

Museum Observation #2

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How can the five principles mentioned in the Science Museum Group's Digital Strategy guide your approach to creating interactively digital & engaging exhibits?

Though this digital strategy plan was created by the Science Museum Group, it is certainly a helpful guideline to follow for any museum looking to expand its digital presence and provide a more fulfilling experience for its audiences. Which is likely why the first principle is all about the audience, as they are the most important part of a museum's future and sustainability.

This may seem to some as common sense; yet, it is not quite that simple. As the strategy plan makes specific note of, not only must the museum cater to its audience's needs, it must also “[t]est on users as part of the development process” (Digital Strategy n.d.). This, and the additional point that products should be reviewed and enhanced over time, are extremely important. The digital world and the technological world are constantly changing. It is not enough for a museum to come up with a digital strategy and then brush their hands of the affair, believing that said strategy will be successful for the foreseeable future. Not only must the audience's needs be fulfilled, but digital content must be accessed to be sure that it is, in fact, fulfilling said needs, and if not, that it be refitted or made better in order to do so.

This ties right into the next point of sustainability. As the strategy plan says, these digital experiences must be “[built] for long term growth” and “well maintained” (Digital Strategy n.d.). As I have said, the plan makes a point to note that these are not going to be one-time implementations, and that interactive and digital exhibits are an ongoing project. Some attempts at creating these exhibits will succeed and some will fail, but remembering that the technological landscape is always shifting and growing allows for flexibility, and, in referring back to the first principle, having test users that can provide feedback on what worked and what did not will allow for greater success in the future (Digital Strategy n.d.).

Which then ties into the entrepreneurial and innovative: working in the long-term means

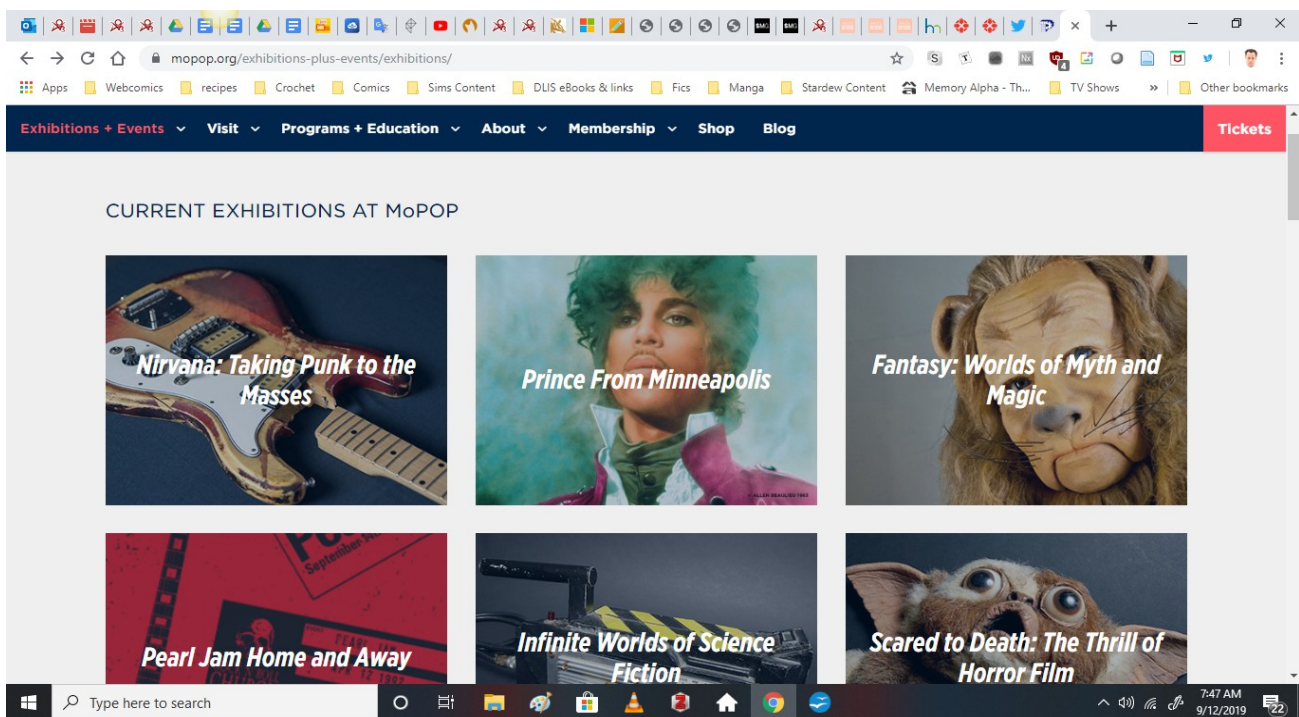
creating projects and programs that have room to grow, to be modified and tailored in order to meet changing audience needs. When working on interactive exhibits, not only is it important to follow technological trends, but to also make successful projects available for others to build off of and improve (Digital Strategy n.d.). By working together and “seek[ing] new partnerships and collaboration to increase capability” (Digital Strategy n.d.), not only does the core museum improve its digital and interactive relationship with its audience; it also aides in improving the same for other museums that may not have the funding to begin such projects at all. When a technology is already in place and widely accessible, it can be used by those who would not have had the ability to perform the initial launch of such an idea.

Which, once again, swings quite neatly into principle four. Making the content and technology used for the exhibits in one museum reusable and sharable helps other museums reach wider audiences and create better digital experiences for their patrons. In addition, a separate museum may find uses or flaws in a project that the original did not, and can provide feedback that enhances both organizations.

The fifth principle really ties it all together and is, I believe, the most important of the five. This point speaks of embedding these policies and practices across the organization, creating a “pan-museum digital department with deep expertise” (Digital Strategy n.d.). As I said before, these practices are not a one-and-be-done sort of scenario; creating an interactive digital experience for a museum's audience is an ongoing project. Having a department within an organization that is dedicated solely to ensuring the digital presence and engagement of a museum and its exhibits is extremely necessary, considering how quickly technology advances and how said advances change the expectations of patrons. And with such a department in place, it ought to be easier on a museum to “[o]verhaul guidelines, processes and policies” (Digital Strategy n.d.) in order to bring their exhibits – and the way audiences engage with said exhibits – into an era where digital interaction and engagement are not only possible, but commonplace.

How do we as information professionals blend the digital and physical worlds in our museums?

Museums and information organizations of all sorts are using various methods of bringing the digital and physical together when it comes to presenting exhibits to audiences. By posting event calendars, hours of operation, admission costs, and directions on a website, a museum can perform the bare minimum of informing its patrons of when and where to go to see exhibitions. However, many museums already do more than that and are working to proceed even further along when it comes to making their exhibits available to online users; there are audio tours, mobile apps, and on-site interactive activities that engage the audience. Websites can also include information on current exhibits, included those that are visiting or only on display for a short period of time, such as how Seattle's Museum of Pop Culture (MOPop) has a series of pages dedicated to short blurbs and images of what they are currently showing at the museum (Current Exhibitions at MOPop 2019).

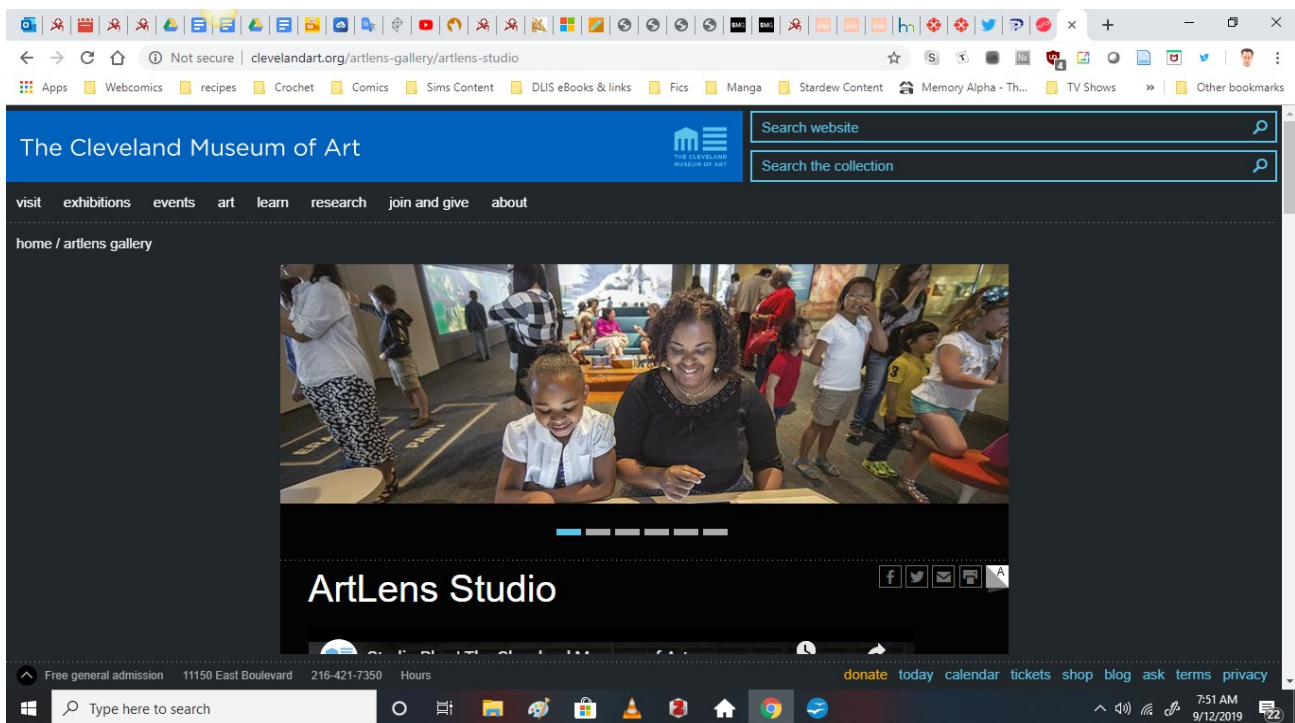


Screenshot of the MOPop's Current Exhibitions page

Others may have individual artifacts and exhibits featured on their websites, which include

information about and descriptions of an artifact, as well as images and even audio clips from the museum's audio tours.

Though these are simpler in terms of digital connection to an external audience, they are the building blocks toward creating greater interactivity and combining the digital and physical aspects of a collection. As said in the Science Museum Group's guide, it is important to “[p]rovide open open data platforms on which others can build” (Digital Strategy n.d.). Already, information professionals are taking these stepping stones of digital content and moving on to creating even greater digital interactivity, as seen with the Cleveland Museum of Art's ArtLens studio, which allows patrons to create their own art, play games centered around the museum's art exhibits, and have their creations shared on the museum's ArtLens Tumblr (ArtLens Gallery n.d.).



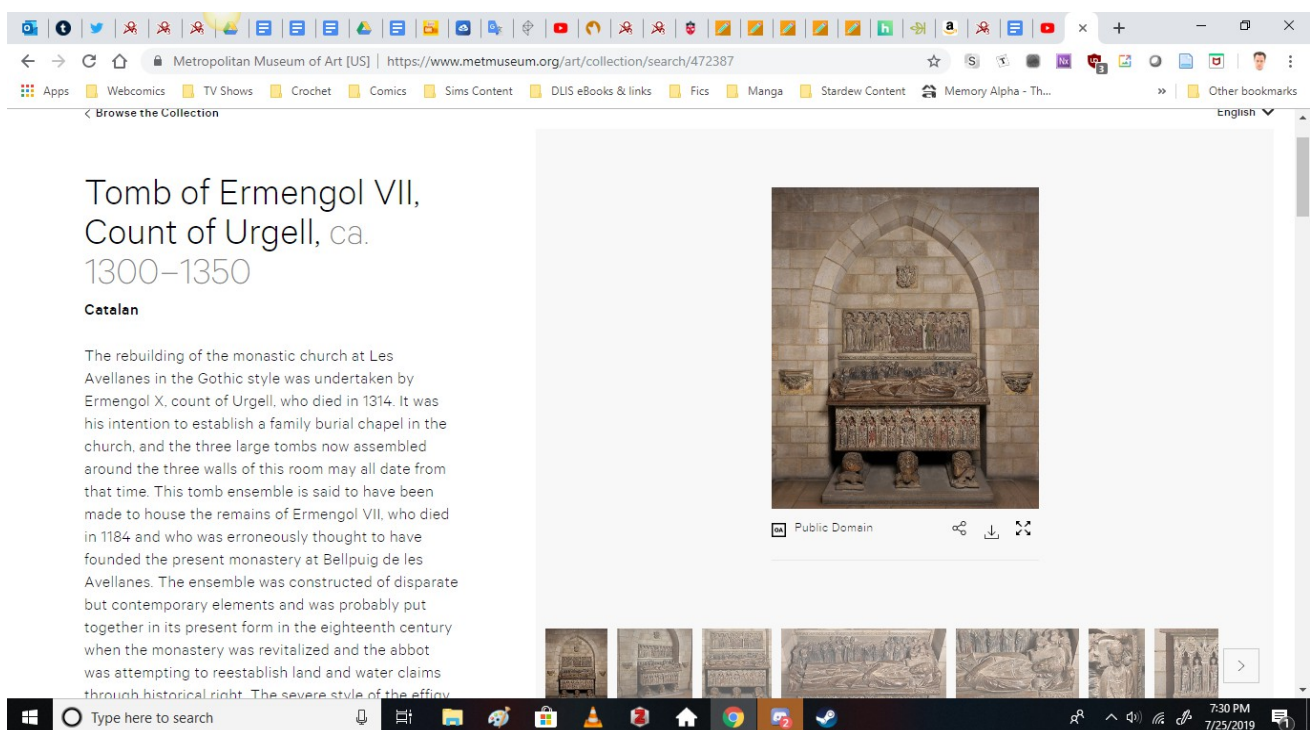
Screenshot of the ArtLens Studio page

How does your museum partner attempt to do this?

The Cloisters, as a submuseum of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is included in the online

resources the MET uses. Though there are no accounts specifically for the Cloisters that I have found on social media, images and posts concerning its exhibits are posted to the MET's Twitter and Instagram accounts. The MET also posts events occurring at both its main location and the Cloisters on its website, with a page dedicated to the Cloisters' location, hours, and specific events happening there (The MET Cloisters 2019).

Additionally, the MET includes pages dedicated to specific exhibits on its website, including those at the Cloisters. These pages have images of the artifact or exhibit, the short blurb posted next to it in the museum itself, and specific details about the artifact. There's also a clip from the museum's audio tour that is specific to the artifact or exhibit the page is referencing, information about the provenance, references, and the timeline of the piece, and links to related exhibits in the museum (Tomb of Ermengol VII 2019).



Screenshot of the page for the Tomb of Ermengol VII

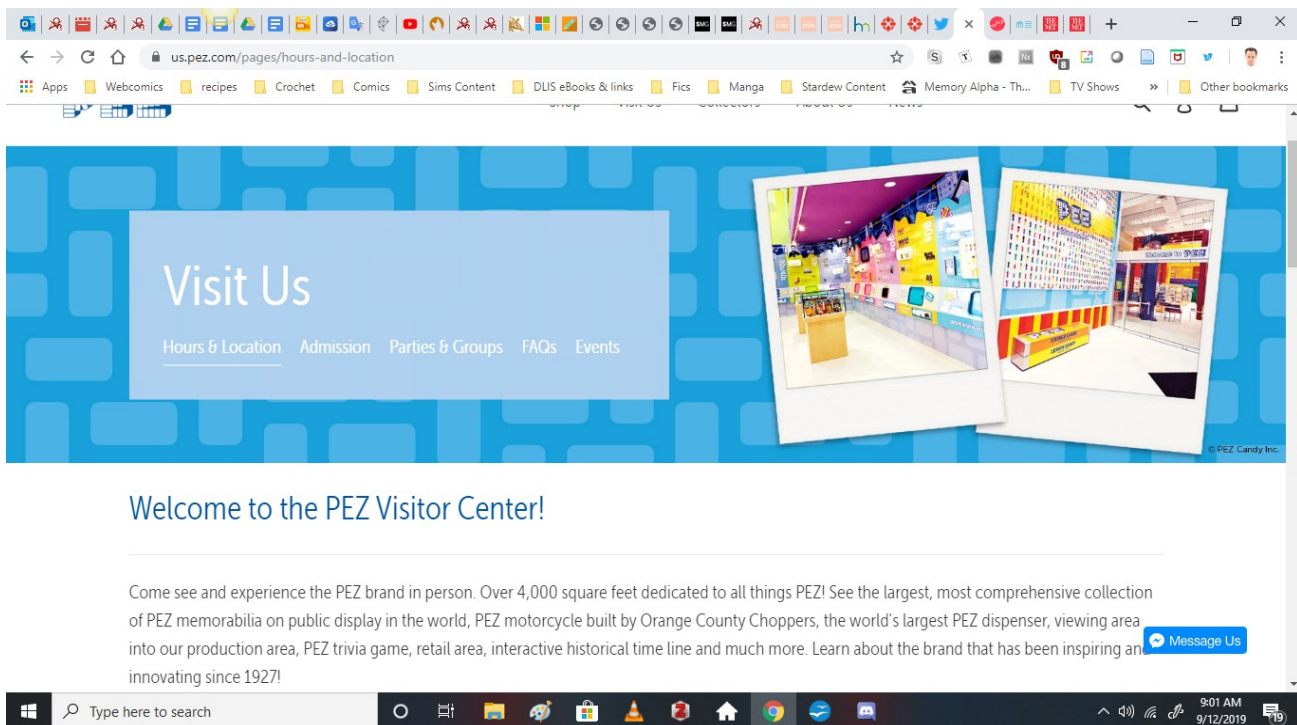
On top of all that, the MET has its own mobile app that users can use to see the events listed on

the website, comes with a traveler's guide to New York City itself and its public transit, and has information on the different wings of the museum, lists of the pieces displayed, and even past controversies over exhibits (Metropolitan Museum of Art NYC 2019).

How can you make your pre-selected museum object interactive with your Museum-Partner?

Considering that the MET already has an app that includes the Cloisters location in its features, this should be fairly easy. The app itself could take those links to related exhibits and point out where they are in the museum, as well as referring to similarly themed pieces in the main MET location. That could lead patrons to exploring more relating to the tomb and its occupant, even if there is not much information available at the museum about Ermengol himself. Considering that the room the tomb is in has a few other tombs as well, the app could provide information on how the tombs are connected, if at all, or simply point out similarities in the figures they were built for or the construction of them.

There could also be on-site activities concerning the symbolism of the pictures carved into the tomb, where patrons can play games around trying to figure out what the symbolism means. Or, in a similar vein, the Cloisters could create scavenger hunts where patrons find certain images or exhibits; the PEZ Visitor Center in Orange, Connecticut does this, awarding a free pin or magnet to visitors who complete the scavenger hunt and solve the puzzle at the end of it.



Screenshot of the PEZ Visitor Center's main page

Though it may seem odd to make a tomb interactive, the tools to do so are already within the MET's grasp. Between the app and connecting the exhibit to related objects in both the Cloisters and the main MET building – which the website already somewhat does – it should not be too difficult to try out different methods of creating an interactive and engaging exhibit for patrons. And if adding interactive features is too much for the current app to handle, considering that it does host information on both museums as well as a guide to traversing New York City, then another app could be developed specifically for that purpose.

The most pressing challenge to this, I believe, is that the Cloisters is built in an architecturally medieval-style building, which was not exactly designed to host electronics.

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