

Author: Anne Vroegop

Heritage: what's in it for me?

In the current situation of budget cuts and declining numbers of visitors it is important that heritage institutions reinforce their position in society, argues interaction designer Anne Vroegop. Gameprinciples and service design thinking are effective tools in reaching this goal. Heritage institutions might look more into the commercial sector to find inspiration.

In the heritage sector one can discern two kinds of technological innovation aiming at efficiency enhancement and the creation of new opportunities.

The first kind concerns professional access and research, where scientific standards are applied. In archeological research for instance, new VirtualReality applications enable the creation of a accurate historic reconstruction of a site.

The second kind concerns the accessibility of heritage. Technological innovations enable the application of gameprinciples and the development of new digital services.

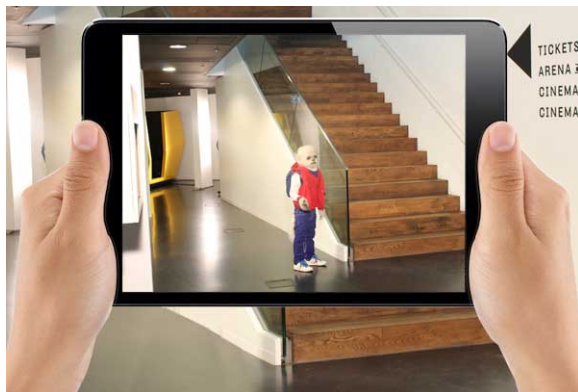
The innovation of (scientific) research however, demands different standards and approaches than the innovation of accessibility. In research only the highest standards are applied, while in the area of access for the public creativity and common sense play a far larger role.

This article gives an incentive to think about technological innovation in the access to heritage.

Minimal interaction, intense experience

Below I will give two examples of innovative applications in reaching out to the audience, with limited use of technology, but with great value for the audience.

Starting Oktober 2013, young visitors of the EYE Filminstitute in Amsterdam can use a augmented reality app, called "EYEWalk", while they are led through the building and get an explanation of the history of filmmaking. This tour on a iPad mini is actually a short movie with actors, that gives the user the illusion that he is being led by geospecific data and that he can interact with the space around him.



EYEWalk

Also the next example shows that heritage games do not need state of the art technology.

Do you take the wounded soldier with you or do you leave him behind? Will you join the army or the resistance? One question is even more confronting than the other in the interactive documentary "Onder vuur". The documentary tells a true story about the war near Srebrenica; the visitor has to empathize with a soldier and make decisions in his position. Depending on his

choices a different line of story deploys. Even six years after the opening of the installation the documentary still has a heavy impact on the audience. The installation in the Legermuseum is an example where the evocation of emotions, new technologies and minimal interaction join together in a environment where a story based on historical facts is told.

The essence of a good interactive documentary is in the quality of the story and the well defined, often simple actions that the visitor has to perform to advance in the documentary. One way to do this, like in Delft, is to offer the visitor a choice of scenarios.

Move your audience with game principles

The explanation for the success of these interactive documentaries/games is that they are based on gameprinciples, with a clear 'what is in it for me'. The best games move and touch people, because they are strongly anchored in a gameprinciple – a intrinsic motivation to play the game. The installation in Delft is based on escapism and curiosity: visitors escape their own reality by immersing in an other reality for a short while and want to know how the story ends. Heritage institutions could cleverly use this by developing forms of presentation based on gameprinciples that fit the targetgroup. This requires that heritage institutions do active research in the needs of their targetgroup and develop forms relating to the collection that enrich the life of their targetgroup. Indeed something only is of value when it makes life easier or more pleasant. Moving people and making their lives more pleasant and more easy, that is the essence.

Service design thinking for a clever application

Indeed, this is service design thinking in a nutshell. In the commercial sector this way of thinking is more common: for example with a chip in your Nike running shoes, you can monitor your running activities with the joining Nike+-app and share the results by social media. This kind of application makes the product (the running shoe) more meaningful to the runner.

In the heritage sector new technologies gain ground slowly. The Rijksmuseum was ahead of it's time in 2008 with the Rijkswidget, an app that showed a different object of the collection on your screen every day. In the same year, Kissdawe developed a enormous slotmachine , that was projected on canalhouses in Amsterdam. Instead of images of fruit, pieces of the collection of the Zuiderzeemuseum were shown. With three in a row users could win free entrance tickets for the museum. When hitting the jackpot, one made a chance to stay a night in the museum. It is a rewarding principle that directly shows the heritage consumer what is in it for them.

And recently a library in Boekarest established itself in a subwaystation. The walls are decorated with prints of bookcovers provided with QR-codes. By scanning the code, passers by can start reading on the go!



QR-codes in Boekarest



Slotmachine in Amsterdam

A challenge: from visitor to user.

Many heritage institutions face budget cuts that force them to follow a more commercial policy. The biggest challenge is not to cut on expertise. Another challenge is the development of new services and tools. Institutions will only succeed if they perform frequent online and offline surveys among their target groups and translate the outcomes to new functions and tasks within the institutions.

To keep playing a relevant role, heritage institutions have to show that they have to offer something substantial to society, by moving people and by entertaining them substantively. The success of the mentioned examples shows that heritage institutions have to grow towards a situation in which they view the visitor as a 'user'- someone that uses their collection, instead of someone who just passively consumes a painting or film. Usersurveys, preferably executed by in-house digital media experts, render essential data. Gaming and service-design-principles help to translate this information into forms of presentation that personally move people and enrich their lives. Forms, in other words, that add value to life and that help institutions to confirm their right of existence.

Networking is 'hot'.

Heritage institutions do not only enhance their position in society with apps, QR-codes and the application of gameprinciples. It is no new insight that a lot can be gained by participating in online networks. These are not only places to share knowledge, but also to share new visions on the interpretation of heritage collective thinking on the future. For this reason alone should the active participation in online networks be part of the regular tasks of anyone working in a heritage institution.

A far more pregnant question is which network deserves the attention of the institution. In the world of heritage one might well speak of a overabundance of international networks, so the most important question seems to be, which network delivers the most value.

Participating in networks of your fellow professionals helps to keep up and to create a sense of connectedness, but it is important also to cross boundaries and to look for new networks, that are related to the professional area, so new cross connections are created. In doing so, the commercial sector deserves more attention than it is getting at the moment.

Anne Vroegop works as interaction designer and conceptdeveloper for her own company Kissdaweb and is also connected to the EYE film institute as coordinator of digital presentations.