**Chapter I, Pt 1: “Masterpieces Up Close”**

To unpack visual components of “Masterpieces Up Close” and better understand the aesthetic ideology the museum has put into it, let us look at what a visitor sees when they enter the virtual exhibition space. When the webpage has loaded, one is presented with a simple interface prompting them to choose whether they want to take a look around or participate in the Key Challenge. After choosing either option, the visitor sees a full-screen 15-second video that “looks around” the space and plays ambient music in the background. Thanks to this stylistic choice, we immediately learn that the experience happens in a 360-rendered space and are immediately encouraged to look around when it loads.

If we have not committed to playing the key game, we find ourselves at the entrance to the gallery, placed in such a way that we can already see “The Night Watch” in the distance, as well as get an impression of architecture of the museum together with the overall structure of the gallery. There are three different ways of navigating the gallery: a cursor that affords holding and dragging to see around oneself (accurately recreating an experience of looking around the physical gallery), an arrow on the floor that allows to jump forward (not trying to recreate smoothness of walking but still implementing the navigation in 3D space), and arrows in the screen space that allow to move in all directions and reset the rotation back to default. The order I have decided to list these features in is not accidental, since they start from most “native” to the actual museum experience to the most special to that of a virtual space. It seems that the Rijksmuseum was trying to give the user an option of navigating around in patterns that are both familiar to digitally-adept users (the latter UI components) as well as attempting to add haptics and a sense of immersion into the space.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In order to zoom in on any artwork, the user needs to click on a sign that says its name; without that, they would only be able to see it in the “pixelated” distance. As we click on “Experience The Night Watch” button, we “jump” to the room with the artwork. The key here is that the museum has made a curatorial decision to combine hyper-accurate (to the physical space) with hyper-digitalized aspects that would never be possible in a museum. For instance, when we are presented with The Night Watch, we are actually blocked from a good view by a glass cage that surrounds it; the cage was installed in 2019 to conduct a restoration process and certainly prevents the in-person museum visitor from having an intimate experience with the painting as it obstructs the view and reflects the light. However, the user is *immediately* presented with an alternative: click on a button to get a high-fidelity close-up of the painting. This seems like a very conscious effort by the museum to juxtapose its own streams of mediation and emphasize the difference in access when an artwork is being rendered digitally. Other than the glass cage, there are other examples of significant parts of the environments that we can explore (and then disable), such as high-quality renditions of columns, statues and frescos of the Gallery of Honor as well as other artworks that fall into sight as we are observing The Night Watch (e.g. Militia Company of District VIII). This narrative point is emphasized in the Key Challenge part of the experience where we get asked two questions about The Night Watch. The first one is about Rembrandt’s astrological sign, which the visitor is able to determine if they rotate the 3D space around[[2]](#footnote-2) and notice that museum walls in the room have Rembrandt’s short biography, including date and place of birth, written on them. The second question, however, requires the visitor to click on the high-quality rendition of the artwork since it asks to find Amsterdam’s coat of arms, thus making us attentively explore the smallest details of Rembrandt’s brushwork.

If we leave the game mode and click to explore the painting, the augmentation is expanded: a background sound is played in the background and multiple buttons appear as audio guide options, i.e. “Highlights tour”, “Present day”, “Composition”, etc., essentially covering the entire range of potential interests or levels of expertise. Every button brings the user to a completely distinct part of the audio guide narration, thus encouraging non-linear exploration. This is important for two reasons: firstly, with the volume of information to be learned about just one painting, the user does not feel the need to consume all the information at once. Secondly, the museum opens up a lot of space for unintentional augmentation as the user keeps coming back to the same artwork, and with different environments surrounding them, new connections and observations can be made.[[3]](#footnote-3) The audio guide is not just non-linear, its clickable points are also placed around the artwork based on their semantics. For instance, in the “Composition” segment, the “Light” and “Depth” options are placed next to the most notable uses of light and depth in the painting. This way, Rijksmuseum takes advantage of something that would be impossible in the physical museum, reimagining the medium of an audio guide and positioning it in more spatial terms. This is one of the examples where we see a more direct application of Benjamin’s constellations, comprehending how different aspects of painting’s history and meaning can be juxtaposed to one another.

As we are listening to the audio guide, we see the museum embedding multimedia and empathizing narrative points with cinematic montage. Through pinpointing obvious as well as complex juxtapositions, all of Rijksmuseum’s curatorial decisions in this part of the experience seem to purposefully establish a certain ethos around The Night Watch. It can be summarized by three main ideas: interactions of internal elements, dramaturgy, and relationships the artwork has with its environment and context. Some of the recognizable elements of montage are: zooming in and out, fading colors in and out to highlight a certain figure or to narrow and expand the number of focal points; rapidly shifting between two or more parts of the painting, superimposing external images or geometrical elements to show patterns of composition and lighting; jump cuts between remote parts of the painting (tbc). How do these montages advance the narrative of Rembrandt’s and a spectator’s attention to detail? When the audio guide talks about symbolism of how Captain Cocq, the central figure of the ensemble, was portrayed, it shifts from his own costume (where we expect symbolism to be found) to a shadow of his arm. The shadow is pointing at a place on another man’s suit where we can notice Amsterdam’s coat of arms, an important element to establish the identity of the group portrayed. This would be impossible to pinpoint for a visitor outside of a high-quality digitized environment. Besides, the museum establishes an expectation of where a secret is meant to be found, and then subverts it by revealing/cinematically shifting to an alternative location of an answer to the question posed. This way, they demonstrate the viewer the way they expect them to interact with their art, i.e. looking closely and searching for the “secrets”, which is how the museum expects to attract more attention to their objects.

Our ever-shifting view of the painting gets intertwined with its innate dramaturgy and helps the museum attract our attention to the dynamics of the still image. This emphasis on its inherent to Baroque theatricality is another use of augmentation to help the visitor find ways to relate aspects of a 17th painting to their personal interests. With the quote from the guide, “Seconds later, it would’ve been a completely different painting,” (“Highlights Tour”, “Movement”, [timestamp]) – and a shifting point of focus, the museum introduces a way to think about the artwork as a real-life occurrence, or a cinematic shot anyone can build their narrative upon.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Even within one painting’s audio guide narration, we can see constellations of meanings it attempts to form with external media sources. Examples of such sources include historical photography of The Night Watch, other artwork it can be compared to, or pop culture it has influenced. For instance, in the “History” part of the Highlights tour, we are shown a photograph of the part that was damaged by acid during an attack on the painting. The photograph is overlaid on top of the recovered version of The Night Watch as it looks today, generating some shock value based on how bad it had looked before the restoration efforts. In a similar manner, as the guide talks about the popularity outside of museum walls, we are shown a spectrum of images from a Dutch football team posing as the militia to a Duck Tales comic special edition cover. In this part, the approach seems to echo the one suggested by Nelson Goodman: “make the works work” by letting the visitor “take” the artwork as far outside of museum walls as they wish. Whether it is finding an inspiration for one’s own photographic creations, watching a Netflix show where the painting is being discussed (and thus learning even more about it), or forming an emotional connection with it because of nostalgia for one’s favorite childhood cartoon, the museum opens as many doors as possible to connect to their visitors’ broad range of interests. It could be argued that as this approach demonstrates, Rijksmuseum not only does not resist unintentional augmentation, it fully embraces the ideology of their artworks (and their surrounding media) existing far outside of their own sake and delivering external experience, as Bautista wrote (10). In this case, we see the museum’s awareness of the positioning of “Masterpieces Up Close”: it is interacted with exclusively on the web, within a browser where finding external information is much easier than any other existing museum information, technical or analog. Therefore, the rapid overlay of all kinds of content as the narration progresses seems to be encouraging the user clicking away from Rijksmuseum’s website and allow contextual juxtapositions happen unintentionally as they venture away from the content museum controls to the one they do not.

Conclusion: Juxtapositions within juxtapositions

**Chapter 2: Where physical space meets the website**

**Part 2.1, The place and space of museum websites**

There are many parts of “Masterpieces Up Close” that drastically reimagine the interactions the user-visitor has with the masterpieces. However, one aspect of museum experience remains intact: no part of the visual aesthetic of its space is ultimately left out. *One* of the ways we get to see The Night Watch is as if we are standing in front of it in Amsterdam and witnessing it surrounded by both the 19th century architecture and a glass cage it was put in during the on-going restoration. What is all of this disappeared, and we faced artworks in a completely reimagined unfamiliar environment? Museum websites are an example of an artefact that was given a lot of attention by both museologists and digital media scholars as a mean of re-contextualizing objects outside of their physical space and characteristics. And while a lot of attention was dedicated to cataloguing and filtering aspects of the object representation process, there seems to be a gap in analysis of these digitalization efforts in terms of recreating/reimagining museum experience from the visitor’s perspective. Instead, present discussions focus on the efficiency of museum websites from a very utilitarian perspective, i.e. how much easier they make access to a certain object or filtering groups of objects. And while this is definitely important in terms of expanding access to wider audiences as well as easing research processes for scholars, it is hard to imagine that this kind of augmentation would have a great appeal to audiences who do not have a lot of interest in art to begin with. The range of digital-only augmented museum experiences suggests that museums’ own treatment of their websites as entity secondary to their existence which is meant primarily for documentation purposes is largely to blame. On top of that, what certainly does not help is the prominence of “standard” websites in the modern web and reliance on standard templates and CMSs (Content Management Systems)[[5]](#footnote-5), especially with museums’ limited budget and attention to new media. Most of these templates do not allow for experiential, museum-unique elements, and the notable exceptions that exist seem to have had an entirely different approach to the development process. An example of such exception is a project that takes place on the website of the Whitney Museum of American Art, “Sunrise/Sunset” and makes commissioned art projects appear on every page of the site only at the sunrise or sunset.

This web experience “augments” one of the inseparable aspects of both a museum-going and website-visiting experience – time. Whitney is putting into question our expectations of timing and pacing when it comes to observing artworks in a museum.[[6]](#footnote-6) For instance, if it is an in-person visit, while it is usually not attached to a particular time of the day, there is a standard amount of time visitors spend in front of each object (a 2016 study concluded that for most, this time is around 29 seconds per artwork) (Kaplan).[[7]](#footnote-7) If it is a web museum catalogue, its distinction and appeal usually come from ubiquitous access for no particular limited amount of time. On the other hand, when Whitney makes the visitor be on a website at a very particular moment during the day, it recreates the temporality of access and controls when and how artworks are being perceived. This way, “Sunrise/Sunset” simultaneously takes away certain assumptions from both kinds of interaction with museum’s content while also drawing upon from both of them. Confirming this observation, the museum’s website says that the core of the idea was to “disrupt, replace, or engage with the museum website as an information environment” (“Sunrise/Sunset”, whitney.org). [Potentially write more]

**Part 2.2, “The Museum of the World”**

What happens when the hyperrealism of “Masterpieces Up Close” meets the reimagined web conventions of “Sunrise/Sunset” while maintaining the augmentation-centric approach? This intersection seems to have heavily inspired the British Museum’s collaboration with the Google Cultural Institute (now “Google Arts and Culture”) on “The Museum of the World” interactive experience.

The museum establishes its central concept right away visually: the loading screen shows a multitude of colorful circles (that will represent historical in the actual interface) which “explode” and start forming constellations. With a clear visual analogy to celestial bodies and a tagline “History connected”, it would be natural to assume that the makers referred to Benjamin’s “The Arcades Project” findings. Even if this is not the case, I believe that Benjamin’s constellations theory will be a great asset to explore the layers of augmentation in the British Museum’s curatorial process. Furthermore, examining this project will help me demonstrate implications of the constellation/juxtaposition theory for museum design thinking. [Write out main points about to be made]

As the graphics render, we are faced with a grey cosmic-looking space and a 3D timeline. On the X-axis, we see five geographic origins of objects: Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania, each marked with their own color. All objects that belong to a region are denoted by small 3D spheres the color of that region and lay on the corresponding parts of the axis. The Y-axis is used for mostly decorative purposes to spread out spheres vertically in case there is a big cluster, since the user’s ability to see these clusters is actually quite important to the ideology of this reimagined space. By being able to visually gage [potentially talk about visualizing the number of objects from a certain time/place]. The Z-axis denotes the main timeline from 2,000,000 B.C. to 2,000 A.D. and situates the aforementioned object-spheres accordingly. The navigation of the content lays along the Z-axis and allows us to travel among all the objects of all time periods. It would be relevant to point out that similar to “Masterpieces Up Close”, we are presented with a number of ways to move through the space. The first option is scrolling the timeline back-and-forth, which affords the quickest progression through time and imitates an interaction that we would be used to from a more familiar medium of a museum website. However, since this feature essentially makes the objects and the timeline advance in our direction in a spaceship-like quality, scrolling also conveys a lot of dynamics of a quick physical movement through space. Just as in the Rijksmuseum’s UI solution, there is also an option to navigate the timeline with front and back arrows which is more convenient for a slow and more controlled exploration of the environment. An additional navigation feature that we did not see in “Masterpieces Up Close” is a filter on the right that lets us choose a category of objects we want to explore: “Art and design”, “Living and dying”, “Power and identity”, “Religion and belief”, “Trade and conflict”. [Possibly mention how this interacts with an idea of website filters].

The way we are offered to explore the objects is inherently tied up with augmentation. Before we click on an object, we do not get to have a visual impression of it, nor do we possess a lot of information about it. Outside of the time period it belongs to, its place of origin, and its type (only if we are using the aforementioned filters), the object presents itself to us as a colorful sphere with no scale or context. This is a stark contrast to the Rijksmuseum’s model where they expect the user to gain interest for one of the artworks based on either visual appeal or recognition, the way it would likely happen during an in-person museum visit. Here, however,

Masterpieces Up Close observations:

* Sound at the beginning
* Imitating the movement of the head
* (potentially include) In the intro video, the lights get switched on to create an illusion that we are the only person in the exhibition and it is being opened just for us
  + Not sure if including that “we are the only person here” adds anything to the thesis
* **Narrative**
  + That of famous guests visiting
  + Taking it into the real world
  + Tying it up together (juxtapositions, juxtapositions, juxtapositions)
* Shortcuts such as a highlight tour

Key game-centric observations:

* Active exploration is encouraged by making you take a close look at each painting and find the right one

Potentially mention downsides?

* Doesn’t address too many of accessibility concerns

The British museum observations:

Unlike MuC that has multiple artworks but still clearly establishes priorities, hierarchy, doesn’t change size of the artworks, doesn’t change setting:

* Completely strips away sizes (lit review ref)
* Completely strips away positioning (more serendipity, less attention to one artwork, more to their network)
* Completely strips away surroundings (potentially talk about colonialist implications of 18th(?) century European architecture surrounding objects)

1. Introduction
2. Lit review
3. Part 1: Bird’s eye view of augmentation *and* existing digital museum artefacts
4. Part 2: Case study 1
5. Part 3: Case study 2 (+ websites)
6. Part 4: Short survey of bad examples
7. Conclusion

Introduction

* Establish definitions
  + Juxtaposition
  + Montage
    - The word **‘montage’** is rooted in the French language as a term to describe the connection of individual pieces, whether they be film, music or images, into a cohesive whole.
  + Augmentation
    - Justification of why a separate term needed for the digital iteration
    - Talk about how AR, VR, and other digital media contributed to that
  + Ideology
  + Affordance
* How it started, how it’s going (idea, how did I arrive here)
* Since there are many ways

Part 1

Bird’s eye view of augmentation *and* existing digital museum artefacts. Justification of choice.

Survey of bad examples:

* Why does it happen?

Criteria of a “good” experience:

* Reinvention of material presentation for the digital media
  + Not holding onto the spaciality, or conventions of presenting the material
* Critical augmentation/juxtapositions
* Unintentional augmentation + serendipity
* Narrative to tie this up together
* Balance of curated and affording free exploration
* Drawing upon both physical and digital experiences
  + I.e. evoking both ways of interaction in navigation

A different angle:

* What makes an online museum experience “worth visiting”/visitor-friendly?
* What makes an online museum experience conducive to the museum’s mission? What digital affordances such experiences utilize?
  + Controlling intentional augmentation but letting unintentional augmentation happen
  + Not trying to recreate the physical space, reimagining the architecture in a digital sense
  + Utilizing the affordance of more loose-linked architecture and presentation, allowing juxtapositions happen on their own
  + “Lived” vs. “observed” experience

(<https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2018/04/designing-tactile-experience/>)

* + Presence of the narrative – does it play role or not?
  + Unifying experience, appealing to commonly lived through situations; opportunity for museums to become less elitist
* Contrast to the previous approach of physical vs. virtual
* No need to interview
  + It isn’t important what they were *trying* to achieve, it is the visitorial perspective that is a complete deal-breaker
* Examples to illustrate either side:
  + Good:
    - Masterpieces Up Close (in biggest detail, obviously)
      * Recreates the physical space BUT takes advantage montages unavailable in the physical space
      * The game aspect as a presentation technique
        + I originally scoped this out but then realized that this is precisely the part that attracted me to this particular online experience and made it stand out
        + The game part also what makes the existence of a 3D model so much worth it, because it asks the user to pay attention to the tiniest details of paintings and the exhibition space
    - Whitney’s sunrise / sunset
      * Can be utilized in the website format as well, no need for some overtly expensive technical implementation
    - The Museum of the World <https://britishmuseum.withgoogle.com/>
      * Constellations!!!
    - New digital aura built on augmentation and juxtapositions?
      * Emphasis on experience rather than straightforward learning
    - Potentially Met Unframed (need to take a closer look)
  + “Bad”:
    - Regular presentation/slides flow

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/sophie-taeuber-arp/swKioHNhYqZoLw>

* + - * Doesn’t fulfil the spatial experience while trying to giving the same amount of info if not more
    - Trying to recreate the full space in 3D

<https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/mauritshuis>

* + - * Very resource-demanding but awkward

1. Want to reference this here: <https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2018/04/designing-tactile-experience/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Include the screenshots? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Potentially reference the Getty podcast with T.J. Clark here (<https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/audio-t-j-clark-on-poussin/>) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Potentially expand this part further [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (Not sure if this is a good source to cite) <https://review42.com/resources/cms-market-statistics/#:~:text=43.6%25%20of%20all%20websites%20use%20a%20custom%2Dmade%20CMS.&text=Drupal%20powers%20about%201.8%25%20of%20the%20web>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Needs a source probably [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-long-people-spend-art-museums> (include into lit list) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)