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Transmedial museum experiences: the case of Moesgaard

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Abstract

This article's aim is to elucidate the uncertain ontological status of the transmedial museum experience, which I define as the aesthetic encounter of a user with the complex object that is the conjunction of historical artefact, informative label and fictional stories on different media platforms. I combine a theoretical mapping of the concept of the transmedial museum experience with a case study of three transmedial exhibitions hosted by the Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus, Denmark.

Keywords

transmedial, museum, storytelling, experience, audience, digital

Experiencias museísticas transmediales: el caso de Moesgaard

Resumen

La intención de este artículo es dilucidar el incierto estado ontológico de la experiencia museística transmedial, que defino como el encuentro estético de un usuario con ese objeto complejo que es la conjunción de un artefacto histórico, una etiqueta informativa y unas historias ficticias en distintas plataformas de medios. Combino el mapeado teórico del concepto de experiencia museística transmedial con un estudio de casos de tres exposiciones transmediales presentadas en el Museo Moesgaard de Aarhus, Dinamarca.

Palabras clave

transmedial, museo, relato, experiencia, público, digital

Introduction

Museums use narratives to curate physical assets, usually by means of a factual approach (mostly through labelling) or fictional methods, whereby museums integrate their artefacts within full-blown narratives in order to offer a different kind of experience to their visitors. Fictional approaches, such as creating a character to demonstrate how a particular historical artefact was used, also existed in the pre-digital era (Parry, 2013, p. 18). The object becomes the anchor of a transmedial storytelling experience, which is nowadays often enabled by digital platforms that support multimodality and, sometimes, direct manipulation by the user. Transmedial doesn't equal digital. In museum literature and policy documents, digital technologies are often addressed as though all platforms and genres were equivalent (conflating topics as different as digital heritage or the virtual museum). In this paper, the focus is exclusively on transmedial experiences, that may or may not be interactive, digital or analogue (Kidd, 2014, p. 27).

A number of questions arise: Is there an added communicative value to the transmedial approach? What kind of experience is this? Is there a problematic tension between fact and fiction? Does the museum artefact lose or gain significance in the process?

In order to answer these questions, this paper will use Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus as a case study, and analyse three of its exhibits from a transmedial perspective. According to its website, the Moesgaard Museum "accommodates archaeological and ethnographic exhibitions, special exhibitions and student exhibitions" with the explicit intention of immersing the public in the life of the Bronze, Iron and Viking Ages. My arguments here are based on my own ethnographic observations conducted at the museum during a number of visits. The focus is on the aesthetic experience and not on the user experience from a design perspective (where other types of user-based empirical work, such as usability studies or interviews, would have been desirable).

The transmedial museum experience

This section maps the transmedial museum experience theoretically, building upon the fields of museum studies, interaction design and transmedial theory.

The museum experience is defined by Falk and Dierking as a continually shifting interaction among personal, social and physical contexts (Falk and Dierking, 2000). The personal context of visitors has weighed heavily in museum studies, where a number of works have classified museum experiences according to what people are seeking (Kotler & Kotler, 1999; Pekarik *et al.*, 1999; Packer, 2002). There is a common belief that storytelling, particularly digital, can attract parts of the public that hasn't been interested in museums before (Hanko *et*

al., 2014; Tallon and Walker, 2008). The main argument is that digital tools can support visitors' creativity and sense of play, transforming them "into participants rather than passive observers" (Hanko *et al.*, 2014, p. 2). Another argument is that immersive digital experiences are more "visceral and emotional" (Wyman *et al.*, 2011, p. 463). However, these texts are not specific as to how exactly the experience of the digital unfolds. This paper wants to contribute to filling this gap, because transmedial storytelling experiences might be one of the best ways of integrating digital technologies in museum settings in order to "create pockets of compelling experiences" (Wyman *et al.*, 2011, p. 466).

I propose the following definition: a *transmedial museum experience is the aesthetic encounter of a user with the complex object that is the conjunction of historical artefact, informative label and fictional stories on different media platforms*. To frame an experiential encounter, I am inspired by the way that interaction designers approach experience, most notably the work of Dourish (2001) and McCarthy and Wright (2004). For Dourish, the concept of experience is always embodied and made by the subject even if triggered by an object: "Embodiment is the property of our engagement with the world that allows us to make it meaningful" (Dourish, 2001, p. 126). That is, our engagement with the world is more than interpretive, it is always embodied and highly social. Such an experiential approach is not alien to museum studies, where a constructivist turn has become widespread: "The process of meaning-making is the process of making sense of experience, of explaining or interpreting the world to ourselves and others. In museums, meaning is constructed from objects, and from the sites themselves" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, p. 12).

Experience for McCarthy and Wright, who build on Dewey, is about "felt-life" with an emotional quality (McCarthy and Wright, 2004, p. 6). Experiences are always a combination of past events, present circumstances and future expectations. Moreover, all experience has an aesthetic potential (McCarthy and Wright, 2004, p. 19). They create a framework for understanding experience that is made of four threads (compositional, sensual, emotional and spatio-temporal) and six corresponding sense-making operations (anticipating, connecting, interpreting, reflecting, appropriating and recounting). The four experiential threads provide a holistic framework through which to characterise any experience.

- The Sensual thread is about our sensory engagement with a concrete situation. It is embodied and visceral.
- The Emotional thread refers to the evaluative relations that unite needs and desires with the particular situation.
- The Compositional thread is about interpretation, about decoding the narrative structure of a situation.
- The Spatio-temporal thread refers to the qualities of space and time. Experiences have rhythms.

As for transmediality it is useful to adopt an approach that considers the aesthetic experience of the work as its defining quality, such as in my earlier work in collaboration with Lisbeth Klastrup:

Transmedial worlds are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms. What characterises a transmedial world is that audience and designers share a mental image of the “worldness” (a number of distinguishing features of its universe). (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004)

Audiences can relate to this world across different instantiations through a number of distinguishing features: “mythos, topos and ethos”. The mythos refers to the foundational story of the world; the topos to the spatial and temporal setting, including the geography and history; and the ethos to the morality and beliefs (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004). Key to this approach is the idea that there is a user at the centre of a complex network of stimuli which coalesce into a combined experience that is as much anchored in the past as in the present. An example could be a person watching a film adaptation of their favourite novel and considering how ‘faithful’ it is in relation to the remembered content of the book. A WhatsApp discussion with a distant friend about the topic will also for a moment evoke the experience of that world, as the ways we engage with transmedial worlds grow in complexity (Klastrup and Tosca, 2016).

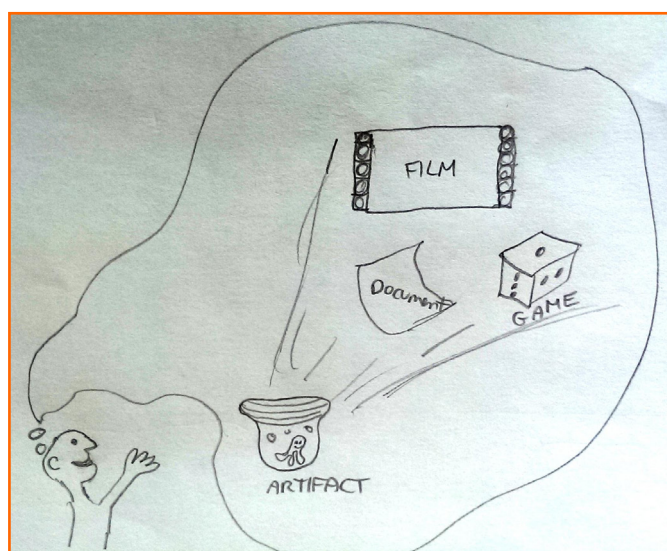


Figure 1. A transmedial museum experience

Transmedial reception processes are thus about piecing together an overarching narrative, even when the pieces might also make sense in and by themselves. In museum transmedial experiences, the story originates with the historical artefact, pulling users into the contextual world of the object in a strong way and affording a kind of emotional performativity that is a new kind of experience in itself. In

a way, even traditional museum communication can be considered transmedial, as Kidd also noted (2014, p. 27), since there is always a combination of object and label that forms an interpretive unity. Nevertheless, in the examples I will consider here, it is the fictions that carry most of the emotional and visceral weight of the experiences, which are greatly enhanced by digital technology.

Three worlds

In this section, I present three exhibits chosen to illustrate how transmedial museum experiences create worlds that provide visitors with a meaningful and emotionally powerful context in which to situate the historical objects.

The ethnographic stories are presented in the form of vignettes or impressionistic tales from the point of experience of a visitor (Van Maanen, 1988). It is a way “to draw the audience into an unfamiliar story world and allow it, as far as possible, to see, hear, and feel as the fieldworker saw, heard, and felt” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 103). My intention is that the form of this text also contributes to reinforcing its theoretical argument. The vignettes are built around the four threads of experience advocated by McCarty and Wright. They should therefore provide a second-hand transmedial experience for the reader of this paper, who might hopefully be pulled into the storyworld in a more visceral way than a mere description could achieve. After the vignettes, a joint analysis follows, based on the concepts of experience and transmediality introduced in the previous section.

Heroes of the Colosseum

I walk through the archway and, even before I enter the room, I can hear the cheers of the crowd. The lights are dimmed, so all my attention goes to the sun-drenched arena in front of me. Two gladiators measure each other slowly, ready to enter combat: a retiarius and a secutor. Around me, people are urging them on with cries. I stop and watch, fascinated; I am so close! All around me, people rustle and shift; I feel the nearness of many bodies as we cluster together to get a better view. Some children are making bets about who will win: “that is me”, they say pointing to their favourite fighter. The combat is quick and hard. The retiarius has lost his net, two women next to me praise his oily muscles and worry that he is lying on the ground. Behind me, a high podium covered with a red canopy is full of people watching, mesmerised; a few of them are taking pictures. I hear a loud metallic noise and turn around. That’s it, now the retiarius trident is sent flying and he is disarmed. We all look up at the emperor. The thumb turns down, and the handsome fighter gets dispatched without ceremony. A big group of teenagers claps, “that was awesome, man”. Two slaves rush in to drag his

dead body away. The crowd is still restless. I can almost smell the blood-drenched sand. In the background, I hear the roar of a lion and flinch, involuntarily; I wonder what is up next at the games.

The 'Gladiator, Heroes of the Colosseum' exhibition displays more than 200 items from Italian museums documenting the life and death of gladiators all over the Roman Empire. Weapons, clothes, sculptures, jewellery, tombstones, models of their living quarters and all sorts of other items are exhibited and carefully labelled in the big rooms of the museum. There is also audio-visual material specially developed for the exhibition.

At the centre of it all is the arena, recreated inside a huge room, complete with rows of seats and a podium where the public can stand, and a big half-circular screen that shows a film of actual gladiator fights as if they were really in front of us.

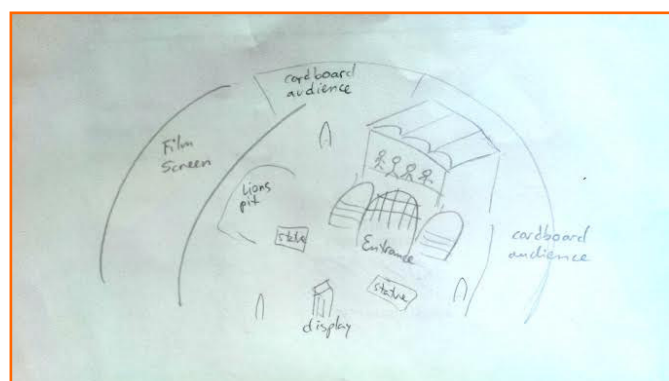


Figure 2. The "arena" room (approximate drawing from my field notes)

Visitors enter the room through an arched gate with a metal grid and are suddenly standing face-to-face with the fighting gladiators, in a perspective that puts them at the centre of events. People stand and watch the short film that is on a continuous loop. The quality of the acting and the visual production is very high. The film shows the empty arena in the morning hour, some gladiators training and, later, the actual games, with a few different events, including a parade, a lion attack and a dwarf combat. When the fighting is over, we see slaves cleaning the arena and the seats, and then night falls for a while. The rows of seats on-screen seem to blend with the cardboard rows of seats around the room, giving the impression of continuity, of the screen spilling out into the room. The audio-visual design is flawless: we are surrounded by all the noises of the crowd and a melancholic soundtrack envelops the room when the fighting is over.

The big space where visitors stand also has a couple of information screens, phallic columns and human-sized wax dolls dressed up as gladiators, including one fighting with a stuffed lion, but people pay less attention to them. The simulation of the gladiator arena is too mesmerising. Most people stay for several viewings, talking about what they see on-screen: who will win, if dirty tricks are allowed (like throwing sand in the face or hitting with the shield), how gladiators

look well trained...

By contrast, visitors go quickly through the main exhibition, where the artefacts are displayed in traditional vitrines. The exhibition attempts to show all the sides of the life of a gladiator, with areas that deal with how one becomes a gladiator, their training, their sex lives or their deaths.

Visitors become both audience (similar to the excited, invested audience of the real Colosseum) and gladiators (we are eye-to-eye with them, and around and above us, spectators cheer) for a while. We experience the games from a visceral point of view.

The people of the sun

I am sitting on top of a burial mound. Night has fallen. The sky is covered in hundreds of tiny lights, some brighter than others: the stars. To my left I can see the woman. We whisper, in awe of her: she is a sorceress, a shaman. She has wild hair. She is naked from the waist up, and has painted the secret symbols of nature on her body. A snake rests, curled, around her arm. I am afraid of her, of what she can see, but when she speaks her voice is kind and deep. "I can fly like a bird. When I see the sun, I see..." She tells us of the sun and moon, of how the fish is the helper of the sun and pulls it down into the water at night. And when she speaks, her voice is magic and it paints figures in the air. I see what she is talking about, I see it written in light on the black sky. The disc of the sun pulled by the chariot and the stallion, the fish, the snake; how everything changes and then everything becomes the same, itself. And that is how we grow older and our crops are blessed. We are the people of the sun.



Figure 3. The chariot of the sun (approximate drawing from my field notes)

The 'Bronze Age' exhibition includes a burial mound complete with wax figures of a dead man and two others performing burial rites. On top of the mound, there is a row of seats next to another wax figure: the shaman woman. The faces of the wax figures have been reconstructed from old skulls found in real graves, so they look like real people from that time (circa 1200 BCE). In front of us, there are three vitrines

displaying her amulets (made of animal bones), where we can see which animals she was connected with and which power she gained from each of them. The black ceiling simulates a night sky with many small bulbs that look like stars. A simple animation is projected onto the night sky: white lines slowly drawing the figures of the tale she is telling. It is a simple but powerful tale of her people's beliefs, an ancient religion centred on the cult of the sun. The animation loops at short intervals, and spectators usually sit through one viewing and later examine the glass vitrines with the objects. Children seem afraid of the imposing wax figure with the snake around her arm. In general, people huddle together in the semi-darkness, talking in very low voices to each other. The subdued attitude and the dreamy quality of the music used in the film contribute to an atmosphere of contemplation not unlike that of a church.

Viking navigators

I sit at the tiller of a Viking ship. It is the first time I've held one, and I move it right and left, just to check how much resistance it offers. I have a mission, to sail King Harald Bluetooth's wife, Tove, to Germany. She is on board the ship. I know she is not happy, but I cannot spare her any thought because the seas crave all my attention. Our ship breaks the waves, it trembles slightly, just as hesitant as I am. I try to concentrate on the route, which is laid out before me. We Vikings prefer to navigate by following the coast as much as we can but, of course, we cannot get too close. It is dangerous. We can also use the stars as guides, and by looking at the heavens and the coastline I can see my path very clearly. But steering the tiller is not easy, because when I turn it to the left, the ship turns in the opposite direction. And the coastline is tricky, bulging in and out as though it were a live thing. I need to get used to it. I am not in control. I am just riding the waves and the winds. But we will get there, we always do.



Figure 4. Viking navigators (copyright Moesgaard Museum)

The 'Seven Vikings' exhibition invites visitors to learn about the Viking world by following closely one of the seven protagonists we first meet as wax dolls on a ship. Each visitor picks up a 'key', a reproduction of an archaeological artefact that will activate different stories according to the character to which it corresponds. We can choose between a crucifix, knife, comb, little ship etc. (and thus follow a bishop, a warrior, a carpenter...). I take a piece of pottery that belongs to Queen Tove, the wife of legendary King Harald Bluetooth. I learn about trade routes, customs, religion and beliefs through the eyes of Tove. Each time I come to an exhibit, I place my piece of pottery on a small glass and a story unfolds just for me.

The exhibit that has inspired this vignette above is a room at the centre of the exhibition, with doors to all the destinations that are part of the story: Byzantium, York, Ingelheim, etc. On the walls, looped films show Viking ships sailing, endlessly and beautifully, glowing in the darkness. In the centre of the room, a blue half-sphere with a map shows the Vikings' travelling routes. Beside it, there are two steering posts, each with a tiller and a screen. When the visitor sits down and places her object on the glass, she is given a sailing mission, one that is different for each character. The screen shows the route and we get an explanation of Viking navigation techniques while having to steer our ship in the right direction, avoiding rocks or getting lost. It is not a very difficult game, but it requires us to pay attention and concentrate on using the tiller.

There is always a lot of activity around this particular exhibition. Children like to try several trips, and even exchange 'keys' with each other so that they can get a different route. Some adults are content just to watch, but most also want to try the steering game. It is actually surprisingly satisfying to have a go at steering the ship, although several visitors wished that it was a bit harder to master.

What kind of transmedial experience is it?

A joint analysis of the three cases seems more efficient, since we can make use of their differences to see the nuances more clearly.

The first step is a reflection on the different media they use. All three exhibits make use of several media types, including film, sound, text, wax figures and other props (the arched door, the podium, the mound, the tiller...) that build a whole scenography into which the body of the visitor and all her senses are incorporated into the experience. We are not only conjuring other worlds in our imagination; they have become three dimensional, occupying the same space as us. We walk into them, become surrounded by them; in the third example, we are even invited to manipulate them.

Thus, the three examples could be said to belong to the genre of installation art, which, as Bishop has proposed: "addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space. Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a

distance, installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision" (Bishop, 2005, p. 10). From a transmedial perspective, we could say that installations such as this let us inhabit the worlds of the past, satisfying a fundamental desire for imaginary worlds to become material (Tosca, 2015).

If we refer to the four threads of experience advocated by McCarthy and Wright, we can make sense of the complex experience of interacting with these worlds. Interestingly, the four threads do not represent a step-by-step development of an experience, in which our brain first processes the sensual, then the emotional and so on. Although the whole process is triggered by the sensory perception, the threads of experience are very much intertwined and would be difficult to isolate, as demonstrated by the vignettes.

The three examples offer rich sensory worlds that immediately provoke emotions in the participant. I have described the church-like contemplation on top of the mound, the blood thirst of the spectators in the arena and the proud engagement of the sea pilots steering their ships. The Sensual thread is always visceral, and it goes hand in hand with the Emotional thread, because these experiences are designed to make us feel. When we feel, we care, so we also make an effort to understand what is going on, which is what McCarthy and Wright call the Compositional thread. It requires our engagement to decipher the rituals of combat in the Colosseum and the rhythmical logic (of the days and the seasons) behind the tale of the sun. But more than that, comprehension gains in depth when it is also embodied; it is not the same to read about Viking navigation techniques as it is to actually *navigate* using them, even if it is only a simulation. We learn by doing, as Dewey famously proposed (Dewey, 1938). Concrete experiences can be attached to our mental encyclopaedias of lived-experiences and things we know, creating stronger bonds than if we were just being told about things.

Lastly, all three experiences are very clearly spatially and temporally situated, orchestrating a rhythm that is fixed in the case of the two first examples (with looped films that cannot be interrupted), but controlled by the participant in the third case. The inevitability of the two films is evocative of the subjects of life and death and the rhythms of the world, while the more open nature of the navigation game, where it is more or less up to the player to learn to be efficient and take the ship to the right port, complements the theme of control at the centre of this exhibit. The spatio-temporal arrangement is the designer's way of framing the experience. We don't want participants to imagine just any context, so a very specific historical reality has to be simulated.

McCarthy and Wright advocate for an understanding of experience as "felt-life", that is, with the self at the centre of the experience. This means that the exhibits described above will elicit different kinds of emotions in different people, even if the sensorial perception is the same. There is no telling what will engage any single visitor in the arena installation: it could be recollections of films such as *Ben Hur* or

Gladiator, the memory of a Latin teacher enthusiastically describing the games or even a flashback to a smelly bullfighting arena on a hot summer's day. A child, a history aficionado and an expert in old swords will all approach the exhibition with different baggage and expectations, but they will all be pulled in by the aesthetic strength of the transmedial world. In terms of transmedial theory, the three examples make an effective extension of the worlds they are recreating. They provide participants with a context in which the historical objects exhibited at the museum make sense. One could argue that if the visitor, say a history professor, already knows that context well, then the transmedial approach is not needed. However, *knowing* about something is not the same as having the chance to *experience* it with our own bodies.

Transmedial theory can also help us to evaluate these experiences through the concepts of mythos, topos and ethos, originally proposed to describe "worldness" (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004). Evaluation shouldn't be confused with an attempt at establishing the truth, since we are dealing with fictional accounts. That is, the gladiator fights we see in the arena didn't happen, but they could have happened. They are faithful to the mythos, topos and ethos of ancient Rome.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed a definition of transmedial museum experiences anchored in the fields of museum studies and interactive design, and illustrated it through three cases from Moesgaard Museum. I have shown how historical artefacts can prompt a transmediation that pulls visitors into the contextual world of the object in a strong way, providing a sort of emotional performativity that is a new kind of experience in itself. The added value that transmedial experiences bring to museum communication resides in the viscosity of the experiences that become "felt-life" and attain a transformative potential alongside the participants' life experiences.

In the introduction, I also wondered if transmedial experiences would cause these fictions to overshadow the historical objects, thus creating an undesired tension between fact and fiction. I would like to argue that the museum artefact doesn't lose any significance in the process. Quite the opposite, in fact, as the purpose of these installations is to ensure that the artefact is approached as part of the total transmedial experience. The fictional accounts (in whatever medium they are presented) provide an experiential context in which the artefacts make sense. If some of the public decides to ignore the historical artefacts and enjoy only the stories, then they are not participating in the full transmedial experience. My observations indicate that most visitors do pay some attention to the artefacts as well, even those who move quickly through the rooms. There seems to be a small number of visitors who don't engage with the artefacts at all, but it is doubtful that they would act otherwise in a

more traditional museum communication setting. Therefore, I would argue that the fictional narratives give them a context that they would otherwise never get. And maybe this context might one day prompt them to look at the historical objects. In any case, this opens up to discussion the role of an ethnographical and archaeological museum: is it centred on the objects or on communication about the historical periods? The answer lies outside the scope of this article.

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