Villages of Ether (Revisited)

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Abstract

Museums are becoming involved in collaborative projects with partners from other sectors. Are we creating virtual communities where virtual museums are going to be virtual keepers of the collective virtual heritage? If so, can we provide the kind of information needed in this new role? Or should we continue to direct most of our effort into documentation for collections management? I shall look at how cultural heritage information is currently accessed by different groups of people and at how existing object records can be re-purposed effectively to meet the likely needs of users in the future.

Introduction

The title of this paper is taken from a poem by Emily Dickinson (505) -

I would not paint—a picture—
I'd rather be the One
Its bright impossibility
To dwell—delicious—on—
And wonder how the fingers feel
Whose rare—celestial—stir—
Evokes so sweet a Torment—
Such sumptuous—Despair—

I would not talk, like Cornets—
I'd rather be the One
Raised softly to the Ceilings—
And out, and easy on—
Through Villages of Ether—
Myself endued Balloon
By but a lip of Metal—
The pier to my Pontoon—

Nor would I be a Poet—
Its finer—own the Ear—
Enamored—impotent—content—
The License to revere,
A privilege so awful
What would the Dower be,
Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts of Melody!

[an analysis of the possible meaning of this poem can be found at http://forum.swarthmore.edu/~jay/swa pa/dickinson.html]

My title, *Villages of Ether (Revisited)*, is intended to convey an ambiguous message. On the one hand, it is reminiscent of the fashionable terms "virtual communities" and "global villages". Taking such concepts to a ludicrous extreme, we could see a virtual museum as the virtual keeper of the collective virtual heritage of a virtual community.

On the other hand, Villages of Ether conjures up a vision of communities buoyed along by the emission of vast quantities of volatile gas. There is certainly a growing community of people developing impressive sounding projects in this field. Strangely, few of them seem to involve any evaluation, or if they do the results are usually suppressed.

The first version of this paper was given at a Spring Seminar of the Irish Museums Association held at the Ulster Museum in February 1999. That version has been so much revised that a completely new title would be in order. However, I felt the original, albeit slightly amended, is so applicable to my thesis that I have retained it.

Although there is still much enthusiasm for the internet, and museums' potential rôle in the virtual world, we are also beginning to see the beginnings of a backlash. The most impressive expression of this that I have seen is in that most useful section of the Guardian newspaper' weekly supplement, *The Editor*, which summarises the "hot" books of the moment in a few paragraphs, and then gives a digest of the summary in two pithy sentences. If I could be bothered to read it, I almost certainly wouldn't agree with Francis Fukuyama's latest thesis, but here it is, as honed down by the Guardian:

Information technology has wrecked community life, increased crime, propelled women into the workplace and destroyed family values. But we're programmed to return to the traditions of the past. (The Editor, July 2nd 1999)

An article in the same newspaper's Online supplement only yesterday (September 9th 1999) outlined the results of recent surveys carried out by the "Virtual Society" programme. These show that internet social structures closely mirror those in the real world, and thus white middle class male values tend to dominate (speaking as one myself!).

One of these traditions, of course, is that of visiting museums. It is heartening to find, in the recent MGC survey, that museums are extremely, and increasingly, popular, even with those who don't visit them. The survey showed that 35% of all adults in the UK have visited a museum in the last year - a higher number than visited historic buildings, artistic events and even theme parks. Despite all the dire warnings over at least the 26 years that I have been a museum professional, real museums seem to be doing remarkably well. They are socially inclusive, attracting people from all walks of life and appear to have a very favourable public image. Of course we

should not rest on our laurels. Neither should we throw out all this carefully nurtured esteem in some sort of race to catch up with the "digital" world. It could be just as disastrous a mistake as it would have been for museums to go down the theme park route, as some doom-mongers advocated in the 1970s.

The Past

In 1989 I was appointed to the new position of Scottish Museums Documentation Officer, based in the National Museums of Scotland and one of my first tasks was to establish how museums had been using computers. Very quickly I discovered that, as a curator, I had been almost unique in my dedication to computerised documentation. This was quite a blow to my chances of realising the part of my job description that required me to look at building a national database of museum collections in Scotland.

I soon established that there are around fourteen million objects in Scottish museums, the vast majority held by a handful of museums, including the National Museums of Scotland (four million), the Hunterian Museum of the University of Glasgow (two million) and Glasgow City Museums (one million). There are approximately one million computerised records of these museum objects, a number which has not been growing significantly in recent years.

The next obvious question was "is anyone actually interested in accessing these records, other than museum folk?" I scoured the literature for an answer, with no success. To find an answer, I set up a project in conjunction with Museum nan Eilean in the Western Isles. This was called the Western Isles National Database Evaluation Exercise (WINDEE). Ultimately it involved three touchscreen installations located in Stornoway Public Library, Sgoil Lionacleit in Benbecula and Castlebay School Library in Barra. Each installation allowed users to access a

database of 8,000 records of museum objects from a wide range of institutions both within the local area and elsewhere. These objects all had a connection with the Western Isles, and we were fortunate to obtain copies of records from the British Museum, the National Museums of Scotland, Glasgow Museums, St Andrews University Library and many others. Access to the databases was by means of an interactive map, which users could simply touch and be led to records of objects from that particular area. There were also screens of general information about the area, and simple quizzes. These were included for comparative purposes. The entire cost of the project, including the employment of a researcher for a year to create records of objects in local collections, programming (by myself) and purchase of equipment, was £25,000. Half of the funding came from Leader, because a bilingual element was included.

The WINDEE project demonstrated convincingly that many people were interested in this sort of access, at least in the Western Isles. This was one of several projects that enabled us to win £7.5 million from the Millennium Commission to set up the Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network (SCRAN) in 1996.

Catechism was a survey of museum enquiries that I conducted in conjunction with Helen McCorry, from whom you will be hearing shortly. We obtained over a thousand typical enquiries from over a hundred museums, of all kinds, and classified these with a view to determining whether or not they should be answerable with reference to the collections database. We found that around two thirds of enquiries related to collections and we then proceeded to divide these up by the type of information requested. The results can be seen in our joint paper, which is available on my website.

Who are the Villagers of the Ether?

There are quite comprehensive, and probably reliable, statistics for internet usage and penetration worldwide. In June this year the total number of people with access was estimated at 179 million. Over 100 million of them are located in the USA and Canada, with around 43 million in Europe, including 11 million in the UK (Nua Internet Surveys at www.nua.ie), and 20 million in Japan. 59% of those on-line are English speakers, 26% speak other European languages and 10% are Japanese speakers (http://www.glreach.com/globstats/). This leaves an awful lot of people - several billion worldwide, including nearly 50 million in this country, with no access to the wonders of this new(ish) medium.

Statistics on the number of registered domains, on a country-by-country basis, also show that the UK is relatively internet-aware, with an average of 172 inhabitants per domain in July this year. This compares with 46,587 inhabitants per domain for China, for example.

Projections of future growth of the internet abound. These are usually based on projections of past trends. Some of the more realistic forecasts can be found at sites such as http://www.nua.ie

However, all is not necessarily as cosily predictable as it might seem. The same source of internet trends also drew attention to the fact that, in April 1999, Web traffic actually appears to have declined (http://www.mediametrix.com). Four of the top five "portals" - AOL, Yahoo, Lycos and the Go Network recorded a decline that month, with only Microsoft showing an increase. This little-reported blip was ascribed to a "seasonal adjustment", though oddly it is the first such ever noted. A significant, though possibly local, drop in web usage of 9% was recorded in Sweden in July (http://www.sifointeractive.com), and this was amongst the amazing 44.3%

of all Swedes who accessed the internet that month. The only groups who increased their usage were young men and single-person households. The only types of site that recorded increased usage were business-related ones, porn sites and chat lines. The Web obviously still has an appeal for the sad and lonely, relatively high income, young Swedish male. But are there signs that internet usage has reached saturation point among the rest of us? Only time will tell.

73% of web surfers use a version of Microsoft's Internet Explorer, with just under 25% using versions of Netscape (according to the latest figures). Most of the remainder access the web with Web TV, a proportion which does not seem to be rising dramatically. The most popular operating systems, by a huge margin, are various versions of Microsoft's Windows (3.1, 95, 98, NT), totalling over 90% of all users, with Apple Macs lagging far behind, with 5% at most.

How do users find what they are looking for? A very large majority use one or more of the "portal" sites, such as Yahoo (33 million visitors in June 1999), AOL (30 million) and MSN (23 million). When it comes to search engines, usage rates are much lower. People seem to prefer to be guided to sites of possible interest rather than to conduct a freewheeling search across the web as a whole (as I, for one, prefer). On a smaller scale, Webrings are an effective way of guiding people from one site to another. Many of the visitors to my personal web pages arrive in this way.

Museums on the Web

Thousands of museums now have a web presence, but few seem to have any clear idea of why. With a few worthy exceptions, statistics of usage are sadly lacking. Museums and museum-related sites can be split into the following categories:

- Basic information about a large number of museums (the 24 Hour Museum and Virtual Library -

Museum Pages).
- Individual museum web sites (examples used here are the Science Museum, National Museums of Scotland and the Bennie Museum, Bathgate).
- On-line museum collection databases (Hampshire, Moray, the Whitworth and others)
- Collaborative projects offering mediated information (FENSCORE and SCRAN).

One problem with looking at the available statistics for these websites is the lack of standardisation in what is recorded. The discussion list, MUSEWEB@onelist.com has been hosting a discussion recently about the need for standards so that meaningful comparisons can be drawn.

Bearing in mind the non-standard nature of the raw data, some interesting information can, however, be derived. I shall be looking, in particular, at the statistics for the Bennie Museum, which is typical of the vast majority of museums in the UK, in that it is operated entirely by volunteers on a very slender budget (about £6,000 per annum).

I set up a basic website for the Bennie Museum about a year ago, adding statistics collection in March 1999. A recent innovation has been to include simple listings of the entire collection (between 5,000 and 6,000 objects), though it is too soon to draw any conclusions about usage of the database pages.

The website has been attracting about three visitors a day. It is not promoted, except by inclusion in the VLMP and 24 Hour Museum listings, and by links from my personal webpages (which attract rather more hits) and those of West Lothian Council. About a third of accesses in July and August 1999 were from .uk top level domains. Over 60% of visitors found the site by using a search engine, with Alta Vista being the most popular (with 41% of all hits coming from search engines). 14% of visitors came via local gateways - SCRAN and various other Scottish sites, 11% from the local authority

website and another 11% by means of the VLMP. Just 3% of hits were derived from the 24 Hour Museum.

It would be a mistake for a museum to rely entirely on search engines finding their site. Recent figures (again from www.nua.ie) show that the volume of the web actually indexed by the leading search engines varies from just over 15% for Alta Vista to 34% for HotBot. Including appropriate metadata, such as Dublin Core, or at least some relevant keywords, in the HTML header code might make all the difference for very little effort. There are also agencies which will submit details of your site to the major search engines, sometimes for a fee.

By comparison with the Bennie, the National Museums of Scotland website gets a third of its visitors from the .ac.uk domain alone, with another 12% from other .uk domains and another 12% from other country-specific domains, the remainder being made up largely from .com and .net domains. Looking at similar web statistics in the public domain, such as those for Hampshire County Council's HantsWeb site, shows a similar pattern, with by far the heaviest usage coming from the organisation's own top level domain. This might well be inevitable in a large organisation, where the corporate website is used as much for internal communication as for external, whereas it clearly does not apply to small museums, such as the Bennie.

The Bennie Museum website at the moment does not offer much scope for finding out what visitors to a small museum website want to access. The larger museum websites can provide some indication. Nearly half the hits on the NMS website, for example, are simply to the home page, suggesting that many visitors just have a quick look then go off somewhere else, without digging any deeper. The next most popular page is the one about the new Museum of Scotland, with about a quarter of all hits, then the frequency declines sharply, through collections information (less than 10% of hits), news and events (about 6%), contact information for staff (4%) and so forth

down to "venue hire" with just 139 hits out of 412,749 in the period December 1998 to June 1999. It should be noted that the NMS does not, as yet, offer on-line access to collections databases, just a considerable amount of mediated information about the collections in general and a focus on a few selected objects. This, so far, does not seem all that popular with visitors.

There are few individual museum on-line databases, the first in the UK being that of Hampshire County Council's museums service in southern England, closely followed by the much smaller Moray Council Museums, from the north of Scotland, and a handful of others. There are several possible reasons why more museums have not made their databases available (yet):

• They do not have the necessary records.
• They have the records, but not the technology.
• They have the records and the technology but have higher priorities.

The Hampshire database does not seem all that much accessed in comparison with other parts of the County Council's website. Figures for the Moray database are not yet available, but I have been informed that it is not much accessed either, though the website as a whole does generate two or three enquiries a month from overseas regarding the collections, many of which are genealogical in nature. Such a level of interest hardly justifies a big investment in the technology, though it is a useful adjunct to the other work of the museums service.

Perhaps collaborative database projects will prove to be the way forward for museums wanting to give wider access to their records? The Federation of Natural Science Collections Research Units (FENSCORE) database, which has been on-line since early this year, is already proving very useful for natural sciences research, and usage is

increasing dramatically. One could hardly argue, however, that such usage is by the "socially excluded", unless one includes all natural scientists in that category! In fact, users of the FENSCORE database follow much the same pattern as those of the National Museums' websites, with .ac.uk domains dominating.

The Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network (SCRAN) was set up with a view to channelling money via digitisation projects into museums. Just how far it has succeeded in this is moot, but at least we now have some indication of how people are using such resources, though it is very early days.

What are the searchers looking for? This is easier to answer, because search terms used to query the database are logged. Over half the queries are for a "what" - either an object (for example, "sword") or a subject ("housing in Scotland"). The rest are split fairly evenly between "who" and "where" types, with a tiny percentage of other kinds, including "when". These categories are the ones that SCRAN records include, with an additional large number of fields to handle administrative information, including legal title, image size, and so forth.

A comparison with the results of the catechism survey is interesting.

I have now re-categorised these for comparison with the SCRAN figures, and the results are similar. "What" enquiries predominate, with over half of the total number again. "Who" and "where" are also significant, and "when" is, once again, well under five per cent.

There are some important lessons to be learned from the early years of SCRAN, I believe. The project has naturally evolved from its original inception as simply a means of channelling lottery money into museum documentation projects. As a result, our original data standards, based on SPECTRUM and the Dublin Core, had to be modified quite considerably.

The expected museum content has not always materialised, mainly because museums in Scotland have spent the past few years struggling to stay afloat in the midst of local government reorganisation, and consequent massive cuts in funding and staff. It has been estimated that there has been a cut of over 30% in the funding of local authority museums in Scotland, across the board.

The focus of SCRAN has shifted dramatically towards providing material suited to the school curriculum. This, in my opinion, has sometimes led to the effect of the "fascism of the storyline" (Michael Houlihan, IMA Seminar, Belfast, Spring 1999). If we stick to basic facts about our objects, we are accused (wrongly, I believe) of keeping aloof. On the other hand, anything more discursive has a tendency to date much more quickly, and is more prone to distortion. There are many examples of this in a Scottish context, illustrated by the problems the new Museum of Scotland suffered over a supposed lack of information about our great national hero, William Wallace ("Braveheart"), in the new displays. Of course museums have always had to deal with such issues, but in the anarchic world of the internet things can quickly get out of hand.

I do not believe that too much emphasis can be placed on the need to evolve standards which are compatible with emerging "industry standards" and those in other sectors, such as Z39.50 and the Dublin Core. These ensure future-proofing and a certain amount of credibility for our information.

I also believe that too much effort cannot be put into documenting collections in the traditional ways. This information can then be used for a variety of purposes, from collections management to multimedia essays. Without it, nothing can be done.

We are currently being told that e-commerce will be a big moneyspinner for museums, yet there is little evidence so far that this is likely to be the case. The goods of interest to most

people at present are cars and car parts, followed by books, toys and CDs. The Natural History Museum picture library currently receives just one order a week directly from its website, according to a paper delivered by its manager at the Museums Computer Group meeting held there earlier this week.

There is a great deal of money currently going into content creation, for example in the National Grid for Learning. The New Opportunities Fund has recently awarded a further £50 million for this purpose, and Baroness Pitkeathley claimed at the launch of the NOF-digitise Programme on August 31st

We are looking for new and exciting ways of using technology to enable people to access and learn to use information. This is an opportunity for libraries, archives, museums, galleries, education sectors and many other organisations to make their resources and information available to a much wider audience including many people who may previously have felt excluded from the learning process. (launch of the £50m NOF-digitise fund, 31.8.1999).

This is obviously a worthy objective, but just how realistic is it to expect that digitisation of museum information will help deal with the problems of social exclusion? Museums themselves have been shown to be socially inclusive, but how much longer can they achieve this while, in many cases, their core funding is becoming progressively more constrained?

Projects such as SCRAN, no matter how much funding they receive and disburse, cannot operate successfully unless the external environment is a healthy one. Many museums in Scotland simply do not have the staff resources to spend time doing SCRAN projects. The core funding for core activities, such as collections management, in museums must be in place before we can play a full role, should we so wish, in the new villages of ether.