Evoking Sherlock: Objects and Accessibility

Using technology to reach marginalized audiences

RNIB Introduction

Lindsey Holmes to deliver overview of SensingCulture Southeast

The Arthur Conan Doyle Collection Lancelyn Green Bequest

The Arthur Conan Doyle Collection is one of the largest Sherlockian and Conan Doyle related collections in the world, the life's work of noted Sherlockian scholar Richard Lancelyn Green. At Conan Doyle's small practice in Southsea, the young doctor gave life to Sherlock Holmes. As Portsmouth played such a significant role in the development of Conan Doyle's literary career we are proud to play host to this remarkable collection celebrating the famous resident writer.

The Issues Surrounding Accessibility

When we were approached to take part in the RNIB's project, we jumped at the opportunity. At the moment, the Collection resides in multiple locations; spaces with the means to preserve the various needs of the Collection. Visiting is therefore a limited quantity and creates an uneven stage for discussing accessibility. The only public facing exhibition is a semi-permanent display located in our City Museum, which during an earlier walkthrough with a local sight-impairment focus group revealed that we were woefully lacking. As a purpose-built museum is still out of reach, the offering of gaining support and experience from the RNIB meant that we could build and deliver some kind of an accessible exhibition and learn skills and techniques that can be applied to future projects (and spaces).

Once plugged into the RNIB's SensingCulture project, we began to explore ways of reaching visitors with vision impairments. For our Collection we have focused on audio description and handling objects.

The Problem of Replicas

Our original vision was to create replica objects. But this carried inherent problems. Namely: The collection is largely visual (books, photographs, newspaper clippings, etc.) and doesn't lend itself to obvious translations. The object side of the collection is predominantly pop-cultural (souvenirs, toys, games) and many of these items are still commercially available, making replication a Duchampian exercise.

The other problem is conceptual. One of the more personal objects contained in the Collection is a pair of Conan Doyle's spectacles. They're an ordinary pair of glasses for the time (roughly 1920s) and are not too dissimilar to their modern equivalents. The thing that makes them significant is that they're Conan Doyle's. A replica would simply be a pair of spectacles that aren't Conan Doyle's.

We're left with a problem, namely form before function. We came to understand and appreciate the value of handling objects, but were finding it difficult to bridge the gap.

The University of Portsmouth

At this point in our narrative, I took our quandary to Dr Brett Stevens, who was already overseeing several student projects around the Collection. I was aware that the University had 3D printing technology, and was curious to learn more. After a discussion based on our original handling object brief, Dr Stevens addressed the issues around replicas and took it further by saying replicas can be boring and that technology applied without considerable thought given to concept can result in monumentally boring and inefficient projects. And so he steered us towards some of the more "interesting" "wish list" ideas and challenged us to think beyond the literal translation of replica.

Ideas

Suitably challenged, we began pursuing other ideas.

Reichenbach Falls

The name "Conan Doyle" first and foremost evokes "Sherlock Holmes." To entice new audiences into the Doylian side of the collection, Sherlock deserves to have his name on the marquee (much to Conan Doyle's chagrin). The Sherlock stories are fortunately, rather accessible. Audio versions can be borrowed not only from libraries, but are freely available through public domain repositories such as Project Gutenberg. However, the wonderfully evocative and iconic images that accompanied the stories upon initial publication (most notably by Sidney Paget) aren't. Could we somehow use technology to recreate the drama, the atmosphere and the iconic figural representation of the famous illustrations? We began to discuss bringing Paget's remarkable illustration into 3 dimensions and beyond.

A 3D model of the grappling figures on a rocky platform is generated with channels circulating throughout the form. The model would be attached to a plinth with an information panel which would house a pump. The pump would send cold water into the rocky form, cooling it, and producing condensation on the exterior surface. The heat generated by the pump would then be channelled into the figures, separating the figures from the "rock" by form and temperature. The falls could be evoked by a recording playing either from a speaker in the plinth or through an audio guide.

Spirit Photographs

Conan Doyle dedicated his post-Sherlock life to the study of Spiritualism. He embarked upon world tours to promote the notion of communicating with the afterlife. Part of the Collection is a series of Spirit photographs, some with Conan Doyle himself. As Spiritualism was such an important part of his life it would be remiss to not include some aspect of his passion into a general

Collection exhibition. To illustrate the concept, we have focused our attention on one of the photos of Conan Doyle and a "spirit" from our collection. The photograph would be recreated through 3D printing as a contour, from which a resin block would be cast and a static-discharge pin array would be embedded in the block to distinguish between one subject (Conan Doyle) and another (the spirit). A static generating device, like a flocking machine, could then charge the pins with a low static field. An audience member could then distinguish between the background, which would be neutral, the figure of Conan Doyle, carrying a slight charge, and the "spirit" which would hold a much higher static charge. In an effort to communicate the technique of creating the sprit photograph (for those who don't buy into Conan Doyle's school of thinking) the entire device could be used like a Theremin. As the audience member moved there hand across the figure of Conan Doyle, a projection of his voice, speaking on the subject would be emitted from a speaker being charged by the flocking device. The spirit would engender a dissonant sound, and when both were played at the same time, a sound similar to two radio station vying for the same air space would be created: an aural illustration of super-imposition.

Technology and the Object

High speed internet, sophisticated websites, and innovations in printing technology mean that Museums and Archives have a new range of curatorial tools at their disposal. We now have more opportunities than ever before to physically illustrate our collections in an effort to increase accessibility (for more marginalized audiences than just those with visual impairments), with tactile paintings and drawings, 3D printed maps and floor plans, audio descriptive guides and virtual tours. There is little excuse to cling to previous methods of divorcing the audience from the object. Conservation and protection can still be observed while simultaneously provided a more robust museum visit.

Over the past few years, the 3D printer has changed from concept to reality and then from expensive technology to commercial availability. This trend is set to continue, with more advanced and cheaper versions coming out in the following years. As this occurs, not only will museums and universities have greater access to the technology but so will schools and homes. The files used to create the 3D printed forms for our SensingCulture project will be made available to download from our website with the hope that the designs can be shared the world over. And although the objects we are currently developing use a blend of technologies beyond 3D printing, we are attempting to keep the costs at a minimum and use devices and materials that are affordable and commercially available. All of this information can be stored online, from plans, schematics and material lists to video instructions. These object/devices, just like the information stored on Wikipedia are not limited to a physical context. At the technological plateau of our time, there is no reason why the Conan Doyle collection can't be at the same time both in Portsmouth and Tokyo, or the British Museum be in London and Addis Ababa.

Focussing on a particular accessibility demographic often creates accessibility by-products: increased color contrast can assist low-vision visitors in reading signs and placards as well as dyslexic members of the public. Audio guides with corresponding signs and placards can assist those with low-vision and visitors who are learning to read. New developments in object-based museum tools will with all probability create unexpected opportunities for "other" visitors.

Although the private sector may be the driving force behind new technology, research conducted by museums and learning institutions should help to drive improvements in accessibility. The motivation behind the innovation can inspire as can the information conveyed by the innovation. Partnering with institutions like the RNIB should become more commonplace. Making our collections more accessible is not only ethically sound, but increases the opportunity to reach

larger and larger audiences, increasing our footfall both physically and digitally and keeping our services fresh and relevant.