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Interactivity in museums: the politics of narrative style

> How can today's museums compete with television? Viewers are captivated by the action and excitement on the TV screen while museum visitors face only static exhibits in glass cases.
>
> (Stickler 1995: 36)

In this introduction to his short article on museum interactives John Stickler replays some common motifs in the way museums are defined in relation to contemporary media culture. Museum exhibits are perceived as static, unexciting and only requiring a passive form of appreciation; film, television, video and multimedia presentations are, by contrast, 'interactive'.

One of the contexts for this criticism is the way many museums have traditionally organized their exhibits, with a strong linear narrative which allows space for only one point of view – that of the curator/institution. Museum critics point to the ways in which this single, linear narrative is expressed in gallery designs which have a one way flow based on a clear sequence of exhibits. These spatial arrangements are supported by strong ideologies which determine the arrangement of the objects in ways which fix their meanings. The most obvious of these are evolutionary narratives whether in the natural or the social world (Bal 1992, Bennett 1995, Haraway 1985, Jordanova 1989). The effect of these narratives is that the visitor is unambiguously placed as a receiver of knowledge, as the end point of the production process rather than in an interactive relationship to the objects being displayed.

These critiques have developed from two angles, each motivated by quite different perspectives. The first has been an ideological critique, mainly from within the academy, which has pointed out that strong linear narratives make it almost impossible to achieve an equitable social representation. They bind museums to their historical role in the processes of imperialism, colonialism and nation-building. The second line of critique has been from within museums, and is usually motivated by a simple recognition that the traditional authority of museums alienates a significant number of potential visitors. This alienation has become a problem in a context in which a growing number of curators are arguing for an increased public and political role for the museum and governments are increasing the pressure for museums to become more self-funding.

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The first line of critique is most effectively represented by the 'New Museology'. Like the broader field of cultural studies from which it takes its bearings, New Museology is interested in questions about the ways in which power is socially deployed. The line of criticism taken by new museologists has a long history within cultural studies, and its arguments have been well rehearsed. Strong narratives, which gain their strength from a linear, sequential perspective are associated with a politically conservative ideology, while weaker narrative forms are associated with ideologically progressive political positions.

For Tony Bennett, for example, strong evolutionary narratives are associated with nineteenth-century classification systems and a design philosophy which encourages linear displays. This linearity encourages a mode of walking which is organized and pedagogically orientated. As Bennett says, 'locomotion – and sequential locomotion – is required as the visitor is faced with an itinerary in the form of an order of things which reveals itself only to those who, step by step, retrace its evolutionary development' (Bennett 1995: 43). According to Bennett, the pedagogy developed by this technology of 'organised walking' is not just about how people are represented. It is also a technology which 'saturates the routines of the visitor as the lesson of art's progress takes the form of an itinerary that the visitor is obliged to perform. The museum converts rooms into paths, into spaces leading from and to somewhere' (44).

The second line of critique is embedded in the call for a greater use of media technologies in the museum environment. As Chapter 5 made clear, such a call is aligned with attempts to make museums more democratic and accessible. Media technologies are seen as an important strategy in making museums culturally relevant to an increasingly media-literate society. Thus, in the literature on museum interactives, the point is frequently made that their presence enlivens the museum, turning it from a static into an interactive space, making it more entertaining for a younger audience, introducing a 'fun' way to learn. As Stickler puts it,

> [t]wo key words, 'immersion' and 'interaction', combine with newly developed technologies to allow today's museums to hold their own with television, films and video games. If the diorama is the stereotypic example of traditional museum presentation, the 'immersion' concept takes away the viewing window and allows the public to walk right into the exhibit.
>
> (Stickler 1995: 36)

Modern interactives are seen as effective counters to Bennett's 'sequential locomotion' with its didactic objectives.

Like Stickler, I am interested in developing ways in which visitors can 'walk right into the exhibit' and thus play a part in producing its meaning, challenging the authority of the museum to produce and regulate their subjectivity. However, I do not see this development as being dependent on the use of multimedia interactives within exhibition spaces. As I will argue, most of the literature on museum interactives frames these as didactic tools based on some form of mechanistic activity. Visitors push a button, touch a screen or manipulate an object

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in order to elicit information. Adding a multimedia station to an exhibit will not, therefore, necessarily challenge a one-way flow of communication which the exhibition as a whole may be premised upon. Nor does multimedia in itself necessarily represent a more democratic, open medium of communication.

If the arguments of the 'New Museology' are right and the problem lies with the use of strong linear narratives, multimedia interactives will not, in themselves, challenge the linear narrative structure behind exhibition design. Instead, exhibition spaces need to be reconceptualized as having to be interactive in themselves. This requires museums to move away from a didactic, hierarchical model of communication towards an understanding of exhibition narratives as polysemic and open ended. The first step is to redefine, in the museum context, what might be meant by interactivity. As I hope to show, this will also have the effect of pointing out that the discursive production of an opposition between a museum experience and an interactive one is unhelpful as well as a misleading description of many contemporary museum exhibitions.

The chapter considers three museums as examples of different approaches to interactivity. I will attempt to show how each approach to interactivity determines the narrative tone of the museum and affects the way history is represented. The first example is concerned with 'technical' interactivity and the ways in which this approach limits historical understanding in the case of the exhibitions at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. Discussion here will be related to the specific American context of the Museum, focusing on the links between faith in the democratic possibilities of technology and the American ideology of individualism. I argue that a technological understanding of interactivity is used to support a strong linear narrative which prevents any negotiation of meanings.

My second example is the Australian National Maritime Museum which makes an explicit attempt to provide an interactive space within the narrative structure of the exhibitions. Using the findings of a visitor study report, I discuss both the problems and the possibilities of an exhibition design philosophy which moves away from strong narratives in museums. I call this approach 'spatial' interactivity.

Finally, I will discuss the Museum of Sydney as offering a possible middle ground: attempting to use the concept of interactivity to suggest a new space in which meanings can be negotiated, while maintaining an explicit political commitment. This I term 'dialogic' interactivity. Before I discuss these museums, however, it is worth reviewing how interactivity has been understood in museums.

Interactivity and museums

While the discourse on interactivity in museums is new, the idea is not. As a number of commentators have pointed out, the idea of interactive displays has a long history. Kathleen McLean (1993), for example, traces it back to as early

as 1889, when the Urania in Berlin contained visitor activated models and a scientific theatre as well as to the Deutsches Museum in Munich which was experimenting with film and a variety of working models in 1907. McLean's choice of examples illustrate three of the main assumptions in contemporary discussions of interactivity – first that it involves the presence of some technological medium, second that an interactive exhibit is a physical object which is added to the main display, and third that interactive displays are something which the visitor can operate, that it involves physical activity.

Such assumptions can be understood as a narrowing of the concept, a narrowing which has occurred largely as a result of contemporary media. Writing in 1981, Bonnie Pitman-Gelles (1981: 35) had a much wider view of interactivity when she explained that interactive exhibits

> provide a sense of discovery or direct experiences with objects. They appeal to a variety of senses and generally require the adult or child to handle materials, play roles, day dream, operate equipment and participate in play or work. An interactive exhibit can be a single station involving push buttons or computer terminals, more complex visitor-activated units, or entire environments such as those at Colonial Williamsburg and the Florida State Museum's caves.
>
> (Pitman-Gelles 1981: 35)

While there is some overlap with McLean's definition, there is also space for an understanding of interactivity which sees it as an imaginative and conceptual activity rather than a physical one – it could be as simple as daydreaming, or an empathetic response to objects.

This breadth of definition has largely been lost from more contemporary discussions. Stephanie Koester (1993), in her discussion of interactive multimedia, can be taken as a representative of recent approaches, approaches which have a heavy investment on the part of multimedia companies. In her report for Archives and Museum Informatics, a company with interests in computer multimedia applications, Koester explicitly suppresses an older understanding of interactivity in favour of a more narrow, technologically oriented definition. She points out that the older definition saw many levels of interactivity, including the ability of free movement throughout the museum and the use of various media (objects, labels, pamphlets, audio tape, guide) to experience the exhibitions. However, she makes a distinction between this type of multimedia experience and interactive multimedia which she defines as

> computer-generation technologies that incorporate multiple media, such as text, sound, video, or graphics, into an integrated computer system, which then serves as an exhibit that can inform the visitor on a relevant museum topic using the most appropriate communications media.
>
> (Koester 1993: 9)

In indicating that she will only deal with the latter form of interactive multimedia, Koester limits discussion about interactivity to 'technical' interactivity. This prevents an understanding of more general ways in which museum

exhibitions can be understood as interactive and thus as part of a media-oriented contemporary culture.

As a consequence of this perspective, interactivity seems to be generally understood as something which can be added to an already existing display and which most often involves some form of electronic technology. This has major implications, as the notion of interactivity becomes limited to the use of 'interactives', something which is designed by educators and designers in association with computer experts rather than something which is integral to the curation and design of an exhibition. Such a view is reflected in policy documents, such as the corporate plan from the British Science Museum during its redevelopment in the early 1990s. The plan proposed that as part of the redevelopment of the site, the museum would 'devote 15 per cent of the floorspace in the existing building to interactives' and that it would 'increase this proportion to 25 per cent when the new building extension, the West End Development, is complete' (Thomas 1994: 33).

Much of the literature on interactives sustains this approach with its emphasis on the dos and don'ts of museum interactives. For example, an article in the February issue of *Museums Journal* (1993) accepts the common equation of interactivity with computer technology. Given this, the task is to 'set out the options and give guidelines for successful multimedia installations' (Lewis 1993: 33). For Peter Lewis, those involved with the design of interactives have to ask the following basic questions:

> Is it a stand-alone educational tool?
> Is it part of the overall interpretation of the story being told in the gallery?
> Is it merely for entertainment?
> Is it being targeted at a specific age group?
> Will it consist of a single workstation or multiple positions?
> Who is the audience?
>
> (Lewis 1993: 33)

The next decision, according to Lewis, is to decide 'whether the display will be mechanical or audio-visual'. A list of technical advice then follows for each choice.

It is not surprising, given this approach, that interactivity is a topic of discussion for museum educators, children's museums, science centres and multimedia producers rather than history or art curators. This division is further deepened by suspicion on the part of curators that interactives are merely a form of entertainment rather than a philosophy which could improve museum communication. As John Stevenson admits, 'interactive centres are popular with visitors but their popularity makes some of us uneasy; we wonder how effective they may be and whether they have been established just to attract visitors rather than for educational reasons' (Stevenson 1994: 30). The opposition between education and entertainment is never far from the surface in these discussions, as is the assumption that interactives are mainly for children. As David Phillips argues, 'the interactive business has been mainly about making kids feel at

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home in museums, explaining, say, how aerofoils work in an annexe to a flight gallery' (Phillips 1994: 28). While no doubt this is tied to an older model of education in a museum context, it is also one of the factors preventing the concept of interactivity from gaining more widespread acceptance. It is something which is seen as appropriate in children's museums but not in adult ones. Hence, interactivity is most often discussed in the context of museum education with children as the main learners.

One consequence of this is that much of the discussion around interactivity, while it professes to be more open than traditional museum displays, is in fact concerned with models of learning which involve a simple communicative process – from the museum to the visitor. Thus, for example, McLean (1993: 95) states that designing an interactive exhibit 'requires an ability to integrate communication goals (what you want the visitor to *learn*) with behavioural goals (what you want the visitor to *do*), and even emotional goals (what you want the visitor to *feel*)' (italics in original text). Clearly, the assumption is that the museum defines what is being communicated and that the task of an interactive exhibit is to communicate that information effectively and fully. There is no space in this conception of interaction for visitors to make their own meanings or affect the display in some way – that is for a two-way model of communication. More than an educational tool, interactives are also management tools which are useful not only in communicating information but also in regulating behaviour and psychological states.

Even critical approaches to the effects of interactivity continue to maintain an understanding of interactivity as essentially technologically driven. For example, Andrew Barry's (1998) piece on interactivity in science museums is based on a definition of interactivity that assumes the presence of a technological interface. His main criticism is that interactives avoid the role of cultural and historical explanation. in the case of science museums this avoidance ultimately means that the new interactives fail to make links between the scientific principles they represent and the range of debates going on in society about science. They thus fail to communicate the value of science to society as well as its limitations. Reread from my perspective, however, Barry's criticisms could be made stronger if he engaged with the way in which interactivity is defined. While I entirely agree with him that contemporary interactives are not used for the role of cultural and historical explanation, I locate the reasons for this absence to the way in which interactivity is conceptualized. If we change the ways in which we think about it, it might also be possible to change the ways museums think about the function of interactivity. This is a suggestion that underlies my analysis of the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.

Technological interactivity and its limitations: the Museum of Tolerance

A very clear example of the limitations of a technical focus in designing interactive displays is the Beit Hashoah Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. This

is a museum with a serious message – to explain how intolerance is alive in contemporary society and to combat its spread, using the Holocaust as the ultimate example. While the aims of the museum are a fine example of the way museums can be used to stimulate discussion about serious issues, I will argue that the Museum ultimately fails these aims as open-ended communication is eclipsed by high tech interactives. At the Museum of Tolerance, a technical definition of interactivity is used to support a strong linear exhibition text which is firmly embedded within a metanarrative of individualism. Intolerance is framed as an individual problem which can only be overcome at the personal level. Such a narrative framework and the way in which it is textually and technologically produced severely limits the possibilities for a more complex understanding of the social bases of intolerance.

Of course, there are a number of reasons why this museum may have chosen an interpretative strategy which focused on the individual. Perhaps the most obvious is the location of the Museum in Los Angeles. In presenting its purpose as combating intolerance everywhere, the Museum was able to secure public funding from the Californian State Legislature in a city where violence between and within different racial groups is endemic. As a number of critics have pointed out (Norden 1993, Rosenfeld 1995, Wiener, 1995), this led to one of the museum's central problems – negotiating the need to discuss intolerance in general while keeping faithful to an established historical tradition which depicts the Holocaust as a unique event which cannot be compared with any other.

This tension between an exclusive understanding of the Holocaust and the need to counteract acts of racial violence all over the world is reflected in the initial stages of the Museum's development. As Edward Norden (1993) points out, the initial plan was simply to have a 'Beit Hashoah' – or 'House of the Holocaust'. Such 'houses' memorialize the Holocaust, claiming a special place for it, apart from other instances of racial violence. However, this view of the Holocaust has been diluted in recent years as the term began to be used more generally to describe genocide and other acts of intolerance. As Rosenfeld (1995) has pointed out, the language of the Holocaust is now 'regularly invoked by people who want to draw public attention to human-rights abuses, social inequalities suffered by racial and ethnic minorities and women, environmental disasters, AIDS, and a whole host of other things'.[1] The idea of victimhood is used to link such disparate experiences of acts of social intolerance. As Rosenfeld (1995) explains,

> the rhetoric of 'oppression' has become a commonplace of contemporary American political, academic, and artistic discourse, and its exponents frequently take recourse to the signs and symbols of the Nazi Holocaust to describe what they see as their own 'victimisation' within American society.

In drawing a comparison between being a victim of the Holocaust and other instances of victimization, the moral imperative to stand up to instances of intolerance is strengthened.

This latter understanding of the importance of the Holocaust as a universal reminder of the results of intolerance underpins the work of the Simon Wiesenthal Foundation. As well as developing the museum, this Jewish human rights agency is renowned for its fight against racism all over the world. Such an association, appealing to a worldwide constituency, would quite naturally locate its fight within a universalist rhetoric with recourse to abstract rather than socially specific discourses. The Holocaust is thus produced at a rhetorical level as the greatest expression of evil the world has ever seen – 'the ultimate example of man's inhumanity to man' (Museum of Tolerance pamphlet). At the same time the Holocaust is also a source of individual symbols of resistance which represent the redemption of mankind. The idea that individuals can and should resist expressions and acts of intolerance is thus an important feature of American approaches to the Holocaust.

This approach clearly has a basis in powerful American ideologies of individualism in which the social good is seen to rest in the hands of individuals rather than in social structures. As the basis for American democracy, the ideology of individualism is produced in the museum as the main counter to intolerance. For in the twentieth century, it has been democracy, and more specifically American democracy, which is seen in America as having provided the main bulwark in the fight against Fascism and more recently Communism – political ideologies which are routinely identified with totalitarianism. However, the museum's approach to interactivity, based on a technological interpretation, has more in common with totalitarian than democratic approaches to cultural production. This is because their approach closes off the negotiation of meaning at the same time as producing high levels of crowd control. The ideological narrative might be one of individualism but the means used to express it are those of mass communication.

How, then, does the Museum of Tolerance combine a technically oriented definition of interactivity with an ideology of individualism while at the same time using mass communication techniques? Or, to put the question another way, what is the relation between the museum's use of interactives and the way the exhibition's narrative is textually produced?

The Museum of Tolerance advertises itself as a high tech, interactive museum. As its brochure explains, 'this high-tech, hands-on experiential Museum focuses on two themes through unique interactive exhibits: the dynamics of racism and prejudice in America, and the history of the Holocaust'. These interactive exhibits 'engage visitors in real-life situations that help to identify their own existing and potential prejudices' (Museum of Tolerance pamphlet). They range from computerized maps which at the press of a button show the existence and location of various hate groups throughout America to exhibits that set up a confrontation between the visitor's values and the effects of stereotyping, prejudice and intolerance. For example, an exhibit called *Matching Pairs* asks the visitor to select sets of images representing people. The aim is to reveal racial, gendered and class values which affect our choices. Such a display is reinforced by a cacophony of images and sounds that reproduce racist and gendered values

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amongst many other prejudices. The framework for an individualist under-standing of intolerance is thus set up. In going through each interactive, visitors are led as individuals on a path of greater self-awareness in which their own role in the production of intolerance can be recognized. In this, museum technology has a double function – to make the message of the museum accessible to each individual and to emphasize that the solution to the problem of intolerance lies with the individual.

The interactive capability of many of the exhibits is used to help the visitor monitor their own levels of intolerance and compare it with those of others. In an interactive on the Los Angeles riots of 1992, for example, it is possible to compare your reactions to the events with those of others. In this interactive, visitors are asked their opinion on a number of questions relating to the events of 1992. Their answers are tabulated and given back to them as a percentile of all answers. Technology thus becomes an extension of individual people, a cybernetic self-monitoring system which can be used to reinforce the message that social ills are a result of individual dispositions.

This technological monitoring of each person's level of intolerance is replicated in a number of interactive exhibits which point out the mind set of each person. Interactive exhibits are designed to test each visitor's assumptions about age, gender, colour and class. These measures thus become examples of intolerance rather than ever being used as explanatory categories. There is no class analysis of the Los Angeles riots, for example – only a statistical monitoring of where violence erupted and which groups engaged in it. Issues of class, race, economics, gender are not explicitly discussed as the basis for intolerance. They are merely presented as examples of it.

The use of high tech interactives to suggest that the basis of intolerance is personal rather than social is emphasized textually in the way the exhibition space is organized. What I find disturbing about this phenomenon is the way in which a message of individual responsibility is produced by a highly organized system of visitor control. A system which not only controls where the visitor walks, the order in which they can see exhibits and the amount of time they can spend in front of them, but also then fixes this experience within an individualist ideology. The narrative thus produced is strongly linear – in a chronological and ideological sense – and it has the authority of American culture itself. The result is an absence of space within which critical questions might be asked and a historical understanding of the events and processes gained.

The entire visit to the Museum of Tolerance is a highly managed affair. Visitors gather in the entrance lobby and are called together as a group, where they are required to show their entry ticket before they are allowed to pass a guard who stands at the entrance to the spiral ramp which forms the backbone of the museum. Visitors are then asked to follow the guide down the ramp into the bowels of the building. The experience of walking down the ramp is foreboding. One senses that difficult things lie ahead. On reaching the bottom the guide stops the group and explains that this is a museum about intolerance and the evil which it produces. The guide explains that everyone is intolerant

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and that the displays are designed to prove this. Each one has a message which we, the visitor must learn if we are to join the fight against racism. We are then asked to make sure we go through each interactive exhibit before we view either the films or the Holocaust section.

The language used is both moralistic and didactic – we are told how to think and what to do. This is reinforced by a right of passage experience in which visitors have to choose between two doors to gain access to the 'Tolerancenter'. The one on the left is under the sign 'intolerant' while the one on the right is signposted 'tolerant'. In case someone has not received the message, the guide then informs us that should we choose the door which says 'tolerant' we would find our way barred. The visitor is thus channelled into the exhibition space with their subjectivity already defined for them. The strategy is confrontational, even to those who are sympathetic to the messages the museum is interested in communicating. While this confrontation is useful in forcing self-awareness it prevents a deeper understanding of the social basis of intolerance. This is because many of the responses to the material presented are encouraged at an emotional level rather than from a process of historical enquiry. The effect is compounded by a sense of self-censorship in the presence of so much suffering which prevents the development of a critical, open attitude to the exhibition.

The Tolerancenter is a large enclosed room entirely dominated by the multi-media interactives discussed above. These are the stations which we must engage with in order to learn both how we are intolerant and the mechanisms which those in power use to produce us as such. The didactic aim is clearly to make us aware of these processes so that we can resist them. The multimedia interactives in this space have been designed within a model of communication which assumes a one way flow of information. They have a 'message' which it is our task to grasp. In McLean's (1993) terms they are successful exhibits in so far as they are clear in their educational, behavioural, and emotional goals.

At one level, the lessons these interactives have to offer are useful – they point to the way in which language has been used to denigrate people who are different from oneself on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity, colour, even weight. They show how constant repetitions of simple messages through a public forum such as the media produces ideologies which place one group in power and another as subordinate. They also show how these ideologies become embedded in the very structures and institutions of society. The point is made that alternative ways of looking at the world are erased, partly by achieving total saturation.

Yet, it is precisely this same strategy which is used by the museum itself to manage the rest of the visit, especially through the Holocaust Section which is the centrepiece of the experience. The techniques used are those of total immersion. The exhibits recreate the feel and atmosphere of living in Nazi Germany as a Jew, through a series of technically brilliant dioramas which are 'brought alive' through film and audio, replicating the experience of being trapped. In order to get out, the visitor has to go through each exhibit in the order in which it is displayed. The visitor is enclosed in a one way tunnel with the guide

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constantly monitoring the pace. Even if the guide were not there, the dioramas would control the pace of the visitor as they light up as the visitor comes through, activating their film reels and the audio recordings. Once these are finished, the lights go off and the next diorama lights up. There are no labels, no possibility to backtrack or to read again.

This linearity is further emphasized by the chronological presentation which starts in 1920s Berlin, a time of false optimism, through the rise of Hitler, his control of all systems of public communication, the development of the Second World War and its impact on the Jewish population, ending with the 'Final Solution' – the attempted genocide of European Jewry, described in graphic detail in a simulation of the Auschwitz gas chambers in the Hall of Testimony. At the very end, there is some effort to document the efforts of those who tried to save Jews, but this is framed as an exception which each individual needs to build upon. The design philosophy of the museum is thus a linear one, based on a chronological approach, while its curatorial intent is to achieve total emotional control of the visitor. This control is aided by the attempt to identify each visitor with an actual Jewish person who lived and more often than not died during the Holocaust. After the historical introduction to Germany, each visitor gets a computer generated identity card which they carry with them as they walk/experience the display. At the end, they are asked to return their identity card to the computer and receive a biography of the person they carried with them. Personal identification with the victims is completed.

What are the strengths and limitations of such an approach? On the positive side the museum encourages personal empowerment – a belief that the actions of an individual can make a difference. For Americans this empowerment is also the re-affirmation of their own cultural values. These values, which are seen as universal, can then be used to construct a space which promotes identification with other cultures. There is also the important work of remembering the Holocaust. On the negative side, however, this remembering is achieved by emotive identification with the victims rather than through a nuanced historical understanding. This makes it difficult to make historical comparisons with the present, despite the stated aims of the Tolerancenter. Nothing can be as evil as the Holocaust, no specific example of intolerance can be compared with it. An emotive understanding also preempts the possibility of looking for social reasons as to why the Holocaust and, indeed other instances of large scale racism, occur.

The problem is perhaps captured by Shane Maloney (1994) in his account of his family's visit to the Museum. Maloney describes how the emotional impact of the displays made it impossible for him to experience them with a spirit of critical enquiry. Silence was the only possible response. Remembering the replica of the gas chambers at Auschwitz, Maloney writes:

> In this setting, however contrived and grotesque, my pen and notebook seem out of place, a profanity. I put them away.

> We sit in wincing, self-conscious silence and listen.

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> The story we hear is poignant and horrible and concerns the means of selection for murder of a group of young boys. . . . The tape ends, but the silence does not.
>
> (Maloney 1994: 17)

The problem of silence as the only possible response is one which critics have also identified in relation to other museums which also memorialize the Holocaust. As Mireille Jucheau (1996) argues in her study of the Sydney Jewish Museum,

> it is perhaps not enough, now that certain forms of historical technique are being questioned, merely to present a set of stories about the past without reference to the processes that formed those stories and the context within which they come to be represented.
>
> (70)

This is particularly so with a historical event which most describe as unrepresentable. There is a need to capture this inability to represent by allowing for narrative ruptures. For Jucheau, these ruptures could be as simple as a physical space which disrupts the linear narrative of exhibitions, maybe even a dead end. For her, the Jewish Museum in Berlin is more successful in providing these narrative disjunctures than the Sydney museum, because it provides architectural spaces which go nowhere and which cut across the exhibitionary spaces.

Jucheau's concern for open rather than closed narratives is supported by her use of Saul Friedlander and his suggestion that an important aspect of historical representations of the Holocaust is the necessity to balance between emotive appeals and those which seek to envelop the experience of the victims in a protective distance. As he says, achieving this balance entails

> the imperative of rendering as truthful an account as documents and testimonials will allow, without giving in to the temptation of closure. A resolved account of the disaster avoids confronting some of the most troubling aspects of that event – its inexplicable quality, its multiple and disparate effects; the lingering symptom, the invisible emotional freight carried by its witnesses.
>
> (Friedlander in Jucheau 1996: 74)

A number of critics of the Museum of Tolerance have suggested a relation between ideological closure and the use of 'television formats'. A good example is perhaps Nicola Lisus' and Richard Ericson's (1995) work on the museum which attempts to deal with the contradictions I have noted above between an appeal to interactivity and a highly controlled environment. Pointing to the importance of televisual culture in informing the museum's use of multimedia, Lisus and Ericson argue that 'while the visitor is provided with the sensation of being in a "free-flicker" environment, the individual is not as free as she seems' (7). The museum, they argue,

> has managed to tap into and mimic the emotive power of the television format but at the same time has managed to transmodify it. The Museum

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determines what images will be seen, and in what sequence, all the while making visitors feel that they are passing through a free-flow environment.

(7–8)

They further suggest that this tension, while carefully controlled in the Tolerancenter through the use of multimedia interactives, is completely displaced in the Beit Hashoah section where the visitor is propelled completely into the narrative with no space for critical distance at all. The result is emotional empathy without historical understanding.

While I agree with Lisus and Ericson that this is indeed what happens at the Museum, I am not sure that the problem is entirely due to the 'televisual format'. For them the problem is with the medium being used – television, they suggest, can only produce spectacle. While recognizing that spectacle can have positive political outcomes in encouraging people to act from an emotional basis, they agree with critics of the 'society of the spectacle' (Baudrillard 1983, Debord 1988, Eco 1986) that rational understandings have no place in the medium. The problem with spectacle is that

> the visitor's ability to define and maintain control over the experiences that are imposed upon her is incrementally lost. The real – or rather those things that define the real, namely memory and history – collapses, in degrees, into the fantastic, the fictional, the unreal.
>
> (Lisus and Ericson 1995: 13)

While this is indeed a problem in presentations such as those at the Museum of Tolerance, where there is no relief or change in the mode of presentation, I would argue that the problem stems more broadly from American culture itself. It may not be so much in media images but their use in a society which believes in the democratizing effects of technology and in individual action as the basis for political change. The loss of historical understanding, and indeed the very way in which the Holocaust is understood and represented, has more to do with an ideology of individual free will than it has to do with television culture.

This analysis also throws light on those who like the museum's use of high tech to support a narrative of individual responsibility. For example, Wiener (1995) suggests that the museum presents its audience with a potentially radical interpretation of the Holocaust because the Tolerancenter depicts all visitors as perpetrators rather than asking them to identify with the victims. For Wiener, the political potential of such a move is enormous:

> It's a startling message, since our coming to the museum ought to demonstrate that we are among the virtuous. It's especially startling for Jewish visitors: How could we, the victims, be perpetrators? To suggest that victims can become perpetrators offers an extraordinary truth.
>
> (Wiener 1995)

Unable to see how this strategy springs from American culture itself, Wiener argues that the museum, despite a brave start, is unable to sustain the argument

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because of the need to depict the Holocaust as a unique experience. Thus, he argues, visitors move from being perpetrators to witnesses, losing their ability to act. Unlike Wiener, I would argue that the Museum is not radical but conservative, using a central American ideology to negotiate the tension between an exclusivist understanding of the Holocaust, which seeks to specify its unique circumstances, and the local American need to sustain a rhetoric of individual free will. It is this tension which results in a lack of historical awareness not televisual culture. Unlike Lisus and Ericson, I want to suggest that a judicious use of the medium and the ways in which it works can offer insights into history. It is in this context which I would like to turn to two Australian examples.

'Spatial' interactivity at the Australian National Maritime Museum

The Australian National Maritime Museum's approach to exhibition design presents an almost diametrically opposed strategy to that of the Museum of Tolerance, despite the use by both museums of film, television and photographic media. At the Maritime Museum, every attempt was made to avoid linear narratives. In the context of the above discussion, the differences in narrative style suggest that contemporary media culture can operate beyond spectacle and engage with critical perspectives. However, the move from a linear, chronological understanding of historical representation has its own problems, not least of which is visitor confusion and a sense that a public, group understanding of historical narratives might no longer be possible. I want to explore these questions by a close analysis of a visitor study conducted for the museum in late 1991, which tried to grapple with the Maritime Museum's approach to storytelling. As I will show, the study reflects the author's own inability to accept nonlinear narratives.

Towards the end of 1991, the museum commissioned a study of visitors' perceptions. Environmetrics Pty Ltd were chosen to conduct this study and produce a report. From the museum's point of view the report was to provide a series of recommendations which would guide it in making future decisions about the type of exhibits it would have, inform its marketing strategy and provide it with basic information as to who its visitors were, what they expected and how they reacted to the museum.

The Environmetrics' report criticized the museum for failing to offer strong narratives and routes which would guide visitors in their reading of the displays. In its introduction to the report, Environmetrics stated that 'many visitors had difficulty finding a logical and efficient route through the museum. Their experience of the museum is often of a "piecemeal" collection which does not hang together to build a strong story of Australia's maritime history' (Environmetrics 1992: 7). As a preface to its recommendations, the report goes on to state:

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> Many visitors expected from the name of the museum that they would come away with a global understanding of Australia's maritime history. They expected the museum to convey this in a linear fashion from the beginning to the present, and to bring it alive.
>
> (7)

Many of the recommendations are therefore aimed at instructing the museum on how to construct a linear narrative out of its displays.

Within the Museum itself, there was a lively debate between policy makers, curators and designers over whether museums should have strong narratives to direct visitors. For curators, the question of which form of narrative to choose is closely linked to a shift away from taxonomic collection policies towards exhibitions based on thematic collection policies. This is a move which reflects an ideological shift in the way the curators' position is imagined – a shift away from the curator as a source of knowledge to the curator as a producer (discussed in Chapter 4). From a policy perspective there is a tension between the museum as a 'national' institution and the need to service a number of different communities. While the national status of the museum finds expression in a rhetoric of national identity, political and economic imperatives partially deconstruct this nationalist rhetoric (discussed in Chapter 2). The policy of access, in particular, pluralizes the notion of a single national community. This is a policy which dovetails very well with the new orientation to market niches (discussed in Chapter 2).

These debates indicate that questions of narrative, and by extension of representation, cannot be understood as separate from the institutional, economic, technological and policy contexts that inform them. The debate over narrative is firmly linked to larger issues such as the shifting status of the state, changing forms of the economy and the shifting geopolitical position of Australia. Thus, for example, the choice for many curators is not defined only by their ideological position but also by the recognition that federal government funding is essential to the survival of the museum, a recognition which necessarily requires them to embrace to some extent a strong narrative of nationhood.

While all of these contexts have an impact on how narratives are spatialized at the Australian National Maritime Museum I want to concentrate on the impact of the media and bring the discussion back to interactivity. The museum's use of the notion of interactivity relies on a particular use of narrative which owes little to an understanding of media as spectacle. An analysis of this use makes it possible to develop not only an alternative understanding of interactivity as non-technological; it also allows for a more complex reading of the impact of televisual culture on museums than that normally articulated by critics of 'info-tainment'. Discussion will centre first on issues of design through a number of design policy documents produced by or for the National Maritime Museum which will be contrasted with the views of Environmetrics. This will then become the basis for a broader exploration of the issues which are raised in these reports.

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Narrative as a design issue

In one of its earliest design policy statements, the newly formed National Maritime Museum signalled its interest in breaking down large narrative structures to a level which enabled the viewer to establish a personal connection with the display. The *Exhibition Master Plan* of 1986 stated that 'Large ideas and large artifacts will be reduced to a personal scale so that the visitor will more readily be able to relate to the exhibition' (Exhibition Design Services Pty Ltd 1986: 5). The importance of allowing the visitor to make connections with the exhibits was understood to work at a variety of different levels:

> The visitor's involvement with the exhibition is dependent on his/her knowledge at the time. There must therefore be many levels and ways in which a visitor can make contact with the exhibition and develop an interest in it: emotional, physical, intellectual, associational etc.
>
> (1986: 7)

This desire to involve visitors at various levels reflects an approach to interactivity which demands input from both the viewer and display. The approach is one which sees communication as a two way process without a predetermined hierarchy in which the museum's mission is to educate an uneducated visitor. The visitors themselves are to have an active role in the process, becoming co-authors in the production of meanings. Significantly, this activity is not defined by the use of technology in the first instance. The museum papers do not discuss the use of interactives but identify a need to make the museum space an interactive one.

By 1987, the museum design team, working with consultants, had come to the realization that in order to establish smaller displays and themes which made such interactive processes possible, it was important to establish a separate identity for each thematic display. This meant that each theme had to be physically separate and have its own design philosophy. However, at the same time, there was a need for some sort of unifying structure or principle which linked the exhibits and helped the visitors in orienting themselves:

> A visitor will be confronted with a vast array of ideas, concepts, objects, and elements. A confused and fatiguing experience can result unless these confrontations can be structured, by design, into a hierarchy. This hierarchy will assist the visitors in finding their way around the Museum, focusing on those elements of interest to them, and extracting the level of information their interest demands.
>
> (Australian National Maritime Museum 1987b: 19)

Thus, though each display was to stand on its own, it was recognized that some ordering principle was still required, a principle which both linked and recognized the separate identity of each display.

The problem was solved by a circulation structure which would guide the flow of people around the museum but which would, at the same time, help to establish the separate identity of each exhibit. As the 'Design strategy and implementation study' put it,

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these semi-permanent elements form the link between the scale of the building enclosure and the exhibits. Termed 'Transitional Structures', these elements will create a rational framework within which the individuality of each exhibition can be developed.

(Australian National Maritime Museum 1987b: 19)

This meant that the traditional linear connection between displays, which was achieved either thematically, chronologically or by object type was consciously rejected at the very early design stages. It also meant that there was no expectation on the part of designers and curators that visitors had to see every exhibit in order to fully understand the 'message'. There *was* no single message. Not only was each theme its own entity, but sub-themes themselves could stand on their own. Furthermore, in many cases, there was no necessary order to either the themes or the sub-themes. Everything was organized around individual 'vignettes' – displays which could stand on their own with no necessary connection to the displays on either side. While these vignettes were not part of a linear narrative, there was also the opportunity to make connections or contrasts between displays: 'The design of each individual exhibit must evolve from a knowledge of how visitors will move through it. The design should exploit thematic links, contrasts and relationships perceived by "serial viewing"' (ANMM 1987b: 20). The difference from the Beit Hashoah section of the Museum of Tolerance could not be more marked.

Understanding serial narratives: a media approach

This 'serial viewing' can perhaps be understood as the same type of process that occurs in watching certain genres of television and video clips which do not have a tight narrative structure – for example, soap operas and music video clips. The lack of a narrative structure with a clear linear development makes it almost impossible to fix meanings. Meanings are only made through the activity of the viewer. This is a process which Eric Michaels defines as a process of 'self-inscription' (1987: 91) and which I take to be the same in principle as the concept of interactivity. It involves the insertion of the reader/viewer into the text momentarily as the subject of the narrative. In facilitating this, Michaels argues, the electronic media has developed a format which offers the audience 'a vehicle for densely packed narrative information outside of any narrative line' (86). Genres like the music video clip offer a series of vignettes which are creatively juxtaposed in order to 'invite narrative interest without providing specific narrative content' (86). Video clips and other forms of electronic texts are

> a new form of expression which invite the audience into a space in the text created by distancing signifier from signified. In this new kind of room within the text, the reader/viewer is required to locate himself [*sic*] in order to search for meaning.

(91)

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Michaels' contribution to debate on television formats is important. Rather than understanding this culture as one of spectacle, in which by definition the viewer can play no active part other than to be totally subsumed by the text, Michaels offers a view of media texts which highlights the activity of the viewer in producing the final meaning of that text.

This is an understanding which can also be taken to the museum. The viewing of displays in a museum can also be understood as a process of self-inscription, particularly when the sequence of the displays is not linear but works through individual display vignettes which, if serialized through the activity of viewing, 'invite narrative interest without actually possessing specific narrative content'. That is, the displays are not embedded within a strong narrative outside of the

Figure 6.1 This photograph shows the entry to the circulation structure which looks rather like a gangway. From this 'gangway' it is possible to choose which display areas to move into, go up a level and have a bird's eye view of the Museum, or go down a level into the lower gallery where the Navy and Leisure exhibitions are located. The possible choices offered by this circulation structure can be likened to a hypertext program which has multiple entry paths and therefore the possibility of the construction of multiple narratives.

Photographer: Jenni Carter, 1991. Australian National Maritime Museum collection. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum.

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text. Self-inscription makes the process of viewing a series of images – whether in electronic form or in museums – highly interactive.[2] There is a space for activity on the part of the viewer which cannot be controlled by the producers of the video or exhibition but which nevertheless becomes part of its production. In a way, the interactive space allowed by this new form of narrative collapses the very distinction between a producer and a consumer. Both are involved in the process of making meanings which are never fixed. Predetermined routes or narratives are not part of the structure of this new form of text, for, within the new form, there is always the possibility of an accidental connection. The sequence of images can never fix narrative meaning.

The positive effect of self-inscription is that it allows for a pluralizing of narratives and therefore of perspectives and subjectivities. There cannot be a single narrative viewpoint and meaning is not fixed. However, this also means that the ideological valence of the text in question is not fixed either. This presents certain problems for theories of representation which rely on an idea of meaning as being fixed within the text. In semiotic analysis, textual representations are understood to mark a specific ideological position. If these representations are open not only to different interpretations but resist narrative within their structure, discussions about the ideological nature of the text are problematized. Texts can no longer be understood as operating hierarchically, from the top down. This does not mean that the activity of the audience should be understood as a 'bottom up' activity. It is not just a question of resistance to dominant forms of representation and narratives, resistance to narratives produced from the 'centre'. It is more that something has changed in the very structure within which representations take place.

Tom O'Regan exemplifies this shift in his discussion of Hollywood film which he bases on Eric Michaels' work with the Warlpiri community in Yuendumu (Central Australia). For Michaels, the success of Hollywood films in this remote Aboriginal community was an example of how Hollywood had developed genres which were open to multiple interpretations. These genres, Michaels argues, are less threatening to the maintenance of the local Aboriginal culture, than Australian-produced dramas and documentaries which involved direct representations of Aboriginal society – even where these attempt to be 'sympathetic'. This is because the latter are far more likely to break tribal laws. As O'Regan (1990: 72) comments,

> from a standpoint of cultural maintenance, Eric can consider it 'promising' that . . . 'the most popular genres appear to be action/adventure, soapies, musicals and slapstick, and forms such as game shows, entertainment variety, gossip and other types which invite the audience to construct multiple texts out of their fragmented semiotic resources. . . . As the least character motivated, most formulaic fictions, they may encourage active interpretation and cross-culturally varied readings.'

In other words, the further away a genre is from linear narratives, the more chance it has of crossing cultural boundaries. This also means that, for the film and television industries, questions of narrative have an economic as well as an

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ideological base. As O'Regan comments in one of his articles, 'for popular film, as with aesthetic texts generally, ranges of interpretations are actively solicited and even invited. . . . Indeed such pluralising of meaning is an important component of the "demand management" of Hollywood' (1994: 352). As he says,

> the 'conversation' between producers and audiences is designed to minimise obstacles to participation on the part of potential audiences, but this strategy of incorporation is achieved through a communicative inefficiency (which is exploited *most efficiently*) as propositional contents are bent further, opportunities for partial misunderstanding are increased and even encouraged. *And this is not a problem.*
>
> (1994: 339–340, emphasis in original)

The politics of serial narratives in museums

How, then, can we understand the negative reaction to serialization in the museum by the Environmetrics report? Why is it that the report authors portray the lack of linear narrative structures as a problem which the museum must fix? What type of exhibitions are valorized by the report? Are those exhibitions which are attacked for their lack of linear narratives in any way different from those which are not criticized? These questions will inform the remaining analysis of the Australian National Maritime Museum.

The valorization of linear narratives by Environmetrics appears to be based on the assumption that history museums should be organized chronologically. The chronological representation of the Holocaust in the Museum of Tolerance's Beit Hashoah conforms to this expectation. As such it is consistent with an image of the museum inherited from the nineteenth century. The Maritime Museum, however, did not fulfil these expectations. As the report writers noted, most visitors whom they accompanied through the museum had difficulty in finding a natural route through the museum:

> [T]here was a general expectation that the museum as a whole would have an 'efficient' route which would cover all the main sections . . . many visitors follow very convoluted paths which double back, crossover and miss whole sections.
>
> (Environmetrics 1992: 48)

The expectation of an 'efficient' route is also an expectation of Environmetrics who seem to imply that the visitors got it wrong and 'miss whole sections' (see Figures 6.2 to 6.4 for an illustration of this point).

For Environmetrics, it is not normal that exhibitions should require viewers to circulate and criss-cross a space. Exhibitions should be designed so that a one way flow is the 'natural' path. While, as Eric Michaels argues, some television and video clips have established a structure which exploits the lack of narrative continuity through serialization and the use of vignettes, museums are still

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expected to have continuous or sequential narratives. The lack of an obvious starting point was disconcerting for both the visitors and Environmetrics – visitors can walk down and begin with the USA–Australia gallery or walk up the ramp through a series of individual displays with no narrative connection and begin with the *Discovery* exhibition. Serendipity or chance encounters are part of the design plan of the museum, but one which is disconcerting to some visitors.[3]

The consistent characterization of this serendipity as a problem by Environmetrics is particularly evident in their comments on the requirement for visitors to make a choice about which display area they will see first. According to the report, the museum contained a number of points where alternative routes were possible. However, these decision points 'offered several alternatives without providing clear enough clues about what the consequences of each choice might be' (Environmetrics 1992: 51). One example picked out by the report is on the upper level of the museum, in the *Discovery* exhibition (see floor plan of the area). Here, the report explains, people are confused by three possible pathways: 'one leads further into the *Discovery* gallery and the other two (on each side of Fish on Poles) lead out of the gallery to the unknown, to "somewhere else"' (52). That 'somewhere else' is a display on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander uses of the sea. Although it is never made explicit, it becomes evident that for the report writers, a more 'natural' path would be to include the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands display within the main body of the *Discovery* exhibition.

While Environmetrics had no quarrels with the *Discovery* exhibition itself which is given high marks for visitor satisfaction, the placement of this exhibit to the side affronted their sense of chronology, for the absence of linearity prevents an easy temporal narrative in which the Aboriginal maritime experience is relegated to antiquity, with no links to history since European settlement. Thus they make no reference to the fact that many of the artefacts and practices referred to in the display were still in use. Instead, they chose to highlight the success of the display as due to the popularity of 'primitive art' (73). However, most of the objects were not art but maritime technology – boats, fishing nets and spears, as well as evidence of trade patterns with Pacific Islands.

The inability to differentiate between the two classes of objects is not an issue in the main area of the exhibition which deals with the 'white' discovery of the Pacific. It would seem that Environmetrics' disconcerted reaction to the placement of the Aboriginal display is based on a Western narrative about Aboriginal peoples which places them in the past, without considering that the disruption of this narrative may be deliberate. The assumed need for linearity thus makes them blind to the possibilities of critique which are part of the exhibition's layout. Thus the layout of the gallery is criticized for the fact that the most obvious entry point does not conform to the expectation that 'history is linear' (73). Had there been a linear pattern between the two, the Aboriginal display would not have offered the possibility, however dim, of being read as another experience of the sea which is contemporaneous with white Australia rather than prior to it.

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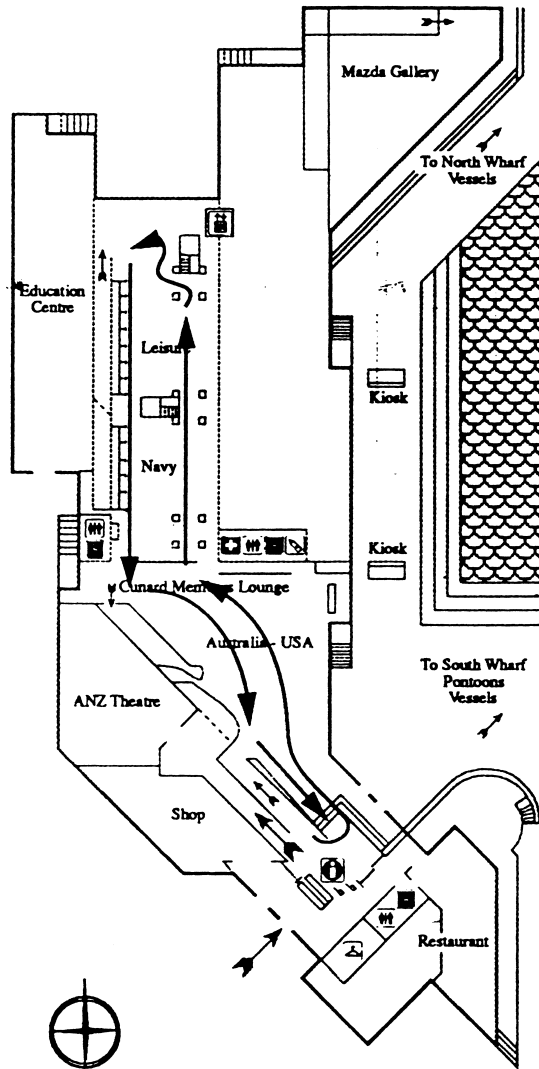
Figure 6.2 Diagram A: floor plan of lower level, Australian National Maritime Museum – first preferred route.

The route indicated here begins in the nineteenth-century side of the USA–Australia gallery. It then follows the right-hand side of the Navy and Leisure galleries and returns through the left-hand side of Leisure, Navy and the USA–Australia gallery. This effectively means that the serialized narratives within each theme are further broken down by the routes the visitors take.

Diagram in Environmetrics Pty Ltd, May 1992, Australian National Maritime Museum – Visitor Study, Sydney, p. 48. Australian National Maritime Museum collection. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum.
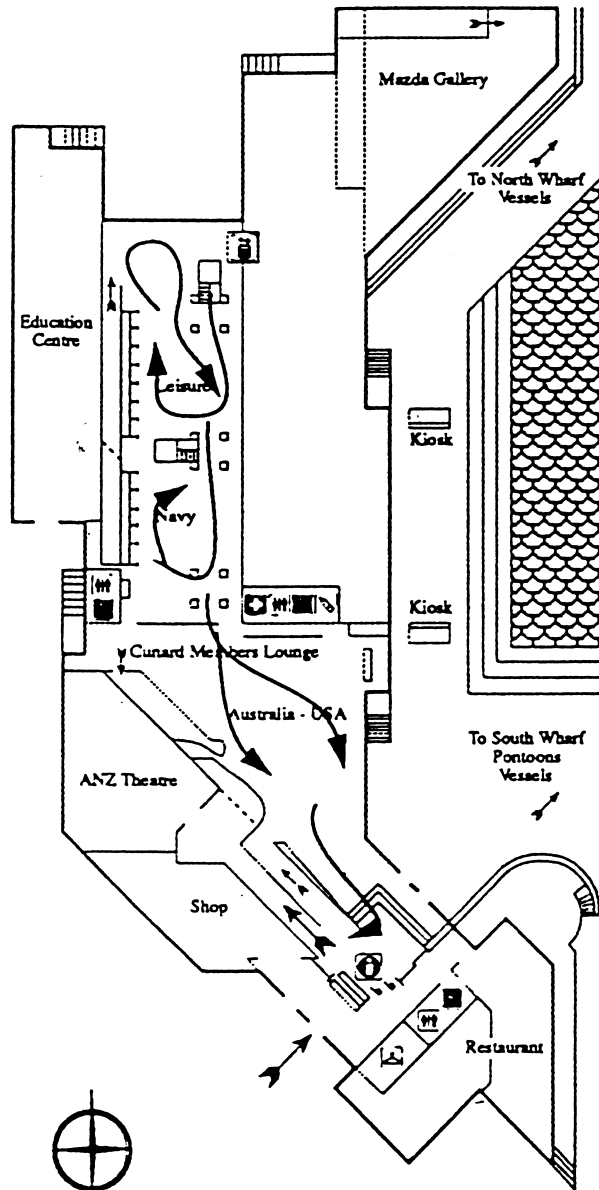
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Figure 6.3 Diagram B: floor plan of lower level, Australian National Maritime Museum – second preferred route.

The routes followed by visitors in this diagram show how their experience of the museum does not follow the traditional linear, sequential narrative structure. Instead, visitors double back and criss-cross over their own tracks. This may mean that they do not follow a chronology or theme in the 'correct' way. However, the serialized nature of the displays encourage this type of 'meandering'.

Diagram in Environmetrics Pty Ltd, May 1992, Australian National Maritime Museum – Visitor Study, Sydney, p. 49. Australian National Maritime Museum collection. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum.
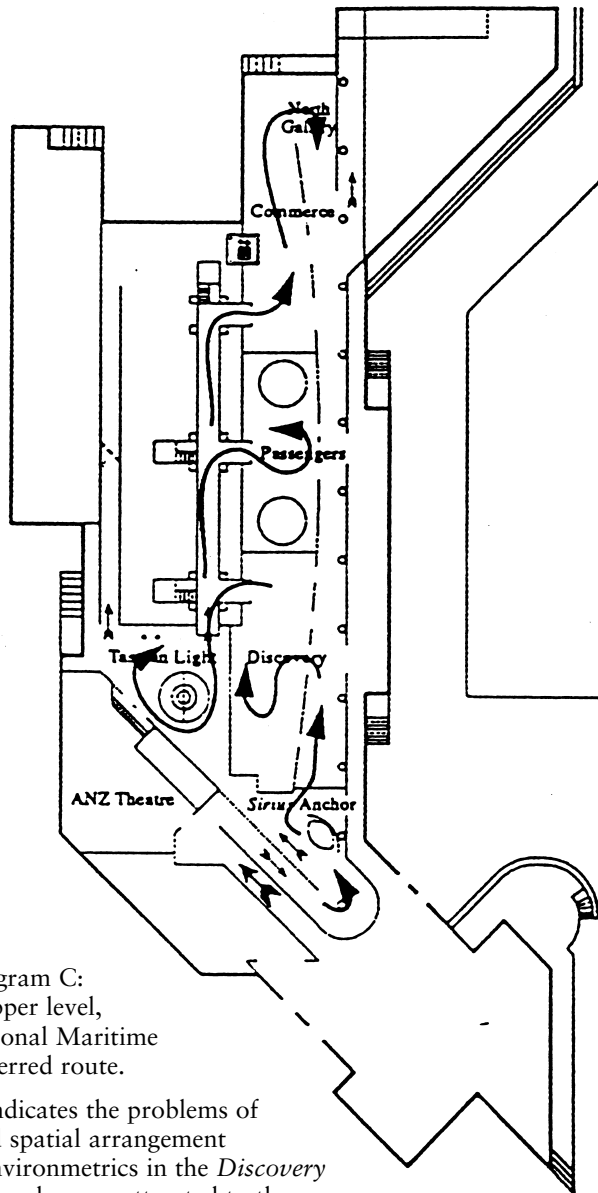
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Figure 6.4 Diagram C:
floor plan of upper level,
Australian National Maritime
Museum – preferred route.

This diagram indicates the problems of
chronology and spatial arrangement
identified by Environmetrics in the *Discovery*
gallery. Most people were attracted to the
display to the right of *Discovery* first – the
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island display. For Environmetrics it would have been
more 'natural' to place this display at the entrance to the *Discovery* exhibition from
the circulation structure (see Figure 6.5). In this plan, that entry is the exit from the
gallery. Chronology could then assert itself and the indigenous uses of the sea could
be safely relegated to a past prior to the the white 'discovery'. As it is, the two areas
co-existed in tension as they do in the subsequent reconfiguration.

Diagram in Environmetrics Pty Ltd, May 1992, Australian National Maritime Museum – Visitor
Study, Sydney, p. 49. Australian National Maritime Museum collection. Reproduced courtesy of the
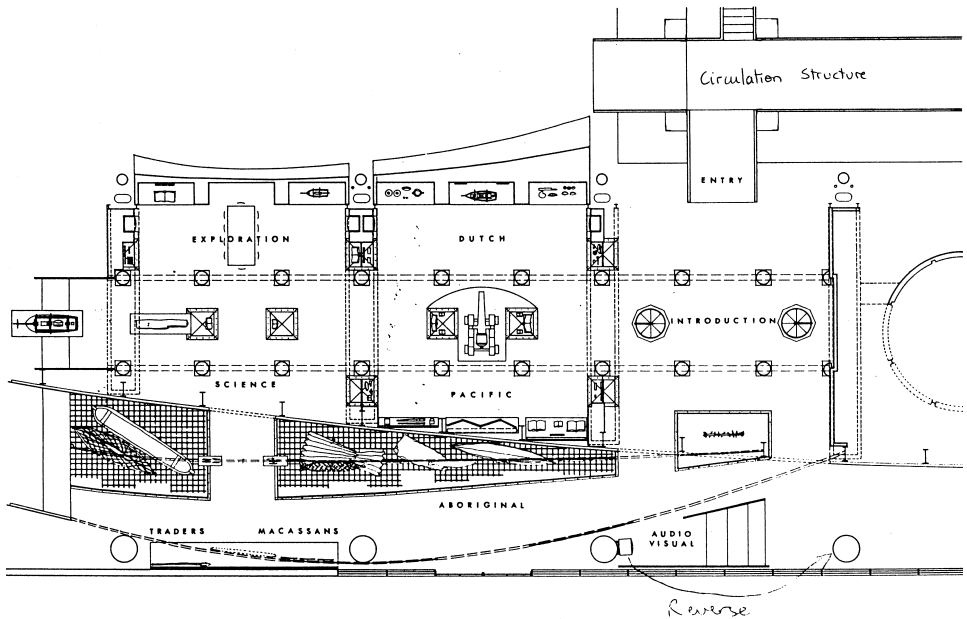Museum.

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Figure 6.5 Floor plan of *Discovery* gallery.

This diagram shows the original design plan for the *Discovery* and Aboriginal section of the Museum. The main entry was envisioned from the circulation structure. The introduction area with the two globes and the 'fish pole' sculpture as a background provided a choice for museum visitors – right into the 'European' discovery or straight through to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island display. The two galleries have since been redesigned as part of an ongoing process of research and evaluation.

Floor plan in Australian National Maritime Museum, Design Review, 28 June 1989. Australian National Maritime Museum collection. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum.

Serial narratives and history genres

The report's treatment of displays which do not deal with 'public' histories – histories such as those of the discovery of Australia – adds a further layer to the problem of narrative. For displays which do not involve public or national narratives, but are nevertheless organized according to the principles of serial narratives, are not positioned as problematic in the Environmentrics report. When a 'vignette' or 'serial' approach is used in more 'social history' types of display where 'ordinary' people and experiences are the subject of the display, the possibilities for establishing personal connections are highly valued. Here the possibility of interactive displays is viewed more positively by the report writers. Linearity and chronology are not constructed as significant issues in 'experiential' displays.

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Figure 6.6 This photograph of the original introductory area to the *Discovery* gallery shows the space under discussion, in which visitors made a choice between turning right or going straight ahead to the Aboriginal section of the gallery.

Note: This exhibition area has since been reconfigured. The introductory area now contains an explicitly contemporary exhibition focusing on the lives of living Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. It is also framed in a post-Mabo context, a context which did not exist at the time of the first exhibition's opening. The contemporary nature of the new exhibition prevents visitors from equating the spatial organization of the display with a conservative narrative which relegates Aboriginal culture to the past. Photographer: Jenni Carter, 1991. Australian National Maritime Museum collection. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum.

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For example, in *Passengers*, an exhibition about the experience of travelling by sea, loosely framed within the history of migration to Australia, individual displays are praised for the opportunities they present for individual and group recollection and personal identification. *Setting the table*, for example,

> was able to evoke a lot of memories for the people who had actually been on passenger liners – they could remember the crockery, the cutlery and it was one of the displays that helps people connect to the museum.
>
> (Environmetrics 1992: 77)

One of the more popular displays dealt with the wave of immigration following the Second World War. In *Refugees* and *Displaced Persons* the displays 'allow visitors to stand and watch and get into the memories of other people, which was particularly valued by older respondents in this research' (1992: 78).

The vignette approach was also considered successful if it worked by creating general impressions or images, a mood or feeling. This is interesting in terms of Michaels' description of vignettes as 'inviting narrative interest without providing specific narrative content'. Thus *Hazards Under Sail*

> does not overrate the objects, the objects themselves are actually fairly slight, being little pieces of china, a bit of a doll and a glass jar, so it is just pleasant. People look at these objects not to understand the object but to remember about shipwreck and the danger of the sea which is part of its romance and mystery. This display succeeds in conveying this very appropriately.
>
> (Environmetrics 1992: 75–76)

The social history displays allowed for emotional involvement or interaction on the part of the viewer which came close to Michaels' understanding of self-inscription as the insertion of the viewer into the text as subject. Environmetrics put it this way:

> The key emotional experience offered by the ANMM to adult visitors is the opportunity for them to make connections with their own experience, history, or family history. These connections were exciting, thrilling moments of discovery. The shock of recognition often placed the visitor right in the museum.
>
> (Environmetrics 1992: 46)

In these cases it would seem that Michaels' claim that the postmodernist space is about 'self-inscription' and that this process is particularly associated with the electronic media, is having some impact on the way in which some museum exhibitions are designed.

Environmetrics' approval of 'mood' exhibitions and of exhibitions which establish a personal connection appear to contradict the recommendation for increased use of linear narratives, a contradiction which is never recognized. As the report recognizes, visitors get a thrill out of discovering themselves as the subject of the exhibition. This thrill is amplified if the discovery happens by chance:

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people like to look around by themselves, and discover new things, rather than being shown around. People do not like their museum experience to be rigidly planned and organised. It is apparent that, overall, people like to have their own discovery experience.

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The report then never resolves an internal contradiction. There is a perceived need for more linear narratives and a spatial structure which guides the visitor in a one-way flow. This is especially so if the visitors are to understand the 'global' story of the Australian maritime experience and if their sense of chronology is to be rewarded. That the museum might have consciously moved away from global narrative frameworks and a strong nationalist history which defined Australian society as a single community is never recognized. However, the need for personal space, for 'self-inscription', *is* recognized in the more overt social history-based displays. The report seems unable to recognize that a global theme, thematic routes and a chronological arrangement of the displays may well destroy the visitor's experience of discovery encouraged by 'designed serendipity'.

This tension is symptomatic of a wider problem in 'imagining' the museum. The use of linear narratives and their association with cultural master-narratives such as that of the nation has underpinned the definition of the museum as a public space. In their singularity, linear narratives were universal. Thus it was possible to talk about museum visitors as 'the public' or as 'the people' as if they were undifferentiated. The narratives in history museums were likewise universal, subsuming the experiences and histories of different communities into the one historical experience of the nation as a single community (Duclos 1994). The introduction of social history, however, was one of the catalysts for breaking down this singular narrative. As individualized communities, people and places became a site for study and a subject for display, the notion of a single public began to disintegrate. This may have affected the museum to the extent that it too can no longer be understood as a public space in which the territory of the nation is imagined and represented as a fixed, linear, all-encompassing narrative.

The notion of the museum as a rational public space is further problematized by the effect of electronic technologies which encourage serial rather than linear narratives. As I have shown, the evolving nature of museum displays as a medium which invites narrative through the play of intertexts places the museum firmly within the logic of the electronic media. This is a logic which encourages self-inscription, that is the collapse of a distinction between viewer and viewed. For notions of a public space to be maintained there needs to be a distance between the representations of the public sphere and those who view them, a distance which linear narratives are designed to produce. Only then is it possible for the viewer to be integrated within the public being produced. Without this distance, however, the distance between the personal and the public cannot be maintained. The potentially limitless possibility for the museum to create more and more spaces for self-inscription make it almost

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impossible to maintain a distinction or a separation between the public and private spheres.

It is perhaps the disappearance of these certitudes which makes both the public and museum critics wary of exhibitions which refuse a strong referent. And yet, it is this refusal which may make it possible for museums to engage with history in more complex ways, allowing different perspectives to be represented. The danger, of course, is the lack of a curatorial perspective. The difficulty for those museums who wish to be less didactic and more interactive is to achieve a balance between multiple points of view while maintaining an editorial line which is not reductive. In some ways, the problem at the National Maritime Museum was a lack of a curatorial line. The Museum lacks a strong conceptual focus. It does not attempt, for example, to deal with the theme of the sea as an organizing idea. This means that its six themes – Discovery, Leisure, Passengers, Commerce, Navy and the USA–Australia gallery – do not coalesce around any discussion point. There is a need then, to develop an approach to interactivity which remains open ended but which nevertheless engages in a dialogue from a position. It is to this end that I now turn to my final case study, the Museum of Sydney. While it also has a spatial understanding of interactivity, this museum does organize its exhibitions around a concept – in this case cross-cultural communication. In so doing, it moves beyond 'spatial interactivity' and begins to develop 'dialogic interactivity'.

Dialogic interactivity at the Museum of Sydney

Like the Maritime Museum, the Museum of Sydney on the site of first Government House (MoS) also approaches the question of interactivity from a conceptual basis which is not premised on a technological definition. And like the Maritime Museum, the Museum of Sydney also has a strong sense of the importance of spatial experiences. To this sense, however, it also adds a notion of dialogue. This is perhaps best expressed by its first Senior Curator, Peter Emmett, who defines the museum's space as 'a spatial composition, a sensory and sensual experience; a place to enter, senses and body alive. Its meanings are revealed through the physical experience of moving through it' (Emmett 1995: 115). In stressing the experiential dimension of the museum space, Emmett is also stressing the notion of shared communication, of dialogue.

The subject matter of the museum is helpful in this regard, for it deals with cross-cultural exchange during the early years of white settlement in and around Sydney Cove. In an unusual move, the museum decided to go beyond the original brief of interpreting the historical site, which contains the foundations of first Government House, to interpreting the city of Sydney. This enabled it to set up a series of cross-cultural dialogues – between past and present, between indigenous and settler voices, between the museum and its visitors, between traditional historical knowledge and contemporary critiques of that knowledge.

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A little history

Since its rediscovery by archaeologists, the site of the first Government House has become associated with the clash of different cultures. As Sharon Sullivan pointed out, the site represents the clash of cultures, of different histories – indigenous Australia, penal settlement and outpost of empire (Sullivan 1995). Such a history is going to mean very different things to different groups in the present.

The site became the focus of public attention in 1982, when the New South Wales (NSW) government decided to lease the site for commercial development. The Department of Environment and Planning requested an archaeological dig before any building commenced. Begun in 1983, the dig revealed the footings of first Government House as well as a lot of debris dating back to the period between 1788 and 1845, when the house was knocked down. In the lead up to the Bicentenary of European settlement in 1988, these discoveries fed a growing interest in the origins of the Australian nation. A spirited public campaign to save the site was begun and an association called the Friends of First Government House was established. It included historians, archaeologists, heritage administrators, National Trust Members, the Fellowship of First Fleeters, the Women's Pioneer Society, the Bloodworth Association, opposition politicians and members of the media. In 1985, the NSW government finally decided to preserve the site. Over the next six years, archaeologists continued to explore the site and to recover material from it. When it was eventually handed over to the Historic Houses Trust of NSW in 1991, it was almost inevitable that different opinions should develop about the site's significance and the most appropriate ways to deal with them.

Unlike the Friends of First Government House, the Trust did not interpret the site's significance in terms of a narrative about the birth of the nation. Instead, it viewed the site as significant for its potential to articulate the relations between the process of colonization and contemporary political issues. Rather than being a museum to the House, focused on the site itself, it became a museum to the ideas and the historical processes the House represented. Thus, in its policy statement for the Museum, released in 1992, the Trust said:

> The most potent and provocative significance of first Government House site is as a symbol of British colonisation of Australia in 1788 and its subsequent role as the seat of British authority in the colony. To Australians in the 1990s this symbolism will mean different things to different people. Hence first Government House site becomes a symbol of different perspectives on how we see ourselves as Australians today.
>
> (Historic Houses Trust in Ireland 1995: 100)

Such a statement angered the Friends of First Government House whose aim had been to preserve the site for its significance as the birth of the nation. They wanted the House to be its focus. In their reply to the Trust, the Friends focused on the primacy of the site as a way of anchoring historical interpretation:

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> The foundations of Government House were laid in the same year as the foundation of the nation now known as the Commonwealth of Australia. They are the only known remains from 1788. The life of this building and its additions thus coexists with the Convict Era of Australian history. As such it represents a tangible record of continuous occupation and development not only of the formation years of Australia but also of the broader concerns of colonialism and imperialism in the nineteenth century. These tangible links, the very foundation of a nation, are unique.
>
> (Friends of First Government House site in Ireland 1995: 100)

While the Friends accepted that the site could be interpreted as a symbol of 'colonialism' and 'imperialism', they wanted such a history to be framed as the beginnings of the Australian nation-state. But the debate is not only about whether the site should be interpreted as the birth of the nation. It is also about the claims that can be made from the historical record. While the Friends of First Government House had no qualms about anchoring the interpretation of the site in a narrative of nationhood, the museum was working with a notion of history which saw it as a set of fragments which stood as metaphors for the present. For the museum, history is always an act of interpretation and as such it is an intervention in the present for the future. For Emmett, this intervention had to be located in contemporary politics: 'at a time when native title, British inheritance, republicanism – are front page news' it is impossible to 'sustain a museum dedicated to a chronology of events that affirm a nationalist mythology' (Emmett 1995: 112). This meant that the museum went on a mission to set up correspondences between the past and the present and by extension, between different cultures. To do this, the museum engaged both with New Historiography and with the New Museology. It became self-reflexive, developing displays which commented on past historical and museological practices. By questioning received ideas, the museum hoped to provide a space for dialogue, for public discussion.

This approach was also made possible by the fact that the museum had almost no objects to work with. The main focus of the site, the house, no longer existed. Only its foundations remained and the conservation plan stipulated that these remain covered. The archaeological dig had produced very few complete objects and these spoke mostly of the lifestyle of the inhabitants. There was little material from the site itself which could be used to explore its impact on the indigenous population, on convicts or any other groups. To explore these themes, the museum had to locate other material and work from the written historical record. These practical problems were also part of the context in which the museum decided to move beyond the confines of the site when shaping its approach to exhibition design. This was an approach which required extending the ways in which museums normally provide interactive experiences.

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Creating dialogue

How is the notion of experience and interactivity produced at this museum and how does it relate to the museum's view of history? At first sight, the claim that the museum is interactive might appear too strong. Push button computer interactives do not dominate. But multimedia experiences do, in the sense that sound, objects, visual images, text and video walls are combined in provocative ways. To some extent, this is what all museums do. However, this museum uses these media to some unusual effects. The sound of the human voice, for example, is used to create imagined and reconstructed dialogues, rather than access to oral histories. Text is used not in the conventional series of interpretative labels, moving from the general to the specific, but as literary and historical quotations engraved on to the wall surfaces. Graphics tend not to be photographs but especially created digital video installations which are an exhibition in themselves. The effect of this treatment is constantly to pose questions, suggestions, rather than finished statements which tend to fix the narrative in the authoritative voice of the museum. The result are some rather unusual exhibitions, both inside and outside the museum building.

Unlike the National Maritime Museum or the Museum of Tolerance, the Museum of Sydney does not have an imposing building. In fact, as Kay Schaffer (1996) points out, you could almost miss it. While this has a practical reason – in that part of the conservation management of the site was to cover it up and prevent any further building from taking place – the effect is to create an open public space which almost becomes part of the street. The museum is, to some extent, an extension of the street life rather than an imposition on it. This is reflected in the decision to have one of the galleries as a glass box, jutting out, away from the building and above the plaza. The effect is a double one – passers by can be viewers as well as viewed and the contents of the exhibitions inside the museum are visually linked with the urban space to which they refer. This lack of a boundary between the museum and the street is further reinforced by using this open space as an exhibition space with the aim of setting up a dialogue between passers by and the museum.

To this end, the plaza has two structures on it. One is an opening on to the ground beneath the plaza, exposing the foundations of first Government House. To anyone who stops and looks, it is immediately evident that there is something significant below the ground. The second structure is a public sculpture with a difference. As one walks through the plaza towards the museum building at the back, one is invited to meander through a stand of sculptured timbers resembling tree trunks which call for your attention with strange murmurings. On coming up close, one is able to hear human voices speaking in a now unknown tongue – that of the original inhabitants of the area, the Eora people. The trunks themselves house a core sample of ancient Aboriginal middens, attesting to the existence of another culture. This is further emphasized by the names of many of the Aboriginal inhabitants of the area at the time of white settlement which are burnt on to the wood. The signatures of many of the First Fleet Officers are also displayed on these trunks, etched on to metal plates.

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This introduction to the museum already contains many of its interpretative strategies. There is a constant juxtaposition of material remains from both Aborigines and newcomers. The relationship between the two is by no means a settled one. Second, there is the use of sound to suggest the possibility of communication, of dialogue, however brief it might have been. And third, the visitor is required to move in this space, taking in both visual and auditory experiences. It is these characteristics that perhaps best represent the combination of a spatial interactivity with a dialogic one and its potential for historical interpretation. The approach is captured in Emmett's comment that the museum's 'medium and methodology is about the poetics of space, the choreography of people, the relation of things and senses, spatial and sensory composition, to exploit the sensuality and materiality of the museum medium' (1995: 115).

This approach is continued as one enters the museum. Before visitors can get to the welcome counter to purchase an entry ticket, they have to come through a glass door/enclosure. As well as being a liminal space between the inside and the outside of the museum, this space is also an auditory experience. Paul Carter (1996), a historian with an interest in the possibilities of sound in capturing moments of instability, was commissioned by the Museum of Sydney to create a sound exhibition for the entry space. Carter developed *The Calling to Come*, an auditory experience based on the Diaries of William Dawes. Dawes was an Officer of the First Fleet, an astronomer and a linguist. One of the few people to have an interest in understanding and recording the local Eora language, Dawes' diary reveals his attempts to communicate with Patyegarang, an Aboriginal woman with whom he had a relationship. The diary is the only record we have of one man's attempt to translate between the two cultures. In the exhibition Carter tries to capture this attempt at translation between two cultures through a sound recreation of Dawes' and Patyegarang's attempts to understand one another's culture through language. The exhibit is difficult to understand – perhaps too difficult – but the attempt reveals in itself the difficulties of cross-cultural encounters.

Once inside the museum proper, the visitor is greeted by a three-storey high multimedia wall. The wall provides a constantly moving set of images of Sydney and its environs at the time of first contact and in the present. The Aboriginal presence is loud and clear. It is impossible to come away from the museum and still believe in the concept of *terra nullius* – that Australia was an empty land at the time of settlement. The landscape is full of human presences – both people and their material culture. It also moves from past to present, making it clear that there is a continuity of Aboriginal presence in the Sydney area. Addressing a younger audience familiar with multimedia presentations, this exhibit is not a touch screen interactive. Nor does it provide a static image. The constantly moving wall of images demands interaction, but on the viewers' own terms. There is no spoken narrative or label, only a musical sound track.

For the museum, the use of digital technology to produce these moving walls represents a shift away from a technical understanding of interactivity which

relies on mechanical models of interaction. This shift is also seen by the museum as symptomatic of a new understanding of the role of museums. In an interview with George Alexander and Kurt Brereton, Gary Warner, the Audio Visual and Computer Projects Coordinator at the Museum, pointed out that multimedia was used to provide one more layer of interpretation, one more visual and auditory experience. The contemporary nature of this experience, he argued, enables the museum to move beyond the popular understanding of museums as mausoleums to the preservation of dead cultures. As Alexander and Brereton indicate, this attempt also has an impact on the status of the museum's interpretation of the past. For Alexander and Brereton, this museum 'hopes to be less a mausoleum of dead cultural artefacts than a kind of electronic layer-cake of interpretations capable of being revoked or transformed' (1995: 7).

It is part of the museum's intention that its interpretations should be unstable and capable of constant renegotiation. This involves a recognition that history can only ever be a set of fragments about the past. The result is a multitude of small narratives, which do not come together to make one large metanarrative. To use Jucheau's expression, 'the seams are allowed to show'. As Alexander and Brereton point out,

> [h]istory is always a cobbled collection of fragments masquerading as a seamless picture of the way it really was. The question is whether you try to spak-fill the cracks and gaps or show the ruins and fragments as testaments to our desire to remake the whole with all the political, cultural and social implications attached.
>
> (8)

The Museum of Sydney makes a very clear choice for the latter.

This belief that digital technologies can transform the status of museum narratives is different in character from Stickler's attempt to argue that interactives make the museum modern and contemporary. At the Museum of Sydney, multimedia is not simply a technology which will turn a static space into an interactive one. Rather, it is a medium which is uniquely suited to a notion of history as a set of fragments. As Ross Gibson (1994/95) argues, the relationship is even closer; multimedia, and its basis in electronic reproduction techniques make it impossible not to question a notion of history which makes claims on the basis of authenticity and truth. Even visual evidence, Gibson argues, can no longer be understood as an unmediated attempt to represent 'reality'. Interpretation appears to be all that remains: 'suggestion and persuasion rather than unequivocal proof are now probably the best you can hope for when using imagistic and sonic "documentation" to present "truths" about the world' (Gibson 1994/95: 64). But, as Gibson realizes, interpretation provides an opportunity for dialogue, for an exchange of views. Translated to the museum, this means that historical interpretation can only be tentative and open-ended. This is an attitude which makes the museum open to the cultural negotiation of meanings.

This insight provides the basis for the *Bond Store Tales*, an exhibition curated by Gibson. In this exhibition, Gibson uses 'digitized image and sound systems

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to deliver ever-reconfiguring "micro-narratives" or "testimonials" about everyday life in the Sydney environs' (1994/95: 63). Interactivity is intrinsic to this exhibition because the order of the 'virtual exhibits' is not predetermined by the museum but by the activity of the visitors and the choices they make about which exhibits to linger on. As Gibson explains it, the Bond Store exhibits are activated by the movement of the visitors:

> as viewers move throughout the meaning-full space of the Museum, looking at objects and at images of objects, dozens of little histories combine and recombine, over time, in a virtually limitless 'metanarrative' pattern. The Museum visitors follow their curiosity and the etherial culture 'responds' by 'telling' some of the stories derived from research into the material culture. Depending on the chancy contiguity of story to story as the visitors wander and scrutinise, unstable histories get knitted together out of the micro-histories that 'arise' in any stint of vigilance. During a 30 minute period, therefore, a visitor can gather up a kind of demountable, questionable-yet-persuasive history, which is patently provisional and fleeting.
>
> (Gibson 1994/95: 65)

Recalling the practice of putting all goods in a bond store as they arrived on trading ships and releasing them only once a tax had been paid, the Bond Store exhibit uses the metaphor of a holding space to entice visitors into hearing stories from the past. While based on careful historical research, the characters represented through the medium of holograms are fictional. The stories they have to tell represent the clash of cultures which are part and parcel of a busy maritime port where settlers came into conflict with local indigenous populations, traders from all over the Pacific visited and attempts to develop a town continued despite Aboriginal resistance. The holograms which emerge out of black space as visitors move around the room represent convicts, Aboriginals, servant girls, officers and their ladies, visiting traders. They all have a story to tell which undermines received ideas of the period. They are like ghosts from the past, returning to haunt modern understandings.

Beyond the Museum of Sydney

The museum's interpretation of history and its attempt to reflect it through a 'dialogic' approach to interactivity is not without its problems. Some of these relate to the contested nature of the site while others have to do with the style of interpretation. The notion of dialogue necessitates the acceptance of multiple voices. This stance, however, angers those who wish the museum to interpret the site of first Government House as the birth of the nation (Friends of First Government House 1994 in Ireland 1995) as well as those who take the site as representing the moment of invasion and colonization (Hansen 1996, Marcus 1996). The former accuse it of being 'politically correct' while the latter accuse it of being apolitical or not coming down strongly enough on the history of dispossession.

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Representing the latter view, Guy Hansen (1996), for example, sees a 'Fear of the Masternarrative' as leading to a lack of political commitment. Uncomfortable with the notion that history can only ever be interpretation, Hansen accuses the museum of sitting on the fence in regard to the history of Aboriginal dispossession. Julie Marcus (1996) also accuses the museum of not paying enough attention to indigenous history. She sees this as an act of conscious marginalization. When put side by side with the reactions of the Friends of First Government House, it is hard not to conclude that the museum is caught between an interpretation of Australian history in terms of nation-building and another which sees it in terms of invasion and dispossession. The very fact that the museum can be attacked for either having too strong a narrative of historical revisionism or no narrative at all seems to indicate that lack of a curatorial perspective is not the main problem at the museum.

Debate about the nature of the museum's representation of history is also made more difficult by the methodologies the museum uses as part of its interpretation strategies. Many of its exhibits are like art installations. In fact, many of them were produced by artists rather than curators. However, they use historical material. This hybrid character – neither a social history museum nor an art gallery – is part of this museum's approach to creating a dialogic interactive space. However, it leads to complaints from both art and social history curators unused to the blending of such different traditions. It also leads to charges of elitism.

A major problem with the Museum of Sydney is its demand for high levels of knowledge on the part of the visitor – both about history and about knowledge production in museums. This is a museum for museum lovers and for those with an interest in contemporary media installations. It is not a museum for the general public. Its treatment of objects is highly aestheticized. What once was rubbish is displayed in pleasing arrangements, even if the message is still one of bric-a-brac. There is little attempt to contextualize the objects according to their history of use. Despite being a social history museum, it treats everyday objects as art. While this may be an interesting play on the nature of museum knowledge, it leaves those without the necessary knowledge unable to play the game. The dialogue has a limited audience.

The question, then, is whether a dialogic approach to interactivity can be developed in ways which speak to broader audiences, using their own cultural languages, while still dealing with important political issues. Further work is needed on the part of museums to locate ways in which dialogue can occur over contemporary social concerns using the language of popular culture. But a more complex notion of interactivity should go some way at least towards making this possible. I have tried to indicate a space for museums and contemporary media forms to be thought through together rather than as necessarily opposed. As I have shown, this also requires a recognition that interactive museum environments are not simply a result of the application of multimedia technologies to the museum space. Both need to be thought of as communication media. Questions as to how to make them less didactic or hierarchical apply to both mediums.

The Museum of Sydney represents a first step in this direction. In conceptualizing museums as a space for dialogue, its staff took the first steps by relativizing its truth claims. Interestingly, the Museum did this by thinking through multimedia technologies alongside historical interpretation. The next step might be, as Anne Curthoys (1996) perceptively points out, to represent this relativization not only from the perspective of the converted. The Museum also needs to represent some of the 'old-fashioned' historical narratives which it implicitly sets itself against. Dialogue would then take place inside the museum as well as outside in ways which might be less antagonistic. As the National Maritime Museum understood, narrative interest can be created by juxtaposition. Museums need to have the courage to use multiple interpretations of history side by side.

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