Storytelling
in Museums

Edited by Adina Langer

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PREFACE

Adina Langer

In 2001, as museums worried about their relevance at the dawn of the digital age, Leslie Bedford advocated strongly for a trend she was beginning to witness in her *Curator* article "Storytelling: The Real Work of Museums." In it she wrote,

> Stories are the real thing. Stories are the most fundamental way we learn. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. They teach without preaching, encouraging both personal reflection and public discussion. Stories inspire wonder and awe; they allow a listener to imagine another time and place, to find the universal in the particular, and to feel empathy for others. They preserve individual and collective memory and speak to both the adult and the child.[1]

Two decades after Bedford's assessment, it is no longer controversial to think of storytelling as essential work in museums. We delight in showcasing stories that teach and inspire and in weaving together fragments to build a more complete whole. In the 2020s, museums are in the business of telling stories from as many perspectives as possible to bring people closer to a vision of the truth that

accounts for complexity and contradiction. The storytelling paradigm has come of age, and this book is the first to explore it holistically. The eighteen essays that comprise this edited volume represent a conversation among a diverse set of professionals for whom storytelling connotes their daily museum practice. As educators, collectors, curators, designers, researchers, planners, and collaborators, the authors of this book consider the "real work" of storytelling from every angle. From the inclusion of personal stories in educational programs to the meta-narratives on display in exhibitions, this book balances practical examples with ethical considerations, placing the praxis of storytelling within the larger context of the twenty-first-century museum.

But what do we mean when we say "storytelling?" The term has become so ubiquitous in recent years as to risk losing its meaning. Rather than relegating the word to empty jargon, this book seeks to illuminate its use in situ, allowing common themes to emerge from the experience of practitioners in the field. This book is not a prescriptive manual based on a singular definition of storytelling, but it does recognize that there are some common elements of storytelling that ground the discussion. As an interpretive focus, storytelling is about the people behind the art, artifacts, and history on display. As a communication method, storytelling relies on rhetorical devices that shape the relationship between the "teller" and the "listener," clearly defining their roles and perspectives. As a design approach, storytelling intentionally plans for audience engagement with a varying assortment of story elements, often including characters, narrative tension, the arc of events across time (plot), and the interplay of the familiar and the unexpected. Finally, as a community engagement strategy, storytelling connects people with the larger social, or even political, narratives that help them make sense of the world and their place in it.[2] Recognizing both the challenge and importance of understanding what we mean by storytelling, the contributors to this volume tease out the definition and role of storytelling in their own work and in their experiences as museum professionals. Some essays focus primarily on storytelling's philosophical underpinnings, while others offer more concrete advice for practitioners.

This book begins with a big idea: Storytelling in museums gains its relevance through the primacy of mission-driven audience engagement. This primacy can be traced through the methodological literature. For example, Beverly Serrell's *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*[3] has come to be viewed by curators, educators, and exhibit designers as a kind of contemporary bible for museum practice. Its insights go beyond label writing, and the second edition, published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2015, includes research from evaluators and visitor-studies experts that affirms the importance and effectiveness of taking a vis-

itor-centered approach to storytelling within museums. Audience-engagement is the watchword of museum practice, and Serrell reminds us that audiences respond best to clearly articulated "big ideas" in our exhibits. If label text must always support the big idea of an exhibit, then it follows that all museum content—from exhibits, to programs, to collections access and marketing—should support the "big idea" of the museum as well. The most clearly articulated big idea of any museum is its mission. Modern museums embrace educational missions, often imagining an audience of curious non-experts, eager to learn about people, places, and ideas that may be unfamiliar to them, but whose humanity is universally recognizable. The inclusion of personal stories—whether testimony from war veterans, scientists, artists, cultural creators, laborers, witnesses, family members, or survivors of trauma—supports this educational mission by evoking an emotional response in visitors.

Museums have come to rely on storytelling to support their missions because visitors identify with personal narratives. Emotional connection, that feeling of resonance, is a hook that can lead to deeper and broader curiosity. And curiosity is the lifeblood of the museum in its current form.[4] We seek to foster lifelong learning and to create situations in which our visitors are challenged, perspectives are broadened, and people feel safe to discuss the big questions that underpin human civilization: How do we know what we know? How do people gain and use power? What motivates people to care for each other and for the planet? What are the larger narratives that give our lives meaning?[5]

Thus, an important concept for ethical consideration in museum storytelling is the role of visitors' emotional response in fulfilling educational missions. Are we providing an honest appraisal of our subject matter? Are we providing a depth and breadth of evidence in support of conclusions that can be drawn through informal learning? Are we encouraging reasoning by anecdote, or emphasizing emotional connection at the expense of other forms of reasoning? Are we challenging visitors to take responsibility for their engagement, to be more than mere consumers of stories? The authors of the chapters that follow consider these questions in settings ranging from living history demonstrations to exhibits about dinosaurs.

Museums seek to use their power as educational institutions to foster prosocial missions. Storytelling, woven around art, artifacts, images, and documents, has become a primary tool for fostering that mission. But curatorial ethics apply in storytelling as they do in the stewardship and use of art and artifacts.

As museum professionals, our responsibilities are not only to our visitors, but also to our collections, and to the sources of those collections. When human stories take their place alongside more traditional art objects and artifacts

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in our collections and educational toolkits, the imperative to consider the ethics of stewardship and representation grows ever stronger. This is true whether those stories are embedded in provenance or recorded through oral history.[6] Are we acting in accordance with best practices of consent, even if our narrators have passed on and are no longer able to speak for themselves? Are we tokenizing? Are we using individuals as stand-ins for entire groups? Are we honoring the complexity and contradictions embedded in the human experience? Are we using people to make a point? Museum professionals have long navigated among stakeholders in their practice, but the use of personal stories in museums requires a special ethics of care.

In a Twitter presentation hosted by the National Council on Public History on July 8, 2020, Aleia Brown shared her understanding[7] of the idea of an ethic of care[8] for Black life as it applies to public history projects. The idea of an ethic of care is rooted in Black feminist theory and has gained traction recently within the archives literature as exemplified in Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor's "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives."[9] Brown's presentation challenged public historians to shift their thinking beyond the concept of "shared authority"[10] when imagining partnerships and projects focused on communities that have suffered from marginalization, dispossession, and one-sided "representation" at the hands of people and institutions that have long held power in American society.

Brown's analysis is relevant to the work of storytelling in museums because it challenges us to think more broadly about our missions and the imperative to balance a broad audience-centered educational outlook with considerations related to the people—individuals and communities—whose stories we share through our exhibitions, programs, marketing platforms, and research portals.

In thinking about the perspective that results from this approach, it is also helpful to consider the work of artist and theorist David Koh. In the 2020 *Medium* article "The 4th Person Perspective: The Emergence of the Collective Subjective," Koh wrote about the effect of digital technology on narrative storytelling and identity, both individual and group. He described the paradox of "narrative impressionism" that can result from seeing only a single image within a whole comprised of an abundance of images produced from multiple perspectives, the result of a multitude of slightly different camera angles capturing the scene.

> We then realize we live within the sight of all cameras and thus the narrative itself. There is no existing behind a camera or outside the narrative when there are cameras, and eyes everywhere ... Because we only see one perspective of things

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that are far away, our views skew to the extreme. This is called one dimensionality. Metaphorically, this applies towards many things: vilifying people from exotic cultures, romanticizing unreachable celebrities, vilifying lower or higher class people, even unhealthily romanticizing a romantic partner. Image is not solely the fiction we consume in entertainment but also the fiction we experience in real life.[11]

Demonstrated in the essays that follow, museums that emphasize storytelling from multiple angles can serve as a kind of counterpoint to our tendency to fixate on singular images of things we know little about. Through multivalent storytelling, museums can help illuminate the reality of an emergent fourth-person perspective.

This "collective subjective" creates a kind of paradox for museums as traditional sites of cultural power: at the same time that they must acknowledge that they cannot control the narrative, they must also embrace their power to contribute to it through the multivalent, multivocal stories that they choose to share. Despite the anxiety induced by the advent of the internet, the past three decades have not led to a diminishment of the special gravity at the core of the museum. Time has only honed our understanding of how that gravity results from the trust placed in the institution by its constituents.

Thus, an exploration of the praxis of telling stories in museums is especially relevant as we reflect on the events of 2020, a year in which we were called upon to examine our assumptions in almost every sphere of our personal and professional lives. The COVID-19 pandemic placed tremendous stress on our institutions, forcing us to consider what we value the most as we balance the needs of staff and stakeholders. It also encouraged us to embrace an expanded definition of the museum, encompassing digital platforms in addition to physical spaces. Likewise, the summer of racial reckoning spurred by the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others prompted us to think more deeply about equity and belonging.[12] Questions have been raised at every level about power and privilege, racism and anti-racism, agency and use.

This book moves beyond advocacy for storytelling as an essential part of the museum's toolkit. It provides a diverse set of critical reflections on the use of personal stories, and multiple storytelling techniques, to support the larger public narratives embedded in museums' missions. The idea for this book was born from the collaborative engagement begun with the planning of the 2016 AAM session "Out of Many, One: Personal Stories to Public Narratives." Four of the contributors to that session are joined by nineteen additional authors representing perspectives from different regions of the United States and around the world and from across the museum field, to provide both a snapshot of this

popular practice at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century as well as a review of important questions for practitioners to consider as they move forward with this methodology. Although the majority of the essays are rooted in the discipline of public history, this volume also includes contributions representing art museums, science museums, and children's museums. The book's contributors represent a spectrum of ages, gender identities, and sexual orientations, and racial, religious, and ethnic identities within the museum field. They offer insights from the point of view of their lived experiences. Thus, we hope this book will resonate with museum professionals at every stage of their careers as well as students, educators, and innovators in related fields such as public history, archives, nonprofit management, journalism, and higher education.

The eighteen chapters that follow are divided into two parts. Part One: Storytelling Methods consists of essays focused on the structure and function of storytelling in museums. Part Two: Storytelling in the Community consists of analyses of museums' community engagement as it relates to the stories they tell. There are many ways in which the content in these two sections overlaps, but the grouping is intended to provide some scaffolding for engagement with the volume. The following summary can help guide you through your reading of this book.

PART ONE: STORYTELLING METHODS

In chapter 1, Benjamin Filene interrogates what museums mean by "storytelling" in exhibitions and provides examples of best practices from across the field and around the world. Designer Corey Timpson follows in chapter 2 by discussing his approach to dialogically rich and inclusive storytelling through his work in the United States, Canada, and Asia. In chapter 3, Amy Weinstein describes how artifacts and oral histories work together to tell stories at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York City. In chapter 4, Anna Tucker describes how the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience used the storytelling paradigm as the basis for the design and curation of their new museum in New Orleans, Louisiana. Written by educators Marcy Breffle and Mary Margaret Fernandez, chapter 5 digs into interpretation at Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia, and provides insights into how cemeteries can best serve as inclusive sites for public history by sharing the diverse and interrelated stories of their "residents." Chapter 6 examines how personal stories expand public narratives through two case studies involving digital and distributed projects

overseen by educator Miriam Bader. In chapter 7, I explore the mobilization of personal narratives at higher-education-based Holocaust museums and provide insights from an evaluation of traveling exhibits. Deitrah Taylor follows in chapter 8 with an exploration of dramaturgy as a storytelling methodology for public history and the realization of the West African concept of *sankofa*. In chapter 9, Rebecca Melsheimer and Jose Santamaria describe best practices for storytelling in science museums with a focus on label text. Finally, in chapter 10, Lois Carlisle provides insights into the craft of effective digital storytelling and marketing strategy gleaned from her experiences at the Atlanta History Center.

PART TWO: STORYTELLING IN THE COMMUNITY

Chapter 11 begins this section with the evolution of museology in Morocco through Samir El Azhar's chronicling of the introduction of story-collecting at the Ben M'sik Community Museum in Casablanca. In chapter 12, Judy Goldberg and Meredith Schweitzer describe the multisite collaboration that led to storytelling workshops associated with the *Voices of Counterculture in the Southwest* exhibit at the New Mexico History Museum. In chapter 13, independent designer Margaret Middleton advocates for centering queer stories for family audiences in museums and provides practical advice for doing so effectively. In chapter 14, Sarah Litvin describes how the single story of the Reher family of Kingston, New York, gives way to multiple community connections on the interlocking themes of immigration, community, work, and bread, rooted in the preservation of the Reher family's bakery in the Rondout neighborhood. Chapter 15 shifts to New York City with an exploration of the collaboration between Chinese medicine specialist Donna Mah and the Museum of the Chinese in America to produce a temporary exhibit about Chinese medicine focused on stories of "ideas, people, and practices." In chapter 16, Elysia Poon returns to New Mexico to chart the implementation of the School for Advanced Research's *Guidelines for Collaboration* through the case study of the Indian Arts Research Center and the way that its artifact review process re-centers Indigenous perspectives and changes the stories people learn from objects. Chapter 17, written by Michelle Grohe, describes the use of transformative inclusion in exhibit planning through the case study of the *Boston's Apollo* exhibit, which explores the story of the relationship between the white American painter John Singer Sargent and Thomas McKeller, a Black man who worked as his model. Chapter 18 closes out the book with a three-voice case study focused on the story of the decades-long relationship and emerging partnership between James Madison's

Montpelier and the Montpelier Descendant Community, which resulted in the award-winning exhibit *The Mere Distinction of Colour* and is actively shaping the future of the museum site. The chapter is written by Iris Carter Ford, Patrice Preston-Grimes, and Christian Cotz.

As this book goes to press, museums are continuing to define and refine themselves in response to the needs and desires of their communities. Even as we seek to understand this process, we remain forever in the middle of the story.

NOTES

1. Leslie Bedford, "Storytelling: The Real Work of Museums," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 44, no. 1 (2001): 27–34, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.2001 tb00027.x.

2. For a gateway into the academic discourse of narrative theory on which this characterization is based, see "What Is Narrative Theory? | Project Narrative," accessed January 7, 2022, https://projectnarrative.osu.edu/about/what-is-narrative-theory. Also useful to consider when thinking about rhetoric in museums is: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (first edition) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

3. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (second edition) (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442249028/ Exhibit-Labels-An-Interpretive-Approach-Second-Edition.

4. Wilkening Consulting, "Curiosity: A Primer," American Alliance of Museums, October 13, 2020, http://www.wilkeningconsulting.com/uploads/8/6/3/2/86329422/ curiosity_primer_ds.pdf.

5. For more on the use of personal stories to tell larger narratives, see: Shawn M. Rowe, James V. Wertsch, and Tatyana Y. Kosyaeva, "Linking Little Narratives to Big Ones: Narrative and Public Memory in History Museums," *Culture & Psychology* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 96–112, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X02008001621.

6. The oral history literature is a rich source of discourse on ethical considerations around collecting and presenting narrative. For an excellent perspective on contemporary oral history theory, see Robert Perks, ed., *The Oral History Reader* (third edition) (London; New York: Routledge, 2015).

Although a number of the essays in this book discuss oral history practices, the book's premise goes beyond oral history to examine story collection and storytelling in other contexts as well.

7. "Thread by @CollardStudies: Thank You! I'm Glad to Present and Discuss What an #EthicofCare Could Look like Doing Black Public History. Preface // Drawing from a Differ. . . .," accessed November 13, 2020, https://threadreaderapp.com/ thread/1281000986358755328.html.

8. Twitter, "(20) #EthicofCare—Twitter Search / Twitter," accessed November 13, 2020. https://twitter.com/hashtag/ethicofcare.

9. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," n.d., 22.

10. This concept was first popularized in Michael H. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

11. David Koh, "The 4th Person Perspective: The Emergence of the Collective Subjective," *Medium*, February 20, 2020, https://medium.com/@CellestialStudios/the-4th-person-perspective-the-emergence-of-the-collective-subjective-5bb10302dd14.

12. Ailsa Chang, Rachel Martin, and Eric Marrapodi, "Summer of Racial Reckoning," NPR, August 16, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/08/16/902179773/summer-of-racial-reckoning-the-match-lit.

I

STORYTELLING METHODS

1

THE WHY, WHAT, AND HOW OF THE BEST STORYTELLING IN MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

Benjamin Filene

The museum field has embraced storytelling as the way to describe what we do in our exhibitions. But are we fooling ourselves? Usually, we're not using the term in the way that most people (including our visitors) do. In our exhibitions, we don't expect people to sit still and listen to a yarn. Even the most rigid design efforts can't force a linear progression through a beginning, middle, and end. Rarely do our topics lend themselves to neat endings anyway. And how can you develop characters in a 100- (or 75- or 35-) word label?

So, why do we keep turning to storytelling to describe our aspirations? And if we *are* in the storytelling business, what does it look like when we get it right? These questions apply to all our public offerings, but they have particular centrality to exhibitions. Although museums use all kinds of in-person and online programming formats to engage audiences, exhibitions remain key attractions and central to the institutional identities of most museums.

The storytelling turn in museums has been a half century or more in the making, shaped by new ways of understanding knowledge and learning. Postmodernism undercut the notion of a finite, unchanging, or even fully knowable body of knowledge. Encyclopedic or definitive histories became untenable.

Storytelling in part became a way to pull back: we're not giving the *only* take on this subject; we're telling a *story*, making an interpretation—one of many that could be told.

The postmodernist philosophical insight about knowledge translated directly into a new understanding of learning: constructivism. If knowledge is not fixed and eternal, the ways in which people acquire that knowledge are likewise shaped by their backgrounds, predilections, and contexts. So our visitors aren't all trudging up the same knowledge mountain: they are building the structures they need out of the materials that seem useful to them. If, under constructivist learning principles, visitors "make meaning," then museums must find ways to meet visitors where they are and build bridges to their experiences.[1] Personal connection becomes essential to successful museum learning; and emotional engagement—so central to effective storytelling—becomes not a distraction but a powerful tool for encouraging exploration and meaning-making.

Critics have found that emotional engagement to be a source of worry, particularly in the realm of history.[2] Will emotion taint historical analysis and lead to presentist or pandering renditions of the past? But good storytelling is not at odds with solid research or facts. It does not mean embellishing or making up history. Rather, the attention to story works from the building blocks of good historical practice—people, tensions and uncertainties, change over time—and connects them to the foundation of good public history: there is an audience out there, with needs and interests that we must address if we want our work to have impact. Storytelling offers a framework through which to pursue audience engagement because it invites attention not just to what is said—the content—but to how and to what effect. It pushes museums to move past a singular focus on the information or ideas we are sharing and to consider, too, the strategies through which we share them and what visitors actually do with them. Storytelling encourages craftsmanship and intentionality as we build rich, multilayered visitor experiences.

So, what does effective storytelling look like in a gallery setting? Much like in fiction or film, any attempt at a rigid definition of exhibition-based storytelling quickly collapses under the weight of its exceptions. Instead of seeking a fixed formula, I offer a list of common attributes—ingredients to be considered when baking the storytelling cake, even if the creative baker may ultimately choose, with intentionality, to experiment with others. So, with that culinary *caveat emptor*, here are some elemental attributes of storytelling in exhibitions.

IN AN EXHIBITION,

... the best stories are about people.

This seemingly simple observation is still not universally understood. Too often, we museum professionals build exhibitions around abstract ideas and illustrate them with mute objects: "Industrialism was powerful; look at this powerful machine." But to grasp and wrestle with the implications of an idea, visitors need a human connection that invites emotional engagement and empathy. Presidential speechwriters know that the story of a single unemployed autoworker carries more weight than a raft of unemployment statistics. Exhibition developers need to ask human-scaled questions: What was it like to work behind that powerful machine? How much noise did it make? How hot was it? What did it smell like? In what posture did one need to stand behind it? For how many hours for what paycheck did one work to buy how much food for one's family?

I think of the National Museum of American History's 2020 exhibition *Girlhood (It's Complicated)*, which brought to life issues of gender identity, conformity, and resistance by showcasing Isabella Aiukli Cornell's 2018 prom dress, bright red. The label text notes that Cornell, a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, chose red to express solidarity with Indigenous women and their struggle against "systemic violence and abuse." The display prominently features a personal plea from Cornell: "Today and always we remember and honor our Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. They are not forgotten. Bring them justice. Bring them home."[3]

Of course, not every story is literally about people. But I submit that when they are not, successful stories are about forces with which people identify: A story about birds migrating thousands of miles resonates with people's pull to home; stories about DNA work better when connected to questions about the essence of life.

... the best stories have tension.

It's a stretch to say that all of our exhibition stories, down to the object labels, have a beginning, middle, and end. Some do, certainly. I'm partial to Larry Borowsky's "Telling a Story in 100 Words" and to the sometimes-lyrical tales that win AAM's Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition.[4] Many in-gallery media pieces and "object theaters" are short, sit-down pieces with narrative arcs. I think of the Minnesota History Center's 1990s-era *Homeplace Minnesota* and its ongoing *To the Basement* piece about a tornado event. But

exhibitions as a medium tend not to have a fixed path or a set start time. Visitors graze or meander, even in shows that do have fixed linear paths.

So, what aspects of narrative storytelling can apply to individual exhibition components? Most centrally, story-driven exhibitions seek out tensions. Even at the level of individual objects and identification labels, they push beyond basic illustration and simple fact. The story is how these objects—and the people they illuminate—relate to each other, to imagined alternatives, or to what came before and after. I think of the National Museum of American History's exhibition *In Sickness and in Health* (opening 2023).[5] It plans to show the first artificial heart—the actual device that, "tethered to a console the size of a washing machine," was implanted into an Illinois printing estimator named Haskell Karp in 1969, to keep him alive as he waited for a human heart transplant. Instead of simply treating the device as a technological miracle, the draft exhibition text introduces tensions. It adds that the forty-seven-year-old Karp died less than two days after receiving a human heart. It notes that the device was untested when implanted and that the surgeon, Denton Cooley, was deemed "reckless" by colleagues for taking such risks. The label mentions that the federal government dedicated millions of dollars to help develop the artificial heart. The device becomes not only a miracle but a question, a locus for multiple competing forces that come together across time—a story. I think of Fred Wilson's exhibition *Mining the Museum*. Through the power of juxtaposition, Wilson managed to tell stories largely without words. When his display paired slave shackles and fine silver, all he needed to animate tension and bring the story to life was a title: "Metalwork." His juxtaposition of a KKK hood in a baby carriage didn't even need that.

. . . the best stories are particular.

Great stories are about specific people, rooted in time and place, not generic types. The singularity of the story is what makes it resonant and human. While a composite picture can be deeply researched, it also flattens. Lacking the irregular details of individual lives, it somehow feels less true. For generations, historic houses and historic sites have depended on this-happened-here specificity, but museum exhibitions sometimes short-circuit the particularity of their stories, succumbing to a desire to "cover" the topic at hand and pursue more "serious" interpretation by reaching for generalities.

By contrast, I think of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (LESTM) in New York, whose power, since its founding in 1988, has been rooted in the particular. Instead of talking about immigration in general, the LESTM tells

you stories of the actual people who lived right there at 97 Orchard Street—the seamstresses, saloonkeepers, newlyweds, and deadbeat dads. As a simple but striking example of the power of specificity, I think of how the Arktikum in Rovaniemi, on the edge of the Arctic Circle in Finland, depicts its Indigenous people, the Sami.[6] Instead of relying on general depictions of native traditions and vague assertions of the tenacity of their culture, the exhibition shares the stories of two particular Sami people, interviewed in three moments in their lives. Through photos and oral history excerpts, we see and hear from "Salla" as a girl in 1992, doing chores with her family; as a young adult in 2001, trying out new identities in the big city of Helsinki; and again in 2014, as a farmer with a family of her own. Is Salla a typical Sami? Certainly not. But her story says more about the richness and complexity of contemporary Indigenous people's lives in the region than would a dozen carefully honed labels of generalizations.

... the best stories connect to something bigger.

For all their specificity, good stories resonate beyond themselves. They animate broader ideas or tensions. I think of how the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm explains class divisions through a series of five-second videos and pithy labels: "The king eats off a silver plate" (video of hands digging into meat on a shiny platter); "The nobility eat off a tin plate" (another video; not quite as much meat on the plate); "Burghers share a wooden plate" (video of unidentifiable brown mushy material on plate). With hardly a word, mealtime becomes a story that makes class inequities hit home.

I think of the Minnesota History Center's exhibition *Sounds Good to Me*. In a section on music-making in the home, it brought to life the power of the phonograph by featuring 1909 letters that Minnesotans James and Mary Scofield exchanged with their grown daughter Mayme in Wisconsin. Over the sound of Caruso singing in the background, visitors heard actors reading excerpts from the letters, chronicling how the phonograph changed the Scofields' relationship to music. James expresses his astonishment at being able to hear Caruso "at the drop of a needle." At one point, Mayme explains sheepishly, "Owing to having a phonograph in the house, I didn't write last night." "We are wild for the phonograph."[7] To set the stage for the Caruso example, the museum provided context—showing how middle-class Minnesotans heard music in the home before and after the phonograph, from parlor pianos to garage bands. Such contextual information provides background and framing, but strong stories bring these ideas to life.

In the best exhibitions, stories build upon each other to create a sense of an overarching narrative. This dynamic is perhaps easiest to see in a chronologically organized exhibition. I think of the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia, which across a linear layout tells a series of stories about the "ordinary" people who supported the Revolutionary cause and shaped its success. By the end of the exhibition, one's traditional understandings of who founded the country have shifted, with women and Black and Indigenous peoples becoming much more central to the story.

The notion of an overarching story applies equally to non-chronological exhibitions. Here is where the power of Beverly Serrell's "big idea" especially comes into play—the statement that identifies the exhibition's "fundamental meaningfulness that is important to human nature."[8] With a big idea, freestanding vignettes coalesce around an overarching framework. For *ToyBoom!* (opened 2019) at the North Carolina Museum of History, it was that "Cold War toys reflect the abundance and anxieties of their time." An exhibition about the segregated African American village of Terra Cotta in Greensboro, North Carolina, was built around the idea that "Terra Cotta residents built community through constraints." With the most effective big ideas, disparate exhibition components resolve into a bigger picture that a visitor can carry with them beyond the gallery, like a quilt design that connects patchwork pieces into a whole. I think of an exhibition that inspired me at the very outset of my career, *Dream and Reality: Vienna, 1870–1900* (1985), which charted how modernism shaped the arts, intellectual life, and visions of the future among European urbanites before World War I. By connecting Sigmund Freud, Gustav Klimt, and Gustav Mahler; dinnerware, graphic design, and public buildings; the exhibition didn't just teach me about Vienna but changed how I understood how culture (and cultural history) works.[9]

. . . the best stories are purposeful about voice.

As with any story, it matters greatly who is doing the telling. The best exhibition stories are attuned both to perspective and tone. *Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina* (a traveling exhibition that opened at the North Carolina Museum of History) conveyed the challenges of a religious minority in the South through a series of quotations whose matter-of-factness conveyed the mix of acceptance and enduring pain that interviewees carried with them. Muriel Offerman, of Wallace, North Carolina, recalled that "We did have Christian prayers and Bible readings in school. I always felt that I was being left out, but I managed

it by just keeping my eyes open. It was like I wasn't praying that prayer if I didn't close my eyes." Leonard Kaplan of High Point, North Carolina, recounted,

> When I was in second grade, we were having a Christmas play, and I was very little, so they designated me to be baby Jesus, the lead role. I came home all excited and told my father, "Guess what? I got the lead role! I'm going to be baby Jesus!" He said, "You're not going to be baby Jesus." So I went back the next day to tell the teacher I couldn't be baby Jesus.

Labels in third person can be equally attentive to voice. I think of *Collecting Carolina*, a series of installations at the North Carolina Museum of History designed to convey how objects tell stories. To illustrate the skill involved in creating a tobacco-twine coverlet, curator Diana Bell-Kite used highly visual language that conveyed motion, like the voiceover in a film narrating a scene:

> A tireless twiner
>
> Elma McCormick's fingers could *fly*.
> On sweltering August days, they flew over the tobacco
> stick, coarse twine taut in one sweaty hand, green stems
> sticky in the other. Around, under, flip over, around,
> tighten—19 times per stick, 500 sticks to fill the barn.
>
> When the pungent leaves cured golden and the air
> turned brisk, Elma's fingers flew with a crochet hook,
> too. Same rough twine, same resolve. Work into
> the loop, chain stitch, three loops on the hook. Finally, her
> fingers alighted, motionless atop her completed star-
> wheel coverlet.

. . . the best stories don't mind showing that they *are* stories.

Even as the best exhibition stories are transporting, they aren't closed machines: they invite visitors to consider how they have been assembled. They encourage visitors to weigh evidence, are open about gaps in existing research, and invite multiple interpretations. I think of *Vasa's Women*, a companion exhibition to the massive reconstruction of a seventeenth-century shipwreck in Stockholm. The exhibition begins with a question about historical omission: "Where are the women?" It notes that women are largely absent from the museum's massive and beautifully detailed story of the reconstruction of the excavated ship. But actually, women played important roles on and around the ship. The label explains

how the curators began to realize that women were absent from the exhibition because their stories were hard to access, not because they were peripheral. Through a series of stirring examples, the exhibition details how the curators brought women's stories to the surface. The curators had to learn to think differently—to ask different historical questions, use different research tools, and allow themselves more freedom to focus on individual lives and to speculate.

Art museums traditionally have privileged connoisseurship and expertise in their storytelling, but some museums are challenging the assumptions built into that approach by inviting new voices to join in with their own interpretations. I think of Ars Nova, a contemporary art museum in Turku, Finland. It highlighted the constructed nature of stories by showcasing different storytellers. The labels in its exhibition *Young Curators* (2018–2019) were written by eighth graders, who expressed their fascination ("Dark as the night before Monday") and mystification ("It's pretty, and really colourful, but it kind of looked like a tree at first") with the modern art on the walls.[10]

Being transparent about the process of storytelling doesn't mean we turn every exhibition into a self-referential "meta" exercise. Often it just involves asking questions and resisting easy answers. I think of *Reading, Writing, and Race: One Children's Book and the Power of Stories*, a traveling exhibition (2018–2019) that focused on *Tobe*, a pioneering photobook about rural African American life.[11] One section, "Close Reading," highlighted the book's racial and class-based assumptions by juxtaposing photographs featured in the book with alternative archival images that had not been chosen for publication. "Can you spy five differences between [these two images]?" asked a text panel. "Why might [the photographer] have chosen to publish this image instead of the alternate scene?" The exhibition went on to point to details in the chosen image that might have made the people in the photo seem more accessible and appealing to middle-class white families. Such simple "think with me" invitations position visitors as active learners, encouraging them to recognize that they, too, can analyze and construct stories.[12]

... the best stories connect us.

In dissecting the elements of a museum story, we can't lose track of their impact when they come together. Stories in exhibitions can encourage personal reflection but also connection—among family members and, sometimes, among strangers. I think of the Oakland Museum of California's 2014 exhibition *Vinyl: The Sound and Culture of Records*. It was hardly a tightly structured storytelling venture; more it was a grab bag of listening stations, record bins, and beanbag

couches. But at every turn it invited the sharing of opinions and memories, through "curated crates" of albums, top-ten lists, summer song recollections, shared listening experiences, and chalkboard talk-backs ("Did we forget your favorite record? Tell us what it is!"). It became the kind of experience that prompted one to turn to a fellow visitor and say, "What do you make of that?" The sharing of stories was contagious and became part of visitors' experience of the exhibition.

Of course, there is no one way to tell a story: the best ones break the mold. But the elements above can perhaps serve as starting points—questions to be asked—as one sets out to do the ineffable work of in-gallery storytelling. If we approach storytelling in museum exhibitions with intentionality, a spirit of experimentation, and a determination to listen and respond to how our audiences experience our efforts, then "storytelling" can become more than a postmodern metaphor. It can guide us in our efforts to make museums the relevant, transformative gathering places that we want them to be.

NOTES

1. I explore this historical arc in a different context in "History Museums and Identity: Finding 'Them,' 'Me,' and 'Us' in the Gallery," in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, eds. James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 330–31.

See George E. Hein and Mary Alexander, *Museums: Places of Learning* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1998) and George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 2000 [1998]).

2. Alexander Freund depicts storytelling, as exemplified by StoryCorps, as a threat to the professional field of oral history and as a sign of a wider (and dangerous) "emergence of a crass hyperindividualism": "The storytelling industry thrives on sympathy but fails to create empathy or understanding" [Freund, "Under Storytelling's Spell? Oral History in a Neoliberal Age," *The Oral History Review* 42 (2015): 97, 108]. While I agree that public storytelling *can* be used in ways that divert attention from collective or systemic power dynamics, I don't feel that this dynamic is inherent to the approach. I explore what museums can learn from StoryCorps and analyze the power and limits of its approach to history in "Listening Intently: Can StoryCorps Teach Museums How to Win the Hearts of New Audiences?" in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, eds. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage/Left Coast Press, 2011), 174–93.

3. *Girlhood (It's Complicated): Prom*, https://americanhistory.si.edu/girlhood/fashion/prom.

4. Larry Borowsky, "Telling a Story in 100 Words: Effective Label Copy," *History News* 62 (Autumn 2007), Technical Leaflet #240: 1–8.; American Alliance of Museums, "Excellence in Label Writing Competition," https://www.aam-us.org/programs/awards-competitions/excellence-in-exhibition-label-writing-competition/.

5. Since the time of drafting this chapter, the exhibition has been reworked and will open in fall 2023 under the title *Do No Harm*.

6. I am grateful to the Fulbright Foundation for a 2019 fellowship to Finland that allowed me to explore the rich public history practice of the Nordic-Baltic region. Some of these examples I cite in "What Finland Taught Me about Doing History in Public," in *Museum Studies: Bridging Theory and Practice*, ed. Nina Robbins (ICOM International Committee for Museology, 2021).

7. Minnesota Historical Society, "Mary Scofield and Family Papers" (finding aid), http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00696.xml. (Without archival access due to the pandemic, I cannot give citations for the particular letters quoted here.)

8. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (second edition) (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 7.

9. The original exhibition that I saw in 1985 was *Traum und Wirklichkeit: Wien, 1870–1930 (Dream and Reality: Vienna)*, at the Kunstlerhaus in Vienna. In 1986, the Museum of Modern Art opened its version, *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture & Design*, accompanied by a book-length exhibition catalogue [Kirk Varnedoe, *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture & Design* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986)].

10. "Young Curators," Aboa Vetus & Ars Nova, https://www.aboavetusarsnova.fi/en/exhibitions/young-curators.

11. The exhibition first opened in 2014 at the North Collection Gallery at the University of North Carolina with the title *Where Is Tobe? Unfolding Stories of Childhood, Race, and Rural Life in North Carolina*.

12. I am eternally grateful to David Carr for the language and spirit behind this invitation. See Beverly Sheppard, Marsha Semmel, and Carol Bossert, "'Think with Me': David Carr's Enduring Invitation," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 59 (April 2016): 113–19.

2

STORYTELLING
BY DESIGN

Inclusive Museum Experiences

Corey Timpson

Stories have the power to inspire; storytelling has the power to engage. My responsibility as a designer working in the museum field is to ensure the storytelling I craft respects and does justice to the stories being told. This is my maxim. It guides my approach to creating meaningful, rich, and inclusive museum experiences.

ENGAGEMENT

I largely think of storytelling as one of the principal tactics museums employ as they attempt to inform, educate, and engage their audiences. Programs aimed at school groups, stakeholders, and remote and on-site audiences all aim to deliver an outcome that has most often been contextualized, dressed up, and wrapped in a story. Even service offerings, such as the self-service buying of tickets, have some contextualization that is story-based—providing rationale, incentive, or explanation. Like anything that is designed, storytelling in museums is both a strategic and creative discipline. I consider this use of storytelling deliberately

and carefully, structured and implemented to achieve a strategic outcome. That outcome is engagement. An engaged audience is more likely to care, to try, to learn, and to realize the intended result of the scenario—this can be to laugh, it can be to purchase a ticket, it can also be to build rapport and trust, and/or to reflect, consider, and learn.

Museums, built upon their collections, irrespective of the nature of the collection, have a wealth of stories to tell. The careful consideration of how to tell those stories is critical in ensuring relevance with intended audiences, ensuring appropriateness in relation to the audiences, and building and fostering trust with the audiences. Once trust between the museum and the audience exists, learning and experiential objectives may be achieved.

INCLUSIVE DESIGN

All of my work adheres to a strict inclusive design methodology that I have developed, in partnership with Sina Bahram, over the past ten-plus years of our collaboration working on cultural projects in the United States of America, Canada, Europe, and Asia. When it comes to storytelling for in situ experiences, for remote audiences, or for blended audiences, no matter the program type, the inclusive design methodology realizes several outputs. The most prominent output is accessibility. Given that one in four people has a disability in the United States,[1] and this is a massive percentage of the population, it is critical that museums consider exactly who the public is that they serve, who their target audience is for their program development, and how they are going about attempting to engage that audience. Crafting storytelling experiences inclusively is largely about making informed, deliberate decisions early in the design development process and informing design decisions along the way. Other outputs of the methodology include scalability, interoperability, and greater return on investment. There is no greater barrier to a good story than inaccessible storytelling. It is really that simple.

Storytelling must consider both the development of affordances and the surfacing of those affordances. To emphasize the distinction, the development of captions, signed interpretation, or visual description are all examples of developing an affordance. Placing the captions on the bottom of the video screen, or on a companion mobile device, are examples of how the caption affordance gets surfaced. The distinction is important when considering how we develop our storytelling to ensure we don't avoid producing an affordance because we haven't yet determined how best to surface it.

When strategizing how to develop an engaged audience, how to nurture the trust of the intended audience, and how to achieve these objectives through storytelling, there is no single tactic more critical that using an inclusive design methodology across all aspects of the concept, design, development, and final execution of the program.

RELEVANCE

Relevance has become something of a key word the past few years in the museum field.[2] Across Europe, the United States, and Canada, conferences list multiple sessions on "relevance"; articles and papers are published on relevance; curators, educators, and interpreters speak of relevance; and the term has worked its way into museum marketing as well as strategic and corporate planning. And yet the concept of relevance-building has been a simple design tactic for generations. If something is personally or collectively relevant it is more likely to attract attention. If the design goal is to help sell a product and the channel is a poster, when the poster is relevant to the viewer, they are more likely to read it. The more people read the poster the more likely it is to build brand awareness and trust, so that ultimately more products will be sold. If the storytelling I am crafting can be personally or collectively relevant to the audience, then it is more likely to realize the strategic objectives it is being designed and crafted to help achieve.

Years ago, "participation" was a key word.[3] For good reason. Participation allows for co-creation and shared ownership. If I have created something, if I own something, I am more likely to care about it and to engage with it. Likewise with the concept of personalization, if something is personal to an individual, then it is more likely relevant to them. Again, a greater potential is created to capture attention, to develop caring, and to cultivate engagement.

When developing exhibitions, educational programs, or public events, a critical variable in the design of storytelling is to strategically consider opportunities for participation (and collaboration) and personalization. These design strategies, perhaps no longer the popular industry key words they once were, nevertheless build relevance within audiences, fostering opportunities for engagement and positioning programming to better achieve the strategic objectives of the organization.

In 2009 as I was crafting the experience design strategy for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR), I developed a multilayered strategy.

In most museums, the predominant experience design scenario is: the museum informs the visitor. Rooted in the line "encouraging reflection and dialogue" from the museum's mandate, the experience design framework of the CMHR included four layers:

- the museum informs the visitor
- the visitor informs the museum
- visitors inform one another (museum as venue/facilitator)
- visitor types inform visitor types (such as remote visitors, on-site visitors, students, educators, members, casual visitors, etc.)[4]

When dealing with the subject matter of human rights, vulnerable to competing interpretations, the participatory nature of programming was critical to enabling the pluralism necessary to develop, nurture, and maintain trust.

Core exhibition installations at the CMHR include a "Share Your Story" booth allowing visitors to contribute their thoughts and perspectives on curated topics, to hear from other visitors, and to engage in a facilitated dialogue. In another example, the "Imagine Wall" installation allows visitors to draw, write, and express a sentiment related to key human rights topics on colored and themed cards and then put the cards on display. This not only shares individual and collective expression but affects the gallery's mood and style given the themed cards have different subjects and bright, highly contrasting colors. When an environmental news story is at its popular apex, for example, and more visitors offer an environmentally themed sentiment over another topic, there are more green cards being used and mounted, and the gallery's visual mood and aesthetic is affected and responds, which in turn affects the gallery experience for all visitors.

PLURALITY AND PERSPECTIVES

With over 90 percent of the population in the United States using smartphones,[5] and similar ratios in Canada, Europe, and Asia, museum visitors today are more digitally enabled and have direct access to more information than ever before. Given the ubiquity of information, the opportunity for museums to be questioned, challenged, or even discredited is substantial.

Each of the United Nations' seventeen sustainable development goals addresses ensuring global equity and humanizing globalization.[6] Museums, as trusted knowledge institutions, holding an enormous amount of soft power[7] and

influence and playing prominent roles within communities, can play a critical role in contributing to a more equitable society, now and in the future. Crafting storytelling tactics and techniques must reflect and respond to this reality as a basic tenet of engaging a diverse audience.

Given the role of museums to collect heritage, to steward (in many cases) the public's collections, and to provide access to this knowledge, the current scenario of mobile-enabled information ubiquity, competition for audience attention, rapidly evolving behavioral expectations, and increased diversity of audiences, museums need to carefully and deliberately consider what they collect, how they collect, how they manage collections, and furthermore how they express and provide access to their collections through programming. When storytelling is used as a tactic of program delivery, it must be designed and developed within this fundamental reality. In practical terms, storytelling must ensure that entry points to the stories, and therefore the programs and the museum's content, are available to everyone.

To be relevant and achieve success, all the storytelling tactics employed, including those of participation, collaboration, and personalization, must be initiated within this context and inclusively designed.

Within the "Civil Liberties" installation at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, the visitor's image is captured (but not stored) by a camera hidden in the scenography of a tossed apartment. There is a barred prison door at the front of the scene. The visitor appears on a monitor included in the scene, and superimposed over the live feed of the visitor are questions provoking one to think about how much of their civil liberties they would consider compromising in order to feel protected by the government. This installation personalizes the experience for the visitor by literally placing their image, via a live, black-and-white grainy feed, at the center of the installation they are looking at, behind what appear to be prison bars, as their image is overlaid with questions. A visitor can revisit the installation and see different provocative questions overlaying their image each time.

INTERACTION DESIGN

Interaction design (IxD) is a critical design facet when developing storytelling for exhibitions and installations. Interaction design can play an important role in ensuring the audience—composed of people with various general preferences, learning styles, abilities and disabilities, cultural perspectives and beliefs, and even more vectors of difference—can be individually and collectively motivated

and empowered to engage. Most museum exhibition experiences are dominated by passive interaction design. People read, watch, and listen—they view artifacts in cases, art hung on walls or positioned on plinths, sculptures and objects free-standing and stanchioned off. They read the associated labels, didactic panels, and interpretive text and view and listen to audio-visual materials. Diversifying the interaction design to include instances of active and interactive IxD provides varied experiential opportunities, allows for diversity in learning methods, and also surfaces opportunities for greater inclusive design and accessibility. Active interaction design scenarios allow the audience to perform a task, to do some-thing, while interactive opportunities allow visitors an opportunity to contribute, to exchange, and to affect the outcome of the task they and/or others are involved in. Both active and interactive interaction design scenarios enable visitors to be a determining factor in defining their own experiential outcomes. Storytelling that is designed to feature a mix of passive, active, and interactive IxD scenarios provides greater opportunities for audience members to find entry points to the stories that are most comfortable or accessible to them, to build emotional and cognitive rapport with the content, and to develop relevance and be engaged.

When digitally enabled, active and interactive design scenarios (and some passive design scenarios such as dwell-time tracking via mobile devices or kiosks) also allow museums to capture important usage data. This data can be integrated into analytics and evaluation and contribute valuable insights to data-informed decision-making processes, further allowing storytellers to tune their design intent and ultimately their engagement tactics.

The "Posters for Freedom" installation in the *Mandela: Struggle for Freedom* exhibition developed for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, and now travelling across North America, allows both on-site and remote audience mem-bers to compose protest posters which are then projected into one of three blank protest signs, aggregated with other static protest sign replicas, from the Sowetto Uprising. The poster-making activity is available for anyone to participate at https://PostersForFreedom.ca and facilitates not only an active and interactive experience among audiences but extends the reach of the exhibition to remote audiences, while capturing important data. As this exhibition travels and via the web interface, analytics can be compiled and interpreted based on geolocation and many other insightful data points that can inform the evolution of design tactics and future decision making overall.

PRESENTATION AND STYLE

As with interaction design, strategically varying graphic design and presentation styles can also be used in building relevance for diverse audiences. Varying the stylistic approach—from editorial photo to art directed, from composed to illustration, from photorealism to cartoon, from documentary film to animation—can attract different sectors of the audience with different preferences, interests, and tastes. Style can really affect visual interpretation, and for this reason great care must always be taken to ensure appropriateness between the graphic and presentation stylings and the content being presented. One would not want difficult or upsetting information, for example, to be presented in an unintended manner and to provoke trauma within the audience. Applying strong inclusive design standards in graphic design, interface design, and presentation will help ensure that content is not only accessible to the widest possible audience but also that the audience spends more of its cognitive energy on content and experience and less on trying to access or process the content and experience. Strong storytelling carefully applies congruent stylistic differences across content presentation and media in ways that help deliver storytelling efficiently and effectively to wide audiences.

MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

The role of digital media and technology in museums has increased exponentially in virtually all aspects of museum practice. Facilities management, museums services, collections management, communication and marketing, interpretation and programming are, today, all digitally enabled to some extent to create efficiency, leverage data, be scalable, and create interoperable outputs. Storytelling also benefits from the strategic use of various media and technologies. Many interactive techniques in museum storytelling are surfaced through digital means, while remote audience engagement today is largely facilitated via web, mobile, social media, and digital conferencing technologies. Digital media and technology can provide unique and scalable instances of interactivity, personalization, remote audience engagement, and prolonged audience engagement (beyond the on-site visit).

When strategizing relevance-building with audiences, museum storytellers need to consider exploiting the advantages that digital media and technology provide, but they must also address the barriers. Not everyone is comfortable using technology, and even for those who are comfortable there is a learning

curve that often needs to be accommodated. While reading an artifact label might be straightforward, using an Augmented Reality (AR) application may not be. There is also an increasing sensitivity to the privacy implications the use of digital media and technology brings with it. Leveraging personal mobile technology can open many possibilities for personalized, dialogic storytelling, yet the devices themselves, in particular the most recent releases with more advanced functionality, can create cost barriers to participation. Yet space constraints, personal preference setting like volume control and size of text, responsive environments, digital augmentation, social integration, and immersion can all effectively be facilitated (or mitigated) through the use of digital media and technology.

Transmedia storytelling holds enormous potential for immersion, interactivity, and fostering personalized experience design. Its greatest attribute is that as a material composition of storytelling, it can provide many different entry points and increase the ability for more people to engage. Virtual Reality (VR), for example, remains a fairly novel technology. It can create rich audio, visual, and vibrotactile experiences and be an excellent component within transmedia installations. Yet in most instances, it (virtually) removes visitors from the gallery and from the people they came to the museum with (there are very few virtual reality applications in museums where visitors share virtual space). VR can also be difficult to make accessible. As with many storytelling tactics, relevance can be won or lost in the application of design intent, and the use of emerging technology in museum storytelling needs to be carefully designed for the context in which it will be applied and the goals it is attempting to attain.

The changeability of both content and experience within an exhibition setting, a typically arduous and complex task, can be made nimble through digital means. Imagine the changing of content through a digital content management system and never having to perpetually refabricate labels or text panels. Or projected scenography that can be turned off when the space is used for a secondary purpose. Or content and its presentation that can be themed, or spotlit and prioritized based on target audiences, special tours, or visitation patterns. These are practical operational examples, and yet for storytelling purposes, the digital environment or digital presentation might appeal to a different audience segment than the print or analogue, it can enable rapid or even dynamic responsiveness to programming initiatives, it can facilitate greater inclusivity and accessibility, and it can deliver blended (digital-physical) experiences that museum audiences won't find at home or in other, non-museum settings. Emerging technology like mixed reality and sensor-based responsive environments can be far more than novel attractions, even if experiential novelty is of storytelling value.