At the advice of my Museum Studies classmates, I chose to take the Director’s Tour at the Metropolitan Museum of art for this assignment. I’ve been to the Metropolitan more times than I can count so I was looking forward to the fresh perspective that guidance from the audio cues might afford. I was not disappointed, though the experience wasn’t as rich as I had expected.

When I arrived the afternoon of Columbus Day, a day off from work but a dreary one and therefore a perfect museum day, the Great Hall was bustling (others apparently came to the same conclusions about the day). I made my way to the ticket booth and purchased admission; inexplicably, at the same register, I had to purchase the audio guide in a separate transaction. Then I went to pick up the device, an iPod cloaked in black plastic with a bright ribbon tether (to hang around your neck?) and a pair of cheap headphones. The woman who dispenses them gave me quick and courteous introduction on how to use it, specifically pointing out the volume control button on the side. I was ready.

But the friend I was meeting had not yet arrived. While waiting, I explored the interface and noticed the architecture tour begins where I was standing (in The Great Hall). I pushed play. Morrison Hecksher introduced himself in his upper crust New York accent and told me where the volume controls were. He then told me about the Hunts and Beaux-Arts and that there were supposed to be sculptures where I now saw flowers. Then my friend arrived.

I gave him a device; we selected the Director’s Tour. I pushed play. This time Thomas P. Campbell, Director The Metropolitan Museum of Art, introduced himself, in a British accent. His voiceover cadence wasn’t as natural as Morrie’s, but it too, sounded authoritative and expert, and congruous with stereotypes associated with high art.

He told me about the Hunts (again) and then about the “special map” that accompanied the Director’s Tour, which I had to go ask for from the center information desk-- another inexplicable idiosyncrasy. Why not distribute them *with* the audio guides?

Map in hand we had some trouble orienting to the first next stop on the tour, The Tomb of Perneb. I usually just breeze by this antiquity because it’s always crowded. This time I went inside, as directed. There were too many people to walk slowly and follow along specifically looking at the features being described in my ears, but I appreciated hearing about how the Tomb came to be at the Museum.

I described my initial acquaintance with the audio tour in step-by-step detail because first impressions so heavily define the user experience. I’ll describe the rest of the tour and my reaction to it more generally.

At one point my friend signaled to me by tapping me and pointing to the restroom. He had to go. I’m sharing this mundane detail because that’s when it clicked that the sensation of being on the tour was similar to snorkeling. Underwater you communicate by tapping and pointing. Gestures replace speaking because you’re effectively muzzled and can’t talk.

Strangely the headphones covering your ears affect your vision. Listening to the audio guide is like wearing a snorkeling mask that cuts off peripheral vision. The guide sends you directly past hundreds (thousands?) of objects which may as well be anonymous “other fish in the sea.” You barely notice what’s by your side as you propel yourself along marveling only at what’s in front of you.

In this way, the Director’s Tour asks the listener to surrender agency for decision-making\*. That’s not a drawback per se, listening is perhaps a little less like wearing blinders and more like wearing a viewfinder. By asking me to zero in on and focus on things I hadn’t been enamored of enough in previous visits to stop and read about in the interpretive labels, the Tour taught me things, interesting things (about armor and Queen Elizabeth I’s court, for example) that I wouldn’t have otherwise learned.

But the tour limits choice in another way and this is a definite criticism, there’s no fast-forward or I couldn’t find the button (which would still be a problem). There’s a rewind function, but if say, you rewind too far you can’t skip forward. And some segments have “hear more” addenda which you can’t skip to if you (or I accidentally) rewind to the main segment.

reminded me of the way you communicate underwater and that the sensation I was experiencing on the tour was similar to the sensation of snorkeling. using a form It was then that realized the sensation I was having while navigating from directions.

Always for a reason

Who is it for.