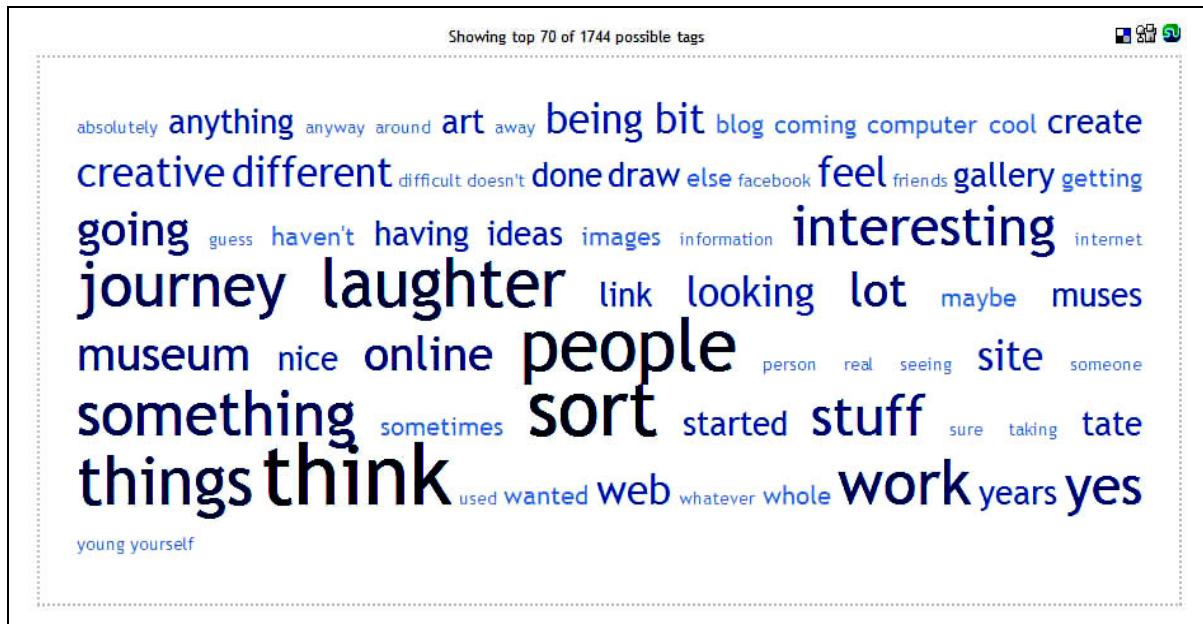




National Museums Online Learning Project

Stage two report: part 1

Creative journeying: portraits of our users



A wordcloud generated from transcripts of stage two Creative Journey interviews

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Introduction

We provide in this report – part of the second stage of our research for the National Museums Online Learning Project – a series of portraits of the partners’ web users. The focus here is on the Creative Journeys and those who participated in the second phase of Creative Journey testing and trialling. A second report, due at the end of April, will cover the Webquest strand of the project.

Our aim here is to provide, through five case study accounts, a snapshot view of the expectations, hopes and experiences of Creative Journey authors. From these accounts we gain further insight not only into some of the conceptual issues we looked at in our first report, but also into what users want from the next stage of Creative Journey development. The accounts we provide here offer an accessible and hopefully valuable ‘way in’ to understanding who these users are, and how they perceive the value of the Creative Journeys space.

Data generation

In October 2007 we contacted 38 of the 59 people who had created a profile or posted an entry on one of the existing Creative Journey sites. We approached a mix of London-based and non-London-based people from those Creative Journey sites which had eligible participants (Tate, National Portrait Gallery, British Museum, V&A, Soane and Imperial War Museum). We deliberately included a number of people who had created a profile but never posted an entry, so we could explore some reasons for non-participation.

We then conducted a total of 19 interviews with Creative Journey authors: ten face-to-face in London, four by phone or Skype, and five via email. The interviews were a combination of open-ended questions and gathering of visual data. A broad mix of people agreed to be interviewed about their Creative Journeys. We talked to artists, scientists, musicians, teachers, students, academics, parents and writers. There were teenagers and retired people; computer novices and web experts; museum newcomers and museum professionals; and both people who were regulars at their museum, and those who had never visited their museum.

From these 19 interviews we selected five to be written up as user profiles. These five cases, we felt, represented well the series of key themes and concerns which emerged across all interviews (names have been changed):

- Desmond is an older, local user, approaching the Creative Journey from a background in the sciences rather than – like most of the others – from within a creative arts context.
- Tara is an art student in London, still in her teens, and with an engaging perspective on the present and future of web-based communication.
- Catriona is another local user, a composer and sound artist whose high level of immersion in online social networks and digital ways of working gave her a particularly interesting perspective on the Creative Journeys.
- Lindsey is a mother – London-based – just embarking on a return to work, someone with little confidence or experience in the use of computers but a strong interest in the visual arts and in the collections.

- Simon is an overseas user – an artist and teacher based in New Zealand – who has never physically visited the partner museums.

Research themes

In analysing the 19 interviews we conducted, we tracked the emergence of some key themes, which the selected profiles represent well. Some of these connect with the issues we identified in our first report for the project, others were new. We outline these themes here, and then draw them out more fully in the profiles that follow.

The social

Our first report placed an emphasis on the function of the Creative Journey environment as social, a space designed to nurture and enable connections to be built between users, in which the collections themselves functioned as a hub and focus for the meaning-making and community-forming activities of its users. This emphasis on the social, and socially-informed ways of learning, emerged again – strongly – in the interviews we conducted over the second stage of the research. The portraits offered here indicate some of the primary ways in which the idea of the social emerges in user expectations of the Creative Journey space.

Institutional boundaries

A new theme which emerged over this stage of the research relates to users' changing understanding of where the boundaries of cultural institutions lie. There is a sense in which the clear boundary of the physically-located, material institution is rendered more 'permeable' by the existence of its online equivalent – the museum becomes more open, more transparent to its users. For some, this was a positive shift, and it was interesting to see how many interviewees perceived the physical museum as a kind of inaccessible, disorienting 'labyrinth' in comparison with its easily navigable, 'always open' online manifestation. For others, the blurring of the boundary between the online and the offline institution was more problematic, removing for them the certainty and security of the stable, organised, materially present collection.

Insiders and outsiders

Another new theme also relates to shifting boundaries, and is concerned with how users position themselves in relation both to the museums and galleries, and to the internet. During our interviews, we asked users to draw a visual representation of their relationship to the museum and to the web. Some users responded by creating images which positioned them as being very much at the *centre* of the web – these were images which defined the user as someone in control, confident, and in a good position to draw creatively upon the richness of the collections and the wider internet in constructing their personal digital narratives. Often, these same users created images which positioned them as outside and marginal to the cultural institution itself (Desmond and Catriona are examples). For others, the case was switched, and they created images which placed the individual user outside and marginal to an internet environment over which they had little control, and on which their own activities as users had very limited effect. At the same time – Lindsey is an example here – their relation to the physically-present institution was one of security and belonging. It is possibly the former group, the users who come to the Creative Journeys with an already-high level of confidence and immersion in the internet, who are more likely to engage fully with it.

Authority and user-control

This was a theme which was dealt with at some length in the previous report, and the tension we noted there between understandings of the museum or gallery as a space owned and controlled by expert scholars-curators-educators, and the partly technologically-driven movement toward user-generated content and user-ownership of collections and archives, emerged again in this second stage of the research. While many users viewed the Creative Journey initiative as a space where expertise and authority could be challenged by users' ability to create content and make public interpretations of objects and images, there was still a sense that in doing so their activities needed to be legitimised by the expertise and authority invested in the institution. The following profiles indicate how this tension appears in the accounts of some of the Creative Journey authors.

Technical wish-lists

Finally, many users made revealing comments about their technical expectations of the Creative Journey interface, and explored some useful insights into ways of improving on existing functionality and usability. We draw out these technical issues, alongside the conceptual, in the profiles which follow.

Desmond: getting off the track

'Thinking outside of what I know'

Desmond, a scientist and technician, looked to the Creative Journeys space as somewhere where he could consciously nurture in himself a new, multiply-connected, non-linear way of thinking and working. Throughout our interview with him, he stressed his disciplinary background and how he was taught to think in ways which, for him, now seem overly constrained:

I've been a scientist all my life... And they teach you to think in a very precise way, they don't actually teach you to be, [pause] think outside, think of other ideas, other ways you can do things. You're taught to think in a very straight, very narrow way. And I think this [the Creative Journey] is sort of helping me to think outside of what I know.

Associated with this perceived 'linearity' in the scientific way of knowing (interestingly, his Creative Journey is one which explores the history and nature of the railway track and road – fundamentally linear cultural artefacts), is a sense of isolation for Desmond. He sees the Creative Journey space as somewhere where a new, social, collaborative way of working and learning can be developed:

I'm trained to sort of think along certain lines. You get a book, you go through it all. You pick up theories... It's very rare that you can chat with other people because you're often working on a specific area of interest. Other people are working elsewhere. But with this type of development, you're getting more people interested, so you can actually bounce your ideas off other people.

A new social space

Key for Desmond, therefore, and for the majority of our interviewees, is this sense that the Creative Journey space is a distinctively *social* environment. This, for him, is its primary source of value, the main way in which it is helping him work against a professional background which seems to value the isolated, single-track road:

A lot of people, a lot more people are getting interested in sort of industrial archaeology. It hasn't been up until now, so it's sort of something I'm catching the end of it and sort of something, um, I think it's sort of tough, um, creating stuff online and getting the views of other people certainly helps a lot. Bouncing ideas off other people. And that's what you get, if you work in isolation and you just try and do your own research, which is what I've been used to in the past, you don't get the people, the other stuff coming from other people.

Future development of the Creative Journey application, for Desmond, should be focused on its ability to nurture the collaborative and social among groups with shared interests – it should be about "a sort of collaboration of ideas, trying to get people to collaborate more". For him personally, then, the Creative Journey is about immersion in a connected environment in which he can begin to approach a new way of knowing: "I have to learn to share with people, share ideas with people, that's what I'm, that's what I'm bad at". As he sees it, the main problem with the current Creative Journey space, at this early stage of its development, is its emptiness – its relative "lack of people".

Amateurs, producers, experts and consumers

As well as seeing the Creative Journey space as a fundamentally social one, Desmond also sees it as somewhere where the museum visitor's role can shift from being one of consumption to one of active production:

Interviewer

Okay. What do you think draws people, in general, to specifically the museum's Creative Journey site?

Desmond

It's difficult. Um, [pause] it's much the same way as you'd visit a museum, I think. You just go in there to sort of [pause] look at what's there and then come out again. You don't actually go in there to look at what's there and to sort of [pause] put something back. I think that's what's happening.... Yeah, I think that's the way it should really develop.

Through the social, user-generated content model of interaction, Desmond sees the museum visitor as being able to create, as well as 'use' the collection. In our first report on the National Museums project we highlighted a tension between two understandings of the purpose of the museum – one which constructs it as 'object-focused' and 'owned' by the expert scholar-curator, and another which sees it as 'user-focused' and primarily concerned with active interpretation and 'ownership' by its visitors. We argued that the volatile digital object and the online mode, with its tendency to place more control in the hands of the users, foregrounded this tension. This is something that we see come up again here in Desmond's articulation of the value of the Creative Journey space. While highlighting, as above, the potential of this environment to enable the user to "put something back", he also focuses on the role of the 'expert' as someone who might model the kind of content which is appropriate to be made public:

Desmond

Um, perhaps they need to get some bigger names on there, I don't know, actually some, [pause] people actually can, uh... [pause] I work with Microsoft a lot and they've got some big names on there, the evangelists, and they're always putting stuff down. And you can always feed back to them, so maybe they ought to start doing that sort of, museums should maybe do that.

Interviewer

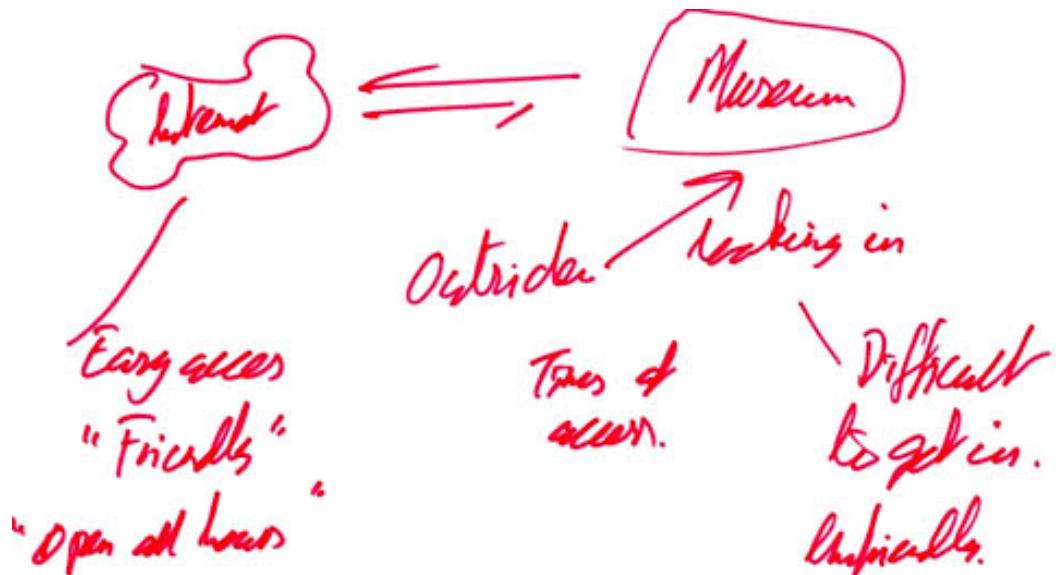
Okay. Are there any, any kind of types of people in particular that you think would be...?

Desmond

It's people that, uh, I don't know, it's rather difficult, you need to sort of get sort of [pause] possibly senior lecturers at University. Or people knowledgeable in their fields. Who actually know something about specific fields to just put something down.

The outsider

However, and perhaps paradoxically, later in the interview it is this vision of the physical (as opposed to online) museum as a space 'owned' by the expert which Desmond describes as problematic. For him, the physical museum is an alienating space which constructs him as an 'outsider', whereas the online museum is one within which he is both comfortable and at home. This discussion took place within the context of Desmond's visual representation of his own relationship with the museum and with the internet, given below.



The physical, material 'Museum' is a clearly bounded space, one which for Desmond constructs the user as outsider:

Right. Museum. I see myself as an outsider looking in. I think [pause] museums traditionally have been there for the people who actually work there. That sort of traditional concept. People who actually work there actually understand the exhibits and know what's going on in each exhibit. The person coming to the museum doesn't understand what's there. So you're really sort of an outsider looking at this sort of elitist world almost. It's difficult. Um, so it's, it's really sort of, I find it difficult to get in, and once you're in there, I don't know if pressured is the right word but it's sort of, it's unfriendly. You don't really feel as if you belong in the museum, for some reason you don't really feel as if you belong there.

By contrast, the online museum is one which is permanently open, accessible, "friendly":

Whereas if you can get the concept of a museum on to the internet, it's, [pause] because I work with computers I see it as a friendly area. I know where I'm going, I know how to get to where I want to go very quickly. In a museum I cannot get around very quickly. Um, take the V&A, once you get inside there's a great [unclear] of stairs going everywhere, signs everywhere. It's very difficult until you get to know the museum exactly where to go. Whereas on the internet I know within seconds where I can go very quickly. It's a more friendly area and it's also open when I want it.

As in several of our interviews, we have this description of the physical museum as a ‘labyrinth’, a “rabbit warren” – a disorienting space in which the user gets lost and is almost, at times, unwelcome. The online museum, by contrast, is seen as being in the hands of the user – a more transparent, navigable, ‘homely’ environment. To see the Creative Journey space as located within this context is to see it as one which enables a new way of formulating the idea of the museum – a museum which is centred on, owned and produced by its users.

In summary

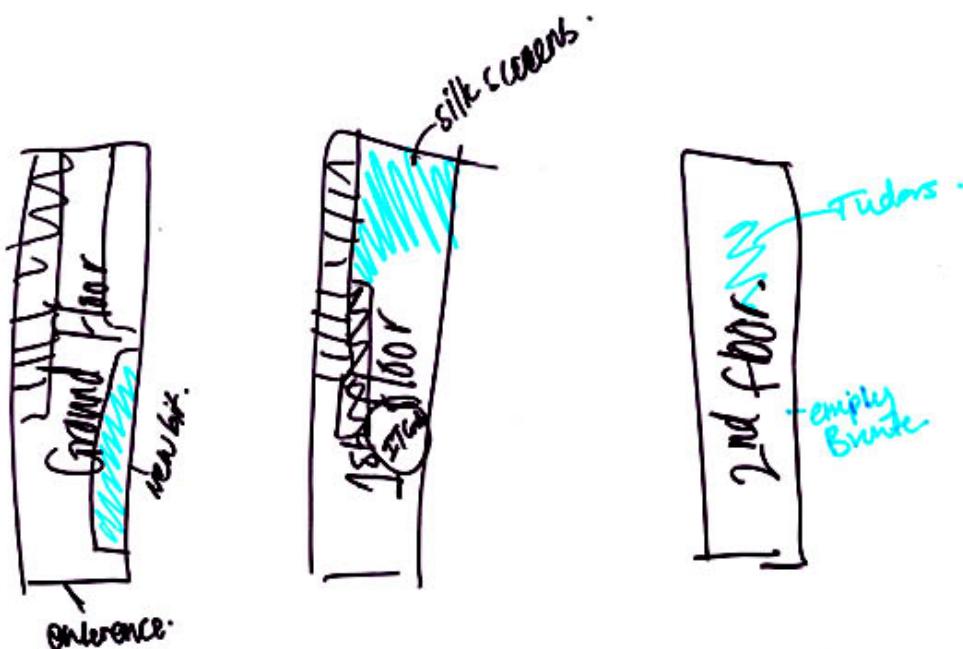
Where the majority of early Creative Journey authors come from a background in the visual and creative arts, Desmond is interesting in that his disciplinary background is explicitly in the natural sciences. While, like Catriona (below), he is someone who is clearly at ease with computers and the digital environment, he has not, like Tara, grown up in the age of the internet – he describes himself as “getting towards the end of my working life”. It is interesting, in this context, that he describes the value of the Creative Journey space as being in its ability to nurture a new, and for him ‘non-scientific’, way of thinking. Is it a problem for the project that this environment seems to embed within itself a particular ‘way of knowing’ which is so tightly associated with the creative and the visual?

Tara: the value of the real

Tara studies art in London, and is an enthusiastic museum-goer and a frequent web user, with especially close ties with one of the partner museums. As the youngest of our interviewees, we were keen to get her perspective on some of the issues raised so far in the project. We were surprised by what she said about the role of the physical museum and her experience of the web.

At home in the museum?

We met Tara in the museum she knows best, and it was immediately obvious how at ease she was there. Unlike Desmond, who described feeling like an outsider in physical museums, Tara was relaxed and spoke of the “homeliness” of that space: “it’s really interesting because this is like a really famous gallery, obviously, but ... it’s really homely... it’s very familiar”. When asked to draw herself in relation to the museum, she drew, quite literally, a floor plan, shading in the areas she frequently visits. Her representation is simple, and makes the museum look small and manageable:



However, this sense of comfort and familiarity does not extend for Tara to other museums. Early on in the interview she named and talked about visiting and “loving” a number of the other partner museums, but when asked about being intimidated by museums, she said (notably, of exactly the same museums):

Some, like the British Museum, I'm too scared to go in there. Like, I don't like it, I can't go on my own. When I first visited Tate Modern I got to [pause] the escalators and I went back. Because it was too, it was too hard to, it was too complicated... But the Victoria and Albert museum, I find that I go to one section and come out every time, without meaning to because I'm just not aware that there's a whole other bit, like there's five other floors or something.

Tara’s insider status at her museum, then, appears to have grown out of the amount of time she has spent there and her involvement in various programmes and activities, rather than a natural

confidence in museum spaces. In fact, her position in relation to other museums (not being able to go in at all) seems even more alienated and intimidated than Desmond's.

The value of the real

However, this hasn't made her reject physical museum spaces in favour of online spaces, as it has to some extent for Desmond – quite the opposite, in fact. Her view is that it is vital for young people like herself to come to museums and galleries:

Interviewer

And why do you think it's important [to bring young people into the gallery]?

Tara

Because we're like the future. And I think if we forget, because it's so easy to like look on the internet for the piece of artwork, it's completely different to look at them in real life in front of you. If you lose the sense of what they give you in real life you kind of lose the sense of art. So I think it's important for people to come to see the real life things, otherwise, you know, people are going to forever be in their own little bubble of what they choose to watch and what they choose to see.

Interviewer

Why is it different at the gallery?

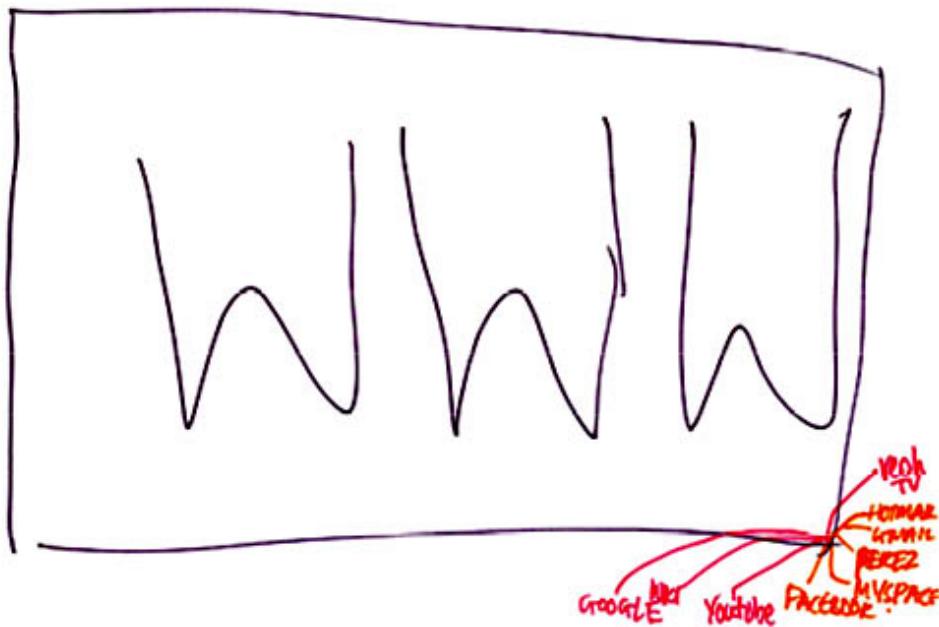
Tara

...I think [pause] people now they're like, we can go on the internet and watch the shows we want, we can record what we want on TV. And if we're just being, start being that selective in everything we do and don't come to institutions then we'll just be little bubble people everywhere, just never meeting up and it will just be really antisocial. I think museums and galleries can be that force that still drives us to be social. And I think it's, that's why it's important for young people to just be aware so they can come and... You don't actually have to be, like you can be really passive and just look at stuff or you can be really into it and just go, go home and do other stuff, but it's important to just come and see the real things.

When asked if she had ever had an experience on the web to compare with being in the gallery, she insisted: "No, never. No, it's completely different... Like when you go on YouTube and you watch a band play and then you watch them live, it doesn't compare."

Content creation online

Tara's drawing of herself in relation to the web emphasises visually the difference she describes between the web and the museum. The web, while being an "infinite" space, is largely blank and undiscoverable, and Tara is a "tiny insignificant dot" at the margins of it. She described the sites she uses as her "internet habits", and appeared not to see her use of Google and Wikipedia as exploring new things but rather as fact-checking tools, perhaps slightly illegitimate ones at that: "I Google the most ridiculous things sometimes. It's like if I don't know how to spell something, I'll Google it. ...And I'm just like I don't even have to open Word."



Similarly, while she takes content creation on the web quite for granted as a normal thing to do (blogging, using Facebook and MySpace), this is content on a small scale created: “for my tiny little net, network of like ten people”:

Interviewer

So you're not really having much effect out here.

Tara

No.

Interviewer

But within this corner.

Tara

Yeah. Yeah definitely.

Developing the Creative Journey

Knowing all of this, it would seem difficult to predict what Tara's engagement with the Creative Journey site would be. Indeed, her approach to the site seems somewhat ambivalent. Having only made a profile and not created any entries (because, she said, she lost her password and “sometimes something small and technical kind of stops you”), she appears nonetheless to have thought about her use of the site:

Interviewer

If you were to carry on with your Creative Journey now, now that you've already sort of got to know some of the museums and stuff, do you have any idea what, [pause] what, what it would become, how it would be...?

Tara

I think it would be interesting to track how I see galleries and museums now and when I go

to university and start doing projects and things, about how they evolve for me, because I will need them on a much more personal level than I did.

Her view of what the Creative Journey should accomplish links the value of the online firmly to the offline, but also to the social: “even though it’s the internet and Creative Journey is based, it should still be people coming in and link... I think that’s the point of the Creative Journey, is to link back about what you do in the art world. ...Creative Journeys could like literally be platforms to like raise it, to like join it together, I think.” While comparing the site to social networks like Facebook and MySpace, she sees the Creative Journey as being quite different from those kinds of purely social spaces because “it’s not about finding your friends, it’s about creating a social network like linked with art and galleries and museums.” On the other hand, we talked about customising these spaces, and she was clear that the Creative Journeys need that type of functionality:

I think the whole point of MySpace, when I got it, was you have your own page that shows your identity, and I think even if you’re mapping out your journey you still want your journey to look like you, no matter if it is you doing things. So I think if there’s not that kind of template to build from, to make it your own, I think it will be really, it will look inferior if it doesn’t match up.

She also asked for functionality to make other users into ‘friends’ on the site, so that it would be easier to find someone again.

In summary

What we found really interesting about Tara is the extent to which she is critical of the web as a medium for engaging with the world. We get the sense that for someone like Tara, the impetus to engage with a Creative Journey would not come from its ‘webbiness’ at all. Rather, it would be its connection with the physical museum that would be the draw. Which leads us to ask a new question: to what extent can the project encourage web-savvy (perhaps web-jaded) learners to participate on the basis of offering something qualitatively different from the social networking sites which are now familiar and increasingly ubiquitous? This is a theme which emerged strongly again in the case of Catriona, which follows.

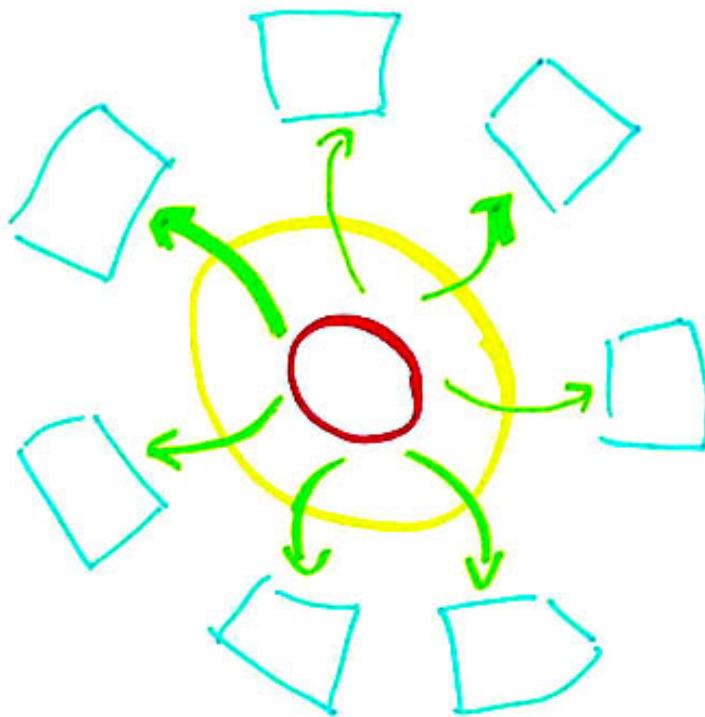
Catriona: a digital insider

After a half year stretch of sabbatical, in which she spent time developing her work as a digital composer, Catriona turned to the public space of the Creative Journey as a way of easing herself back into the idea of paid employment. For her, it was a space which “will sort of make me in some way sort of accountable to myself, because it was public”.

A digital insider

Catriona could be described as a kind of ‘digital insider’ – in her own words, she is a “social networks junkie”, being an active contributor to networks within Flickr, Vox (a blogging site), Twitter (instant, mobile ‘microblogging’), All Consuming (a blog aggregator) and others.

In the image she drew during the interview (given below), Catriona represented herself as a pink circle sitting at the heart of the internet (represented by the yellow circle), “because”, she said “I kind of feel like who I am is, is bounded, to a certain extent by the internet [laughter].” The comparison with Lindsey (below), for example, and her positioning of herself as a tiny dot *outside* the monolithic chaos of the internet, is interesting.



The blue squares ‘beyond’ the circle of the internet represent for Catriona the partner institutions and collections. Although she emphasises that (being London-based) she does not access the collections *only* via the web, there is a sense in which her experience of them is mediated by her immersion in internet environments – she almost has to ‘pass through’ the internet to reach the collections, whether or not her experience of access is online or ‘actual’. The internet, as she says, “encompasses everything for me”.

Within this context of immersive internet use and total comfort with digital, networked ways of being, what is perhaps most interesting about Catriona in relation to this project is the specific role

she sees Creative Journeys as filling. What might the Creative Journeys site offer, which other applications and networks do not?

The social space of the Creative Journey

Primarily, Catriona sees the Creative Journeys space as a social one – a space within which a specifically *creative* community and creative dialogue might be nurtured around the established ‘brands’ of the various museum and gallery partners:

But I think the online thing is great and especially with something like this where it's, [pause] I think, if there's sort of, if you're keeping the whole sort of institutional base thing but being able to sort of spread out as well, it sort of gives an indication, you know, if you're in the Tate section obviously you have some kind of interest in art. If you're in V&A then probably you've got sort of a design background, that kind of thing. So you've got people in similar areas who are coming from a similar place and if they start to comment obviously you can then end up with a really good dialogue about, you know, what you could do better or ‘have you seen this?’ or that kind of thing, and it's just really fantastic.

For Catriona, the value of this kind of networking is in making contact with others who understand the highs and lows which are particular to the creative artist:

You know, when something really exciting has happened, I mean, quite often for me if something exciting happens with my art [pause] um, [pause] you know, if someone wanted to give me a commission or something, I actually have very few friends I can ring up and say, ‘this has just happened, it's so fantastic’ and they'll go, ‘oh, wow, that's brilliant, let's go out for a drink’. Because pretty much none of them would understand what a big deal it is.

Um, but I can post it on something like Vox and I'll get six responses saying, ‘wow, oh, that's awesome, well done’. And it's just nice, to have, have that kind of interaction because most of the people who I have that connection with are actually online.

As she says later in the interview, “I actually feel closer to my invisible online friends than I do to a lot of my real life friends”, for this reason.

The value of the ‘unfinished’

The other interesting aspect of Catriona’s understanding of what the Creative Journey might be is her emphasis on it as a space where it is acceptable to post ‘works in progress’, somewhere where – unlike other online and offline spaces – the value of the ‘unfinished’ is understood. In part, this connects to the previous point about the value of a community which understands the nature of the creative process. It also seems implicitly to connect with the idea of the ‘journey’ itself promised by the Creative Journey metaphor – the sense that what is being shared is a progression, a movement, rather than an completed artefact.

Um, because, um, the things I tend to post about on my main blog and then on the Vox blog [pause] and to Flickr, on a certain extent, I'll really only post about things that are finished. Um, and sometimes if I'm having trouble with a piece, I'll, I'll post

something about that, but it will usually just be to say, 'having a bit of trouble with this piece, I'm going to try to do this about it'. But, I feel, I think I've only once posted a piece that was incomplete. Um, because I feel quite uncomfortable about sending that sort of thing just out into the world where [pause].

But I think it would be different among a community of people who are trying to achieve similar things, who understand that experience of working on something and you know where you want it to go and it's just not going there. And that can be helpful, I think, to have that, people who understand that sort of step and who understand that what they're hearing or seeing is something that isn't finished.

Developing the Creative Journey interface

As a sound artist and highly competent digital insider, Catriona had some interesting suggestions for development of the Creative Journeys interface. First, she stressed the need to be able easily to post sound files as well as visual images and text. She also found the creation of linkage in the prototype "not as streamlined as it could be", and was frustrated that she couldn't create link text that was "anything other than a URL". Not having the option to create a draft form of a posting, she said, "has actually driven me nuts" – the inability to save something without making it public (this has since been implemented). This connects interestingly, perhaps, to her idea that the Creative Journey space should be one where the 'unfinished' can be both shared and hoarded. For Catriona, Vox is the paradigm of good design for social networking sites, with a simple interface, a real focus on the building of networks with "promotion of particular posts or particular images that go up", the ability to tie-in links with Amazon, Flickr and others, and the easy ability to fully integrate sound files and videos to individual postings – "They've made it quite flexible while keeping it very, very easy".

In summary

Catriona is a particularly interesting Creative Journey author in that the technical and social aspects of working online present no barrier to her in terms of unfamiliarity or 'alien-ness'. She appears to be a digital citizen who is entirely at ease with the fragmented, volatile, connected and global way of experiencing the social and the creative. If, in this, she differs from other interviewees, her perspective might be taken as indicative of the growing numbers of people who are immersed in the online environment in this way. For Catriona, the online is a familiar, comfortable space, in contrast to the physical museum which is for her as it was for Desmond - a disorienting, constraining "rabbit warren". "Often I'm not quite sure what I want to look at...I've got to choose where I want to go. [laughter] I don't want to choose!".

Lindsey: 'a typical person'

Lindsey described herself first of all as a 'typical person' – trying to balance childcare with a return to creative work (having not worked while her children were small). She looked to the Creative Journey site to provide her with some structure and "an impetus to think about and look at work", though she says she prefers physical museums because they take her out in to the world:

I would say that [pause] having brought up young children in central London, museums have become a necessity. It's almost like the place that you went to feel real again because there were things to think about and look at and wonderful sort of spaces to be in with young children.

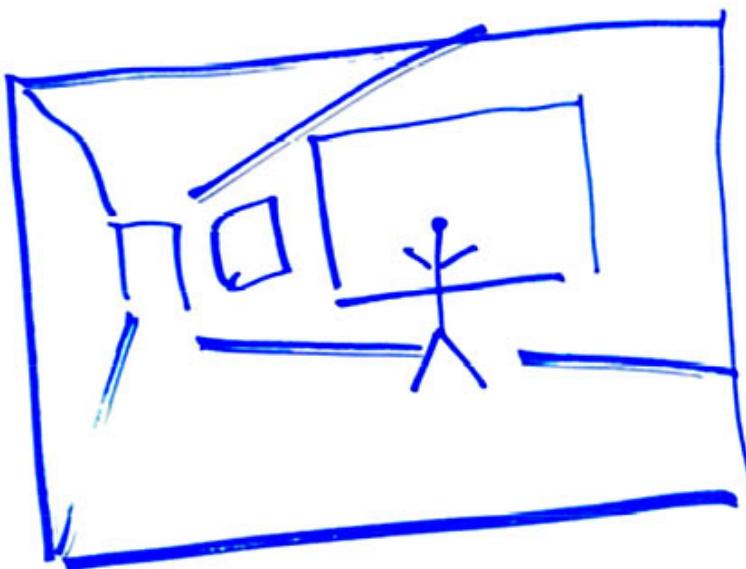
The value of the real

'Real' objects, and the physical museum, are very important to Lindsey, for their immediacy and sense of connection. To digitise an object is to impose upon it a kind of homogeneity. It is almost, she hints, to dehumanise it:

I think there's something really tangible about seeing how something is, like what it's like really close up. I think there's something about the digital medium that, that takes it away from the immediacy of being real. And, and just, you know, it's just so... Um... [pause] maybe it's something about being human. That if you see something in the flesh or in, you know,...something real, you can really see what it's made of. Whereas I think when it's online it becomes a little bit as though it's part of the same.

The central and overlapping presence of both her and the object in Lindsey's drawing of the physical gallery space emphasises this connection:

I guess in museums [pause] there's an image. [pause] And there you are. [laughter] So I guess you're, it's more, it's more an immediate thing, isn't it? But, uh, you've got lots of pictures on the wall, you've got choice and it, it's more focussed.



This focus seems to be represented by the straight, unambiguous pathway the museum offers: the way through it is clear. Lindsey's perspective here is in sharp contrast with those of Desmond and Catriona, who perceived of the physical museum space as labyrinthine, and the online, virtual space as transparent and homely.

Lindsey

it's an edited [pause] journey.

Interviewer

The museum itself is an edited journey?

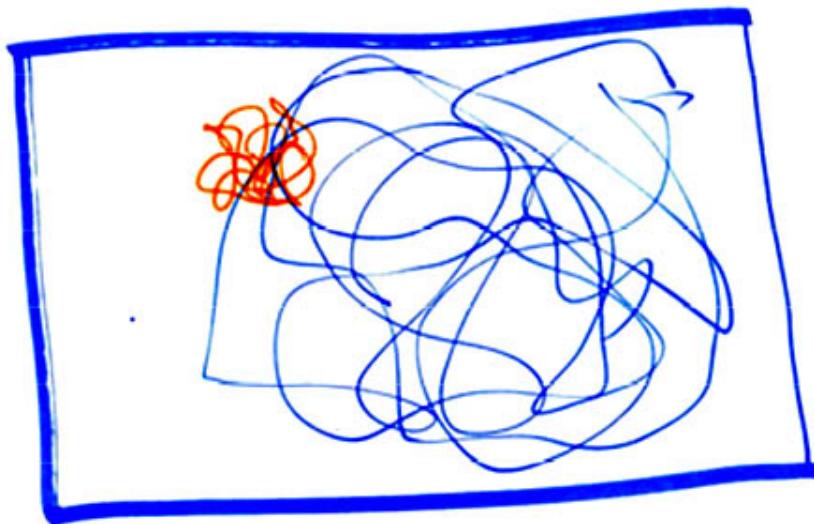
Lindsey

More of an edited journey. Or even if you go and see a show, you're seeing something that is a [pause] contained vision. Whereas [on the web], you have to create your vision from the chaos.

More like an observer than a participant

This idea of the user having to create their own vision was not, for Lindsey a particularly welcome one. For her, it is the web which is the un-navigable space, a domain of chaos which renders her an outsider.

In the following drawing, in which we asked her to represent herself in relation to the web, the smaller orange squiggle is the museum online, and the larger blue squiggle is the web. She is represented by the barely visible, tiny blue dot on the left-hand side.



In comparing these two drawings it seems clear that Lindsey sees herself as an 'insider' in the physical museum (though reliant on someone else's editing of the 'journey'), and an 'outsider' on the web. The expertise and authority manifested in the curated exhibition is a source of pleasure and security for her, while the need to create her own "vision" in the chaotic, digital, networked domain is a source of anxiety and discomfort.

Her explanation of her experiences of the Creative Journey site seems to support this sense of being an outsider, ill at ease. She is unhappy with the Creative Journey she has created, saying that she

hasn't used it "properly" or "well". The sense that there is something out of reach or that they aren't 'getting' is one that some other interviewees expressed as well. Although she seems on one level to know that there are problems with the interface (searching, in particular), she also blames herself for failing to make it work:

whereas I find it an interesting idea, I'm not sure that it's functioning very well. Or it, or I am, it's either not functioning very well or I'm not using it very well. Or maybe it's a combination of both of those two things.

Following on from this, she has been unwilling to comment on other people's journeys because of feeling unhappy with her own, and described feeling "more like an observer rather than a participant."

Fragments and journeys

To share with us what she had hoped the Creative Journey site would offer her, and to explain her sense of frustration and constraint in the online medium, Lindsey showed the interviewer her notebook as an example of what could be described as her paper creative journey.

The notebook showed her creative process – her musings, developing ideas, thoughts, reflections, ideas, creative 'tests'. These were not random – the entries followed on from one another and the interviewer could see how ideas developed and eventually became finished pieces. She made notes about composition, colour, feelings, textures, what was inspiring her and how she wished to develop an idea. She handwrote comments throughout and annotated everything she included in the notebook. She made connections with the work of other artists. There was clearly a great deal of thought put into the creation of this and it also appeared to take place over some time. It was, in effect, an offline Creative Journey constructed in analogue mode, and in sharp contrast with her two postings on the Creative Journey site which are textual fragments, without context or a sense of her personality.

Structure and authority

Lindsey would like the Creative Journey site to provide more structure – to set tasks for her – and for there to be a strong and authoritative expert presence on the site:

I think, I think it can work if there's a really strong editor who, who draws out similar ideas and comments upon work. But I think to be as loose as it is at the moment, I'm not sure that it's giving people, well, it's certainly not giving me the – it's almost like it's just this self motivator to go off and do whatever you like with it. And in a way that is quite amorphous and spongy and... Because I feel that I'm not, I don't have a clear direction anyway. And maybe actually [pause] I should think of a clear agenda for why I want to use it, rather than, say, yeah, definitely, it's a really good idea, I want to use it, what am I going to use it for?

She would also like it to provide ways for people to meet face to face and to use the site as a support for those meetings, rather than an end in itself. It seems that Lindsey's desire for a social and interdependent space – which she associates with offline or face-to-face encounters – is not being met by the current functioning of the site.

In summary

The confident artistic presence in Lindsey's notebook is radically different from her Creative Journey, or her description of herself in relation to the Creative Journey site. She has been unable to bring to this online space the focus, the magic that real objects and face-to-face encounters have for her. The Creative Journey site is not presently structured and supported enough to enable Lindsey to stay in what she experiences as a chaotic and alienating online environment. A key question for the project, therefore, is how the Creative Journey space can be designed to draw users like Lindsey in, to give them the confidence to begin to develop digital literacies which challenge their sense of themselves as 'outsiders'?

Simon: the confidence of distance

Simon is a 40 year old artist and teacher who was born and raised in New Zealand. He found out about the Creative Journey site from an English friend living in New Zealand. Where Lindsey's perspective on the digital domain, and on the Creative Journey site, was one of alienation, Simon – though similarly lacking in technical confidence – was able to use the Creative Journey space as one in which to work on and develop his digital literacy skills.

Finding a way inside

Simon had been thinking about blogging anyway, though he doesn't consider himself part of the computer generation: "it's always a little bit of a hassle for me and it takes me time". He'd previously visited the Saatchi site but found it too large and intimidating: "there were all these forums which, it seems to me are just sort of people bouncing around rubbish to each other. ...it was just people having a go at each other and I thought, oh, not interested in this." He was looking for something smaller, friendlier – still social, yet more in tune with his way of working:

Much like, you know, when I'm out and about walking in the, the material world and picking up junk, I think it's a bit like, um, yeah, the, the analogy holds, that when I'm online and I'm sort of sifting through people's journeys and I'm going ooh, there's a nice image, ooh, look, there's a link I'll follow that.

Simon was one of the first people to start commenting on other Creative Journey entries, and has posted several entries himself, including images from the collections and images of his own work. He went in wanting interaction with other people, but even though that hasn't happened very much (despite his initiating conversation and questions for people in his own entries and in comments on theirs), the information he has found via the site has been really stimulating for him: "One of the, one of the big things that I found with the site, um, [pause] is I either browse through the links to the [museum] or, or some of the other, um, galleries, or I browse through people's Creative Journeys and see what links they've got."

Social connections and serendipity

In this sense, the Creative Journey as it is currently conceived works well for him, conceptually. He sees his love of information and networking as a bridge to the online world, helping him to overcome the strangeness and challenges of new ways of working:

Simon

I don't know, I, probably because of the generation I'm from, I, I relate more to the old stately kind of, [pause] um, you know, a glass case full of dioramas that tell a story.

Interviewer

Yeah. Back when museums were museums, hey.

Simon

Yeah, yeah, exactly. [laughter]

Interviewer

And yet, and yet you seem, I mean, just, well, your kind of online persona on the

Creative Journey site, you seem so at home in that kind of, um, the, the sort of interconnected with people and stuff kind of environment that seems quite different than a traditional museum to me. Does it seem different to you?

Simon

Yes, it does, it does. And I guess that what makes me comfortable and able to be in that environment is, um, because I am a bit of an information junkie, I like to know things and I like stuff and I like pictures and... Um, [pause] and that whole kind of interconnectivity, I think, is one of the key words there. For me that's part of it, there are so many connections that it's almost like a model of the real world to me, and the way I navigate the real world a lot is by making connections and networking with people. And, you know, it [pause] it seems to me to be a bit of a, um, a parallel.

He considers his Creative Journey to be in a “research phase”, and says that the site and the collections have “fed into me sort of having some ‘aha’s about what I’ve done in the past” rather than inspiring new work. He spoke in detail about some of these ‘aha’ moments, and gave a sense of the excitement of naming and contextualising himself in relation to museums and the art world more generally.

So, for Simon, learning through the Creative Journey takes three main forms: acquiring digital skills; following links and material other people create or provide; and connecting his past work with techniques and concepts used by others. Simon is attracted to the sociability and the freedom of the Creative Journey space. He values the feeling of being able to stumble upon material and create his own meaning from it.

The unfinished site and the unskilled user

On a practical level, Simon described some problems with uploading images (“there are a few things which I’ve wanted to save the image and put it on and I’ve just failed miserably”), but did not see these as a problem with the site – he was rather inclined (as were many of our less computer-literate interviewees) to put this down to his own inexperience or lack of skill. This is potentially an issue in as much as it may mean users will not report problems they come across, or may feel the site is not ‘for them’ or that they do not use it properly (as we see with Lindsey). However, despite these difficulties, Simon was positive about the site:

Simon

Despite what I’ve said, um, I have to say that the image saving and putting upping, um [laughter] of Creative Journeys, I’ve no idea what the terminology for it is, um, ...I would say that, that personally, I find Creative Journeys easier to use than some of the other sites that I’ve tried to do the same thing.

Interviewer

Well, that’s encouraging anyway.

Simon

Yeah, well, you know, and that’s why it kind of intrigues me that, you know, [pause]

if it is, if this is sort of the prototyping stage, well, you know, it's, it's going to be good when it's all finished because it's pretty good now.

Reclaiming the good stuff

Having travelled in Australia and Asia, but never visited Europe, Simon's relationship with the partner museums is at a distance. He values these museums for what they make available online, rather than their physical presence or even particularly their prestige:

as soon as I created that account and it gave me the sort of link to, to look at the Tate, which I'd never really looked at before, you know, I mean, I'm, [pause] you know, the other side of the world. We're all aware of what [it] is... but I didn't know that there was all this mass of information I could access from here.

In talking about a local museum he visits in person, he was critical of it becoming, as he sees it, about "infotainment". He regrets the loss of "so much of the good stuff" that has disappeared from display. The online museums, and the Creative Journey site, seem to offer him a way to reclaim some of this good stuff, on his own terms, rather than those of an institution whose priorities may be shifting in favour of an audience which he feels doesn't include him.

In summary

Internationally-based and without ties to the physical museum, Simon experienced the Creative Journey from a different perspective than many of our other interviewees. His appreciation of the museum's online resources and the Creative Journey site was quite apparent throughout the interview, as were the ways in which the site is supporting and enriching his learning and practice. In using his offline "gathering" practices as a bridge to working online, Simon shows one way for even relatively inexperienced web users to confidently and enthusiastically create presences on the Creative Journey site. His experiences also suggest that there is much that the Creative Journey site could offer to people at a geographical distance from the partners. When considered alongside Lindsey's interview, we might even see Simon's distance from the physical museum as being a positive advantage in terms of his motivation to engage with the Creative Journey. He was much less constrained by conventional understandings of the museum in his engagement with project, much more willing to take what he needed from the Creative Journey space, and to contribute to it his own "vision". In this sense, it is possible that the global reach of the project is one of its most significant, and most intriguing, aspects.

Conclusion

People are engaging with the Creative Journey site. Not as a prototype or a test server, but as a place to do meaningful work and learning, to connect with other people and their ideas, to find out more about themselves, and to establish an online presence in connection with a museum they care about. In hearing and retelling the stories of Desmond, Tara, Lindsey, Catriona and Simon, as well as our 14 other interviewees, we found ourselves caught up in their surprise, delight, frustrations, disappointments and excitement. These are people with real motivations and real expectations of this project. In asking who Creative Journey authors are, we found a range of answers, and a number of new questions and challenges to consider.

The online museum appears to permit some users a way in to the institutional space which the physical museum excludes them from, through geographical distance or by its perceived inaccessibility. Through their images as well as their words, several of these interviewees showed us how they have a sense of control and choice online, and how they use this to powerfully position themselves in the Creative Journey space. These digital insiders are likely to become one of the main user groups for this part of the project.

However, we were often surprised by the importance of the real, physical museum to many of our interviewees, and the relative ease with which they can work in online environments while at the same time privileging the material objects and spaces which constitute the physical museum as 'the real thing'. Creative Journey authors *do* want to create content and seize interpretive authority, but they also love the stuff museums are made of, whether they have been visiting all their lives, or have only recently begun to know them.

Some key questions

So, some questions emerged over this stage of the research which are likely to be key in the next stage of Creative Journey development and implementation:

- How might the social function of the Creative Journeys – which was core to the expectations of all interviewees – be strengthened and foregrounded in the next stage of development?
- How might the ethos of user-control and user-generation of content continue to be nurtured?
- How might the Creative Journey space and functionality be developed in a way which helps digital outsiders like Lindsey to connect and participate?
- Is it a problem for the project, and for users like Desmond who come to it from a context other than the creative arts, that this environment seems to embed within itself a particular 'way of knowing' which is so tightly associated with the creative and the visual? Does the 'Creative Journey' label function well as indicating an essential purpose for this strand of the project, or is it dangerously constraining?
- What can this project offer users – like Catriona and Tara – that other social networking sites do not? If the key here is the connection of the Creative Journey space to the physical museum, how can this connection be used to structure the Creative Journey experience while avoiding over-structuring it? In other words, how best can the Creative Journey space

take account of the increasingly blurred boundary between the virtual and the real institution?

Issues for the next stage of technical development

The following issues for technical development came through strongly in our interviews. Some of these have already been addressed, others offer scope for further debate and discussion as development proceeds.

Image, linkage and multimedia

Images are at the heart of the Creative Journey site and the online museum, so it is vital that the interfaces for finding, saving, uploading and embedding images in posts are flawless. Interviewees also want ways of embedding video and sound files directly, and more flexibility in the way they can insert external links.

The unfinished journey

Authors want draft functionality, the ability to post privately, and tools for customising the look and feel of their journey space. Clarity about data ownership, which we stressed in the first stage report, did not come up in these interviews – perhaps in part because authors know the site is not yet publicly available on the web. However, various people's comments about their willingness or unwillingness to share works in progress indicate an awareness of potential personal vulnerability which can be mitigated in part by providing draft and private posting status.

Smooth searching

If the searches a new user tries are unsuccessful, they may give up before they have even begun. It is important that the early steps of a user's involvement with the site – before they have posted their first entry, or their profile – provide them with some successes and encouragement to carry on.

A wider net

Many interviewees asked for the museum Creative Journey sites to be more closely linked together. They want the richness and 'buzz' that diverse authors and journeys would provide. Most are interested in being surprised and in having ways of stumbling upon new things, though some are also concerned to be able to make links with people like themselves, with similar interests and goals. Keyword tagging, a place to see random postings, ways of seeing who else has written about an object they are looking at are all things that could be done to support these connections. High profile placement of recent postings, and viewable statistics for different users would reward participation.

Also in terms of creating connections, interviewees asked for ways of being notified if someone commented on their posts (or replied to a comment they had made), making 'friendship' links to be able to more easily follow other journeys, and a private messaging facility.

Face-to-face connections

Capitalising on the connection with the physical museums, some interviewees wanted to be able to connect with people face-to-face, do museum visits together, attend workshops and seminars, and have this all link in to the Creative Journey site. This might be best achieved by creating some public discussion boards on the site where such connections and arrangements can be made. A thriving

discussion board community would also provide opportunities for people to engage in more structured activities together, if they wished.

Finally...

As the Creative Journeys strand of the project enters its next, crucial stage of development, it continues to operate at the cutting edge of our new understanding of participation, education and engagement in the digital age. As we said in our last report, many of the tensions which creatively structure this project – the relation of the virtual to the real, of the expert to the amateur, of the insider to the outsider – will not be resolved by or within this project. However, the project continues to negotiate these tensions positively, and the Creative Journeys – even in their very early manifestations – have, as we have seen, already had some quite profound effects on those who have chosen to engage with them. We would share with Catriona a perception of the future of this strand of the project as a positive one:

I think the project itself is fantastic. I'm really looking forward to seeing where it goes because I think it can be great. And very helpful and [pause] I mean, it has been a real revelation to me...

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