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Playing with the History

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Fig. 1.

Greensboro class
learning about
typewriters.

As you entered Connection Point, the Greensboro History Museum's new gallery, you could hear the loud clickity-clack of typewriter keys. The flapping noise let you know without looking that the paper wasn't behind the bar. A young visitor, who had been proudly typing with great speed, questioned a nearby adult, "How do you print it out?"

It was fun for the teenager and even more fun for the adult, a stranger, who laughed and showed her how to take the paper out. They shared a moment of exploration and discovery, sensory stimulation and sensory recall, a new experience and a nostalgic memory – a connection (fig. 1).

Connection Point: A Space for Adults to Play

Connection Point is our new, 860-square-foot space, developed by staff of the Greensboro History Museum. The space evolved from an initial "history lab" concept, with a focus on interactives that helped visitors think like a curator, to one that encouraged adult play, with a goal that visitors could come back every week and experience something new. We incorporate differing learning styles and define Connection Point as a tinker-space focusing on embodied play with physical interactions of objects, as well as virtual reality; a thinker-space, where visitors play with mind experiments and ideas; and a sharing-space, where family and strangers connect while playing. In this space we literally invite people to have fun.

The Greensboro History Museum (GHM), an AAM-accredited Smithsonian Affiliate, is a public/private partnership of the City of Greensboro, North Carolina, and Greensboro History Museum Inc., the nonprofit which owns the museum collection and provides funds for exhibitions and programs. The museum's main building was formerly an early 1900s church, and the campus includes several historic houses and a cemetery. The museum's eight full-time and three part-time staff members are city employees and all contributed to the exhibit team, with the director and curator of exhibits taking the lead.

Museum director Carol Ghiorso Hart initiated and proposed the concept to a donor in 2014. Creating the physical space required downsizing and moving the museum shop, and the space didn't become available until 2018. During those interim years, the museum's staff met occasionally to discuss the goals of the project and their observations on how visitors experienced and perceived our museum. Hart served as curatorial team leader and did research, including meeting with the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History education staff to learn about the education research they undertaken for their new wing, which also had a history lab concept. Curator of Exhibitions Robert Harris art directed and designed the space and exhibit.

From the beginning, the museum team wanted Connection Point to be more than touchscreens and video interactives. The lead team of Hart and Harris drew inspiration

Fig. 2.

Designing the room.

from the approach of science and children's museums, which values play and fun as a way to educate. We had several goals. Some were educational, but a primary goal was to challenge a dominant cultural assumption that we heard expressed throughout our city while conducting outreach, non-visitor surveys, focus groups, and conversations with community members: that history museums are boring, filled with dusty old things.

Goals for Connection Point

Over the course of three years of conceptual planning for the space, our exhibit team committed to creating a space that would function in a few different ways and where exhibits could be created and updated on a small budget. These are the goals that guided us.

- Change public perception about what a history museum is by presenting a surprising, different kind of history museum space.
- Develop a space for teenagers, young adults, and seniors that was participatory, hands-on, and different from the interactive experiences anywhere else in the museum. We have many opportunities for visitors to push buttons to activate sounds, lift physical doors to reveal information and activate screens, but we were looking for something that would provide more sensory experience with active engagement. We were particularly interested in providing

opportunities for unstructured pathways, where the visitor built their own connections in an open environment that didn't prescribe what they read, touched, or saw next.

- Create an exhibition space people could return to weekly and have a fun, new experience – a place where social interaction and human connection was encouraged, challenging the notion that the history museum exhibit experience is largely a solitary endeavor. Our observations of visitor experiences, particularly how very differently students in groups working with our educators experienced our museum, led us to want more social interaction within the space for all our visitors.
- Reinforce the museum's core vision: to engage our communities by encouraging curiosity and critical and creative thinking while fostering a love for learning about history.

Harris designed a room that visually is a touch edgy – a space that is of today, yet has an historical vibe. It has a sense of mechanics to enforce the tinkering mission, looks completely different than any other space in the building, and immediately says “relax, have fun, and explore.” It is steampunk, bringing together mechanical and historical into an updated, somewhat irreverent visual style. The design evokes the industrial world of the late 1800s yet feels modern. It doesn't take itself too seriously. We used gears and



pipes as icons and created a lighting scheme that is warm, with accents of reds, yellows, and purples: a steam-punk palette described by author Jess Nevins as what happens when goths discover brown. We added unexpected touches inspired by a Victorian drawing room, the investigation style of fictional private detective Sherlock Holmes, and contemporary monitors. Artificial ferns, magnifying glasses, mechanical clocks, and peacock feathers provide additional touches of whimsy (fig. 2).

type-WRITE

Our first exhibition, *type-WRITE*, opened in May 2018. It was designed as a hands-on experience that included 12 typewriters

dating from 1930 to 1970 with which visitors could play. We mounted them on three small, round tables complete with typing paper, Wite-Out® (a white fluid used to cover mistakes), and carbon paper (used to duplicate pages in a time before photocopiers). The tables' circular shape, small size, and placement (along with chairs) were designed to encourage social interaction. To shape the thinking space by offering interpretation and depth, we layered graphics on the adjacent walls, using images and text to foster historical and social connections. We asked questions: How did the typewriter impact women's lives? How was it connected to the Civil War and weapon manufacturing? What was the typewriter's role in detective stories and film?



Fig. 3.

Typewriters for all ages.

We also provided related history books next to comfortable reading chairs.

When we hosted an event in March 2018 as part of the North Carolina Museum Council’s annual meeting – while we were still developing the space – we took the opportunity to test elements and get feedback from our fellow museum professionals. The typewriters were a huge hit, and many noted that they were fun (fig. 3). The most common comment we received as feedback was that there should be “more typewriters!” Plus, when a member of the Southeastern Museums Conference mentioned that a group of typewriters from the collection of Los Angeles philanthropist and civic leader Steve Soboroff would be coming soon from California and touring through several southeast universities, we were able to connect with the Southern Literary Trail. This connection allowed us to be the first of the venues to exhibit the artifacts, bringing a new and unanticipated element to the space.

While it wasn’t in our plan to have exhibit cases within the exhibition, the loan of historic typewriters had seemed too good an opportunity to pass up, and so we pivoted to take advantage of it. We redesigned an area to display in cases nine of Steve Soboroff’s amazing collection pieces, including machines owned by Nobel-prize winning author Ernest Hemingway; African American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou; and musician and writer John Lennon, for a huge unanticipated wow factor. We were also able to tie in a typewriter in our collection connected to Greensboro’s William Sydney

Visitors had permission to play with vintage typewriters similar to ones within the cases, giving them a tactile sense of history.

Porter (short story writer O. Henry), who wrote a story where a wonkily typed letter of the alphabet furnishes the ironic twist. The installation provided an unanticipated “itch factor” (as in, “I am itching to get my hands on that”) that we were able to scratch, which further enhanced the visitors’ fun. Visitors had permission to play with vintage typewriters similar to ones within the cases, giving them a tactile sense of history. The delight of visitors who were told, yes, of course you touch these, was apparent and the visitor surveys confirmed this.

Project Democracy 20/20

In December 2019, we opened a new installation in Connection Point as part of our multiyear Project Democracy 20/20 initiative exploring American democracy through exhibitions, public programs, and innovative community connections. It kicked off with the Smithsonian Institution’s Traveling Exhibition Services (SITES) exhibition, *American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith*, along with additional interpretation and artifacts layered throughout the



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Fig. 4.
 “Gerrymander
 Madness,”
 our virtual reality
 experience.

permanent exhibits of the museum. It will continue with our own *NC Democracy: We’re Working on It* exhibition, now scheduled to open in 2021.

This new iteration of Connection Point includes elements of the “Unity Square” section of the SITES exhibit. Unity Square has four participatory hands-on games that encourage debate and discussion. These are fully integrated into our exhibition, which also includes a typewriter station and a thinker-space display where visitors ponder the date and president associated with five historic scandal stories. You obtain the answers by putting on old-school red lens filter glasses to see the writing. We also have two stations for GHM’s “Gerrymander Madness: The Anti-Democracy Virtual Reality Game” (fig. 4).

Working with a technical team from CrossComm Inc., a software development firm, we developed a virtual reality game for use in the exhibition that accomplishes several of our goals. In “Gerrymander Madness: The Anti-Democracy Game,” players are tasked with carving out North Carolina’s congressional districts to choose the voters. It firmly is not dusty or old, appeals to younger adults, and reinforces through embodied play and movement a historic and currently relevant concept. Large monitors show the experience of the individual gamer, with an ongoing leaderboard that welcomes involvement from others in the space. Younger people often encourage those not familiar with the technology – some of whom had just helped them figure out the antique typewriters – providing social interactions among

generations and strangers rarely seen in the museum. People are coming back to try again or see if they were still on the leaderboard. The physical gameplay reinforces how the process of gerrymandering works. It also offers an active connection to the interpretative panels and district maps on the walls, which show how gerrymandering historically has affected our state's government.

Lessons Learned

One of the questions we asked on a written exit survey in March 2020 was, "In one word, how would you describe your experience in Connection Point?" The answers were largely along the lines of "thought-provoking,"

"enlightening," "innovative," and "awesome." We were expecting to see "fun," as that was the word people commonly used when talking to our gallery volunteers and staff; it was also a word that we frequently overheard. The results speak to how people's experiences are processed, and how people think they are supposed to feel and experience in a museum. One of the drawbacks to that kind of survey is that many responders will give you back what they think you want to hear. We are hoping to formalize a participant observational approach to data collecting and explore other methods of evaluation. What we do know is that people often said they would be coming back with a friend or family member.

Fig. 5.

Bridging generations with typewriters.



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That they needed more time. We observed young adults hanging out for hours with friends, and sometimes alone, writing on the oldest of the typewriters (fig. 5, p. 65).

In American culture, play and fun are sometimes seen in opposition to work and serious learning – a dichotomy that we have to work against. We see this especially in “Gerrymander Madness,” and we have to acknowledge that it is a fun game – but this is serious stuff of history, and important.

One of the challenges is to meet visitor expectations of the value of a visit to the history museum. We have found that many adults are not expecting to have fun, and

may even be a little put off by it if they do. If people expect to come to the museum for a quiet, contemplative meetup with the past so they can learn something new, and it is presented as play, the value of their visit may have been lessened. Parents who bring their children to our museum so they can feel good about doing something educational may perceive play as frivolous. We have learned that we have to not only present the experience but also help the visitor process how to feel about it. We have to signal, that yes, it is okay to have fun in a history museum, and then layer that experience with interpretive graphics or interactives to offer the deeper dive into historical content (fig. 6).

Fig. 6.

Guests trying to
decode our
historical scandals.

Connection Point, we've learned, works best when there is a facilitator. This can be labor intensive. Even though there were cues, signs, sanitizers, and chairs, people had to be prompted to touch because they felt they were breaking the rules. The games that were the most fun, prompting laughter or return visits, had significant social interaction. While the typewriter could be experienced solo, people displayed fun in groups.

We also found that people pretty much ignore the historical context and stories unless there is an educator in the room. Most go straight for the tables and leave without reading the interpretive panels. We need to work on how to better integrate or redesign the historic context that literally envelopes the visitors on the walls – or decide that we have done a good job even without that part.

Last, we've learned a benefit of our size and that interactive elements needn't be cost prohibitive. As a midsize museum, we have largely midsize crowds, so we have the option of designing exhibition spaces where people can be encouraged to hang out or have longer turns at an interactive element. We are a free museum, and we don't have a large budget, but the typewriter portion of the exhibition only required a small budget. The biggest challenge is keeping the typewriters in good repair. (The machines were such a highlight of *type-WRITE* that we included typewriters in Project Democracy 20/20, using them to show how you can write to your political representative.)

How Do We Reconnect as We Disconnect? Or, Moving Forward in a Time of Social Distancing

In August 2020, as we write this article, the gallery is silent. The museum has been closed since March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "Gerrymander Madness" is now only available virtually (for free on Steam and Oculus Rift). We don't yet know when visitors will be back, and we don't know how we will transform a space thoughtfully designed to maximize social engagement, interaction, and sensory experience. But we are working through what made the adult play space so fun and how we can translate its essentials to a new physical design.

We are coming up with ideas, though. Now, hands-are-off and social distancing is the new normal. Do we put plexiglass dividers bisecting and between the tables? Highlight all the sanitizer dispensers? Make everyone put on gloves? This can be figured out. Some of our exhibition goals will have a tougher time, because the smaller, intimate spaces are no longer acceptable, and visitors trust us to keep them safe. Governmental rules, scientific recommendations, and social practice will be continually changing. This is a challenge, but it also promises creative fun for our museum team.

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