 2, n. 2).

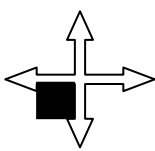
26. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 11-22 (see chap. 2, n. 33).

27. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (NY: Hill and Wang, 1981), 25-28. Distinct from aesthetic experience however, Barthes allows that the deeply felt emotion, generated by a confluence of photograph and personal longing, “pricks” rather than pleases.

accumulated information. Similar to *punctum*, *Realaesthetik* reverie engages personal associations and only that art historical information that the viewer brings to the experience.

Predating Barthes but sharing a similar position, Kenneth Clark has underscored the distinction between contemplating a work of art and considering its art historical significance or interpretable content. He has written that the benefits of art “are achieved by the enjoyment of the works of art themselves, not by information and classification.” Museums, Clark laments, have put learning about art history above experiencing art which is “surely an error, a sort of decadence in which the means has become the end.”²⁸ The introduction of art historical facts and interpretive activities do not fit comfortably within the reverie schema, but such activities have an important place in theories of aesthetic experience and are accommodated in the schemata located in the lower two quadrants of the typological framework.

RECOVERY



Situated in the rational/cognitive quadrant, *Realaesthetik* recovery is an active intellectual event. Here viewers approach art as a vehicle for communicating specific ideas, and the activity of art viewing becomes a search for objective answers—to regain or reclaim the artist’s intended meaning and/or the work’s cultural significance. It is the experience of trying to recover a concrete,

28. Kenneth Clark, “The Ideal Museum,” *ArtNews* 52, no. 9 (January 1954): 83.

objective meaning within the work. It requires the viewer to be “receptive” not “projective.”²⁹

In engrossing art encounters marked by recovery, art historical research is the paramount type of information at play. Multiple kinds of art historical investigations might be harnessed in recovery art encounters: formal analysis, connoisseurship, iconography, social history, artists’ biographies, and so on. This information is used to help the viewer discern the work’s art historically sanctioned meaning. Doing art history—as distinct from learning about art history—can itself sometimes slip into the realm of aesthetic experience: looking at art while ruminating on one’s research can culminate in a clarion moment where all the pieces of the puzzle fit together. This is related to but distinct from the flash of insight gained in wonder. While wonder occurs as a stand-alone experience of the unexpected—an “aha” moment—the instant of clarity in *Realaesthetik* recovery culminates in a “eureka” moment, when the viewer experiences a sense of certain knowledge or understanding as a result of a cognitive process.³⁰

In this schema, the meaning of a work is not constructed so much as it is revealed. Over a period of several years reflecting on Barnett Newman’s painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* and studying the painter’s writings, de Bolla describes a point at which looking at the painting taught him to understand a different kind of relationship between the painting and a viewer. Taking his cue from Newman’s stated aim to take the human figure out of the painting and place it in front of the painting, de Bolla has a visceral

29. Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., *Concerning Beauty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1935), 89.

30. The contrast of an “aha” moment and a “eureka” moment, appears in Fisher, *Wonder, Rainbow*, 75.

experience of scale when he stands before the painting describing it as “the ocular . . . transformed into the ontological.” He reports that “the image seems to compose me, to generate a sense of well-being, of being at one with myself. . . . I know things differently when in this state; indeed, I recognize that I know things that in other states are not accessible to me as knowledge.” This understanding is something the painting “knows,” it is an insight that he has recovered from the painting not something he has projected on to it. Reading the primary source material of Newman’s own writing and spending years looking intensely at the painting, de Bolla had a “eureka” moment that he likens to “pinching oneself metaphysically.”³¹

Searching for the artist’s intended meaning or a work’s cultural significance using art historical research and intensive looking is one of the salient characteristics of *Realaesthetik* recovery. In engrossing art encounters marked by recovery, art is confronted as a puzzle to be solved and the puzzle is art historical in nature in the sense that it utilizes art history-related information or research. The viewer’s satisfaction derives from accurately placing the work within a larger art historical context and a belief that one is sharing in an experience that has touched the lives of others in similar ways.

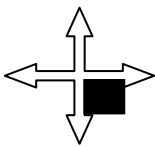
Like wonder, which is also located on the rationalist end of the epistemological continuum, recovery can produce the satisfaction of feeling a part of a larger community, in that viewers expect that what they are experiencing has been and will be replicated by others; as de Bolla writes, “what is strong for me *must* be strong for you.”³² Mather, de

31. De Bolla, *Art Matters*, 48, 49, 53, 43, 49.

32. *Ibid.*, 10.

Montebello, and Hein all express the effect of aesthetic experience as feeling connected to something greater than ourselves, to being magically bound to some of the world's most extraordinary creative forces which can be both inspiring and delightful. Aesthetic experiences allow us to “view ourselves as infinitesimal yet highly privileged parts of a sublime whole,” according to Mather.³³ De Montebello thinks museums in general give us “an opportunity to revel in the fact that other human beings have surpassed [us] and are giving [us] something higher than what [we] bring to it.”³⁴ Hein holds that the power of aesthetic experience lies “implicitly on a history of faith in a common experience.”³⁵ This is a manifestation of recovery's universality by embracing the certain knowledge that we are members of an art-viewing community that extends into the past and will continue into the future. Albert Barnes, founder of the Barnes Foundation, described this effect of an aesthetic experience as “a sense of union with something not ourselves. . . . It is a participation in an experience in which our own individuality is absorbed and carried along like a drop of water in a stream.”³⁶

DISCOVERY



Like recovery—an encounter with art that has as its main preoccupation an intellectual response to art—discovery is also active and cognitive in nature.

33. Mather, *Concerning Beauty*, 113.

34. Hilton Kramer, “A Conversation with Philippe de Montebello,” *New Criterion* 25, no. 1 (September 2006): 12.

35. Hein, *Museum in Transition*, 132 (see chap. 1, n. 13).

36. Albert C. Barnes, *The Art in Painting* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925), 45.

Realaesthetik discovery corresponds to viewers who perceive art viewing as an open concept where meanings are ever changing. While recovery involves linking art historical information to attempt to find a definitive meaning, discovery is about making connections between diverse types of information to create a subjective meaning informed by objective observation. Information types include a viewer's life history (personal experiences and memories, accumulated knowledge, and metaphysical beliefs), the visual data perceived in the work (its formal properties and subject matter), art historical facts, and cultural conventions.

Because it falls on the empirical side of the epistemological spectrum, a viewer's personal experiences have a large role to play. From a discovery perspective, museums' collections are "not self-revealing guides to knowledge" but are resources for "undertaking exploration and discovery" achieved by making connections between the art and their own life experiences.³⁷ Discovery experiences invite the viewer to explore the work of art and construct personally significant meaning from it. The objective of this schema is not to turn a work of art into a giant Rorschach inkblot that means anything the viewer wants it to mean (though in reality, this is not an infrequent occurrence in museums), but rather to help visitors move beyond mundane habits of looking by judiciously dispensing useable information that has relevance to the immediate task environment. Munro used the terms "apperception and association" to describe the type of activity involved in aesthetic experiences comparable to *Realaesthetik* discovery: "apperception," according to Munro, is to understand a perception in terms of previous

37. Skramstad, "Agenda for American Museums," 122 (see chap. 2, n. 21).

experience and “association” refers to making connections between the viewer’s “habit and memory,” “education, tastes, and present attitudes,” and the work’s “physical and social context.”³⁸ As in recovery experiences, there is a role for art historical information in *Realaesthetik* discovery as well. But while recovery experiences use art historical data to regain or reclaim the meaning of a work, discovery experiences use such data as intellectual fodder to help viewers make cultural or personal connections to it.

The effect of such experiences is a “self-rewarding experience of connection.”³⁹ It also contributes to self-knowledge, what Greenblatt called “resonance,” which involves reflecting on “the historical circumstances of [a work of art’s] original production and consumption and to analyze the relationship between these circumstances and our own.”⁴⁰ It also engages both emotions and thoughts: “emotions functioning cognitively” (suggesting that the boundaries between the different schemata should be understood as permeable, not rigid). Goodman contends that the “cognitive use [of emotions] involves discriminating and relating them in order to gauge and grasp the work and integrate it with the rest of our experience and the world. . . . It explains the modifications that emotions undergo in aesthetic experience.”⁴¹ Discovery experiences therefore, include what Munro characterized as a modicum of “self-analysis” as well as formal analysis.⁴²

38. Munro, *Toward Science in Aesthetics*, 26, 280.

39. Bruner, *On Knowing*, 68.

40. Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” 42.

41. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1968), 248-249.

42. Munro, *Toward Science in Aesthetics*, 70.

The author Wilma Dykeman's encounter with Jacob van Ruisdael's painting *Wooded Landscape with Waterfall* falls squarely in the discovery quadrant of *Realaesthetik* as she melds together her life history, art history, and cultural history. Her "autobiographical encounter" is provoked by the painted landscape, reminiscent of the Appalachia environment in which she grew up. She recalls her first published book about a river near her adult home and reflects on the metaphorical significance of water in her life. Intrigued by "the stronger bond!" that the painting holds for her, she researches the artist and his milieu and discovers that, in seventeenth-century Holland, a landscape was understood as "God's second book."⁴³ As a result, hers is a succinct example of Greenblatt's definition of resonance for she comes to know "the historical circumstances of [the work's] original production" and is able "to analyze the relationship between these circumstances and [her] own." In the process, her intense and absorbing experience gives her new personal insights as the work "leads me back to my own, oldest place even as it sends me deeper into myself."

The *Realaesthetik* schemata, taken as a whole, correspond in some measure to the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Rick Robinson, who defined four "dimensions" of an aesthetic experience. According to them, these dimensions—cognitive, communicative, perceptual, and emotional—represent the challenges that works of art present:

43. Dykeman, "On Entering Jacob van Ruisdael's *Wooded Landscape with Waterfall*," 27-28 (see chap. 2, n. 11).

. . . a perceptual response . . . concentrate[s] on elements such as balance, form, and harmony; an emotional response . . . emphasize[s] reactions to the emotional content of the work and personal associations; an intellectual response . . . focuse[s] on theoretical and art historical questions; and finally, what we characterize as the communicative response, wherein there [is] a desire to relate to the artist, or to his or her time, or to his or her culture, through the mediation of the work of art.⁴⁴

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson refer to these dimensions as the “content” of an aesthetic experience. Their cognitive and emotional dimensions correspond to the human faculty continuum that forms one of the axes of the framework. But the epistemological predispositions that inform many theories of aesthetic experience appear not to have a role in their typology. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, the particular dimensions that resonate with a viewer are contingent on the work of art and the skill of the viewer. However, the definitions of the perceptual, intellectual, and communicative dimensions as laid out by them seem to rely strongly on the skills and methodologies of an art historian. This may be because their study is based on extensive interviews with museum professionals including directors, curators, and educators, all of whom one presumes to have extensive art historical training. Finally, Csikszentmihalyi’s and Robinson’s concluding recommendations tend to focus on ways that museums might attempt to teach viewers these skills. But archetypal visitors do not want to be “taught”

44. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, *Art of Seeing*, 28 (see chap. 1, n. 21).

during their visit, they want to discover and learn and, according to Housen's earlier cited research, changing a person's art-viewing skills takes months not minutes.

While some of the dimensions confirm a portion of the intellectual foundation of the *Realaesthetik* schemata, not all are applicable for *Realaesthetik* because one cannot assume all visitors enter the museum with the same art historical skills of museum professionals. The "real" in *Realaesthetik* requires that its typology provides a broad variety of pathways to an engrossing art encounter that corresponds more closely to the skills and expectations of archetypal visitors. The intent of *Realaesthetik* is not to establish four discrete or mutually exclusive schemata—it is built around a malleable typology rather than a rigid taxonomy; one that is meant to be both prescriptive and diagnostic. The *Realaesthetik* toolkit (elaborated on in the next two chapters) will provide criteria for strategically conceptualizing and assessing museum-designed experiences aimed at providing visitors with emotionally and cognitively engrossing encounters with works of art.

Viewers carry through the doors of any museum a set of beliefs about what it means to look at art. These predispositions shape, at least in part, the type of art encounter they will have in a museum. According to de Bolla, one aspect of viewers' predispositions concerns their response—implicitly or explicitly—to the question: do aesthetic experiences happen to us or do we make them happen?⁴⁵ Another determining factor is contingent on their answer to the question: are aesthetic experiences predominately a sensory pleasure or an intellectual pleasure? Finally, do they expect an

45. De Bolla, *Art Matters*, 15-6.

art viewing experience to give them insights into themselves (that is, are they motivated by an intrinsic benefit) or do they expect to gain insight into the art (that is, are they motivated by an instrumental benefit)? The top two schemata in Figure 5.4 share phenomenological characteristics. Within these schemata, visitors' engagement with art tends to be more spontaneous and automatic. It is almost as if it happens by itself, with little effort on the part of the viewer. The bottom two schemata share cognitive characteristics. Within these schemata, the visitors' engagement is more deliberate and intentional. The viewer plays a greater cognitive role in shaping the encounter. The schemata on the left of the diagram are built around the conviction that engaging with art involves connections to a universal concept or some certain truth, something greater than the person experiencing it and valued by common consensus; the right-hand schemata share a conviction that engaging with art involves an autobiographical dimension and is a relative activity.

The four schemata that make up the typology of *Realaesthetik* constitute the first step in the game-design process of abstracting a point of departure: identifying the phenomenon to simulate. The point of departure upon which *Realaesthetik* is being conceived is an engrossing encounter with a work of art and aesthetic experience is understood as the ultimate form of such an engagement. The schemata that make up the typology of *Realaesthetik*, present a consolidation and stylization of the characteristics of multiple theories of aesthetic experience. The next steps are to determine general characteristics for each schema, to abstract their most salient properties—the objects, behaviors, and information that viewers will encounter in each schema—and then

determine how best to ensure the various components relate to each other in a cohesive and logical way that has applicability during a museum visit.

The primary *objects* at play in *Realaesthetik* are the same for each schema: works of art. To begin identifying the most salient *behaviors*, Housen's cognitive stages of aesthetic development introduced in chapter one, are informative. The stages she devised are, in effect, art-viewing behavior patterns that she identified based on the language people use to describe their reactions to works of art. These behaviors might be simplified as list-making, linking, creating meaning, and judging. As the two case studies demonstrate and as game designers know, the process of linking information provides a rich behavior upon which to build an immersive and meaningful experience. The behavior of linking might also be understood as the pivot point for the other three behaviors in Housen's theory; list-making identifies the information to be linked, once linked the information creates meaning, and the value of the resulting meaning forms the basis for judging a work of art.

Art viewing experiences shaped by *Realaesthetik* must accommodate the skills and knowledge with which visitors enter a museum and so can begin with directing visitors to link casual observations, free associations, and memories before moving onto linking concepts that push visitors beyond their personal knowledge to have art experiences that correspond more closely with Housen's stages three through five.

The *information* to be linked is the one design factor that varies significantly from schema to schema. Again, Housen's developmental stages are instructive. The greatest distinction between her five stages is the type of information at play, beginning with

stage one viewers who use idiosyncratic observations and concluding with stage five viewers who use concrete observations and personal, historical, and philosophical ideas. Within the context of *Realaesthetik*, the variety of information that forms the building blocks for each aesthetic development stage might represent leveling-up opportunities that challenge visitors to think longer and harder about works of art. An important distinction needs to be made, however: while viewers at progressively higher stages of aesthetic development have the skills to discern for themselves increasingly more sophisticated ideas from looking at a work of art, in *Realaesthetik* different types of information will be suggested to visitors who might otherwise lack the ability to discern it from the art on their own.

Another perspective from which game designers consider abstracting and stylizing the point of departure involves the kinds of “fun” that they want to elicit. Fun is, by definition, something that provides pleasure. The discussion of pleasure in relationship to art within the philosophical literature on aesthetic experience is a recurring and contentious one. That, and the idea that fun within the context of art encounters potentially runs the risk of trivializing such experiences, warrants a digression.

The philosopher Noël Carroll has speculated that pleasure “is so entrenched in our theoretical tradition” because aesthetic experience was originally conceived as an experience of beauty “and perhaps a case could be made for the proposition that beauty, very narrowly construed, correlates to pleasure.”⁴⁶ Yet it seems that for every philosopher who includes pleasure as a necessary condition in a theory of aesthetic experience, there

46. Noël Carroll, “Aesthetic Experience Revisited,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2002): 149.

are others who dismiss it. Monroe Beardsley, Kendall Walton, Richard Shusterman, and Jerrold Levinson argue that aesthetic experience is about comprehending a work of art and this comprehension is pleasure inducing.⁴⁷ Others, including Plato, Leo Tolstoy, Theodor Adorno, Benedetto Croce, Nelson Goodman, and Arthur Danto argue that the inclusion of pleasure in theories of aesthetic experience contaminates such theories with hedonism.⁴⁸

These pro and con arguments stem from the nature of philosophical discourse, which attempts to establish the necessary and sufficient conditions for a definition of aesthetic experience. This philosophical methodology is used to create a taxonomy of aesthetic experience meant to clearly delineate what does and does not constitute a singular definition of aesthetic experience. *Realaesthetik* accommodates multiple definitions of aesthetic experience, even contradictory ones that might fall on the extreme ends of either axis. Further, a methodology that rejects the presence of pleasure in an aesthetic experience serves little purpose here, where the introduction of “fun” is a response to the known motivations of the majority of museums visitors (i.e., archetypal visitors). As has been pointed out, beginning with Hood’s research, studies have shown that a pleasurable experience is one of the main criteria that most visitors use in selecting their leisure-time options. In addition to the criteria that people use in selecting their leisure-time activities, people’s attitude about art in general is also strongly tied to the

47. Shusterman, “End of Aesthetics,” 34; Iseminger, “Aesthetic Experience,” 104-105.

48. Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 245; Ernst Cassirer, “Educational Value of Art,” in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 201; Shusterman, “End of Aesthetics,” 37.

pleasure principle as the 2001 Americans for the Arts survey previously quoted in chapter one reported.⁴⁹ For my purposes then, the philosophical debates over the role of pleasure in aesthetic experience is moot.

Although I reject the pedagogical model of expository teaching—the method in which an expert dispenses information to a passive audience—because it is inconsistent with archetypal visitors’ preferences, the kind of “learning” that visitors do articulate an interest in corresponds to the pedagogical model of constructivism that includes fun as a fundamental part of the learning process. Constructivist learning theory is learner-centric and requires self-motivated learners. One of the primary motivating factors is that learners find the process an intrinsically satisfying activity that is an end in itself. Jerome Bruner has written that the kind of self-directed learning that is a hallmark of constructivism is also self-rewarding; the learner determines the relative worth of any learning based on “whether the knowledge gives a sense of delight” which shares with fun a high degree of pleasure.⁵⁰ The constructivist concept that self-directed discovery through authentic tasks (another tenet of constructivism) is an inherently pleasurable activity suggests that optimal art encounters can embrace the pleasure of fun as an essential behavior and still avoid the trivialization of art experiences.⁵¹

The game designer Marc LeBlanc has defined “8 kinds of fun” as they relate to game design:

49. Quoted in McCarthy, *Gifts of the Muse*, 71 (see chap. 1, n. 2).

50. Bruner, *On Knowing*, 109.

51. See page 38 for a list of the four tenets of constructivism that hold implications for realaesthetiks.

- fantasy: play as make-believe
- narrative: play as an unfolding story
- sensation: play as sense pleasure
- challenge: play as an obstacle to be overcome
- fellowship: play as social interaction
- discovery: exploring uncharted territory
- expression: play as self discovery
- submission: play as mindless pleasure⁵²

Any single game can involve multiple kinds of “fun.” Charades, for example, includes elements of fellowship, expression, and challenge.⁵³ Not all eight kinds of fun are useful to *Realaesthetik*—e.g., sensation is inherently a part of art viewing while submission is exactly the kind of experience *Realaesthetik* is being developed to counter. For the purposes of *Realaesthetik*, fantasy might be understood as a subset of narrative; stories in *Realaesthetik* can be fantasy inspired by the art but they can also be factual such as art historical narratives. Each remaining category of “fun” suggests different ways that a viewer might interact with information thereby making different choices and taking different actions. The “kinds of fun” that a *Realaesthetik* wonder experience can aspire to produce is that of discovery (exploring uncharted territory, what Poincaré described as finding “unsuspected kinship between . . . facts, long known, but wrongly believed to be

52. Marc LeBlanc, “*The collected game design rants of Marc "MAHK" LeBlanc,*” <http://algorithmancy.8kindsoffun.com/>.

53. Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck, “MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design,” (see intro., n. 10).

strangers to one another”⁵⁴) and feeling a part of a larger community (fellowship). The types of fun that reverie experiences generate have to do with making connections between art and personal experiences for the purposes of fantasy (the pleasure of make-believe), and self-discovery through self-expression. The types of fun that mark recovery include narrative, challenge, and fellowship. Like all the schema, linking has a place in recovery art experiences, but unlike the other schemas, recovery concerns linking art historical facts to accurately place the art within the story of art history (narrative). The obstacle to be overcome is to regain or reclaim the artist’s intended meaning and/or the work’s cultural significance (challenge). Recovery is built on the belief that the certain knowledge sought is timeless—that is, that it is replicated in the art experiences of others (fellowship). The fun of *Realaesthetik* discovery includes weaving together a story combining life, social, and art histories (narrative), the task of combining those details in meaningful ways (challenge), the new knowledge or attitude that presents itself when unexpected connections between these disparate forms of information are made (discovery), and the new personal insights that that generates (expression).

The task set out at the beginning of this chapter was to develop a typology for *Realaesthetik*: a collection of capacious and concrete concepts for engaging with art. The typology outlined above presents an abstraction and stylization of a point of departure based on the literature of aesthetic theories; it frames four broad schemata for engaging with art that, when viewed collectively, present a multidimensional picture of aesthetic experience. What remains to be examined is how this typology, combined with the

54. Poincaré, *Foundations of Science*, 386 (see chap. 4, n. 41).

adapted structuring tenets of game design, can be used by museums to devise a task environment that optimizes engrossing art encounters for archetypal visitors.

Chapter Six
THE *REALAESTHETIK* TOOLKIT AND ITS APPLICATION

It is the potential for personally significant encounters with original works of art that give museums their *sui generis* cultural value apart from other leisure-time choices. Thus it may seem odd to suggest that museums might use game-design concepts to help visitors have engrossing art experiences. However, game design is about designing meaningful interactive experiences. The aspiration of *Realaesthetik* is to provide museums with a toolkit for structuring just such experiences with works of art, experiences that are transformative for visitors in that they are changed in a meaningful way. “For in the end, this is what our visitors most want from us,” writes James Cuno, they want “to have access to works of art in order to change them, to alter their experience of the world, to sharpen and heighten their sensitivities to it, to make it come alive anew for them, so they can walk away at a different angle to the world.”¹

Such transformations must be informed by theoretically grounded concepts of engrossing art encounters if museums are to avoid mission creep into the domain of “theme parks.” The Smithsonian American Art Museum’s “Ghosts of a Chance” project, though lacking just such a theoretical grounding, provided a transformative experience for many participants who concluded their visit with a changed attitude about the

1. James Cuno, “The Object of Art Museums,” in *Whose Muse?: Art Museums and the Public Trust*, ed. James Cuno (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 73.

museum as a playful and engaging leisure-time choice. But the transformation they experienced was a change in attitude about art museums (no small feat) rather than a meaningful change in perspective about the art or about themselves. The typology developed in the previous chapter ensures that the transformational potential of *Realaesthetik* is germane to an art viewing experience. The four schemata of the typology—wonder, reverie, recovery, and discovery—have as their foundation, discussions of aesthetic experience that have transpired over at least three hundred years. To illustrate the distinction among the four schemata, each was examined in light of a real-world art experience that was clearly transformative for its author.

However, museums interested in helping visitors have personally meaningful encounters with works of art must have more than a typology for such experiences. They must also have a plan for addressing the demonstrable wants and needs of the majority of their visitors. Using the structuring tenets of game design is one way to begin accommodating these wants and needs.

Table 6.1: Archetypal visitors' needs and tenets of game design

ARCHETYPAL VISITORS' WANTS & NEEDS	TEN TENETS OF GAME DESIGN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> need to feel comfortable in the belief that the museum is a place where they belong, that this is a place that they and their family and friends fit in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> point of departure: presents visitors with a real-world phenomenon that can put them at ease by providing an entrée with which they are familiar and comfortable invitation into the magic circle: can make visitors feel welcome by explicitly complying with their personal predispositions of what an engrossing art encounter consists
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> want social experiences that provide opportunities for interacting with their companions want participatory experiences but walk into a museum or stand in front of a work of art not knowing how to proceed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> task environment: by inviting visitors with a call to action they become aware that they are entering into a new interactive context in which they can actively participate by making choices and taking actions in response to a clearly articulated task
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> want educative rather than educational experiences; they want to determine what they will learn or take away from the experience rather than being taught a lesson that the museum curator or educator wants to convey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> rules: the rules should be flexible enough to accommodate a closed activity for viewers wanting more guidance, and open-ended for viewers wanting greater latitude in shaping their art encounter information dissemination: the delivery of information must be controlled, ideally by visitors themselves transformation: the process of manipulating and building connections between different types of information should reinforce, alter or challenge viewers' attitudes or perceptions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> like to react; they are list-makers and linkers, cataloging the things that they recognize in a work of art, inventing stories, making personal associations, passing emotional judgments, and/or matching elements of the work to what they know of the natural world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> core mechanic: the types of activities that viewers will be engaged in from moment-to-moment should center on ways for viewers to build connections between different kinds of information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> are curious about curatorial knowledge and judgments but are also suspicious or even resentful of museum authority; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> information types: art viewing uses a wide variety of information; this information might be museum-generated, visitor-generated or art-generated; the task environment should indicate what information visitors have available to them and what options they have for using that information integration: the relationship between the objects, information, choices, and actions with which a viewer engages in the task environment must have a consistent, discernable logic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> typically look at a work of art for less than thirty seconds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> goals: should present opportunities for increasing visitor satisfaction in the art viewing experience and provide a sense of accomplishment using appropriate feedback mechanisms (how goals can be used to help extend viewers' looking time is expounded on below)

The ten tenets of game design also provide the tools with which to design engrossing art encounters. Each tenet can be loosely grouped into one of three categories of tools: infrastructure tools, design tools, and testing tools. The infrastructure tools—the point of departure, the core mechanic, and the goal—are fundamentally consistent from schema to schema in *Realaesthetik*. The primary point of departure for *Realaesthetik* is engrossing art encounters, although each schema defines the content of such experiences in different ways. The core mechanic of *Realaesthetik*, the type of activity that viewers engage in from moment to moment, centers on ways for viewers to build relationships between different kinds of information. The core mechanic of information linking is a stylization of archetypal visitors’ propensity to make lists, develop associations between list elements and the art, and to assess their response to the art based on these linked associations. How *Realaesthetik* utilizes the third structuring tool, goals, requires a bit more elaboration.

Game design attempts “to implement a specific stylized concept of a real world activity.”² Game designers often translate the activity into a problem that needs to be solved.³ The real-world activity at play in *Realaesthetik* is an aesthetic experience broadly defined. The problem associated with that activity, within the context of a museum, is the fact that the majority of museum visitors do not know what to do when looking at art. They visit museums and have social, shopping, dining, and museum

2. Jesper Juuls, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 172.

3. Jesse Schell, *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier, Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2008), 36.

experiences but typically leave without having had an art experience. The next step in structuring a designed experience using *Realaesthetik* then, is to convert the stated problem (people don't know what to do in front of a work of art) into a measurable goal (getting people to look longer at a work of art). As elaborated on below, at its most fundamental level, a meaningful encounter with a work of art takes time—the kind of time that most museum visitors do not expend on their art viewing activities.

Final goals often establish the finite limit of play; when the goal is reached, play stops. But in other instances the goal of play can be the sustainability of the play state.

The goal of the game Verbal Tennis is to never end:

A: Do you want to go for a walk?

B: Why do you ask?

A: Aren't you stressed?

B: What makes you think that?

A: Didn't I just see you sobbing?

B: What business is that of yours? Etc.⁴

The philosopher Bernard Suits, in his quirky treatise, *The Grasshopper, Games, Life, and Utopia*, uses as an example of the sustainability of gameplay Kierkegaard's "Diary of a Seducer" in which the protagonist makes a game out of trying to seduce a woman; it is an open-ended game in which the chase (attempting to seduce) is more engrossing than the ostensible goal (fornication).⁵ This idea harkens back to Gadamer's notion of play as its

4. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 317-318 (see chap. 2, n. 23).

5. Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 93 (see chap. 4, n. 5).

own mode of being; the objective of play does not have to be a denouement goal, it can also be the desire to extend the moment.

Like Verbal Tennis, the overarching goal of *Realaesthetik* might be understood as sustainability—the potential to remain engrossed in a work of art for an extended period of time. Museum staff may aspire to define “an extended period of time” to fractions of an hour but in practical terms, it is more realistic to strive to increase the archetypal visitor’s viewing time from seconds to minutes. It may seem a modest goal but research shows, and even casual observation in any museum gallery will quickly reveal, how rare it is to see most visitors lingering in front of a work of art for a full sixty seconds. Sustained looking might be considered an “official” or implicit goal of *Realaesthetik*.

Table 6.2: Infrastructure tools

INFRASTRUCTURE TOOLS	<i>REALAESTHETIK</i>
• point of departure	• engrossing art encounters built on a framework of aesthetic theory (secondary points of departure may also be incorporated)
• core mechanic	• linking information (how information will be linked is defined by individual task environments)
• goals	• sustainability; extending the time visitors look at art (secondary goals may also be incorporated)

While the infrastructure tools provide the foundation of *Realaesthetik*, the four design tools—the information at play, the invitation into the magic circle, the task environment, and the rules—provide museums with the flexibility to design experiences that correspond to the unique characteristics of each schema. While each of the schema share types of information with one or more additional schema, it is the unique combination of information in each that marks their individual character. The invitation into the magic circle should correspond to the varying dispositions of visitors, the sets of

beliefs about what it means to look at art that they carry with them into the museum. The task environments need to accommodate the combination of “kinds of fun” that correlate to each schema. The rules impose limits based on whether the experience should be relatively more closed (museum shaped) or more open (visitor shaped). The schemata on the rational side of the epistemological spectrum—wonder and recovery—can be generally understood as different quests for true or certain knowledge. That is, there is a specific piece of information or knowledge—believed valuable through common consensus—that is being sought. Since such quests are based on the premise that visitors expect to reach a specific conceptual place, the quests need to be more closely structured as closed experiences. The schemata on the empirical side of the spectrum—reverie and discovery—are understood to be relative, visitors have greater latitude in defining the experience according to personal preferences. These experiences must necessarily be structured as more open, granting the visitor greater freedom of movement. Because of the significant differences between the four schemata, additional secondary points of departure, core mechanics, and goals may also be introduced for each.

Table 6.3: Design tools

DESIGN TOOLS	REALAESTHETIK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> information types 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>wonder</u>: information that is emotionally powerful for visitors and that deals with spiritual, metaphysical or cultural ideas valued by a larger common consensus <u>reverie</u>: information that visitors emotionally value and bring with them including their life histories (personal experiences, accumulated knowledge, beliefs, and memories) along with their emotional and subjective responses to information provided within the work of art (e.g., subject matter and formal properties) <u>recovery</u>: art historical information that is perceived as true and correct that art historians have gleaned from formal analysis, connoisseurship, iconography, social history, artists’ biographies, etc. <u>discovery</u>: information that visitors intellectually value and bring with them including their life histories (personal experiences, accumulated knowledge, beliefs, and memories), along with their intellectual and subjective responses to the visual data perceived in the work (its formal properties and subject matter)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • invitation into the magic circle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>wonder</u>: should appeal to visitors wanting or expecting a surprising flash of communally valued insight prompted by a work of art (a phenomenological and rational experience) • <u>reverie</u>: should appeal to visitors wanting or expecting to experience art as a prompt for their own emotional and imaginative musings (a phenomenological and empirical experience) • <u>recovery</u>: should appeal to visitors wanting or expecting to learn about the art historically sanctioned meaning of a work of art (a cognitive and rational experience) • <u>discovery</u>: should appeal to visitors wanting or expecting to construct their own intellectual meanings for a work of art (a cognitive and empirical experience)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • task environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>wonder</u>: should support visitors' desire for art experiences as a flash of sensory pleasure, an exploration of uncharted territory, and an opportunity for fellowship • <u>reverie</u>: should support visitors' desire for art experiences that allow the emotional play of their imaginations through self-created narratives, and the self-discovery that comes with self-expression • <u>recovery</u>: should support visitors' desire for art experiences that are about placing art into the larger narrative of art history, the challenge of recovering that place, and fellowship • <u>discovery</u>: should support visitors' desire for art experiences that allow them to explore uncharted territory leading to a kind of self discovery that creative expression generates
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>wonder</u>: should define an experience that is relatively closed and museum shaped • <u>reverie</u>: should define an experience that is relatively open and visitor shaped • <u>recovery</u>: should define an experience that is relatively closed and museum shaped • <u>discovery</u>: should define an experience that is relatively open and visitor shaped

The last three game design tenets—information dissemination, integration, and transformation—comprise the testing tools of *Realaesthetik* and are examined at length in the next chapter.

The two tables above comprise the first two sets of tools in the *Realaesthetik* toolkit that are conceived as a structuring device to help museums design engrossing art encounters for their visitors. The constructive function of the toolkit will be examined in light of four designed experiences developed at the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA)—each of which correlates to one of the four typological schemata.

In the summer of 2007, the director of the NCMA, Lawrence Wheeler, charged me (then a member of the senior management team) with facilitating the interpretive planning process for the Museum's collection which was to be reinstalled in a new

facility scheduled for a spring 2010 opening. While I was still in the process of writing this dissertation, my research was well under way and the content that would eventually constitute chapters one and two were shared with the interpretive planning team during the course of the initial planning process. Working with a smaller group of museum educators at a later stage in the planning process, four of the final interpretive strategies were further shaped by nascent stages of the research that now constitutes chapters four and five. Because the construction of these four designed experiences owes much to the concept of *Realaesthetik* in its early stages, they can be examined in light of the first two categories of the *Realaesthetik* toolkit: infrastructure tools and design tools.

From the inception of the new NCMA facility, the director was insistent that the reinstallation privilege aesthetic experiences for museum visitors over educational experiences; the interpretive team was given clear directives to keep gallery didactics including text panels, labels, and other in-gallery interpretive devices to a minimum.⁶ With this proscription in place, a team of twenty-one staff from ten departments (conservation, curatorial, design, development, education, graphics, marketing, planning, security, and visitor services) were convened to begin the interpretive planning process. Following eighteen months of seminar-like discussions that explored visitor psychographics, workshops on defining the factors contributing to significant and

6. Wheeler's commitment to this vision is confirmed in a statement that appears in the press release announcing the Museum's opening, "We could not have asked for more: a building that is both aesthetically stunning and environmentally "green"; a space to show our collection to the very best advantage; and a place that will serve as a destination not only for art lovers but also for anyone seeking a respite and a place of beauty and serenity." Like other museum directors quoted in this study, Wheeler's concept of aesthetic experience is heavily tilted toward a phenomenological model. North Carolina Museum of Art press release, March 12, 2010, <http://www.ncartmuseum.org/pdf/ncma-project-3-10.pdf>.

meaningful learning experiences, and brainstorming and prioritizing sessions on the types of information staff felt were important to provide for visitors during their visit, a draft of the interpretive plan was completed and presented to the director for approval.

The goal of the interpretive plan as stated in the final planning document echoes important aspects of *Realaesthetik*,

The North Carolina Museum of Art respects that visitors come to the Museum seeking a wide variety of art experiences. They may come to reflect on a masterpiece, to learn about other times and people, to be moved—viscerally and intellectually—by the power and beauty of art, to have a compelling art-inspired adventure.

The goal of the NCMA’s interpretive plan is to facilitate these myriad experiences by providing pristine galleries for those seeking the quiet contemplation of art, delivering information for those wanting to learn, and supplying inspiration and guidance to those open to vivid and out-of-the-ordinary gallery experiences.⁷

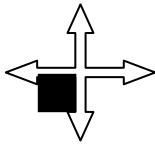
These goals accommodate the variety of interests and expectations with which visitors walk through the doors of a museum: that people have different concepts of what an art experience means, that visitors want different levels of information and assistance from museums, and that visitors do not want to be “taught” so much as they want participatory experiences that help them learn. In hindsight, it is clear that the way the plan articulates visitors’ various expectations of what an art experience consists of correspond to some of the typology of *Realaesthetik*, albeit with different language: “reflect[ing] on a masterpiece” might fall within the reverie quadrant, “learn[ing] about other times and people” relates to the recovery quadrant, and “be[ing] moved—viscerally and intellectually” correlates to the entire human-faculties axis of the typological grid.

7. *North Carolina Museum of Art Interpretive Plan* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2009), 3.

Finally, the emphasis on a “compelling art-inspired adventure” demonstrates that the plan privileges art experiences over more generic museum experiences.

Following the penultimate draft of the interpretive plan, the planning team broke into four smaller groups to develop several of the initiatives conceptualized during the planning process. As director of education, I worked with five museum educators to create multiple, in-gallery resources to be made available to visitors at specially designated counters around the Museum (in accordance with the director’s vision to keep gallery didactics as unobtrusive as possible). The remainder of this chapter examines four of these “art encounters” that were conceived specifically with adult visitors in mind and that have strong corollaries to the four schemata. The designed experiences include: *Take the Grand Tour*, the *Sound Track Experience*, *North Carolina Museum of Art Owner’s Manual*, and *Welcome to the Inferno*. All four of these designed experiences utilize the infrastructure tools of *Realaesthetik*: each has as its fundamental point of departure engrossing art encounters that require visitors to link different kinds of information for the purpose of extending the time they look at and reflect on a work of art. How each of the art encounters employs the design tools of *Realaesthetik* is necessarily different because there are ostensibly four sets of design tools, one for each typological schema. Each of the art encounters builds upon a secondary point of departure that exploits the salient characteristics of one schema (confirming that, despite the constraints imposed by the schemata, the *Realaesthetik* toolkit actually presents limitless design possibilities).

REALAESTHETIK RECOVERY: Take the Grand Tour



In engrossing art encounters marked by recovery, art is confronted as a puzzle to be solved. The puzzle is art historical in nature—that is, art historical research is the paramount type of information at play. Key “kinds of fun” in recovery include narrative, challenge, and fellowship. The narrative involves placing a work of art into the larger context of the story of art. The challenge or obstacle to be overcome is to regain or reclaim the artist’s intended meaning and/or the work’s culturally sanctioned quality. Built on the belief that the certain knowledge sought in recovery extends into the past and will continue into the future—that is, that it can be replicated in the art experiences of others—accounts for the fellowship behavior that characterizes recovery. The viewer’s satisfaction derives from a cognitive solution and faith in the belief that one is sharing in an experience that has touched the lives of others in similar ways.

Anyone who has ever worked with the general public in an art museum knows that a frequently asked question is “What is it worth?” Visitors’ curiosity about the question is equaled only by the reticence of curators to answer it. At the NCMA, the curators’ hesitation about exploring this question with visitors rested on two concerns: security (providing dollar values to works of art might draw unwanted attention to monetarily valuable objects) and philosophical (placing too much emphasis on the financial worth of a work of art may overshadow more intellectually fruitful ways in which to assess a work’s value). Two NCMA educators—familiar with the psychographic profile of the majority of museum visitors—Ashley Weinard and Diana

Phillips, posited that ignoring such a popular though prosaic question was a missed learning opportunity to expand and possibly change visitors' attitudes about the multiple ways that art can be valued. *Take the Grand Tour* was conceived as an interactive gallery guide designed to help visitors explore the question "How do we value art?" in a vivid and out-of-the-ordinary way.

The NCMA holdings are strong in Greek and Roman art, and Italian art of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. These works lend themselves to the concept of "buying" art using the historically documented social custom of eighteenth-century Grand Tours. This then, served as the unique point of departure for this designed experience. *Take the Grand Tour* is presented to visitors in the form of a travel journal. Contained in the journal is an invitation cum description of a Grand Tour, an introduction to a travel companion (based on a real eighteenth-century Grand Tourist), a travel itinerary, a map, and four types of "currency" with which to purchase works of art (Figures 6.1 through 6.5).

Recovery: Invitation into the Magic Circle

The invitation into the magic circle of *Realaesthetik* recovery should appeal to visitors interested in learning art historical information about a work of art. Museum information brochures often end up littering bathrooms and parking lots with cylindrical debris. *Take the Grand Tour*, like all of the print-based art encounters developed by the NCMA, was conceived as a souvenir rather than a brochure in the hopes of extending its shelf-life—and the experience—beyond the Museum's walls. The NCMA decided to use the design of its print pieces as a way to pique visitors' curiosity, to serve as the de facto

first invitation into the magic circle. The design of *Take the Grand Tour*, conceived as an eighteenth-century travel journal, evokes the point of departure in order to add verisimilitude and make the Grand Tour experience more real in visitors' imaginations. (Figure 6.1) The next part of the invitation appears in the form of the opening paragraph of *Take the Grand Tour* (Figure 6.2),

Complete your classical education on the Grand Tour. All the noblemen and -women of the eighteenth-century England are doing it. Journey to Venice, Florence, Rome, and Naples to see the natural and manmade wonders. Observe the fiery eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, marvel at newly unearthed ancient artifacts, and float down the Grand Canal of Venice. When you return home in a year's time, your knowledge of history will be sharper and your taste for art more refined. You may even carry home a souvenir or two. Most important, you will come to value art in a new way.⁸

Recovery: Task Environment

Once visitors have been invited into the magic circle by being cast as the protagonist of the adventure, a task environment is set up for them. In *Realaesthetik* recovery, the task should support visitors' interest in learning about a work of art's place within the larger story of art. The task that resonates with visitors having a predisposition for recovery-type art encounters is more receptive than projective; they want the

8. Ashley Weinard and Diana Phillips, *Take the Grand Tour* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2010), n.p.

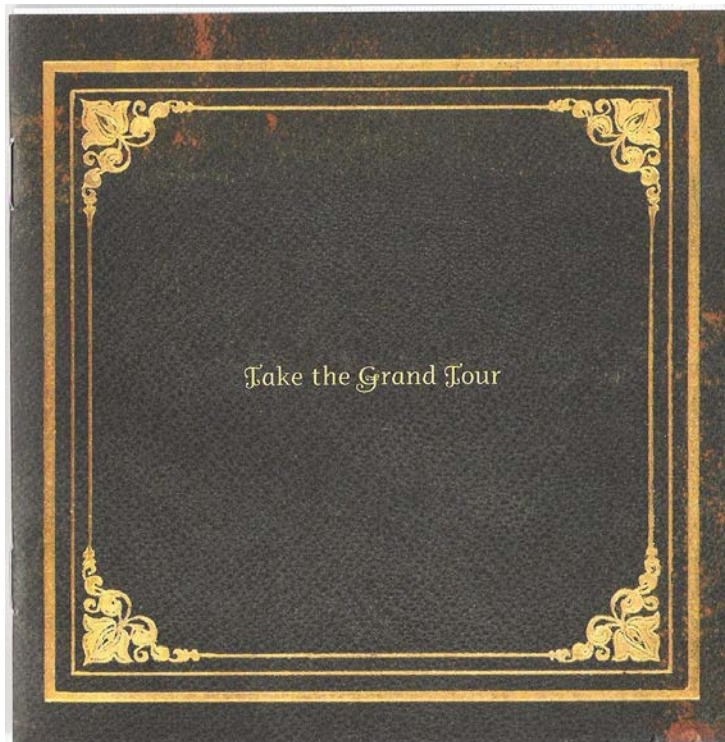


Figure 6.1: Take the Grand Tour cover

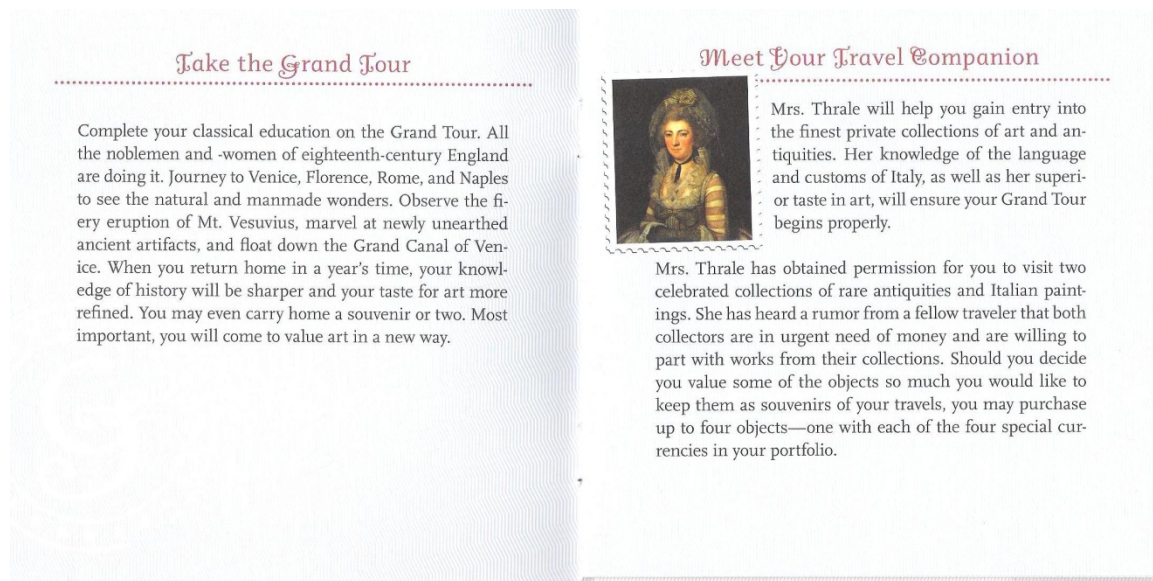


Figure 6.2: Take the Grand Tour invitation and task

challenge of recovering a work's place in the story of art and in the process, generating a sense of community in the belief that they are replicating the art experiences of others. To set up the task environment, *Take the Grand Tour* introduces visitors to their traveling companion (Figure 6.2),

Mrs. Thrale will help you gain entry into the finest private collections of art and antiquities. Her knowledge of the language and customs of Italy, as well as her superior taste in art, will ensure your Grand Tour begins properly.

Mrs. Thrale has obtained permission for you to visit two celebrated collections of rare antiquities and Italian paintings. She has heard a rumor from a fellow traveler that both collectors are in urgent need of money and are willing to part with works from their collections. Should you decide you value some of the objects so much you would like to keep them as souvenirs of your travels, you may purchase up to four objects—one with each of the four special currencies in your portfolio.⁹

The currencies allow visitors to purchase works of art according to their relative worth; visitors can acquire a work for its financial value, its historical value, its aesthetic value or its personal value. (Figure 6.3)

Recovery: Information Types

The magic circle has now been inscribed and visitors have been invited to enter. In the process, they have also been introduced to the task that lies ahead for them: making choices about what works of art to “purchase.” The task requires visitors to link one piece of information to a particular work of art based on what they value most about that work. Recovery-type art encounters privilege art historical facts so the information to be linked in the Grand Tour is derived from art historical scholarship.

Eight cards, depicting the eight works of art to be viewed, are included in a pocket

9. Ibid.



Figure 6.3: Take the Grand Tour currency

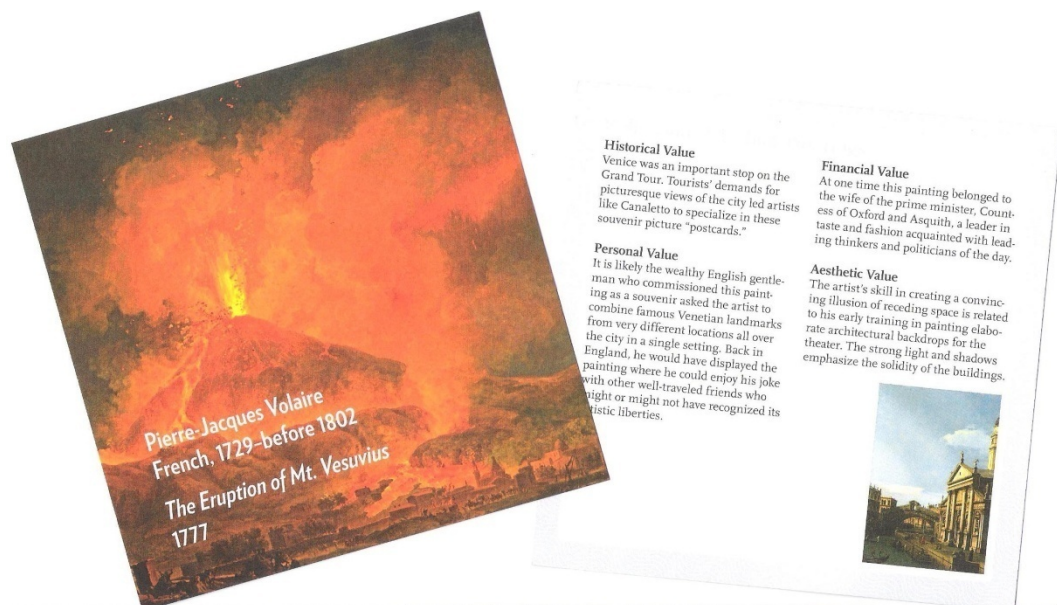


Figure 6.4: Front of card for Voltaire, The Eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, and the back of the card for Canaletto, Capriccio: The Rialto Bridge and the Church of S. Giorgio Maggiore

in the back of the journal. (Figure 6.4) On the front of each card is a detail of the work of art and on the reverse side are four pieces of information corresponding to each of the four currencies provided. Not surprisingly, the wording for the “financial value” was contentious and multiple drafts were required for each. In the end, information is presented in a way that both curators and educators feel accurately but abstractly represent significant information about the financial value of each work. For example, the card for *The Eruption of Mt. Vesuvius* (1777) by Pierre-Jacques Volaire includes the following information:

Historical Value

Vesuvius erupted twelve times between 1707 and 1794. This volcano and archeological discoveries at nearby Herculaneum and Pompeii became chief attractions for Grand Tourists.

Personal Value

In 1786 Hester Thrale wrote about her experience of Vesuvius while in Naples:

This amazing mountain continues to exhibit such various scenes of sublimity and beauty . . . When in the silent night, however, one listens to its groaning . . . nothing can surpass one’s sensation of amazement.

Financial Value

Voltaire made his career creating more than thirty-nine scenes of Mt. Vesuvius for British travelers who went to Naples to visit the ruins of Pompeii and witness the spectacle of the active volcano. Scholars consider this one of the “Volcano Painter’s” best works.

Aesthetic Value

No painter ever excelled Voltaire in water, fire, and moonlight scenes. Many have attempted to paint eruptions of Mt Vesuvius, but unless they are present at the time of the eruption, such painting must be imperfect.

Sir William Hamilton, eighteenth-century diplomat and antiquities collector¹⁰

10. Ibid.

Visitors are further aided by a set of questions accompanying each currency to help them consider the nature of the different ways that art can be valued and to assess which piece of information is most important for any one work of art (Figure 6.3):

Historically

- Are you drawn to this time period?
- Does this work depict an important time in history?
- Is the work important to the development of art?

Personally

- Does the work evoke an emotion in you?
- Is the character or subject a role model for you?
- Do you feel a personal connection to something in the work?

Financially

- Do you recognize the artist as being famous?
- Do you think this work will appreciate with time?
- Do you think there is a growing demand for this kind of art?

Aesthetically

- Do you think the work is exceptionally beautiful?
- Do you enjoy looking at it?
- Do you value the skills the artist demonstrates?¹¹

While the information included on the back of each card is not dissimilar from the types of information a visitor might typically read on an object label, what makes the experience different is that visitors are given meaningful work to do with the information beyond just reading it. Decontextualized information is of limited value if a person cannot immediately apply it to their own preexisting knowledge and to the present context, as constructivist learning models argue. *Take the Grand Tour* creates opportunities for visitors to use the information presented to help make their purchase choices fulfilling, in a coincidental but exemplary way, Hans' contention that play is

11. Ibid.

about “how we make choices and how we give value to things through our choices.”¹²

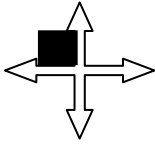
Recovery: Rules

The rules that are imposed in *Realaesthetik* recovery prescribe a relatively closed and museum shaped experience. In *Take the Grand Tour*, the choice of objects is dictated by the museum as is the information about each object. The currency allows visitors to “purchase” only four of the eight works of art included on the Grand Tour. Once a purchase is made, visitors “spend” their currency by putting a sticker of the purchased work (provided in the pocket at the back of the journal) on the currency. Once one type of currency is spent, visitors cannot purchase another work of art for that same value. The limitation provided by this rule was conceived as a way to encourage visitors to be more thoughtful in assessing the value they assigned any given work because they were only allowed one purchase of that type. In prototyping the portfolio, Weinard and Phillips discovered that this rule was effective in producing conversations between people taking the Grand Tour as they argued for or against each value for each work—that is, people stood in front of works of art for an extended period of time having substantive conversations about the works using art historically sanctioned ideas.

Take the Grand Tour fulfills all of the constraints imposed by the design tools for *Realaesthetik* recovery. It demonstrates how the recovery schema of the *Realaesthetik* typology can be combined with key tenets of game design to provide archetypal visitors with an engrossing art experience (one based on sound theoretical footing) without veering into “mere” play.

12. Hans, *Play of the World*, xii (see chap. 2, n. 12).

REALAESTHETIK WONDER: Sound Track Experience



In engrossing art encounters marked by *Realaesthetik* wonder, viewers have a phenomenological response to a work of art; confronted with something new, unexpected or surprising, they experience a flash of emotionally charged insight. Wonder presents a particular challenge for *Realaesthetik* because it is, by definition, something that happens spontaneously to a viewer in front of a work of art. While the other schemata require a task environment that directs the viewer to take some action, wonder requires minimal effort on the part of the visitor, in a pure wonder scenario the experience happens to them rather than because of them.

Being on the rationalist end of the epistemological continuum, wonder embodies a belief in the emotional power of universal ideas and certainties that are shared among a larger community. In practical terms, this sense of fellowship is generated by a viewer confronted with an emotional response to a work that he or she believes others have in a similar way. The challenge for museums is how to set the stage for insightful emotional surprises such as that found in wonder.

Mindful of the director's interest in keeping text-based information to a minimum in the galleries, two educators, Angela Falk and Deborah Reid Murphy, proposed creating a radically different audio tour for the new galleries. Their point of departure was movie sound tracks and how sounds enhance the visual information presented in a film. Working with production support from Antenna Audio, and extensive feedback from curators and other educators, they produced the fifty-stop *Sound Track*

Experience.¹³

Wonder: Invitation into the Magic Circle

The need for an invitation into the magic circle was never more pronounced than with the *Sound Track Experience*. Visitors have specific expectations about what an audio tour is like and because the *Sound Track Experience* is such an unconventional audio experience, testers in the prototyping phase were baffled by the recordings (the prototype version did not yet include an invitation into the magic circle). Once testers were introduced to the concept by the prototype facilitator, however, they were more curious to experience the tour. The final version includes this introduction:

Are you ready for a different kind of museum visit? [Brief audio clip of Julia Child fading into a brief audio clip of two men talking about their mother.] Don't expect to hear art history lectures like those found in traditional audio tours. Instead, we've developed mini sound tracks.

They're designed to get you thinking about art from unexpected angles. . . .

Although every stop has an element of the unexpected or surprising, not every stop in the audio tour falls within the category of *Realaesthetik* wonder. Some of the stops present a more cognitive experience; it is only those that were designed to produce an affective response to the art that qualify as wonder experiences and are the focus of this discussion.

13. The *Sound Track Experience*, along with accompanying images, can be downloaded at <http://ncartmuseum.org/visit/tours/>. This is perhaps the least successful of all the designed experiences developed for the interpretive plan. In hindsight, it would have benefited from the expertise of a sound designer with a more sophisticated understanding of the psychological effects of sound and sound experiences than could be provided by a traditional audio tour production house. Nonetheless, the general concepts of several of the stops can serve as prototypes for future experiences using sound to inspire wonder.

Wonder: Task Environment

Realaesthetik wonder should support visitors' desire for art experiences that produce a (seemingly) visceral reaction. These visitors value their response to a particular work of art when it produces a strong emotional reaction that they perceive as intuitive. Such responses fall into the realm of wonder when they are both unexpected or surprising and when the evoked emotion makes visitors feel connected to a larger community who they believe experience the work in ways similar to themselves. In the *Sound Track Experience*, the element of surprise begins with odd audio juxtapositions to individual works of art, and for those stops that fall within the category of wonder, ends with visitors having an unexpected emotional response to the art. The introduction to the audio tour continues with this set of instructions:

. . . At each stop in this tour, ask yourself how the sounds relate to the art.

Use your ears to explore new ways of seeing, thinking, and talking about art. Each sound track presents a different kind of experience that we hope will surprise and challenge you to bring new ideas to looking at art.

Although visitors are given a task including a cognitive element (which lies outside of the wonder typological quadrant), the aim of several of the stops was to create an initial surprise (an unexpected set of sounds or conversation) immediately followed by an intuitive insight, an “aha” moment when visitors feel the emotional link between the sounds and the art. It is the unexpected affective response which qualifies these particular stops as a designed experience of *Realaesthetik* wonder.

Wonder: Information Types

The information at play in *Realaesthetik* wonder should be emotionally powerful for visitors. It also needs to present ideas that visitors deem to be valuable within a community larger than any one individual, such as humanistic, spiritual or historical ideas. The wonder stops on the *Sound Track Experience* use information in each of these categories with the intent of prompting vividly felt and subjectively savored responses.

Stop number twenty-four of the audio tour is for a replica from the studio of Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Louis XV* (after 1715), depicting the king at the time of his coronation at age five. The recording is the voice of a real five-year old boy practicing the boy scout oath with an adult:

On my honor, I will do my best

To do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law;

To help other people at all times;

To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.

Hearing such an extremely young voice reading an oath about God, country, and duty makes it possible to *feel* the king's age more powerfully than merely reading a label saying he is five. It is as if the audio stop makes all of the pomp and regalia in the painting fade to the background as the viewer looks into the face of a very little boy with very big responsibilities.

Stop number fourteen is for Guido Reni's painting *Madonna and Child* (1628-30). The painting is a tender depiction of the Virgin breast feeding the infant Jesus, his body resting gently against her hand that supports his back and head. Their eyes meet and the

maternal devotion is palpable. The audio stop is a clip from the national oral history project StoryCorp; it is two grown men talking about their mother.

Brother #1: Tell me about mom.

Brother #2: If you were sick, stressed out about something or whatever, I remember many times when Mom, coming in sometimes in the middle of the night, she loved waking you up in the middle of the night. Either she had a dream about you . . .

Brother #1: Right

Brother #2: . . . or was thinkin' about you so you were sitting up at the end of your bed and she'd put that hand on your back, take your head and bring it to her bosom, ya' know, rub your back counterclockwise [chuckles from both brothers]. It was like, "why do my troubles seem so miniscule right now."

Brother #1: Somehow, the back rub made it seem like, "I'm okay." That or the fried egg sandwich would do.

Brother #2: Remember I went to Africa. And it was just like a thousand degrees, I was stressed out and I just woke up one mornin' like, "I need my momma's fried egg sandwich, I got to get outta here." [chuckles] I was ready to go home that day. I'm like, I gotta go home and get a egg sandwich. [chuckles]

Brother #1: The egg sandwich represented home.

Brother #2: It represented comfort and mom. Yeah.

Two men discussing their memories of their mother and the love she had for her sons reinforces the profound human relationship at the heart of a sacred story. For me, the fact that the maternal memories were voiced by adult males also serves to fast-forward the story to Christ's early demise, underscoring the poignancy of Mary's eventual plight. The use of this earthly drama to enhance pious emotion is a fitting contemporary version of the humanistic theatricality that was a hallmark of religious Italian Baroque art.

Stop twenty-seven is for a painting by Roger Brown entitled *American Landscape with Revolutionary Heroes* (1983). The painting depicts full-length portraits obscured in deep shadow of six of America's founding fathers including Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison, and John

Marshall set against a backdrop that has been likened to a Pop version of the American flag with bands of color shifting from dark grey at the top to neon turquoise at the bottom and bordered with star-like stylized sumac trees.¹⁴ The audio clip is an excerpt from Jimi Hendrix's 1969 Woodstock rendition of the *Star Spangled Banner* played on a screaming electric guitar. Both the painting and the music combine iconic pieces of American history updated for contemporary audiences. The shock of the old made new that the painting and the music project is further enhanced by the fact that visitors, standing in front of this work, are surrounded anachronistically by European portraits in the Grand Manner—electric guitars and a large family portrait by John Singleton Copley make for strange bedfellows indeed. Such a contrast is in keeping with the jokey/serious dichotomy that informs so much of the art produced by artists who, like Brown, graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago in the nineteen sixties and seventies.

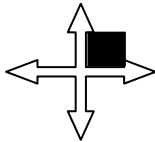
Wonder: Rules

The rules of *Realaesthetik* wonder should define an experience that is relatively closed and museum shaped. In the *Sound Track Experience* the museum preselects the works of art and presents information to produce a specific kind of visceral or unexpected emotional insight: a sense of the extreme youth of King Louis XV at the time of his coronation, the tenacity of maternal love and the humanizing of Mary and Jesus, the humor of American history made contemporary. At their best, the wonder stops in the *Sound Track Experience* succeed in creating a visceral insight, an “aha” moment or a

14. *North Carolina Museum of Art Handbook of the Collections*, ed. Rebecca Martin Nagy (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1998), 247.

surprising juxtaposition for visitors to experience. The responses sought by the Museum were meant to help visitors use their emotions to grapple with issues such as spirituality, cultural values, history, and so forth.

REVERIE: *North Carolina Museum of Art Owner's Manual*



Realaesthetik reverie involves a phenomenological perception of a work of art; that is, the art is experienced as “something vividly felt and subjectively savored.”¹⁵ The work triggers a strong emotional reaction and

serves as a prop that inspires a flight of spontaneous imaginings. The key behaviors that characterize reverie are creative inventions that use art as inspiration and the self-expression that comes from that creative process. The information used to create those narratives comes from two sources, the art and the viewer’s life history. The information contained within the work includes its subject matter and its formal properties. The viewers’ life histories include their accumulated knowledge of the world, their beliefs, their life experiences, and their memories. Reverie involves musing over a work of art in a kind of focused daydreaming that draws associations between the art and the viewer’s life history. The pleasure of reverie is in the imaginative journey undertaken; it is the pleasure of “make-believe” (imagination focused by the prop of art) which allows viewers to participate in the art rather than merely observe it.

The North Carolina Museum of Art is one of only a handful of state-owned art

15 . Richard Shusterman, “The End of Aesthetic Experience,” 30 (see intro., n. 29).

museums in the United States.¹⁶ Funding for the new facility that opened in April 2010 included \$72.3 million from the North Carolina General Assembly, the City of Raleigh and Wake County, and \$4.5 million in private gifts.¹⁷ Toying with the idea that the museum and its collections are “owned” by the citizens of North Carolina and acknowledging the fact that archetypal visitors do not know how to “use” a museum, I worked in collaboration with Linda Dougherty, Chief Curator and Curator of Contemporary Art, to design an experience using an “owner’s manual” as its point of departure. The resulting art encounter includes sections typically found in any consumer product owners’ manual: “instructions,” a “quick-start guide,” “FAQs,” and a section on “troubleshooting.”

Reverie: Invitation into the Magic Circle

The invitation into the magic circle of *Realaesthetik* reverie should appeal to visitors interested in using art as a prompt for their own emotional and imaginative musings. The concept of an owner’s manual is so familiar that little was needed by way of an invitation beyond the title of the manual. The design mimics such manuals in its industrial aesthetic and laminated pages which are meant to withstand multiple uses (Figure 6.5). The first pages explain the point of departure, “The North Carolina Museum of Art belongs to the citizens of the state. This Owner’s Manual is designed to help you

16. Other known state-owned art museums include the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, and the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida.

17. North Carolina Museum of Art Fact Sheet, <http://ncartmuseum.org/images/uploads/ncmafactsheet.pdf>

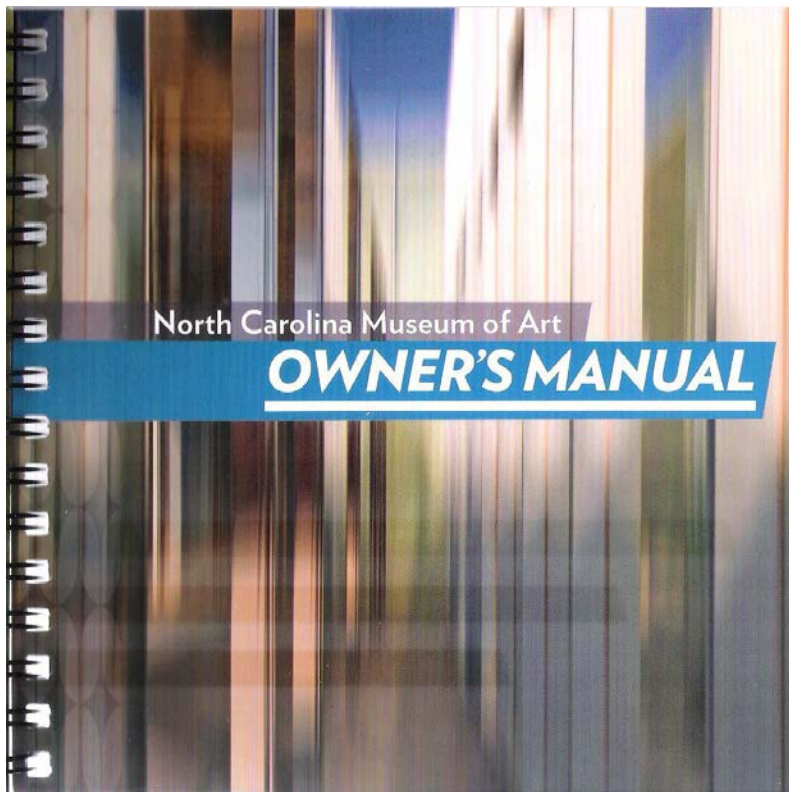


Figure 6.5: North Carolina Museum of Art Owner's Manual cover

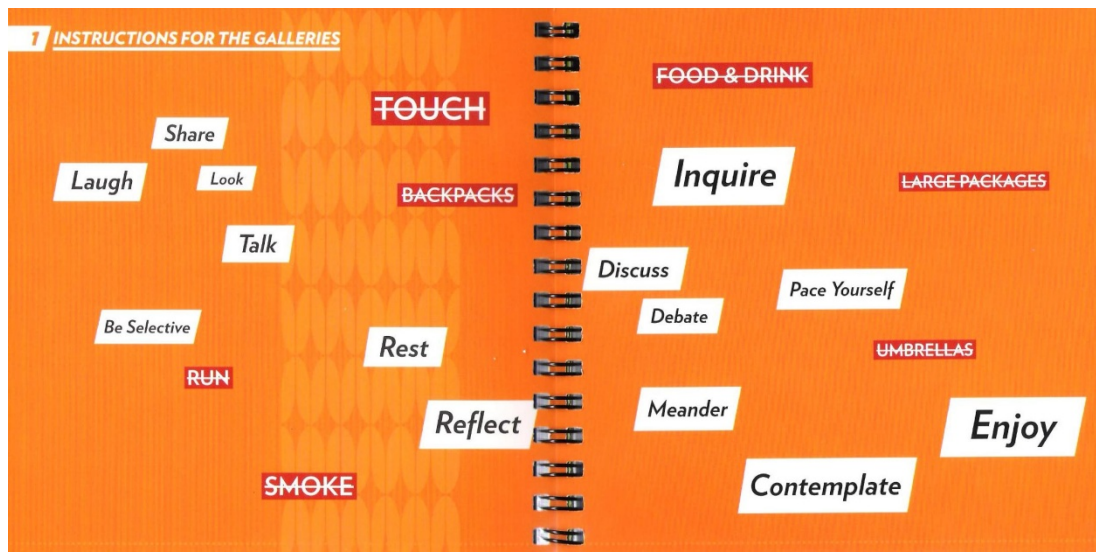


Figure 6.6: NCMA Owner's Manual instructions for the galleries

get the most out of your Museum visit . . . whether you've come from near or far.”¹⁸

Reverie: Task Environment

Visitors predisposed to reverie-type encounters with works of art expect experiences that allow the emotional play of their imaginations. They also expect an element of self discovery as a result of their creative musings. To reinforce these visitors' expectations of open-ended, empirical experiences, the manual provides “instructions for the galleries” that simply list assorted verbs meant to validate different kinds of museum behaviors: share, look, talk, laugh, be selective, reflect, rest, inquire, discuss, debate, contemplate, enjoy, and pace yourself. This section of the manual also includes words that are struck through—~~touch, backpacks, run, smoke, food & drink, large packages, and umbrellas~~—to replace the Museum's previous, page-long list of daunting museum rules and regulations (Figure 6.6). The “instructions” section was intentionally designed to quickly address archetypal visitors' known apprehension when first arriving at a museum—particularly when entering a building that would be new to everyone.

The “quick-start guide” provides three types of activities—things to do, things to ponder, and things to discuss—each of which includes two specific tasks from which visitors can choose. (Figure 6.7) Things to do includes “Tell a Story” and “Play ‘What's Missing?’”; things to ponder includes “A Mass of Mess” and “Getting Emotional”; and things to discuss includes “Be a Curator” and “Consider: Windows or Mirrors?” Each task begins with a quote that provides a context for the activity,

18. Susan Glasser and Linda Dougherty, *North Carolina Museum of Art Owner's Manual* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2010), n.p.

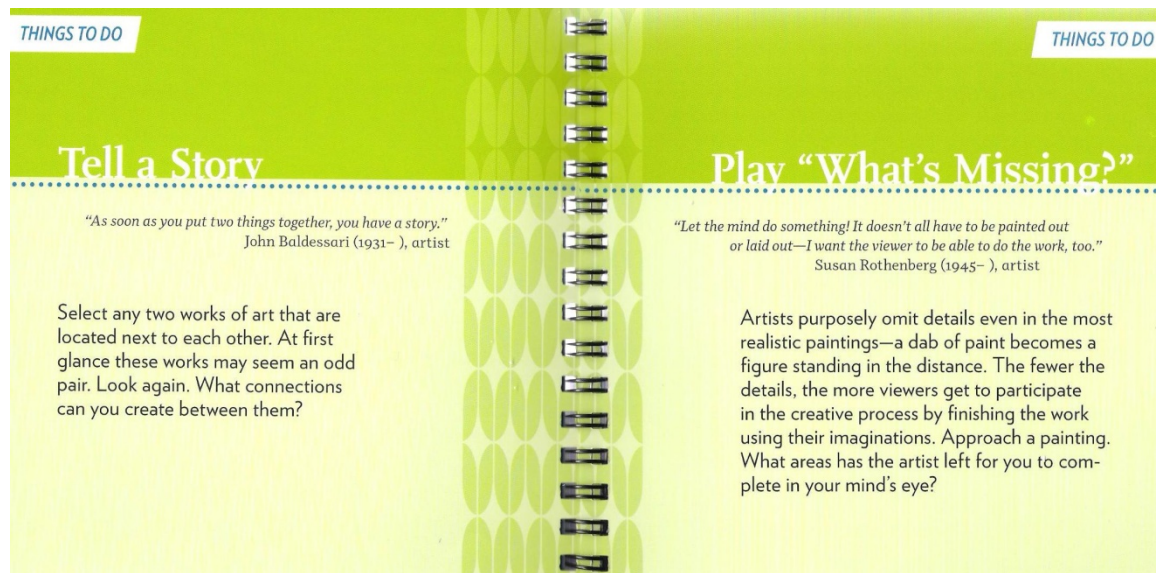


Figure 6.7: NCMA Owner's Manual tasks

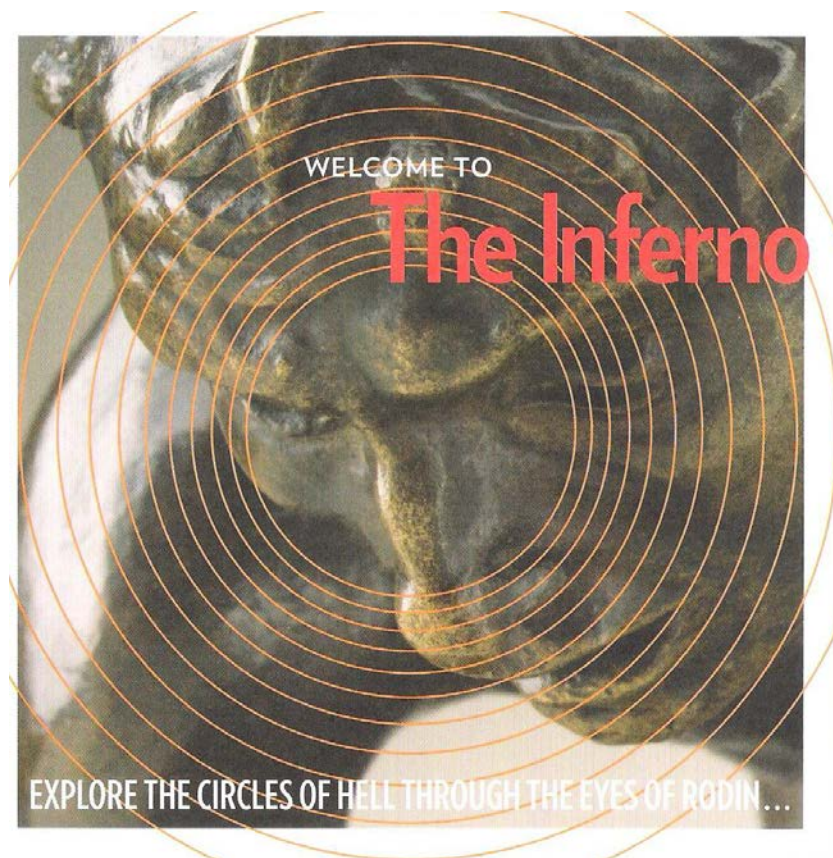


Figure 6.8: Welcome to the Inferno cover

Things to Do: Tell a Story

As soon as you put two things together, you have a story.

John Baldessari (1931-), artist

Select any two works of art that are located next to each other. At first glance these works may seem an odd pair. Look again. What connections can you create between them.

Things to Ponder: Getting Emotional

A work of art that did not begin in emotion is not art.

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), artist

Artists engage us in many different ways. Select one of the responses below, and find different works of art that evoke that response in you. _____ makes you nostalgic, surprises, gladdens, annoys, shocks, awes
What do you see in the work that makes you respond that way?

Things to Discuss: Consider: Windows or Mirrors?

You use a glass mirror to see your face; you use works of art to see your soul.

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), author

It has been said that art is both a window and a mirror—it can frame a scene or reflect ourselves. For the next painting that grabs your attention, consider whether it’s a window or a mirror.¹⁹

Art experiences marked by *Realaesthetik* reverie play with the information that visitors enter the museum with and that is personally meaningful to them. The various tasks included in the *Owners’ Manual* provide suggestions of how visitors might utilize this information. The manual presents additional ideas that are meant as imaginative fodder to encourage visitors to stretch their musings beyond what they might typically do when left to their own devices. The quotes are a simple and concise way to suggest the kinds of thoughts that others bring with them to an experience of art.

Reverie: Rules

Because it falls on the empirical side of the epistemological spectrum,

Realaesthetik reverie appeals to visitors who expect an art experience to be personal and

19. Ibid.

relative rather than objective and definitive. The rules for *Realaesthetik* reverie then should be open-ended, granting visitors freedom in shaping their own experiences. While *Take the Grand Tour* dictates the works of art that visitors view and the information available for manipulation, the *NCMA Owner's Manual* is designed to let visitors select whatever works of art attract them (and encourages them to seek out art that they might not typically stop to consider in the activities that prompt them to find works of art that they find messy, shocking or annoying). Once a work is self-selected, visitors are then given six different ways that they might choose to muse on it; each of these suggestions is also open-ended. For instance, in “Tell a Story,” visitors are prompted to “create” a connection between two works of art rather than try to discern the connections that a curator devised (which would put such an experience on the rational side of the epistemological spectrum). The manual does contain one such flaw in the activity “Be a Curator” which asks visitors, in effect, to guess the curator’s intended theme for any given gallery. To alter this activity to fit more comfortably within the reverie quadrant, it would have been more appropriate to ask visitors to “invent” an overarching theme rather than discern the curator’s pre-assigned theme.

The FAQs in the *NCMA Owner's Manual* do not give visitors specific tasks but the questions are those frequently on the minds of archetypal visitors and the answers provided reflect an empirical disposition (both phenomenological and cognitive). For instance,

What does art mean?

Most art has more than one easy or simple meaning. Some art is about the broader world, including popular culture, current events, history, religion, politics, personal memories, dreams. Other art is about the world of art

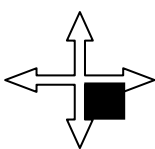
itself—artists sometimes are commenting on their own work or that of other artists living and dead. Most artists hope that viewers bring their own memories, knowledge, and associations to art, so the meaning will be different, and special, for each person viewing it.

Why isn't all art beautiful?

Art can be beautiful but it can also be difficult, disturbing, or even—some might say—ugly. During the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe, art academies instructed students in the rules of balance, unity, rhythm, and harmony. By applying these rules to shapes, colors, and overall designs, artists learned to produce art that was called “beautiful.” Judged by these traditional standards, much contemporary art would not be described as “beautiful” or even pleasurable. Many contemporary artists believe it's more important that their works are thought-provoking or challenging.²⁰

The final section of the manual, “troubleshooting,” is meant to address some of the logistical issues that visitors have in museums: finding one's way, juggling bags, getting hungry, concerns about seeing everything. Like the “Instructions for the Galleries” section, this final portion of the manual was designed to address archetypal visitors' general apprehensions about entering the unfamiliar and potentially intimidating environment of an art museum.

DISCOVERY: *Welcome to the Inferno*



In *Realaesthetik* discovery, an art encounter is understood as an opportunity for invention involving the construction of a plausible meaning for a work of art using connections between diverse types of information: a viewer's life history (personal experiences, accumulated knowledge, beliefs, and memories), the visual data perceived in the work (its formal properties and subject matter), art historical facts, and cultural conventions. Because it falls on the empirical side of the

20. Ibid.

epistemological spectrum, discovery embodies the belief that engaging with art is a personal and relative activity; the art experience is perceived as an open concept of interpretation where the viewers' role is to construct their own meanings for the work. The central behavior that characterizes discovery is linking myriad types of information; the art is used as a prop to generate an unfolding story that can be fictional, factual or both (but unlike *Realaesthetik* reverie which uses art as a starting point for visitors' imagination, the stories in discovery art experiences privilege a cognitive dialogue with the art rather than an emotional flight of fancy). The creativity that discovery-type art encounters prompt also points to two other "kinds of fun" that characterize this type of experience: the exploration of uncharted territory that results when different types of information are connected in unexpected ways which, in turn, can also lead to the kind of self discovery that creative expression generates.

In 2007, the NCMA announced a gift of twenty-two bronzes sculptures by Auguste Rodin, donated by the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation. By the time the museum opened in 2010, the gift had expanded to include thirty sculptures by the French master. The size of the collection warranted its own gallery in the new facility and a catalog was also planned. The interpretive team discussed at length the need for a more informal gallery resource for this particular collection. Most of the art encounters were intentionally conceived to help visitors explore multiple galleries and artists in the new building but, in the end, it was determined that this collection by a single artist was so important that it warranted its own treatment. The deciding factor was that many of the pieces were maquettes for the *Gates of Hell*, Rodin's design for a giant door of a museum

that was ultimately never built. Since the collection did not include a cast of this pivotal work, the interpretive team felt it would be useful to provide visitors with the larger context for which so many of the sculptures were intended. Educator Camille Tewell decided that the logical point of departure for this project would be the *Inferno*, the first part of Dante Alighieri's fourteenth-century epic poem, the *Divine Comedy*, which served as part of Rodin's inspiration for the *Gates of Hell*.

Discovery: Invitation into the Magic Circle

An invitation into a *Realaesthetik* discovery experience should appeal to visitors interested in constructing their own intellectual meanings for a work of art that might include making links between such diverse types of information as art historical data, life experiences, and larger philosophical questions. The invitation for *Welcome to the Inferno* appears on the front of the envelope housing the gallery guide (Figure 6.8): “Welcome to the Inferno, explore the circles of hell through the eyes of Rodin . . .” These thirteen brief words foreshadow an experience that will deal with art history (“through the eyes of Rodin”), larger ethical issues (“the circles of hell”) as well as visitors’ own ideas about morality (implied in the word “explore”).²¹ The art encounter is enclosed in an envelope—like a real invitation—that visitors have to extract in order to “enter” the circles of hell. The die-cut design further reinforces this notion of a spiraling descent into hell.

21. Camille Tewell, *Welcome to the Inferno* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2010), n.p.

Discovery: Task Environment

The task environment of *Realaesthetik* discovery should support visitors' desire for art experiences that provide them with opportunities to explore new territories of knowledge created by connecting a variety of information types while also allowing for creative self-expression and self-discovery. *Welcome to the Inferno* presents a unique challenge in light of the amount of information at play in an art experience marked by discovery. In all of the art encounters, the Museum wanted to keep text to a minimum; the guides were designed to provide just enough information to make visitors curious to *look* at the work rather than *read* about it. Because *Realaesthetik* discovery is grounded in the work itself (unlike *Realaesthetik* reverie that uses the art as a springboard for the imagination), the task environment must encourage visitors to look closely and thoughtfully at the work in order to support their information-linking to the visual evidence provided. To accomplish this, *Welcome to the Inferno* utilizes two types of questions. The first type prompts visitors to examine individual sculptures thoroughly to generate ideas based on Rodin's aesthetic decisions.

For *The Kiss* (1881-82): "Do their lips touch?" and "can you find it?"

referring to the narrative detail that Rodin provides (i.e., the book that the couple was studying before their passions were inflamed).

For *Ugolino and His Sons* (1881-82): "Which child is still alive?" (Figure 6.9)

For *The Thinker* (1880): What's strange about *The Thinker's* pose? Hint: try it.²²

22. Ibid.



Figure 6.9: Welcome to the Inferno task; Ugolino and His Sons

Questions of the second type encourage visitors to ruminate on their own ideas about morality and direct them to contemplate the lost souls in the *Gates of Hell*, those figures that came from Rodin's imagination rather than a literary source (Figure 6.10). The general question "In which of Dante's circles of hell would you place them?" was followed by object-specific questions,

For *The Falling Man* (1882): "What makes him suffer?"

For *I Am Beautiful* (circa 1885): "Lust . . . or vanity?"

For *Fallen Caryatid with a Stone* (1881-82): "What is her punishment?"

These open-ended questions, presented at the end of the experience, invite the viewer to create their own narratives for each piece while still linking it to the ideas at the heart of Rodin's project—what does sin look like—a merger of the personal, the historical, and the ethical.

Discovery: Information Types

Realaesthetik discovery sits in the empirical and cognitive quadrant of the typology; such experiences must accommodate a wide spectrum of information that visitors find intellectually valuable. This information can include their life histories, along with their intellectual and subjective responses to the visual data perceived in the work. Because *Realaesthetik* also strives to push visitors beyond their own art viewing habits, *Welcome to the Inferno* included small morsels of a broad cross-section of information deriving from art history, popular culture, literature, and science to model for visitors how wide-ranging information has its place in an art experience. The information also serves as a prompt to direct visitors' attention to particular details in the works. For

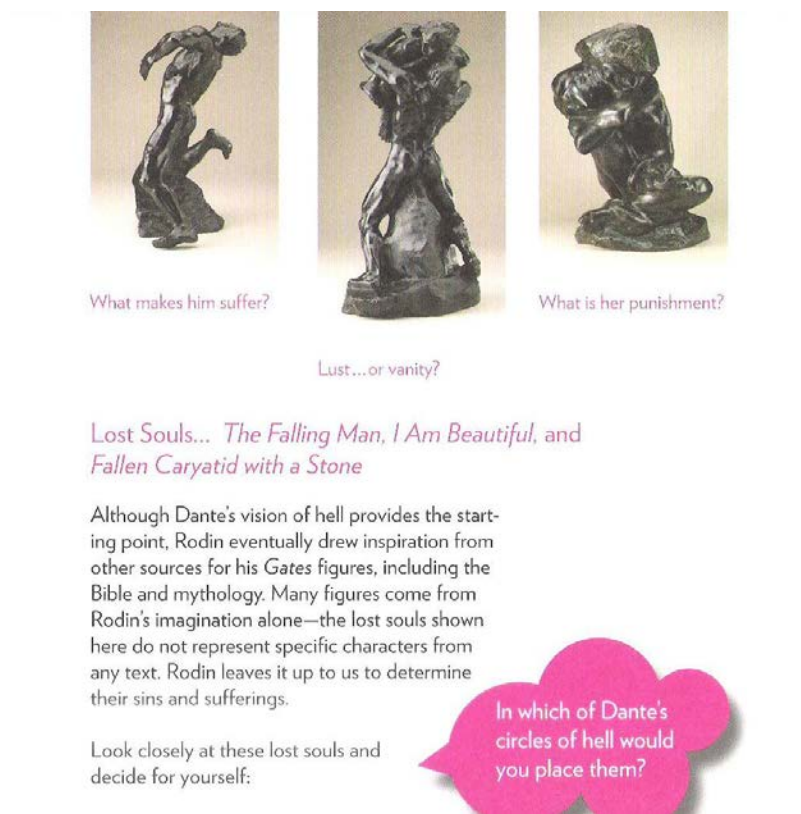


Figure 6.10: Welcome to the Inferno open-ended questions

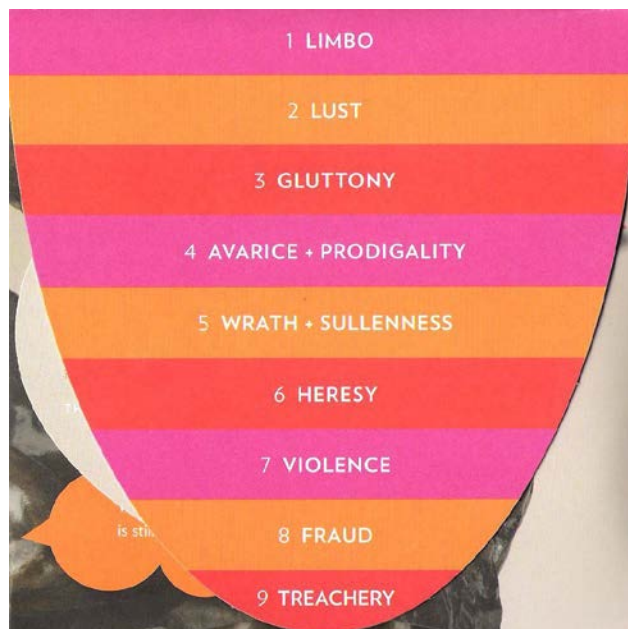


Figure 6.11: Welcome to the Inferno; Dante's circles of hell

instance, the information provided for *Ugolino and His Sons* included,

[1] THE STORY

Count Ugolino switched loyalties one too many times. Imprisoned in a tower as punishment, he starved to death along with his sons and grandsons. Dante puts this shady politician in the ninth circle of hell, along with other traitors.

[2] SHOCK VALUE

Certain passages from Dante's text fueled rumors that Ugolino was driven to cannibalism during his captivity.

[3] EVIDENCE

In 2002 DNA analysis was performed on Ugolino's bones. The results of the analysis indicate that he ate no meat in the months prior to his death. The count was 75 to 80 years old at his death and had few remaining teeth.

[4] THE BODY

Other artists showed Ugolino seated, looking stressed, or chewing his fingers. Rodin's Ugolino bends under the weight of his grief as he drags along the floor of hell, naked and blind.²³

The use of images in this guide is also meant to prompt visitors to look at the sculptures rather than simply read the text. The featured works (*The Kiss*, *The Thinker*, and *Ugolino and His Sons*) are illustrated in detail only; in order to answer the questions posed, visitors have to look up from the guide and seek out the actual sculpture. The other three sculptures (*The Falling Man*, *I Am Beautiful*, and *Fallen Caryatid with a Stone*) are fully illustrated but at an intentionally small scale, again encouraging visitors to locate the works in the gallery and look at the real thing rather than a reproduction in order to complete the task.

Discovery: Rules

Realaesthetik discovery falls on the relativist side of the epistemological spectrum

23. Ibid.

and therefore should use rules that define an experience as open and largely visitor-shaped. Although *Welcome to the Inferno* does not grant visitors as much latitude as does the *NCMA Owner's Manual*, visitors are still encouraged to explore and invent on their own though within a more tightly drawn circle of (immoral) ideas. Visitors are provided with the categories of sin that make up each of Dante's nine circles of hell—limbo, lust, gluttony, avarice and prodigality, wrath and sullenness, heresy, violence, fraud, and treachery—and were encouraged to determine the likely circle to which different sculptures might be assigned. (Figure 6.11) The art encounter includes this challenge:

Although Dante's vision of hell provides the starting point, Rodin eventually drew inspiration from other sources for his *Gates* figures, including the Bible and mythology. Many figures come from Rodin's imagination alone—the lost souls shown here do not represent specific characters from any text. Rodin leaves it up to us to determine their sins and sufferings.

Look closely at these lost souls and decide for yourself: In which of Dante's circles of hell would you place them?

To assign these characters to individual circles of hell, visitors need to respond to the visual evidence found in each of the sculptures, and link it to Dante's descriptions of the circles of hell and their own ideas about what each type of sin might look like. In effect, they are creating meanings for the sculptures informed by Rodin's aesthetic decisions and their own notions of immorality.

The infrastructure and design tools in the *Realaesthetik* toolkit are meant to

provide museums with guidance in developing engrossing art encounters. The examples discussed above illustrate how these tools can begin to be used for each of the four types of art experiences that make up the *Realaesthetik* typology. The third set of tools in the *Realaesthetik* toolkit, the testing tools, are conceived as a diagnostic device that provides a formative set of criteria for optimizing these experiences further. These tools are particularly important as they reinforce the concept that designing engrossing art experiences—like designing a play experience—is an iterative process requiring repeated modifications and testing. The *Realaesthetik* testing tools, discussed at length in the next chapter, present the questions that museums need to ask relative to each designed experience to determine if the experience holds together as a meaningful and transformative art encounter.

Chapter Seven
***REALAESTHETIK* TESTING TOOLS**

From a game-design perspective, looking at art might be considered a game of conflict over information. In that type of game, Salen and Zimmerman have written, “the process being simulated is the conflict of acquiring and sharing cultural knowledge.”¹ The *Realaesthetik* testing tools are useful in helping museums assess whether they are putting information at play in cohesive ways that enhance rather than hinder an engrossing art experience. Designing gameplay that focuses on the manipulation of information presents unique challenges. How information is disseminated is an important part of the design process. Is information embedded in the structure of play or does the structure of play reveal or unleash information from the player or the art? This is a critical question since *Realaesthetik* includes museum-generated information (such as art history), art-generated information (such as the work’s formal properties or subject matter), and visitor-generated information (such as life history and other elements of visitors’ personal narratives).

The timing and the amount of information presented must be controlled. If too much information is presented too quickly, the viewer can become overwhelmed; if the information is presented too slowly, the viewer may become bored. The information used

1. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 434 (see chap. 2, n. 23).

in *Realaesthetik* can be factual or fictional, personal or communal, hidden or obvious. With such a plethora of information types, it makes sense to give visitors the ability to access information in increments and self-select the type(s) of information they are interested in using. It is also essential to provide visitors with directions as to what to do with the information once it is received; that is, give it meaning within the task environment.

In order to make the information “meaningful” to the player, there must be a point to its inclusion. The choices that a player is allowed to make must make the information useful and make the consequences of its use discernible. When a piece of information is presented, the player is asked to make a decision or take an action. The structure of *Realaesthetik* must then provide some feedback to viewers, some way that they can gauge the impact of their choices. This cause-effect process is what makes play meaningful and gives a player’s actions value. Play is, according to Hans, about “how we make choices and how we give value to things through our choices.”² As “transformational” experiences, *Realaesthetik* aims at helping visitors question, confirm or reject some perception about art or themselves with which they entered the museum. By giving visitors more control of the information dissemination process and providing them with things to do with that information in ways that are fully integrated into the experience, museums increase the probability that visitors can move beyond their typical art viewing habits to reexamine their assumptions about personal and cultural values in the process of an engrossing art encounter. The questions presented in the final set of tools in the

2. Hans, *Play of the World*, xii (see chap. 2, n. 12).

Realaesthetik toolkit can be used to refine or enhance all of the NCMA’s art encounters to ensure that they are as engrossing as possible based on key tenets of game design. The *NCMA Owner’s Manual* serves here as a model for demonstrating how the testing tools can enhance a designed experience further.

Table 7.1: Testing tools

TESTING TOOLS	REALAESTHETIK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> information dissemination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What choices do visitors have for controlling the <i>type</i> of information they will use? What choices do visitors have for controlling the <i>quantity</i> of information? Are there other choices they can be given? What choices do visitors have for controlling the <i>timing</i> of information? Are there other choices they can be given? What information-dissemination platforms have been employed? Are there better or additional platforms that can be used to enhance visitors’ experiences beyond their mundane habits of thought?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> integration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How are visitors made to care about the information? How is the task given value within the context of the magic circle? How are the consequences of visitors’ choices made discernable?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> transformation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What questions does the experience put into viewers’ minds? What is the “disordering dilemma” that challenges visitors’ assumptions about those questions? Jack Mezirow uses the term “disordering dilemma” to refer to major life-altering events that serve as the impetus for transformative learning experiences. The term is being adopted here to refer to any piece of information or incident that challenges peoples’ existing habits of mind.³ How is their attitude about those questions or ideas expected to change?

Information Dissemination

The information used in *Realaesthetik* experiences originates from three sources in varying degrees: it is dispensed by the museum, it is elicited from visitors, and it is evoked by the art. With this much information at play, the more responsibility for the dissemination of information that the museum can give to visitors—its type, timing, and quantity—the more likely it is that visitors will feel at ease, in control, and not

3. Jack Mezirow, "Transformation Theory of Adult Learning," in *In Defense of the Lifeworld*, ed. M. R. Welton (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 50.

overwhelmed. Museums subscribing to the tenets of game design thinking should consider these questions when refining how information is disseminated in a designed experience:

- What choices do visitors have for controlling the *type* of information they will use?
- What choices do visitors have for controlling the *quantity* of information? Are there other choices they can be given?
- What choices do visitors have for controlling the *timing* of information? Are there other choices they can be given?
- What information dissemination platforms have been employed? Are there better or additional platforms that can be used to challenge visitors' experiences beyond their mundane habits of thought?

What choices do visitors have for controlling the *type* of information they will use? This question underscores a challenge currently facing the use of all of the art encounters at the NCMA. The first concept for helping visitors determine which art encounter to use (and thus which types of information they will manipulate during their visit) was that the art encounters would be distributed through a “juke box” that asked visitors a compelling question about their interests and/or expectations and, based on their response, a specific art encounter would be dispensed. Logistically daunting, that solution was replaced with a second option: the art encounters would be made available at staffed “art en/counters” that were placed in strategic locations within the galleries away from the bustle and conflicting prosaic priorities at the information desk (“where’s

the bathroom,” “where can I put my coat,” etc.). The unexpected location of the counters was also selected because it was felt that, once visitors began moving through the galleries and discovering the paucity of conventional gallery didactics, they would be more inclined to seek out additional information in the middle of their visit. Through quick and casual conversation, trained staff would elicit from visitors the amount of time they wanted to spend in the museum and the type of experience they were looking for (unconventional, fact-based, social, etc.) in order to help them choose the most appropriate art encounter to use by matching their interests and expectations to the different types of information utilized in each of the art encounters. Staff (paid or volunteer) would provide a first-hand and personal invitation into each of the different magic circles. Staffing these art counters proved problematic and so, in the early months after the Museum’s grand opening, the art encounters were placed in the counters unattended. The inventory was quickly depleted which speaks well of their engrossing designs. The art en/counters have since been relocated near the front desk without the requisite staffing or staff training, a distribution system that has proven problematic.⁴

This problem will not be unique to the NCMA. It highlights a challenge for the *Realaesthetik* toolkit moving forward. If museums want to offer multiple ways for visitors to have art encounters using the *Realaesthetik* typology, invitations into individual magic circles may not prove sufficient. The toolkit question suggests that museums aspiring to design *Realaesthetik* experiences for their visitors will need to

4. Sandra Rusak, Director of Education at the NCMA, telephone conversation with the author, November 15, 2010. A final evaluation of the art encounters revealed that, at this new location, only 12% of visitors (n=6) during the assessment period picked up an art encounter and used it in the galleries during their visit. Exit Interviews Report, North Carolina Museum of Art, December 2010.

provide an orientation for visitors that helps them anticipate the variety of experiences (i.e., types of information) available so they can make informed selections about the kind of encounter they want to undergo. Education psychologists refer to such orientations as “advance organizers,” and Lynn Dierking and John Falk have tested and confirmed how advance organizers can enhance visitors’ experiences in museums.⁵

Advance organizers need to create an immediate sense of trust and comfort for visitors (the first level in Maslow’s hierarchy) if visitors are to be made receptive to what lies ahead. Museums typically provide advance organizers in the form of an orientation film, signage, and gallery maps which may work if the intended museum experience corresponds to visitors’ conventional expectations. The *Realaesthetik* toolkit is designed to accommodate archetypal visitors’ expectations but also to modify them. Therefore, different types of advance organizers—what the toolkit presents as an invitation into the magic circle—may need to be considered. There are at least three ways that museums might pursue this. The first, and most impractical, is to brand the entire museum as a place for *Realaesthetik* experiences. A rigorously implemented branding message including promotional materials (in print and online, on-site and off-site) and front-line staff training would be required to consistently and constantly communicate to potential visitors that they should expect a very different type of museum visit.

Options two and three are more logistically practical and economically feasible. Option two is to invite a specific audience into the magic circle. Members or donors, for

5. John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 117.

example, could be extended an “invitation” similar to that sent to registered guests in Egan’s fictional resort offering them “customized” art experiences.⁶ Messaging to a finite group becomes more financially viable and can serve to generate a cohesive community of museum users who share their experiences and become advocates of the experiences to others.⁷ The third option is to provide an invitation to everyone for a specific and finite time period. The general public could be invited to “adult swim” evenings that allow the Museum to manage visitor expectations prior to their arrival through special promotions; visitors then come primed for a different kind of art experience that everyone participates in collectively. Like the invitation into any one of the particular magic circles contained in the art encounters, these advance-organizer invitations provide a way for slowing down visitors’ entry process to transition into a different mindset, one that interjects a spirit of playfulness that prepares them for looking at art in unexpected ways.

What choices do visitors have for controlling the *quantity* and *timing* of information? Are there other choices they can be given? In the original concept for the art encounters, the first information choice visitors were invited to make was which art encounter to use. Other choices are then dictated by individual art encounters. The *NCMA Owner’s Manual* offers visitors great freedom of information choices in keeping with reverie-type art encounters: they can select which works of art to look at (because of its

6. See page 98.

7. Gaming communities can be a powerful part of the game experience for many players, as witnessed in the ARG gaming community on the Unfiction website that was so integral to the Smithsonian American Art Museums’ GOAC project. The development and sustainability of such communities as they relate to *Realaesthetiks* (informed by research in gaming communities as well as professional learning communities) suggests a fertile area for future exploration.

generic nature, it can even be used in other museums), which activities to undertake, and how many to do. Within any given activity, the information they choose to put into play is virtually limitless; e.g., in the “Tell a Story” activity, visitors are asked to invent connections between two works of art linking information pulled from the formal properties they observe in the work, its subject matter, as well as facets of their own life experiences. Because of the spiral bound booklet (which is the structure used for the *Owner’s Manual*), visitors also have complete control over the timing of the information; they determine what to read, what to skip, and what activity over which to loiter.

The quotes at the beginning of each activity validate the approach of the activity as one that corresponds to the ways in which others have engaged with art. The activity description then gives instructions on how visitors can try it themselves. Additional information might be helpful for this purpose: perhaps an example of someone else’s experience that could serve as a model, additional questions that could help visitors linger in front of the work and expand on their solution to the activity, or suggestions of particular works of art to consider. In the “FAQs” section of the *Owner’s Manual*, the Museum suggests answers to general questions about art that visitors often ask. Could visitors’ consideration of these questions and answers be further enhanced by letting them react to the proposed answer or provide their own answers in some communal forum?

What information-dissemination platforms have been employed? Are there better or additional platforms that can be used to enhance visitors’ experiences beyond their mundane habits of thought? The *Owner’s Manual* was designed to help visitors have engrossing art encounters that they control in large measure enabling “free movement

within a rigid structure.”⁸ The activities in the *Owner’s Manual* provide opportunities for visitors to explore art using a variety of techniques that take advantage of the personal narratives with which they enter the museum. Designers of such experiences should ask themselves what other platforms might be used to present additional challenges that stretch visitors’ responses to the tasks further?

Museums have a wide range of platform options from traditional to technologically innovative: exhibition design elements, broadsides, brochures, docents, labels and text panels, audio wands, touch screens, cell phones, and smart phones, and so forth. To provide additional inspiring information for visitors as suggested above, the manual could include a “Help Line” (in keeping with the owner’s manual point of departure) that visitors could call for more suggestions. This would let them maintain control of the quantity and timing of information by accessing it at intervals when *they* want it while also letting them record or text their own solutions. Such a help line would take on the role of a non-player character in game parlance, a character that can prompt the viewer to look more closely, evoke more memories, introduce additional art historical facts, suggest thought-provoking questions, model particular solutions, etc. When visitors get stuck or need help, they call for pre-recorded tips or suggestions that help them move forward with their experience while still allowing them to direct their own narratives and paths of action. In a similar way, visitors could be invited to document their reactions to the FAQs.

The Denver Art Museum (DAM) provides a cautionary example of no-tech

8. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 304.

platforms that open up two-way communications with their visitors in ways that correspond with the suggestions above. At DAM, visitors are invited to enter their responses to the art in journals, on post-it notes, and in dedicated creative writing and “artmaking” areas located throughout the Museum. Like the guest comment books that many museums use, these adult-focused participatory options garner some thoughtful responses but more often attract children and teens who enter silly or obscene comments and drawings (thus requiring daily monitoring by staff). Despite the need for vigilant monitoring and the visual clutter that scores of post-it notes stuck to a wall presents, the persistent value of DAM’s no-tech approach is that it sends a tacit message to visitors that the Museum is interested in hearing their voices and that visitors’ time in the museum is enhanced by an attitudinal shift from a passive to a reflective mindset.

A more eloquent example of inviting two-way communication that accommodates the suggested modifications to the *Owner’s Manual* can be found in a work by the sound artist Halsey Burgund, *Scapes* (2010), that was on exhibit at the DeCordova Sculpture Park + Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, from July 13 through December 31, 2010.⁹ Burgund uses open-source platforms, GPS technology, and interactivity to engage visitors as they walk through the Museum’s sculpture park.¹⁰ Using their iPhone (or one borrowed from the Museum), visitors stroll through the park listening to a “spatially related musical composition” that changes depending on their physical location; an

9. I am indebted to Nancy Proctor, Head of Mobile Strategy & Initiatives at the Smithsonian Institution, for bringing this sound piece to my attention.

10. Decordova Sculpture Park + Museum web site, <http://decordova.org/art/exhibitions/current/scapes.html>.

algorithm ensures that the tour is never the same twice.¹¹ Visitors have the option to listen to the soundtrack or add to it by answering one of five questions in forty-five seconds or less:

1. *Scapes* is an excuse to talk to yourself about anything at all. Go for it.
2. Ask a question of those who come after you.
3. Tell a story inspired by something you see or feel here.
4. Look straight up and describe what you see.
5. Tell us about someone you wish was here with you right now. Talk to him/her.¹²

The visitors' spoken words are added to the soundtrack in real-time. Visitors have called it "absorbing and hypnotic," and "profound [and] exciting."¹³ The work has avoided the pitfalls that mar DAMs no-tech two-way communication platforms. Remarkably, visitors' recordings have not been filled with profanity or incendiary comments. One commentator postulates that the reason the recordings have not had to be censored is because, knowing they will become part of other people's experience of the park, "Suddenly, their work takes on a much bigger audience and import, which . . . focuses the

11. "Not Your Father's Audio Museum Tour," a recorded interview by Adam Ragusea with Halsey Burgund for Radio Boston, <http://www.wbur.org/media-player?source=radioboston&url=http://www.wbur.org/2010/07/21/scapes-at-the-decordova/&title=Not+Your+Father%26%238217%3Bs+Audio+Museum+Tour&segment=scapes-at-the-decordova&pubdate=2010-07-21>.

12. Burgund's work is being presented here as an effective example of two-way communication in a museum context. However, it is also worth noting how closely the experience Burgund designed for park visitors corresponds to *Realaesthetik* reverie in the type of information he is encouraging visitors to use and the tasks he sets up for them.

13. Ragusea, "Not Your Father's Audio." Nancy Procter, "Mobile Social Media: Halsey Burgund's *Scapes*," MuseumMobile Wiki, October 21, 2010, <http://wiki.museummobile.info/archives/16082>.

mind, filters out the noise, and brings out the best in people.”¹⁴ The project provides an apt example of how the NCMA could enhance the *Owner’s Manual* by providing two-way communication opportunities for visitors.

When developing exhibitions, many museums know what (art historical) information they want to share with visitors and then select the appropriate platforms from which to dispense it. The only choice visitors are given is whether or not to read, see or listen to the information. The information dissemination tool in the *Realaesthetik* toolkit serves to help museums assess designed experiences from the perspective of visitor choices; it challenges museum staff to ask how best to engage visitors in the dissemination process by giving them options for controlling the type of information, the quantity of information, its timing, and its use. Putting significant choices in front of visitors allows them to customize their experiences to meet their own art viewing interests and abilities.

Integration

Integration raises questions about how well the various components of the experience hold together with a discernable logic that is meaningful for visitors. Meaningfulness in game design arises when players see the significance or value of the information, tasks, and choices presented to them. Within *Realaesthetik*, the questions to ask include

- How are visitors made to care about the information?
- How is the task given value within the context of the magic circle?

14. Procter, “Mobile Social Media.”

- How are the consequences of visitors' choices made discernable?

How are visitors made to care about the information? Educators know that understanding arises when the learner is able to connect new knowledge to information that the learner already possesses. Many museum education departments set out to develop programs and resources that “start with where the visitor is.” By incorporating visitors' personal narratives (the live experiences and knowledge they bring with them to the museum), the thought is that visitors will be interested in the program or resource because it is inherently *about* them. The use of visitors' personal narratives is particularly relevant to *Realaesthetik* reverie and the tasks in the *Owner's Manual* that are about the play of visitors' imaginations, requiring them to mine their personal narratives for inspiration. But personal narratives are part of the *content* of an art encounter marked by reverie, not its *motivation*. To motivate viewers to utilize their personal narratives requires getting them to care about that knowledge in the context of looking at art. Curiosity is a powerful motivational tool, one so integral to game design that it appears in the definition of play for one designer: “play is manipulation that indulges curiosity.”¹⁵ Curiosity is also a motivating factor in people's choice to visit museums and as a prelude to learning.¹⁶

The “Quick-Start Guide” in the *Owner's Manual* starts with this block of text, “Want suggestions on how to get more out of your Museum visit? Select an activity from these options, and let's get started!” Knowing that archetypal visitors enter a museum

15. Schell, *The Art of Game Design*, 30 (see chap. 6, n. 4).

16. Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*, 115.

without a clear sense of what they should do next, the language “starts with where the visitor is.” But there is nothing particularly curiosity-inducing in this text. How might this introduction be enhanced to get visitors to care about using their personal narratives to look at art? It might be rewritten as follows:

The average visitor spends less than thirty seconds looking at any work of art. But we’ve all seen “art experts” who linger in front of a painting. Ever wonder what’s going through their heads? Here’s your chance to linger like an expert. Select an activity from these options, and let’s get started.

Getting a glimpse into the mind of the proverbial “art expert,” someone who can lingering in front of a work of art, provides an incentive that matches the visitor’s desire to feel a level of comfort and competence in their art viewing efforts. This introduction also invitingly challenges visitors to look longer as no one considers themselves an “average” visitor. In addition, it better integrates the quotes at the beginning of each activity by having the quotes serve as surrogates for “expert” lookers.

How is the task given value within the context of the magic circle? For a task to be meaningful it must have a discernable value within the confines of the magic circle. In game design, this is referred to as a game’s endogenous value that is internally generated and unique to a particular game. In Scrabble, the task is to manipulate letters to form words. There is only one tile with the letter “Z” and it has been assigned a value of ten points, an abstraction of its rarity within the English language. In contrast, the most commonly used letters, such as the vowels, are assigned one point. The player has to play ten vowels to get the same number of points as one “Z.” A Scrabble player “believes” in

the value of the “Z” because the game components support the logic of that value.

Outside of the magic circle, a “Z” is just one of twenty-six letters in the alphabet.

In the *Owner’s Manual*, visitors are given the opportunity to select from six different tasks. Through prototyping, the Museum can determine which of the tasks create the greatest challenges for visitors.¹⁷ Each task could then be assigned a rating of “easy,” “moderate,” and “hard.” Assigning endogenous values to these tasks modifies visitors’ choice option; rather than selecting a task merely for its personal appeal, visitors are now selecting a challenge depending on the level of difficulty they want to attempt.

How are the consequences of visitors’ choices made discernable? For a player’s choices to be meaningful, s/he must be able to see the consequences of his or her choices. If there are no consequences it does not really matter whether one visitor chooses to take one course of action or utilize one type of information over another. Looking again at Scrabble, a player can choose to exchange a “Z” for a more common letter thereby increasing his potential to create more words more easily. He may also choose to play the tile, the consequence being a potentially higher word score. The endogenous values give the player real choices with discernable outcomes. Discernable outcomes are a feedback mechanism that give visitors a sense of progress or accomplishment and the affirming pleasure of success. There are a variety of ways that the Museum could introduce feedback mechanisms to let visitors measure the effectiveness of the choices they make with the *Owner’s Manual*, none of which occur in its current iteration. Visitors can be

17. Due to time constraints, the *NCMA Owner’s Manual* was one of the few art encounters that did not undergo prototype testing.

challenged to “level up” from easy to more challenging tasks, select more challenging art (an abstract painting or a work with a disturbing subject matter), extend their looking time, increase the amount of information they link, increase the complexity of the information they link (e.g., starting with personal experiences and free associations, and progressing to linking formal elements or personal beliefs evoked via a help line). Any one of these challenges could be assigned an endogenous value. At the end of an experience, visitors could add up their cumulative progressive successes. In a cooperative experience, they could assess their progress according to a point spread of “expert scores” or, in a friendly competition, compare their progress with their visiting companion. Game design is an iterative process. In a comparable way, determining which one or several of these modifications to make (or any of the enhancements that suggest themselves using the *Realaesthetik* testing tools) will require multiple prototypes and repeated testing with actual museum visitors. The purpose of this exercise is not to present a finished designed experience but to present the design potential of the *Realaesthetik* toolkit.

Realaesthetik challenges visitors to move beyond their mundane art viewing habits in incremental steps. Feedback mechanisms help visitors visualize their progress and reinforce their success. At its most fundamental, the progress that *Realaesthetik* is designed to produce is extending the amount of time that archetypal visitors spend in front of any individual work of art. But it also holds the potential to help visitors progress in the amount and type of information they bring to their art viewing experiences. In the parlance of game design, such progress is understood as player rewards, and to paraphrase game designer Jesse Schell, getting a reward you cannot see is like getting no

reward at all.¹⁸ Providing feedback mechanisms is a difficult but essential component if visitors' experiences are to be made palpable.

Transformation

All experiences affect people; meaningful experiences effect people. Affective experiences create a response or reaction in people. Effective experiences are transformational, they change people. Such transformations take the form of a change in knowledge, behavior, skill or attitude. Psychologists argue that changing a persons' knowledge, behavior or skill happens incrementally over time; in the current context, all three are necessary to advance a viewer's aesthetic development and, as Housen's longitudinal research has demonstrated, observable changes of this kind take semesters to occur. It is tempting to try claiming that experiences marked by *Realaesthetik* recovery and discovery, because they include fact-based information, hold the potential to change visitors' knowledge. As a simple experiment that disproves this point, how many of the new facts presented about *Ugolino and His Sons* or the *Eruption of Mount Vesuvius* quoted above, can the reader recall?

Accessing information does not equate with acquiring knowledge and even the acquisition of knowledge does not guarantee understanding. It might also be argued that extending the time people spend in front of a work of art is a change in behavior (looking longer) and a change in skill (mastering different techniques for looking at art). But for those changes to "stick" they must be repeated over and over until they become second nature for visitors. It is more appropriate to say that *Realaesthetik* helps visitors *practice*

18. Schell, *The Art of Game Design*, 191.

this new behavior and these skill sets rather than actually acquiring them. *Realaesthetik* presents new possibilities for engaging with art but should not be burdened with the overly ambitious claim of changing visitors' skills or behavior. In practical terms then, it is more reasonable for museums to focus on providing experiences that hold the potential transformative impact of changing visitors' attitudes or perceptions. A *Realaesthetik* experience will be transformative if it reinforces, alters or challenges visitors' attitudes or perspectives; that is, if the experience effects the way visitors think or feel about art and themselves. To this end, museums might ask:

- What questions does the experience put into viewers' minds?
- What is the "disordering dilemma"—i.e., the piece of information or incident that challenges people's existing habits of mind or assumptions—about those questions?
- How is their attitude about those questions or ideas expected to change?

What questions does the experience put into viewers' minds? The *Owner's Manual* poses explicit questions as well as encourages visitors to ask their own. The preliminary question that the existing manual asks is, "Want suggestions on how to get more out of your Museum visit?" This is an anemic question as the integration tool already revealed. Not only does it not pique curiosity, it also does not generate a conversation in visitors' heads or prompt additional questions. In the revised introduction proposed above, a question is presented that many visitors likely think, if only fleetingly, as they wander through the galleries and witness a person stopped in front of a work of art or sitting on a bench intently considering a painting on the wall. Such a scene makes it

easy to wonder, “What is going through that person’s mind? What does she see that holds her attention so intently?” The rewrite suggests that extended looking equates with “art experts” and then immediately assures visitors that they too can have an extended viewing experience. Visitors might ask a number of questions, “*Can* I linger in front of a work of art? What would make me linger? What might I think about if I did linger?”

Some of the activities included in the manual pose extra questions: “What connections can you create between [two adjacent works of art]” (“Tell a Story”)? “What areas has the artist left for you to complete in your mind’s eye” (“Play ‘What’s Missing?’”)? and “What do you see in the work that makes you respond that way” (“Getting Emotional”)? Others imply questions: What is the ordering principle in this abstract work (“A Mass of Mess”)? What do all of the works in this gallery have in common (“Be a Curator”)? and Is this painting a mirror that reflects something about me or a window that says something about the world outside of myself (“Consider: Windows or Mirrors”)?

What is the “disordering dilemma” that challenges visitors’ assumptions about those questions? Individual activities start with a quote that presents an idea that may be at odds with archetypal visitors’ notions of art or the experience of looking at art. John Baldessari’s quote in “Tell a Story” invites visitors to “create” connections between two works of art challenging the notion that looking at art necessarily requires art historical data. In “Play ‘What’s Missing?’,” Susan Rothenberg’s quote challenges the assumption that art needs to be “realistic,” a notion prevalent among archetypal visitors. Balthus’ quote, in “A Mass of Mess” that is followed in the body of the activity with a quote from

writer A. S. Byatt, challenges visitors' notions of the skill-less nature of abstract art and, in the process, introduces them to vocabulary that they might not typically apply to works of art such as "tight to loose," "exuberant to lazy," and "loud to quiet." Assigning emotional values to a work of art in "Getting Emotional" is in keeping with the types of behaviors that archetypal visitors already exhibit and the quote by Paul Cézanne validates this idea. But *Realaesthetik* also strives to encourage visitors to go beyond their typical art viewing behaviors so the activity suggests visitors find works of art that elicit less predictable emotions, perhaps annoyance, nostalgia, shock. The activity challenges them one step further by asking what they see in the work that makes them respond that way, thereby supporting their intuitive response with visual evidence.

How is their attitude expected to change? The primary attitude that the *Owner's Manual* is designed to change is people's confidence in their ability to use their personal narratives to have engrossing encounters with works of art, to demonstrate to themselves that they can linger meaningfully in front of a work of art. Another attitudinal change that the manual attempts to alter is the perception that art encounters, to be engrossing, require art historical knowledge (a pervasive perception that most types of *Realaesthetik* encounters are conceived to address). Individual activities attempt to change additional attitudes. For example, that whether or not visitors like "messy" paintings (the manual purposely avoids the pointless distinction of assessing works according to likes and dislikes), such works have been thoughtfully constructed by the artist; that artists who choose not to include excruciating detail might do so not for lack of skill but because they trust the viewer to use their imaginations; and that one's emotional responses to a work of

art are produced, in part, by formal decisions made by the artist.

The Museum could easily have stated these ideas in an expository way for visitors to read, hoping they uncritically assimilate these perspectives. But by letting visitors test their own assumptions and by alluding to other perspectives, the *Owner's Manual* aims to have a transformative impact on visitors by empowering them to come to their own conclusions. Such attitudinal shifts may seem humble by the educational, art historical or visitor studies criteria typically used in assessing the impact of museum visits. That the pre-activity attitudes implied above are so prevalent and persistent, however, suggests that traditional standards, used in isolation, have stymied progress in changing archetypal visitors' attitudes about art. Changing the perspectives with which people engage with art first requires them to become aware of their current habits of thought, presenting them with alternative perspectives, and then giving them an appropriate context in which to explore those alternative perspectives.¹⁹ When visitors are allowed to discover and test new perspectives through personally meaningful activities, chances are increased that the experience will have a transformative impact that creates lasting memories and new attitudes. The single-discipline approach that museums have historically used to engage visitors, whether art historical or pedagogical, have proved insufficient for changing the entrenched attitudes that archetypal visitors bring with them to a museum. The interdisciplinary strategy employed by the *Realaesthetik* toolkit utilizes empirical education and visitor studies research, philosophical theory, art historical ideas, and game design processes in an attempt to construct a robust design framework that is germane to

19. Mezirow, "Transformation Theory of Adult Learning," 50.

the work of museums and holds new possibilities for engaging visitors in engrossing art experiences.

Conclusion

My aim has been to address the real-world challenge faced by all museums of art: how to aid casual adult visitors possessing little knowledge of art history, with engrossing art experiences. Historically, museum professionals have looked to art historical methodologies or education theory to shape experiences for their visitors. These single-discipline approaches are inadequate for the majority of museum visitors who have neither the art historical acuity nor the inclination to “learn” during their leisure-choice visit to a museum. The complexity of the challenge requires a different, interdisciplinary approach, one that takes advantage of pertinent knowledge from multiple fields of research. The *Realaesthetik* toolkit attempts to synthesize a psychographic portrait of the archetypal museum visitor, the most salient characteristics of an engrossing art encounter, the family resemblance between play and art experiences, the most applicable tenets of game design, and a typology of aesthetic experiences in order to create a practical framework for delivering engrossing art experiences for museum visitors.

The art encounters developed at the North Carolina Museum of Art present an admittedly rudimentary application of the *Realaesthetik* toolkit—which itself was under development as the art encounters were being drafted. Nonetheless, visitors’ responses to the art encounters serve to remind us of the chasm that exists between the seductive realm of theory and the real world of museum practice. The *Owner’s Manual* was the most

well-received art encounter,

100% of users said they would recommend this resource to a friend.

Participants generally enjoyed the questions and prompts in the AE [art encounter], finding them “clever” and thought-provoking. 71% of the participants indicated that the AE assisted them in making a meaningful connection to a work of art in the Museum’s collection.¹

However, the evaluation also illustrates the lack of confidence that visitors have in their own art viewing abilities,

71% of participants . . . felt that it would have been better to be directed to particular works of art for each of the activities (Things to Do, Ponder, Discuss) in the AE. While some enjoyed the freedom and open-ended approach of the guide, many found the questions too “overwhelming” on their own without references to the NCMA’s particular collection. . . .

When asked, 0% of the users expected or desired to find more art historical information in the AE than what is already given.²

The request for additional guidance was even more pronounced for *Take the Grand Tour* and *Welcome to the Inferno*, which were tested by groups of teachers. Based on a focus group discussion, the evaluator remarked that, “Data indicates that the Grand Tour AE

1. Focus Group #2 Report: Owner’s Manual and Wedding Ceremony AEs, North Carolina Museum of Art, December, 2010. The summative evaluations employed a small sample size using a mixed qualitative/quantitative approach. While such small samplings make broad generalizations about the results tentative at best, the fact that many of the findings echo those of the visitor studies research cited earlier in this study adds to their credibility.

²2. Ibid.

concept was out of reach for most participants; similarly, some participants felt that the vocabulary used in the Rodin AE was too difficult.” The evaluation of *Take the Grand Tour* included these disappointing observations:

67% of the teachers thought that using the AE involved too much reading in general. . . . During the discussion, several comments were made that indicate the teachers found the AE’s premise too complex. Teachers wondered if an art background was necessary to use the AE effectively. It was suggested that the AE would work better if facilitated by a docent to aid comprehension. . . . No teachers in the focus group made statements indicating any familiarity with the 18th-century notion of the Grand Tour. When prompted, three teachers could recall a specific work of art from the AE that was memorable to them in some way. A couple of the teachers expressed the thought that using the AE “took away” from their experience of the art/Museum.

The most frequently cited suggestion for improvement (n=7) was to “simplify” the concept and content of the AE. . . . A few others (n=3) recommended that the resource be made “more relevant” to average visitors. Two teachers suggested that the AE be made “more fun.”³

The overwhelming issues for participants using *Welcome to the Inferno* were graphical in nature, which can be easily corrected with a redesign. Still, their responses demonstrate the insecurity that these visitors feel when looking at art.

Teachers wondered where to begin reading in the AE, and they were unsure which images went with which text. 50% of the users were confused about sequence in the AE; 75% voiced a desire for step-by-step instructions about where to go in the Rodin gallery and what to read with each work of art.

While 92% read the stories contained in the AE, only 25% thought the AE provided a “good overview” of Rodin’s work. 75% of the teachers felt that the AE needed to contain more information. . . . When prompted, four teachers recalled a specific work of art from the AE that was memorable to them in some way.⁴

3. Focus Group #1 Report: Rodin and Grand Tour AEs, North Carolina Museum of Art, December 2010.

4. Ibid. It is unclear from the evaluation report whether those surveyed wanted “more” information or

While the North Carolina Museum of Art's art encounters, as currently designed, have their flaws, using the *Realaesthetik* testing tools uncovered modifications that could significantly enhance these gallery resources. The insights gained also suggest next steps for using the *Realaesthetik* toolkit. First, the design thinking that the testing tools promote underscores the importance of the invitation into the magic circle. Such an invitation is intended to match visitors' predispositions about an art viewing experience with those incorporated into any designed experience. An experience ill-matched to a visitor's particular predisposition is no more effective at optimizing engrossing art experiences than the profusion of didactics at the Brooklyn Museum or their absence at the Pulitzer Foundation (described in the introduction). A more unambiguous invitation into the magic circle may have alleviated some of the criticisms leveled against the art encounters cited above: people wanting a more closed and directed experience could have been directed away from the *Owner's Manual*, visitors wanting more art historical information could be pointed toward *Take the Grand Tour*, and those wanting a more open-ended, conversation-generating experience could have been given *Welcome to the Inferno*. In addition, the invitation has the daunting task of being engrossing enough to counter archetypal visitors' common assumption (reinforced by the educational strategies of many museums) that conflates knowing *about* art history with looking *at* art. The invitation into the magic circle reassures visitors that there are other genuine ways to engage with art and aids this by assisting them in adopting the necessary ludic attitude for their museum visits.

just different information.

Second, game design is an iterative process and so, too, is designing engrossing art experiences in a museum. Although all of the art encounters (with the exception of the *Owner's Manual*) were prototyped before going into final graphic design and production, the *Realaesthetik* testing tools—not fully formed prior to the completion of the art encounters—suggest multiple other factors to take into consideration when trying to optimize the potential for visitors having engrossing art experiences. The previous chapter presents more than twenty possible refinements to the *Owner's Manual* that can be assessed using quick prototyping and visitor testing.

Finally, the potential of using intellectually rigorous points of departure has yet to be fully exploited. Investigations by various authors correspond to the unique characteristics of each of the four schemata and might serve as fruitful points of departure: for example, David Freedberg's book on the powerful phenomenological responses people have to visual images correlates to wonder-type encounters marked by strongly felt psychological reactions to art; Mieke Bal's "traveling concepts" that investigate cultural ideas in an interdisciplinary way parallels art encounters marked by discovery which also attempt to engage with art using myriad types of information from diverse fields; Kendall Walton's study on art as a prop for make-believe echoes encounters marked by reverie which also encourages visitors to use art as a springboard for their own focused daydreaming; or Erwin Panofsky's study of the inherent meanings of art which is consistent with recovery experiences that focus on determining the art

historically sanctioned meaning of a work of art.⁵ The task of abstracting such potential points of departure in a way that is meaningful for a lay audience and credible for art experts, while challenging, presents opportunities to engage visitors with art using concepts that go well beyond those found in traditional audio tours, academic labels, and tired scavenger hunts that are ubiquitous in many museums today.

The full potential of the *Realaesthetik* toolkit has yet to be tested, but the need for such a toolkit, even in its nascent stage, has never been more pressing. At a 2008 lecture hosted by the American Association of Museums' Center for the Future of Museums, Jane McGonigal, director of games research and development at the Institute for the Future, a non-profit research group in Palo Alto, California, offered these statistics on the growing pervasiveness of gaming in our culture and why museums ignore this trend at their own peril:

69% of all US households play computer and video games

70% of large US companies currently train their employees with games

and simulations; 95% expect to over the next five years

40% of gamers are woman

The average US gamer is 35 years old

One in four gamers is over age 50

Hundreds of millions of people worldwide are spending 20+ hours a week

5. Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, (see intro, n. 15). Bal, *Traveling Concepts*, (see intro., n. 13). Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, (see chap. 2, n. 33). Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, repr. (1955; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 26-54.

playing games⁶

As the fields of game design, video gaming, serious games, educational games, and game studies continue to grow, more and more museums will be entering into this domain to try engaging their visitors. Because game design is such a specialized field, museum staff will likely cede control of the design process to contracted game designers—as apparently happened with the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s “Ghosts of a Chance” initiative—resulting in experiences that are more game than art encounter. If museums are to profit from the many advantages that game design thinking can lend to the design of engaging art experiences, they must be able to talk the language of game design while helping game designers understand the real work of museums.

Finally, on a practical level, opportunity costs should be considered when determining what type of experience museums ought to mediate for their visitors. Just because museums *can* offer experiences that educate and entertain it does not follow that they are the most appropriate or effective cultural institutions to do so. Sherman Lee, long-time director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, was frank on this point: “The art museum is not fundamentally concerned with therapy, illustrating history, social action, entertainment or scientific research.”⁷ James Cuno, former director at the Art Institute of Chicago, has warned that too much emphasis on non-art-related experiences in museums will “run the risk of compromising the special contributions art museums alone can make to our society.” Elaborating, he stated that “virtually everything else that museums do—

6. Jane McGonigal, “Gaming the Future of Museums,” (see chap. 2, n. 20).

7. Sherman Lee, “The Art Museum in Today’s Society,” in *The Dayton Art Institute Bulletin* 27, no. 3 (March 1969): 6.

from lecture programs to school activities, to food and retail operations—is done equally well by institutions other than museums.”⁸ It requires no substantiating research to support the obvious fact that other institutions can actually do these things *better* than art museums. Schools and libraries are more adequately subsidized and equipped to educate, and theme parks and Hollywood can entertain more extravagantly and seductively.

Aesthetic experiences—made practical with the *Realaesthetik* toolkit—are one thing that art museums are uniquely positioned to offer from virtually all other social and cultural institutions. Aesthetic experiences represent an engrossing response to art. Works of art are, after all, those man-made objects upon which the philosophy of aesthetics is primarily based. The potential for being the site of such experiences helps justify the existence of art museums and may substantiate a case for broader public support. Building upon and moving beyond the historical discourse on aesthetic experience, the *Realaesthetik* toolkit presents a way for museum practice to get back to the fundamentals of optimizing the potential for their visitors of having engrossing encounters with art.

8. James Cuno, “Why Art Museums are Essential,” in *Stewards of the Sacred*, ed. Lawrence E. Sullivan and Alison Edwards (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2004) 33, 34.

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Vita

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