



Interactive multimedia & web

For exploration, learning, archives, community and marketing

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Where do I start – hints & tips from my digital adventures.

I've seen the world from both sides now...

I have been visiting and using museums as an archive researcher for broadcast television for thirty years. Over the last decade I have also been involved on 'the other side' and producing new media projects from within museums and the heritage sector (The British Library, English Heritage amongst others). I'm passionate about what new technology can offer, but also realistic about the reality of how digital projects work out.

In my museums persona, I know that our virtual presence (via digital means / distribution / interaction) is as just as important as our physical existence. Without it we might as well lock the doors and walk away. It is not a sexy add on, it is essential if we want to survive. It allows access to our collections and expertise, which means that people value us, which in turn means they will keep funding us. Beyond access, it brings interpretation of material at multiple levels and layers of meaning to many different audiences. Suddenly our visitors are not passive and will want to take an active role. Who would not want to curate their own exhibition on line?

The big question is, how do we develop digital projects that are not just expensive 'eye candy'? That actually function well, far beyond that press release with the great images going out? That are 'future proofed' to be easily adaptable?

From my experience, the answer is not in getting the right management system or the multimedia company with the most impressive list of clients. The real answer is, how committed is your organisation (and individuals) in terms of time and effort? Will it be seen as benefiting all rather than being someone's 'pet' project? Does it form part of a digital strategy rather than using up suddenly available money?

The most successful projects I have been involved in started with a substantial time commitment to researching and considering available and newly generated content. Time taken in research, not only related to likely content but also by actually watching and questioning how people navigate through material, is vital. Holding the material, it is likely that you will supply the content for the developer to work with, but here are some real reality checks. For example, do you actually have the copyright or permission for material within your collection to be able to shown electronically? Don't assume because you display it within your four walls, that this is so. Preparing content takes twice as long as you ever thought possible, and serious planning needs to go into getting it (and keeping it) in a form that allows you to re-version and use in future incarnations easily. That educational DVD should be made so that it can translate into a website or an iPod download.



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Lastly, writing for screen-based media is an art form. Just because you are a great curator, don't assume your talents extend naturally to writing catchy copy that works well as people navigate about. 'Click here' is not a bandage to cover all situations. You are creating a conversation – keep that in mind and something magic starts to happen.

Finding and choosing a developer brings a whole new dimension into the mix. Of course you want a team who have a great track record, prepared to work within your budget. However, be aware that it is a fact of life that you may both use the same words, but you each will understand completely different things from them. So, how easy are they to talk to? Are they listening to you? Do they question rather than assume? Without being 'touchy feely' about it, you need to feel they are committed to you emotionally beyond the lifespan of the project. You both want to produce something which is good looking, but design should complement content as opposed to leading it. It can be a fine balance in respect of the integrity of primary sources – for example, a designer might want to colourise that black & white film to make it appeal to a younger audience.

Try to understand how the application works and how the developers are putting the material together. Knowing how they are building it saves the poor designer from having a mental breakdown when you helpfully suggest that all the elements could be rearranged in a different place on the screen. Given that any linked digital structure is akin to a fine woven web, something that might seem a simple change can mean reworking the whole thing.

Bring a developer into your project discussions early, including the initial idea stage. A good developer should be willing to offer advice and talk through possible costs and potential solutions as a general introduction to what they can offer you. This puts you in a better position to know what it is you want, what technology is available, and what the developer would need from you.

A final thought. Before you start, plan an afterlife for the project. Can you update it yourself? Is it easy to keep it running or do you need an IT department the size of a planet to service it? Any relationship with a developer should include training and support after delivery. Although it might seem like a real luxury, spending time watching how people actually are using your newly born project, as opposed to how you think they will, is always a really big surprise.

Maggi Cook

Maggi Cook has worked with Footmark on numerous projects.