Computer-Based Exhibits: A Must-Have or a Liability?

Simon Yates
Graphic and Interactive Software Designer, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia

Sharyn Errington
Centre for the Public Awareness of Science, Australian National University, Australian Capital Territory, Canberra, Australia

Computer-based exhibits are becoming more common in museums, galleries and science centres and are often expected to be part of exhibitions, especially among the younger generation. The need to include these exhibits can often override the practical aspects of funding, developing and implementing them. Where funding or availability of resources are issues, curators and exhibition designers may need to balance the draw card of having computer-based exhibits against the practical problem of providing a good exhibit.

In mid-1998 a small museum/gallery in Canberra staged an exhibition to show how the community has recycled objects and ideas in and around the Canberra region. The two main aims of the exhibition were to show the many historical and social levels of recycling and to foster community involvement in the museum.

The exhibition consisted of a number of exhibits including:

- national costumes made from recycled materials
- an artistic representation of a slab/bush hut
- computer-generated art combined with cross stitch
- home made toys and objets d'art made from anything at hand
- photographs of the region
- indigenous materials
- photographs of frogs accompanied by digitally enhanced recordings of frog calls
- a multimedia exhibit (*The Armchair Traveller*).

Overall the exhibition was a huge success. This article deals with only one of the exhibits, and problems associated with this exhibit do not reflect on the exhibition as a whole. In this article we discuss the problems involved with the

development and implementation of the multimedia program *The Armchair Traveller*. We also provide some advice and guidance to curators of small galleries and museums who may be considering embarking on computer-based exhibits.

The Armchair Traveller: An interactive multimedia program

The purpose of *The Armchair Traveller* was to emphasise the use of combined media and the "recycling" of still imagery into an interactive experience using digital technology. Essentially the program was a user-friendly database of buildings in the Canberra region that have been "recycled" or re-used i.e. whose purpose over the years has changed.

Initially the program was intended as a web site, but subsequently became an intra-net site. The graphic design was pictorial rather than text-based, making it inviting to the user. The program involved a simple "point and click" exercise making it easy to use. The images used were "before and after" shots of various buildings and places that were arranged in a modular structure allowing for future expansion of the program.

The Finished Product

The program worked *in situ* quite well with many more people interacting with it than initially expected. Observations with other computer-based exhibits have indicated that adults tend to be somewhat technophobic and avoid using the exhibits. This was not found to be the case at this exhibition.

For many visitors to the museum, particularly local Canberra residents, the exhibition was directly relevant to their interests. The users felt comfortable with the information and the way in which it was presented. Added to this was the ease of use of the program and its very appealing graphic design.

The Problems

The design and development of *The Armchair Traveller* was fraught with problems, however. Some of these were "in-house" political issues. Others were more general and can be used to provide advice to others who may find themselves in the process of developing exhibition software.

- **The client–developer relationships**

  The client's expectations for the finished product were unrealistic in relation to the advantages and constraints of the technology and its delivery, especially in terms of web versus CD-ROM capabilities. It may therefore be

necessary to undertake an initial client education process, to ensure an achievable outcome in terms of technology and budget.

- **Know your software**

  To enable development of the program to the client's specifications, the appropriate software used to develop the program was very new. The developers were required to learn the package as well as overcome inbuilt "bugs" in the package. This resulted in the development and design of The Armchair Traveller taking much longer than it should have.

- **Resources: Be prepared**

  In the development of any multimedia program available resources must be considered. In this project there were limited funds available to develop the program to the extent the client had probably hoped. The lack of funds also caused problems in the delivery of the program at the venue.

  Changing perceptions of the client also meant that some re-designs were necessary and the end result was probably not as good as it could have been due to a lack of reserve funding to cater for these changes.

  Originally the computer was situated on a free-standing table in the middle of the exhibition floor which meant there was easy access to computer cables at the rear of the exhibit. This arrangement meant that a member of the gallery staff needed to be in attendance at all times. The aesthetics of the setup were also inadequate for a museum exhibition. For these reasons the computer was later moved against the wall in the venue to avoid any problems with safety and cables becoming dislodged.

  The simple solution to this problem would have been to have the program set up in a kiosk. Lack of funds made this impossible – in fact the computer used to deliver the program was borrowed from the developers for the duration of the exhibition.

  The initial aim during the development of The Armchair Traveller was that it would be expanded beyond the life of the exhibition. Lack of adequate financial support has also prevented this, although other factors such as management problems and lack of technical resources at the museum have played a significant role in the program not being developed further.

Advice to Curators

A sound relationship between the client and the developer is essential for an effective program to be produced that meets the needs and expectations of both the client and the design team. The brief for development must be clear and understood by the developers. If client expectations are unreasonable, this should be communicated to them before development begins.

All members of the development team (which includes the client) must work together coherently to enable the production of a successful program.

Financial constraints are a problem for most museums and galleries and although computer-based exhibits are popular and often expected by visitors, curators should think twice about implementing technology-based exhibits, especially in small galleries/museums where funds are tight.

The development of multimedia programs is expensive. Besides the program itself, appropriate hardware must be available to deliver the program in the best way possible to the visitors – a kiosk is one viable solution.

A program in this situation – with short viewing and interaction times – needs to be easy to use. Avoid the necessity of the audience having to learn how to use the program; it should be intuitive enough to allow a message to be delivered almost immediately.

Technology does fail on occasions and it is imperative to have adequate technical support on hand to deal with any problems that may arise. It can be very frustrating and offputting to visitors to find exhibits out of order so provision for maintenance must be built into the initial budget.

In this project the client and at least one member of the design team were very keen and enthusiastic for *The Armchair Traveller* to be developed. Without this support it would not have happened at all. Despite the problems outlined here, the exhibit did seem to be popular with the visitors. Was it a success, therefore, or not? Are computer-based exhibits a must-have or a liability?

Simon Yates *is the former Art Director of the Multimedia Interactive Learning Laboratory at the Australian National University, Canberra.*
Sharyn Errington *is a Lecturer at the Centre for the Public Awareness of Science Building 42, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia.*

Email: sharyn.errington@anu.edu.au