

IS THE ROAD TO HELL PAVED WITH... PERIOD ROOMS: SIMULATION FIDELITY IN VISITOR ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

1. It is natural to believe that the greater the simulation fidelity of an exhibit, the greater the benefits. This is a naive belief because it is untrue for many applications. Fidelity is only one of several important considerations in creating an exhibit.
2. Provision of a PR is routinely taken as the best approach for any site, dollars permitting. However, a close examination of learning objectives may not lead to the recommendation to create PRs in every case.
3. PRs can be improved through greater use of both formative and summative evaluation, exposing more "back of the house" or process information, enlarging the number of handleables, and concentrating further on historic behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

This paper questions whether simulation fidelity and passionate authenticity are ultimate, over-riding goals. This discussion is in the context of historic sites. But the considerations apply equally well to many visitor activities. It is left to the reader to translate the historic site context to their own sphere of operations.

In this paper, we use the following definitions.

- Period Room or PR: an exhibit which is compulsively faithful to the original.
- Display: an exhibit which may be a partial reproduction or a didactic construction, not meant to be a faithful simulation of the original.

Period Rooms

A *Period Room* is a stage set intended to make visitors think they are viewers of a setting at a certain place and time. This is called "simulation fidelity." The best PRs make people have "immersion" experiences as if they are *in* that time.

For "immersion," there must be a "suspension of disbelief," as they say in the theatre. The illusion is enhanced by putting the stage set in an authentic location with as many authentic buildings and furnishings as possible. Ordinarily, visitors are kept from knowing what is original and what is not in the interest of greater impact. There are few totally pure PRs at CPS; most compromise with practicality.

What is meant by a "practical PR?" There is no sharp line between practical PRs and other displays. Practical PRs may have climate control, cordons or plexiglass barriers, TV surveillance cameras, electric lights, and fire control gear. PRs are arranged for viewing by a visitor from outer space: they would look the same whether or not any sentient Canadians were present to see them. PRs do not have signs within their confines — signs are only situated on the *public* side of the cordon where they are *less* effective as signs.

Displays

An *Display* is like a PR except that it needn't be full scale, housed in an authentic place, complete, or composed of authentic pieces. Moreover, it can have signs and other invasions because there is no impulse to convey the impression of viewing the real thing.

But the distinction between PRs and Displays is not of major *psychological* importance. That is because attention or mental focus does not hinge on scale. Simple curves may convey loads of psychological impacts, such as those by the painter Matisse.

When you look intently at an old brooch, you are drawn into its world. It does not matter much whether that brooch is in a glass case or on a table in a PR. Nor does it matter whether the viewer is much bigger than the object or much smaller. There is some evidence that a diorama can generate as much immersion as a walk-in, 360° experience.

If an Display were cheaper or better than a PR as a way to bring about learning, then, presumably, an Display would be created. In terms of cognitive objectives, mute PRs convey only a fraction of what a well-presented equally expensive Display might. On the other hand, it is uncritically accepted that Displays are aura poor. But Champlain's tiny astrolabe at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Québec, surely qualifies for a good aura artifact served under glass.

Auras

Some historic places and objects are "hallowed," generate an aura, or promote in the visitor a sense of awe or reverence. These are spiritual terms but seem applicable to many historic sites. While some of the factors which lead to good aura can be identified, less professional thought has gone into the synthesizing of *historic* auras than, say, *beauty* auras.

You get good historic auras if a lot of people died at that spot — over 500 is very effective at making a strong aura. Or, when...

- the site is furnished with many and old artifacts,
- it is underground and/or dark,
- sentimental music is played... softly, and
- there is a sense of great dollar or historic value as denoted by the care inherent in developing the site, methods of countering mischief such as the presence of many human

attendants and burglar alarms, and the presence of not inexpensive Interpreters to answer questions.

Two types of learning: cognitive and affective

Thinking *only* of the needs of public visitors, why bother to create PRs?

Those who create PRs believe that visitors carry away from PRs benefits which can not be achieved as effectively in any other way. "Benefits" are changes to their minds, i.e. "learning." Learning changes can be divided into cognitions (or book learning), affects (or attitudes), and skills (or behavioural improvements).

Routinely, cognitive learning objectives have been featured in museums for many obvious reasons. But recently, attention has been paid to affective changes too.

Affective learning can be with reference to the subject matter of the site or it can be about larger issues. Larger issues include impacts on social attitudes (highlights of Canadian heritage, tribulations of our forbearers, global village, the siblinghood of humankind, etc.), new appreciation for those who labour to preserve national history, or respect for governments who enable such sites to be reconstructed. While rarely spoken of overtly, the aura-effect translates into affective impact.

PURITY IN PR'S

1. Non-personal PRs

1. Do artifacts talk? What do they say?

Artifacts are made to talk through the artifice of the Curator. The Curator tries to appreciate the range of experiences which can be brought to visitors and creates the PR accordingly. Therefore, important objects must not be hidden from view even if some of them would be hidden under authentic conditions.

Curators rely heavily on their intuitions. In so far as the Curator *was* once a boy of 15, a grandmother of 82, or a tourist from Bolivia, the Curator can succeed in *intuitive* design. In so far as he or she *was not one of these*, they must rely on front end evaluation for information. No one has sufficient personal intuition to design without some direct input from the range of users.

Using some of the tools of a theatre set, Curators, play with upstage and downstage placement, lighting, and so on. Objects are “stage managed” for purposes of illusion. Thus the period carpenter shop does not reflect the moment after the carpenter cleans up; it represents the heat of activity, with chisels shown next to vices in order to simplify the viewer’s task of inferring what these tools do and how they are used. It is always tea time in Parks parlors.

What do people hear when artifacts talk? What people hear is very much a function of what *the listener* brings to the experience. PRs provide...

- a picture of the scene,
- inferences about how things were used,
- inferences about how it felt to use these things,
- and, sometimes, an aura emanating from the setting, the more complete the illusion, then, presumably, the more energetic the aura.

Unlike most learning settings, PRs don’t interact with the visitors who are, in a sense, “trainees.” A live instructor can readily determine when students are failing to follow the instruction. While the visitor to a PR is by no means passive, the setting is. At the best, visitors can move around a bit. Thus the room “shows” to the visitor different sights in response to the visitor’s movement.

2. How artifacts are made to shout

As far as significant messages are concerned, artifacts are mute. They “speak” meaningfully to visitors through acts of inference on the part of the visitor *aided by the artifice of the Curator*. Curators have a great deal of latitude in creating rooms and they choose to make some artifacts speak louder, even SHOUT, at the visitors. Without this help, they do not communicate much to viewers except for basic messages about room contents, number of beds, etc.

The “loudest” shouting is when visitors *themselves* can enact life in the PR. The closest this is currently practiced is letting customers try the beds (briefly and singly!) and don the clothing in a garrison blockhouse.

Although PRs tend to be set in stone, Interpreters can work with peripheral aspects. For example, a site in Canada...

- uses muddy footprints creatively,
- cuts up onions daily and replaces citrus fruits every so often,
- freshens the soap bars by using them,
- makes and unmakes the beds,
- re-arranges table settings,
- burns candles, and
- fills and drains tea cups.

Of even stronger impact, bannock can be baked and distributed and, greater yet, chickens can be slaughtered and roasted.

Or, individuals *who were part of* the history being commemorated may be invited to attend Canada Day galas.

Professionals appear to believe that auras and immersion arise inexorably in PRs. This widespread professional belief deserves scrutiny so that auras can be conjured up as needed and targeted at chosen segments of the historic sites market. The manipulation of auras should be part of every Curator's training. Just what is the theory of auras?

2. Personal PRs

1. Personal interpretation

While any departure from an authentic PR is resisted by those committed to historical accuracy, they view it as permissible to have personal interpretation. The Interpreter or guide is entitled to enter the scene, touch objects, or touch objects while wearing protective gloves. Gloves diminish disbelief even if the objects are reproductions!

When artifacts are mute, then the Interpreters do the talking. They convey the larger messages which are learned by visitors.

We are not talking here of talking *human* artifacts in the form of animators. They are really just a special type of modern reproduction which may or may not resemble the original. Likewise, Interpreters in costume represent personal interpretation but the clothing artifacts stick to them. These do not violate the rules of PRs.

Interpreters speak with customers and react to their inquiries. Short of having distinguished historic sites Curators present, this is the highest conceivable level of service. It is expensive on a per-customer basis in the off-peak season... but wonderful.

In the absence of personal interpretation, the amount of learning carried away by PR visitors is, I believe, quite small. Getting the "message" from mute artifacts requires mental concentration and determined inference. This is not a usual holiday fun pastime. While some visitors arrive keen to digest the messages in a PR, the majority of visitors, I believe, seek less arduous challenges. They want all the edification they can *easily* absorb. They may want no challenge at all.

2. Improvement through practical compromise

1. Practical compromise!

All PRs depart from the ideal of authenticity. For example, they have the noise of car traffic, the presence of modern smells and the absence of old smells, the intrusion of visitors themselves, modern heating, fire detectors, and electric lights. That's no hindrance to immersion because threats to disbelief can be overcome by human minds in any number of ways.

If the Interpreter can not make artifacts "shout" loud enough, then one must cross the boundary of pure PRs. In this section, departures from the pure PR ideal are discussed.

To begin with, an illustrative case is the Visitor Reception Centre (VRC) as an adjunct to a PR site. VRCs are often viewed as highly important to the success of a visitor's trip. That may be because Displays or a fancy A/V can prepare customers for PRs without camping *within* the PR itself.

I think historic sites does a good job with its VRCs. Illustrating the local artifact collection in the VRC (or otherwise set in context in Displays) helps visitors get the big picture. Also, the VRC can show how these artifacts were used — the behaviours associated with them.

Site managers may view a VRC and Person-Years of interpretation as tradeoffs. Although they serve different functions, this concept is a sound one.

2. Originals vs. handleables

A "handleable," as the term is used here, means an object simulating the original. But it is cheap enough for historic sites to endure the repair and replacement losses arising from being handled by many visitors. Or it may be an original artifact of profound durability such as a cannon.

You learn well from handleables. The sense of touch — maybe even taste — are engaged. The object becomes memorable. Also, you get to inspect it and so you learn more about how it was used, what it weighed, and how it feels.

In furnishing a PR, sourcing of objects is a skilled activity. Cost is an important consideration. There's an hierarchy related to cost. There are originals which are one of a kind. There are objects found at the site, at nearby sites, antiques, restorations, functioning reproductions, facades, and modern mass productions.

Unfortunately, public sentiment is not well understood with respect to attitudes towards authenticity. Most of us think that the higher in the hierarchy, the more aura is generated and hence more public satisfaction and learning. Likewise not well understood is the belief that public satisfaction increases with the ability of visitors to handle objects.

What to do? Should a Curator stock lots of originals in order to propagate auras and the affective component of the visit? Or should he or she stock handleables to help learning as well as emotion?

There is a continuum of immersion. At the low end, customers get a peek through a crack in a door. At the high end, they enter, touch, walk around, hear, smell, and possibly, eat the artifacts!

Many considerations enter into the judgment as to whether objects should be handled. Is there more immersion with more *handling* or with more *authenticity*? While a commitment to authenticity satisfies the historian in all of us, should it be a primary motivation?

My impression is that many sites would do well to be more alive. While the cooperage at Fort Langley may produce fragrant wood chips very naturally, other sites *could* have things that could be handled too. At Fort Langley, some dinner plates were purchased from current production. Surely enough sets of these could be purchased so that they can be handled.

3. Recorded interpretation

1. Before entering the PR

The substitution of VRCs for Interpreters was mentioned previously. The VRC — routinely seen at the start of the visit — can provide an excellent substitute if...

- the amount of material to be conveyed is moderate,
- the VRC has a quality A/V, and
- if a consciously didactic approach is taken so that visitors will remember and apply VRC learning when they reach the PR.

If a VRC presentation discusses the features of a PR — just as an Interpreter might — then it may seem didactic, heavy handed, and dour for holiday makers. But if it does not, then it may not be edifying or even inspiring.

2. Speech

Aside from the obvious value of spoken interpretation, *the ability to change* messages can be important. PRs do not change.

From the visitor activities point of view, this is a serious liability. Recorded interpretation can be cheaper to change than either text or VRC productions. After all, interpreters do a dozen presentations a day. It is easy enough to record one.

3. Text

At one site, text panels are exposed when Interpreters are not present. This is a natural enough approach. But Interpreters don't rate the value of text very highly compared to live Interpretation.

To some extent, technology can overcome some of the paradoxes of using signs. Instead of giving visitors anxieties when they see great heaps of text, a friendly database system can be used. Macintosh HyperCard is becoming a de facto standard because it can have vast information storage yet friendly access. It can be so much fun that visitors would not worry about getting lost in the Table of Contents.

4. Sound and light shows

While sound and light shows haven't come to historic sites yet, they might be acceptable even to PR purists. Sounds and lights are not now deemed to be part of the PR stage set. But manipulating sound and light may not be out of keeping with the spirit of PR reconstruction.

SUGGESTIONS

Formative evaluation of PRs: Is there such a thing???

If a PR is viewed simply as a passive exercise in reconstruction, then no public consultation is needed. But in as much as Curators take an *active* role in creating PRs, it should be recognized that...

- the knowledge of visitors arriving at a site needs to be assessed,
- the way artifacts speak can be influenced by the Curator, and
- the creation of a PR is by no means objective.

Thus PRs should be configured based on information arising from formative evaluations.

The “back of the house”

Few scholarly activities demand as much cleverness as the work of the Curator at Parks. But very little of the thrill of PR creation is shared with the public. Movie makers *love* to create films about their own movie making process.

Exposing the public to the *process* is an important piece of education. It may recruit more Canadians to history and preservation. As commitment to seamless illusion for its own sake diminishes, Curators can feel freer to share their work with their guests. Providing the context for a PR will greatly enhance the visitor’s experience.

Lecturing: to touch or not to touch

Interpreters lecture visitors. More effective lectures arise from the use of props, more interaction with the audience, and good communications tools.

Should visitors handle materials in PRs? Yes... whenever feasible. To be feasible, the materials have to be durable, replaceable, cheap, surveillable, not desirable as trophies, trigger alarms when stolen, bigger than a kid's coat pocket, and so on.

But this truth leads to re-examining the furnishing of PRs.

Should Interpreters have flip charts, chalkboards, and slide projectors? Yes, if visitor learning retention is the goal.

The reproduction of historic behaviour

It is clear from talking to front line Interpreters that visitors want to know as much as possible about human behaviour at the site. Can Interpreters act like the people of the time they are depicting? Not just in superficial ways, but can a consummate Interpreter react emotionally similar to people of the previous time? Can visitors role-play as if they were in the previous time? Surely Curators would be intrigued to investigate how people behaved in the past through "behavioural archaeology!"

IS SIMULATION FIDELITY NECESSARY?

Simulation fidelity is often counter-productive.

In a zoo, it makes no sense to slavishly reproduce a dense forest habitat. No one can see the fauna or flora because of the trees.

In a science museum, it makes no sense to show a model of a steam engine in all its complexity. Visitors will not be able to appreciate the essential concepts which are lost among all the fine-tuning of knobs, pressure relief valves, condensation traps, mustard heater for the engineer's lunch, etc.

Of course, you might choose *as your message* the inherent complexity of the later sophisticated steam engines. That is fine but it may not be a very significant message or one which merits the expenditure of great effort.

The essential messages of an historic site may be better conveyed through a well-crafted Display than through a PR.