

Future Museum Symposium 2023

Position Paper
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I start with a sense of shared foundations. It has been 30 years since John Falk and Lynn Dierking published *The Museum Experience*. It's a given now in our field: a museum visit *is* an experience. It has been nearly 25 years since Joseph Pine and James Gilmore published *The Experience Economy*. It's a given: museums must actively work to *shape* experiences. It has been 25 years since George Hein published *Learning in the Museum*. It's a given: visitors are not just passive recipients of experiences but make meanings within the experiences we create. Over the last decade there has been a surge of commitment to connecting museums to the wider world, from Nina Simon's *The Art of Relevance* to Liz Ševčenko's *Public History for a Post-Truth Era*. It's a given: museums matter beyond our doors.

For all these common groundings, the field has struggled to advance from assumptions to impact. We agree that museums can build public learning experiences that make a better world, but after two-plus decades, do we know what that really looks like or how it works? Can technology help (or hurt)?

At the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, we recently have become more explicit about the impact we seek. Rather than keeping our distance from the swirling world around us—giving a fifty-year clearance before events can count as “history” was one classic formulation—we instead have committed to helping our constituents make sense of what is going on today and using that understanding to shape a new world. Our mission commits us to “empowering people to create a just and compassionate future by exploring, preserving, and sharing the complexity of our past.” As we look to mark the 250th anniversary of the U.S. Declaration of Independence in 2026, we have committed that our work will “strengthen democracy.”

What experiences can strengthen democracy—and how will we know when we're doing it right? One school of thought says that success is conversation—of any sort. Democratic participation depends on dialogue, so anything we do to prompt discussion within family groups; among peers; or (the holy grail) across difference among strangers is a success.

How can technology help? Often tech has an isolating aspect (“Get off your phone!”), but let's look for how technology can invite interpersonal connections. I think of the Cooper Hewitt's “multitouch media tables.” As visitors draw and build side by side, they ooh and ahh at each other's creations. I think of the new *Entertainment Nation* exhibition at our museum, where visitors literally vote with their feet—moving to one side of the room or the other to select which “anthems” they want to hear played.

Multiplayer video games, of course, are way ahead of us in bringing people together for shared experiences. With rigorous attention to user experience, they have reduced barriers to participation. Often crossing not only time zones but racial, ethnic, and gender lines, players from across the globe work together to solve problems or defeat common enemies. How

can we apply the tools they use to the cause of reflection and dialogue, cooperation and exchange?

As technology increasingly becomes not a distinct realm but integrated across all aspects of lives, let us look for new ways to build experiences that advance our field's highest and most longstanding goals.