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Reviewed Article:

What Does Your Visitor Experience? Making the Most of Live Interpretation in a Unique Setting

Persistent Identifier: <https://exarc.net/ark:/88735/10200>

EXARC Journal Issue 2015/3 | Publication Date: 2015-08-30

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Archaeological Open-Air Museums (AOAM) offer a unique setting in which live interpretation can make history come truly alive. For many, or perhaps all, AOAM history is the product being sold to the public. During the five years the OpenArch project has run the partners have spent many hours discussing the merits of live interpretation in the unique setting of an AOAM. It is an effective method—whether done in first or third person—to entertain and educate. But what does the visitor experience when faced with live interpretation? How does

it affect the transfer of information and what are the specific goals of this method? Are there alternatives?



Confucius is quoted as having said (in 450 BCE): “Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I will understand”. The most powerful way to create lasting experiences, next to Teaching Others, is Learning by Doing.

Live interpretation

To begin it is important to set the stage. This means that a precise definition of live interpretation is essential for determining its application, possibilities and limits. Put simply, live interpretation is a method for interpreting the past using (live) people. Traditionally, in the context of AOAM, it involves people in historically accurate clothing in a historically accurate setting. These interpreters of the past can perform live interpretation through different means, including but not limited to: demonstrations of historical crafts and arts; guided tours; shows (both small and large scale); storytelling; and (historical) theatre.

Of course, it is entirely possible to do live interpretation in a different setting, whereby the person interpreting the past cannot use the environment he is in, but is limited to his own person, attire, accessories and other accoutrements. This is the case with an interpreter visiting a school or conference; some living history or re-enactment events; museum theatre; et cetera. While this limits the possible subjects the interpreter can use, as long as he can use reproductions of historical objects he can offer his audience an experience of the past.

Since the goal of live interpretation is to give the audience an experience, it is very important to plan this experience and gauge the impact. The use of live interpretation (as opposed to, for instance, theatre or storytelling) is the possibility to change the performance as and when it is needed. The ability to read his audience and improvise, based on the audience’s reaction, is therefore the most important skill an interpreter has.

The issue of shame

An experience elicits an emotion. This emotion can be positive or negative, but in the case of live interpretation, should always lead to a moment of realisation and education. Negative emotions should not necessarily be avoided, as they tend to leave longer-lasting memories. For instance, when someone has a sudden fright (similar to a horror film or ghost house), which is a negative emotion, it does not mean the experience as a whole is ruined. The interpreter must realise that while he could scare an adolescent or adult to elicit a response—usually a gasp followed by laughter—the same tactic would not work on a toddler; they would just start crying. Again, the most important thing is to tailor the experience to the individual.

One negative emotion that should be avoided is shame. In Dutch, we refer to 'plaatsvervangende schaamte' (vicarious shame) when someone experiences a feeling of shame on behalf of someone else. When someone is confronted by a performance they consider shameful they will generally not take the experience as positive. The vicarious shame takes over when they are confronted with, for instance, medieval beggars or lepers portrayed in an over-the-top manner. Entering an open-air museum's medieval section, the visitor is approached by a dirty-looking beggar holding out a bowl for alms. It is a scene that is repeated in castles, towns, events and other settings across Europe and the world. The visitor, however, does not know what is expected of them in this scenario, leading to indecisiveness and an overall feeling of shame. Some may be able to interact quite easily with such a performance, but this cannot be expected of the average visitor.

Therefore, it is essential to give the audience clear cues on how they should react. As an example, the Gladiatorial combat in Archeon shows how this can be used. The central part of the show is the gladiator fight itself. But, if people were to walk into the arena, see a quick fight and then leave again, they would not have much of an experience. However, due to the way the show as a whole is built up, it can become quite unforgettable. First the rules of gladiator combat are explained by the Lanista (trainer of the gladiators). He uses a volunteer from the audience, creating a bond with them in the process. However, due to the way he presents himself, he usually gets the exact opposite of what he asks for—if he asks the audience to cheer, they boo. When asked to boo, they cheer. After more than half of the show is over, the gladiators themselves are called in. They enter one at a time, with the Lanista making it very clear who his personal favourite is. This creates a sense of unfairness, which elicits a strong response—the audience boos the champion. The second gladiator to come in is then inevitably cheered, despite (actually, because of) the Lanista's protests.

The responses of the audience to stimuli are very much pre-programmed and predictable. At the end of the show, after the champion has lost to the underdog, the audience is then asked to decide the loser's fate. About 99% of the time, they call for his death. The big surprise is then usually that the winning gladiator complies and cuts the losers throat in a welter of blood. This creates a brief moment of shock and disbelief in the audience; "Did they actually..?" This experience can then become highly educational in both a practical sense (teaching the audience about the harshness of life in Roman times) and a more psychological and philosophical sense (this is mob rule). As an aside, to prevent the creation of too many childhood traumas, the 'dead' gladiator can be seen standing just outside the arena when the crowd leaves, covered in blood but very much alive.

Going back to the example of the beggar and the feeling of shame: when the aforementioned beggar approaches a visitor out of the blue and starts asking for alms, none of these rules for interaction are employed or engaged. It is unclear what the correct response would be, or what choices the audience is presented with. What are the consequences of giving or not

giving alms? What response can be expected of the actor? What is the context of the beggar in question? When the scenario is placed in its proper context, however, it might be a very worthwhile experience after all.

The setting

There is a big difference between 'traditional' museums and AOAM. Central to this difference is the amount of interactivity that is possible for, but also expected of, the visitor. They are not just faced with passive objects surrounded by more-or-less interactive displays. The objects themselves are active; many of them are used by the interpreters to help create the experience. The second part of the definition given above—the historically accurate setting—comes into play. This context in which the performance is placed can help guide both the interpreter and the visitor to come to a better experience.

Continuing with the example of our shame-inducing beggar, it has been established that this performance on its own does not necessarily provide a positive experience. First the interpreter should make it clear what his role is. If interpreting in the third person, this can be easily done. In the first person, it is important to explain what the role of the character is in the wider context of the medieval setting. A beggar or, for that matter, anyone placed outside of society as a whole, is in a perfect place to criticise society from the outside. A beggar could, instead of just asking for alms, engage the audience on the evils of society that led to him becoming a beggar. They could even ask the visitor to help them by speaking up for them, simultaneously placing the visitors on the same level as the other interpreters who do have houses, food and money; and asking them to join the beggar in creating a better society. The experience as a whole is then broader than just the experience of meeting a beggar—the visitor is instead meeting the whole underside of medieval society.

This only works in an authentic setting where there are multiple characters that can be interacted with. If we look at the example of the gladiator show, the interaction of the Lanista with the audience ties the experience together—the gladiators on their own do not provide this, nor does the Lanista on his own. The visitors are invited to become part of this world for a little while and see it through the eyes of the characters that inhabit it. But to successfully accomplish this, they need a guide or interpreter. The beggar is not (just) asking for alms, he is asking the visitor to see the unfairness of the world around him. He is asking them to experience what life was like for him for a moment. Again, this can lead to powerful experiences.

"Involve me, and I will understand."

There are, of course, other ways to create such an experience. If an interpreter wants a visitor to experience life as a Roman Legionnaire, he can just give him a helmet and a suit of armour to try on—that is already part of the experience linking the visitor to the historical character

of the Legionnaire. Similarly, giving a visitor a sword to hold and use can give them an idea of the experience of being a medieval soldier or knight. While an interpreter portraying a knight can tell a lot of stories about knighthood and interact with other characters to tell his story; the experience of hefting a sword and striking at someone will leave a lasting impression.

Confucius is quoted as having said (in 450 BCE): “Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I will understand”. The most powerful way to create lasting experiences, next to *Teaching Others*, is *Learning by Doing*. This is, of course, why live interpretation is such a powerful tool for education—the interpreter can involve his audience in the work he is doing by offering them the experience of doing it for themselves.

During the OpenArch project, questionnaires were used to gauge the visitor’s experience. These questionnaires yielded important statistical data on where the visitors came from, how large the groups were and how they appreciated different aspects of their visit et cetera. They were also invited to comment on their visit, both in a positive and room-for-improvement sense. A general image of the visitor and his expectations has started to emerge from this part of the project. The average visitor thinks, for instance, that the catering has room for improvement, but the staff is very helpful and informative. And while there are sometimes miss-informative signs accompanying the displays, they were very happy with the chance to take part in activities. This goes to show that AOAM must manage their visitors’ expectations very carefully: when the visitors expect the same experience as when they visit a more traditional form of museum, where there are signs everywhere and the restaurant serves haute cuisine, they may be disappointed. Faced with a different experience and live interpretation in an authentic setting, they are asked to take on a role that is different from a museum visitor. AOAM ask them to become part of the story that is being told, to take an active role. The visitor, in short, is the actor.

Experiencing history


So, what is central to the visitor’s experience is the interaction between visitor and interpreter. The interpreter, as the word implies, helps the visitor make the transition from passive to active, from observer to actor.

All the AOAM involved in the OpenArch project use live interpretation in one way or another. While most of the partners in the project use third person interpretation, there is almost always an element of role-play or theatrics being used. Many of the partners have also indicated, partly due to what they have learned during the project, that they want to introduce theatrical training for their staff.

Another example of the visitor-as-actor comes from Foteviken museum in Sweden—during their Viking markets there is often a group of Vikings who roam around looking for suitable candidates to capture and sell. Using a net, they first capture a visitor and then shackle him or

(more commonly) her. They place a sign around their neck and then take them to market with loved ones trailing behind. At the market they proceed to list all of the desirable qualities of a *thrall* (slave) and haggle with the audience over a price. Normally, the thrall is then sold back to their loved ones for a reasonable sum.

In this example and many like it, the use of humour is very important. Slavery is a difficult subject, but by dealing with it in this light-hearted manner, it can still become a positive and unforgettable experience for the visitors. History comes alive by becoming part of it for a short moment. The interpreter guides the visitor in and, equally important, back out. They leave with smiles on their faces and a deeper understanding of their own history and identity.

 **Keywords** [living history](#)
[education](#)
[theatre](#)

 **Country** [the Netherlands](#)

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| Gallery Image



FIG 1. THE PUBLIC JOIN NATIONALLY RENOWNED CHEF PIERRE WIND (NL) IN TASTING PREHISTORIC FOOD AND DRINK. PHOTO BY HANS SPLINTER



FIG 2. TWO GLADIATORS FIGHT IN THE ARENA WHILE THE LANISTA, A SOLDIER AND THE CHARON LOOK ON. PHOTO BY HANS SPLINTER



FIG 3. CHILDREN ARE INVITED TO TAKE PART IN A DEMONSTRATION, WITHSTANDING A SCOTTISH CHARGE. PHOTO BY HANS SPLINTER



FIG 4. SOME 50 ACTORS WERE INVOLVED IN THE PRODUCTION OF SPARTACUS, ARCHEON 2014. PHOTO BY HANS SPLINTER



FIG 5. THE SLAVERS HARD AT WORK, GETTING READY TO HAGGLE OVER THEIR NEWEST ACQUISITION (AT FOTEVIKEN, SE).



FIG 6. THE SLAVERS HARD AT WORK, GETTING READY TO HAGGLE OVER THEIR NEWEST ACQUISITION (AT FOTEVIKEN, SE).