5D Interpretation Tool: Content Generation and Development

Kathleen Hanley

2014 Harvard Summer Practicum Student

Peabody Essex Museum

**Project Summary**

During my 2014 Summer Practicum, I worked on the 5D Interpretation Tool--a device that seeks to “improve and enhance the way information about works of art reaches museum-going communities”. Working in conjunction with the five other members of the 5D team (Juliette Fritsch, Victoria Glazomitsky, Kathy Fredrickson, Jim Olsen, and Anna Foucher) I was tasked with preparing the written and visual content for upcoming user testing. My project can loosely be divided into three stages: reading the research collected by previous student interns and expanding upon it, using the research to write content ‘stories’, editing these stories and adding visual content and supplementary links. This report will serve as both a summary of my work on the project and a review of this content development strategy.

**Research**

Because the project seeks to engage PEM patrons in an innovative way, it demands that the content generated extend beyond the reach of traditional curatorial records. Therefore, PEM asked five doctoral students to research the 5 chosen objects, instructing them to think laterally and research exploratively. Despite this instruction, the content they developed--which was then handed to me when I joined the project--was expected information born of and written through the lense of academia. My first step was to comb through their reports, extract what interesting content I could, and use the rest as a jumping-off point toward more tangential and more interesting content. Despite also being the most time consuming, this research was the most rewarding part of my work on the project. The diverse objects used in this test tool have rich histories that demand the sort of storytelling that PEM prides itself on. While the 5D team will need to flush out restrictions on how related the content should be to its object, I found that it was when I stretched this relationship that I could discover content that I think would truly engage patrons in a non-traditional way. As the project grows to include more objects, it is essential that the original researchers explore with an eye for what will be interesting to PEM’s audience, rather than what is interesting to art historians and museum employees.

**Writing**

Without any kind of guidelines for the length and voice of these content ‘stories’, I wrote following the pattern set by Anna and Victoria, as they had already written a draft of their content when I arrived at PEM. With an awareness that the first user testing of the tool will be on an iPad, I kept the stories between 100-225 words. I caution going any more than 225 words in the future as younger generations are used to a concise delivery of content and device screens are shrinking. As for style, I wrote with a formality somewhere between a blog post and an op-ed, fluctuating depending on the solemnity of the content in the story. It is hard to say without user testing whether this relative informality will delight its audience, but I suspect that it will (especially with the 18-25 bracket). As the 5D team moves forward with the tool, I think that choosing a writer with an approachable, captivating, and concise style is essential.

**Editing**

Editing these stories to get them suitable for user-testing was the biggest challenge of this project. I understand that each of the 5 members of the 5D team was assigned an object for efficiency but it made it tremendously difficult to edit. Because they were all so busy with their regular responsibilities, this project was a clear afterthought for most, causing unnecessary delay in the progression of the project. Furthermore, as I wrote the content for their objects, I had to edit to please their individual preferences because the project lacks a cohesive agenda for the format of the content. Because I was working full-time on all of the content, I could modify editing strategies from one object to work for another, and having a different person work on each object eliminates that advantage. I think that if PEM is serious about being ahead of the game for interpretation tools like this, the team needs to have someone writing and editing the content who makes it a priority. I also understand that the lack of clear format for the content is a result of the nascent stage of the project, but after user testing the 5D team needs to clearly outline the standards for length, voice, medium, and supplementary links before generating and editing content for any more objects.

**Concluding Remarks**

Overall this project was a joy. I got the chance to engage with PEM’s diverse collection of objects and collaborate with some of its best employees. I truly believe that the 5D tool is an refreshing project for the museum, and if done right, could be a major magnet for patrons. The nature of unprecedented projects like this is to sacrifice methodological efficiency for innovative results, so I hope that this summary of and reflections on my work with this project can help streamline 5D’s development in the future.