

# STORY TELLING AND RIDDLE GAMES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ENQUIRY ABOUT MUSEUM GUIDED TOURS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the initial phase of a field study, conducted to study social interaction mediated through objects as a learning practice in museums. The guided tour (highly regarded by museum staff) was selected as a starting point to understand how interaction and learning are entangled between guides and young visitors in relation to the exhibition content. Drawing on anthropological studies about play and object mediated interaction in different contexts, the paper argues that the guided tour is a form of objects-mediated interaction itself, where a narrative is being created through play. Museum artefacts can then be interpreted as boundary objects, creating transition zones among the participants' different competences and needs.

These data will also be used to experiment with the creation of new boundary objects together with a group of 9-10 years old children.

## INTRODUCTION

Learning and play are at the moment quite popular topics, several researchers are studying how to create an engaging learning experience for children starting from different approaches. According to Prensky it is vital to consider that nowadays children may be very different from adults, as early exposition to digital technologies have radically altered their way of learning (Prensky 2003). Hence he suggests to exploit in learning, the motivation children have in playing computer games, by designing special digital games for this purpose (Prensky 2003).

At the same time museums are undergoing a significant change, as traditionally they focused on collection and preservation of artefacts, nowadays they are also concerned about the experience they offer to their visitors, in terms of knowledge and engagement (Crowley and Jacobs in press, Fleming 2005). They seem especially worried about school children, as they are often dragged to museums by adults (parents or teachers), who have an idea about what they should get from the visit, but the children may not have any personal interest in museums. Being interested in investigating objects-mediated interaction as a

learning tool, the museum seemed a particularly promising context as the knowledge they want to convey is quite complex and strictly related to the objects they display. Moreover, many studies have been conducted on the subject from different perspectives. Some researchers like Crowley are even questioning the validity of the museum as a learning context (Crowley and Jacobs in press). Others are instead trying new interactive designs to enhance learning and engagement in museums (Dindler and Iversen 2009; Pierroux and Kaptelinin 2007).

Drawing on existing literature and initial data collected during my field study, I will analyse the guided tour as a form of objects-mediated interaction from the perspective of museum staff, who considers it as a valid learning tool to access the knowledge embodied in the exhibition content.

In the next two sections, I will introduce related research and the context of Ribe museum, together with data from the field study conducted so far. In the third section a qualitative analysis of the guided tour is proposed, in order to build a theoretical framework to support my ongoing research project, based on the notion of story telling and knowledge games formulated by Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1950). Afterwards the guided tour is analysed as interaction mediated through physical objects



Figure 1: Children at the permanent exhibition.

(archaeological artefacts, interactive installations, and explicative signs), focusing on the role of these objects; finally conclusions and future works are presented.

### LEARNING AND MUSEUM STUDIES

At the moment many interesting studies have been conducted on the topic of playful learning and museums. Many of these studies seem to accept, sometimes just implicitly, Prensky's stance that children nowadays are "digital natives", as they were exposed to digital technologies since a very early age, and this fact has deep implications on their way of learning (Prensky 2003). He in fact claims that by playing video games and interactive digital media children have more facility to access information quickly and without guidance, learning by doing on an independent basis (Prensky 2003). Interestingly a museum guided tour follows the opposite pattern, it is based on step by step guided access to information, where kids are supposed to listen more than doing.

Many researchers are in fact experimenting with digital technologies to enhance the museum experience through learning-playful activities (Pierroux and Kaptelinin 2007), and by drawing parallels between present and past (Dindler and Iversen 2009).

Other researchers are studying the shifting role of museum from a learn-

ing perspective, for example by evaluating the impact of government initiatives on learning in the museum (Hooper-Greenhill et al. 2004). An interesting case is provided by Crowley and Jacobs, who actually questions the museum as a learning context. According to their data, analysis of family conversations in museums revealed that children eventually learn before going to the museum. But it still provides a valuable contribution to their learning, allowing them to see the real "things" and providing them an arena to perform with their parents (Crowley and Jacobs in press).

Similar issues emerged several times while conducting my field study, museum staff seems very concerned about what children gain from museum visit and they were very interested in my project. Despite the many interesting technological applications provided by researchers, the museums I have visited in Denmark adopt low-tech interactive settings, offering guided tours, cabinets with hidden artefacts, reproductions of clothes, weapons, and toys to play with, as in Ribe, the context of my field study. I found this situation very interesting, hence I have started my field study by trying to analyse the museum experience from their perspective and the values behind it. So far it seems as the guides think that it is their performance in making the exhibition more engaging, so that the chil-

dren could learn about artefacts, their relations with the culture who created them and the values they embody.

### ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY: THE VIKING MUSEUM IN RIBE

The enquiry proposed in this paper represents the first step toward a theoretical investigation of object-mediated interaction as a learning social practice. My starting point is to create an understanding of learning-social practice in museums and create new opportunities for enhancing this learning practice, so to examine it more in depth. This enquiry is conducted in cooperation with the Viking museum in Ribe. This museum, despite the small size of its collection, has a special meaning for Viking Age history, Ribe is in fact the oldest town in Denmark. The town started as an international seasonal market place, it belonged in fact to the big circuit of Scandinavian markets, including sites like Birka in Sweden, Hedeby in Germany, and Kaupang in Norway (Graham-Campbell and Valor 2007). Since the 8th century there is evidence of a systematic organization of the market place under King Godfred, who started to set physical boundaries to delimit lots of land to be rented to merchants, who had consequently to pay taxes to the king. Furthermore, in the 9th century Ribe became officially a town, under the kingdom of Harald Bluetooth, who had fortification walls built around the settlement.

The museum is quite active in proposing new exhibitions, but also conferences and publications. Particularly interesting from the perspective of my research are *Rolf and Christine and Why Ribe*<sup>1</sup>. The first exhibition was created a few years ago to provide a vivid picture of childhood during the Middle Ages to children visiting the museum. The exhibitions display tangible reconstructions of toys, clothing, weapons, kitchen wear, and even a toilet with which children can freely play. *Why Ribe* has started in summer 2010 for the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary from the town foundation. The aim of the exhibition is to convey notions related to the historical reconstruction process, through free interaction in a new "hands on" space (as explained by the director of the museum). This exhibi-

tion will run for three years and my project will be run at the museum in connection to it.

A part from these two exhibitions, the rest of the museum offers more traditional settings, and is organized in rooms with glass display cabinets showing artefacts, supported by textual descriptions, maps or scale models (Fig. 1). Individual visitors can browse the exposition as they prefer, but groups usually are guided through it in a specific order by museum guides.'

#### INITIAL DATA COLLECTION

At the moment my field study is at its initial stage, so far I have conducted 5 semi-structured situated interviews and one ethnographic observation of a guided tour, with two classes of children around 10 years old. The first interview I have conducted was in December 2009 with the director and the head of the museology division of South-West Jutland Museums, an institution responsible for the administration of several local museums, including Ribe. Afterwards I have interviewed the coordinator of guided tours and two guides.

Following the method of situated interviews (Yliriksi and Buur 2007), I interviewed museum personnel in their working context. However, as a guided tour is a performance, it seemed impossible to interview guides during a tour without spoiling it. Hence I started with a participant observation, filming what was going on, then I formulated a focus for the questions based on reflections on the video material. The interviews started in the museum café, that is often used as a coffee room by the staff. I asked them general information about their job, what they want to convey the children and how they do that through examples. Afterwards I invited the guides to stage a tour for me, so that I could ask them questions while they showed me what they usually do. Each interview took around one hour and they were all video-recorded to support further analysis.

#### TELLING "THE TRUTH", MUSEUM DIRECTOR AND MUSEOLOGIST

The initial interview with the director and the head museologist revealed that the context of South-West Jutland Museums is quite active, specifically in organising new activities and exhibitions. All these initiatives are motivat-



Figure 2: Teachers and children looking at a cow stool, trying to guess what it is.

ed by their concern particularly about children's experience of the museum and its learning implications. This last aspect emerged through the interview as particularly important and was behind the conceptualisation of the new exhibition *Why Ribe*.

The traditional assumption behind museal exhibitions, according to the director and head of the museologist, is that the scientific personnel knows "the truth!". The permanent exhibition (Fig. 1), they say, is based on this assumption and it represents an opportunity to share this knowledge with the public. They intend instead to create an awareness about the actual uncertainty related to the process of historical reconstruction. Hence the assumption behind the new temporary exhibition, *Why Ribe*, is that historians and archaeologists do not really know the truth they can only theorise through an uncertain, tentative process.

#### TELLING A GOOD STORY, GUIDES AND TOURS COORDINATOR

Interviews with 2 guides and the guided tours coordinator revealed that from their perspective the guided tour is the most effective way to acquire knowledge about the content of an exhibition. They claim that the exhibition is not intelligible enough in itself, so that visitors could gain meaningful knowledge just by looking at it, unless they are already knowledgeable in history, and according to them it is vital

that school children gets some guidance. This statement is particularly interesting as it expresses their perception of the guided tour as an important element of museum experience, and probably the reason for their desire to be guides.

Interestingly a clear common goal emerged from the interviews, they all would like to provide children with a "nice experience" under the form of "a good story", that could be memorable, fun, and educational. Moreover, according to one guide a good story should hopefully have the effect to elicit a certain curiosity in the children, so that they may become inquisitive about the story of their family and so of their own identity.

According to the guide I followed in the tour, a man around 60 years old who was once a school teacher, to provide a good story it is better to present only a few interesting objects. He usually avoids to show maps or coins, which do not seem appealing to the kids. He prefers instead to engage with everyday life artefacts, like pottery or clothes, and a small reconstruction of the original market place.

The second guide I have interviewed is a woman also around 60 years old, with a background in management and a passion for history. She is also selective about objects, but she believes that a good story has to draw meaningful parallels with the present.



Figure 3: Feedback installation, *Why Ribe*.

Hence she would show coins, to tell the children that craftsmen had to change their money if they wanted to trade in Ribe, like we still do nowadays when travelling abroad.

Two artefacts from the Viking Age seem particularly popular, a smooth bone used as a skating blade and a cow stool, which has been transmuted through time into something similar to a grey round rock (Fig. 2). The curators feel also that these two objects are special, hence they are preserved into an open cabinet, to be available to the visitors.

Furthermore, to avoid that the children may “fall asleep” the guides try to involve the children by asking questions about recognising a particular artefact. For example during the guided tour, the guide showed the skating bone and asked “what do you think it is?”, since none was able to answer, he provided a meaningful cue by singing a song and placing the bone under his foot, then they all understood that it was a skating blade. Another way would be to ask the children to identify a sword, or other object, among the fragments displayed.

However, as it emerged during interviews and the observation I did, each group and each individual has different needs. Some children are in fact eager to participate, often raising their hands to answer the questions; other children may be too shy or not interested in talking. In that case, the guides may try to directly ask to the shy children to answer or to “look at what they

are looking at”, to start a new more interesting story, but of course this issue has no simple solution.

In conclusion museum staff seems genuinely interested in communicating to their younger visitors, but it seems as strategies to collect their feedback may be improved. An attempt of feedback collection was made for the new exhibition, by inviting visitors to insert coloured stones in an installation with three transparent plastic pipes (Fig. 3), to indicate what part of the exhibition had to be improved, as in a kind of a tangible bar chart. But when I participated to the tour, the guide did not stop in that area and the children just ignored it.

## DISCUSSION

Analysis of data collected through interviews and video recordings, provided an initial picture of the guided tour from the perspective of museum staff. Interesting elements seem to emerge, defining the guided tour as a form of an objects-mediated interaction, that unfolds as story telling and riddle games, entangled with objects as starting point and illustration for the story being told.

In the next subsections I will discuss this perspective, starting from the emerging discourse and the quality of interaction, and then I will analyse the role of objects.

### STORY TELLING AND RIDDLE GAMES

Telling a good story seems to be the guides’ goal, in terms of providing a nice experience, but analysing the data available the articulation of the story assumes the form of a complex verbal-physical interaction. This story is in fact willingly turned into a dialogue with the children, in this way it seems as the story is intended to be built by the cooperation of guides and children. Furthermore, the construction of this dialogue has an improvisational nature in the terms expressed by Ingold and Hallam, so that the participants have to be responsive to each other in order to build the story (Ingold and Hallam 2008). This certainly requires an effort from both sides, for example as said by the guide in saying that it is important to follow the children’s look, to discover what they are interested into. An interesting implica-

tion regards the participants’ emerging roles, the guides act as narrators who perform a learnt script each time for their listeners, the children. The role of the listener, analysing the interviews and the observation, is in fact an active role deeply affecting the interaction process (Bakhtin 1989, Suchman 1987). The children can also communicate through non-verbal hints, such as directing their look somewhere else or to a certain object (an information that the guides attempt to use), they raise their hands to answer, they can approach the guide or the object under examination, but they may also go away. If the guides can make good use of all these hints, then they should be able to reshape their narrative according to the children’s needs, even if not verbally expressed. As a consequence, further observations should show that the story being created is an original event each time (Ingold and Hallam 2008), even if based on the same objects.

Furthermore, the act of asking questions introduces an element of riddle game, that deeply affects the story telling process. Riddle games according to Huizinga are one of the oldest forms of games reported both by mythological and poetic sources. They are also a vital element in social interaction, since they adapt to all sorts of literary and rhythmical patterns of discourse (Huizinga 1950). Furthermore, riddle games were originally a form of sacred play, hence they are said to be positioned in between seriousness and play. But as soon as civilisation progressed riddle games lost their duality, branching into mystic philosophy and pure recreation (Huizinga 1950). My impression is that the riddle game is perceived by guides as significantly contributing to the emergence of their story. They in fact use riddle games instrumentally to keep the attention of the children alive and elicit a learning process, acknowledging the game communicational and recreational value. In this sense during guided tours riddle games re-compose their duality of play and seriousness, as the museum visit is essentially a serious matter, but the play element is introduced to make it more engaging.

### THE ROLE OF THE OBJECTS

The main focus of a museum exhibition are objects: archaeological artefacts,

explicative signs providing information about them, tangible installations providing contextual information about archaeological objects and entertainment for children. In this sense the guided tour can be analysed from the perspective of an objects-mediated interaction (Henare 2007), where the objects represent the culture and time in which they were created and used. On a different level, these objects also embody decisions and knowledge of historians and curators. Furthermore, they contribute significantly in shaping the interaction occurring during the tour, as they require physical proximity to be explained and seen. As a consequence a complex form of verbal and physical interplay emerges. The demand for physical proximity can create an opportunity for communication bringing guides and visitors closer. The guide communicates where to go and where to stop, turning toward the children, pointing at the object they want to talk about and starting their story. On the other hand, the guide can actively try to spot objects children are looking at, in order to re-shape the story. In this case the object works as a sort of unintentional signal from children to guides, who have to interpret it in order to effectively communicate with the children. However, in some conditions the need for proximity can hinder communication: for instance in a large audience the most distant visitors could feel marginalised. In such cases, like during my observation, the children left behind went around to see other things or chat with each other. Actual dynamics of a group of visitors, whether close or distant from the guide, might be more rich or complex than they appear at this stage. Therefore, it might be necessary to dedicate them further observations and reflections.

Objects can also be starting points and tangible illustrations for the story, as it happened when the guide invited the children to seat inside the reconstruction of a Viking ship, to tell them a story about the raids. He also added that a travel to the British Islands lasted around 10 days, without a roof or a proper toilet, and with scarcity of fresh water, showing a reconstruction of the small barrel in which the water was kept. Through this story he provided a



Figure 4: Guide telling about travelling at sea as a Viking.

temporal frame to better contextualise how the ship-object was lived while travelling at sea (Fig. 4).

Archaeological artefacts are the hardest to approach, as they are displayed behind glass and are often fragments of actual everyday objects, so alienated from their context and transmuted through time, that they become impossible to recognise. These artefacts also embody notions related to the culture responsible for their creation, that are difficult to grasp just by looking at them. Hence the belief of the museum staff, that guided tours are fundamental to enable the visitors to gain some actual knowledge.

Furthermore, museum objects shape interaction and contribute to knowledge sharing (or are supposed to) among visitors, guides, curators, and historians, in so functioning as *boundary objects*. By boundary objects I refer to the notion formalised in the social sciences to study organizational context, as physical or conceptual objects used to facilitate cooperation and communication among individuals with different backgrounds and values, engaged in the same activity. This communication is made possible through the plasticity of boundary objects, in the sense that the meaning they embodied is conveyed “across sites”, through individual interpretations. This means that abstract concepts, embodied into boundary objects, can

be more easily approached by different people from their own perspective, through the emergence of “trading zones” of interaction, which allow for a negotiation of meaning (Levina 2005, Star and Griesemer 1989). Adopting this perspective, the narrative emerging during the guided tour represents a trading zone enabling exchange of knowledge among different people, with different values and competences.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORKS

The discussion presented in this paper is a first step toward an understanding of social interaction mediated through objects as a learning-social practice in museums, aimed at conveying abstract knowledge. The starting point for my project is represented by the guided tour, as it is an objects-mediated interaction and it is considered by museum staff as the best way to convey knowledge to the visitors.

At this stage I tried to analyse the guided tour from the perspective of museum staff, what are the positive values they see in it and why. According to the data collected so far, curators and guides are very concerned with the experience they provide to their visitors, especially school children. Hence they are regularly experimenting with new exhibitions and new interactive settings, so to tell children a “good story”, that could elicit a process of learning.

Interestingly the story is not just told and listened, the guides try in fact to involve the children in contributing to the story, constantly asking them questions about the artefacts as in a riddle game. Through this game dynamics the children assume the role of active listeners, contributing to the story telling through verbal and non verbal interaction. However, the guides are conducting the process, selecting objects and performing for the children. Drawing on literature about objects-mediated interaction in anthropology and in organisational practice, the role of the objects is analysed in relation to the way they contribute to the shaping of interaction and the learning process. Such objects can be interpreted as boundary objects, creating transition zones among the competences and the needs of the participants involved in the guided tour, facilitating the sharing of knowledge.

At this stage of my project there are still many open questions, the next step will be to test this representation of the guided tour, from the children's perspective. Furthermore, I will cooperate closely with a group of children, we will visit the exhibition and experiment with a new set of boundary objects. Thus new data and reflections should allow me to gain new knowledge about objects-mediated social interaction as a learning tool.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Original Danish title is *Hvorfor Ribe*.

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