

Chapter 14

Personal Digital Collections: Involving Users in the Co-Creation of Digital Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

Personal digital collections systems, which encourage visitors to museum websites to create their own personal collections out of a museum's online collections, are the latest trend in personalization technologies for museums and other cultural heritage organizations. This chapter explores the development, implementation, and evaluation of different types of personal digital collection interfaces on museum websites, from simple bookmarking applications to sophisticated tools that support high levels of interactivity and the sharing of collections. It examines the potential impact of these interfaces on the relationship between museums and their online visitors, explores the possible benefits of involving users as co-creators of digital cultural heritage, and offers an analysis of future research directions and best practices for system design, presenting lessons learned from more than a decade of design and development of personal digital collections systems on museum websites.

INTRODUCTION

Digital representations of cultural heritage have transformed the way museums and other cultural heritage organizations interact with their visitors. The widespread availability of digital collections has resulted in unprecedented levels of access,

offering museum visitors new opportunities for interactivity, many of which are unique to the online environment. One of the more innovative of these opportunities revolves around the ability of libraries, archives, and museums to involve users in the personalization and co-creation of digital collections of cultural heritage.

This ability is best exemplified by personal digital collections (also known as “my collection”

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or “my museum”) interfaces on museum websites, where online visitors are encouraged to build their own personal collections of the museum’s online artifacts, returning to view, modify, and interact with them at their leisure. The primary purpose and implementation of these tools range from simple bookmarking applications to extremely sophisticated interfaces that empower educators and researchers to construct new knowledge out of existing digital cultural content by customizing museum information resources to create new presentations, activities, reports, etc. In theory, the ability to create and manipulate personal collections encourages visitors to develop a personal relationship with collections, and helps them develop lifelong relationships with museums and other cultural heritage organizations. In reality, the success of these systems has been mixed, especially when viewed from the perspective of multiple audiences with diverse needs and expectations.

This chapter examines the development, implementation, and evaluation of personal digital collections systems over the past decade. It addresses such questions as: When do they succeed? When do they fail? What lessons have we learned that can inform the successful design of similar interfaces? How will emerging web 2.0 trends focusing on social media, mash-ups, and integration affect the future of these tools? It answers these questions by providing an overview of existing research about personal digital collections systems, a survey of select systems developed over the past decade, and a discussion of the best practices for the design and development of systems that encourage users to create their own personal collections of digital cultural heritage, thereby becoming co-creators of their own digital culture.

BACKGROUND

Revolutionary trends in personalization have occurred in the online museum environment over

the past two decades (Beardon & Worden, 1995; Bowen & Filippini Fantoni, 2004). As museums and other cultural heritage organizations explore new methods of making their collections available online, the focus has shifted from providing information about objects to providing visitors with new opportunities for interactivity. Many museums now encourage their visitors to draw connections between cultural artifacts, and share those connections with other museum visitors (Bearman & Trant, 2005; Dietz et al., 2004; cf. Borgman, 2003). Online visitors are encouraged to add value to digital collections of cultural heritage, contributing their knowledge to the museum’s collections by adding new connections and interpretations across user communities (cf. Lynch, 2002).

The popularity of such activities has raised a variety of questions about the consequences of allowing users to create and manipulate personal digital collections of cultural heritage. Some researchers have focused on the educational potential of allowing museum visitors to act as curators and design their own online collections and exhibits (Adams et al., 2001). Others have attempted to assess the effectiveness of these tools by examining the ability of personal digital collections to encourage museum visitors to feel more involved with or connected to digital cultural heritage (Filippini Fantoni & Bowen, 2007). This section addresses these and related research questions, providing an overview of the key findings from the literature on this topic.

Personalization and the Museum Visitor

Personal digital collections systems are just one of many tools available for museum professionals who are interested in personalizing the museum experience for their visitors. Many different technologies to support personalization, in the museum and online, have been developed over the past couple of decades (Marty & Jones, 2008;

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