

Open to Interpretation

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Recording Date

2020-09-04

Guests

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Introduction

Interpretation is a fundamental part of how we communicate heritage to the public, but what does the term 'interpretation' actually mean? Peter Inker and Angela Pfenninger join us to explore the world of interpretation. In this episode of **The EXARC Show**, we take a deep dive into the growing interplay between physical and digital interpretations, the role of emotional presentation of relationships between powerful people and marginalized people in the past, and what COVID-19 has thrown up in terms of museum interpretation strategies.

Transcript

Matilda: Hello and welcome to #FinallyFriday. This chat session is run by EXARC, the society for archaeological open-air museums, experimental archaeology, ancient technology and interpretation. My name is Matilda Siebrecht and today I'm joined by two specialists from our EXARC community focussing on heritage and interpretation. Dr Peter Inker started his archaeological career with a focus on reconstruction, from medieval house building to metal working techniques. This then led to an increasing interest in digital reconstruction and questions of how we interpret the past. For the last 13 years he has been at the Colonial Williamsburg open-air museum, where a large part of his work involves the creation of a virtual and digital heritage space. Angela Pfenninger is a live interpreter specialized in theatre and event formats. As well as a background in theatre, she also specialized in museum education and now her main focus is on theatrical interpretation in museums and heritage contexts. She has also been the chairperson of the International Museum Theatre Alliance for the last three years.

So, welcome to Peter and Angela. I have a quick question to start you off. For those who are listening who might not be very familiar with the concept: How do you define interpretation in your work?

Angela: Well Matilda, I'll just pounce on that one. Thank you for introducing us so eloquently, it's a pleasure to be here. Whilst we were talking in preparation for this chat and you sent me the little schedule thing, what is interpretation? I thought, oh blimey, I have to really put my thinking cap on, because normally, in the day-to-day running of things you don't always reflect on "how would I define something that I do?" on a fairly daily basis. And I went back *ad fontes* actually to a book that I really admire to this day, which is a classic. It was written by Freeman Tilden in 1957 – most of the listeners here will of course be familiar with his name or the title 'Interpreting our heritage' - and I thought oh, interpretation, I'm sure I'll find a good definition there I can perhaps pounce on and steal something from. And actually I wanted to steal the entire thing! Because it said there interpretation means "An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information". For me as a theatre practitioner, someone who is very much on the experience side of things, it makes perfect sense to have an emphasis on sense-making, actually, rather than conveying facts or factual information only. So basically interpretation, from the point of view of someone who does the, perhaps more artistic or theatrical or emotional approach, is really to provoke thoughts, not just to instruct, but also to provoke and to unpack relevance of the past for people living today, to see "what's it got to do with me?". Because if interpreters don't succeed in making sense for people that live nowadays, with their own problems in the 21st century set-up, values and thoughts and meanings, it's not going to really hit home - I don't think it's going to settle much. So interpretation to me is really an act of sense-making in a heritage context, that goes beyond the conveyance of facts and figures.

Peter: So, I had a very similar experience when I encountered this question too, as Angela that...this is not a question we're often asked...and the answer I came up with, or at least looking, as Angela did with Tilden and other sources: it's the action of explaining the meaning of something. So very much what Angela has just said, akin to what she just said. To me it is also much broader than a one-to-one personal relationship, which is often... interpretation is presented in the case of an individual, often costumed, at a historic site, interpreting some part of history. Whereas I would actually look very much broader at that concept as well, that interpretation could be applied to, for instance, the panels in a museum, in a traditional glass case museum, that has text with it. Those panels are interpretations of those objects and things. It could also be museum theatre, so even though a direct transmission of facts as it were, as Angela was saying, is not being transmitted, it is being interpreted, it is an act of doing that is taking place there. So I think we can look very broadly at this. In my digital experience this comes across when we create models, for instance, when we create spaces that people can inhabit. That is an act of interpretation, we're taking the archaeological data and reconstructing it, recreating it, as a method for people to understand the past. So yeah, I look at it very broadly.

Angela: Yes Peter, I totally agree on that one, that interpretation actually does encompass many channels. You're right, it's not just a performative approach or is not just a written panel, it could be an audio that you encounter on the site, or you could have a 3D model of something. There's many, many avenues, and I suppose it's quite beneficial to any site really to offer various channels, because the audiences that we do get, they consist of very different learning types, you know some people need haptic information, others want to hear something, others want to read something or have to experience stuff first-hand. It's quite important, even though everyone is enamoured with their own method of course, but it's important to have this whole wealth of offerings so you can catch people at every level where you might find them really.

Peter: Yeah definitely, definitely. I think that providing that opportunity for the guests to find the

methodology, the medium, which speaks to them most, is really beneficial to a museum, if it obviously has the resources to do that. But I would also kind of push that a little bit further and say that sometimes there's not just one interpretation of the past, there's not one meaning as it were, and by providing a diversity of methodologies, interpretations of the past, we're actually providing that diversity that there isn't one way that we understand the world today, so there should never be one way to understand the world in the past.

Angela: Yes, I think that's quite important too, because at the moment the museological world, I think, is opening up to that. That multitude of perspectives, more than it used to be, to be honest. I remember when I was young and went to a museum there was like one official opinion and that was it, and it was very much a top-down affair. At the moment meaning-making is a far more democratic thing and you get this multitude of voices, of marginalised voices, and all manner of perspectives, that don't just serve one grand narrative but also other narratives, other approaches. And that is actually one thing that museum theatre can be quite good for, to be honest, to have that multiplicity of voices or to have someone contend the grand narrative version. You know, come with another view and they can have an argument together, which is actually quite elucidating to those listening in, because it's an invitation to make up their own minds about which information to emphasise, or which type of interpretation to favour. It's not pick and choose, we have the facts and so non-negotiable, but, the way historiography works, is never entirely neutral, I suppose you might agree. You know the way history is being recorded already has a certain agenda to it, and anything we do add another layer of possible agendas, so we try and get that out of the equation by offering more than one approach and that's quite beneficial I suppose.

Peter: Yeah, I think museum theatre is really interesting because it really cuts to the heart of the human experience. I think when you look at theatre, think of Shakespeare, the reason Shakespeare is still so popular is because he cuts to the universal human experience. And so it doesn't matter that it's contextualized within the sixteenth, seventeenth century. It is about universal human acts, right, that can be understood by people today as it was in the past. And to that point of multiple ways of interpreting and the way museum theatre can kind of bypass the empirical, well, keep the empirical but bypass the kind of passive nature of the empirical to something much more constructive that gets people engaged. We recently did a program called "Journey to Redemption". At its essence was the story of the enslaved experience in the 18th century in Virginia. But what the program did is, gradually throughout the interpretation, the voices of the actors on the stage were also heard amongst the voices of the people from the 18th century. And you gradually got a concept of, not only what it was like to be enslaved at the time, but also what it is like today to portray those people in the past. This provided a much richer sense of the human relations, and what it takes, as a museum, to really understand the past. And obviously with the kind of nature of enslavement, this is a very traumatizing event and it still is, even for people today, who were simply trying to pass on that information, it becomes a traumatizing event, so the emotions really locked in to that interpretation.

Angela: Yes, there is a certain quality to play-acting, in whichever form it is, it might be very mimetic, it might be more experimental, but I suppose it serves a purpose that resonates with something deep within us as humans. You have these archetypes, you have the motive of a quest, of a journey, of someone overcoming obstacles, of eternal challenges or eternal values, that every person will resonate with, whether it be love or hate, or war, or peace. You have all these grand themes that are never really out of fashion, and it always serves a good purpose to get people emotionally engaged as you say. And it's not meant to be a cheap trick just to get them very emotional and perhaps laughing or crying or something, but it's something you take away with you, as a souvenir. It's the authenticity of the emotion you felt at that moment. Cause there has been a great deal of discussion about authenticity in performance formats, that are done in heritage sites. And it's a tricky discussion because of course none of us have been there. We can only ever pretend..., only ever

try to offer something that comes close to the actual experience and we do our best to corroborate that with fact and scientific research. But the authenticity, it doesn't start and end with a button, or the fabric dye that is made of plants rather than chemicals, but it's the authenticity of the emotion that the guests can take away with them. And that really hammers it home sort of thing. A message is much deeper entrenched, I think, in a visitor's mind when there's an emotional component going with it. And actually academic study has also shown that the combination of knowledge-based information, plus the format of theatrical explanation, theatrical presentation, is quite an effective way to get people involved and to have them memorize stuff longer. There's a study by Tony Jackson from the University of Manchester (<http://www.plh.manchester.ac.uk/>) which is a few years old, but he basically examined some programs and compared them and also talking to the people who saw them, after some time had lapsed. A similar approach was taken by a young researcher called R eka Vasszi, who did a study last year, I think it was, examining how school children memorize educational offerings after some time has passed, after their visit. And actually the engagement, the level of engagement was quite a strong indicator for the degree of memorizing a fact that was packaged within it. So that's quite an interesting find.

Peter: Yeah, it really is, and I think going back to the kind of empirical nature of archaeology, that it is very scientific, it is fact-based, and there's a very important place for that. But what that tends to rule out is the multi-sensory nature of human experience. And so we can talk as much as we like about spaces and objects and material culture, but often - and this is one of my criticisms of glass case museums - is that, when you put an object in a case, you de-contextualize it, you remove it from its actual intrinsic place with the human being that created it. The human being used this for a purpose. We discovered this very early-on, at Colonial Williamsburg, in the 1930s. The plan was merely to reconstruct the city of Williamsburg - I say merely, haha! - it's a huge place, over 500 buildings. But the plan was to reconstruct this and tour people through the buildings. But it was very clearly understood at the outset that we needed to inhabit these buildings, like Le Corbusier says: buildings are machines for living in. It's the human beings that inhabit the buildings, that are actually the important thing, not necessarily the structures themselves, although there is a place for that. So getting to that multi-sensory human component I think, is the challenge and I think that's where costumed interpretation museum theatre etc begins to approach that.

Angela: That element of human agency is often the common denominator that makes things click in the visitor's mind. They see something, an object or replica, or an object that is normally an archaeological find, in a glass case, with an aura, as you say, removed from the ordinary world, and that re-contextualizes things. It really furthers understanding and appreciation of our ancestors' accomplishments for instance. I think it is perhaps relatively easy for any performer to get into a first person interpretation, say, I mean by that, that you pretend to be a person from the past. You're dressed up and you pretend to be someone from the past. So first person formats like this is of course easier done in a site that is fairly modern or where there is a lot of written sources, material that you can use for your research and really reconstruct roughly how that person would have lived or felt. But if we have an archaeological site that illustrates an era, an epoch that is far, far away in the past, that makes it a lot more difficult for performers. If you have a Neolithic, Stone Age site or Bronze Age site, or something where the source situation is a lot thinner, and you may not have any written record of the people themselves, there might be no diary, no letter no nothing, or not even Romans talking about them, so a lot of performers still want to use that emotional immediacy of dressing up in costume, being there as a physical presence. But they tend to use third person formats in contexts such as these. Which means they look the part, but they don't pretend, and they stay themselves as a 21st century educator, talking about what we know of these past centuries.

Peter: The difference between first person/third person I think is interesting and particularly the nature of trying to interpret the past that is very distant, that has less information I guess than more recent times, although even in the 18th century, which is what we interpret, we do have a prehistory,

prehistoric in terms of the fact that there is nothing written, very little was written down, by them or about themselves - so and the archaeology is much more akin to the archaeology of earlier times. Because the material culture just wasn't there, just wasn't as impressive as it was in the 18th century where objects still survive in people's houses, even today. I think we've discussed so far very much an in-person interpretation. I'd also like to kind of move us a little bit into the digital realm too, where what we can do in the digital realm, when we don't have that information, where we are working on theory, where we are working on analogy to do reconstructions, I think that's where the beauty of the digital realm comes in, because when we create something physically we are forced to make a final decision on something, in order to construct it or build it. Now you can do multiple reconstructions but that becomes very expensive. It also uses a lot of space and ultimately it is not particularly sustainable. Whereas in digital environments we can create multiple - and I mean tens or even more - of reconstructions of the same thing and provide a whole range of information that supports one reconstruction versus another. And I think in that regard, when we're talking about interpretation, we can interpret the world that we don't know, where we have very little information for it, we can provide interpretations that then people can have some agency in understanding how they read the archaeology as presented, as it were, so giving people some agency in that process of reconstructions, rather than presenting them with one final version of the past.

Angela: Absolutely. So do people coming to Williamsburg – cause I've not been yet, shame on me! – do they use your reconstruction, do they have like a mobile phone device, they can see what the building could have looked like previously, or where there's a gap site, do they see what used to be there?

Peter: So, we haven't actually managed to overcome that technological hurdle at the present. We have lots of connectivity issues and there's obviously the technological hurdle of ensuring that the person onsite brings a phone,... is able to download the app, and all of those allied tech problems. But we have done that online and it's also a very useful research tool as well for us to go through iterative processes with our archaeologists, when we plan to do reconstructions as well, so it helps us on the front end with our guests and also on the kind of back end with our professional staff. Right now it is very much theory. Some sites are working with augmented reality to do multiple overlays, and I think this is the future. I think the other element of this, we also need to take into account that museums have an audience beyond the visitors to that museum too, and so I think museums are finally beginning to understand, the more it gets online, the more of its collections go online, the more options there are for individuals to engage with that museum, that it's possible to have a relationship with the museum without even visiting the museum. So one can imagine that in the future that museums could be providing access, virtually access to the collections through their galleries as walk-throughs, could even have curators discussing the galleries, for people across the world, so reaching a much broader audience, a worldwide audience, as opposed to solely those people who have the resources or ability to visit their site.

Angela: I think we actually got a little preview for that development now with the pandemic being on, and so many sites having had to close for months on end. And somehow that whole issue of digitalization, which has been talked about for years on end, with various results, has just sprung into life, because there was such a need for sites to remain present in the actual eye of the visitor, to demonstrate "still there", and to show all their treasures and to make sure they have an audience after their reopening. We're still navigating very tricky waters. Many sites are heavily affected by this whole thing, but I suppose if you open up towards that digital realm, it certainly does help to not only interpret the meaning and the facts that are hidden in your treasures, in your site or in your depots, but also to bind visitors to you and to be more robust when there's a situation going on like we have at the moment. The interpretive community that I know, a lot of the people who are actors, storytellers, there's varying degrees of savviness when it comes to digital formats. So it's interesting to hear all the different layers you know, like you do, you reconstruct buildings, you open up new

avenues of meaning for them, and performers are struggling to cope with these challenges, because most of their work is based on this physical presence and it's very hard to switch media altogether from one day to the next.

Peter: Yeah I think we have been very lucky in that we have a pretty robust tech support, so we've been able to pivot to online digital media pretty rapidly, and I think we were all taken aback by how much support there were in the outside community as it were. We had massive take-up of our digital output and it was really another opportunity for actor-interpreters and our interpreters to use that as a different medium to engage with guests. I'm pretty certain that we've reached a whole lot of people who'd never visited Colonial Williamsburg, who planned to in fact, you can see it in the comments and the feedback on Facebook etc, that I think we did develop a new audience, so to your point, I think definitely, if we can pivot to these new ways of interpreting the past, it makes us stronger, we provide a broader platform for our guests to engage with us, and maybe museums should be thinking a little bit more broadly than: a museum visit can only be counted if they buy a ticket to the museum. That there are other ways of engaging with us.

Matilda: When we first spoke, Angela, you mentioned that there were some differences in the way that different nationalities or different countries approach this idea. Do you see many differences in the way that different regions or countries or nationalities or even groups within that, so genders, ages etc react to your work, so to the sort of more visual side of things to the theatre productions, are there different approaches that are being put in, are there better ones, worse ones? What is your opinion on that?

Angela: I suppose to me there's a broad difference when it comes to perhaps academic traditions between cultures and countries. I live in Germany, I'm German, and we have a very highbrow approach to education and academia. And anything that is bordering on the entertaining is considered evil, by many decision-makers. It's getting better, but you know for a long, long time there was a very strict distinction between that which is serious and good, and that which is trivial. And other countries don't have that distinction so strongly, and I think that's a good thing, not to be so hung-up on this. So I suppose the English-speaking world, with its wealth of, say, performance formats in heritage contexts as well as Scandinavia, they seem to be more laid-back, talk about decision makers and museums, less hesitant to actually get people in to do something that might be unusual or fun! Beware of fun! So I suppose there is a difference there, but since we just talked about digitalization and new avenues to reach our audiences, perhaps these distinctions will crumble in a short while. I was always quite enamoured of the idea of why Germans are a bit like this and if you go to England or America it's easier to get through or easier to sell a program or get it done, but perhaps now that these distinctions are no longer that, but it's more an online/offline thing, and that we as performers are also called upon to open up to that new reality, and to reach people beyond the actual borders, or like Peter said, outside the actual houses, where they find us on the internet. And that will remove some barriers that I used to think we always have, so perhaps there's hoping that some good might come of this new situation for performers as well.

Peter: Yeah, it's an interesting question about our audiences. We have done the analytics, on the digital media we've been putting out, and the audience online is pretty similar to our audience who visit, so we've not actually seen any specific skew to one age group or one ethnicity or one gender at all, actually it seems to be the same type of people, museum people I guess, who are visiting us online, as much as they are visiting onsite. Angela's comment about academia is a really interesting one too, because I have in the past used the f-word, fun, and it can sometimes be distracting to people who, from an academic background, feel that that is a restriction to understanding the past. That we do have to look at it calmly, scientifically and coldly, and I've always been of the opinion that unless we capture the entirety of human experience in the way we interpret the past, and that includes having fun, and doing stupid stuff, and also the serious stuff as well. Lest we capture that

diversity, we're not doing justice to our interpretation of the past, we're not doing justice to the people of the past. They had fun as much as we had fun today, and so why not actually incorporate that in the museum as part of the learning process? And for me I think, the recent ICOM museum definition seems to highlight this significantly. When I read that museum definition – and I'll give you the first line of it: "Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the past and the futures." I really engaged with this but I know a lot of museums did not engage with this. They did not like the idea of moving museums on to a much more diverse approach to the past. So I think it's within the museum community – as opposed to the guests – who actually, I think the guests are looking for this engagement, that they don't want a passive experience at a museum. I guess there's some people who do, but the majority I think are not looking for that passive experience, they're looking to have an interesting time where they can be engaged, they can have fun, even with traumatic history, with history that is really challenging. I think if it's presented in the right way – if it's interpreted in the right way – it becomes very engaging and very authentic and real to the visitor.

Matilda: Well, thank you very much for that interesting discussion. One final question before we open this up to our listeners for the live session. What are your plans for the future? It might change quite a lot in terms of this corona virus. Are there any plans you have in regards to that or will things go ahead as planned? And also, how can the EXARC community help to make a difference do you think, in regards to the points that you've discussed today.

Angela: I can speak for IMTAL-Europe, which you kindly mentioned as we started this conversation. I'm currently chairperson of the International Museum Theatre Alliance, which is short IMTAL, and the European chapter, as it were. We're currently organizing a conference for next year which hopefully – fingers crossed, touch wood! – will actually happen physically, in a nice place where people meet, outrageous! So we're planning to have this lovely conference in Athens, and that will be also hopefully a co-operative project with EXARC and colleagues from IMTAL-America will also be invited to join us. And I think one of the topics we'll have to discuss is: how can interpreters stay afloat, how do we survive another such catastrophe, where people are out of work? Most of the educators were the first to be furloughed or let off. It's hard to get jobs in, you know, there's just the physical reality of how do you survive? So we'll certainly sit down and discuss formats that are robust, that are suitable for an uncertain future. And how to stay relevant, in the face of a changing demographic of a more diverse society, where any top-down approaches or any very conventional narratives may not be valid indefinitely, where we have to open up to new avenues and new artistic formats. So I hope to welcome not just IMTAL but also EXARC members to that meeting next year in October, to get some new impulses for the trade. Fingers crossed.

Peter: So for me, as Angela points out with the conference, a conference, even if it's online, is not the same as a conference in person. And I think it's that connection with other human beings and that multi-sensory aspect of a conference that makes it all the more engaging, and so that's actually the area I am looking into in the future, is really the multi-sensory aspects of the past. How can we look at our sources of evidence and engage with each of our senses, not just our visual senses, in the visual reconstructions, but it's about the sense of the past, the tastes of the past, what was it like to be a human being in the past in all of its aspects, the phenomenological experience of people in the past? I realise that's a very big area to look at, but I think we need to move into that arena as it were. And to answer your question about how EXARC makes the difference, I think for me it's just like today there's not one way to understand our present. We all have different experiences in the present and understandings of the present, so likewise in the past, there's never one way to understand it and so, if I was going to speak to people about this, it's really about thinking about the fact that a single thing, a single place, a single object can have many meanings. It doesn't necessarily just have one way of being explained. And it can be explained in the context of very different arenas.

So moving people into that diversity of experience, diversity of understanding, that we all look at the world in different ways. There is an empirical world out there, but that is interpreted by individuals in the context of their own understanding.

Matilda: We already have our first question from Caroline for both Peter and Angela about digital interpretations. Digital interpretations, like virtual reality or augmented reality, can often feel either empty or artificially staged. What role do you think might individual interpreters have in a digital reconstruction environment – so how can you combine them? What solutions might you each imagine to integrate the voices of individual actor-interpreters so that audiences can benefit from the power of those actor-interpreters' skills but through a digital environment? Perhaps Angela, if you want to go first?

Angela: Yes, I think this is probably tapping more into Peter's expertise but the question made me think of thing we have at IMTAL, that I'm chairperson of, we have one member who is actually a professor at the university and there specializing in augmented reality formats, so they do a lot of digitally based interpretation things, and he tends to be on the lookout for performers, because he wants to basically have technical formats that are populated by people. That there are people that he films in this specific process but individual performers can serve as performers in these formats to make it less sterile I suppose, that is probably the word, so you don't have an animated character but a real person there, that's been captured in this 3D-technological process.

Peter: I think augmented reality is certainly a great way to go because what it does is it enables that digital to be mixed with the real world. I think to Caroline's original point that digital reconstruction can be quite sterile because it is completely virtual, and so the life-like qualities of light and texture often are not included in a reconstruction. And I think that's partially a tech question so if you look at the way CGI (computer-generated imaging) is used in the movies, most of the time now I'm thinking of the Mandalorian for instance, there's no sets, it's all digital. When you watch the show it looks very real, you're very convinced about it. I think in terms of the sterility of digital reconstructions that's just gonna get better as techniques and software become cheaper. To Angela's response in terms of augmented reality I think there is an arena that really needs to be explored because that's somewhere where we can mix in the reality so I think to a point I made earlier in the discussion, that we have these sustainability challenges at the moment as well, so by reconstructing in a digital environment we are not destroying our real world as it were, and likewise we're not destroying our real archaeology, the actual archaeology. So we can take a real-world environment and then include in it, let live actual people, and this means that they can be filmed on green screen or whatever, but mixed into a real world environment so that they are not constantly doing the same thing, over and over again, or are in an environment that would be hazardous in the real world. So I think we can all imagine hazardous environments in the past, be they on water, or you know, down a mine, with fire, where somebody may get injured. We can actually recreate, reconstruct that, in a digital environment and augment reality with that. So I think there's huge possibilities that really have only just begun to be explored.

Matilda: Actually, just adding to that, I had a query, because you mentioned the sort of idea of CGI being used as well. What do you think is the benefit of having, for example, a real person in a digital environment rather than a CGI-person in a digital environment, if that makes sense?

Peter: Well, I think real people give you real experiences as it were whereas CGI, even with modern standards, can still look like CGI. When it comes to physical like buildings and objects and non-human things, we don't notice the difference so much, but when it comes to humans we are programmed to notice the difference between a fake human and a real one as it were. I think the other component of this can be obviously that where you have specialists in fields, so academics or

researchers, that they can actually be the ones giving that talk too, so it's very personal and it's very direct, from the viewpoint of that original person. So I don't see digital replacing human beings, at least in the near term.

Matilda: So, a good sign for the future of theatre, interpretation. We have a question from Rig saying: The major criticism of first-person costumed interpretation is that it could colour the site or interpretation with modern biases of the staff for example. How do you think digital interpretation compares to this and also Angela, we actually spoke about this at some point, you mentioned the fact that you tried to include all sides of the story. How important is that across the board would you say in first-person costume interpretation?

Angela: Well, it's important to have a well-balanced narrative but it's also very hard, so I see where Richard who asked the question, is coming from. Actors are humans and we all have our personal preferences and it's quite hard to leave them at the door I'm sure. So I suppose, with all the discipline that we need in our work as museum educators, who are basically building on science or scientific facts with the acting, there's still a certain element of artistic license, which is the exact element that gives serious academics the creeps, as we established earlier. And that is sort of the gateway through which personal bias can come in. I suppose if you compare something like other personal experience that can vary. If you have, say, a first-person interpreter is offering a very one-to-one service to visitors, may tell the same story, I think may tell the same story to everyone, but it varies whoever is in front of them. Whereas a digital version of something is a direct replica. You have a pre-recorded thing or pre-programmed thing, and it'll always be the same, so that's perhaps a weakness and a strength, because a real-life person may not be able to be completely neutral or completely reliable to always think of all the facts, even if faced with visitor questions. But also it is probably a livelier exchange than something pre-recorded, that can be a hundred percent reliable, but not really consider the visitor's particular interest.

Peter: And remembering that if it's...if we do create a, let's say, a reconstruction of Henry VIII, king of England, who's visually perfect, that it's still a biased interpretation, it's biased to the person who created that interpretation, it just appears like each time you see it, it will look the same but it is still designed and the words put in the mouth is by a human being, so it has some intrinsic biases too. I think the beauty of working with a human being is that the human beings are also very flexible, so they can respond within a human interaction much more quickly. They can also – I mean a good interpreter will read the guests – and redirect a story to the learning capacities of their guests, to their interests, so actually, as it stands today at least, human beings are more intelligent than computers, so I think we have to play to the strengths of digital and play to the strengths of human interpretation.

Angela: And they're not identical strengths I guess, they've got different aspects to them.


Peter: Yes.

Angela: It was an interesting example you just gave, Peter, about Henry VIII, even if it was sort of plucked from thin air I suppose just now, but it's quite a good example to see how we choose, pick and choose characters, you normally, of course if you've got a high status, very prominent character that most people know, like Henry VIII. When planning an interpretive program a lot of people would stick to the thing that the guest will recognize, so you've got sort of these icons, these paintings, like a Holbein painting, or something that everybody knows, that will depict Henry VIII in his prime and he's like, I don't know, thirty-five or something, or forty, and he is already really fat and chubby or something, so everybody will know "ah that's Henry VIII". If you had a picture of him

aged sixteen, no one would recognize him. So from there...even in choosing how to flesh out the role, we're already creating a bias and pandering to people's prerequisites and preconceptions of that particular historic person.

Peter: Exactly, now digital could show you that person growing from a sixteen year old through to manhood, but certainly I think one of the things digital can do is provide multiple versions of an interpretation, so in this case it would be multiple ages, we could also through digital show, Henry VIII is high-status, we know a lot about him, but there are a lot of marginalised people too. So we could discuss the roles of marginalised people and virtually how little we know about them in the past as well. But again I think there is a difference between digital and the human experience most certainly.

Angela: If you can explore different avenues, you can also explore different outcomes, say, you've got battle XYZ and in real history that we know of that battle was won and the outcome was such-and-such, so you could have a simulation of what would have happened if that battle were lost. So you have these multiple avenues of how does the story continue, which is, I suppose, be a lot easier to do with the digital realm, than it is with acting, where you have to sort of choose one strand of action and follow that through. And ideally, it is the one that we know from history that's actually a reliable fact. Unless of course you sort of abandon linear narrative, and you do something more experimental, you know some acting troops might offer that, which is quite original. But it demands a lot from the visitor, who normally thinks: I'm watching a play and whatever they tell is plausible or true. And if you do a lot of meta-history or a lot of experimental acting it also requires a lot of explanation beforehand.

Peter: Well interesting you bring up battle, because [Bannockburn Battlefield](#)  has dealt with this very interestingly and they have a broad mix of reconstructed artefacts, footage of actors, interpreting in their costume, on horseback, and then they have a table which is an interactive battlefield where the guests - it's a circular table - where guests take control of individual units and then direct them, over the course of the battle. So, essentially, a guest will see how the battle unfolded and then they can take part in the battle by moving their units on the field, and then actually have a discussion about that too. So, this is where I think they have been really successful in blending and using each methodology, each medium to its optimum.

Matilda: That actually... a bit relates, so you already mentioned, Peter, the idea of marginalised groups, for example, and how this could be also potentially one way what you were suggesting, Angela, of sharing "what if this had happened, what if that had happened?", do you have any other kind of recommendations or ideas for how different forms of interpretation might be used to highlight these more marginalised groups, that perhaps haven't had their history told, or have it told from one very specific viewpoint?

Peter: Yes, so, we do try and focus on marginalised groups, although we haven't been successful in approaching every single marginalised group, so for instance people with mental health issues, I think we would certainly like to talk about. This also strays into something Angela just pointed to, which is the expectations of the guests too, because I think that we have to bear in mind that guests come expecting one thing, and not that we need to pander to what they do, but also, it's a difficult process to move them from maybe what they expected, to where we would like them to understand the past, how we can show them a much broader sense of the past, so yeah, it's challenging, it's challenging. I think part of it though is not only interpreting in first or third person, is to give agency to our guests too, so to invite them to ask questions, to get involved, and really have that dialogue, where the kind of nuance can really be looked at.

Angela: Yes, I suppose dialogue is really the keyword here, to a certain extent meaning is a co-

creation between the visitors and ourselves as educators. Of course we have our core messages that we want to unpack and bring across, but there's also this element of involvement, that needs to be taken care of. Marginalised groups per se, I think is a bit under-represented in my culture anyway. I specialize in museum theatre and being based in Germany it's not a big thing here, it's not so much a..., social question that is so prevalent as it is like in America these days, or other cultures where there's a lot more awareness of, say LGBTQ-matters, and things like that. It's very much in its infancy here. We're still sort of struggling to offer good programmes and sell good programmes that are dealing with more mainstream issues, and I suppose it's a process that you sort of first introduce a method on the mainstream, on the easy stuff - I call it easy, it's not – but it's more understandable immediately, because people expect it, and then you move on to the more...the tricky bits or the forgotten narratives that people might find a bit harder to relate to perhaps.

Peter: There is an interesting approach in [Den Gamle By](#) in Denmark took, because they have the old town there which, I think, hits all of the various stages of Danish history right up to the modern period, and recently they invited a homeless person to bring their cardboard home into the museum and actually live in the museum, almost as an exhibit, but more to talk about the plight of the homeless and actually be visible to people, so trying to really show that range of experience, not just the higher level hierarchies as it were, the privileged, but also to show that there's a range of experiences, even today as well as in the past, and get it from an authentic voice, from a person who is actually living in those circumstances.

Angela: I suppose you know questions of privilege, or poverty, they are sort of universal, of course people's experience would be slightly different throughout the ages, but the plight or the hardships there would be strong parallels, and it makes a lot of sense to direct our gaze to the present day as well sometimes, because people might develop empathy, and perhaps it doesn't really matter so much whether they empathise with an historical character, whether they actually open their eyes to see what's going on around them now...Of course you don't want to use people as props as it were, you know portray them as objects...of course not, but I can see where you're coming from. It's quite an original approach really. I've never seen that one, I want to visit that and see it. Just to see how it's done and how you represent that notion of "am I privileged, am I disenfranchised?", because these are questions people have dealt with throughout the centuries in various formats.

Peter: Right, and in that case he was very engaged, he actually wanted to do it, he was invited on and he wanted to do it because he felt like his voice wasn't heard in the real world, as it were, but it could be in a museum, which was fascinating.

Matilda: You sort of answered this question already but it is I guess a little bit of a different take on from Caroline (in the group) about the sort of more serious cultural reckoning that's taking place at the moment, especially spearheaded by the Black Lives Matter movement. So, similar to what you've been saying in how you can make multiple voices heard, but also how can you balance between the sort of, shall we say 'ugly truths' of history, where certain segments of the population were very very badly exploited to an extent...that it's a bad part of our history, against this need to make interpretations more palatable enough to keep venues as visitor destinations?


Peter: Right and I think that's maybe where digital does come in, where we don't want to represent or ask human..., modern human beings to do activities where in the past they were hugely exploited, and that goes from pre-history right to today, right. One of the universals of human experience is exploitation of other humans, so that is a place where I think digital could come in, where we can sensitively reconstruct situations of exploitation and perhaps deal with them in a way that is sensitive and that does really begin that conversation which, to that earlier point, perhaps having a

differential in human interpretation, might actually miss some of that sensitivity issue, whereas if we bake it into a digital reconstruction, a digital interpretation, we can guarantee it's the same every time.

Angela: That is true. And somehow, if you're dealing with a very tricky subject, that tends to bring tempers to boiling point you know, because people can get really emphatic and get really upset about something, sometimes I like to switch mediums where I'm not always preaching first-person costume-interpretation when you're dealing with a subject that is very painful, or also very close to home, as in very recent history. So if it's likely to whet people against the grain or trigger very strong emotions, sometimes it's better to find a form that is more neutral and more abstract. That can be digital, or if it's done by personal interpretation it might mean moving away from first person, to something more neutral, where you break the illusion so that emotional engagement can perhaps still happen, but not to an extent where you get people to get really angry or cry or feel ashamed or something that is unpleasant to them, and they leave the place feeling unpleasant and you don't want that. And not because we want to sanitize history but you want people to enjoy their visit at the site after all, and take the message home with them without having very bad feelings about it. I don't really have much personal experience with these things, to be honest, but I think, if asked to do something that was sort of hitting close to home whether it'd be racial issues or political, or very painful recent history, I'd always do something abstract, that'd break the format it uses and do something more neutral, experimental, perhaps not digital, it's not really my terrain, but I agree with Peter that there is a realm of opportunity that you can actually tap into.

Matilda: There's actually a comment here by Ligeri, very related to that, Angela, so she is talking about her experiences of theatre. She took a course of applied theatre at Queen's University Belfast. And talking about using applied theatre in a museum space in Northern Ireland for example with the very painful recent history, and how they achieved it, was by bringing together the sort of opposite groups and engaging them into almost re-experiencing The Troubles, but, from a different point of view. So, what you're talking about then, you probably wouldn't think that this is possible or do you think it's a good method of approaching a situation?

Angela: From what I read in the question I think it is possible if you do what she writes here, it sounds risky but needs a neat protocol in place and that's a thing. If the content is hard, the format needs to compensate for that very strongly, like you need a strict form for that, and perhaps less room for improvisation, less room for emotional responses, or spontaneous things. This needs to be planned, I suppose, more properly so you don't go back into the over-empathetic, or overly emotional thing that would upset people. So I don't know how exactly it's meant, but I suppose if you do something, if you have a conflict like this example, Northern Ireland, and you have performers who are perhaps neutral people, you know, speaking in their own voice but from different perspectives, so you have someone adopting the point of view of a Northern Irish person and you've got someone adopting the point of view of a British, like English person, or a republican, and they can switch points of view as well. One performer can perform more than one point of view, so you know they're not identifying with that character so much, but they're basically contending ideas and not so much people fighting, that might work. It's a matter of rehearsing it really thoroughly I think, and not leave many things to chance with such a format that can be potentially upsetting.

Peter: I refer to [Journey to Redemption](#)  , a programme we ran a few years ago, whereby it did really deal with the relationships of the enslaved and the enslaver, but what they did is, they had the actors themselves talk about what it was like to play those roles, as well. So it kind of blended from each actor taking on multiple characters, and speaking in their voices, on stage, and you know and with a lot of movement, and then them coming out and speaking in their own voices about what it's like to play that person in the past. And then eventually they break that kind of barrier and actually step off the stage and have a conversation with the guests as well. So I think certainly when it comes

to difficult subjects it's very much about trying to be authentic, trying to provide everyone's voice and really trying to engage with the guests in a, I think as Angela said, in a kind of neutral way where it allows people to...I think people trust museums in a way that they don't trust the outside world, as it were, and they feel "it's a safe place where they can have unsafe ideas". That's not my comment, somebody else came up with that but I really like that, as a safe place to have unsafe ideas. Where you can rehearse the discussions that you need to have that maybe then will, when you go into the outside world, you can take that with you.

Matilda: Ligeri says: very much agreed. So, she's also responding to that. Turning a little bit to the earlier discussion about sort of bias is from Florian Saum, he has a question, he's recently given thought to creating a first-person narration persona for Early Medieval, ninth century Laresham, where he works, open-air museum. But I am very much afraid to convey either biased stereotypes on the one hand or being too modern concerning gender roles on the other hand. Do you have any experience of this or any suggestions for how to avoid these issues?

Angela: It's a tricky one, you're catching me off-guard here. I actually know the site, it's only about 40 miles away from where I live, so... is Early Medieval, it's not really a world that I move in at all, but I know what you mean I think, because it's..., how would I put this, it's historical periods that are perhaps not as well documented with written sources where you have a lot of reliable information about how people would have felt, or spoken, or what their beliefs would have been, we have perhaps a little things, we make plausible, jump you know... plausible leaps, but not everything is secure and it's hard to do first person, when you're stuck in that sort of place of not knowing and having to reach conclusions that you're not entirely sure about. That's why probably a lot of interpreters who do ancient history, or perhaps Antiquity or Early-Medieval perhaps, resort back to third person, because they feel a lot safer, and they can actually have the gap in the knowledge as part of their interpretation and talk about it, whereas as a first-person performer, you can't not know anything, you eventually need to know everything about your time, until the point you're telling a story. That makes it a bit hard. Yeah, it's a tricky balance to find as like gender stereotypes is a good issue you're raising, because if you're portraying someone from a society where, say, women would have had to keep their mouth shut, and you're being really rude to the audience, that might be historically accurate, but you're pissing off the audience, right, you don't want that either...so it's tricky, I can't really give you any clear advice but I think, I've read on the subject and I've found something, what was it, with Joyce Thierer or Stacey Roth (Stacy Roth "Past Into Present" and Joyce Thierer "Telling History"), some folks, my go-to addresses, very very good books, and she gave this example of someone playing Abraham Lincoln, and apparently, Lincoln was as a person, his personal trait was that he was really a grumpy guy, he didn't like to talk to people, hated children, that sort of thing, now you're working at a site where you have lots of families coming, all coming up to you and they want to speak to them. So it's this how to strike that balance between being true to your character, you know, as grumpy bastard perhaps, but someone who has to be outgoing and welcoming to the guests. It's very much down to how you solve that in a personal way. It doesn't really answer your question but perhaps Peter can come up with something more useful.

Peter: Yeah, I think it's really challenging, isn't it, and I think the first question I ask is: why are you going with first person? Is that necessary and do you have enough information? I think a lot of what we've discussed today is about training. So, for instance, resolving the biases, it's about the training that the individual goes through, prior to standing in front of the guests, and so, having a broad base of knowledge and understanding of the period, that they can work with, and not going in with simple assumptions.

Matilda: I have one final question from myself. It's been quite an intense discussion so far today, so perhaps a 'soft' question shall we say...to finish off the discussion. What has been your favourite, or most interesting project or experience that you've done in your work on interpretation so far?

Angela: One thing that springs to mind that is a dear memory is, I was invited to perform alongside British colleagues in England, in 2014, and it was to commemorate an anniversary of when the throne fell to the house of Hanover, so the Germans were succeeding the English throne, and I was part of the German group of people who were invited to play these foreigners taking the English throne in 1714, and that was fun because it was that whole international mix that we all appreciate, anyone who has ever done any living history-type thing will probably agree that the camaraderie and the mixing of people from different backgrounds is one of the big forte's and being part of an ensemble was that. And I remember I was playing the king's mistress, and I prepared like a madwoman for this part, I was so anxious, to do sort of...mess it up, and had my pockets stuffed with little bits and pieces that I thought "oh, that will come in handy during the performance, that'll come in handy..." and none of it I needed, and at the end of the last day, we had this scene where there was an audience for the king and I was of course around the king as I was his mistress, and this little boy came up, he was dressed up as well, he was cute as hell, and he was talking, was all role-playing with us and he was talking about how he wants to sail to the South Sea and he needs a ship, and can the king give him money for a ship and stuff, and of course my colleague was playing along, and I was rummaging in my pocket and I found this one bit of paper which was actually a South Sea trading company ship certificate I found on the internet somewhere, a god-forsaken corner of the internet, and I printed it out and I sort of gallantly handed it to that little boy, and he was really, like he saw...his mouth fell open..., I'll never forget that moment, it was so cute and I thought "oh yeah, brilliant, this is what I'm doing this for!"

Matilda: boys, be prepared...

Angela: One of the nice aspects of the job.

Matilda: Yeah, that's great.

Peter: So for me, I'm always tempted to say: the next project I'm about to work on...which I'll tell you a little bit about surely but I think the biggest project, certainly in recent years, has been the Virtual Williamsburg Project. And before you ask me, it's not accessible online at the moment. But there we were able to really explore the archaeological remains of buildings and then reconstruct them with our architectural historians, with our archaeologists, with our historians, and create multiple versions of our interpretations of those buildings, and that was fulfilling because number one, we went back to the original archaeological material from the thirties, from much earlier in the twentieth century, and just exploring that was fascinating in and of itself. But then, getting the chance to rethink the city, how we would reconstruct it if we were to do it again today, to do it over, how would that look? That has manifests as well in some of the more recent 360-tours that we've been working on this year, so Colonial Williamsburg has produced a series of 360-photography tours of some of our sites, so if you take a look at the capital you'll see some of those virtual reconstructions actually embedded in situ in those 360-tours, that you can kind of stand in a place and see the building as reconstructed, now, in the early part of the 18th century, and then click on it and it will show it as it was in the later part of the 18th century, in a 3D environment. So we've been able to kind of integrate a lot of that research and it keeps coming back and keeps being really useful. The next project we're looking at doing is another 360-project, but this time it is very much - I think it was one of the earlier questions - integrating our interpreters and our museum staff, museum theatre staff, into 360-environments. So having actors and interpreters actually live in the 360-environment itself, which I'm really excited about doing. And there our goal is really just to not tell the story of the building, and its construction, but really to use the archaeology, use history, to actually tell the story of the people who inhabited it. So that's me.

Matilda: Thank you very much for that. And thank you Peter and Angela for joining us today and sharing your experience and expertise. Definitely it gave me here and everyone something to think

about in how we interpret the past and how we approach the past. So, thank you very much, to both of you.

Angela: Thank you for having us.

Peter: Thank you.

Matilda: And thank you everyone for listening to this episode of #FinallyFriday by EXARC. If you would like to become more involved with EXARC why not become a member? Alternatively you can make a small Paypal donation through the website, to help support us in our future endeavours, like this podcast for example. See you next month for another episode of #FinallyFriday, bye!