Narrating Culture on the Web: An Audience-Generated Exhibit Narrative

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Introduction

Aotearoa/New Zealand's Puke Ariki Museum, Library and Visitor Centre in New Plymouth presented an exhibition in 2010 called "Te Ahi Kā Roa, Te Ahi Kātoro – Taranaki War 1860–2010 – Our legacy, our challenge." The exhibit received the New Zealand Museums 2011 Project Achievement Award, Exhibition Excellence – Social History (Museums Aotearoa) and is set to open at the Nelson Provincial Museum in 2012 (Macnaught). The exhibit presents the military, legislative, cultural and social history of the Taranaki region, focusing on the "land grab" (Puke Ariki, "War of Law") perpetrated by settlers and representatives of the British Crown against the indigenous Māori people 150 years ago. As the exhibit explains, "dodgy deals" resulted in the illegal transfer of land from Māori to Crown; the struggle for the land resulted in the bloody conflicts known as the Taranaki Wars (Puke Ariki, "War of Law"). The exhibit brings together 150 years of history, political activism, legislation and ongoing settlement research in order to tell a story that, until recently, was unknown to many New Zealanders.

Part of the exhibit's legacy offers an example of how a cultural institution can curate user-generated content as an important supplement to an exhibit; a reading of visitor rhetoric in an artfully designed webpage (Puke Ariki, "Have Your Say") offers a multi-voiced narrative of visitors' encounters with the exhibit. And, while the page is not interactive, the design, the content of the visitor reactions, and new forum interfaces provide a blueprint for successful engagement between the institution and museum visitors who wish to continue the process of discovery and conversation beyond the walls of the exhibit space.

Museums, Authority and New Media

Museum scholars argue that, historically, museums have been perceived as arbiters of culture and history and are therefore superior to the visitors they attract. Susan Hazen writes, "Museums are limited by the public's perceptions that they control knowledge, expertise, and

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learning, that floats above or passes through the community, and that they are not as 'public' as libraries. These perceptions are mixed with enough reality to make them hard to dispel" (135).

Museum technology experts argue that new media technology has the potential to empower museum visitors, and they advocate establishing ambitious platforms for visitor co-creation of new content:

> When empowered to construct their own narrative in response to museum exhibits, visitors establish new connections to the exhibit content … The participation in collaborative narrative activities engenders creative, independent analysis, promoting learner self-efficacy and a personal connection with exhibit subject matter that is unparalleled in more traditional and passive approaches. (Fisher and Twiss-Garrity n.pag.)

While museum content is dependent on the expertise of academic scholars, such content can be enhanced by – and more effectively communicated with – the museum-going public if institutions open themselves up to increasing levels of visitor interactivity. The authors of a paper delivered to the Museums Australia Conference in 2007 argue that, while audience-directed new media design "is not the role or the skillset of the museum professional, whose focus should remain on authoritative scholarship and exhibition based on the primacy of collections," museums can and should strive to achieve their traditional goals by using more interactive platforms. They write, "Yet there is increasing evidence that *greater authority comes through engagement*," and encourage reluctant institutions to see visitor engagement and authorship not as a threat but as an opportunity (Watkins and Russo n.pag.).

Another view of the potential for visitor interaction with and co-creation of museum content via new media unequivocally welcomes the visitor as a collaborative agent in creating narrative in a museum setting and advocates the value of the power transformation implied by the collaborative act. Yehuda Kalay writes in the introduction to *New Heritage: New Media and Cultural Heritage*, "Digital media … puts much of the authority – and responsibility – for constructing the narrative in the hands of the viewer" (7). Many museum scholars react very positively to the opportunities for visitor contributions to exhibit narratives. Fisher and Twiss-Garrity, quoted above, argue that these contributions should be encouraged in order to foster greater connections between institutions and visitors. New media technologies thus offer both

institution experts and visitors a new range of collaborative opportunities that strengthen both the position of the scholar and the visitor.

Museums, Public History and "The Taranaki Wars"

The argument for the validity of visitor interaction in co-creating museum content is expanded by those who acknowledge the role of "public history," or "the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia: in government, private corporations, the media, historical societies and museums, even in private practice" (Rabel 65). Museums, particularly those engaged with sharing cultural and historical information, already encourage their visitors to think of "a history which is 'ours' and which transcends the exclusive concerns of the state to encompass those of the nation and of diverse communities within it" (Rabel 65). Broadly speaking, those institutions and scholars who endorse the validity of public history point to its practice in the population's everyday pursuits. Anne Else, in her chapter in *Going Public: The Changing Face of New Zealand History*, argues, "Even when members of the public have little or no contact with anything historians recognize as 'history,' they are nevertheless constantly engaged in a hugely varied range of encounters with the past, taking place on many different levels" (123). One level can be the narrative of an audience, engaged first with the past and then with exposure to an exhibit or cultural institution, and recorded as text for others to read.

The availability of digital technology allows for greater participation of museum visitors, whom many institutions now appreciate as repositories of public history with much to offer. And museums like Puke Ariki that engage in addressing contested histories and cultural conflict, often initiated by the process of colonisation, are in a particularly important position as educators and mediators as national populations struggle with the legacies of their pasts.

Given its history of European colonisation and national policies tied to the Waitangi Tribunal for making reparations to Māori people, Aotearoa/New Zealand museums and cultural institutions are in a unique position to host ground-breaking educational exhibits that examine the nation's history. Conal McCarthy's book *Museums and Māori* offers a case study of the historical and contemporary relationship between Aotearoa/New Zealand museums and Māori

communities. McCarthy argues that "The politics of indigeneity … is an important strand of contemporary discourse, especially in the realm of museums and heritage" (209), and concludes his examination by saying, "the social transformation of New Zealand society and the cultural transformation of New Zealand museums is evidence that people make history, as well as being made by history – and if the world can be made, then it can be unmade and remade" (247).

The emergence of the role of public historian – in Tribunal claims research, in cultural heritage institutions – has become important to the way Aotearoa/New Zealand re-interrogates its history. In *Going Public*, Rabel writes of the documents chronicling Aotearoa/New Zealand's official war history:

> Anyone surveying the historiography of war in NZ cannot fail to be struck by the dominance of works produced under state supervision. These works have been written either by government employees or by individuals commissioned to do so by government departments. In both cases, almost all the works produced have carried the imprimatur of 'official history'." (55–6)

But Tribunal research has produced a new kind of official history, one that seeks to remedy the actions taken by the government in the past. And the narratives uncovered by Tribunal research have not only tremendous significance for reconstructing Aotearoa/New Zealand's history, but also for constructing identities for the nation and its citizens today. Giselle Byrnes, an academic and Tribunal claims researcher, says that "the Tribunal's published narratives and its direct appeals to 'the nation' are evidence that while much of its work is focused on the past, the Tribunal itself is firmly anchored in the present." She further claims that "the Tribunal's work illustrates how the writing of history is always a product of its times and its own historical moment, and that historical narratives can never be divorced from their immediate social and political contexts" (101).

The new "official history" represented by Tribunal research supports the placement of the exhibit's "Have Your Say" collection of comments on a level with other research into how the past has shaped modern Aotearoa/New Zealand. Scholarship about the Tribunal's findings highlights the appropriateness of an exhibit focusing on this region's experience of colonisation and conflict. In the exhibit's accompanying volume, *Contested Ground/Te Whenua I Tohea*, Peter Adds writes, "the Waitangi Tribunal's 1996 report on the Taranaki land claim suggests that

no other Māori group in New Zealand felt the impact of warfare and ongoing colonial oppression more than the tribes of Taranaki" (256). This research has made enormous contributions to a clearer and better chronicled narrative about the Māori people's loss of sovereignty over land once British colonisation began in the nineteenth century, and exhibits like "Taranaki Wars" create a space for education and discussion of these important national issues.

At the "The Taranaki Wars" exhibit dedication ceremony on 17 March 2010, Bill Macnaught, then manager of Puke Ariki, greeted those assembled at the museum by reciting a traditional Māori ritual opening and welcome and then offering greetings in English. He described the exhibit in one sentence: "It gives an account of the history of the military conflict in Taranaki in the nineteenth century followed by an explanation of the bitter legacy that the wars left in this region to this day." In the very next sentence, he mentioned the goals of the multi-faceted comment system offered to visitors through various media: "The final part of the exhibition encourages everyone to share their views about the way forward for Taranaki, and for New Zealand, in reconciling the arguments between Māori and Pākehā" (Puke Ariki, "Opening Remarks"). From the start, the exhibition was intended to encourage debate between different constituencies in the hope that such conversations might lead to communal understanding.

Curated Comments as Co-created Exhibit Material

The "Have Your Say" page offers an online comment area created from a broad variety of visitor reactions to the exhibit. The comments are displayed with attractive graphics that refuse to privilege one point of view over others. The comments page gives voice to the current state of the cultural conflict over colonial and indigenous versions of history examined in the exhibit while it creates a new narrative, one that tells a multi-voiced story of New Zealanders' interaction with the past and the museum itself. The comments' central narrative is a chronological one: history, both national and personal, moves toward the encounter with the museum and the exhibit narrative, and becomes a meditation on the present and the future, regardless of the differences between individual readings of the exhibit. If we read the comments, in any order, we can identify a single narrative that gives voice to museum visitors' impulses to join, contest and parallel the trajectories of the narrative presented by the exhibit and current Aotearoa/New Zealand historical scholarship.

As the public visited the exhibit, the museum encouraged visitors to record their reactions to the narrative and their statements about Aotearoa/New Zealand culture and policy given the new understandings of land moved from one owner to another. The museum had Apple Macs located around the exhibit, and visitors who interacted with the material could leave their impressions there. At the end of the exhibit, museum-goers were encouraged to write their impressions on pieces of white board for display on a wall, visible to all who exited the exhibit. The museum also gathered other forms of written and verbal reaction to the exhibit, including but not limited to the online comment area hosted by the museum website. In this way, the museum was able to collect a sizeable sample of reactions to the exhibit, most of them full of praise for the exhibit (Conaglen). Museum staff then curated the most representative and on-topic comments and presented them on the "Have Your Say" page. The responses were collected by museum officials partly in order to gauge visitor reaction to the exhibit as a way of determining the success of the exhibit. As such, the material is valuable, but as part of the museum's online collection, it represents an artefact by itself, an artefact that carries with it the narratives of the people who were moved by the presentation of their region's history (Conaglen).

An online visitor arrives at the page itself by negotiating away from an informational page about the exhibit; the icon on which the viewer clicks is a rectangle reminiscent of a faded archival document (Puke Ariki, "Have Your Say"). The visitor clicks on this icon and is taken to the main page, a dark image that slowly reveals itself to be a stage at very low light. One can just make out the light fixtures above and the surface of the stage itself below. As the page loads, blocks of texts, all at different angles and at different distances from the screen, begin to appear. The colour scheme of the stage and the comments is sombre, but contains elements of white, black and red, a traditional Māori colour palette. The online environment for readers, then, claims centrality for visitor comments, as it is hosted by the museum site. The stage is a bilingual place, with comments in te reo Māori as well as English, and clearly represents a performance or a forum.

A white circle cursor point allows the user to bring a comment "upstage," giving the user a measure of control over the action on the screen and a sense of building a collection of comments that suggest a story. The text blocks twirl as they come into focus, and the stage itself tilts; nothing centres the experience beyond the effect of the block of text one has chosen. Click on more comments, and the stage disappears as the user travels into the forest of words. The viewers cannot see what each comment says until they have brought it into sharper and closer focus, so users are not able to cherry-pick comments and arrive only at a pre-chosen variety of responses. One cannot, for example, restrict oneself to only comments that praise the exhibit or agree with one perspective on Aotearoa/New Zealand history. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich reminds us that "software interfaces – both those of operating systems and of software applications – also act as representations. That is, by organizing data in particular ways, they privilege particular models of the world and the human subject" (16). The web page design itself has emphasised that the viewer must approach the comments without any sense that the museum itself imposes a hierarchy of privilege. The arrow keys navigate backward and forward, allowing the user to move upstage or downstage. Through this process, the site design does not suggest a hierarchy of value among the comments; indeed, it suggests that the individual paths through the comments and across the stage are themselves acts of discovery and learning. As the screen "stage" itself rotates, de-centring the entire setting, the reader is encouraged to encounter each comment as a representation of an individual point of view and as a part of a larger narrative of the community's journey to and through the exhibit.

By examining the rhetoric of these comments and reading them as narrative, we gain another important historical narrative, one that interrogates national history and individual space, one that places the visitor experience as yet another relevant narrative surrounding contemplation of "The Taranaki Wars." The speakers often address the exhibit creators and the museum at large, but often their imagined audience includes future visitors, all New Zealanders, and, in reality, anyone who visits the exhibit website.

I use the word "narrative" with an awareness of the distinction Lev Manovich suggests between database and narrative. He writes, "With new media, the content of the work and the interface are separated. It is therefore possible to create different interfaces to the same material."

He further adds that "The 'user' of a narrative is traversing a database, following links between its records as established by the database's creator. An interactive narrative … can then be understood as the sum of multiple trajectories through a database" (227).

Visitor-generated content experienced in a variety of trajectories by users offers a freedom of interaction with the material, but the journey is not without structure. The collection of visitor comments is obviously a database, but, taken together, they constitute for the website visitor a narrative that fulfills literary theorist Mieke Bal's definition of narrative text. I refer to Bal's *Narratology* in constructing an argument for reading the comments as a Bahktinian polyglossic utterance by a single narrator, discoverable regardless of the path one takes through the virtual stage's text. Bal distinguishes the *text*, or "a finite, structured whole composed of signs" (5), from the two other layers of narrative, represented by story and fabula. The text, then, is made up of the blocks of text that present visitor commentary on the exhibit. For Bal, the *story* is "the content of that text, and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and 'colouring' of a fabula" (5). The story of the "Have Your Say" page relates a singular story, the story of visitors approaching the exhibit, internalizing it, and preparing to walk away; within the multiple individual experiences remains a single yet communal narrative of discovery. The story is distinguished for Bal from the *fabula*, or collection of elements that the story arranges. She writes, "Events, actors, time, and location together constitute the material of a fabula" (8). The multiple voices of the commenters offer "material or content that is worked into a story" (Bal 7). Bal further distinguishes the fabula from the story by writing: "The fabula is really the result of the mental activity of reading … The fabula is a memory trace that remains after the reading is completed" (10). The fabula is expressed by the collection of narrators that can both be read as individual museum-goers and, as Bal explains, as a "function and not a person, which expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text" (15).

My analysis of the comments proceeds, then, by way of keeping in mind these terms of narrative theory as well as Aristotelian rhetoric, particularly with regard to a speaker or writer's expressions of ethos and pathos. Suhas Deshpande, Kati Geber and Corey Timpson argue in their book chapter, "Engaged Dialogism in Virtual Space," "Classical rhetoric identifies several key characteristics of audience behaviour. Creators of virtual museums can draw upon the simplicity

and comprehensive nature the Aristotelian key concepts of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*" (274). Such a reading of the comments recognises a desirable level of interactivity emphasising the public history element of the visitor co-creation in the best sense – as visitors negotiate a relationship with the historical narrative in factual and emotional ways.

A Reading of the Comments[1]

1. Locating the Self within Temporal and Geographical Narratives: Ethos and Statements of Identity

For many writers, the narrative journey begins in a past very distant from the visit to the museum but sharply aligned in geography to the exhibit. Many comments reveal a desire on the part of the writer to connect him/herself to the region and to the Taranaki Wars, mostly by alluding to a first-person connection to the past and stating the writer's individual origins in an attempt to gain authority and credibility for their reactions to the exhibit narrative: "This is the best way for me to learn about Māori lands and about my whakapapa"; "I cannot ignore that my ancestors were settlers in Taranaki. That my family and I have benefited from such an unjust process." These speakers, in the absence of a format that allows the audience to recognise the speakers' situated ethos, or concrete signs of credibility and authority, provide elements that build on each one's invented ethos, or traits that identify them and their place in the story. This positioning occurs in both the comments of those who welcome the new narrative offered by the exhibit and those who resist the new narrative in favour of the traditional narrative. These comments indicate a strong desire to connect the self to the historical narrative and to claim geographical origins or simply inclusion in one or both sides of the conflict. The writers employ various means by which to claim authority, all of them strengthening the speakers' place in a national timeline. They use the first-person plural possessive ("our ancestors," "our past," "our history," "our culture") and first-person singular possessive ("my great grandmother," "my country," "my paekeha ancestors," "my whakapapa," "my ancestors," "my family," "My partners great grandfather," "my heritage") in order to emphasise their personal and national connections to the exhibit narrative. Those who wrote comments in te reo Māori actively declare

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a relationship with their ancestors through re-claiming the medium, or the text, that was nearly lost partly due to the events chronicled in the exhibit.

Others self-identify in other ways, choosing national, geographical and ethnic labels to locate their authority within the various voices represented by the exhibit ("I am a New Zealand European," "I am Māori and Pākehā," "Being Māori and Pākehā," "100 percent Māori"). Others stated their connection to the land, emphasising the names "New Zealand," "Taranaki," and the even more specific "Waireka," or the site of one of the pivotal Taranaki War battles (Keenan 29–30). Each writer who invoked the word "settler," meaning the Europeans who entered Aotearoa/New Zealand with the encouragement and protection of the British Crown, is locating part of the history of Aotearoa/New Zealand offshore, in Europe; some other writers pushed the time of the Aotearoa/New Zealand narrative back even further, by insisting, "This is a nation of immigrants … Māori included."

Overall, a significant number of comments were geared toward creating a personal narrative that had its beginnings during the time of the Taranaki Wars, the broad span of time of European settlement, and even earlier, in the case of the Māori writers or those who invoked a time before the Aotearoa/New Zealand islands were inhabited by humans. The writers all display a need to locate their own experience of viewing the museum and pondering the exhibit's significance by claiming that their own personal narrative parallels and informs their reading of the exhibit narrative. These assertions may be read as ethical appeals; these writers are demonstrating the authority they have to comment on the exhibit narrative and carefully constructing an argument, in some cases, that rests partly on the authority and credibility their ancestral ties, or whakapapa, confer on them as writers – regardless of where their sympathies lie. In some cases, a declaration that includes a geographical location further enhances the claim the writer has on the past and the land – the main conflict being, after all, over land ownership.

The elements of self-identification are fabula offered by these writers, elements of the larger individual and national stories, then, and can account for a variety of narrative beginnings to the visitor experience of the exhibit. In the absence of story structure, these elements nevertheless forge beginnings through the only tools writers have to construct ethos; their

accumulation supplies the first part of the story regardless of the user's trajectory through the comments.

2. *Attempts to Reject the Exhibit Narrative: The Ethos of Discounting the Past*

Of course, the sense of cultural conflict that exists today in Aotearoa/New Zealand is on full display in the comments, and we can read the resistance to the exhibit narrative as a moment of conflict on the journey through the exhibit: "Modern Māori should just deal with the mistakes their ancestors made and stop dwelling on the past …" Many writers stepped outside the narrative presented by the exhibit and re-asserted the dominance of the traditional narrative of colonial conquest told from the coloniser's point of view. One writer says, "The good intentions of colonisation have been overlooked …" And a great many of those writers exhibited an eagerness to de-emphasise the value of seeking out historical narratives; others even more actively dismissed the past's usefulness in learning about the present and deciding the future. We might conclude from the rhetoric of these writers that the traditional narrative cannot be upheld in the face of the newly told historical narrative unless history itself becomes devalued or at least disconnected in importance from the present. Comments include, "I think too much time is spent dwelling on the past," "Mistakes were made a long time ago they are in the past," and "No one should say sorry. What's in the past is in the past." By denying the relevance of the main area of historical investigation, some of the visitors are able to hold the exhibit's narrative at arm's length, effectively negating the validity of that narrative. Inherent in this move by these commenters, however, is an unstated validation of the narrative related by the exhibit, or they would not have to de-emphasise the value of reimagining history.

3. *Endorsing a Narrative of Discovery: Ethos as Enlightened Person*

Many visitors alluded to the process of becoming educated about the Taranaki Wars as a step on a journey. Their narratives might have begun in the past or just on the day they set off for the museum, but the turning points of their narratives occur after they have taken in the lessons of the exhibit. In their statements of praise for the museum and in their own more direct admissions, they create a before-and-after narrative that represents the acquisition of knowledge that changes them as people, regardless of whether they are comfortable with that new narrative. Some writers, while acknowledging they have learned from the exhibit, also contrast their new

state with their previous one, claiming "I didn't know much," "I didn't know how little I knew," and, for example, "I did not know a lot about this." These writers emphasise the distance they have travelled from ignorance to enlightenment, from not-knowing to knowing, with the implication that they have changed in the process: "The exhibition has been a huge eye opener for me these issues are never talked about," and "This exhibition helped me a lot to understand more of the issues which challenge New Zealand." The invented ethos of these speakers displays their willingness to be changed by the exhibit and emphasises the open-mindedness with which they approached the exhibit – or the persuasive power of the exhibit, or both. The audience of the comments, then, detects a traditional turning point in the narrative, a climax that is expressed in communal reporting of individual change.

Some of the comments revealed a change more significant than merely the accumulation of information and education; many linked their new knowledge to gaining perspective, registering emotion and feeling resolve. Many of these writers employ language that stresses emotions such as gratitude and sadness. They also use emotional words and phrases, writing, "I cried tears of sadness about the years of injustice"; "Māori were killed ripped from their land their language was laid to rest and their sovereignty was taken from them"; and "Tangi hotuhotu te ngakau" (The heart cries).[2] The writers argue "never forget the people who died" and refer to "heroism and suffering on both sides," emphasising the impact of the emotions engendered by the exhibit and signifying individual and communal pathos associated with the narrative's climax. This movement toward using pathetic appeals reinforces that the visit to the museum exhibit was not only intellectually but emotionally climactic. The story, as constructed by the reader through a variety of pathways, has as its climax the elements of storytelling that colour the memories of readers, the "memory trace that remains after the reading is completed" (Bal 15).

And still others seemed to approve of the exhibit as it displayed and validated a point of view that they already held; their initial ethos becomes reaffirmed through their agreement with the narrative suggested by the exhibit. Many of their comments suggested that others would benefit from viewing the exhibit. These writers observed the exhibit and offered a mirror narrative in which others make the same journey and became better educated: "As a mum I feel

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[2] All te reo Māori English translations are by the author with the assistance of Thea King.

it is irresponsible to not give our children the knowledge of understanding of what history holds"; "I think everyone in Taranaki including expatriates should understand the turbulent history of this region. In particular the young people of Taranaki should be aware of its history." These writers locate themselves alongside the museum experts as moral authorities positioned to announce what others who have not reached their level of knowledge must do. These comments include, "I hope that many people take the opportunity to see this exhibition and then discuss it with their families" and "We will be recommending this exhibition to other people." These writers not only endorse the exhibit narrative but also embrace the value of historical exploration and the claim that this history is relevant to their present. The invented ethos of these speakers claims the kind of knowledge and privilege embodied by the museum curators, and helps to validate the larger narrative of discovery as an integral part of the exhibit.

4. Refusing to Allow Narrative Closure

Remarkable about the vast majority of the range of comments is the frequent desire on the part of all stakeholders to refuse to allow a narrative ending to the story. However content they are with having gained an understanding, they look to the unwritten future as the desired ending of the narrative. On one hand, the narrative is complete; on the other hand, the true ending exists beyond the frame of the narrative. Of the narrative cycle, Bal explains, "A possibility can just as well be realised as not. And even if the event is realised, a successful conclusion is not always ensured" (196). In the voices of the multiple narrators, the event is realised, but the conclusion to the greater story has not been written. The future implied by the comments can be as far-reaching as the pasts the speakers invoked. Many writers are dissatisfied with the status quo and wish for a variety of resolutions, each tied to individual writer's sympathies. Some writers make very clear that the story has by no means been concluded. Many of these writers call for a change and pin their hopes on the future; many speakers offer encouragement. One writer says, "Kia Kaha, Kia Maia, Kia Manawanui" (Be strong, be brave, be persistent); another quotes the Māori proverb, "Whaia te iti kahurangi kit e touhu koe me he maunga teitei" (Pursue that which is precious, and do not be deterred by anything less than a lofty mountain). We are presented with hopes for the future, some vague but positive: "Recent events have led me to believe we still have a long way to go on this journey. We have started

positively and need to continue this way for positive change to occur," and "We have a lot of things to put right."

Users of the website can themselves become editors and narrators of the exhibit material. The writers seek knowledge and feel empowered by the museum to add their own reaction to the exhibit narrative. These writers demonstrate through these comments that they want to become actors in the narrative. The use of new media, with its implication that visitor voices deserve to ascend the stage in a formal virtual environment, shows us how well prepared the museum audience is to offer a supplementary narrative, and possibly how (comfortingly, for museum curators) predictable the story of a visit to the museum exhibit can be. Puke Ariki has given these voices a forum and has implicitly acknowledged the value of this user-directed narrative, one that becomes, rightly, an instrumental part of the exhibit itself.

A Hypothetical Architecture of Online Commentary with Limited Interactivity

The comment display represents the first stage of co-creation and interactivity. As a testament to the many voices of the nation, it offers a text in which we may read the past, present and future of participants in the narrative of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Curated, but widely representative, the comments were presented as written with misspellings and punctuation oversights included, and demonstrate an immediate, genuine and heartfelt response to the exhibit. The strength of that new narrative stands alone as part of the curated exhibit, but also suggests that the visitors to the museum and website are prepared and eager to have an even more active engagement with the topics raised by the museum exhibit. This offers an exciting starting point for thinking about new media applications in the modern museum, reinforcing the mission of the museum and cultural centre as inspiration for important national and cultural discussion – even in digital spaces. In his essay, "Cultural Heritage in the Age of New Media," Jeff Malpas makes a distinction between cultural institutions' "reproductive and productive power," arguing that new media can be used to both "record or to represent heritage artefacts or sites" and "create something new or supplemental to the artefact or site" (17). The comment page alone already provides this supplemental material, but it also provides the foundation for additional supplementation of the museum exhibit.

Moving toward greater interactivity without curation, with the public providing supplemental material to officially hosted institutional sites, is understandably thought of as problematic. Clearly, any institution engaged in soliciting such supplementation must work through issues regarding authority and appropriateness. Yehuda Kalay voices part of this concern in the Introduction to *New Heritage: New Media and Cultural Heritage*, writing of how the ease of collecting and storing data using new media "diminishes the power of official gatekeepers, such as academic journals, museums, and governmental agencies, and opens the floodgates to 'un-authorised' evidence and interpretations – the product of amateurs and charlatans" (6).

The challenges are not just philosophical, however. Most of the useful research on the design and implementation of healthy and successfully curated user discussion forums focuses on the practices of news organisations and large online discourse community platforms. Questions surrounding libel and inappropriateness as well as the tools of moderation – human, automated and crowdsourced – frequently occupy those who host comment sites and those who study them. The dream of online interaction as a demonstration of the most optimistic realisation of Jürgen Habermas's "public sphere" offers "hopes of reinvigorating democracy by encouraging discourse among those of opposing views, one where the status of participants is less important, and where ideas sink or swim by virtue of the strength of their arguments" (Wojcieszak and Mutz). Two main problems recur in online forums: "discussions, conducted through threaded lists of comments, often end in 'flame wars'" (Faridani et al.), while research has supported fears that participants in online discussion self-segregate into isolated communities of philosophical agreement (Wright and Street; Wojcieszak and Mutz; Dahlberg).

Although a cultural institution's potential users little resemble the more homogeneous discourse communities of self-selecting political forums and the more heterogeneous discourse of news-driven political commentary, their unique missions must frame the choices they make in designing forums. The needs of users should be assessed by analysing the kinds of comments they currently make upon responding to an exhibit. Only by understanding the ways users experience an exhibit, make claims about their relationship to its content, and respond to interface design can we better design forums that support and respond to the important conversations cultural institutions can sponsor online.

A good compromise between offering curated comments and hosting a forum where users can interact with each other directly is suggested by Opinion Space, an interface design that allows users to read others' comments, add their own, and understand where they stand individually as part of the larger discussion – without having the opportunity to respond directly to individual comments and thus avoiding overtly confrontational behaviour. This discourse architecture was developed at University of California-Berkeley and is currently in use by the United States Department of State. The developers of Opinion Space write that "while participatory culture thrives on the sharing of diverse opinions among large population over the network, there are several problems with existing systems" (Faridani et al. 1175), i.e., threaded textual comment boards. The problems they identify include the potential for "flame wars," the overwhelming nature of large numbers of comments, and the potential for "cyberpolarization" (Faridani et al. 1175). The developers describe Opinion Space as "a new online interface incorporating ideas from deliberative polling, dimensionality reduction, and collaborative filtering that allows participants to visualise and navigate through a diversity of comments" (ibid). They report high user engagement and a willingness to read comments by those with other opinions (Faridani et al. 1182).

Visually, Opinion Space is reminiscent of the "Have Your Say" page in that it features a dark screen with lighter elements representing individual responses to a topic. The process of entering a response to a discussion topic begins with registration and then user response to five "opinion profile" prompts, which require the user to respond on a sliding scale from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" that places their points of view relative to other users' responses to those five prompts (Dowd). Once a user is placed (as a point of light with a halo around it) on a two-dimensional map relative to other users (represented by a white point of light), the topic question box opens, and the user responds with a textual statement in response to a question specifically about the forum topic (Faridani et al. 1177). Next, the user is invited to peruse the Opinion Space display, "a projection of a sample of the users onto a two-dimensional plane where each user is represented by a point based on the 5-dimensional response to the profile opinions" (Faridani et al. 1177–8). The user may click on these points and read not only the other

users' statements but also the other users' responses to the profile questions. Users are then able to indicate agreement with the statements and rate their insightfulness to the topic at hand.

The Opinion Space comment map offers users an uncluttered, easily navigable space in which to register their opinions and gain insight into how others respond to the selected topic. Opinion Space allows a viewer to see the aggregate ratings given by other users for each entry; over time, a user may view the points of light and determine by the points' colours whether the community has found certain comments to be postitive or negative contributions to the discussion (Faridani et al. 1178). Additionally, the developers have included a scoring system on the State Department site that rewards users for registering ratings (Dowd); they surmise that readers include "1) casual users who want to quickly find and read the most insightful comments, 2) 'authors' who want to contribute eloquent comments that gain the respect of other participants, and 3) 'gamers' who want recognition for their role in shaping the space by rating the comments of many others" (Faridani et al. 1183). These categories may be identified as analogous to three kinds of museum visitors: 1) those who wish to read the narratives of discovery left by other users, 2) emotionally and intellectually inspired users who hope to register their insights and reactions to the exhibit, and 3) stakeholders who wish to help shape the conversation and discover value in understanding perspectives and constituencies.

A cultural institution like Puke Ariki, of course, would host a much smaller-scale discussion than the U.S. State Department, one that attracted users after their museum visit, potential visitors, or users interested in a museum exhibit as a topic of conversation. By interacting with the field of comments in an Opinion Space-like format, users could come closer to responding and reflecting on others' comments – even rating the comments – without engaging in specific confrontational speech acts, as in a threaded list. Building on the "Have Your Say" page, an initial design would include the curated comments and allow for additional comments that would be scaled and rated. The potential audience for the new web page would initially be made up of former visitors; in a paper considering how online information should be provided to users, the authors write, "We suspect that 'after the visit' could be a suitable time for pursuing a strong cultural impact (providing in-depth content, multimedia material, links to interesting sources, etc.). Moreover, past visitors are usually easy targets to reach: they bought

tickets!" (Francioli, Paolini and Rubegni). Users may be driven to add original commentary or provide visual emphasis for comments they agree with – and allow the institution to offer a space for discussion that would allow users to co-create in meaningful ways. The balance of power between institution and users might more smoothly be navigated with such a system, discouraging flaming while encouraging museum use of "electronic solutions as a platform from which to embrace a plurality of voices" (Hazen 141).

Considerations for Future Co-creation

"Comments Are Dead. We Need You to Help Reinvent Them," reads the early 2011 headline on the website of the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service's MediaShift Idea Lab. Phillip Smith writes, "Let's face it – technically speaking, comments are broken. With few exceptions, they don't deliver on their potential to be a force for good." The foundation recently publicised a Mozilla + Journalism, or MoJo, challenge for readers and designers of news sites, asking "how do we enable more coherent, elevated discussion?" ("Beyond Comment Threads"). Few observers of online discussions would disagree that the available tools for moderation are often unsatisfactory. Currently, the three most often used methods for moderating online communities include 1) human moderators either conducting pre- or post-moderation of comments, either previewing comments before they become visible to users or reviewing and perhaps deleting comments once they have been posted, 2) collaborative filtering systems that allow users to rate comments, and 3) filtering software that attempts to detect linguistic markers for incivility. The obvious difficulties with these systems are, respectively, that they may be prohibitively expensive, subject to mob rule, or inaccurate censors of perfectly legitimate material.

The MoJo challenge garnered 24 "winning" entries by 22 May 2011 ("Beyond Comment Threads"). Many of these participants stressed the need for new design architecture: "Can an interface nudge people to listen better?"; "We also need to change the interfaces to guide people towards [a variety of online] interactions"; "Redesigning the interfaces to exploit the flexibility of the new devices and allowing greater choice to both the journalist and the reader" ("Beyond Comment Threads"). The kinds of innovations suggested by the designers of Opinion Space and those who work on collaborative filtering systems and language-based filters dominate the suggestion field.

The suggestions primarily about design echo the arguments of Scott Wright and John Street, who write in "Democracy, Deliberation and Design: The Case of Online Discussion Forums" that good design can guide readers by making supplemental information and fact-checking easily available, setting the tone for discourse. Wright and Street argue that "we should view (online) deliberation as dependent on design and choice, rather than a predetermined product of the technology" (849). Wright and Street consider how "the internet has been posited as a solution" to the problem of enabling deliberation in democratic societies by some, while others argue that "the internet will only make the situation worse, leading to a balkanisation or polarisation of politics" (850). They accuse both sides of the debate of "creating a false dichotomy," suggesting, "It is no more plausible to conclude that online discussion forums destroy deliberation than it is to suggest that they make it possible" (849). Their research supports their argument "that the structural design of a discussion board can affect subsequent usage by influencing the level of interactivity and discussion" (855). Others who stress the centrality of design argue that "designing for usability is not enough; we need to understand how technology can support social interaction and design for sociability" (Preece).

While online news organisations and user communities continue to develop methods for moderation of hosted debates, it may be useful for museums to regard Puke Ariki's "Have Your Say" page and modifications that would resemble Opinion Space design as a strong example of visitor co-creation and interactivity, not limited but enhanced by individual users' inability to respond directly to each other. Encouraging visitors to respond to the exhibit with first-person statements may also offer a kind of moderation; in a study of the comment dynamics of the computer interest community Slashdot, researchers found, by using linguistic filtering software, that "Even in an irreverent community like Slashdot, 'I-statements' are indicators of good content and civility matters" (Brennan, Wrazien and Greenstadt 7). The strong appeals to ethos demonstrated in the "Have Your Say" comments suggest that increased emphasis on identity in prompts would both help develop a civil public platform and would be in concert with some of the fundamental questions of identity explored in the "Taranaki Wars" and other museum exhibits.

I'd like to briefly suggest the kinds of additional engagement and supplementation this model might inspire. Practical and easily achievable suggestions include allowing visitors to choose and display photographs of places and landscapes relevant to their comments; the photos might be initially offered in an online gallery by the museum. Users may also choose to identify themselves as stakeholders in the conversation based on age, ethnicity, gender, whakapapa and other relevant factors through visual choices, perhaps font colour or through the use of icons. The visual elements of such a conversation, from photos of places to individual visual declarations of identity, can themselves become elements of the narrative.

Other suggestions for building supplemental material would, of course, include other user-supplied images of themselves and their artefacts as well as their surroundings. The site might also create a means for visitors to add further definition, explanation and narrative – through text-based testimony but also through hyperlinks and geolocation applications. Imagine a narrative that might be created over a presentation and description of landscape, an envisioning of actual distance, an imagining of the past layered over the present. Additionally, users might wish to provide not only evidence to support their arguments but their own narratives regarding their or their ancestors' histories.

Reading the comments as narrative allows us to imagine the nation-space of Aotearoa/New Zealand, still struggling with the legacy of the Taranaki Wars and the process of colonisation. The comments themselves create a new narrative about Taranaki and Aotearoa/New Zealand history that is both a reaction to and a narration separate from the museum's narratives. The Puke Ariki "Have Your Say" web page can be read as the first step on the path toward truly "public history" approaches to historical narratives – combining the essential importance of the public and social media spheres in museum curatorship. This Puke Ariki-hosted web page already truly allows the museum to function as a forum and provides the foundation for exploring further degrees of interactivity at museums and cultural centres.

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