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ENGAGING PRACTICES:
re-thinking narrative exhibition development in light of narrative scholarship

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This thesis bridges narrative theory and the practice of developing narrative exhibitions in museums. It aims to show how an understanding of narrative theory provides a dynamic context for evaluating ongoing exhibition practices and adapting them to changing attitudes and aspirations.

For practitioners within the museum sector it introduces a rich body of previously under-utilised scholarship along with a method of interfacing it with museum practice. The idea of deriving ideas for museums from other sectors is not new. Museums increasingly embraced narrative in the 1980s after seeing its value in attracting audiences to film, theatre and theme-parks. Then it was assumed that what was relevant in one sector would be equally relevant in another. However, the interim upsurge of Media Studies suggests that rigorous examination of how each medium operates is necessary in order to identify similar constraints and affordances before scholarship from one area of practice can be appropriately applied in another sector.

In opening a path for museum practitioners to gain insight from narrative practitioners in other sectors, the thesis intends also to open the way for knowledge to flow from the discipline of museum studies out into other areas of narrative practice, where cross-disciplinary approaches have already gained ground.

At the outset, a context is established through a review of narrative literature. Two different approaches are used. Firstly a broad review of different ways to approach narrative is carried out and a typology of narrative is developed. Secondly commonalities are identified between narrative in exhibitions and narrative practice in other media.

Exhibition practices are then described in detail, focusing on experience at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, where research was enriched by in-depth interviews with exhibition development staff. Te Papa's development of narrative exhibitions is traced, and two case studies demonstrate how their model is put into practice to achieve narrative delivery within the museum galleries.

For museum professionals and narrative practitioners in other fields, this thesis provides an opportunity to examine processes of narrative delivery against a backdrop of theory. It makes a useful link between the museum sector and other areas of narrative practice.

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