Inspiring, engaging and connecting

AHI

Stuart Frost learns from Room 3 at the British Museum

Susan Cross is our first Provocative Fellow

Plus Glasgow Here We Come!

The Journal of the Association for Heritage Interpretation 29-1 / Summer 2024

Engage

Claire Dalton and Andrew Todd are emotive about the National Famine Museum

Contents

© SS Great Britain Trust.

Courtesy Failte Ireland

Cover image:
Visitors immersed in the emotive experience at The National Famine Museum, Strokestown Park.
Courtesy Failte Ireland

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Editorial

Welcome to Summer 2024. Has the ongoing rain from autumn to spring got you down? I hope not, though emotions are the theme of this issue of Interpretation Journal. You will find ideas and discussions about the theme weave their way throughout the issue.

In This Issue

News, Views & Reviews brings together news from AHI and across the industry. There is exciting news to announce about this year's conference to be held in Glasgow. It is also the turn of Interpretation Australia and Interpret Europe to introduce themselves as Global Association for Heritage Interpretation members. We also have a preview of a new exhibition at *SS Great Britain*.

Interpretation Hacks continues our series of practical ideas. In this issue we cover emotions in Live Interpretation and the use of jokes in Write Track. Sustainable interpretation investigates carbon neutrality while Digital Horizons focuses on 3D design tools. We also put the spotlight on AHI's excellent Interpretive Writing best-practice guide.

Our theme is **Emotions**. We have two main features on the theme. However, you will also find it explored in Interpretation Hacks and Interpretation Research Lab. Claire Dalton and Andrew Todd share their approach to embedding emotions in the AHI award-winning National Famine Museum at Strokestown Park, County Roscommon. Carolyn Lloyd Brown and Jo Scott make the case for using emotional mapping in interpretive planning. Emotions is rounded off by Bob Jones as he reminds us of when this subject was featured in **Past Issues** of the Journal.

I am delighted to launch a new feature for this issue. **Provocative Fellow** invites Fellows of AHI to challenge us to think about an aspect of our practice drawn from their experiences. Our first piece is by Susan Cross who discusses how difficult it is to research and interpret peace.

Interpretation Research Lab features Philip Ryland's study of emotional responses to displays generated by a range of exhibits and he attempts to establish whether the emotional trigger from the exhibit might be grouped according to the type of response stimulated. Stuart Frost looks at what the British Museum has learned from Room 3, their experimental exhibition space that ran for 18 years and hosted 70 displays.

I hope you enjoy the issue. The next issue will be about **Storytelling**.

We always welcome feedback, ideas, article proposals and discussion about the content. Look out for posts about the journal on AHI's social media channels and feel free to email me at journal@ahi.org.uk.

Bill Bevan, MAHI

Bill Bevan, MAHI
Engage Editor

This issue we feature the following contributors:

Andrew Todd
Tandem Design

Carolyn Lloyd Brown
Visitor Engagement Consultant

Jo Scott
Jo Scott Heritage

Susan Cross
TellTale

Stuart Frost
British Museum

View from the Chair

2024 began with a webinar featuring the winning projects of the Engaging People Awards 2023, in response to members requesting more information about the category winners. This provided the winners with an opportunity to highlight the methods they had used to create their excellent visitor engagement as well as expanding on the legacies that their particular projects had created. It was an informative and celebratory evening. For those of you who missed it, the webinar is available on our website. We will be launching the next round of Awards at our conference in Glasgow in October.

Plans are well underway for our 2025 celebrations when AHI marks its 50th anniversary. Thanks to the response to provide support for the proposed Museum Freecycle programme (from the piece in the January newsletter), a funding bid is being put together by the team focused on making our 50th year one to remember, the Freecycle scheme being a key element. While we do not have a date yet, our conference will be held in Cardiff in 2025, as it was here that AHI began.

With regards to membership, the trustees are conducting a major review which will help us understand what our current members want from an AHI membership and how we can attract others to join. As we endeavour to attract new members it is important we ensure that our organisation demonstrates diversity, equity and inclusion. In our first online discussion with a group of current members, it was heartening to hear that they found our Association welcoming, caring, supportive and uncompetitive. However, discussion about Full Membership made it clear that we have work to do in making this process meaningful to many of our Associate members.

I am very much enjoying my involvement with the Global Alliance for Heritage Interpretation (GAHI) and am joined by our former Chair, Jim Mitchell, who has contributed significantly on behalf of AHI and continues to do so. The GAHI webinar series is underway and if you have missed any you will find links on our website.

...the trustees are conducting a major review which will help us understand what our current members want from an AHI membership and how we can attract others to join.

We attended the Museums and Heritage Show in May. Interpretation is very much in the forefront of how exhibitions, landscapes, museums, heritage sites, etc, tell their stories and explain their existence. There are many new freelancers trying to find a way into our profession who we need to support. Diversity and inclusion was much talked about, reinforcing our need to widen our membership.

I am looking forward to seeing you all at our Conference in Glasgow, 9–10 October. Our conferences are known for their friendly and supportive atmosphere and the willingness to share experience and knowledge with others. Do come – you will be most welcome.

Jackie Lee, MAHI
Chair
Association for Heritage Interpretation

Industry Digest

Two Articles on Growing Your Audiences

Diversification – this article gives examples of US museums that have increased visitor numbers post-pandemic by diversifying their programmes, staff and volunteers.
https://observer.com/2024/02/museums-attendance-down-diversification

Digital – Rowena Fry, Advertising Consultant at digital marketing agency Crafted, shares her advice for museums looking to grow their audiences in the digital age.
https://www.museumnext.com/article/how-can-museums-expand-their-audiences-in-the-tech-led-age

Goods News: Increasing Visitor Numbers in 2023

There has been a recent flurry of news stories about the substantial increase in numbers of visitors to UK attractions in 2023. The figures for Association of Leading Visitor Attractions show a total number of 146.6 million visits in 2023, a 19% increase on 2022. While some sites boasted 40%+ higher visitor numbers, many recorded increases of 10%. Numbers are still lower than in 2019, but this is a significant post-Covid improvement which bodes well for 2024.
https://www.alva.org.uk/details.cfm?p=403&codeid=878

Bad News: Financial Losses

The majority of England's biggest subsidised cultural institutions are now operating at a loss, including many internationally renowned theatres, galleries and museums that receive regular state grants.
https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2024/mar/24/england-culture-jewels-arts-lobby-group-royal-shakespeare-company

Scotland's Wildlife Discovery Centre

The Highland Wildlife Park opens this exciting new centre this summer, connecting people with wildlife to inspire action to protect, value and love nature at a time when the world faces a biodiversity crisis.
https://www.highlandwildlifepark.org.uk/

Unveiling the Mysteries of Light

The Royal Society's annual Summer Science Exhibition offers a free interactive experience for anyone curious about the latest advances in science and technology. At the heart of this year's exhibition, visitors will witness the mesmerising dance of nanoparticles suspended in mid-air.
https://royalsociety.org

Heritage Wellbeing

The wellbeing created by day-to-day encounters with local heritage is worth £29 billion annually nationwide, according to Historic England's 'Heritage Capital and Wellbeing' report. On average, a person's life satisfaction improves to the value of £515 a year, just by living near local heritage sites such as a small civic museum or village church.
https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/news/research-shows-heritage-boosts-your-wellbeing/

Addressing Empire Armed Forces Museums' Network

Several armed forces museums have set up a network to discuss and exchange ideas and pool information about collections acquired as a result of military action by the British in colonial countries.
https://www.nmrn.org.uk/news/mutual-support-museums-addressing-empire

AI and Artists

The generative AI Midjourney list has been found to use copyrighted art works to train programs to mimic artists' styles without their consent. Among the names are Frida Kahlo, Walt Disney and Yayoi Kusama.
https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/01/04/leaked-names-of-16000-artists-used-to-train-midjourney-ai

Illustration & Heritage: Sharing Histories to Draw Out Futures

The 14th Annual International Illustration Research Symposium will be held on 22 and 23 November 2024, at Camberwell College of Arts, University of the Arts London. The symposium will explore the role illustration plays in cultural heritage.
https://illustrationandheritage.com

Monumental Issues

A session at the forthcoming European Association of Archaeologists conference in Rome will look at how the decolonisation of urban space, changes in global power dynamics and multipolarity may transform the public perception of monuments to become potentially inclusive healing apparatus.
https://bit.ly/4b9ap5s

Re-enactors and Living History

If you're looking for a group to provide period-based living history or re-enactment for your event, these fairly comprehensive lists are good places to start.
https://www.historic-uk.com/LivingHistory/ReenactorsDirectory/
http://bajr.org/WhoseWho/Reenactment.asp

Seen Any Good Websites?

These 10 websites have been collated by Numiko, a digital consultancy, to show that it's possible to capture the essence of an institution while creating something unique and useable. Each organisation has tried something different and they may inspire you with ideas.
https://numiko.com/insights/best-museum-gallery-websites-2024/

If you have anything you would like to submit to digest, please email journal@ahi.org.uk. Deadline is 15th September for publication in December.

Globetrotting

Australia

Interpretation Australia is a membership-based association and the peak body for interpretation professionals in Australia.

In the vast tapestry of Australia's cultural and natural heritage, there lies a crucial thread woven by the work of Interpretation Australia members.

Interpretation Australia is an organisation dedicated to supporting its members in their endeavours to illuminate and preserve the nation's diverse history through engagement and inspiration. With a mission to foster understanding, appreciation and conservation, Interpretation Australia plays a vital role in shaping our country's rich heritage narrative.

Interpretation Australia, 32 years young, was formed in 1992 to share issues and ideas, improve professional standards and raise the profile of interpretation as a profession. Like our international counterparts, our members work across various industries and locations, providing interpretive engagement solutions for the wider community.

At its core, Interpretation Australia serves as a beacon of excellence in interpretation. It is a field that bridges the gap between places and visitors, illuminating stories and connecting people with the significance of their surroundings. Through workshops, conferences and resources, Interpretation Australia empowers professionals working within museums, parks, zoos, heritage sites, cultural institutions and beyond to craft compelling narratives that resonate with and inspire diverse audiences.

Over the past year, Interpretation Australia has implemented a new strategic plan to help guide the next stage of the organisation's growth. Additionally, the plan provides a clear pathway for members to engage, interact and participate within the Australian interpretive community to strengthen the bonds of best practice and innovation and progress our chosen field as an independent industry.

Interpretation Australia

Photo by Kylie Christian.

Interpretation Australia delegates engaged by the on-site guides at World Heritage site Port Arthur, in Tasmania.

We also enjoyed a return to face-to-face events with our 'What is Interpretation? A Personalised View' conference in November 2023. This was our first since the Covid pandemic and it was an exciting and triumphant return for existing and new members alike. We look forward to repeating its success when we meet in tropical Queensland later this year.

In guiding the custodians of Australia's past, present and future, Interpretation Australia embodies a steadfast commitment to empowering and supporting our members. Through their dedication and expertise, Interpretation Australia helps the interpretation industry illuminate the stories that define us, enriching lives and nurturing a deeper appreciation for the wonders that shape our collective identity.

Kylie Christian
President of Interpretation Australia, who works as an interpretive specialist within the heritage industry in Sydney
https://interpretationaustralia.asn.au

Europe

Echoing the Interpret Europe conference.

In these challenging times we could hardly avoid a provoking conference theme and we have realised that we are, as interpreters, challenged as well.

This year's Interpret Europe (IE) conference 'Sustainability: Challenging mindsets through heritage interpretation' discussed how interpreters could contribute to a more resilient and sustainable future.

We asked ourselves the following questions:

- Why should heritage interpretation challenge mindsets?
- What does challenging mindsets mean?
- How can we do it?

The questions will still hover above our heads while a fruitful discussion continues in the years to come. However, some leading thoughts have been shared by 43 presenters and four keynote speakers.

We were extremely honoured by the presence of AHI colleague and emeritus professor from the University of Surrey, David Uzzell, whose speech shed light on the inherent complexities of the relation between interpretation, understanding, appreciation and protection, exposing the gaps between theory and practice. Drawing from psychological insights, Professor Uzzell advocated for moving from mere instruction to fostering inquiry-driven approaches and a dialogue with people.

Sujeong Lee, Head of Research Office, UNESCO WHIPIC (South Korea), proposed redefining the concept of heritage interpretation and revealed WHIPIC's research of a changing paradigm in interpretation, indicating a multilayered process reaching beyond presentation and communication.

Professor Lluís Bonet from the University of Barcelona (Spain) presented the European Cultural Heritage Skills Alliance blueprint, where interpretation is receiving greater importance. Špela Spanžel, Director General of the Cultural Heritage Directorate (Slovenia) emphasised the role of participation of stakeholders in interpretation for future resilient societies.

The IE conference took place in Koper, Slovenia, 21–24 March. It connected 123 participants from 26 countries across Europe, South and North America and Asia. As Koper lies on the triple border region, study visits took participants to places in Slovenia, Croatia and Italy, from underground caves to wild beasts and intermittent lakes interpretation centres. From boat production, a mythical park and to a bora wind museum, naming only a few highlights. The pre-conference tour in Ljubljana and the post-conference tour to Venice provided even more diversity to indulge in.

The next IE conference will be held in Poland, 11–14 April 2025.

Helena Vičič
Managing Director
Interpret Europe
https://interpret-europe.net
Helena has been Managing Director of Interpret Europe since 2020 and an IE Certified Interpretive Trainer, Guide, Writer and Planner.

Association for Heritage Interpretation

Glasgow
Here We Come!

The AHI Conference 2024 will be held in Glasgow, from 9 to 11 October.

Meet the people behind Glasgow Life, the city's culture, arts and sport CIC. It boasts enviable levels of engagement with residents from disadvantaged groups in this post-industrial city and cultural hub. We'll learn how to apply their results to our own engagement challenges.

There will be keynote talks by Duncan Dornan, Head of Museums and Collections at Glasgow Life and Mark O'Neill, international consultant and researcher and former Head of Glasgow Museums, 1998-2009, coupled with a visit to the Burrell Collection (Art Fund Museum of the Year 2023), and the architecturally stunning Riverside Museum. We'll see nature returning to the riverside at Glasgow Science Centre, take lunch aboard a restored Glasgow-built tall ship and spend evenings exploring intangible heritage through a multisensory Burns Night and Songfest.

Courtesy the Tall Ship Glenlee Trust.

Glenlee at Riverside.

We've managed to cheat inflation and provide excellent value for money with members' full residential package for just £495 (the same as 2022), or £325 for non-resident delegates.

For more information and booking for Early Bird discounts, visit https://ahi.org.uk/conference24

Any questions? Contact the office on admin@ahi.org.uk or 01795 436560.

Join us at the Glynhill Hotel & Spa, close to Glasgow, with easy access by road, train or air.

See History Blossom On Board the *SS Great Britain*

The interpretation team has been finding creative ways to tell the story of plant migration on board Brunel's Victorian steamship.

Between the 1850 and 1870s, the *SS Great Britain* carried precious cargo across the oceans. Plants from England were taken out to newly established nurseries and gardens in Australia, and rare ferns, trees and expensive orchids were shipped back to England. These exotic plants were sold on by the most exclusive nurseries, servicing the 'fern fever' and orchid obsession that gripped Victorian Britain. This huge growth in public demand for exotic plants stimulated the international plant trade.

New research from the Brunel Institute has shown just how significant the *SS Great Britain* was in transporting plants in the 19th century. Some of the most influential horticulturalists and plant hunters sent specimens between the antipodes and the UK using the fastest ship available – the *SS Great Britain*. The plants were added to botanical gardens in the UK and Australia, contributing to the study of the oldest human science: botany.

The ship regularly carried Wardian cases on the top deck. Invented by British doctor and amateur naturalist Nathanial Bagshaw Ward in 1829, these tough, portable wooden greenhouses kept the plants alive as they crossed the oceans. We have commissioned a local Bristol carpenter to create six replica Wardian cases – copies of an original held in the collection at Kew. In partnership with community gardens, independent growers and garden centres, the cases have been planted up with the different flowers, ferns, foods and saplings that the ship transported around the world.

© SS Great Britain Trust.

A costumed interpreter, a botanical illustrator travelling in first class, studies ferns in a replica Wardian Case on board the SS Great Britain.

Visitors are invited to explore our floating garden and discover the plant cargo and people who travelled on board. They can step into a recreated botanist's cabin, talk to new costumed characters and seek out 'fascinating fern facts' around the ship. The public programme includes botany-themed talks and tours. We will host a Botany Late in August, where local distillery 6 O'clock Gin will offer tastings of our new 'Botanist' gin, and visitors can take part in themed crafts and guided tours.

The Wardian cases will relive their original purpose. This summer two cases will transport plants to the prestigious Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival. From 2–7 July we will be engaging festival-goers with the origin story of the plants on show around them.

© SS Great Britain Trust.

The illustrator's sketchbook, made with art students from South Gloucestershire and Stroud College.

Iona Keen
Head of Interpretation SS Great Britain Trust
https://www.ssgreatbritain.org
Iona Keen has worked as a heritage interpreter for over 20 years. She is Vice-Chair of the South West Fed.

© Science Made Simple.

Zoë Gamble, from Science Made Simple, showing that our emotions are contagious.

LIVE INTERPRETATION

It's the Singer, not the Song

'I did it my way' blares from the TV. The singer might not technically be the best vocalist, but, for some reason, the studio audience find the performance incredibly moving.

The most powerful singers are masters at expressing their emotions about the message behind the song. This makes all the difference and it's an approach that, as interpreters, we can learn from.

Don't get me wrong: words matter in songs and messages matter in interpretation. But when engaging a diverse audience that initially may not be interested, emotions lead and everything else follows.

Express your Emotions

Precisely how you do this is up to you. Educators display their enthusiasm in a vast range of ways, depending on:

- Their presenting personality
- How animated they are naturally
- The engagement level of the audience
- The size and age of the group
- The nature of their content.

However you show your emotions, they need to be clear enough so audiences can become infected by them. Psychologists call this magical process 'emotional contagion'. It's your secret weapon as an interpreter.

But Emoting is Not Enough

If the audience doesn't believe these feelings are genuine, they will lose trust in you and your ideas. It's like a nine-year-old singing contestant trying to pull off a heart-rending ballad that expresses the pain of lost relationships. Align the emotions you share with your own experiences, values and worldview.

Connect Before you Communicate

The best way of connecting with others is through revealing your emotions. So next time you're in front of visitors, ask yourself if you're just going through the motions belting out the same old song or are you sharing your authentic feelings about the message?

There are only a few core ideas in any interpretation setting. What matters most is that you sing those songs your way.

Paul McCrory
HOOK training ltd
www.hooktraining.com
Trainer obsessed with helping informal educators engage their visitors.
Author of *Hook Your Audience*.

Sustainable Interpretation

Carbon Neutrality

I'm sure you will all have heard the phrase carbon neutral. For us in the heritage sector, it represents a critical point between preserving our cultural and historical legacies and safeguarding the future of our planet.

As awareness of our environmental impact grows, it's crucial to ensure that our work does not come at the expense of our planet. You could argue that the sector has a unique opportunity – and responsibility – to lead by example in environmental stewardship. Whether you set out to achieve carbon neutrality across just one project or go big and take this approach to all your activities, this journey is not straightforward, being full of both promising prospects and significant challenges.

The Positives:

- By adopting renewable energy and sustainable practices, we can serve as leaders of energy conservation and environmental responsibility.
- The shift towards sustainability encourages creative and innovative approaches to interpretation with the potential to engage broader audiences.
- Long-term costs. Although initial investments may be high, the transition should ultimately lead to cost reductions.

The Challenges:

- The transition to green options and practices can be expensive in a world where budgets are tight.
- Integrating modern sustainability solutions while maintaining heritage sites presents unique challenges and constraints to work around.
- Carbon offsets might be useful, but they could distract from the core objective of directly reducing emissions through practical, sustainable choices.

Before we can become carbon neutral, we need to know what our carbon footprint is and the impacts of choices we make. This isn't easy and requires peeling back the layers. It's not just about the energy to run the lights but about an air-conditioned server in California running a webpage, for example, or the journey of an item before it gets to you or your client.

It is a journey the Design Museum has been on recently. At a talk given to South West Fed back in November 2023, Elise Foster Vander Elst (an exhibition maker who focuses on green transitions in museums) shared the Design Museum's findings from creating the Waste Age exhibition, in 2021. For example, it discovered that the nails used in the displays had a surprisingly high carbon footprint from the steel, so the answer was to remove all 3,000 nails at the end of the exhibition and reuse them in the future! This saved on having to buy more.

The Design Museum created some really helpful tools that are freely available to use and worth a look: www.designmuseum.org/learning-and-research/design-museum-research/working-to-make-change

Have you managed to measure the carbon footprint of a project? If so, we would love to hear from you.

@AHI_Social
@TheWayDesignUK
#AHIJournal

Mary James
The Way Design
https://thewaydesign.co.uk

Bright White Ltd 2024 - The Highland Wildlife Park, Cairngorms, Scotland

Digital Horizons

3D Design Tools

Regardless of the scale of the project, interpretive designers work with clients to understand the brief, then build an image in their mind of a future that does not yet exist – it might be a space, a display, an interactive experience – anything that communicates with the audience. At some point the designer needs to communicate that idea (or concept) to others. We use 3D design tools to ensure that the image in the designer's imagination is shared successfully and effectively.

How Does it Work?

Fundamentally, creating a 3D design involves three descriptions:

- Geometry – the shape of a 3D object. Although approximations will work for some applications, there is great benefit in the downstream production process if the geometry is dimensionally accurate.
- Surfaces – what colour or texture does each surface have? How does it absorb or reflect light? How transparent is it?
- Lighting – what light sources illuminate our imagined objects? Where does the light come from? What colour is the light?

When it comes to describing geometries, a variety of sources are available:

- Manipulation of primitives. A primitive is a 3D shape like a sphere or a cube. By adding primitives together and pulling their dimensions around, you can build complex shapes.
- Vector drawings. Let's say you have an idea for a curvy display surface, you can create a vector shape or import it from a package like Adobe Illustrator, then give it 3D depth.
- Architect's drawings. It is possible to bring a 3D description of an architectural shell into your digital workspace – this is extremely useful when designing interiors of interpretive spaces.
- Terrain models. There are many interesting digital techniques for capturing the lay of the land, such as LiDAR scanning that can be imported into a 3D design space.
- Collections of objects can be scanned using a variety of techniques and imported into the scene.

Taking Things a Bit Further

Sometimes, it is appropriate to think about 3D design tools as physics modelling tools. For example, a question might arise over the legibility of a graphic panel that is behind glass. By modelling the panel, the glass, the room it sits in and the sources of light, it is possible to design-out such things as problematic reflections.

If a workflow is metric (dimensionally accurate) then it is highly possible to pass the geometries on to manufacturers to feed into computer-controlled manufacture systems like robot-assisted joinery (CNC) or 3D printing. These techniques are used far more frequently than I think most people would assume, and this makes it a full digital design development journey called CAD/CAM, computer-aided design/computer-aided manufacture.

Outputs

Still Images

The most straightforward and common output from a 3D design workflow is a still image – a visualisation that can be carefully composed to communicate the feel of entering a room or beholding an object on display. The key thing is that it is one moment in time – a freeze frame.

Animations

Most, if not all, 3D design packages feature the ability to animate the scene. An example of this that you have probably come across is a fly-through, where the position and orientation of a virtual camera is animated to provide a sense of walking or moving through a space. The objects themselves can be animated too, for example a kinetic sculpture.

Perhaps the most exciting use of 3D design workflows is the ability to load the 'scene' you have created into a package that allows you to put a VR headset on and move through the space.

Explorable XR Experiences

Perhaps the most exciting use of 3D design workflows is the ability to load the 'scene' you have created into a package that allows you to put a VR headset on and move through the space. That 'feel' and power of communication that an interpretation scheme hopes to achieve can be tested in full before anything is made in reality.

Is it for you?

I've often heard people say, when they first see a 3D design package, that it is going to be beyond them. True, the interfaces can be intimidating at first, but there is really no reason to feel like that when there are so many tutorial videos on YouTube and such a great support community already in place. Stuck? Google your situation and you'll see hundreds of people have already answered the question – you're in good hands with the online communities.

Could 3D design change the way you work with your clients? My advice is to give it a go. Packages like SketchUp are free to use and now run in a browser – there is nothing to lose by having a try.

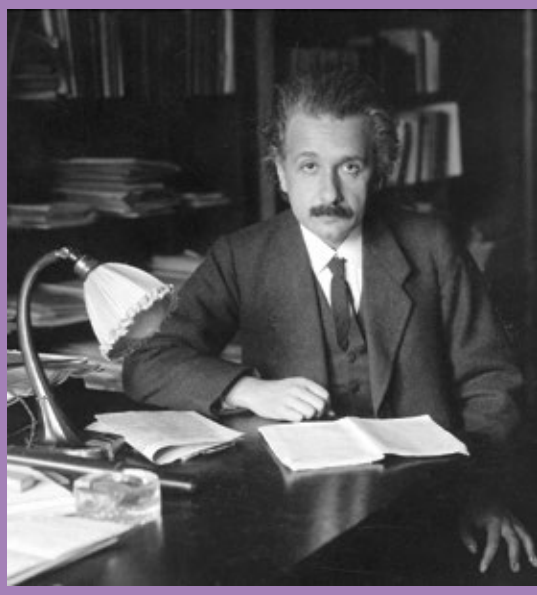
Explore on...
www.sketchup.com

Other packages
https://www.maxon.net/en/cinema-4d
https://www.autodesk.co.uk/products/3ds-max
https://www.autodesk.co.uk/products/maya

Chris Walker
Bright White
www.brightwhiteltd.co.uk

Write Track

Did you Hear the One About...



Creative Commons.

The real Albert Einstein shares a joke at the University of Berlin, 1920.

> *I just found out **Albert Einstein** was a real person! All this time I thought he was a **theoretical physicist**!*

How many jokes do you see at heritage, nature or science visitor sites?

Probably when the interpretation is for children.

We can be a sober lot at times, worried that people will not take our subjects as seriously as they should.

While it is important to be earnest, there can be a wider role for jokes in interpretation. Humour is an important part of the emotions of joy and happiness. Laughter (or groans) can be a prompt for visitors to actively engage with your stories and with each other. Good jokes provoke thought, tell stories and reveal truths about their subject. Their meaning is contextual and works best when relevant to the audience and the subject. Sounds a lot like engaging interpretation?

Here are four key aspects to using humour in interpretation:

- Your subject allows humour to be an appropriate interpretive approach.
- The joke works with your audiences or segments of them.
- Humour is not used to laugh down at any individual or sector of society (except maybe the joke teller).
- The joke interprets part of your story rather than just being for entertainment or standalone.

Let's unpack the joke above, which is a word-play pun, with an element of self-depreciation, comprising a set-up and punchline.

The set-up is the joke's premise, which leads the reader or listener to anticipate something. This set-up uses the name of a well-known real person and then creates anticipation with the claim that the teller has just found out he's real.

If your audience doesn't know who Einstein is, then they will not get the joke. Context and relevance are important.

The second line is the punchline, playing on the use of the word 'theoretical'. It introduces the concept of theoretical physics as a result.

It packs a lot into 19 words!

The Einstein joke works as a way to introduce a person and a subject, part of your interpretive layering. It may leave your audience asking a question – what is theoretical physics? You can go on to expand upon these ideas.

Here's another example, or should I say, have you heard the one about different temperature scales?

> *Did you know that Swedish astronomer Anders **Celsius** died in 1744 aged 43? His rival Daniel **Fahrenheit** was convinced Anders was really **109**.*

And it's good night from me.

Bill Bevan
Engage Editor

Best-Practice Guidelines

In this issue, we put the spotlight on our Interpretive Writing guideline, written by James Carter, FAHI.

You will probably need to write or oversee the writing of interpretive text at some point in your work. This best-practice guide is the ultimate introduction to what you need to know, whether your words will be seen or heard.

It begins with what good interpretive writing can do for you. You are then invited to ask yourself three questions before putting pen to paper.

Why are you writing? What is your sense of purpose and how will it offer your audience something they want.

Who's going to read it? Think about the people who are going to read your words.

What are you going to write about? Define the idea you'd like your audience to think about, the effect you'd like to have and then choose stories and facts to achieve that.

The main part of the guide comprises 10 key points to take on board to achieve successful interpretive writing. There are also a couple of grammar nerd's notes and advice on working with the designer.

If you would like to find out what these 10 tips are, you can read and download the guideline from the AHI website. As a member you can register or log-in to the website to access best-practice guidelines under Professional Development in the Resources tab.

Interpretive Writing, James Carter, FAHI
AHI Best-Practice Guideline 7, July 2020

Read on...
You can read and download the full version of Interpretive Writing and all our best-practice guidelines – http://bit.ly/3ESodlW

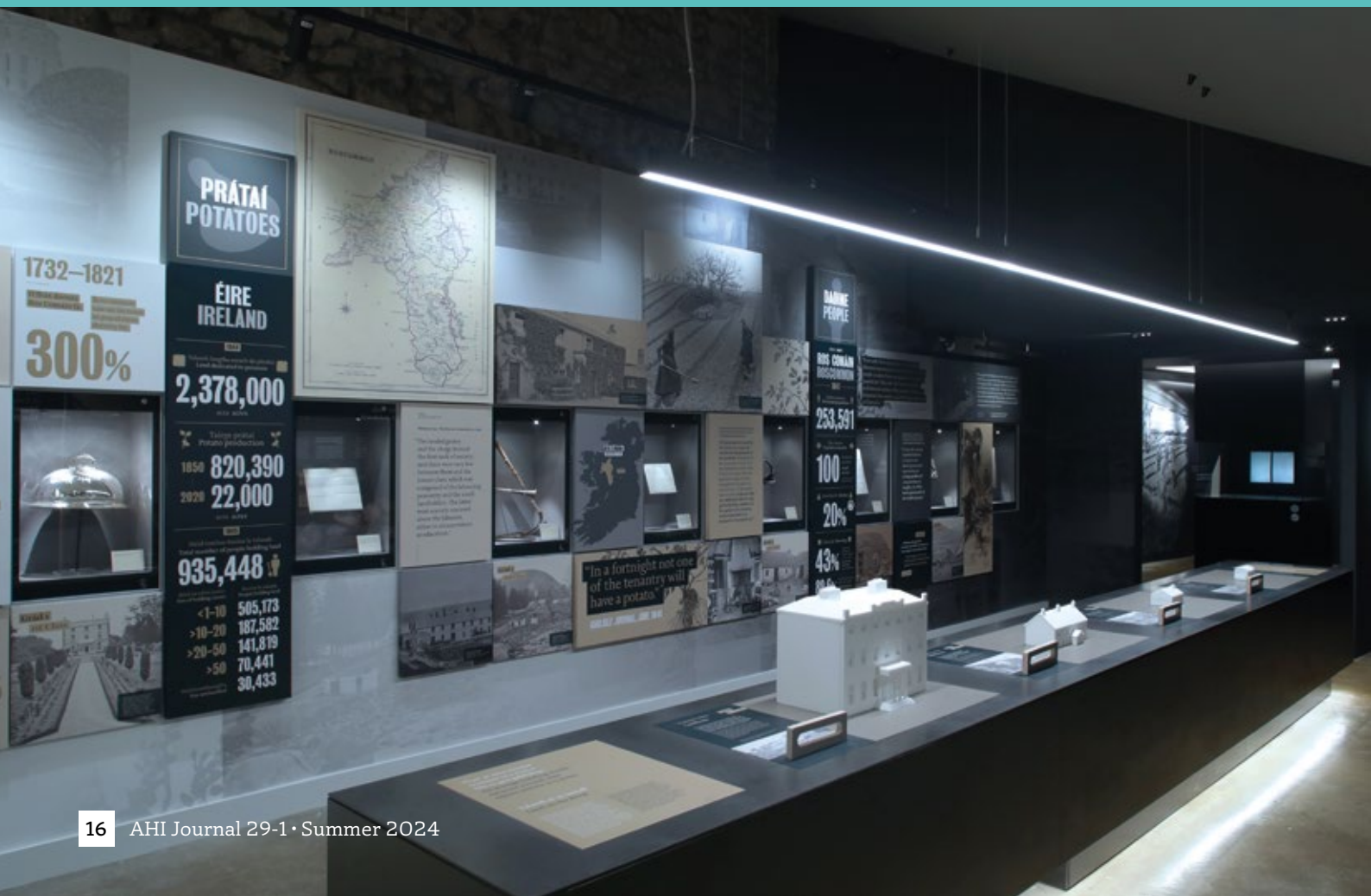
Good interpretive writing helps visitors think about places, objects or events in new ways.

Embedding Emotion in Interpretation

As interpreters, we are all used to striving for empathy and engagement through emotions that will leave a lasting effect on our audiences and perhaps even influence their behaviour going forward. But when your subject is as emotive and harrowing as the Great Irish Famine, how do we balance the sombre realities of this seminal period in Irish history in a way that resonates with the emotional sensitivities, attention spans and social consciousness of visitors today?

An Gorta Mór, the Great Famine, lasted for over seven years, beginning in 1845. The loss of most of the population's main food source, the potato crop, to blight was the root cause for these shocking statistics: one million people died from hunger and disease and another million emigrated, most commonly to England, the US and Canada. In a country with a population of only around eight million at the time, these losses had a devastating and long-lasting impact.

Within the National Famine Museum at Strokestown Park, County Roscommon, we planned and developed a contemporary visitor experience, a significant step change to a gallery-after-gallery approach. We worked hard to create spaces that evolved throughout the experience, keeping this historic period relevant to a new generation, avoiding cliché and emphasising relatability.



Four contrasting home models, from the 'big house' to a labourer's mud hut.

Sombre showcasing of the Cloonahee petition, illuminated and narrated in this intimate space.

The Strokestown Estate, which also contains the house and gardens, is managed by the Irish Heritage Trust and owned by the Westward Group. It was through owner Jim Callery's personal interest in the archive of the estate when he purchased it that a huge number of unique archival materials relating to the Strokestown estate and his own native townland of Cloonahee came to light. This archive of 55,000 documents and objects collected over a 300-year period underpinned the visitor journey throughout the museum and gave an authenticity to the emotional experience.

Placing People at the Heart of the Experience

Relatability was a huge motivator for us. People's lives, in the western world at least, are now far removed from the realities of 19th century rural life and many will luckily never know what it means to be truly starved of food, to be evicted, or to emigrate with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. We were keen to provide touchpoints between people then and now that everyone could relate to, for example interpreting their housing, working life, diets and family life.

Direct quotes and eyewitness accounts from the time formed the backbone of our approach. Personal items such as a shard of mirror and a silver tray were juxtaposed to reveal their significance to their respective owners, contrasting the possessions of those who had and those who had not.

One of the star objects was the Cloonahee Petition, whose chance discovery by Jim Callery led to the conservation of the estate and initial establishment of the museum. Written by the residents of the townland to their absentee landlord, it described in clear and personal detail the despair of the estate's inhabitants, ending with the chilling, 'We will not turn to violence unless pressed to by hunger.'

In the course of planning, this document's location changed from being at the end of the visitor journey to being in the middle, becoming one of several focal points to the emotive experience

Our interpretation presents an inclusive, balanced and nuanced view of the struggles faced by all people of the time and to which people today can relate.

rather than a culmination. The artefact was supported by a narrowing gallery space framed by large-scale black and white illustrations of some of the characters visitors had met earlier on in their journey.

Recognising that presenting the letter in an isolated way without context was not the way to emotionally connect with visitors, we recorded an actor from the local area speaking the words as a light illuminated them on the page (a facsimile, on account of the real artefact's fragility). Our first listen to this recording, alongside the project's Historic Advisory Panel, brought a few shivers down the spine even for the people who knew its contents very well. They had all read the letter multiple times, but when voiced by a local person, a whole new personal connection and perspective was given to the words on the page.

Our interpretation presents an inclusive, balanced and nuanced view of the struggles faced by all people of the time and to which people today can relate. Visitors first encounter the estate's owner Denis Mahon in a dinner party scene drained of colour, as his shadow paces the room and it is revealed that he has inherited enormous debt, along with the huge estate.

Tension is built around the relationship between landlord and tenants throughout the museum. We did this through spatial design, intensification of the colour palette but also with direct quotes culminating in the local priest's words of 'Worse than Cromwell and yet he lives' in relation to Denis Mahon, who was murdered the next day, possibly by one of his own tenants.

Mahon's murder is interpreted by AV through four very different characters, each bringing their own perspective based on archival sources, sensitive display of the potential murder weapon and questioning how much we really know about why Denis Mahon was murdered.

The Tools in our Toolbox

Careful use of colour, light, materiality and spatial design were hugely important in subconsciously influencing the visitors' emotional journey throughout the whole museum. The use of tactile materials such as stone walls, panels, glass, metal, and raw and blackened timber, as well as dramatic lighting challenge visitors' normal expectations of a museum, stirring all the senses at different points.

In the first gallery in the museum – the former stables – visitors are surprised to be greeted by a huge overhanging wooden sculpture, inspired by the US National Memorial for Peace and Justice, populated with illustrated figures that visitors encounter throughout the museum.

This forbidding structure is echoed in a later gallery, where an angled canopy interprets the space available to six people on a transatlantic journey. We deliberately steered away from creating a pastiche of the 'coffin ship' bunks, instead using the design of a canopy structure to challenge people's perceptions and affect them physically, mentally and emotionally. Interrupted horizontal sight lines within the canopy, a rolling soundscape and subtly pulsing light sheets all contribute to unsettling individuals and a resulting 'motion sickness' experience. This helped to physically encapsulate a sense of how unpleasant the weeks-long journey would have been for people at the time.

Colours are used to powerful effect throughout, from full colour illustrations pre-famine, to the line drawings in faded colour and monotones as the story progresses and life drains away from the estate. In later galleries, these colours are punctuated by strong and earthy colours for emphasis.

Responses to colour can be subjective but our choice of red, most commonly associated with anger or danger, juxtaposed with the description of Denis Mahon's daughter's wedding to reveal the inequalities of life at the time.

Courtesy Failte Ireland

Visitors immersed in the emotive experience at The National Famine Museum, Strokestown Park.

In contrast, within the zone about Denis Mahon's murder we changed tack and used black and a cool-toned blue colour to examine the event dispassionately rather than overdoing the emotive element.

Being Mindful of our Audiences

We were mindful of being inclusive to international visitors (particularly English and American visitors) who come to Strokestown seeking a connection with their ancestors, and were aware of the sensitivity of language and description particularly around the English government's response to the famine. The chosen tone of voice was developed carefully and approved by stakeholders before we worked collaboratively with the copywriter to develop the copy across the museum.

Feedback

The last zone of the museum allows visitors to decompress from their emotional journey, with light colours, a window overlooking the estate's woods and a comment wall. Many responses reference the visitor's emotional reaction to the subject, as well as how it has made them feel about their own lives and families: 'We should never forget. Their story is our story.'

"Connecting with our Irish roots has been quite overwhelming. Their struggles allowed us to be here today."

Online reviews have praised the 'excellent, balanced educational experience'.

"This museum is compelling. The Irish potato famine was horrific, and that horror is captured by this museum. The economic discrepancies between the small number of wealthy landowners and their tenant farmers is captured and explained in painful detail. The exhibits are extremely well done. The audio guide (included with admission) is excellent."

Finally, if we would do anything differently in terms of the visitors' emotional journey, it would be to use fewer words. The content is succinctly written, there's just a lot of it and many primary source quotes. While this of course will appeal to some visitors (and subject experts) we are keen to continue exploring other ways of embedding emotion within interpretation.

Visit...
https://strokestownpark.ie/national-famine-museum/

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All the Feels – More than a Meme

Emotional Mapping: Plotting Sense of Place

'Feeling maps' survey and map people's emotional responses to their environment as they walk through the streets of a particular urban area... [they] enable researchers to share a participant's position and views of the landscape as he or she articulates emotions and memories related to those views.

Y. Rofé & A. Rosenberg Weinreb, 2013

I was curious to know why town planners and architects have long been exploring the concept of emotional mapping, particularly in relation to neighbourhood planning and urban design, but few interpretive planners seem to have taken up the idea. I became intrigued by the idea of mapping a site visit through focusing on emotional responses to spaces and places. So, when opportunities arose, I began experimenting, using the responses to reflect on visitor experiences and to plan potential interpretive messages and interventions with site teams.

Many sites can be enigmatic – consider the power of mystery and imagination.

An Insightful Additional Tool

As a practitioner, I found the specific focus on recording my feelings, and the feelings of site teams and visitors in different spaces and places added a further dimension to tried and trusted visitor experience planning methods.

It has led to some game-changing conversations with colleagues and clients, and added value and depth to defining and articulating intangible values and sense of place. I have now used this approach successfully at a range of sites, from archaeological monuments to a cathedral and an open air museum, and conclude that 'feeling maps' can play a valuable and complementary role in capturing the distinctive qualities of places.

Capturing Special Qualities

This was reinforced when Jo Scott and I were invited to undertake emotional mapping at an internationally significant battlefield site. Our brief was to augment the many technical and analytical reports that describe its importance with a deeper and more emotive exploration of spirit of place. The aim was to bring a fresh perspective to communicating the site's special qualities.

The challenge at any battlefield site is to balance emotional responses with an understanding of the authenticity of the landscape. They are places of memorial, pilgrimage and cultural identity, often with a contemporary resonance that has complex, multiple narratives. How could we help the team unpack all of this?

Emotional Mapping in Practise

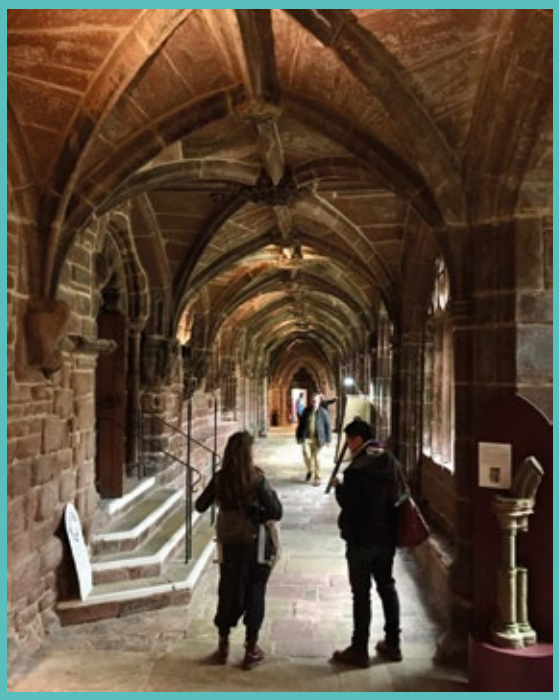
We facilitated a process that you can adapt and undertake at any heritage site, either alone or with a colleague, and ideally by engaging site teams and visitors in the process. The essential element is to encourage participants to 'take off their practical heads' and instead use all their senses and think about their changing emotional responses as they move around a site. This is much harder than it sounds!

Asking the Right Questions

"The battlefield in the landscape is like a clearing in the forest" (workshop participant)

We asked the team – all involved in visitor engagement and management – to work in pairs as they explored the site. We invited them to record how they felt as they moved to different parts of the battlefield and to focus on their senses. We encouraged them to note their thoughts and feelings using whatever tools they felt comfortable with such as annotating paper maps; filming and photos; or recording comments on their phones.

Jo Scott mapping her responses to the battlefield exploration.



When doing an emotional audit, pause frequently and pay close attention to how you feel; reflect on, or discuss later, what knowledge you bring with you.

Specifically, we asked them to:

- Map emotions connected with the battlefield and those connected with memorial, to see if they were the same.
- Note if there were place(s) that spoke most strongly of the battle, or whether it was the movement across the landscape that evoked a sense of history and past events.
- Mark the place(s) with the strongest sense of memorial, and whether they felt the need to behave differently there and why.
- Consider whether the terrain and the weather affected their feelings.
- Record things that impacted (positively or negatively) on their connectivity with the place, and whether anything could amplify the sense of connection.

Finding Common Threads

"The quiet landscape; the weight of history" (workshop participant)

We gathered afterwards for small group discussions, then came together to share and consolidate the mapping insights, using these new perspectives to collectively develop landscape values and spirit-of-place themes. For many, the combination of experiencing the distinctive landscape elements (topography, views, vegetation and weather) and the authenticity of location gave them a powerful sense of continuity and feelings of 'a direct link to people in the past'.

"History whispers here" (workshop participant)

By focusing on their own emotional responses to different parts of the site, the participants were able to compare their individual findings and find common threads that expressed special qualities. By recording feelings of calmness, they also identified, for example, how and where the peacefulness of memorial could be disrupted, and considered ways this could be addressed. Participants tagged different emotions to specific places as they moved around the site, which were collated into annotated 'feeling maps' that helped discussion about site management. Linking responses to visitor management challenges led the team to consider zoning areas, to ensure the mediated landscape retained an even stronger sense of authenticity (reflecting how it was on the day of the battle). All this helped draw out themes and special qualities across different parts of the site, alongside practical solutions for managing the landscape and visitors.

The process works equally well for interiors. We've found it very useful when considering interpretation for historic spaces where, for example, qualities of light and responses to different smells can be captured. We regard it as an insightful approach to complement and inform traditional visitor experience planning techniques.

Engagement with gallery spaces and objects reveal specific insights when emotional responses are focused on.

Emotional mapping is a useful tool for consultation – it can draw out special qualities of place and help with visitor management.

How Can I use this Audit Approach?

- As a complementary tool to your interpretive planning process. Even if you choose not to share the results formally, weave the findings into your analysis.
- Site managers can use it to explore new and different perspectives, in the same way a sensory audit can help with understanding different visitor needs.
- As a useful tool for operational teams when planning routes and guided walks, and in developing new ideas for more immersive and sensory experiences.
- For stimulating qualitative consultation with visitor groups.

We encourage you to try emotional mapping, to explore how narratives of space can unfold, using atmosphere and imagination, and capturing intangible qualities that engage and connect.

Read on...

Rofé, Y. & Rosenberg Weinreb, A. 2013. Mapping Feeling: An Approach to the Study of Emotional Response to Built Environment and Landscape. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 30(2), 127.

Watson, S. 2018. Emotional engagement in heritage sites and museums – Ghosts of the past and imagination in the present. *A Museum Studies Approach to Heritage*, 441–456.

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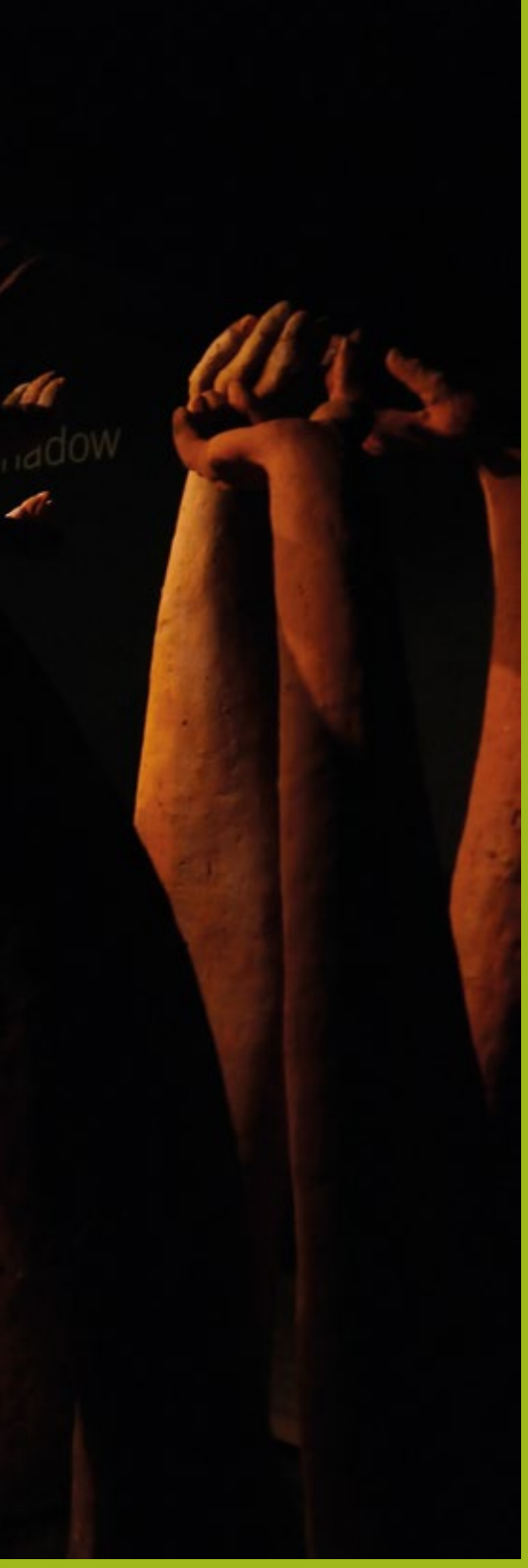
Sharing Stories of the Kindness of Strangers

One of the great things about interpretation is that the more you do, the more interesting and complex the issues it raises become. If, like me, you have a long career in the business, you may hit some that make you question your assumptions and practice.

That happened to me 1916. I was in Mechelen, Belgium at an Interpret Europe Conference on 'The Future of Europe'. Among the museums and memorials of the First World War, I was leading a strand of the conference on interpretation and peace.

Backstory: Why me?

I had been involved in interpretation for more than 35 years and had a pretty solid grasp of what interpretation can achieve. I understood that interpreters are in the business of telling stories. I had spoken about this internationally, advocating the power of stories to influence understandings and relationships and highlighting their value in exploring human history and the natural world. I knew that stories work on the imagination and emotions as well as the intellect. Importantly I recognised that when interpreters choose stories, that is a significant and serious responsibility.



'Falls the Shadow' by Helen Pollack, Passchendaele Museum.

I had been drawn into interpretation of peace and conflict by a combination of personal interest and coincidence. Working intensively in the Republic of Ireland for a decade had introduced me to the challenges and sensitivities of interpreting contested history, oppression and recent conflicts.

By 1912, with the centenary of the First World War approaching, I was working for military organisations and thinking about how that anniversary might be interpreted in a modern, united Europe. I saw it as a pivotal moment, a great opportunity to celebrate how far the continent had come in 100 years and for interpreters to help shape that narrative.

> *Paxson identified that whereas violence can be measured numerically in, for instance, deaths, casualties, and events, measuring peace is more about relationship dynamics.*

In fact, in the UK the 1914–1918 centenary played out alongside the Scottish and Brexit referenda and was referenced in both. Interpreters played a small part in shaping the narrative compared to politicians, print and broadcast media and artists. When I arrived in Mechelen to focus on interpretation and peace, the UK and Europe were noticeably more divided, and I was considerably less confident in my sense of peace and unity.

Defining Peace

I found 'peace' surprisingly difficult to research. My starting point, based on recollections of my conflict resolution and peace-building training with the Society of Friends (Quakers) some decades ago, was that 'peace is not simply the absence of conflict', a widely used quotation attributed to Spinoza (1670) and widely repeated including famously by Mahatma Gandhi and Ronald Reagan. It is an interesting, uncontroversial insight, but not, I felt helpful to interpreters, and needed a more specific, concrete definition, not simply an absence.

I discovered that Margaret Paxson, an anthropologist studying peace, had found the same. Her essay 'What is peace?' argues that peace is harder to think about than violence which is more quantifiable and recognisable. She points out that 'there is immensely more contemporary social science on violence than there is on peace' and 'most… research that says it is about peace is really about conflict'. I believe this is also true of interpretation.

Paxson identified that whereas violence can be measured numerically in, for instance, deaths, casualties, and events, measuring peace is more about relationship dynamics. She described this: 'You just look into the faces of real people and the connections they make or don't make with each other, and the stories they tell or don't tell and the ways they decide or don't decide to treat the stranger as one of their own.' To me, this said that choosing stories was even more important than I had thought.

Her research into measurable attributes of peace included looking at 'peace enclaves', communities in former Yugoslavia which had avoided violence during both the Second World War and the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, and in the Plateau Vivarais-Lignon in France where villagers rescued thousands of Jews from the Holocaust. Her conclusions highlighted the importance of strong and deep community networks and, in a phrase that jumped out at me, Paxson said these communities 'shared stories about the kindness of strangers, faithfully passed down'. I recognised that as familiar territory: sharing stories in many ways is what my work was about.

Passchendaele Museum. It is easier to display the objects of conflict than of peace.

My practice involved finding the people who 'owned' the story, recognising them as the ones best placed to tell it. Paxson was suggesting something different: telling stories of people who are strange to us and doing it faithfully. I knew this would require deep listening, trust and a greater ability to step beyond the limits of our own culture and life experience.

This felt challenging but surely highly relevant to interpreters. I had found my big question and a focus worthy of discussion at an international workshop.

The Workshop

Workshops are great spaces for exploring ideas and I was fortunate that this one attracted a group of experienced interpreters from many countries.

Paxson's paper had given me two excellent questions:

- Do we as interpreters choose stories of conflict rather than peace?
- With a definition of peace based on strengthening networks and sharing stories of the kindness of strangers, how could heritage interpretation contribute to building peace?

The first question was uncomfortable, but easy. We decided that yes, as interpreters we did choose to tell stories of conflict – for good pragmatic and professional reasons. We need our interpretation to appeal to wide audiences, who may be seeking entertainment as much as information. We know that compelling stories, told in engaging, ideally participatory, ways, are vital in gaining and holding attention. Conflict offers us many great ingredients. It is often place-based and involves dramatic and evocative action stories with strong characters. It can be portrayed in many media and include debate, role play, dressing up, playing with weapons, and looking at artefacts. Of course, we, as well as our audiences, are drawn to it.

Moreover, sometimes our organisations were the result of struggle, or memorials to conflict, and telling those stories were central to their mission. Accounts of shared hardships and battles could be important in group identity. We concluded that interpretation was participating in and possibly contributing to a view of history that focused on conflict, and that would be hard to change.

The second question was challenging but we were on surer ground. The discussions highlighted the role that community interpretation can play in strengthening local networks. Workshop participants could also think of a few interpretation projects that had told the stories of outsiders or strangers. Even if our projects do not usually focus on peacebuilding as a goal, we confirmed that we do have relevant skills. Viewed through this lens, the stories we choose and who we involve in sharing them with become crucial.

My Last Question – and Next Steps

I had one more question, for the workshop and for myself. A large part of my work as an interpreter had focused on hidden and untold stories, often from minority or marginalised groups. I was proud of my role in helping those people tell their stories. I still am. But I began to consider whether in doing that, I had contributed to creating an echo chamber where notions of 'Us' (together on the inside) and 'Them' (elsewhere) were reinforced.

In my final comments I suggested that, if we were looking for interpretation that fostered peace, it was not enough to have systems for helping people to tell their stories, we also needed ways of developing interpretation that enables people to listen to the stories of strangers. I wondered what that would look like.

Several years later, I am still wondering and only a few tentative answers are emerging. As with any change, I suggest we need to start with ourselves and our organisations. We need to become people and organisations that 'strangers', however we define them, can trust with their stories. We have to create strong networks that involve frequent contact with people different from us.

Fundamentally we have to be prepared to listen and change, so that we can represent these 'strangers' and their stories faithfully. Following Paxson's advice our sites, institutions and practice should model 'treating stranger as one of our own'. There has been considerable progress on this step in the last two decades, particularly in museums and art galleries, but it is not universal.

Then, of course we have to bring our audiences with us: a major challenge and stumbling block, especially when the heritage and countryside sectors are under such intense financial pressure. We have seen that uncovering unspoken stories, for instance of colonialism and slavery, is contentious and can evoke strong responses from those who feel their own stories are under attack. They too need to be heard and have a secure place in our networks.

Understanding that the stories we choose to tell can be used to wage peace or build conflict brings home that we bear a heavy ethical responsibility. We have much to learn about how our work can strengthen peaceful coexistence. I believe this is an important and urgent challenge of our time and that our skills as interpreters can be harnessed to the task. I hope to focus on this in the next stage of my work.

Read on...

Cross, S. June 2013. Citizens of the world in 2014-2018: Interpretation in the front line. Proceedings of Interpret Europe/National Association of Interpretation Conference, Sigtuna, Sweden.

Cross, S. July 2011. Cultural differences and interpretation for international visitors. Proceedings of Interpret Europe Conference on '*European diversity, a treasure-house to challenge heritage interpreters*', Freiburg, Germany.

Paxson, M. December 2012. What is peace? https://aeon.co/essays/waging-peace-is-much-more-than-ending-war

Understanding that the stories we choose to tell can be used to wage peace or build conflict brings home that we bear a heavy ethical responsibility.

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Making their mark: women silversmiths from Oman (19 October 2023 – 17 December 2023).

Experimental Spaces

Introduction

On 17 December 2023 a small display at the British Museum closed to the public ('Making their mark: women silversmiths from Oman'). This was the seventieth and last free exhibit, sponsored by the Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun, to take place in Room 3. Over the last 18 years or so, Room 3 has proved the value of having a modest space to experiment and innovate new approaches to curation, design and interpretation.

From 2005 onwards there were four displays annually, one of which was always related to Japan. Each display was evaluated, initially by an external agency, then in-house. Recently, the displays have been evaluated with the support of a team of trained evaluation volunteers.

The average dwell time in Room 3 is typically about three minutes, which focuses the mind on how to attract visitors' attention and to communicate key ideas impactfully in a short amount of time. Each Room 3 display generated useful learning to feed into bigger charged-for exhibitions, and new permanent gallery displays.

I'll focus here on two displays which illustrate how these exhibitions have had an institutional impact.

Samurai to Manga: Japan across the centuries (15 December 2005 – 8 February 2006)

"It is different to what I am used to... it is not how I would expect an exhibition to be in the British Museum, but it is an interesting and welcome surprise."

(public feedback)

'Samurai to Manga' was one of the earliest Room 3 displays and arguably most impactful in changing the approach to

Samurai to Manga: Japan across the centuries (15 December 2005 – 8 February 2006).

interpreting permanent galleries at the museum. The idea was a simple one – there were three pairs of objects, one object in each pair was more historic, the other more contemporary. A modern robot, for example, was paired with an 18th century automaton. The display sought to highlight continuities between the past and the present in Japanese culture. Although juxtaposing objects in this way was innovative from the BM at the time, the most long-lasting legacy of the display was linked to interpretation.

"A bit like a leaflet compared to a book, it is alright, it tells you something but not much."

(public feedback)

The objects had no labels. Instead, a panel was placed between each pair of objects. Evaluation showed, perhaps not that surprisingly, that this was not a very effective approach. A high number of visitors ignored the panels. These findings prompted debate which led to three conclusions for free displays:

1. Visitors tend to go to objects first, particularly those that stimulate their curiosity.
2. Interpretive panels that are not in a direct relationship with objects have low attracting power and are not very effective.
3. Interpretation needs to be in a direct relationship with the object, starting with the basic points visitors want to know and then build out to a bigger story.

These principles were used to develop a largely panel-free approach to interpretation in a later refresh of the Japan galleries (Room 92–94). These displays were structured around a relatively small number of gateway objects, objects designed to attract visitors' attention and introduce an important story. Evaluation of the Japan gallery pre and post-gateway objects confirmed that the approach is more effective. The gateway object approach has subsequently been used in a large number of redisplays and refreshes: 'Medieval Europe' (Room 40–41); 'Money' (Room 68); 'South Asia and China' (Room 33); 'Japan' (Room 92–94); 'Islamic world galleries' (Room 42–43). Evaluation has shown that it is an effective strategy for attracting visitors and deepening engagement.

Tutankhamun Reimagined (1 Dec 2022 – 29 Jan 2023).

The Warren Cup: Sex and society in ancient Greece and Rome (11 May–2 July 2006)

"It is quite provocative for a museum – that is good."

(public feedback)

The British Museum acquired a remarkable Roman silver cup in 1999, a cup that takes its name from its first owner in modern times, Edward Perry Warren. The vessel is decorated with two beautifully naturalistic, and sexually explicit, scenes of male-male lovemaking. For most of the 20th century the cup was considered too explicit to display, and it was denied entry to the United States in the 1950s on grounds of obscenity. Following the British Museum's acquisition of the vessel, it was placed on display in the permanent galleries in 'Rome: City and Empire' (Room 70) where it has remained ever since, more or less.

In 2006 the Warren Cup became the sole focus of a Room 3 display, allowing the cup to be displayed and interpreted in more depth and with more nuance than possible in the older permanent gallery with a 70-word object label. Displaying such a sexually explicit object in such a high profile way, in such a prominent location, was a bold move for the time. The exhibition allowed the modern history and significance of the cup to explored, and other objects from the collection addressing same-sex love and desire in other cultures were highlighted graphically. The exhibition attracted a high level of visitation and was very positively received. There were no complaints, and indeed the display drew attention externally to the potential of the museum's collection to offer new LGBTQ+ global histories from deep history to the present day.

For most of the 20th century the cup was considered too explicit to display, and it was denied entry to the United States in the 1950s on grounds of obscenity.

"... it celebrates beauty and history and research all at the same time and I have loved every bit of that here."

(public feedback)

The interpretive approach developed for this display inspired the first LGBTQ+ trails of the British Museum, which in turn inspired Professor Richard B Parkinson to write *A Little Gay History – Desire and Diversity Across the World* (2013). That publication in turn inspired the 'Desire, love, identity: exploring LGBTQ histories' exhibition at the British Museum during 2017, which subsequently toured to five venues around the UK (2018–19). This exemplifies how a small experimental display can be a catalyst for change with much greater institutional impact than might be expected.

Overarching Thoughts

"I'm really thrilled to see an object at the centre with all these different themes being explored. It's how people learn best."

"Very moving, very touching, very powerful."

(public feedback)

It is impossible to fully convey the learning that has been generated through 70 extremely varied small displays over a period of 18 years. Room 3's object-in-focus philosophy arguably inspired the British Museum/BBC Radio 4 collaboration, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, a project which had extraordinary reach globally for over a decade. More recent displays have addressed colonial collecting: ('Solomon Islands: Collecting Histories'). Others have included experiments in co-curation ('Rubbish and Us'), showcased a collaboration with Google to use digital technology to draw out personal stories from Buddhist sculptures ('Virtual pilgrimage: reimagining the Great Shrine of Amaravati'), and displayed vibrant street art inspired by Tutankhamun sprayed direct onto the walls by Cairo-based artist Nofal O ('Tutankhamun Reimagined').

Each of the 70 Room 3 displays has been evaluated and each of those reports is part of an archive that the interpretation team regularly consults. The big point – which cannot be overstated – is how valuable it has been to have a space that has enabled and encouraged creative, nimble and innovative displays. As the British Museum develops plans for the long-term redisplay of its free permanent galleries over the coming decade, we are extremely fortunate to be able to draw on such a rich archive of evaluation and practice.

Key Learning

- Room 3 has provided a safe space for experimenting. As a free admission space, it didn't matter if some shows had lower visitor figures as there was no loss of income. It is invaluable to have a space where it is OK if things don't work as planned.
- Small displays and experimental exhibits can have big institutional impact. Some of the Room 3 displays led to major innovations and bigger projects.
- Room 3 provided a space for experiments with process as well as content. It provided professional development opportunities for staff who had not curated shows before, and helped others develop project management skills.
- Although most display ideas did come from curators, anyone from the organisation could propose an idea, and success was always the result of collaborative, interdisciplinary teamwork. Good teamwork, allowing different people to bring their skills and insights to the project, was key.
- In a big institution where changing the permanent displays is very expensive and a long-term project, it has been invaluable to have a space where it has been possible to respond quickly to topical events and debates.
- Deeper visitor engagement in Room 3 was easier to achieve with one object, or a small group of objects. Visitors enjoyed having a modest display to focus on, exploring a subject in slightly more depth than usual, but still in a relatively short period of time.
- Some Room 3 displays helped overcome institutional inertia and built confidence about tackling potentially challenging or sensitive issues that the museum had overlooked historically.
- Robust evaluation of exhibits is a powerful tool for influencing key stakeholders. Sharing short impactful summaries of evaluation – with key quotes – has been extremely helpful.

Challenges

- Even with a small project team working at speed in a dedicated space, it was still sometimes challenging to be nimble even in Room 3.
- Implementing changes mid-run due to insights from evaluation was tricky, and only done on very rare occasions. Lots of institutions undertake summative evaluation, but how many actually go back and make changes to a display as a result?
- Room 3 displays typically attracted about 70,000 visitors. Its location meant that it was a little detached from the rest of the displays, and people visited either at the end or start of their visit to the museum. Think carefully about where you locate your experimental space.
- Evaluation is time-consuming and can be expensive – think creatively about how best to do it and how to maximise the impact on key stakeholders and decision makers.
- First-time visitors often expected Room 3 displays to be bigger. We had to work to make sure the marketing proposition matched the visitor experience onsite.

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What Emotions
do Cultural or Heritage Exhibits Stimulate?

In researching this article, I found myself standing next to two elderly ladies viewing pieces of abstract artwork at an exhibition. The ladies were discussing the works and somewhat impolitely, I listened to their conversation. One lady was clearly in raptures over a particular work; she described the vibrancy of the colours, the way in which the lines and blocks merged and helpfully for the purposes of this article, the way she felt about the painting. She was clearly 'captivated' by it. The other lady nodded and smiled supportively to her companion's obvious pleasure at the work in front of them, but as they walked away from the work commented, 'Yes, I liked the colours, but I didn't understand it, what was it supposed to be?'

Emotion is a very personalised response to something we see, read or hear and the type and scale of response can often be framed by the context, the setting and of course by anyone else we are sharing the experience with. This article summarises the breadth of emotions generated by a range of exhibits and in so doing, also attempts to establish whether the emotional trigger from the exhibit might be grouped in any way according to the type of response stimulated.

Sixty groups of visitors were approached at a range of cultural and heritage locations. In terms of their social grouping, 11 were alone; 28 were with a partner and 21 with family and/or friends. A breakdown of the type of location visited is detailed in Table 1 below.

A breakdown of the specific type of exhibit or experience being viewed when their emotional response was recorded is detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 3. What emotions or feelings does the exhibit or experience stimulate?

Positive emotions/feelings (64%)		Negative emotions/feelings (30%)	
Happiness/Pleasure/ Delight	18%	Shock/Sadness/ Stunned/Depressed	15%
Curiosity/Excited/ Wonder	14%	Anger/Frustration/ Annoyance/Disgust	9%
Awareness/ Appreciation/ Understanding	13%	Confusion/ Puzzlement	6%
Surprise/Enchanted/ Nostalgic	11%	**Other responses (6%)**	
Respect/Admiration/ Inspire	8%		

Table 1. Type of location being visited

Heritage site	Museum exhibition	Museum (general)	Gallery (general)
42%	32%	18%	8%

Table 2. Type of exhibit or experience being viewed by the respondent

Object or collection of objects	Personal artefact	Commentary/ living history sounds	Painting/ photograph	Wall-mounted panel
29%	23%	20%	15%	13%

In total, 225 emotional responses were recorded from which eight main groups of themes emerged, which are summarised in Table 3 above. This research only focused on the emotional response of adults and thus the response of any children within family groups was not captured.

The most widely recorded response was one of 'pleasure' and 'delight' in what the visitor had encountered, whilst the second most popular response was one of 'curiosity' suggesting perhaps that the object or artefact being viewed had stimulated the

visitor's interest and potentially the desire to learn more about it or the people and civilisation it represented. By comparison, the most widely recorded 'negative' response was one of 'shock' or 'sadness' based on the personal story being told. This response, although potentially negative, also helps the visitor to establish a deeper connection and understanding with the object or people associated with it.

It is interesting to record how these emotions or feelings were triggered through each visitor's experience of viewing an exhibit; this is presented through the diagrams below.

Happiness/Pleasure/Delight
Associated with: Beauty of the exhibit (26%); craftsmanship of the artefact (24%); human story behind the exhibit (18%); method of display (14%).

Curiosity/Excited/Wonder
Associated with: Craftsmanship of the exhibit (38%); commentary/living history sounds (31%); label (content) for the exhibit (24%); human story behind the exhibit (12%).

Awareness/Appreciation/ Understanding
Associated with: Human story behind the exhibit (16%); authenticity of the object or artefact (12%); imagery associated with the exhibit (8%); label (story) for the exhibit (6%).

Surprise/Enchanted/Nostalgic
Associated with: Craftsmanship of the exhibit (27%); size of the object or artefact (24%); colours of the exhibit (22%); method of display (18%).

Respect/Admiration/Inspire
Associated with: Human story behind the exhibit (32%); object or artefact itself (28%); label (story) for the exhibit (24%); commentary/living history sounds (18%).

In relation to the 'negative' responses

Shock/Sadness/Stunned/Depressed
Associated with: Human story behind the exhibit (42%); exhibit itself (33%); label (content) for the exhibit (23%); commentary /living history sounds (21%).

Anger/Frustration/Annoyance/ Disgust
Associated with: Commentary/living history sounds (37%); human story behind the exhibit (28%); label (content & story) for the exhibit (24%); imagery associated with the exhibit (16%).

Confusion/Puzzlement
Associated with: Exhibit itself (18%); label (story) for the exhibit (16%); human story behind the exhibit (14%); commentary/ living history sounds (11%).

What broad themes potentially emerge from this study?

1. *The human story behind the object or artefact featured strongly*. Reminding us of the importance of 'telling a good story', but also of making personalised connections with your visitors wherever possible, notably when you are bringing people 'to life' for a modern generation of visitors. The use of 'first person' stories clearly play a key role here and was mentioned as being 'revealing' by visitors.

2. *Sounds or an audio commentary also featured strongly*. A soundtrack to the past or an audio explanation also clearly play a key role in helping to establish and strengthen connections, although care should always be taken to ensure that through the commentary a 'scripted' visitor response (be that positive or negative) is not being too heavily promoted.

3. *Labelling of exhibits appeared to play an important role*. It is worth reflecting on the content of an exhibit's label. Those which guided the visitor on what to look at, or which posed specific questions for them to consider, were mentioned favourably by visitors in this study.

4. *The craftsmanship of the exhibit* also appeared important in establishing a positive emotional response and so careful attention to the design and display of the exhibit, as well as the associated text used, should be undertaken. Colour, form and texture were all important components mentioned by visitors here.

5. *Authenticity did not appear to play a key role in developing an emotional connection*. It was only mentioned in relation to 'I appreciate seeing the real thing'. It is interesting therefore to speculate whether visitors take it for granted that objects and artefacts on display are authentic or whether the story developed through them is more important that the object or artefact in its own right.

In reflecting on the design of experiences and the stimulation of an emotional response, care should always be taken to ensure that any visitor response created is genuine and not overly, or too strongly shaped by shrewd use of language, imagery, colour or other design techniques.

Finally, it is important to recognise that this piece of research merely presents a 'snapshot' generated from visitors viewing one exhibit and therefore does not represent the full 'emotional' picture. At no point was 'indifference' to the exhibit recorded nor did 'experience fatigue' emerge as a response, both of which might well have been recorded had the researcher followed visitors through a longer period.

Coming in Winter 2024: Stories

Dr Philip Ryland, MAHI
teaches tourism and is also Associate Dean (Student Experience) in the Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University.

Past Issues

Emotions... you can't live without them

Once again, we take an 'in-theme' snapshot of several past AHI Journals. Remember, the members' Journal archive is a treasury of ideas, discussion, and experience to provide inspiration for your next project. Emotions... they define us as a sentient species. But they exist as a spectrum: at one end 'anger', at the other 'empathy'. In between there is everything from love to hate, euphoria to fear, sympathy to enmity and no doubt many more, for emotions are also highly personal.

First-hand accounts of emotional events are gold dust. As a hardened interpretive planner, I remember 'welling up' on my first visit to a remote highland clearance village, armed with the testimonies of those who loved, laughed, cried and died in the township over millennia.

Michael Glen's article (Spring 2010 issue, vol.15, no.1) 'Words That Sing and Dance' admirably captures the emotional response of the interpretist to such sites.

James Carter's polemic (Spring 2012 issue, vol.17, no.1) 'Play up! Play Up! And Play the Game' explores the emotional tribalism that surrounds many sports... and so much else in society! James reminds us that facing up to our demons – our emotions – means getting involved, that perhaps 'a lesson for all interpretation... is that intellectual understanding will always be empty without a meaningful personal (emotional?) experience to give it some sticking power'.

In **Sam Ham's** essay 'A little psychology goes a long way' (Autumn 2013 issue, v18, no.2) he effectively challenges us, as interpretists, to channel our emotions with his reflections on how an understanding of psychology is 'pretty hard to top'. Sam's essay pushes us to look beyond Tilden, to discover for ourselves 'reasonable, evidence-based approaches to interpretation'.

Victoria Harrison and **Helen Moore** in their article (Autumn 2014 issue, v19, no.2) 'Where was God during the First World War?' explain the challenges faced by York Minster's response to commemorating the First World War through an exhibition and educational programmes. In pursuing their interpretive plan, York Minster's endeavours are a reminder of Confucius (early Chinese interpretist?) – 'I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, [but] I do and I understand' – an even stronger reminder that the emotions contained within grief, comfort and memorial are universal.

Bob Jones, MBE, HFAHI
BlueSkyBlueWater Interpretative Planning Consultancy

Coming
in our next issue...

"Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form."

Jean Luc Godard, screenwriter and film director

Are you sitting comfortably? Issue 29-2, Winter 2024 will be about storytelling.

We have a range of case studies that show the use of storytelling techniques in interpretation from creative writing in national parks to community story writing in woodlands and use of narrative in trails and exhibitions.

Interpretation Research Lab will see the launch of an annual contribution to the Journal by the London College of Communication as well as the results of Philip Ryland's survey, where he asks visitors, 'What makes a good story?'

Eric Langham picks up the Provocative Fellow baton from Susan Cross. He will explore the power of stories to captivate and embolden audiences and ask if telling stories is enough to inspire meaningful connections and shape the future.

We will also review the AHI Conference in Glasgow and have the usual regular features.

Affordable
Interactivity

Software born in the National Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa, is now helping museums and galleries around the world create their own interactive experiences.

"We've worked with museums for the last 30 years creating bespoke digital experiences. We know how expensive they can be, and we know how effectively a simple interactive object label with great stories can engage visitors." Curio Publisher CEO and Co-Founder Emily Loughnan is very enthusiastic about helping make technology more affordable, and more agile.

"We've created this software so anyone can make an interactive; you don't need technical skills. You just need a story to tell."

Curio Publisher is free to create an account, make an interactive and publish it to a touchscreen. You can do that using the free trial licence you get when you sign up, and if you want to stay on the free version for a single interactive, you can.

Curio is ideal for:

- A single object with stories attached to various details.
- A display case with many objects, and a story to tell on each one.
- A map of an area with what's on today or highlights to see.
- A menu of videos to watch.

Visit our website to find out more, see what others are creating, and start your free account.

www.curiopublisher.com

CURIO

Emily Loughnan is an experienced digital producer.
Email her to ask any questions or set up a live demonstration for your team:
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