On-Site Visitor Experience

What is the argument about history embodied in the site? How well does the physical design communicate that argument? What is the interpretive point of view?

By and large the MSV's focus is history in the Shenandoah Valley (both the past and the present). There are several rooms that have varying focuses, but for this assignment, I've focused on the Shenandoah Valley Gallery, which contains traditional glass wall exhibit cases with artifacts, multimedia presentations, and vignettes that bring to life the story of the Shenandoah Valley.

Who is the primary audience for this work? What types of visitors are actually in the space?

I talked with a seasoned volunteer who's been working at the MSV for over 15 years, and she said that it's truly a mixed bag of visitors. The museum hosts a lot of student programs, from school field trips to art classes. Many of the visitors are the general public coming through Winchester and/or visiting family and friends.

I visited the MSV on a Wednesday, the day of the week that they offer free admission to the galleries, so most of the visitors were adults from the general public with a few families focusing on the special Rembrandt exhibit.

What are the primary items used to communicate the interpretation? What supports are used to frame and contextualize the materials?

The gallery is filled with maps, pottery, letters, portraits, paintings, drawings, and newspapers. The physical artifacts are either displayed in glass wall exhibits or behind half-wall barriers that separate visitors from the historical vignettes (like a 1930s kitchen and Native American caves), while other artifacts are represented via photographs on teaching panels. All of the artifacts are clearly named and dated via labels, as well as placed in historical context via brief blurbs.

These primary items are intended to communicate life in the Shenandoah Valley through the centuries - the industries that have come, gone, and/or remained in the Valley; famous historical figures that are from the Valley and/or made their mark on the Valley, like Patsy Cline and George Washington; the general lifestyle of families in the Valley over time; and so much more. The interpretation is simple: tell the story of the Shenandoah Valley as we currently understand it.

How is the site laid out? Is it easy to navigate? Does it encourage a single flow of traffic?

The Shenandoah Valley Gallery is essentially one big room that's connected to the art galleries via other adjacent rooms. When the visitor walks into this gallery, there's a floor to ceiling interpretive panel with pictures of all of the counties that make up the Shenandoah Valley. They can choose to start their single loop around the gallery going left or right - there's no clear traffic flow.

- *If the visitor starts their tour by going left through the gallery*, the first exhibit they see is a vignette of Native Americans in the Valley, and then they move to a movie viewing section with benches and a short video that tells a high-level story of the Shenandoah Valley.

- *If the visitor starts their tour by going right through the gallery*, the first exhibit they see is a vignette of a log cabin from the 18th century and then they move to a traditional glass wall exhibit filled with land surveying artifacts.

I'd change flow of the gallery to make it a more chronological experience for the visitors. Right now, they bounce from historical period to historical period without any real anchor. One minute they're looking at a surveying exhibit; and then they turn around, and there's another exhibit filled with pottery from the Valley that spans centuries; and then they turn around once more, and there's a Civil War exhibit next to a freestanding Patsy Cline display in the middle of the aisle. I think that the visitor experience would be more powerful and effective if the exhibits told the story of the Valley starting with the Native Americans, moving through colonization, towards the Civil War, into the early 20th century, and then ultimately with the modern world (and the industries that are presently in the Valley).

Are there any interactive elements in the physical space? What are they and how effective are they?

The Shenandoah Valley Gallery has several multimedia presentations available to promote engagement with visitors. Some examples include:

1. A touchscreen video that plays a series of first-person reenactments, taking the visitors through the process to becoming a land surveyor and also a land owner in the 18th century. The re-enactors in these videos read from primary sources, too, as they bring this part of the Valley's history to life.
2. A touchscreen video with footage from the 1930s that focuses on educating children for farm life in the Valley, along with oral histories from local residents that bring history to a very personal level.
3. A small room adjacent to the main gallery that's dedicated to Civil War in the Valley, complete with teaching panels that highlight key events from the War as well as a documentary-style movie that lasts about 10 minutes and replays automatically. The video covers the start of the War to the burning and occupation of Major General Philip Sheridan towards the War's end.

Are their curators/interpreters/docents in the space? How are they interacting with the public?

Visitors in the galleries interact with two types of people:

- *Lead Educators*, who are subject matter experts in all things related to the Shenandoah Valley
- *Volunteers*, who go through rigorous training so that they, too, know a lot about the museum's collections, but their main role is to support the Lead Educators and be available to answer basic museum questions from visitors

This is a self-guided museum, so visitors move through the exhibits at their own pace. The volunteers greet visitors and provide general information about the museum and current exhibits, while the lead educators are considered the museum's docents.

Digital User Experience

What is the argument about history that is embodied in the digital representation? How well does the design communicate that argument? What is the interpretive point of view of the site?

One of the MSV's objectives is to preserve artifacts that tell the story of the Shenandoah Valley, so they've created online collections for users to explore. These collections include photographs of art pieces (like pottery, textiles, baskets, and paintings), as well as historical artifacts (like a sugar cutter from the 1750s and a spice box from the 1800s).

Who is the primary audience for this work? How well does it succeed in delivering materials that are appropriate for that audience? What assumptions does it make about the audience?

While the MSV itself attracts many students (from both home schools and public schools), locals, and Winchester tourists, the online collections appeal to a more diverse audience exploring artifacts, not just history of the Valley. When you're in the MSV, the narrative is, "Here's this amazing collection of artifacts that tell the story of the Shenandoah Valley." When you're online, the story isn't at the forefront - you're simply exploring an online collection of artifacts that span a few centuries.

How is the site laid out? Is it easy to navigate? Does it encourage a single flow of traffic?

The online Shenandoah Valley Collection is a basic exhibit comprised of photographed artifacts and paintings. Users can sort through the collection using one or more filters like category, artist, date, place, and tags.

What kinds of content does the site offer? How does this differ from the content that resides in the physical space?

Each artifact's digital record has the following data:

- Name of artifact
- Date or date range of artifact
- A short paragraph that explains what the artifact is and places it in historical context
- Object details that include things like medium (paper, brass, earthenware, etc.), size, collection to which it belongs, and tags
- Provenance (i.e., when the artifact was obtained and from where)

Does the site have participatory or interactive elements? What are they? What does the user take away from these experiences?

The site doesn't really have any interactive elements for the end user, outside of filtering through a collection and clicking hyperlinked data in the artifact's digital record (like the collection name and tags).

Are there opportunities to interact with the site's creators? If so, how? Is this interaction central to the success of the site?

No, there's no opportunity to interact with the site's creators.

How would you change the digital experience to make it more effective?

Tell the Valley's stories! The MSV has a good number of multimedia exhibits throughout its galleries that would make a great addition to their online presence, whether through social media or their actual website. These multimedia exhibits are captivating portrayals of life in the Valley that are more likely to engage the general public than just stills of artifacts. I'm not sure if the MSV doesn't have the resources to post these multimedia pieces online or if they're concerned that it'll detract from physical foot traffic that brings revenue to the MSV via admissions. However, by changing out galleries every few months to showcase other artists, the MSV is dynamic, which maintains freshness and ensures a stable stream of visitors.