

Hands-On: Hypermedia & Interactivity in Museums

Hands-On: A 1995 Snapshot of the Evolution of Interactive Multimedia

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When the First International Conference on Hypermedia and Interactivity in Museums was being organized in 1991, the concept of interactive multimedia systems was equivalent to single workstation kiosks with drives that read videodisks or the new CD-ROM technologies. The debates of the day were about whether digital or analog storage provided better assurance for the future and about how best to install the kiosks within museum exhibits.

By the 1993 conference the focus had shifted to CD-ROM publications, reflecting the widespread sales of computers with CD-ROM drives and the victory of digital over analog. The debates that raged hottest were about intellectual property and about distribution avenues.

Here we are two years later and we find the focus of the ICHIM Conference has shifted again. This time the emphasis is on remote access to interactive multimedia, made possible in the past year by the explosion of the World Wide Web which didn't even exist when we held our meeting in 1993. The papers in this volume reflect the evolution of mechanisms for delivering interactive multimedia, the new social and institutional arrangements they engender, and the continuing importance of the underlying issue of intellectual property. We are witnessing an explosive growth in the size of the potential audience for each of our multimedia products that is brought about by the method of distribution rather than by any investment on the part of museums. Even the best kiosk implementation in the busiest of museums would have been seen by fewer than 500 people a day, while CD-ROM's would be likely to reach several thousand people over a longer period of time and the World Wide Web sites of many museums attract as many as 10,000 visitors a week.

But the more important implication lies directly below the surface - these new visitors are people outside our traditional constituency. Reaching them not only means exploiting new delivery mechanisms, it means new collaborations and partnerships. It means working together with other cultural institutions, working together with other professionals within our museums, and working to identify new sources of technology support and money and to forge successful relations with them. This is, of course, a great opportunity, but it is also a significant challenge.

The tensions attached to change are nowhere more evident than when we confront new technologies. In the fall of 1995 the situation of intellectual property law worldwide remained in a state of flux. In the United States, the government had just issued its White Paper on Intellectual Property and the National Information Infrastructure. In Europe the European Commission Green Paper of July 1995 was being hotly debated. Much of the future of reaching broader audiences through dissemination of multimedia in digital form hung in balance. In this volume these issues are dealt with in both a theoretical pragmatic fashion, with concrete advice to museums on good practices.

The Conference itself was an opportunity to take stock of the past five years of progress and the future before us. The plenary session papers by Suzanne Thorin, reflecting on the Library of Congress experience with the American Memory project and the foundation that provides for the new National Digital Library Program, and by Alex Morrison, reflecting on lessons learned from five years of MicroGallery implementations, set the stage for dozens of papers over three days by speakers from over 20 countries. This volume is devoted to the papers which address the theme "Hands-On". It hopes to illustrate the state of interactive multimedia practice in museum today and report what those with their 'hands on' the daily work of bringing multimedia into museums are doing and thinking.