The Wonderkamers: Creating Today’s Best Interactive Museum Exhibits

Posted by Elisabeth Allen on Monday, March 16th, 2015

One of the top buzzwords in today’s entertainment design space is interactivity. But what does interactivity really mean? Often, it’s a code word for a hands-on exhibit or for the integration of certain types of technology. At their most fundamental level, interactive exhibits seek to do more than just tell or inform. Instead, the goal is to engage and draw visitors more deeply into the narrative that the exhibit is exploring. One recent groundbreaking museum exhibit, the Wonderkamers at Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, will be recognized by this year’s Themed Entertainment Association’s (TEA) THEA Awards.

Wonderkamers, which translates to “Wonder Rooms,” is a role playing game and interactive art installation that gives a fresh and entertaining introduction to the world of fine art. It is especially focused on getting the attention of young visitors. Guests play curator while exploring a wide spectrum of different art forms, with the end goal of curating their own small art exhibits.

TEA’s Thea Awards Committee wrote, “The blend of art, storytelling, themed environments and gaming elements makes it unique within the world of art museums.” Gamification combines with storytelling and technology to create an unforgettable experience for children and adults alike. We were fortunate to have the opportunity to interview the team behind The Wonderkamers, who shared their insights on the experience of creating this innovative exhibit.

What was the most challenging aspect of this exhibit to design?

The exhibition is the result of three years of intense collaboration with a multidisciplinary team of educators, game designers, media specialists, filmmakers, set, lighting and sound designers. The biggest challenge was connecting everyday and everybody to create this game changing exhibition: to make a physical and virtual three-dimensional game in which the visitors, who are mostly kids that normally don’t like or come to art museums, take a whirlwind tour through the worlds of fine art, haute couture, architecture and the decorative arts.
Herman Kossmann, creative director from Kossmann.djong says: “We were always challenging each other to make everything as wonderful and connected as possible. Our goal was to make an engaging narrative space where content, collection, light, film and interaction merge and work together. Working in a multidisciplinary team was the only way to accomplish this. And of course the support, trust and patience of our client the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag was also a key factor in making this innovative experience.”

Gamification seems to play a key role. How does the game integrate into the overall experience? What are the guest experience goals?

Actually, the game is the experience! The idea behind the Wonderkamers exhibition was to link all the individual rooms, which originally contained standalone exhibits, into a coherent whole. The storyline of the game provides the backbone, and because it is purpose-built, it integrates seamlessly with the educational content. So we were not really gamifying an existing situation, but creating a new game from scratch.

The goal of the Wonderkamers is to bring the art world to life, by approaching the topic in a refreshing way that suits the target group [kids, teenagers and the young at heart]. The strength of it is that it doesn't try to do too much; but rather select a clear key message in each room of the exhibition. Visitors take away these bite-size messages from each room they visit. The exhibition is a sort of 'tasting platter' of different artistic disciplines.

How does the virtual curation and miniature museum experience work? What are the learning and experience objectives behind this part of the exhibit?

The experience is built on Kiss the Frog's personal visitor Identification system ‘Backstage’ This is a custom-built piece of software, which allows individual visitors to carry around a cloud of information with them during their visit. All they need is a consistent item which identifies them, in this case the tablet. This way the system can pull up the correct artwork when visitors are decorating their miniature museums and know which results belong to which visitor. It is also the means by which the museum can email guests the photos and creations that they made while they were in the Wonderkamers.

This part of the game basically wraps up the learning objectives from the rest of the exhibition. Visitors apply the knowledge they have gathered to create their own gallery, and also get live tips about gallery composition. Decorating the miniature gallery gives visitors an end goal to work towards. It pulls the game together, so that visitors leave feeling that they have achieved something. The moment that their creation appears on-screen, inside the physical structure that houses the miniature museum, is magical!

What drove you to make interactivity a priority?

The average museum visit lasts just 90 minutes. Many children never visit a museum or are simply bored by art museums. The Gemeentemuseum really wanted to change this, and not by making just another paper scavenger hunt or workshop. The museum was keen to attract more young visitors, and needed to really do something innovative and different to achieve this. Therefore the museum thought they had to get really close to the perception of young kids.

Furthermore the Gemeentemuseum really wanted to have kids participating actively in the art world, because they strongly believe that children are more keen to learn about art by “doing.” Whole generations of kids have already grown up or will grow up with interactive tools. They are already used to interactivity in their surroundings. We could even say, they are bored when something isn’t interactive. That’s why the Gemeentemuseum made interactivity a priority.

Nevertheless interactivity and extraordinary design concepts have always been the means to an end. Wonderkamers may be full of tablets, AR codes, virtual dressing rooms and touchscreens, but it’s really all about art.

Gemeentemuseum director Benno Tempel says: “Unlike many other educational projects, it puts kids in touch with genuine artwork. In its thirteen spectacularly designed display areas, youngsters discover a wonderful new world where they can design their own Berlage building or learn to dance the Boogie Woogie, urged on by the great Mondriaan himself. At the end of the game, they select their favorite artwork from the depot and create their own exhibitions in the miniature museum. Kids understand how unusual it is to be able to do things with real artwork. Where else can you put on a period costume and strut your stuff on the catwalk?”
Since the opening of Wonderkamers, the average length of a visit has doubled. And it’s the kids who can’t be dragged away. Youngsters have been returning three or four times. And not just that: they’re going on into the main museum to see the original works like Victory BoogieWoogie with their own eyes. As Tempel says, “When you’ve just created your own Mondrian on a touchscreen, it’s hardly surprising if you want to take a look at the real thing afterwards.” Since the section re-opened, more than 30,000 games have been played.

What technological innovations or integrations did you need to develop to bring this together?

We pulled together a lot of innovative ideas and technologies that we have explored in past projects. Examples include augmented reality wayfinding, the personal visitor identification system, and the use of the augmented reality code stickers around the gallery to send information from one platform to another during game play.

The major new innovation was the game server, which manages the very complicated task of allocating the rooms and keeping track of all the 35 different tablets, when there are large groups of visitors in the exhibition. This was developed specifically for this exhibition, and contains most of the intelligence behind the Wonderkamers.

What lessons or ideas would you share as takeaways with others interested in your case study?

Madeleina Borthwick, an interaction designer from Visit the Prog says: “Test, test, test and test some more! The visitor’s interaction with an exhibition as complicated as this can’t be designed on paper only, you need to see how it works with real visitors. Especially in the case of the Wonderkamers, the context is terribly important. The visitor is walking around a physical space and constantly switching between mediums: from tablet to touchscreens, from projections to physical parts of the decor. This makes it trickier to hold their attention and make sure they are standing in the right place, looking at the right thing, at the right moment.”

To realise a project like this, it is also necessary to have a strong and creative multidisciplinary team. The Gemeentemuseum made the wise choice of involving all these parties from the very beginning of the project. Throughout the process, everybody gave input from the perspective of their own specialty, which led to the strong end result: the game and information is interwoven with the space, to create a spectacular, immersive experience.

Conclusion

The Wonderkamers exhibit has a lot to offer in terms of serving as a blueprint and model for other interactive exhibits. It’s conceptually strong, and has a clear, targeted message that has permeated every aspect of its design. Some of the key lessons – the importance of an interactive team, a clear vision, thoughtful technology integration, and the power of testing – offer insights that are helpful across entertainment design disciplines. One thing is certain: the integration of story, technology, and experience at Wonderkamers creates something truly unique, that’s unlike anything else in the space today.

Images courtesy of Wonderkamers/Gemeentemuseum Den Haag