Interview with Keir Winesmith

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[Author accepted version]

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- Hannah: Thank you for spending some time today reflecting on your experience in thinking about and creating innovative digital media platforms for a number of leading museums in the world. We would be really interested in talking broadly about your time at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), and in particular about some lessons learned in the design of the SFMOMA's recent touring app and audio project that has been associated with the major redevelopment of the museum site.¹
- Keir: Numerically, the touring app has gone well, with well over 100,000 downloads, plus additional onsite device rentals, which is almost another 100,000. Also, the usage is incredible. We're only measuring people who listen to more than three things onsite, as it's important to be strict about who we consider a 'user'. Someone sampling it from home in, say, Japan doesn't count as a user, as this is an onsite visitation app and very much about your experience in the SFMOMA building. The people who match that criteria, on average, have session lengths above 100 minutes, which is very high for a museum interpretive experience.

In our approach, we intentionally moved away from the traditional model of the curatorial voice as one of authority. Instead we've gone to a model of particular expertise – like a kind of passionate advocate for the artwork itself, the ideas explored and how it fits into the museum space. The model is much more in the style of *This American Life*² but delivered as the user walks from space to space, with each new space triggering the next episode of the narrative.

In our deep, root and branch survey of the San Francisco Bay Area's arts-interested population we found some die-hard fans of museum visitation, but to attract and be relevant to a wider audience, and to be sustainable, we need to be able to speak to audiences in a way that's relevant to them. That is not necessarily using academic authoritative language, it's really about using passion, expertise, and interest.

Stephanie Pau, who was the executive producer for all of the in-building audio content, was really trying to find people who could passionately speak to why you should look at the art work and the building. Not to explain it, or encroach on the visitor's ability to understand and interpret it, but to make room for you, as a visitor, to be an expert in your own way, and leave room for you to find things that you didn't know were there.

The curators were totally involved in almost every step of the app development and content: they were providing stories that might work, suggesting people who would be good for those stories, and so on.

We approached a diverse set of writers, thinkers, artists, designers, philosophers, comedians and local producers, to offer a distinct set of ways into the art, for anyone coming into the museum with some sort of openness. We're not going to convert people to being more open, so I consider openness is a prerequisite for taking up the experience. Many users have found a voice within the app that speaks particularly to them. For example there is one tour with a couple of comedians who are actually confused by modern and contemporary art but open to learning about it, so they're very good avatars for the interested but not convinced visitor.

Another voice that really resonates for me is the young German-American radio producer Luisa Beck, who does the tour of the German post-war art collection. She interviews her mum and her grandmother about what it was like to grow up during and post-World War II in Germany, and unpacks and explores her German identity and the stories of those two generations through the artwork on the wall. In another tour approach, a philosopher talks about how the eye sees, and how the brain consumes abstract visual imagery.

That combination of expertise and close-looking, with your eyes on the art and your phone in your pocket, is critical to the experience design of the project. We didn't want to clobber the museum experience. We're very much about phone in pocket and eyes up, which is why it's also so important that the location triggering service works seamlessly (which it hasn't always). When it does, there are truly moments when it is like someone is holding your hand and telling you a story that you feel is hidden from everyone else, and was hidden from you before you visited.

Hannah: Have any of the tours not been so successful?

Yes we have found that when we stray too far from the art, people don't go with us. For example, one of the tours is a kind of "sport meets art" where we've taken the language of sports broadcasting and applied it to the art museum context. I think it's hilarious, but I'm a sports nerd, as well as an art nerd. The success rate of this tour has been much lower, with the vast majority of people not making it to the end, in contrast to some other tours, which have as much as 85 per cent of people completing the full length – often 25 or 30 minutes.

Overall the reviews for the app have been off-the-charts positive, except for when the location services don't work. I sometimes liken it to going on a walk with a close friend in a new town, who is giving you directions like ... "we're going to turn left here, we're going to turn right here", but they're also telling you their story of the place.

- Wally: You have a lot of statistics and evaluative data to hand about the SFMOMA app, and I was wondering how important it has been to build in tracking and diagnostics?
- Keir: Yes we have been using a model of "3:18:3", for our digital projects, which includes three months of testing and evaluating immediately after launch date, then a period of reflection and change after 18 months when you can refresh content or tweak the user experience, and then after three years you should be able to replace the technology.

If you can't fund a cycle of evaluation and alteration, if you can't fund new content, and if you can't fund replacement hardware or software after three to four years, then maybe you shouldn't do the project. And yes we're baking analytics into our practice, including every interactive inside SFMOMA, the website – every single thing – from the first day is being measured and tracked. Because without that, mixed with genuine human qualitative evaluation, you won't know what's working, and you can't get better.

Hannah: Can you tell us about one of the tours which is in the local environs of the city?

Keir: One of the tours is actually out through the city. We start in the building, but then we say: "turn around - we're going to walk outside", which is odd, but exciting for a museum app.

We have found that it really resonates with people, because it's saying that the story of this building is tied to the story of the city of San Francisco, and we're going to show you inspirational spaces, share the history of the city, and how it influenced the building project.

- Wally: It strikes me that that the app's success lies in the simple idea and technological concept of the audio tour that is done very well. But it's the thinking behind the content and the choice of that content that really resonates. Do you agree with this characterisation?
- Keir: Yes, I think that's a fair summation. Within all the digital projects we have worked on in the museum we try to achieve a balance of about a third focused on content, a third focused on software and the user experience, and a third on hardware and operations. If you can keep these activities in balance, then I think you stand the best chance of doing a meaningful project. If you've only got enough money to build the thing, but not enough money to do proper experience design, and proper content, then it's going to fail.

The other thing, and you picked it up immediately, is there is an intuition in museums that everything is for everybody, which is generous and in many ways, correct. Anyone should be able to get into the building and it should be accessible to all. But, in my opinion, when it comes to an interpretive project, there is a tendency to make it function like the kitchen sink: it has to work for the visitor planner, the researcher, tours for schools and teachers, and for kids and families. Once you're working for everyone, you're kind of working for no one. So we pushed hard internally during the scoping stage on simplifying the feature set. For example, we took out the parking helper system that was requested.

By doing this, we aim for greater legibility to visitors, as they absolutely understand the value proposition of the tours: there are two models – guide me, or let me guide myself. And, with in each, you can sync with friends and family, to have a social experience, if you choose.

I think it also works because the technology came to maturity in the six months before we opened. If SFMOMA had opened a year before, we would not have built this app. And in two years from now I think it will be different again, and the right thing to do will be different than what it was for us in 2016. [Editors: 5 months after this interview was completed, the app platform used by SFMOMA was acquired and decommissioned. The SFMOMA app is no longer available to download.]

Hannah: Turning then to your reflections more broadly on current assumptions that pervade the GLAM sector that the digital can "do everything", from drawing out an archive;

to providing a searchable database tool; to creating an immersive experience; and to situating content etc. Are you suggesting that it is more productive to be much more targeted when conceptualising and designing digital tools?

Keir: I see that there are two ways that the GLAM sector engages with the uptake of digital. The first is the "othering" of digital, in that it is somehow still considered as distinct from the lived experience of the world, by both our audiences and some of our staff. But as we know, the world doesn't stop when they get to the front door (even if it's a beautiful old front door). All the Instagram alerts, text messages and emails follow with you into the building. Given the technological transformational context of people's lives, I think the othering of the digital is anachronistic.

But, at the other end of the spectrum, the second response is the fetishizing of the digital as the solution to a set of diverse problems, and this is also problematic – although a more nuanced and contemporary issue. And also one I think will go away. We will, I predict, see an end to dedicated 'digital officers' and targeted funding exclusively for digital development in 10 years from now. I'm also predicting that the best museums, galleries, libraries and archives who are embracing digital are going to approach it in a way that is much more like water; something that everyone is drinking and part of normal practice, and not something that's delicious and shiny to add on at the end.

I think in many ways it's less digital products, and more digital practice that is going to leave a lasting impact on the cultural sector. In that digital can offer something more fundamental to cultural memory that shiny products and projects.

Wally: Can you elaborate on these cycles of production?

KW: The GLAM sector is very good at thinking and working on what I call "object time"; so think of a 200-year-old object where a conservator is making a choice today about how it is displayed, to ensure it's going to last 1000 more years. If you're in a city history museum, you might be operating on the 10 to 20-year horizon, if you're a modern or contemporary art institution you might be on a 20 to 100-year horizon. If you're the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, you're operating on a multi thousand-year horizon. Your "object time" is very broad in both directions.

Then there is "exhibition time", which is 18 months to five years of planning, with some exhibitions 10 years in planning. And the exhibition might only run for three to

four months. Some works are displayed longer in permanent collections, however they are still only ever on show for limited time spans.

Then there's the scariest of all time scales in the GLAM sector which is "strategic initiative" time, which is the humorous mimetic version of museum time, where people roll their eyes! When you think of a strategic plan for new building say, that is years in the planning, and years in the making, and then years afterward as you adjust to the new normal.

The concept that's new, and the one that we need to respond to, and the idea that resonates with this book is "digital time"; that is a mixture of real time responses to visitor actions, social media, press and problems as they arise, and the life of technologies we've developed and deployed.

At the moment most GLAM organisations applied the exhibition and strategic initiative timescales and models straight onto digital, and I think that's actually a failure of the sector. What I hope we're going to see more of is the introduction of strategically short runs for some experimental digital projects; projects that teach us something, and then we either decide to drop them or consider operationalising them.

Something that SFMOMA learned from Silicon Valley, is how to adopt their R&D process. We created an R&D lab within the museum that's simply a loose confederacy of people who want to work at that inventive and responsive tempo. I hope we'll see this in the next decade as normal behaviour, however we'll also need to see changes in granting and funding behaviours to make room for this way of working – especially for small to medium institutions.

- Hannah: In asking the GLAM sector to invest more in experimentation and risk-taking isn't their agency and authority on the line?
- Keir: Yes I think it's a matter of trust. In the U.S. the vast majority of public institutions have less than 50 percent trust from Americans. Libraries and museums, though, are well above 50 percent in terms of the trust of the general public. GLAM sector institutions need to handle that trust with great care, because trust is an easy thing to lose. However that can lead to conservative behaviours, as we're very nervous about anything that could negatively affect the perception of our audiences and the funding we attract.

However, I think that trust is worth spending. If you're honest with your community, you can take a stance about something that is important to your community. You Interview with Keir Winesmith (2019) don't need to do everything perfectly as long as you're transparent about it. We might put something out and say; "this is a part of an experiment, we don't know if it's going to work, but we want to understand from you, our audience, if this resonates with you." That generates trust too, and audiences feel that agency and the sense that the museum is relevant to them, because its trusting them to give important feedback.

- Wally: Do you think that the digital is playing a role in redrawing institutional boundaries in the GLAM sector?
- Keir: I'm not convinced those boundaries are being redrawn now, however I agree that they should be. I think there's an enormous amount that visitation/audience-focused institutions (galleries & museums) can learn from use-focused institutions (libraries & archives). Interestingly, I see a shared way in which museums (and heritage) are using the same language as prisons and hospitals, by referring to "visitors" not "users".
- Hannah: This is architecturally, of course, where the museum came from in the 19th century really, as the museum and the prison often shared the same typological plan.
- Keir: Yes there's a language of protection there, that we don't trust the public with these objects, as they are our history. However I am seeing an appetite for change from mid-level museum workers, who are often the glue between institutions, and are more likely to work across different sectors.

There's a transferrable skill when you start to see people move more fluidly between the "G", the "L", the "A", and the "M", (and actually the "P", of park as well). I think there is an appetite, however we maybe more like a decade away from a real confidence in blending these types of institutions.

There are some institutions that are blended from the outset – encyclopaedic institutions in smaller geographies with smaller communities that just do everything because they have to. Cases of say museums genuinely learning from libraries about user service models for their various systems, I believe that is further away than I would hope it to be. It would be interesting to see libraries and archives push further out into a participation model and try and draw galleries and libraries with them. 20 years from now, unquestionably, all the successful institutions will have more progress in terms participation. The ones that will be left behind are the ones that hold fast to this prison-like metaphor of visitation, where audiences need to be kept at arm's length. I also believe that many of the cultural institutions we need for society in the future do not exist yet.

- Hannah: I am interested in teasing out a bit more the relationships between the physical institution and the digital institution and digital practices. For example if there is a major renovation of a museum, as there was at SFMOMA, does that necessarily mean a remake of the digital identity as well?
- Keir: One of the things that attracted me to the project, as described by SFMOMA's Chief Content Officer Chad Coerver, was the opportunity to work with a team of super smart and really dedicated folk on presenting our digital self first, and for it to be emblematic of the institution we wanted to become.

The decision to rebuild the institution – the shape and size, the façade and the galleries – had been done but the practical application of the visitor experience, the flow into the galleries, and the stories we would tell, that work had just begun. Also being able to close the museum for a lengthy period left room for wonderful cross-functional teams to excel. There was the visitor experience group which had members from all across the organisation to really think holistically about the visitor experience and how that would then impact the brand and the visual identity, and the language we used, from the home page on the website right through to the design on the elevators. We didn't outsource any of the thinking about the digital and we worked closely with those cross-functional teams. The new digital presence was launched nine months before the museum actually opened its doors, and the vast majority of people who came to the museum had had a digital-first experience.

I think many institutions that are rebranding while keeping the trains running at the same time can struggle to get mental space to really interrogate what they're doing.

To generalise, I certainly don't think the digital should be leading rebranding, I don't think it should be leading how we define what an organisation is, but it needs to have a seat at the table, and it needs to be considered in that 360-degree view of what you're about. I think actually what is more problematic than people leaving the digital out is actually leaving the audience out of that thinking, being too inwardly-focused and too departmental, in how you define or redefine yourself.

In order to maintain a connection to our communities, the best investment we can make is to actually understand our audience and their motivations, and our nonaudience, and understand which bit of our non-audience would be open to engaging with us in some way, even if that's purely digital or purely social.

- Hannah: I'm interested in the way that some museums are built with a very striking spatial and curatorial ordering (like the Guggenheim New York), and how influential that is when designing new digital apps and so on.
- Keir: It's interesting you bring up the Guggenheim as they have taken the approach with their app to function as a search or browse tool, yet the spiral building dictates a linear experience from top to bottom. We're lucky at SFMOMA because there's a pretty consistent floor plan that is very legible. Institutions that have grown over 100 years adding new wings, or buildings, or places that started as a historic house, are often seeing digital as a solution to difficult spatial architecture and way-finding. Apps made for way-finding as a primary function almost always fail. (I've built one, so I speak from experience there!)
- Wally: You mentioned about having that team of different experts and skills in a project, I just want to ask you a bit more about that; the collaborations behind successful projects generally. Looking from outside there seems to be a constantly evolving new set of job roles, skills and titles like the content strategist and so on. If that's right, how does someone plan their career if they want to work in the space? How do institutions manage the fluid mix of skills that are needed?
- Keir: That's really tricky. More than anything, a diverse set of experiences and successful projects that offer a constellation of knowledge and skills are in many ways the most valuable things you can bring into an organisation.

Technical competencies can be learned, but the practical application of them on a day-to-day work is something that you need to perfect. A diverse interest in design, digital, and your audience is key. However I am not in any position, and I don't trust anyone else who says they are, to judge and gauge what practice is going to look like in 20 years from now. If you're just entering school and you want to work in digital culture in 10 years from now, I can only encourage you to be curious and omnivorous because we don't actually know what you'll need.

- Wally: We really enjoyed the article that you wrote on institutional philosophies in online collections, and there is a quote from Peter Gorgels of the Rijksmuseum, where he talks about "culture-snackers", and compares them. Just extending that, do you think digital projects are creating new opportunities to identify new kinds of users with different expectations (Gorgels, 2013)?
- Keir: It's not creating them, they exist, but it's reaching them when we weren't before.One of our projects that has been incredible successful is "Send Me SFMOMA". This

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is a text-based service, where you SMS the collection and say "send me a landscape", "send me a hamburger", "send me an emoji of kisses", or "send me something blue". Over the last 10 years we have been tagging our collections with quite vernacular tags, and we more recently have added colours and connected the collection management system to a digital management system that is accessible via an API.

We wanted to create something that has no barriers in terms of access, but also something that encourages unexpected results beyond just famous white male artists that everyone knows. Creative Technologist Jay Mollica decided to go with SMS, and in a few days of development he had a pilot to test the idea.

Because we had all the infrastructure in place, it meant that someone in our team who had a really good idea could execute it in a short period of time. It has been incredible popular, so popular it got blacklisted by the carriers as spam – art spam. We then added some functionality and a few hundred more emojis because they were clearly popular with people and, when we relaunched it with a registered sort code, it went viral. It's received 4.5 million text messages this summer, which is incredible.

It's giving the "culture-snacker" a way of connecting with art in their life. And people are discovering art they've never seen before, because we're surfacing the rest of the collection that's not currently on view. People drop in and out of it, and we're seeing patterns of binge user behaviour. On average people are sending 20 SMSs to us, which is enormous, but they're doing it episodically over a number of weeks.

- Wally: In that same article, another interesting thing that struck me was the way you talked about digital technologies become metaphors for the way people talked about nondigital things. You talked about, for example, Aaron Cope of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, talking about the database. Also within the Rijksmuseum they have found that Pinterest and Flickr are their natural digital metaphors to resonate with. In light of these observations do you think these digital technologies are providing new metaphors for the way to think about the old practices?
- Keir: Yes, what I was trying to argue is that the digital manifests institutional philosophy in all the ways that the digital is presented to the public, including something as normal as online collections, the visit planning page, or the ticket purchase page. In the institutions that are really doing this work well, they are manifestations of their inbuilt biases, their focuses and priorities. If you've got an organisation that is say

bilingual, then your online collection is going to look and feel very different to that of an institution that only has historical artefacts, or one with only work by living creators. There can be a sense of normalising what GLAM institutions are doing, it's like saying "everyone should have an app" and they're all kind of the same. Those that are doing the digital well are expressing a unique understanding of their mission and audiences in every single decision and activity, including their online collection presence.

For example, at SFMOMA our online collection is 100 per cent about big delicious photos of the artwork. When you go to any page, you can zoom in right down to the brushstrokes and actually look at it closer than with the human eye in the gallery. Then we are say okay, here's the metadata and the stories and so on.

But the first thing we want you to do is just fall in love with the power of the object. We wanted to lead with that over everything else, whereas Cooper-Hewitt leads with the database, which I think is cool, but it's not us.

- Wally: It was a very interesting article on digital strategies and how they are manifest. Related to that, a lot of the things that you've written about, say through the widespread use of APIs now, and SMS access, is that galleries are expected to almost give things away now that were once held privately by each institution. Are there dangers in this democratisation going forward? Do up and coming artists have any fears, for example like in the music industry and the way the digital has fundamentally changed access?
- Keir: I think there's two points in there. I actually don't believe the openness and transparency is an unalloyed good in all cases. In many cases institutions are "giving it all away" but in a way that is not necessarily connected to the context and the history of the institution. It can be more like an illegible dump just putting up all your collection metadata on the Internet without anything wrapped around it to contextualise it. It's the digital equivalent of taking your files and dumping them in the street, or grabbing polaroids and throwing them in the park. Sure, people can find them, and it is open, but unless you know where to look, and unless you know how to look, it's still actually excluding people who don't have this weird mix of say art history knowledge and a programming degree, or the ability to process spreadsheets.

I'm absolutely in favour of openness but I think we take an open-first approach at our peril, and we should be taking instead a use first, context second, and openness third approach. Unless we're using it institutionally, why on earth would someone else want it in a big file dump?

We should be providing that context, and taking that and making it open; that's genuinely democratic. Some institutions are doing that and they're amazing and I hold them in the highest regard, but many aren't. I think of other systems of extraction like hackathons, and unpaid internships, with the expectations that "I'm giving you exposure therefore you're going to work for free".

I would argue against an extractive model for this sort of work, unless it's actually benefiting the original creator, or benefiting the community, or benefiting new practitioners, designers, historians, theorists, artists or programmers.

- Hannah: We are just about out of time, but I was interested in what you have said at the MuseumNext in Melbourne in 2017 about your observations that your audiences were interested in expertise and learning something.³ And that the allure of purely social media functions is dissipating? This is really interesting, and in the context of this book, as we have heard the mantra for some time that we've got to encourage the community to speak, and that people are interested in listening to each other.
- Keir: I think people are overwhelmed by this fire hose of information and content that is constantly available online. Going to memory institutions is a way of seeing the work that has been collected and curated and presented in a thoughtful way. That doesn't reduce their want to make a response to that creativity, as people love to create in that environment and see that creation reflected back through their communities. They like to draw, they like to take and share photos, and love to tell stories. I think one of the best things about going to a museum is going with friends and having discussion, taking a photo of the thing that you've just fallen in love with.

But people have less and less appetite for other people's creative output. There's so much creative material being generated, that you need to have some sort of filtering mechanism to not just drown. The most common filtering mechanism is "people I like" and "people who think like me", which is a premise of social media. But if you're going to trust someone – and we go back to trust again – if you're going to trust someone you don't know to make aesthetic decisions on your behalf, ultimately you are paying with your investment of time, to receive an experience that has been designed for you. However we have found that people are not necessarily interested in the creative output of strangers in the museum context.

We definitely want to continue to feed social media habits, we have no problem with people promoting our institution, and it can be definitely generous, playful and fun, but it doesn't change the visit in a fundamental way.

- Hannah: Finally I want to come back to this idea of digital story-telling, as a key motivation in the SFMOMA app. What was the process of arriving at that creative decision? Is it from listening to what the audience might want, or is it coming from knowledge of the collection, or from the fact that it's in Silicon Valley and people are pretty fed up with a lot of tech-savvy experiences and want something that's quite tangible and real?
- Keir: It's a constellation of factors. In Northern California there are, more than anything else, people looking for an information rich and compelling story. At SFMOMA we want to do some of that in digital form, because there were things we wanted to say, and ways we want to say it that were just simply not possible in printed words on the walls. We thought, as a team, really broadly about what our voice would be and about it being welcoming. So with the app, and a book *SFMOMA 3600* published in 2016 (Bloch and Stein, 2016), we drew from a community of poets, artists, philosophers, performers, writers and curators all writing about the work they love. They're writing anecdotally and really personally, even the curators are writing personally. The interpretive narratives are drawn from a bunch of different places, and from different people. There are playful things in the museum, things you can make, such as a digital photogram where you can make your own portrait in the style of old photogram using the things that are already in your pocket.

Then there's the wall labels that I think are really well written, really open in their interpretation, not closed, and not didactic. And also in the text we have on the website, which is hopefully making room for you to engage with the museum and the work immediately.

I think that's one of the reasons why SFMOMA is being looked at by other institutions, and it's not because we are displaying novel technology in Silicon Valley, as we've seen technology has a short shelf life and is often superseded or simply disappears. It is because we have a really compelling set of stories that anyone can find themselves within, that we've developed through an experimental, iterative, and collaborative approach.

What I'm encouraging is an openness to trying new things, and for every institution that's going to mean a different set of concerns. I'm excited to be a GLAM visitor in

the future – some 10 to 20 years from now – that's the world I want to live in. Too many times I'm annoyed, frustrated, talked down to or disappointed when visiting a cultural institution. That is what makes me want to be part of change in the GLAM sector.

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¹ SFMOMA tours available at https://www.sfmoma.org/app/

² This American Life https://www.thisamericanlife.org/

³ https://www.museumnext.com/conference_history/melbourne/