

Design research into mobile museum mediation

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Abstract: Using mobile media, museums may transcend institutional settings to highlight the significance and meanings of cultural heritage: framing art and design in the urban sphere, shedding light on nature in the wild, or bringing historic sites to life. The possibilities are manifold, but not straightforward, as augmenting the everyday without the help of a museum context can be tricky, and may upset traditional understandings of the curatorial. This is, however, not simply a problem in need of a solution but also a challenge that may inspire constructive reflection and innovation in the museum community. The PhD research project "Mobile Mediation of Fashion by Museums" explores how aesthetic and ethnographic design methods can be used to develop mobile experiences and articulate museological matters of concern. Building on user perspectives, expressed in response to cultural probes, the project has generated a design game to support projection and discussion of possible concept scenarios and their implications. The game format was used in a series of workshops with Designmuseum Danmark, to ideate and consider new ways to appreciate Copenhagen fashion culture via mobile media. This paper describes the project's problem field, research methodology and process, in order to suggest how this approach could be used by museums confronting similar challenges.

Keywords: mobile, mediation, design research, design game, museology

Introduction: mobile mediation as a problem field and design challenge

As our daily lives and social interactions are increasingly permeated by our use of mobile phones, so our cultural experiences are also often filtered through the same media. Accordingly, museums must learn to engage with a networked audience through these channels, and adapt their communication strategies to include social media and mobile applications (Tallon & Froes 2011). One notable potential is the actualisation of museum matters outside the museum, by framing art and design in the urban sphere, shedding light on nature in the wild, or bringing historic sites to life.

The new opportunities for mediation¹ are manifold, but not straightforward. Aligning inclusion and interaction with curatorial goals and standards may prove difficult, and thus expose conflicts of interest and diverging ideas and ideals for the museum. Similarly, inspiring an appreciation of the cultural significance of everyday objects without the help of the museum context can be challenging, and while museums exert themselves to offer digital experiences and invite dialogue, the public is seemingly less than keen to participate (Lynch 2013; Katz et al. 2011). But as importantly, innovative mediation strategies, and the movement towards a distributed, medialised or community oriented 'post-museum' practice, simultaneously changes and reflects changes in the way we understand museums (Proctor 2011; Rudloff 2013; Hooper-Greenhill 2000).

Developing solutions that appeal to the public and meet museum objectives is therefore only part of the challenge. Addressing the matters of concern relating to the issue, as suggested by Latour (2004) is also important, if we want to understand and consciously build the future of museums.

This understanding guides the PhD research presented in this paper. Looking to explore a field of possibilities rather than current museum media usage, the project uses design as a tool for research. By exploring solutions and asking questions, research through design can produce new insights into the scope, limits and pitfalls of a field, and how they reflect on the context. Used in this way, design methodology can add another dimension to analysis in the humanities, as well as inspiring and assisting constructive reflection in the museum community.

Whereas ethnographic methods – semi-structured interviews and workshop/focus groups – have also been employed in the project, the designerly methods developed in the project and the insights gained by these methods, is the main focus of this project presentation.

¹ The term 'mediation' is used, in accordance with ICOM's Key concepts of museology, as a translation for the widely used Scandinavian term "formidling" (Germ. Vermittlung), i.e. referring to "a whole range of actions carried out in a museal context in order to build bridges between that which is exhibited (seeing) and the meanings that these objects and sites may carry (knowledge)" (Desvallées & Mairesse 2010, p.47).

Research design

The PhD project 'Mobile Mediation of Fashion by Museums' addresses the growing interest in mobile/social media as tools for museum mediation, by examining their potential as well as the implication for museums. The objective of the project is thus: a) to explore the field of possibilities for mediating culture outside the museum with mobile media, through the ideation of exemplary concepts for the fashion field; b) to examine how this type of mediation corresponds to the (design) museum's praxis, self-image and curatorial/educational objectives; and c) to discuss the implications in a museological and cultural context. Methodologically, the project explores how aesthetic and ethnographic design methods can be used to develop mobile experiences and articulate museological matters of concern.



Figure 1: Project diagram.

The project's three-stage research process, designed to draw out relevant problems in the research field for subsequent analysis and discussion, is illustrated in figure 1. Stage I focused on generating inspiration and gaining insight into the perspectives of prospective users through a combination of individual semi-structured interviews, cultural probes and a workshop with user informants. Stage II involved explorative design work carried out by the researcher, seeking to ideate relevant concepts for mediation as well as augmenting the understanding of the field and uncovering potential problems. In stage III, the concept elements served as conversation pieces in a set of workshops with museum professionals, aimed at eliciting their views and assumptions regarding mobile mediation.

The issues highlighted in these workshops will inform the continued analysis and theoretical discussions that are the primary objective of this academic research project, i.e. a contribution to the field of museology. Still, the design research methodology developed in the project could also be applied to a practical museum setting, to support ideation of concepts for mobile mediation as well as institutional reflection on the implications of a chosen strategy for mediation.

Stage I: Inspiration / cultural probe

Although data on user behaviour can be useful, the empathy required in design thinking is not fuelled by knowledge of an average public. Instead, individual perspectives may provide a better understanding of real user needs and of the problems and possible solutions inherent in the field (Silvers et al. 2013). Understanding the involvement of prospective user informants as a tool for designerly insights rather than for production of ethnographic data about museum target groups, demographic representation or generalisable results were therefore not of interest to this project. Stage I was completed with the participation of eight informants: all female, aged 20-41, with a self-proclaimed interest in fashion and new media. All eight informants were interviewed individually, six responded to the cultural probe and four participated in the workshop. An interest in, and experience with, the problem field was chosen as the guiding principle for sampling, as expressed in an open call for participation² distributed via social media networks. Concordantly, the assemblage of an outwardly homogenous group was regarded as an asset, letting inward differences in views and perspectives stand out more clearly.

² <http://blatryk.wordpress.com/2012/06/11/mode-medier-museer/>

The eight activities in the cultural probe, sought to explore connections between fashion, media, urban and popular culture, and everyday life, as experienced and expressed by the informants. Following Gaver's suggested 'probology' approach (2004), valuing uncertainty and subjectivity, the probe (figure 2³) was designed to inspire creativity and aesthetic pleasure, and asked for personal notions rather than factual documentation. The returns (figure 3) were accordingly playful and moot, defying objective analysis.



Figure 2: Cultural probe.



Figure 3: Probe returns.

Still, the material and the interactions with prospective users pinpointed some of the challenges and contradictions inherent in the current museum field. The probe returns thus revealed a preference for analogue over digital activities, even for this media savvy group, and the desire to invite participation to shed light on stories not told by the dominant narrators of fashion was matched by equal concerns regarding how to filter contributions in order to secure a high quality of content. Similarly, a curatorial narrative was regarded as an essential contribution from museums in the overwhelming stream of content, viewpoints and sources found online. In this way, the findings mirrored subject matters uncovered in the theoretical research, whilst adding the ambiguity of real life perspectives, so crucial to design. These perspectives were later condensed into personas, used in the workshops in stage III.

Stage II: Exploration / design journal

The second stage of research focused on understanding the problem field through ideation of potential concepts for mobile mediation of urban fashion. Using a design journal method, borrowed from the practice of fashion design, questions and ideas – ensuing from readings, material from stage I, and experiences from museums onsite and online – were expressed in visual collages and were complemented by written musings, notes and comments (figures 4-5).



Figure 4: Journal page



Figure 5: Journal page

³ For a detailed description of each probe activity, please visit <http://blatryk.wordpress.com/2012/06/29/cultural-probe-for-fashion-media-and-museum-mediation/>

As argued by design researcher Martin Ludvigsen, “thinking aesthetically about an interactive artifact is to be conscious about its entire composition over time and the effect it has on the context and users” (2006, p.93). In a very concrete manner, the collage format thus supported the (visual) articulation of complex fields as an interplay of contexts, artifacts, technologies, problems and propositions. Also, formulating questions and suggesting possible concepts visually, rather than in writing, allowed for more open-ended thinking, where problems were revisited, reconsidered and added to rather than defined and closed.

Zooming in on the specific challenges regarding mediation of fashion, as a cultural form that has no place and is in perpetual flux, this part of the process uncovered a variety of issues. The problems identified included how to trigger a museum experience in the public sphere; the ethics of coaxing user behavior e.g. by inviting street style photography; questions of aggregation and self-representation; understandings of cultural versus commercial objects; and the question of whether urban style should fall within the museum’s remit. The process also resulted in a selection of potential concepts, and a shortlist of paradigm headings: *Intervention* (offering a museum perspective in new contexts); *Toolbox* (augmenting observation, building user competences rather than providing information); *Exchange* (knowledge sharing between institutions and the public, either by aggregation or calls for participation); *Reflection* (inspiring personal reflection) and *Synergy* (creating synergy in distributed mediation).

Stage III: Discussion / design game

As described above, the objective was not to generate solutions. Instead, taking inspiration from the critical design tradition and adopting Mazé & Redström’s ambition “not to converge upon a single problem or solution, nor to provide a roadmap to a particular preferred future, but to materialize a territory of possible viewpoints as a basis for curating - and catalyzing - a conversation in the here and now” (2008, p.66), the intention was to outline ambiguous concepts that would inspire a nuanced debate in the workshops for curators and communicators from Designmuseum Danmark.

To strike a balance between the need for open-endedness – considering both the ethos of critical design and a general rule of thumb for participatory design processes, stating that a rough sketch is a better starting point for criticism and co-creation than a polished prototype – and the inspirational and rhetorical strength of aesthetic arguments, the concepts were broken down into constitutive elements. Each element was represented with an image and printed onto card, forming together a kind of exploratory design game (cf. Brandt 2006). The combination and interchanging of concept elements into a variety of scenarios thus served to structure and trigger the workshop debates.



Figure 6: Design game/concept element cards

An example scenario, used in the workshop and illustrated in figure 6, could be: fashion item/icon, (as subject for mediation, here exemplified by Danish fashion brand Nørsgaard’s classic stripy RIP 101 T-shirt, seen to the left) + shop (purchase as trigger situation) + QR code (as placed on sales tag), leading to a discussion about the content or activity behind QR code (prompted by various new

concept cards, as seen on the right). Breaking down the concept like this allowed for discussions on the overall idea of museum interventions into a commercial setting, and potential content or activities. This process also made the relative importance of the constituent elements clear. Replacing the subject of mediation with another fashion brand, for instance, set off a debate about collection policies, museum values and the museum's brand, but also inspired ideas that linked curation, mediation and communication strategies.

Perspective

The workshops have thus not only generated empirical material for the academic research project, but also established an arena for fruitful discussion among the professional participants. In this manner, this low-key approach may inspire other museums facing similar challenges to develop their own games tailored to their specific subject areas and educational objectives. Undertaking the fairly labour intensive preparations as an in-house task, rather than relying on suggestions from external consultants, who may not fully understand the museum context, could also be time well spent. The knowledge, passion and perhaps valid resistance of the staff could give crucial clues to visionary concepts as well as their pragmatic realisability, saving precious resources in the long run. Using design methodology as a tool for creative and critical thinking could then provide a better basis for ideation of, and reflection on, the museum's (mobile) mediation strategies.

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