IxD Lab1 2008 - SPOOK - Stakeholders interviews

During our user studies we conducted two interviews with education experts working for international museums. What follows are the texts of the conversations with Sarah Longair and Shana Forlani. Many thanks for their precious suggestions. We would also like to thank the British Museum, London and Venice Guggenheim Museum, Venice for their kind cooperation.

Email interview with Sarah Longair (Schools and Young Audiences Education Manager, Department of Learning and Audiences, British Museum, London), 3rd December 2008

Q: In your museum what attention is given to spreading technologies among pre-teens?

A: We have a digital centre which is currently being refurbished which will offer schools sessions using digital media to explore the collections - take photos around the museum, research them, manipulate images, do slideshows etc. We have a special families audiotour although have not yet incorporated mobile devices, although our interpretation team keep abreast of these developments.

Q: We believe introducing technology and play in a child experience when visiting a museum, might be an appealling way of attracting a younger target. Do you fear this might be an unappropriate educational approach?

A: My experience at the previous gallery where I worked, Dulwich Picture Gallery, we piloted using palmpilots with bespoke educational activities which assisted them in exploring paintings. This programme involved a 'follow-up' element, where their answers which they input into the programme were saved on a website that could then be accessed back at school to develop their work. At that time (2003 - 5), mobile technologies belonging to individuals were not sophisticated enough to support such programmes. Our evaluation showed that it was incredibly good at engaging young people - especially those who were not accustomed to visiting museums. They were adept at using the technology which gave them a fantastic 'way in' to exploring unfamiliar paintings and art works. However, the programmes, which added a lot of information, had to be carefully designed so as not to focus the students at looking at the device, rather than the picture. See: http://www.streetaccess.co.uk/SA/pages/museums.html for more information on this project and downloads at the bottom.

Q: There is a growing attention towards educational programmes in museums; a common way is to organize workshops and/or to attract younger visitors with online applications. Do you think a mobile application could be innovative?

A: From my experience it engaged teenagers in a way which I hadn't seen them focus before, as it is personal way of exploring museums, which can feel unfamiliar and intimidating. Being able to access information, games, questions which help them engage with the artefacts on a device familiar to them is a particularly strong approach.

Q: Do you think a mobile application for children would be valuable for a museum? Which aspects would affect most a decision on such a project?

A: In theory the educational/fun learning approach would be the priority, although practicalities and costs would most probably take precedence. Does the museum require equipment/expertise? Could it be downloaded prior to arrival on the user's own device? If so, how would they know about it? If they bring their own devices, how do they get access to the right programme on site? Does it require its own manned kiosk? What evidence would there be for the museum of positive engagement - i.e. how to evaluate it? Would it cluster groups of children around particular objects/paintings and what might the impact of this be?

The other aspect you would have to justify is what makes it different and better from a paper trail around the museum (which has its own advantages, e.g. allowing children to draw objects, cheap, low level involvement by museum staff etc).

Q: Do you think a mobile game that has some very moderate action (in the 'multiplayer mode' and 'time race mode') would be a problem for a museum (e.g. security, other vistors, etc.)?

A: It depends on what the action is - anything which involves kids potentially rushing around has implications on behaviour and the other visitors. Some museums don't mind and see children's excitement as positive, others are less tolerant. Asking the kids to do something to do would have to be risk-assessed - i.e. the museum is encouraging the kids to do something where they might not be totally aware of their surroundings, therefore be less vigilant, and can easy trip over things, walk backwards into objects etc. It's a worst case scenario, but the museum would have to consider them all before making it a public resources.

Q: Many museums do not allow people to take pictures of the collection (and some just let cameras with no flash), do you think this would be a big issue to be taken into consideration even if designing on a small scale?

A: Tricky to say - I loved the way in your suggested programme the children's photograph became something they collected. You wouldn't be able to ask a museum which didn't allow photos to make an exception for this project, I don't think - it's too hard for the museum to implement - you cannot have rules for one set of visitors and not another. You might consider a non-photograph option to promote to museums which do not allow photos, where kids respond with multiple choice/written/text message answers.

Q: We thought prizes children receive at the end of the game would be an important aspect. We don't want children to have a bad experience. Do you think this might be a better hook for our users and a good marketing strategy for the museum?

A: Incentives are good as they encourage the kids to complete it, rather than give up half way through. However, the programme shouldn't rely on an incentive to make it work - if it's transferable to a school group, for example, it might be less appropriate to offer prizes. The prize doesn't necessarily have to be something material - it could be a password to a website with more games, or something? I ran some family activities where if they completed a trail they could come and make a badge of an image they'd drawn on the way. That way, they looked quite creatively at the objects on the way round.

In UK museums, families are quite used to doing activities/trails etc which don't need a prize - it's certainly a good marketing hook as you say to get people interested in the first place, but I would think a marketing strategy should focus on the novel way of exploring the museum and seeing it like you've never done before, giving ownership to young people to explore the museum their own way, etc.

Interview with Shana Forlani (Education Department, Venice Guggenheim Museum, Venice), 10th December 2008

Q: In your museum, what attention is given to spreading new technologies among pre-teens?

A: We are particularly keen on using different technologies in general. We are now showing Cardazzo's work using touchscreens. Usually the only limits we have on technology concern spaces of intervention. Last year we worked with Vodafone to create an audio path that could be accessed from the visitors' mobile phones. Although we were not concentrating specifically on the target audience of pre-teens, the experience was very successful. Anyhow we always believe technology has to respect human interaction.

Q: We believe introducing technology and interactive games into a child's experience when visiting a museum, might be an appealing way of attracting a younger target audience. Do you fear this might be an inappropriate educational approach?

A: Yes and no. It is important to have a strong human component. The mobile phone should not be a "cold" device. And it would be best if children did not pay too much attention to the phone itself. For instance we would love something that also involves our young interns as a human presence.

Q: There is a growing trend towards educational programmes in museums; a common way is to organize workshops and/or to attract younger visitors with online applications. Do you think a mobile phone application could be innovative?

A: It would be really interesting to work with mobiles. As I said, we were involved in a project with Vodafone which was really remarkable. However, this makes me think of the financial aspects: Vodafone, for instance, was great sponsorship for us. We are now working on an online educational website but I must say, financial resources are an important matter.

Q: Do you think a mobile phone application for children would be valuable for a museum? Which aspects would most affect a decision on such a project?

A: The major issue in developing such projects is the yearly budget of the museum. We are a private institution that can mostly go on thanks to private donations. We have a good budget for educational programmes but at the moment we are already facing some problems with some graphic guides for children. I suggest you work out a budget for the application because what

seems interesting here are the low impact interventions and the relatively cheap costs to create a system inside the museum.

Q: Do you think a mobile phone game that has some very moderate action (in the 'multiplayer mode' and 'time race mode') would be a problem for a museum (e.g. security, other visitors, etc.)?

A: This is really important. When we carry on our workshops, the first thing we tell children, is that they have to behave appropriately inside the museum. We continuously try to give them the idea that this space is something special, to preserve. I'm a bit worried by the possible behaviour of children in a multiplayer mode game. Why don't you try to develop something that involves parents? I think it would be a lovely idea. Usually, we see a lot of families who come here to be together. And if you manage to reach two targets at once, this would be much more valuable for a museum.

Q: Many museums do not allow people to take pictures of the collection (and some only allow to take pictures with no flash). Do you think this would be a big issue to be taken into consideration even if designing on a small scale?

A: I'm sorry but I believe this would be a real problem for us. Unfortunately we have to deal with copyright. All of our collection cannot be reproduced, in any form without permission. I suppose you should find some solution, maybe an authorized database children can access instead of capturing details with their camera.

Q: We thought prizes children receive at the end of the game would be an important aspect. We don't want children to have a bad experience. Do you think this might be a better hook for our users and a good marketing strategy for the museum?

A: Personally I wouldn't give prizes. I think by solving the mystery and enjoying the experience is all you need. People have to approach culture as an entertaining thing. I also think children would not appreciate some gadgets. Maybe it would be something more appropriate for their parents, but we should still consider working with a reduced budget. Giving prizes means having continual resources.

Q: During a revision of our work there was a discussion about the graphics of the game. Do you think the style we designed is appropriate for children 8-10?

A: I really like your graphics. Mostly because I think it perfectly suits children that age and at the same time it would also be appealing for parents.

Q: Do you have any suggestions to improve our work?

A: I think you should focus more on parents. They could be a great side-user. Designing an application for children that could be used in a challenging way also by their parents could be a real plus. Families are an important target for museums. Good luck!