

# Curious words and public definitions: engaging visitors in the collaborative creation of a museum exhibit

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade or so we have witnessed a burgeoning interest in developing new forms of engagement with visitors to museums, galleries and science centres. Digital technology has played a critical role in this regard, providing novel means for visitors to view, inspect and reveal exhibits, offering ways to engage with new audiences and potentially extending this engagement beyond the single museum visit [1,6]. However, in many cases, whilst interesting in their own right, innovative stand-alone interactive exhibits can fail to resonate with the overall themes and character of an exhibition or gallery space [1]. In this paper, we discuss the development and use of an 'interactive' exhibit: the 'Interactive Escritoire'. This exhibit draws on recent innovations in digital technology, but is designed to embody the ambience of the museum and the character of the activities in which the original occupants engaged. The Escritoire encourages participants to contribute their own content to an exhibition. By considering how participants engaged with the artefact when it was deployed, particularly through analysing the details of the visitors' materials, we will discuss how the integration of conventional and digital artefacts can encourage visitors to creatively contribute to exhibits and exhibitions within cultural spaces.

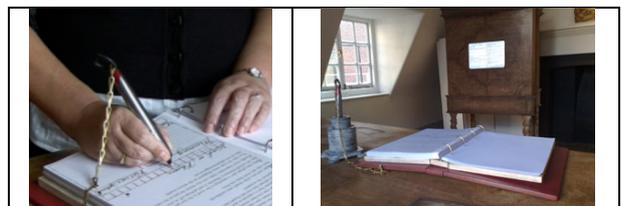
## 2. VISITOR-GENERATED CONTENT: THE 'INTERACTIVE ESCRITOIRE'

It has been suggested that with recent developments in digital technologies museums are now moving towards a second generation of interactive exhibits [3]. In the first generation interactive devices such as touch screens and mobile guides enabled visitors, in a constrained manner, to access digital content associated with an exhibit. More recently a second generation of interactive devices has offered visitors the possibility of contributing their own

content and therefore allowing for potentially more creative forms of engagement. In this study we discuss one such exhibit, one that seeks to integrate novel digital technologies into a historic museum space: Dr Johnson's House in London.

Dr Johnson's House is a small museum in central London dedicated to holding a collection of original artefacts associated with the life and labours of Samuel Johnson, who amongst other works, produced the first comprehensive dictionary of the English Language. The curators of the museum have long been concerned with exploring ways in which they can increase the appeal of what seems to be a specialist collection, and to encourage visits from people who might not ordinarily be drawn to a museum that is primarily concerned with the production of a dictionary. To celebrate the tercentenary of Johnson's birth the museum commissioned a number of artists to develop a number of pieces that would be placed within the museum in an exhibition called the *House of Words*. We collaborated with one artist, Jason Cleverly, to create a work that would provide a distinctive approach to engaging visitors with the collection and serve to encourage new forms of interaction with and between visitors.

The premise of the 'Interactive Escritoire' is that visitors emulate the historic undertakings of Dr Johnson, and compile entries to contribute to a small-scale modern day dictionary. The exhibit consists of a carefully crafted desk, sited in the garret of the museum, on which is placed an 'interactive dictionary', pen and inkwell (see Figure 1). The visitors write entries on the paper pages of the dictionary using an Anoto® Digital Pen which is kept in the inkwell when not in use. Their entries are also displayed on a screen in a cabinet at the back of the garret. Apart from completing fields for a word of their own inventing and its definition, there are few constraints on the visitors' activities. The system attempted to recognise the visitor's handwriting. The textual version would be presented alongside the handwritten original on the display and on the associated website ([www.drjohnsonsgarret.net](http://www.drjohnsonsgarret.net)). By providing spaces for drawings the visitors were also encouraged to illustrate their contributions.



**Figure 1:** a visitor contributing to 'The Interactive Escritoire' (left) and the exhibit *in situ* in the Garret of Johnson's House, London (right)

We gathered video-recordings of visitors using the Escritoire at various times during the three months of the *House of Words* exhibition. We also analysed all the entries

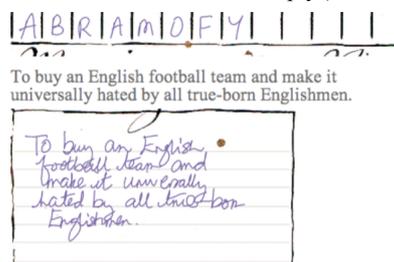
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the visitors created through the technology. In this paper we will focus on analysing the visitors' contributions.

### 3. DEFINING WORDS AND ILLUSTRATING DEFINITIONS

The exhibit proved very popular and visitors who produced over 700 entries. An analysis of the 742 moderated contributions on the website reveal visitors developing new words in a wide variety of ways. They created new words by joining previously distinct words together (e.g. 'MuffinBrain', 'lapoftheroom'), by merging and transforming a combination of words (e.g. 'Cycloptomist' 'Japorean'), and by compound creations of homophones (e.g. 'Horrorscope', 'escapea'). Visitors created new definitions for existing words, redefining words from proper nouns (e.g. 'Henman' defined as '*verb intrans.* To fail at the last stage of any endeavour'), nouns (for 'Redwine', 'help'), and they also defined neologisms, new words with new definitions (e.g. for 'Bonzer', 'lurgi'). They also carefully crafted new words, adding suffixes to names (e.g. 'Johnsonate', 'Abramofy'), verbs and nouns ('homelessnessless', 'hellacious', 'Dumply').



**Figure 2:** an example entry from a visitor to the House of Words Exhibition

As well as creating words and definitions on each page of the Interactive Dictionary there was a space for visitors to illustrate their definitions. Again, the visitors were innovative in how they illustrated their made-up words. To develop their content, the visitors drew from previous entries by previous contributors. In the video recordings they can be seen browsing through the dictionary looking at what already had been written. Although most entries were created by a single participant, they were often produced in the light of contributions of others and were designed to be read by future visitors. It is interesting to note that although the contributors did have the opportunity to supply their name in another box, few provided a full name, most leaving it empty, signed it with a pseudonym or merely gave a first name. This may be due to the public nature of the installation and that it could also be accessed remotely through the Internet, but the ability to remain anonymous may have contributed to the popularity of the installation and the numerous entries that were produced.

### 4. SUMMARY

Despite the novelty of digitally enhanced exhibits providing the opportunity for visitors to generate their own content, some commentators have raised concerns about the quality

and value of such initiatives [5]. Doubts have been expressed about whether visitors would want to embrace such devices creatively or perhaps be intimidated by them [2]. The Escritoire proved to be a popular exhibit that encouraged participation and engagement from the many visitors to the museum. The entries made by the visitors were often original and humorous. They were also addressed to particular kinds of recipients (i.e. the community of visitors to the exhibition). Through careful design, in this case by integrating novel capabilities into what appeared to be a historic artefact, in quite a playful way, and by offering a very simple way of entering content, it seems possible to develop second generation interactive installations that enable visitors to develop creative content. However, any success depends on the ways in which visitors interact with each other, both with and without the technology, and how they shape their contributions within cultural spaces for others.

Analysing how participants engage with exhibits within museums and science centres has been seen as a challenge for visitor studies [3]. Only recently has the field begun to draw from innovations in the social sciences [4]. However, when new technologies are introduced, particularly ones which involve contributions from visitors we may need to consider further innovations in how we bring together analyses of the uses of technology with analyses of behaviour in public places.

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