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October 21, 2022

Fantastic Beasts Review

For my museum exhibit review, I chose to visit the *Fantastic Beasts: The Wonder of Nature* exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum. This exhibit was small, taking about a half hour to get through, and combined fictional and real-world elements to discuss subjects such as how mythical animals could have been created, how animal conservation works, and how humans are endangering animals. I chose this exhibit because I was interested in how these subjects would blend with the overall pop culture theming of the exhibit, especially since I haven't personally seen the Fantastic Beasts movies, and I ended up being quite impressed by how it mixed. The exhibit is strange because while its content seems more geared towards children, the harry potter theming can also lend itself to fans, who might enjoy the recreations of creatures from the series more than the educational content within it. On a more critical lens, the museum fails to adequately address some key issues from the course, namely its participatory elements, but it does appear to engage positively with the idea of curatorial dreaming.

In terms of participatory elements, we look to Simon's work on how objects are used within museums. Simon talks about museum items not as objects solely for its significance, but also for its ability to connect people, whether to the object itself or strangers (Simon). The exhibit attempts to create these social objects but fails to do so successfully. One example of this

is an interactive quiz that has a participant matching the sound to the appropriate animal. This seemingly fits into one of the five design techniques Simon highlights, specifically asking visitors questions, but falls short in its social elements. When done correctly, asking questions creates engagement for visitors and gives feedback to staff, due to the question being open ended (Simon). The quiz provides none of these features, and the only social experience I gained from interacting with the object was to vent my frustration to my partner that one of the quiz answers was a fictional creature. It could also be argued that the exhibit produces social objects through provocation, namely with how they juxtapose mythological animals with real world ones, but I'd argue that the exhibit failed to do so in an engaging way. Provocation, especially that through juxtaposition, is meant to raise questions in the minds of visitors and in turn create discussion (Simon). The issue with this exhibit is that the questions being raised are answered for you. Having a mermaid skeleton and a diagram of a seal together might raise questions on their own, but by having text beside it that explicitly explains the connection removes the social aspect. The exhibit also does not attempt to explore the other three design techniques that Simon lays out, as there is no live aspect, sharable objects, or instructions on peer engagement.

Despite the flaws in the social elements, I think the exhibit still provides a promising look at curatorial dreaming, specifically in how it engages with the human caused extinction of animals. Butler and Lehrer explore how museums can curate materials that call on viewers to understand their roles in historical and ongoing issues, as well as creating spaces of empathy and inspiration (20). The latter half of the exhibit does a good job at creating this sort of space, albeit also in an un-interactive way. There are multiple screens set up that speak to the issues of dehabitation, poaching, and overfishing. All these videos are clear on the fact that these issues

are human caused, but also go out of their way to provide hope for the future by highlighting human efforts to mitigate and reverse these effects.

Despite its unique approach to teaching about environmental issues, the *Fantastic Beasts: The Wonder of Nature* exhibit fails to properly build social engagement among its participants. Instead, the exhibit treats its objects solely as educational pieces, failing to address the challenges of how to create well-designed interactivity. These failings of the exhibit unfortunately overshadow the positives the exhibit brings forward, as it leaves the exhibit with a large gap between the cultural criticism it displays, and its actual contents.

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December 16, 2022

Fantastic Beasts Exhibit Revision and Extension

Fantastic Beasts: The Wonder of Nature is an exhibit currently running at the Royal

Ontario Museum from June 11, 2022, to January 8, 2023. The exhibit mixes creatures from the

popular *Harry Potter* franchise and its spinoff *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* with

real world animals to teach visitors about mythology, animal conservation, and human threats to

wildlife. The combination of popular media and interesting subject matter makes the exhibit very

appealing at first glance, but upon visiting the museum the execution leaves a lot to be desired.

The exhibit has little in the way of participatory elements, and the few chances for participation

it does lack any significant input from visitors, leaving no room for social engagement. Instead,

the exhibit feels like it relies too heavily on its theme, which in recent years has become a topic

for much controversy and harm. Therefore, I am pitching a revision of the exhibit, based on

critical museology, that will revamp the theme while still keeping its educational contents

preserved, and proposing additional elements that will engage both children and adults alike as

active and social participants.

Before I delve into why I'm proposing such a radical change in theme, I have to

acknowledge that at a surface level, the *Fantastic Beasts* theme is very appealing. Having the

exhibit be linked to an immensely popular ongoing movie series makes it have an immediate

draw, and helps it be instantly recognizable for promotional purposes. The overall *Harry Potter* franchise is also incredibly popular with both adults and children alike, drawing in a lot of potential visitors and revenue for the museum. The issue with the theming of the exhibit then isn't entirely with the subject matter, but rather than with the creator of the franchise J.K. Rowling. From 2017 to at least 2020, Rowling has been engaging in "repeated and escalating anti-trans commentary" (Duggan). Immediately this raises ethical concerns about the exhibit. Are these the kind of views we want to platform in a museum? Are we creating a safe space for patrons by hosting this exhibit? These aren't just mild comments from Rowling either, but rather aggressive attacks that vilify trans individuals. Rowling on numerous occasions suggests that trans individuals are threats to "biological women" and children, and an erosion to women and girl's rights (Duggan). By hosting an exhibit based on her works, we are also inadvertently platforming her ideals. This is problematic for a number of reasons but in a critical museology framework, we have to think about queer representation in museums. LGBTIQ+ galleries are still a significant minority in mainstream institutions, and often focus on white cisgendered men (Sullivan and Middleton 44). There is already a lack of accessible representation within museums for trans individuals, and hosting Rowlings works further emphasizes that museums are not a safe space for trans people when we should be working towards further inclusion and diversity. It is also not as though the people closest to the series are supportive of Rowling either. Both fans and actors alike have criticized Rowling heavily for her tweets, and rightfully called them out as harmful. For many fans of the series, *Harry Potter* was a place for self-discovery, and helpful in their struggles with gender identity (Duggan). Through her comments, Rowling has alienated her queer fans from her work, and by hosting this exhibit the ROM has alienated queer visitors.

Furthering this is the clash between ethics and Butler and Legrer's curatorial dreaming. In their article they explore "how we might curate materials that participate – and implicate viewers – in painful histories" in order to create spaces of empathy (Butler and Lehrer). The exhibit manages to do this through its highlighting of endangered animals, and the human driven forces that are endangering them. This creates a dissonance within the theming of the exhibit, however, as how can the exhibit work to create this space while ignoring the ongoing issue of transphobia. Because of this dissonance I think it's important to rework the theme in a way that still supports the history of animal conservation while not rejecting the history of trans individuals. This is fairly easy to do for two reasons. The first is that the theming of the exhibit largely falls off as you go through it. It begins heavily focused on the theming, showing fantasy creatures and the real-world animals that inspired them. Slowly, it turns towards the topic of conservation, with the fantasy theme being pushed to the wayside for realism. Secondly, the theme isn't unique to *Harry Potter*. Many of the fantasy creatures featured in the exhibit are commonplace creatures such as mermaids, dragons, and unicorns that can be found in many series. The most unique feature is Newt Scamander, the wizard conservationist, but even he has a role that could be filled by other characters. Fantasy series such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *The Witcher* all feature fantasy creatures and characters designed to observe them. The ROM could even go a step further and work with local artists to create their own fantasy creatures, keeping the theme while supporting local talents, instead of teaming up with a large media franchise for a cash grab. Replacing *Harry Potter* with one of these series wouldn't be a simple task, but it would be a large step forward in making the exhibit inclusive to all patrons.

Moving on towards the actual content of the exhibit, I want to create engagement in visitors by utilizing social interaction, something nonexistent in the exhibit as it stands now. Nina

Simon explores five design techniques to curate social objects, but the exhibit only interfaces with two of these techniques, questions and provocative presentation, and does so shallowly, leaving a fleeting sense of engagement (Simon). In regards to questions, the exhibit features quizzes based on the fantasy creatures encountered throughout the exhibit, and this fails to be social in two ways. The first is that it requires prior knowledge to complete. Visitors that have not seen the films are only able to answer the question through trial and error. The second is that the quizzes lack open-endedness, creating no discussion between visitor and exhibit. There is an objectively correct answer, creating the opposite of what Simon calls a great question, which allows for diverse responses and allows visitors to feel confident in answering (Simon). Instead, I'm proposing to move the questions away from fantasy elements, and instead ask children for their opinions on how we can protect endangered animals and improve conservation efforts. By asking children these open-ended questions, we not only allow them to feel engaged and confident in their voices, but the museum also gets a valuable perspective from an underutilized group. As Patterson states, children are not simply passive recipients of knowledge, but rather "agents who bring their own knowledge, experience, and interpretive capacity" (331). Going back to the issue of theming, by allowing children to have an engaged voice through participation, we actually open up the exhibit to be more inclusive. When left to their own devices, children are shown to curate museums to cater to the interests of everyone, helping break down the barriers between child and adult (Patterson 341).

Fixing the underwhelming implementation of provocative presentation is a simpler fix. Currently, the exhibit creates provocation by juxtaposing fantasy creatures beside their real-world inspirations. On paper this seems like a good idea, have visitors fill in the gaps between two objects, and discuss amongst themselves, creating social interactions. In practice, the exhibit

fails this by writing out the explanation for the connection underneath the object. By doing this any chance for interaction disappears, as visitors don't have to engage with the objects to understand their placement. Instead, I propose simply to move the explanations to a different part of the room, or to remove them all together. This way visitors are more easily provoked by the objects and will turn to each other to create social engagement. To add to this, creating fake histories for these objects can cause a different form or provocation, by putting visitors in a position where they have to question what they're seeing to find the truth. By adding an element of uncertainty, the exhibit would actually benefit, by maintaining and stimulating curiosity (Birch). Birch adds that children have a great taste for creative thought, and truly enjoy exploring different possibilities, which this provocation would provide them with many. Of course, this isn't limited to just children. Children and adults share many ways of engaging with spaces, sharing a similar attentiveness that enables provocative interactions (Birch).

The last three design aspects are not included in the existing exhibit, but I propose an extension that will combine all three. These designs are live interpretation, instructions, and shareable objects. By creating an area that simulates a fake conservation enclosure, I believe we can create an environment that interacts with all three design elements. I will preface that this proposal works under the assumption that there are no budgetary limits to the expansion. While the elements of this enclosure have been done in various ways by other museums and galleries, combining them would be a costly endeavour. Much of the cost here would focus on the shareable object's elements of my proposal. It's easy to propose something like colouring pages that can be uploaded online, but not only are these only engaging for a short period, the accessibility and uploading of these objects are often handled by adults, taking agency away from children. Instead, I propose to go a step further, and use children's drawings of endangered

animals to inhabit the enclosure. These drawings would be digitized on sight, and then projected into the enclosure. This requires a heavy use of technology, but I think the trade-off for engagement is immeasurable, and furthermore this is something that has been done for quite a while now. You can see this technology in art exhibits like the Immersive Van Gogh or Immersive King Tut, but it is more prominently featured in the teamLab Borderless exhibit. This technology is used, in a similar fashion to my proposal, to create an ecosystem based on drawings, where children can learn about the food chain and endangered animals (TeamLab). The engagement levels of this exhibit are enormous, as visitors can follow their drawn animal around, watching it eat, grow, multiply, and ultimately die, all while feeling a deep sense of connection. Acknowledging the inspiration this exhibit has provided for my proposal, I plan to use this to create a more focused, educational experience that still remains engaging. It can be argued that this level of technology is overzealous for an exhibit like this, but studies have found that experience-based learning had the greatest effect on learning about sustainability in natural environments (Ballantyne and Packer). While my proposal does not feature an outside learning environment, the exhibit does deal heavily with animal conservation, and by creating a fake enclosure I hope to emulate a natural learning environment. By putting visitors in a simulated environment, it will help them visualize the issues the exhibit attempts to teach, and by adding tasks it will help these issues have a greater impact on their learning (Ballantyne and Packer). These tasks will lead the exhibit to the next two forms of social engagement, instructions and live interpretation. Simon gives various examples of these that revolve around taking visitors out of their comfort zones, and by creating difficult tasks within the enclosure I believe we can make the space one where interpersonal experiences emerge. These experiences can be facilitated by a fictitious caretaker, who not only relays the challenges of conservation, but gives visitors

difficult tasks, such as attempting to feed their animals, or keeping them safe from poachers, in order to create an engaging presentation. This approach is substantiated by studies that show that children will engage with disturbing or violent material boldly and directly, creating deep engagement with exhibits (Patterson 336). The approach of taking visitors out of their comfort zone to create social interaction has been further substantiated by other interactive experiences, such as the underground railroad re-enactment at Connor Prairie. This experience invited visitors to experience the harsh realities of the underground railroad, and then discuss their experience as a group (Cauvin et. al.). The experience was found to be powerful emotionally, but inconsistent in its delivery. This example shows that a live performance element, like the enclosure, has the ability to be emotionally engaging to visitors, but it needs the help of other elements to be truly successful. By combining the enclosure with given instructions and shareable elements, I believe the exhibit can overcome the flaws of the Connor Prairie experience, giving way to a truly social space.

By examining the *Fantastic Beasts: The Wonder of Nature* exhibit through critical lenses, we find that it has deep rooted flaws that create not only an unengaging experience, but also one that has the potential to alienate visitors. Through deep revision and extension of the exhibit, we are able to create a space that is both welcoming to visitors and engages with them socially. This is done through a combination of efforts, such as revamping the shallow theme to be more inclusive to trans people, reimplementing existing objects to create ambiguity and open-ended engagement, or creating a new section of the exhibit that utilizes modern technology and critical museology to create a space that leaves visitors with deep, interpersonal experiences.

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