Evaluating the Social Context of ICT Applications in Museum Exhibitions

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Abstract

The spreading of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in exhibitions is, among other reasons, due to the wish of curators to find new ways to improve visitors’ experiences in museums. This has lead to an interest to understand if and how they really work as a museological and museographical element and assess their effectiveness. However, systematic studies in this field remain very limited or are not of sufficient depth. Although the technological field has a long tradition of assessment, this usually concentrates on technological, attitudinal or cognitive issues and does not take into account the specific features of the visit in a museum or cultural heritage site and the importance of the social context. This paper stresses the need to carry out and take into account the results of a systematic body of analyses dealing with how technological displays are really used. It also discusses the need to concentrate on the social dimension of the visit and use of ICT and to develop the methodological aspects. Based on previous studies and on our own research, the contribution of this paper is twofold: firstly, it provides an overview of empirical results concerning the use of different kinds of ICT exhibits and secondly, it discusses some preliminary ideas aimed at the construction of a methodology for evaluation. The aim is to establish the basic guidelines for the effective integration of ICT applications in museums and cultural heritage.

Categories and Subject Descriptors (according to ACM CCS): J.5 [Arts and Humanities]: Cultural Heritage, Museums, evaluation, qualitative studies

1. Introduction

The spreading of new technologies as communication tools in exhibitions is not only due to fashion and socio-economic pressures, but corresponds also to the most recent stage of a museological renovation trend which started in the last third of the 20th century and aims at improving the visitors’ experience. As ICT applications have proven to be effective for learning and communication in other contexts, museums adopted them for their exhibitions hoping to introduce better ways of communicating with their visitors and to encourage their participation. This interest in their integration in exhibitions has now led to an interest in verifying if they really are effective in the museum environment and understanding how they operate in that context.

Three fields have undertaken research evaluating ICT applications in cultural heritage. The first of them is technology/engineering: this has a long tradition of studies, for example inside the specific branch of Human-Computer Interaction, but mainly focused on technological issues related to usability of the interface. As the field evolves, research studies have recently been concerned with some aspects closer to museum interests, like multi-user environments and interfaces, but they still do not question the traditional linear and sequential computer interaction paradigm. The second field is formal learning environment, which is concerned with cognitive issues arising from the use of technology for learning, but their results can only be extrapolated to some extent to museum settings because the contextual conditions of the classroom and the exhibition are different. The last field where evaluation studies have taken place is museums, where the spreading of ICT displays has recently led to an interest in evaluating their effectiveness from a communicative/learning point of view. In this direction, cultural organizations have often collaborated with external bodies or commissioned related studies. However, these studies are either mainly aimed at studying visitors’ attitudes and perceptions [e.g. VKT’01, OBP05] or they are undertaken by organi-