Ryan Perry
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Crafting Curatorial Narratives

Stories are fundamental to our humanity. As evolutionary psychologists John Tooby and Leda Cosmides observe, "it appears as if humans have evolved specialized cognitive machinery that allows us to enter and participate in imagined worlds."[1] Stories help to convey actionable information, through which the audience can reflexively cast themselves as the protagonist. Would we make the same decisions or would we choose to act differently? Interaction with physical objects, as well as digital surrogates, allows observers to foster a tangible connection with art, history, and science—which are otherwise represented by intangible concepts.

Museums offer an ideal platform for conveying narrative structures, and the museum curator is uniquely positioned as chief storyteller. Museum curators, being responsible for collections and their interpretation, can convey important information through storytelling. In crafting a compelling narrative, the curator empowers visitors to interact with objects on a deeper level. Even without touching these objects, the visitor is able to *use* them to enter the imagined worlds alluded to by Tooby and Cosmides. Without a narrative structure of some form, museum exhibitions have the potential to lose sight of the interconnectivity within their collections.

Given that my interest and background both point toward history exhibitions, I found the role of narratives in interpreting objects to be particularly compelling from a curatorship perspective. History exhibitions lend themselves naturally to the crafting of narrative structures. As a discipline, history allows us to consider the modes of causality and contingency; to interpret the available evidence; to use reason (and a bit of imagination) to recreate the past. In short, it serves as an ideal platform for storytelling. Developing a curatorial perspective to the creation of these narratives will undoubtedly be essential to my future career as a manager of cultural heritage resources.

This essay will explore the curator's role in crafting museum narratives across three broad levels: theory, tools, and specific applications. Curators build upon a foundation of

museum theory relating to narrative structures. The first part of this essay will focus on this background discourse, which directly or indirectly informs the ways that objects are presented. Within this framework, curators employ a variety of tools and methodologies in conveying their narratives. The next portion of this essay will explore innovative approaches to museum narrative structure. Storytelling methodologies cannot exist independent of content. As such, the final section of this essay will serve as a case study for how theory and methodologies could be applied to a specific type of museum, specifically in relation to history exhibitions. By funneling down from theory to practice, curators gain the ability to develop a considered approach to narratives.

Narrative Theory

While museums offer great potential for presenting narratives through the arrangement of objects, this organizational conception remains relatively new. Museums have increasingly emphasized user experience, and the use of narrative structures has played a role in this shift. A discussion of storytelling in museums must therefore be preceded by an exploration of what came before.

In his comprehensive, if outdated, overview of the field, *Introduction to Museum Work*, George Ellis Burcaw offers twelve separate definitions of museums.[2] However, none of these definitions feature any mention of museums as platforms for conveying a narrative. Instead, the definitions focus predominantly on the housing of the collection, with passing nods to the edification of the public. In tracing the fundamental basis of museums into pre-history, Burcaw suggests that humans instinctively have “a desire to accumulate objects and the desire to show them to other people.”[3] Through the remainder of the book, Burcaw approaches the display of objects as a “show-and-tell” that can educate the public on a particular topic, while shunning institutions that waiver too close to entertainment tropes.

Burcaw’s vision of museums as storehouses for collections that also happen to perform educational functions serves to exemplify the background against which conceptions of narrative structures can be best understood. Under the storehouse/schoolhouse model, education remains a one-way street—edicts handed down to the museum visitor. In contrast, under a narrative structure, the curator must engage the audience in order to tell a compelling story. While the curator may never enter into a face-to-face conversation with the visitor, their approach to the

story remains a dialog of sorts. The curator must ask him/herself, will this narrative resonate with visitors? Will visitors become caught up in the story enough to want to know how it ends? A storyteller that fails to engage with the audience on this level will not succeed.

Curators must grapple with the potential benefits and drawbacks to using narrative structures if they are to successfully engage with their audience. Leslie Bedford outlines several important benefits in her article, "Storytelling: The Real Work of Museums."[4] The primary benefit involves the ways through which people learn: storytelling allows us to make sense of the world. In her appeal to human nature, Bedford mines similar territory to Burcaw's proposed collection instinct, as well as Tooby and Cosmides' focus on the evolution of learning.

Secondly, Bedford illustrates how storytelling helps people to develop values and beliefs. Bedford's conception of values and beliefs features a fundamental difference from that of Burcaw—rather than speaking to a universal morality, Bedford alludes to something less absolute. Whereas Burcaw sought to teach visitors directly, Bedford seeks to open up a space for dialogue through storytelling. In relation to museum work, Bedford argues:

> More than anything else, then, stories are powerful because they do not fill in all the blanks. They open up a space into which the listener's own thoughts, feelings, and memories can flow and expand. They inspire an internal dialogue and thus ensure a real connection.[5]

The postmodern perspective, to which Bedford alludes, offers some powerful opportunities for engaging visitors.

Postmodernism describes the fracturing of traditional conceptions of *truth*. Unlike modernism, which seeks to reconstruct new versions of truth, postmodernism leaves it in pieces for each individual to sort out for themselves. In the realm of museums, postmodernism offers a reconception of how information should be presented to visitors. Rather than presenting information to visitors as being inherently true, the postmodern curator would leave space for visitors to interpret and rationalize an object for themselves. Through telling a story, curators are able to convey valid strategies for interpretation, while leaving the blank spaces that Bedford refers to in her article.

While postmodernism has the capacity to inform curatorship in a meaningful way, when museum professionals venture too far into pure theory, the relevance for curatorship is diminished. In his article, "Museums, Plasticity, Temporality," Jean-Paul Martinon constructs a philosophical basis for "[rethinking] the future of museums outside of this narrative structure, one for which the future is reduced to words such as projection, prediction and prophecy."[6] Martinon argues against the construction of narratives as a form of positivist discourse; against nineteenth-century conceptions of the future as being a natural outcome of the past and the present.

Despite the high-concept nature of Martinon's argument, his hesitancy in embracing narrative structures does have some more practical implications. If nothing else, his article serves as a reminder to curators of the inherent pitfalls of narratives. By framing an object within a narrative, curators of exhibitions have the potential to overemphasize causality. In doing so, events can be misrepresented or misconstrued as the *inevitable* result of a given set of causes—when in fact a particular outcome was never guaranteed. Often hidden factors can have a disproportionate impact on an event that curators are attempting to explain through the narrative lens of physical objects.

The museum field will continue to grapple with the concept of narrative structures. As theories from outside of the field filter in, their meanings change with the context. A number of important lessons can be gleaned from theory, which will only serve to strengthen the curator's relationship with collections. While theory can offer a foundation for deliberate actions, ultimately the practical nature of museum work will be more impactful.

Narrative Tools

No matter how relevant, compelling, or informative a museum narrative may be, its effectiveness will depend on the storytelling techniques employed by curators and other museum professionals. A perfect story told in an ineffective manner will fall on deaf ears. After exploring the theory that supports (or qualifies) the use of narratives in museums, the next step is to develop effective storytelling techniques. In order to be effective, narrative tools must be matched to the context through which they are expressed. Museums, as with any medium for conveying information, have a certain set of tools that are especially well-adapted for working in context.

Exhibition labels serve as the primary point of entry for engaging with visitors. As such, they offer opportunities to craft a narrative in short vignettes. If used purposefully, each item and corresponding label can play some role in developing the narrative and propelling it forward. By using clear and concise language, the curator can lead visitors deeper into the story without overwhelming them with too much information. For all of their value as a tool, labels need not shoulder the entire burden of museum storytelling. The availability of other canvases and media open up new possibilities for engaging visitors in narratives.

House museums use architecture as an important tool for conveying their narrative. Not only are they able to display the belongings of historical figures, they are also able to place objects roughly *in situ*—serving to further convey how their original owners may have used and interacted with them. The structure of the house itself becomes an artifact, which plays a supporting role in the narrative. Effective house museums are able to use their structure as more than simply a container for their collection.

Laura Hourston Hanks, a professor of architecture and built environment at the University of Nottingham, expands on the narrative role of architecture in her article, "Narrative, Story, and Discourse: The Novium, Chichester."[7] The article explores how modern museum architecture can enter into a dialog with its environment. Though housed in a modern building, the Novium echoes design elements of the surrounding historic buildings, and also incorporates the Roman bath house at the base of its structure. As Hanks observes: "while a temporal gap between the Roman bath house and the contemporary museum inevitably remains, the physical gap between them was bridged by the design of the museum's exterior by means of architectural referencing. As such, the narrative has greater coherence and affective power."[8]

The Novium's architects have offered a connective thread between the narrative history of the bath house, through to the ongoing architectural development of the surrounding city. While museum architecture is often significant in its own right, the Novium speaks more directly to its context as a site of layered history spanning two millennia. Other museums would do well to follow its example by closely interrelating architectural plans into the museum narrative, even in the absence of an existing historic structure.

Soundscapes offer another intriguing narrative mode. Just as other media use sound to augment narrative—film being the most prominent example—museums can likewise develop a

parallel auditory experience to increase visitor immersion. Sound can offer subtle cues, or be center-stage in a narrative. In either scenario, sound contributes to the sense of authenticity, even if recorded sounds are, by their nature, reproductions.

Nikos Bubaris, a professor of Cultural Technology and Communication at the University of Aegean, poses the question "what are the possibilities that open up once we recognise the agency of sound and the ways it affects the visitors' experience?"[9] As his article, "Sound in Museums – Museums in Sound," demonstrates, the possibilities for using sound as a narrative tool are extensive. Bubaris contrasts the use of sound in museums with traditional conceptions of museums as what Tony Bennet terms "monastic stadiums."[10] No space is ever truly silent, as Bubaris observes, so sound has always been an element of the museum-going experience. However, the transition of museums from arenas of incidental sound and hushed conversations to deliberately constructed soundstages offers new areas for narrative development. The effect can be seen as equivalent to the advent of "talkies" in early film—the addition of sound may augment the experience, but if done incorrectly, it can also distract from the visual physicality of museum objects. This balance offers a new challenge for curators.

Bubaris differentiates between "diegetic" (foreground) and "non-diegetic" (background) sounds—the former functions as the voice of the narrative's protagonist, and the latter provides a backdrop. Hearing first-person narratives via a protagonist figure offers visitors a chance to have the illusion of conversation with cultural figures. Non-diegetic, incidental soundscapes, similarly transport the visitor into an imagined context for that conversation. Narrative structures have been essential to recorded sound since its inception. By leveraging the powerful narrative capabilities of sound, museums can further engage their visitors.

While sound technology has existed for more than a century, online digital exhibitions offer a relatively new medium for arranging objects into narratives. Digital exhibitions offer a significant break from other narrative tools in that they not only change the means for conveying information, they also change the venue. By engaging with visitors online, museums develop different relationships with their audience, which require a new precepts for what constitutes a museum. Digital exhibitions also serve access more than preservation—further shifting museums' center of balance toward user services.

Industry leader PastPerfect offers a comprehensive suite of tools for collections management, and also provides online catalog services. While PastPerfect offers hosting service for basic online collections, the default presentation lacks any narrative tools. Visitors can search for images, but the curatorial voice is largely absent. Functionally, this represents a return to the collection-centric museums of the last century—objects are presented with little context as items of curiosity, rather than as elements in a coherent narrative.

Writing in an article that appears to be self-published by the Open University, Annika Wolff, Paul Mulholland, and Trevor Collins describe how another software suite, Storyspace could be used to develop museum narratives.[11] While this article does not appear to have been peer-reviewed, and consequently lacks reliability from a scholarly standpoint, the concepts offered in the piece can be used as points for consideration when considering possible alternatives to PastPerfect's lack of narrative structure.

Storyspace structures information in layers corresponding to story, plot, narrative, and objects. The authors suggest that this structure fits the needs of curators, since faceted metadata can be used to craft multiple narratives from a single set of objects. While this sounds great in theory, in reality this level of metadata description would be unrealistic to pursue on the item level—it would take too much time to enter. The curator would likely be better served by manually selecting items to craft a narrative. While metadata can assist in this selection process, it would not be a viable substitute for a curatorial perspective.

Taken as representative examples, architecture design, soundscapes, and online collection managers offer a sampling of the diverse set of narrative tools available to curators. With shifts in visitors' expectations for what a museum experience should entail, new these tools assist curators in developing narratives that connect with visitors. Curators must employ a diverse and constantly-adapting set of tools to keep their narratives fresh and effective.

Case Study: History Museum Narratives

So far, this essay has discussed narrative theory and tools in a manner that would be applicable to a wide range of museums. In an effort to focus more directly on the practical implications of storytelling in museums, the final section of this essay will explore how narrative

structures may be adapted for use in history museums. I will draw from both theory and practice in terms of their applicability to history museums.

Curators of history museums perform similar functions as professional historians in developing an exhibition narrative. As such, taking a look at how historians craft narratives will be a useful first step. Historians David E. Kyvig and Myon A. Marty posit that historical narratives can be constructed by piecing together traces of evidence:

> Traces are everywhere—in the remains, tracks, marks, records, remnants, relics, evidence, and footprints of events. Historians need to know how to find such traces; how to sift and sort them; how to establish their authenticity, credibility, and importance; and how to assemble them as they reconstruct events. In turn, we must know how to treat events in a chronological sequence or some other way, to relate them to people and ideas, and in so doing to build a story that is history.[12]

The history museum curator's responsibilities run parallel to this description, with the major distinguishing factor being the end product of the research: the historian writes a narrative and the curator arranges objects to tell a narrative.

Before history museum curators can begin to develop narratives, they must establish a basic understanding of how their audience will approach the subject of history. Will visitors come in with some basic understanding of the topic? What preconceptions do they bring to the exhibition? How does the prevailing social memory impact the subject?

Although Mark A. Greene is an archivist, the postmodernism-informed conception of memory that he presents in his article, "The Messy Business of Remembering," maintains its relevance in the museum field as well.[13] Quoting a curator at the Henry Ford Museum, Greene delves into the difference between memory and history: "memory is often owned, [whereas] history [is] interpreted."[14] While history museums may want to focus on historical narratives, memory and heritage also play an important role in how visitors will come to understand the museum collection. As Greene argues, "neither history nor social memory is more 'rational,' 'flexible,' or anything else."[15] Visitors will likely interpret historical narratives on the basis of social memory—and curators would be doing their institution a disservice to simply dismiss these visitors.

Shawn M. Rowe, James V. Wertsch, and Tatyana Kosyaeva explore how museums can "successfully [link] a 'big narrative' of a group to the 'little narrative' of an individual" in their article, "Linking Little Narratives to Big Ones: Narrative and Public Memory in History Museums."[16] The extent to which visitors make personal connections with the material remains an essential measure of a successful narrative. Even though personal connections have the potential to lead to interpretations of the material that are not necessarily valid, these risks are outweighed by the strong connections with the material that could result.

Leslie Bedford uses historic house museums as an example for how narratives can strengthen connections with visitors. She describes how The Newark Museum made their upper-class residence more relatable by "[peopling] the rooms with an engaging cast of mostly fictional, but historically credible characters."[17] While a historian or traditional museum professional may balk at this historical fiction, the storytelling element of this approach allows for visitors to engage in the "little narrative" of the individual. Since some of these fictional characters were servants, the curator was able to bring more diversity into what would otherwise be an exhibition of upper-class lifestyles. The Newark Museum further emphasized the narrative element of this approach by framing the character vignettes within book-shaped labels within each room of the exhibition.

Beyond offering narratives for visitor consumption, history museums can also be sites of continued dialogue between curator and visitor. As museum consultant Christopher Clarke-Hazlett notes, "an ever-increasing number of museums are committing themselves to the enterprise of 'making' historical meaning in partnership with public audiences."[18] Under this participatory model, the narrative develops through discourse and varied interpretation. The realm of truth is decentralized in the process. In order for this partnership to work, the visitor should come to the museum ready to learn and the curator should focus on teaching the historical method in addition to the content of the exhibition.

Within the discourse surrounding history and museums, a persistent question remains: how can museums bridge the gap between professional history and social memory while keeping the visitor engaged? In developing a narrative for an exhibition titled *Slavery in New York*, public historian Richard Rabinowitz advocates for a more rigid grasp on critical authority.[19] Despite this rigidity, his approach is tempered by a number of compelling methods for using

objects to deliver a historical narrative. Through episodic storytelling underpinned with a hierarchical structure of text, Rabinowitz crafted a narrative on slavery in New York City from a relative scarcity of relevant objects. This structured information assisted visitors in comprehending the resonance of the big narrative while drilling down to individual, little narrative that fosters deeper connections.

While Rabinowitz remains more inclined to lead museum visitors along a fixed "storypath," James B. Gardner, writing as curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, outlines a shared authority in his article "Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public."[20] Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Gardner's shared authority is its open-ended nature. Sharing the process of history, curatorship, and storytelling with museum visitors allows for a range of experiences and teaches more than just historical facts. Participatory exhibitions allow visitors to learn the historical method while gaining exposure to a historical narrative.

Gardner quotes his colleague, Steve Lubar, who warns, "sharing too little authority means that the audience will lose interest in or be unable to follow the narrative; it over privileges the curator's point of view."[21] Consequently, curators need to find the correct balance between authority and visitor participation in crafting their narrative. Inviting visitors deeper into the fold of the historical process can only serve to strengthen the field of history—rather than eroding professional acumen as many academic historians implicitly fear.

Conclusion

While an understanding of the theory and tools outlined in this essay would contribute to the crafting of an effective museum narrative, ultimately the most important factor is experience working with the collection. The curator's intimate knowledge of the collection will help to impart nuance on the narrative's defining characters, point of view, atmosphere, and tone. Moreover, becoming an effective storyteller will take some experience, as well as trial and error. The curator must find his/her voice.

The challenge of crafting a narrative intrigues me on a professional level because it offers a marriage between my previous work as a historian and my future career as a manager of cultural heritage resources. In approaching history from an academic perspective, my focus was

primarily on entering into a scholarly discourse from the vantage point of my research interests; finding resources that supported my thesis. The curator has an entirely different angle on the very same basic activity. Rather than beginning with a thesis and finding artifactual supporting evidence, the curator is able to start with the object and determine what types of stories it can tell that would be compelling for an audience. I find this reframing of the work of history to be a compelling and worthwhile undertaking.

Participatory, open-ended exhibition design intrigues me as a means to use narrative structures to teach the historical method—all while posing substantive historical questions for the visitor to consider. This narrative structure serves as a rough analog to a mystery novel: visitors are drawn into the story because they are actively engaged in trying to solve the questions posed in the narrative by connecting the dots between objects and evidence. The process of performing historical analysis should not be the realm of historians, it should belong to everyone. And I feel as though narrative structures are the best means for achieving this ideal.

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[1] John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, "Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds? Toward an Evolutionary Theory of Aesthetics, Fiction and the Arts," *SubStance* 30, no. 1/2 (2001): 9.

[2] G. Ellis Burcaw, *Introduction to Museum Studies* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1997), 18-20.

[3] Ibid., 24.

[4] Leslie Bedford, "Storytelling: The Real Work of Museums," *Curator* 44, no. 1 (January 2001): 27-34.

[5] Ibid., 29.

[6] Jean-Paul Martinon, "Museums, Plasticity, Temporarlity," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (2006): 157.

[7] Laura Hourston Hanks, "Narrative, Story, and Discourse: The Novium, Chichester," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 58, no. 1 (January 2015): 27-39.

[8] Ibid., 32.

[9] Nikos Bubaris, "Sound in Museums – Museums in Sound," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 29, no. 4 (July 2014): 391-402.

[10] Tony Bennet, "Civic Seeing" *A Companion to Museum Studies*, Sharon Macdonald, ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 247.

[11] Annika Wolff, Paul Mulholland, and Trevor Collins, "Storyspace: A Story-Driven Approach for Creating Museum Narratives," self-published, accessed on April 28, 2015, http://people.kmi.open.ac.uk/paulm/hypertext-2012.pdf.

[12] David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (New York: AltamMira Press, 2010), 47.

[13] Mark. A Greene, "The Messy Business of Remembering," *Archival Issues* 28, no. 2 (2003-2004), 95-103.

[14] Ibid., 96.

[15] Ibid., 100.

[16] Shawn M. Rowe, James V. Wertsch, and Tatyana Kosyaeva, "Linking Little Narratives to Big Ones: Narrative and Public Memory in History Museums," *Culture & Psychology* 8, no. 1 (2002), 96-112.

[17] Bedford, 31.

[18] Christopher Clarke-Hazlett, "Interpreting Environmental History through Material Culture," *Material History Review* 46 (Fall 1997): 5.

[19] Richard Rabinowitz, "Eavesdropping at the Well: Interpretive Media in the *Slavery in New York* Exhibition," *The Public Historian* 35, no. 3 (August 2013), 8-45.

[20] James B. Gardner, "Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public," *The Public Historian* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 12-21.

[21] Ibid., 19.