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Place-making With Telepresence: A Navigation Guide to *A Journey into Time Immemorial's* Seven Exhibition Spaces

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Abstract

A Journey into Time Immemorial is an interactive website that historically represents the everyday way of life of Stó:lō-Coast Salish peoples in a computer-generated naturalistic setting. This paper closely examines aspects of its seven exhibition spaces to investigate the relationship between the poetics of new media and contemporary curatorial practices in Indigenous culture. By doing so, it seeks to showcase an award-winning example of how an Indigenous community made use of digital technologies and online platforms to reclaim the right to curate, design, and display its own living history, to extend place-making into cyberspace, and to establish a direct relationship with the general public.

Keywords

Indigenous media; place-making; landscape and living history; cyber museum; digitization of tangible and intangible heritage; collaborative museum practices; telepresence; aura.

Introduction

In his canonical book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson (1991) argues that censuses, maps, and museums are the elements of grammar that have been deployed by colonial states to construct and reinforce nationalist ideologies since the nineteenth century (p. 163). Anderson's thesis belongs to a media studies corpus known as the "paradigm of imagination", an approach that places the emphasis on recognizing: *...the importance of the cognitive instruments that allow us to conceive the society in which we live, to build images of this society. Such images are crucial to political action, historical projects, and the very experience of belonging.* (Dayan, 2005, p. 172)

Anderson's argument in relation to institutional exhibitions closely echoes Malraux's (1967) suggestion that a museum is not only a real, physical place, but also an imaginary

one, an environment in which visitors must interpretatively (re)construct the meaning of objects placed in collections (pp. 11-12). It is in this sense that such spaces are said to have a rhetorical function, which Anderson (1991) claims are designed to appeal to the *museumizing imagination* --- one's ability to fantasize that an exhibition transports them deep into the secrets of an exotic culture that might otherwise remain little-known and out-of-reach (p. 182).

However, as Said (1995) remarks, it is those who organize, disseminate, and claim ownership of a collection of artifacts and specialized knowledges that effectively have the power to shape and reify narrative "accounts" of a nation's past (pp. 165-166). This historical materialistic outlook highlights *the importance of having the means and space to take stock of, design, and exhibit one's own national archive*. In post-colonial societies, nowhere does this seem more overdue than in regards to the curation and display of Indigenous intangible and tangible heritage.

For decades now, digital technologies have offered new opportunities for self-expressions of identity: accessible and powerful design software, interactive affordances, and unprecedented exhibition platforms. This shift has opened up promising directions for the preservation and transmission of First Nations heritage and traditional knowledge.

Based on the story of Xáytem longhouse in the small town of Mission, in Western Canada, the interactive cyber museum, *A Journey into Time Immemorial*, provides a UNESCO award-winning example of how First Nations are using new media based curatorial approaches to represent their own history. Funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage through its Virtual Museum of Canada initiative, this website renders an artistic interpretation of the way of life of the Stó:lō Nation's Coast Salish peoples in the Fraser Valley located east of Vancouver, in British Columbia ("A Journey", welcome screen message, 2008-09).

This paper examines the exhibition spaces of *A Journey into Time Immemorial* to lay bare its navigation architec

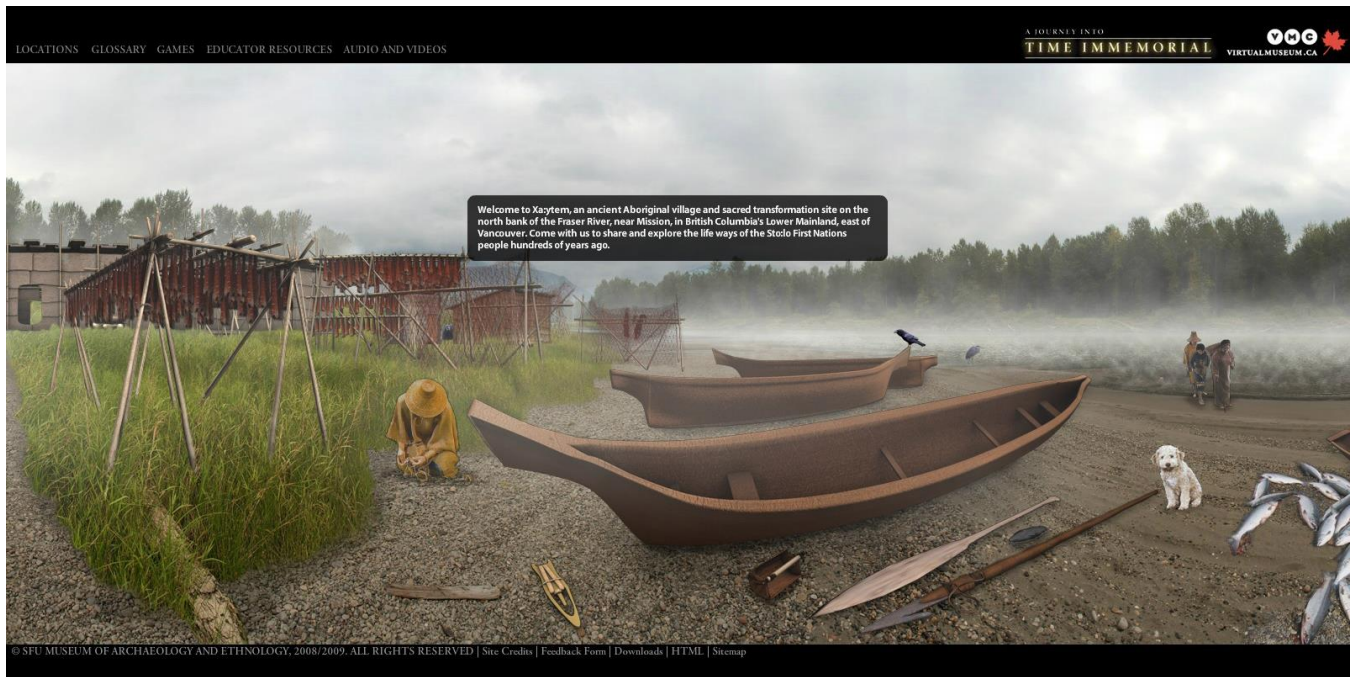


Figure 1. Screen capture taken in exhibition space #1 (**Beach**) of *A Journey Into Time Immemorial* showing welcome screen when cyber museum is entered in window mode. Photography/artwork: Creative Studio, SFU. ©SFU Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 2008-09.

ture. By doing so, it seeks to show how Indigenous peoples are making use of digital technologies and online platforms to extend their place-making rituals into cyberspace through telepresence. This claim is supported by the fact that *A Journey into Time Immemorial* was imagined and designed by members of different Indigenous communities drawing from a body of knowledge primarily sourced from oral history interviews with Stó:lō-Coast Salish elders.

The first part of this paper examines the navigation architecture and spatio-temporal structures of this interactive cyber museum by showing screen captures and diagrams supported by textual descriptions. The second part follows with a discussion on how digital technologies make it possible for First Nations to autonomously engage in place-making practices by allowing them to curate their own stories of the people and of the land, shaping them through design, and then sharing them on an open global platform.

Experiencing *A Journey into Time Immemorial*

Before reflecting on how telepresence can be used to support place-making in regards to Indigenous cultures and the representation of their intangible and tangible heritage, it is useful to explain the architecture and spatio-temporal logic of the cyber museum under study. This first section and its four subsections aim to provide a sense of what visitors see when they navigate through the seven exhibition spaces.

By recording observations made inside this interactive cyber museum, this paper proposes to introduce readers to some of its key design elements. Figures 1 to 7 are screen-shots captured while the author was navigating through the

website to conduct her phenomenological investigation. Each figure is meant to give a quick snapshot impression of one of the seven exhibition spaces, selected because it is representative of the exhibition space it was taken in.

Navigating Through The Seven Exhibition Spaces

The opening sequence of *A Journey into Time Immemorial* takes place in exhibition space #1 (**Beach**). It initially shows an exterior scene of a village as seen in Figure 1. For the first seven seconds, the following message is displayed in white font over a black box above the canoes:

Welcome to Xáytem, an ancient Aboriginal village and sacred transformation site on the north bank of the Fraser River, near Mission, in British Columbia's Lower Mainland, east of Vancouver. Come with us to share and explore the life ways of the Stó:lō First Nations people hundreds of years ago. ("A Journey", welcome screen message, 2008-09).

Moving the cursor sideways to either edge of the screen triggers a panning mechanism that slowly reveals the full circular, cycloramic canvas of the scene shown in Figure 1. The six other exhibition spaces in this cyber museum can be accessed by clicking a strategically located trigger point that appears only upon a rollover event: a white icon in the shape of a hand under a red label inciting the visitor to "JUMP TO" another exhibition space.

For instance, when a visitor pans around exhibition space #1 (**Beach**) shown in Figure 1, and moves the cursor on or around the door of the Longhouse structure in its upper-left quadrant, the white hand icon appears under-



Figure 2. Screen capture taken in exhibition space #2 (**Longhouse-Front**) of *A Journey Into Time Immemorial* in full screen mode. Photography/artwork: Creative Studio, SFU. ©SFU Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 2008-09.

neath a small red caption that reads “JUMP TO Longhouse-Front” (not shown in Figure 1). Clicking on this icon causes the image to quickly cross-dissolve into the closer, foreshortened image of the Longhouse shown in Figure 2. Moving the cursor in this exhibition space #2 (**Longhouse-Front**) triggers a panning motion, which reveals a distinctly different view of the landscape, as well as different characters and artifacts than the ones seen in exhibition space #1 (**Beach**).

A rollover on the door to the Longhouse makes the white hand icon appear, this time underneath a small red caption that reads “JUMP TO Longhouse-Center” as seen in Figure 2. Clicking on this white hand icon triggers a cross-dissolve that brings the visitor into exhibition space #3 (**Longhouse-Center**), located inside the Longhouse as seen in Figure 3. As was the case in exhibition space #2 (**Longhouse-Front**), here, the visitor has a choice to either backtrack or continue forward, except that in exhibition space #3 (**Longhouse-Center**), there are three different possibilities associated with moving forward. A first option is to click the white hand icon in front of the doorway in Figure 3 under the label that reads, “JUMP TO-Longhouse Cooking Area” to discover what is behind the bark panels.

Option one thus enables the visitor to enter inside exhibition space #4 (**Longhouse-Cooking Area**) shown in Figure 4. However, a second option would have been to continue panning inside exhibition space #3 until a similar partition would appear under the caption “JUMP TO Longhouse-Work Area”. Clicking on this second point of access affords the visitor a view of the next cyclorama, exhibition space #5 (**Longhouse-Work Area**), in which women use hand tools to make artifacts as seen in Figure 5.

The exhibition spaces shown in Figures 4 and 5 also have, at a certain angle of view: a narrow door marked with the caption “JUMP TO Longhouse-Center”, from which visitors can backtrack into the previous exhibition space, that is, back inside the Longhouse-Center. From there is a third option for moving forward, which is one of two points of exit from inside the Longhouse: when the cursor rolls over the back door, again the white icon of a hand appears underneath a small red caption that reads “JUMP TO Longhouse-Back”. Clicking on this trigger point activates a cross-dissolve that brings the visitor into the exterior landscape of exhibition space #6 (**Longhouse-Back**), where trees, bushes, and plants become the objects of discovery of this naturalistic setting as seen in Figure 6, which shows trees haloed as a result of cursor rollover.



Figure 3. Screen capture taken in exhibition space #3 (**Longhouse-Center**) of *A Journey Into Time Immemorial* in full screen mode. Photography/artwork: Creative Studio, SFU. ©SFU Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 2008-09.



Figure 4. Screen capture taken in exhibition space #4 (**Longhouse-Cooking Area**) of *A Journey Into Time Immemorial* in full screen mode. Photography/artwork: Creative Studio, SFU. ©SFU Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 2008-09.

Moving the cursor to survey the forest area depicted in Figure 6 makes another white hand icon appear, this time under the red label “JUMP TO Pithouse”, which can be clicked on to enter the last cyclorama of the cyber museum. Figure 7 is a snapshot of exhibition space #7 (**Pithouse**) taken while the cursor was rolling over objects in the Pithouse that glow with the same white halo effect.

From the Pithouse, the visitor cannot backtrack to explore any of the previous cycloramas once again, but may either stay in the Pithouse or else exit the cyber museum. Save for this detail, this itinerary simulates that of a visit in an institutional art gallery where one would physically enter different rooms one after another, yet be able to turn around and retreat back in most of them while inside the building’s exhibition halls. Advantages of an interactive cyber museum include access at any time from any place that supports online connectivity, and the fact that visitors can discover Stó:lō-Coast Salish peoples’ living history in an immersive environment that simulates everyday life.

Navigation Architecture

Crawford (2003) has shown how computer science dia-

grams can be adapted into structures that help researchers analyze and visualize the interactive character of any software application; he refers to these as “interactivity diagram” or “architectural diagrams of interaction”, which essentially look like flowcharts mapping out major information spaces as individuals nodes, and the relationship between them as one or two-sided arrows that indicate the links made possible by their connection (pp. 75-79).

By applying Crawford’s analytical tool to *A Journey into Time Immemorial*, one can produce a visualization of the interactive aspects of the *navigation architecture* --- that is, all potential individuating pathways between the seven exhibition spaces. And indeed, Figure 8 schematizes at a glance the itineraries that visitors can take to navigate through the cyber museum, including all possible pathway permutations. In this diagram, the seven circles are each a “node” that represent an exhibition space, and while one-sided arrows indicate a pathway that allows visitors to move only in one direction, double-sided arrows show the reciprocal two-way connections that exist between certain nodes. Crawford (2003) uses the terms *branchpoint* to describe a node that offers more than one option forward or backward, and *storytree* for the overall structure (p. 77).

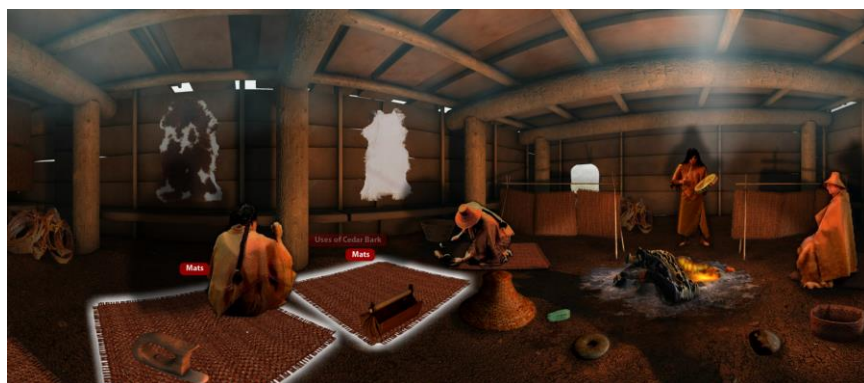


Figure 5. Screen capture taken in exhibition space #5 (**Longhouse-Work Area**) of *A Journey Into Time Immemorial* in full screen mode. Photography/artwork: Creative Studio, SFU. ©SFU Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 2008-09.



Figure 6. Screen capture taken in exhibition space #6 (**Longhouse-Back**) of *A Journey Into Time Immemorial* in full screen mode. Photography/artwork: Creative Studio, SFU.©SFU Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 2008-09.

As Figure 8 illustrates, the interactivity diagram for *A Journey into Time Immemorial* looks more like a cross, than like a tree. And indeed, the information architecture in this cyber museum is spatially organized more like the exhibition halls of an art gallery than an interactive story.

Figure 8 also suggests that the structure of the navigation architecture is almost linear, with the exception of a branchpoint node at exhibition space #3 (**Longhouse-Center**), from which the visitor can choose to proceed in four different directions: backward to the **Longhouse-Front**, forward to the **Longhouse-Cooking Area**, forward to the **Longhouse-Work Area** or forward to the **Longhouse-Back**. This architecture highlights the fact that the Longhouse is the central, symbolic hearth of this village.

The diagram also shows how the architecture of this cyber museum includes three end nodes from which one must backtrack because they are dead-ends: exhibition space #4 (**Longhouse-Cooking Area**), exhibition space #5 (**Longhouse-Work Area**), and exhibition space #7 (**Pithouse**). As the entry point into *A Journey into Time Immemorial*, exhibition space #1 (**Beach**) is also an end node, but one from which visitors cannot backtrack. Just as the Longhouse situates the center of the village, these four

end nodes circumscribe its limits: the imagined and symbolic periphery within which the axial hearth radiates.

Spatial Structure

Taking a different analytical approach, Figure 9 shows how the cyber museum, *A Journey into Time Immemorial*, comprises a total of seven cycloramic exhibition spaces interconnected in a structure that aims to present itself as a naturalistic succession of exterior and interior scenes. As shown in this topological view, four out of these seven sites of knowledge --- exhibition space #1 (**Beach**), exhibition space #3 (**Longhouse-Center**), exhibition space #6 (**Longhouse-Back**), and exhibition space #7 (**Pithouse**) --- are adjacent to one another: the **Beach** (an exterior) is contiguous to the **Longhouse-Center** (an interior), which is itself contiguous to the **Longhouse-Back** (an exterior), which is in turn contiguous to the **Pithouse** (an interior). In Figures 8 and 9, **Beach** is the first cyclorama of the cyber museum and the **Pithouse** marks the end of the linear succession formed by four alternating exteriors and interiors.

As seen in Figure 9, the two separate interior rooms inside the Longhouse --- exhibition space #4 (**Longhouse-**



Figure 7. Screen capture taken in exhibition space #7 (**Pithouse**) of *A Journey Into Time Immemorial* in full screen mode. Photography/artwork: Creative Studio, SFU.©SFU Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 2008-09.

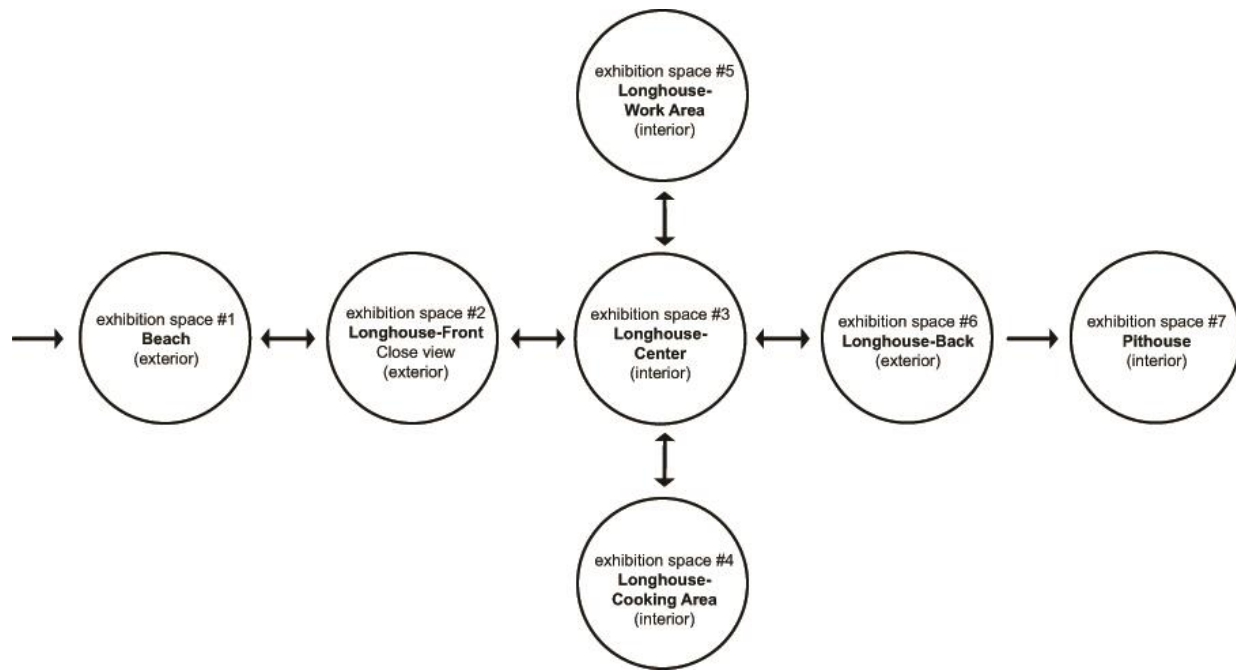


Figure 8. *A Journey Into Time Immemorial's* seven cycloramas presented as interactive nodes that connect in sequence. Image credit: Claude Fortin. ©SFU Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 2008-09.

Cooking Area) and exhibition space #5 (**Longhouse-Work Area**) --- are embedded within exhibition space #3 (**Longhouse-Center**). Indeed, the **Longhouse-Cooking Area** (an interior) and the **Longhouse-Work Area** (an interior), each provide distinct cycloramas of interior areas located *behind* the bark-covered partitions seen in the background in Figure 3's **Longhouse-Center** interior.

As for exhibition space #2 (**Longhouse-Front**), it is unique in its visual treatment in that it is the only cyclorama that simply offers a magnified view of a single visual element first displayed in another cyclorama --- namely, the front of the Longhouse that appears much smaller in the background of exhibition space #1 (**Beach**).

Here, it is noteworthy that exhibition space #2 (**Longhouse-Front**) shown in Figure 2 offers what seems like a foreshortened cycloramic reinterpretation of the exterior landscape around the Longhouse doorway in the upper-left quadrant of Figure 1's exhibition space #1 (**Beach**), *with modifications of its spatial and temporal parameters*.

In fact, except for the appearance of the Longhouse structure, it is difficult to match up the overlap. In the **Longhouse-Front** cyclorama, many visual elements, such as the beach, have become barely visible, while others are foregrounded more expressively as is the case with the multiple drying racks on which are suspended a number of big fish. The presence of these fish as well as new animated characters moving around the drying racks suggests that the **Beach** and **Longhouse-Front** scenes are not meant to be synchronous --- *they are taking place at different times*.

Temporal Structure

This design conceit supports the sense *that time passes* when one travels from the first exhibition space (the **Beach** in Figure 1) to the second one (the **Longhouse-Front** in Figure 2). Further, as Figures 8 and 9 suggest, *A Journey into Time Immemorial's* logic of navigation is characterized by linearity and continuity --- two defining temporal attributes of history --- which are made spatial *through the act of navigating* from one exhibition space to another.

Inside the exhibition spaces, each cyclorama has its own vignettes and live-action videos depicting Stó:lō-Coast Salish living history. And here, computer-generated design is used to suggest different experiences of time. At first, one has the sense that time unfolds chronologically when watching animated figures played by real actors perform everyday chores outdoors and indoors. But then, this sense of time is disrupted once the visitor notices that animated figures and objects are placed next to still ones. This contrast was intentional according to the production manager:

We began this project with a vision of presenting an experience of a living history, where the static objects in the SFU and Xá:ytem museums could be seen in use, as part of a living community...using actors and inserting them into landscapes allowed us to show cultural continuity and the strength of tradition. (Dr. Barbara Winter qtd in Meadahl, 2008, paras. 4 and 8).

Such a graphic design strategy also makes the visitor more aware that the cycloramic scenes are visibly made up of asynchronous elements that have different relationships to

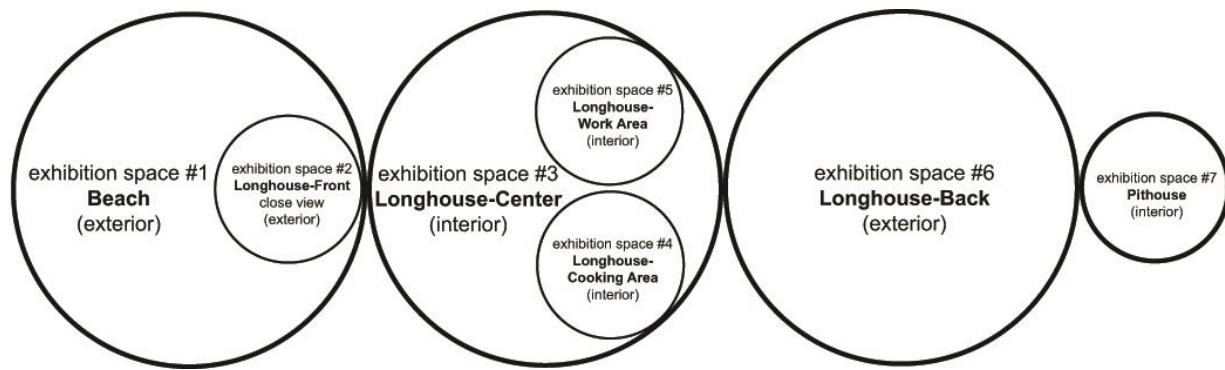


Figure 9. Topology of the seven exhibition spaces of *A Journey into Time Immemorial* showing the spatial relationship between cycloramas: how they adjoin with or are embedded into one another. Image credit: Claude Fortin. ©SFU Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 2008-09.

the passage of time. This, in turn, suggests that each exhibition space presents a simulation of living history, which offers a composite portrait of tangible and intangible heritage drawn from distinct time periods. Hence, while the experience of navigation drives the visitor forward through a narrative journey of discovery, the stylized use of digital compositing in the scenes can evoke different clusters of bygone times long past (Manovich, 2001, p. 245, 264).

This sense that many pasts are brought forth into the present is further emphasized by the long oral history interviews embedded in each exhibition space. These video clips can be made to appear and played at any time in a few clicks when a visitor chooses to forage deeper into the layers of information architecture. The live interviews refer to both past and present, but they also offer the possibility of carrying the traditions of “living history” into the future, thereby keeping it alive in the present and for posterity.

Finally, by navigating within *cycloramas that are circuitous*, exploring the exhibition spaces also works toward producing a sense of temporality in which time is experienced as repetitive, an effect reinforced by the sound loops playing naturalistic ambient noises and the animation loops showing actors performing the same movements over and over again. This design strategy further immerses the visitor into a reconstruction stretching all the way back in time to an immemorial past that has the circularity of myths.

Eliade (2005) has extensively written on how the ritualistic repetition of archetypal gestures “reveals an ontology uncontaminated by time and becoming” that traditional, premodern cultures deliberately practiced to reconnect with the cyclical structure of time that exists in nature (p. 89).

Like the perennial return, each year, of Spring --- Summer --- Fall --- Winter, the repeated performance of a ritual evokes the circular movement of time that is manifest macrocosmically (the motion of the planets) and microcosmically (the perpetual regeneration of nature). While a linear understanding of time suggests historical changes and human evolution, a circular structure of time enacts a con-

stant return to what has already happened and what will always be, that is, a call to what is immutable and eternal:

For the cosmos and man are regenerated ceaselessly and by all kinds of means, the past is destroyed, evils and sins are eliminated, etc. Differing in their formulas, all these instruments of regeneration tend toward the same end: to annul past time, to abolish history by a continuous return in illo tempore, by the repetition of the cosmogonic act [underlined emphasis added]. (p. 81)

In illo tempore --- a Latin expression that means “in that time” --- refers to that undetermined time in the past that symbolically stands for the origin of time. The hypnotic circularity of *A Journey into Time Immemorial*’s seven exhibition spaces symbolically summons the Stó:lō-Coast Salish peoples’ connection to these sacred origins, to the power of nature, and to the restoration of life through ritual. As well, while the Longhouse acts as a spatial representation of the hearth of this village, the cycloramas actualize its temporal hearth, wherein visitors can partake in the repetition of rituals calling forth the mythical “center of time”.

In a similar train of thought, the very essence of mythological thinking is present here in that a dialectical tension between nature and culture prevails throughout the exhibition spaces (Levi-Strauss, 1976, p. 225). The simulated reconstruction of a Stó:lō-Coast Salish village seems to exist in a liminal zone which balances, on the one hand, naturalistic representations of indoor/outdoor spaces, and, on the other hand, cultural artifacts and living knowledge. The cyber museum is the place where they meet, and as such, is the site of transmutation of oral history into myth.

It is also a space used by designers as a live-action painting canvas to produce different impressions of time. The coexistence of such vastly different temporal structures in *A Journey into Time Immemorial* supports Anderson’s (1991) argument that the “museumizing imagination” typically creates temporal boundaries where there were often none (pp. 178-179). In addition, it works towards creating a sense of place in an immersive naturalistic simulation that *proposes alternative understandings of sitedness*.

Place-making in the Cyber Museum

According to Basso (1996), the notion of *place-making* describes how people create symbolic and embodied associations to a physical site by remembering and then reimagining events that took place there in the past; this mental process aims to foreground understandings of what happened *here*, in *this* place (p. 5). Might it be possible for online environments to support place-making practices?

Place-making in Indigenous Traditions

This paper first reflects on this question by drawing on an ethnography based on fieldwork conducted among the Western Apache peoples, an American Indian tribe:

Even in societies where writing and other devices for “preserving the past” are absent or devalued, historical knowledge is produced and reproduced...it is well to keep in mind that interpreting the past can be readily accomplished --- and is every day --- without recourse to documentary archives, photographic files, and early sound recordings. It cannot be accomplished, readily or otherwise, without recourse to places and the place-worlds they engender...a widespread form of imaginative activity, place-making is also a form of cultural activity [underlined emphasis added]. (Basso, 1996, p. 7)

While *A Journey into Time Immemorial* is a cyber museum that does include elements such as documentary archives, photographic files, video recordings, computer sound bites, animations, and digital graphic compositions, it is noteworthy that the design of these elements is mostly based on the testimony of elders that were interviewed for the project; in other words, the main method of knowledge transmission here is *oral history* (Fortin, Hennessy, & Bizzocchi, 2019).

Yet, as Basso (1996) remarks, beyond the question of what method is used to preserve and transmit traditional knowledge, a historical world view needs a “place” to become a “place-world”; it cannot exist without a physical site. For this reason, it is most interesting to consider the issue of *sitedness* in *A Journey into Time Immemorial*, a living history exhibition project that lies at the intersection of museums, new media, and First Nations cultures.

A Journey into Time Immemorial represents a digital reconstruction of a Stó:lō-Coast Salish pithouse and longhouse village that is only accessible to visitors online. Now, while it does include a rich array of media elements used as visual and aural evidence to represent a place-world sourced from oral history, *the sense of place is one that necessarily appeals to the imagination*, for visitors must enter and navigate this cyber museum *from physically remote locations*. In fact, it would be difficult to determine what the exact location of the cyber museum is. Is it where the hard drives are stored? Is it at the service point where the server processes the program? Is it located at the end node (host) from where it runs? Or at the end node where it the visitor accesses it? Or is it in the visitor’s imagination?

Telepresence and Museums without Walls

Such is the conundrum posed by the manifestations of electronic *telepresence*, which go as far back as the early nineteenth century with the invention of the telegraph (Sconce, 2004, p. 51). Significantly, telepresence has been developed to appeal mainly to two sensory modalities: vision and hearing (technologies such as the telegraph or vibrating devices are rare examples of its haptic expressions). In *A Journey into Time Immemorial*, presence is largely invoked by structuring the gaze: images, as spatial phenomena, render this place-world a conceivable site.

This is not without implications since the generation of images is also what prefigures the act of imagining, a mental process contingent on visual impressions (Enns, 2004, p. 13). And this, indeed, is the crux of both Anderson’s (1991) and Malraux’s (1967) canonical theses about museums: the museum is a site that claims a space in the visitor’s imagination. This process is in turn strongly supported by the museum practice referred to as *musealisation*:

From a strictly museological point of view, musealisation is the operation of trying to extract, physically or conceptually, something from its natural or cultural environment and giving it a museal status, transforming it into a musealium or ‘museum object’, that is to say, bringing it into the museal field. (Desvallés & Mairesse, 2009, p. 50)

Differently put, the process of musealisation transforms artifacts by separating them from their original contexts, by providing them with a new status as works of art, by changing their functions within the museum, and by thus exposing them to other interpretations. This opens up the possibility of rewriting the symbolic significations of artifacts and the contexts they are exhibited in. By extension, it also implies that the exhibition context can be, as Malraux (1967) so famously called it: “a museum without walls” (*le musée imaginaire*), which uses technologies of reproduction to replicate and disseminate *en masse*, in print or digital media, ubiquitous representations of artifacts and the new *tableaus* they are embedded in for public display.

This strategy has indeed always been part and parcel of the musealisation process: artifacts are first taken out of their original settings and then recontextualized in a new physical setting. Concomitantly, images of these artifacts appear in catalogues, newspaper articles, collectible prints or postcards, and now also on digital screens. (Anderson, 1991, pp. 182-183). The infinite capacity of digital technologies to disseminate culture widely and rapidly is perhaps one of the reasons why they have been so amenable to contemporary museum practices. But how do they support place-making in *A Journey into Time Immemorial*?

Place-making in a Global Museum

Whereas in a physical, institutional museum or in a historical longhouse village, visitors would have to physically enter different rooms to see the full exhibition, this cyber

museum removes the constraints of physical distance and opening hours: exhibition spaces, available at any time, can come to the visitors on demand. Some authors purport that such instantiations of “global” cyber museums give visitors more freedom to experience and interpret exhibitions:

With hypermedia, telematics and the interactivity, all traditional limitations must fall, making possible museums without walls, curators outside museums, museum action and museum objects in situ and in use. The museum should be the way of appreciating the environment not only in its time-space but also its spiritual dimension...the total museum is thus created in cyberspace and in its counterpart of the human mind. (Šola 2010, p. 425-426)

This is not the only way in which *A Journey into Time Immemorial* overcomes the limitations of physical space. As Figure 9 shows, the cyber museum also supports the linkage of indoor and outdoor settings that might otherwise be problematic or costly in art galleries. This, in turn, makes it possible to contextualize the artifacts in what computer-generated design makes it appear to be their “natural historic setting”, an important motivation in the curating process according to the production manager of this project (B. Winter, personal communication, 16 November 2011).

This design draws on a walk-through historical reconstruction, except that instead of being physically present in an authentic site at a specific moment, the experience takes place online by way of jump cuts through a succession of 360-degree computer-generated cycloramas. As a result, here, navigation operates as a process of discovery of the Stó:lō-Coast Salish peoples’ everyday way of life, including hunting-gathering work and the preparation of food.

True, some of the combined aura of the physical objects and spatial environment has been lost, but much has been maintained. And more importantly, as Benjamin (2010) proposed, the loss of the direct aura of physical artifacts can be compensated by an increase in accessibility (p. 14).

Another significant advantage in using a digital toolbox and online environment to recreate Indigenous living history is that First Nations can thus maintain control over the representation of their heritage. Museal institutions and artifacts are not merely means to disseminate culture, they are also active discursive agents that control, legitimate, and reify historical narratives. In projects such as these, digital technology allowed Indigenous peoples to reclaim those narratives: the team who controlled the development of content, and of its design, was of First Nations ancestry.

This is significant for, as Basso (1996) reminds us, while place-making requires a site to project stories, it is in effect “a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of ‘what happened here’” (p. 6).

In Support of Collaborative Museum Practices

The making of *A Journey into Time Immemorial* provides an inspiring example of how agency might play itself out when First Nations peoples use digital technology to independently and collaboratively design their own exhibit,

as explained in this interview with the production manager:

The project was designed as a collaboration between the Director and staff of the Fraser Valley’s Xá:ytem Longhouse Interpretive Centre in Mission and the Simon Fraser University Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology in Burnaby, two municipalities located in British Columbia, Canada. It developed over time, out of conversations between myself, as Curator of the SFU Museum, [Dr. Barbara Winter, the production manager of A Journey into Time Immemorial] and Dr. Linnea Battell, the Director of the Xá:ytem Longhouse.

Content was written and designed by a team comprised of Stó:lō and other First Nations researchers and SFU students and alumni, many of whom have First Nations ancestry. The visual design of the project was created by the Media Design team, which was made up of Xá:ytem staff and SFU graphic artists and videographers. The process was collaborative, with the SFU members of the team providing the programming expertise, and the Xá:ytem members setting criteria for look and feel. The site was vetted by Dr. Battell at several stages during construction.

In terms of the information architecture, the information categories and content were defined by the Xá:ytem staff, with writing done by First Nations SFU students. The written text was edited, vetted, and approved by both Dr. Battell and project research staff.

Xá:ytem organized interviewees with the elders and did the interviewing, creating the video content. The relationships between the data sets and the pathway links through the site were defined by Dr. Battell and carried out by the programming staff. (B. Winter, personal communication, 16 November 2011)

Conclusion

To conclude, the project writ large demonstrates that the rollout of new media technologies of representation can be effectively applied to support tangible and intangible heritage exhibitions that prioritize and enable self-expressions of identity. Easy access to digital tools and to what Castells (2010) has called the “space of flows” (i.e. information networks) allowed First Nations partners to create a direct relationship between the general public and themselves, and thus become their own “cultural connectors” (p. 434), leaving behind older models of museum practices and experiences catering only to the voice of the elite.

This essay has analyzed aspects of the online exhibition, *A Journey into Time Immemorial*, to explore the ways in which emerging technologies might offer new ontological paradigms that support place-making in the Digital Age. The analysis is based on the assumption that online environments are distinct settings that offer alternative ways of curating exhibitions and presenting collections of cultural artifacts. As this paper demonstrated, this cyber museum also accommodated the sharing of traditional knowledge: it is exciting to think that new possibilities still lie ahead.

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Author Biography

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