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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  
Masters of Arts in Museum Studies  
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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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I also wish to acknowledge Dr Claudia Orange, the Mātauranga Māori team, and Raewyn Smith-Kapa at Te Papa for their willingness to accept my research proposal and their agreement that I could access organisational records, making this project so much more meaningful; to designers and photography team for graphic content; and to Stephanie Gibson who provided advice, encouragement and reading of the thesis in her capacity as Te Papa's liaison person. Particular thanks go to those staff at Te Papa who so generously shared their professional knowledge, experience and insight during the interview process. Because their interviews addressed not only the procedures of exhibition development but personal experiences and attitudes, the analysis of the practices was greatly enriched. The timely and efficient service of Massey librarians and Te Papa's archive team have been appreciated, given the challenge of distance learning.

Appreciation is also due to Waipa District Council. My curatorial role at Te Awamutu Museum has provided invaluable opportunities to trial narrative-based exhibition processes and to observe outcomes "on the floor" and in our communities.

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# Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
List of Figures .....	viii
List of Tables .....	ix

## **Chapter one: Introduction**

1.1 Background .....	1
1.2 Aim .....	3
1.3 Objectives .....	4
1.4 Research methodology .....	6
1.4.1 Literature review .....	7
1.4.2 Qualitative Interviews.....	8
1.4.3 Organisational documentation & archives .....	12
1.5 Limitations .....	12
1.6 Outline .....	13

## **Chapter two: Literature review & typology**

2.1 Background .....	17
2.2 Approaches to narrative .....	18
2.2.1 Living stories .....	18
2.2.2 Classical/formalist narratology .....	19
2.2.3 Realist narratology .....	21
2.2.4 Structuralist narratology .....	23
2.2.5 Contextualist narratology .....	24
2.2.6 Cognitive narratology .....	25
2.2.7 Postmodern narratology .....	26
2.3 Intersections and convergences .....	28
2.4 Summary .....	32

**Chapter three: Literature review & medium of narrative exhibition**

3.1 Background ..... 33

3.2 Specific features of the medium ..... 36

    3.2.1 Narrative exhibitions are a fixed configuration of components through which visitors plot a variable path ..... 36

    3.2.2 Objects are a primary means that museums use to support their story-telling & stimulate narrative meaning-making in their audiences ..... 38

    3.2.3 Visitors participate with each other in socially based meaning-making processes ..... 41

    3.2.4 An interpretive framework supports linkage between the narrative exhibition and the different communities interfacing with it ..... 43

    3.2.5 Narrative exhibitions afford meaning-making by different interpretive communities who engage with the exhibition in different ways ..... 49

        3.2.5.1 The exhibition development team ..... 51

        3.2.5.2 Māori audiences ..... 53

        3.2.5.3 Art audiences ..... 56

        3.2.5.4 History audiences ..... 59

        3.2.5.5 Science audiences..... 61

3.3 Summary ..... 64

**Chapter four: Te Papa’s approach to narrative**

4.1 Aim..... 65

4.2 Background ..... 65

4.3 Narrative in the ‘old’ galleries ..... 69

4.4 Taking narrative to a new level..... 71

4.5 A new exhibition development model ..... 75

4.6 Tracing narrative through this process ..... 76

4.7 Implementing the process .....	80
4.8 Summary .....	85
 <b>Chapter five: Case study <i>Qui Tutto Bene</i></b>	
5.1 Background .....	87
5.2 Terms of engagement .....	88
5.3 Translating a written concept into an exhibition.....	94
5.4 Summary .....	100
 <b>Chapter six: Case study <i>Out on the Street</i></b>	
6.1 Beginnings .....	103
6.2 Developing a concept .....	104
6.3 Translating a written concept into an exhibition .....	108
6.4 Summary .....	117
 <b>Chapter seven: Concluding discussion</b>	
7.1 Overview.....	119
7.2 Developing shared language of narrative among staff .....	121
7.3 Developing more audience-focused narratives .....	122
7.4 Using narrative to hone team dynamics .....	126
7.5 Conclusion .....	129
 <b>Appendix one: Concept description <i>Out on the Street</i></b>	
8.1 Description of exhibition .....	131
8.2 Storyline and themes .....	131
8.2.1 Disturbance and disquiet .....	132
8.2.2 New Zealand identity.....	132
8.2.3 New idealism .....	133
8.2.4 Critique of progress .....	133
 <b>Bibliography and references .....</b>	 135

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Timeline <i>Qui Tutto Bene</i> .....	91
Figure 2: Floor plan <i>Qui Tutto Bene</i> .....	facing page 98
Figure 3: Photograph exterior <i>Qui Tutto Bene</i> .....	facing page 98
Figure 4: Photograph interior <i>Qui Tutto Bene</i> .....	facing page 98
Figure 5: Photograph alcove in <i>Qui Tutto Bene</i> .....	facing page 98
Figure 6: Photograph interactives in <i>Qui Tutto Bene</i> .....	facing page 98
Figure 7: Label from <i>Qui Tutto Bene</i> .....	facing page 98
Figure 8: Timeline <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	109
Figure 9: Exhibition floor plan <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	facing page 112
Figure 10: Layout introductory area .....	facing page 112
Figure 11: Layout segment one .....	facing page 112
Figure 12: Layout segment two .....	facing page 112
Figure 13: Layout segment five .....	facing page 112
Figure 14: Layout segments three, four & six .....	facing page 112
Figure 15: Photograph entry area <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	facing page 112
Figure 16: Photograph approach to <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	facing page 112
Figure 17: Photograph segment one, <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	facing page 112
Figure 18: Photograph exhibits, <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	facing page 112
Figure 19: Photograph television, <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	facing page 112
Figure 20: Photograph Back to Nature, <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	facing page 112
Figure 21: Photograph colour-coding, <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	facing page 112
Figure 22: Photograph Split Enz display, <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	facing page 112
Figure 23: Photograph theaterette, <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	facing page 112
Figure 24: Photograph taonga, <i>Out on the Street</i> .....	facing page 112

## List of Tables

Table 1: Chatman's narrative communication diagram .....	20
Table 2: Typology of narrative approaches .....	30
Table 3: Table of exhibition development phases .....	78

# Chapter one: Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Current practices in museums vis-à-vis narrative exhibitions have particular origins in new international museum practices that developed in the 1980s<sup>1</sup>. Prior to the 1980s, museum professionals (usually curators) used the master narratives that framed academic knowledge, to understand museum collections and inform their displays. Master narratives were either minimally stated or symbolically implied through taxonomic arrangements or aesthetic codings. Re-evaluations in the 1980s saw a partial but definite shift in priorities in museums, from the preservation of collections to more active development of relationships with communities, and this resulted in increased attention to foregrounding stories that the objects could signify – stories with broader appeal to audiences who were not necessarily knowledgeable about academic discourses.

Within New Zealand at that time there was the additional pressure of a move towards biculturalism at a national level as well as within the museum sector, where significant holdings of Māori taonga in collections were not balanced by Māori participation at any level. The New Zealand government commissioned the development of a new national museum concept to guide development of a museum that would better serve current needs<sup>2</sup>. The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa was the result of that process and was embodied in legislation in 1992. From that point until its opening

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Hudson's *Museums for the 1980s – a survey of world trends* (1977) traces the emergence of these changes.

<sup>2</sup> *Ngā Taonga o Te Motu - Treasures of the Nation* (1985) envisaged a Museum system that “would help bring all of the cultures of New Zealand closer together” (Department of Internal Affairs, 1985, p 2). It proposed “a Pacific Cultural Centre that would include the National Art Gallery and relevant aspects of the National Museum, together with any other appropriate functions” (ibid., p.1).

to the public on 14 February 1998, a detailed foundation was envisaged, designed, subjected to public consultation, and built. While the term 'narrative' was not a central feature of the concept, the principles of narrative were inextricably woven throughout the vision of a new museum which would tell the stories of the people of New Zealand – *tangata whenua* (the Māori, people of the land) and *tangata tiriti* (Pākehā, people by right of the Treaty). The stories of the nation were reflected at every level, including the design of the mission, the building, the organisational design, and the framework of exhibitions. The curator-led model of exhibition development was replaced by a multi-disciplinary team approach, moderated by a project manager, in which objects and interpretation were organised around storylines and narrative flow.

These developments were informed by best practice in other museums around the world, as well as by expertise from other narrative media such as writing and theatrical production.

My interest in this commitment to narrative developed while I was employed at Te Papa from 2003 until 2006. My experience during that time was shaped by my position as a museum professional and employee, and also by my activities as a museum visitor. As a museum employee I worked with different exhibition teams and was able to develop an understanding not only of the tasks I was directly responsible for, but of how exhibition development unfolded among the team as a whole. I experienced narrative (manifesting as a vivid and compelling storyline) as a strong force aligning staff with disparate attitudes and roles, and under considerable pressure, into highly motivated well-knit exhibition teams. But an additional benefit of working in a museum is the opportunity to be a regular exhibition visitor. So during that time I also spent many hours browsing the public spaces reflecting on my own responses to exhibitions and observing those of other visitors. Front of house, it seemed to me that narrative had a more ambivalent effect. As I observed my own meanderings and those of other exhibition visitors, it struck me that though Te Papa's narrative swept some visitors along, others of us grazed and roved through these

highly designed spaces in a less orderly fashion. At times we would be reeled in by a compelling artefact or story, but soon would be off again on another subjective tangent. The recognition grew that the operations of narrative exhibitions from a visitor's point of view could well be far more complex than we in the museum world conventionally thought.

In order to better understand my experience I began to look into scholarship on narrative. I was immediately impressed by the radical shifts in thinking about narrative that had occurred during the past ten to fifteen years, including looking at how narrative functioned in different media, and also at engaging visitors as active collaborators in meaning-making. During the 10 years that Te Papa had been open to the public, exhibition practices had remained remarkably stable, replicating the original blueprint that had been implemented a decade earlier. I wondered whether applying the dynamic discourse of narrative theory to the practice of narrative exhibition development might point to ways in which narrative exhibitions could be enhanced.

## **1.2 Aim**

I have therefore undertaken a project based on the hypothesis that an understanding of narrative theory provides a dynamic context within which to evaluate ongoing exhibition practices and adapt them to changing attitudes and aspirations. Further, the scholarship of narrative in many different areas of practice can be seen as relevant to exhibition development provided the characteristics of the medium are taken into account.

## 1.3 Objectives

The first objective in affirming this thesis is to construct an overview of narrative theory and narratology<sup>3</sup> that would form a basis for understanding the narrative operations involved in developing and experiencing exhibitions. There are three elements contained within this objective. The first is to describe a range of theoretical approaches used in the literature to understand narrative. No one approach is necessarily seen as 'right or wrong' or historically outmoded, although how they are employed is seen to change over time. In the climate of postmodernism that influenced scholarship since the 1980s, for example, different approaches are now less likely to be seen as competing, and more likely to be understood as coexisting in a layered, more complex framework. This 'palette' of modalities is developed to understand narrative operations in exhibitions. A second element of this objective is to look at scholarship from many fields of application of narrative. Following early theoretical investigations into literature, theatre, psychology and anthropology prior to the 1980s, narrative scholars broadened their field of interest to encompass a far greater range of human activity. The development of digital and web-based narrative practices in particular has given rise to new and complex non-linear narrative possibilities. In surveying these diverse areas of practice however, it becomes important to introduce the third element – the definition of medium. Different media present different constraints and affordances to narrative operations. Before the 1980s, theory was usually based on an assumption that narrative was uttered or recited if it was linguistically-based theory, or that it was written if it was a literary-based theory. By the 1990s, with the spread of interest in media studies, the possibilities were recognised to be far more varied. For example narrative operations in digital and web-based environments opened our eyes to the possibility of narratives without a distinct linear sequence. In this climate, it is important therefore to define the constraints of the medium one works in to test the relevance of scholarship from one

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<sup>3</sup> I have used the term narratology in this thesis to refer to the study of narrative practices and forms as distinct from narrative theory, which I use as the study of generalizing principles.

area to another. So generating proposed criteria to define the medium of narrative exhibition becomes a critical component of this objective.

The second objective is to investigate and describe Te Papa's approach to narrative exhibitions. Again, there are several elements in this objective. First, it is important to trace how the Project Team arrived at the exhibition development process they put in place in the early 1990s for the lead-in to the opening of Te Papa. Reviewing the sources that they used in terms of exploring international best practice in museums, consulting with museum experts as well as the New Zealand public over the concept of the new museum, and engaging expertise from related industries, all contributed to achievement of this objective. The second element of this objective is to describe the process they arrived at. The third element is to demonstrate how the process worked in practice. To support this, two case studies of exhibition development are undertaken.

The third objective is to demonstrate to museum professionals how knowledge of narrative theory and narrative in other media could enhance their understanding of how narrative operates in exhibitions, and improve their exhibition development practices.

The fourth and final objective is to provide readers with the opportunity to experience for themselves the degree to which the overview of narrative theory and narratology presented in the literature review enhances their ability to understand the exhibition development processes described here. Some readers may be practitioners in other fields of narrative application. By demonstrating a model for transferring narrative understanding from one area of application to another, it is possible that this study about narrative operations in museum exhibitions might also become useful to narrative practitioners outside the museum sector.

## 1.4 Research methodology

The core task of this thesis is to build a connection between the theory of narrative and its practice in museum exhibitions. Because of my employment at Te Papa and my connection with practitioners, I was keen to carry out research in the organisation and among practitioners.

...qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret these things in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, and observational, historical, interactional and visual texts – which describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals lives (Denzin & Ryan, 2007, p.580).

Van de Ven demonstrated considerable enthusiasm for qualitative research, challenging the traditional remoteness of researchers from their field of interest and advocating a model he called 'engaged scholarship'. He suggested reducing the resistance between theory-based and practice-based approaches, urging researchers to recognise that theory and practice were in themselves only partial solutions. "Then it is easy to see the need for a pluralistic approach to knowledge co-production among scholars and practitioners" (2007, p.4). A pluralistic approach would see theory functioning as a support to practice and practice providing a testing ground for theory – a complementary rather than 'either or' relationship.

In my final research strategy, three different kinds of research were integrated – each suited to a different objective. Interview material co-related well with organisational archives when there were points of intersection. A more detailed discussion of the methodologies that made up my research strategy follows:

### 1.4.1 Literature review

In this thesis the literature review was important at two levels. Firstly it contextualised the project, identifying information and ideas that were relevant, and positioning it within an existing intellectual framework, as would be expected in any Masters thesis. For that reason the scope of the review was multi-disciplinary, encompassing the literature of museum studies, narrative and media studies.

Secondly, it served as a tool to demonstrate the core premise of the hypothesis – that an understanding of narrative scholarship could provide a tool to evaluate and enhance exhibition practices.

Finding the language of narrative literature formidable at first, I began by developing a big-picture understanding using web-based overviews and bibliographies, as well as introductions to core texts that provided useful overviews (Bal, 1997; Fireman, McVay & Flanagan, 2003; Fludernik, 2000; Herman, 2003a; Richardson, 2000; Talib, 2005). Once key narrative theorists were identified, texts were sourced and reading began in a more methodical way. I reviewed the holdings of Massey University Library, the Te Papa Library, professional journals and e-journals. An advantage of becoming familiar with Te Papa's library (which included the inherited collection from the National Art Gallery and the National Museum in the 1980s) was that it was possible to sample representative material that had been available to the project team steering redevelopment during that key historical time.

My early assessment of the literary sources suggested that a key value that narrative theory could offer museum professionals was providing an overview of many diverse approaches to narrative rather than the classical approach<sup>4</sup> that most museum professionals intuitively adopted. The cognitive, audience-based models seemed to me to hold particular promise for people involved in exhibition development. But

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<sup>4</sup> See table two.

beyond building a typology or a sense of the diverse ways of thinking about narrative in theory, I was unsure how well some of the themes I observed, say in the field of education, would translate into the sphere of museum practice. Doubts arose for me as to how media-specific these ideas were, and how appropriately they could be moved across to a new area of practice without interrogating how they operated. I therefore returned to 'square one' looking at the ideas of McLuhan (1967, 1994), media studies and media-specificity. This then led me to develop a set of criteria appropriate to the medium of narrative exhibition, in order to filter and integrate findings from the literature into the sphere of museum practice. With this more robust framework in place, I was able to scope new readings in areas of practice I would earlier have thought to be too obscure, some of which emerged as being highly resonant with situations encountered in exhibition development<sup>5</sup>.

### 1.4.2 Qualitative interviews

Because I was employed by Te Papa as I developed this project, I chose to focus on their exhibition practices as being more accessible to me than those of other museums. Staff interviews were a logical research method to opt for because my work colleagues were rich in exhibition development experience and were already engaged in debates over the merits of narrative in exhibitions.

Before undertaking the research, a draft research framework was developed to conform with Massey University's *Code of ethical conduct for research, teaching and evaluations involving human participants* (Revised 26/10/06), with the intention to provide "protection for all participants in research ... as well as to protect researchers and institutions" (2006, p. 3). At the same time, it was important to construct an

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<sup>5</sup> Narrative practices in web-based technology in particular shared the non-linear characteristic of museum exhibition narratives.

effective framework that would generate valid, reliable and useful information for the thesis.

Two sections of the code stood out as particularly pertinent to the situation. Firstly the section on the Treaty of Waitangi reminded the researcher to consult with Māori involved in the research, at all levels – including “the design, governance, management, implementation and analysis of research” (*ibid.*, p. 5) – and to gain consent of collectives. Researching in a museum that valued its bicultural principles reinforced the importance of a consultative approach with Māori, in developing a framework.

Secondly the code highlighted the principle of minimisation of harm “to participants, researchers, institutions and groups” (*ibid.*, p. 4). My position as an ‘insider’ – a colleague of the intended research participants, and an employee of the institution that also employed them – would require careful management to maintain an appropriate balance of interests between our three entities. While the risks of bias of the ‘insider’ researcher are commonly accepted, Smyth & Holian balance the risks against definite advantages:

The insider researcher...bring(s) aspects of the organisational history, working relationships and personal alliances into play in the research process... [that] shape the perception and behaviour of the researcher and organisational members involved in the research (Smyth & Holian, 1999, p. 2).

They point out that contrary to the prejudice of some scholars, bias can be as much of a risk for researchers from outside the organisation as it is for insiders. But a risk that was definitely greater for insiders was that they may uncover too much. At an individual level there was the possibility that interview participants who already shared a rapport with the interviewer might divulge information and opinions without fully recognising the implications of having these published. At an organisational level, while it would be equally possible to give (or deny) the insider researcher permission

to publish particular material as it would to an external researcher, it would be more difficult for the organisation to exercise control over more subtle forms of acquired organisational knowledge.

The greater risk may be that the insider gains access to organisationally sensitive information and risks... confronting others with less than welcome observations regarding organisational practice and surfacing and naming ethical dilemmas... When all this has to be managed while continuing to operate in their organisational role, there can be some stress involved in maintaining working relationships, and considerable tension may build from continuing to address the issues, do the research, and keep on top of job requirements and role expectations (*ibid.*).

Keeping these principles in mind, a draft research procedure, including an information sheet and consent form, was drawn up. The procedure was that an interviewee would be approached and given an information sheet outlining the project, listing five baseline research questions from which the interview would progress<sup>6</sup>. Interviews would not be confined to the questions identified on the information sheet however, but would use them as a starting point. Questioning would be extended using Rubin's model of "responsive interview" which he described as asking a basic question, then following up with other questions seeking to contextualise and engage in greater depth the interviewee's initial response (2005, p.108). Interviewees would be requested to

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<sup>6</sup> Potential interviewees were asked to consider the following key questions on which interviews were based:

- Will you please describe in your own words what a narrative exhibition is, and how it differs from exhibitions that are not necessarily described as "narrative"?
- Would you please outline from your point of view how narrative is developed in Te Papa exhibitions
- Did you have a role in the development of Out on the Street or Qui Tutto Bene? Please identify what that role was. Can you trace the development of narrative in that exhibition? OR Would you please talk about a particular aspect of narrative exhibitions that professionally interests you?
- What are the advantages of narrative exhibitions over exhibitions that are not necessarily narrative? From the point of view of audiences? From the point of view of the staff developing the exhibition?

read the proposal and procedure, then return the consent to me at a later time. Once the signed consent was returned, an interview would be scheduled.

The draft research proposal, information sheet and consent form were first presented to Dr Claudia Orange who represented Te Papa's interests. She gave her support to the project with two provisos. She nominated Stephanie Gibson, a member of the curatorial staff, to liaise with me during the project and she requested that interviewees be named in writing up the thesis rather than being anonymous.

I then attended a meeting of the Mātauranga Māori team to introduce my project in person and receive input as to how I could best proceed. The team was forthcoming at many levels, suggesting sources for the literature review and encouraging me to proceed with proposals to Māori staff for interviews. Several members subsequently agreed to be interviewed. Following this meeting, the research proposal was lodged with Massey's Ethics Administrator, evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk.

Staff were then approached individually. When interviews were scheduled, an outline of content in addition to the 5 baseline questions was provided. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and returned to the subject for correction (usually several weeks after the interview). Each interviewee was asked to reconsider and correct anything they wished, and give final consent for publication. It was this corrected transcript that they consented to being used, and that would be quoted in final text.

As it turned out, no staff who were approached declined to be interviewed. One interviewee failed to sign off her transcript for use in the project and the material was not used. But a total of eleven interviews were successfully completed and are reflected in the final text.

### **1.4.3 Organisational documentation & archives**

Research into Te Papa's records and organisational archives provided a foundation of information and timeframes. There was a strong synergy between the perceptions shared in staff interviews and the events detailed in documentation.

Permissions to access and publish documents were negotiated with Raewyn Smith-Kapa (Group Manager Product and Service Delivery) and some interviewees provided additional documentation, especially for the case studies.

## **1.5 Limitations**

Three noteworthy limitations have been identified in this thesis. Firstly, the interviewees who contributed to the research were not necessarily representative of the full range of practice at Te Papa, or of practices throughout the 15 years or so that are of interest to this project. Because interviews were carried out only with staff still working at Te Papa, a broader range of perspectives of the early development was unable to be captured. Interviews were also limited to those who were willing and available to be interviewed. While there was a very high uptake among those staff I approached, two people who might have made a significant contribution, were not among the final interviewees.

Secondly, the elapsed time between the interviews and the write-up of the research was upwards of three years. During that time practices change. So it should be recognised the snapshot of Te Papa practices captured in the case studies does not necessarily reflect practice at the Museum at time of publication, even though they do

provide a wealth of accurate detail about exhibition development experiences at the time.

Thirdly, in order to develop a full picture of narrative operations in exhibitions, visitors' responses to narrative should ideally be researched to the same extent as staff perceptions. That was logistically impossible within the scope of this project<sup>7</sup>. While Te Papa has conducted ongoing visitor marketing research, its frameworks have not focused on narrative engagement. Thorough qualitative research during Te Papa's project development phase in 1996 affirmed the importance of becoming immersed<sup>8</sup> in the experience. Strategically, narrative was selected by the Project Team as a way of achieving this. Ongoing visitor marketing research at Te Papa focuses on whether visitors are engaging, and if they are not, what is hampering engagement, rather than whether narrative itself is a viable form for exhibitions.

## 1.6 Chapter outline

Chapter two follows the introduction, and presents the first phase of the literature review. It provides an overview of narrative theory and insight into the different approaches that have been made to understand and theorize narrative. This chapter puts in place the groundwork for the first objective of the thesis – to construct an overview of narrative that will form a basis for understanding peoples' inner processes in developing and experiencing narrative in exhibitions. It identifies the two main roots of narrative theory – the literary root that looks at narrative as a 'product' and the psychological root that looks on narrative as an activity. It also describes the more

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<sup>7</sup> Lynne Allan's research in *Closing the gap between developer intention and visitor reception* is an example of a visitor oriented approach that pairs well with the methodology in this thesis to produce a holistic understanding of narrative in exhibitions

<sup>8</sup> Immersion was identified as being one of the key motivations in the recreation/leisure market. It was defined as "about being immersed in the experience e.g. puts you back there in history, places you there. It is also about emotional involvement e.g. like being there, experiencing it" (Colmar Brunton, 1996, p. 15)

complex, layered view of narrative that characterises postmodernist approaches. A typology of narratologies summarises this chapter.

Chapter three presents the second phase of the literature review. The chapter begins by proposing five features of a narrative exhibition that define it as a medium in its own right. Using these features as a guide, it then looks at the broader literature of other areas of narrative practice (including new media) for useful scholarship that can operate within its constraints and affordances. By using the features of the medium as a test for relevance of scholarship, this part of the literature review highlights ways to cope with problems such as irregular visitor paths that were sidelined when museum practice operated on a literary or theatrical model of practice.

Chapter four traces Te Papa's development of the narrative exhibition process and product, and is concerned with objective two. In fact it picks up before the doors of the new museum opened. The changing structure of the sector is described, as are the approaches to narrative in the two institutions that were amalgamated to form Te Papa. In order to model a new approach to exhibitions in the new museum, the first narrative exhibition undertaken was *Voices*. Tracing the development of the exhibition in this chapter provides some insight into the final framework for narrative exhibition development that bring this chapter to a close.

Chapter five presents a case study of *Qui Tutto Bene*, an exhibition telling the story of Italian immigration to New Zealand that involves community consultation. The case study describes how the Te Papa exhibition development worked in practice and includes substantial quotes from staff that flesh out how the exhibition development was achieved. Photographs are also included, not simply to illustrate the text but to make key points about spatial and visual issues. Similarly the case studies are included not simply as an 'illustration' of the process, but as an opportunity for readers to experience how their reading of the narrative theory overview informs the detail of practice described here, thus addressing objective four.

Chapter six presents a case study of the exhibition *Out on the Street – New Zealand in the 70s*. Contrasting with the previous chapter, in which the exhibition development process unfolded largely as planned, the development of this exhibition was plagued by divergent opinions on narrative and on the resulting exhibition content. It was an extremely difficult exhibition to work on, and sparked debate among staff about the fundamental value of narrative and concept description. Despite this, once it opened to the public it proved to be a highly engaging exhibition. This chapter demonstrates the importance of considering two categories of outcomes – those for the exhibition development team and those for the exhibition visitors.

Chapter seven concludes the thesis by discussing how familiarity with narrative theory and narrative practices can enhance the development of narrative exhibitions.

Concrete examples are presented that pointed to benefits extending beyond mere interest and broadened understanding. Examples fall into two categories – the first focuses on ways in which the development of exhibitions can be directly benefited, the second focuses on how dynamics within exhibition teams can be benefited. This conclusion addresses objective three in establishing the thesis - that an understanding of narrative theory provides a dynamic context within which museum professionals can evaluate their ongoing exhibition practices and adapt them to changing attitudes and aspirations. Further, the scholarship of narrative in many different areas of practice can be seen as relevant to exhibition development provided the characteristics of the medium are taken into account.



## Chapter two: Literature review & typology

### 2.1 Background

A starting point for establishing this new context in which to place Te Papa's narrative exhibition practices was to establish a broad overview of different approaches scholars have made in their quests to understand and improve narrative. Each scholar clearly advocated their own model and terminology as the best, and in many cases it was the best for the particular way in which they were using it (to make a more compelling novel, to evaluate child development or understand different cultures). All approaches have informed different people over time, and all remain in practice within their own disciplinary niche. So this chapter reviews with an eye to distinguishing between these main schools of thought, and developing a typology<sup>9</sup> of some key approaches.

It has been pointed out that in the climate of postmodernism that has influenced approaches to scholarship over the past few decades, a tendency to use multi- or inter-disciplinary methodologies has increased markedly. Different approaches became more likely to be seen as interleaving or co-existing in a layered, more complex framework than operating in isolation from each other. New approaches were forged when traditional ones were hybridised or engaged collaboratively.

It is ironic that narrative, which is so easy to grasp intuitively, can be so difficult to describe academically. We recognise the inner voices with which we make sense of daily events, and the feeling when something 'seems right'. Few people will question that constructing stories is at the heart of our human understandings. But the literature of narrative theory is complex, and every effort has been made in this literature review

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<sup>9</sup> David M Boje (2001, pp.15-16) is acknowledged for his model and some of his content in the typology that constitutes appendix 3

to make the sources comprehensible to people who are concerned with issues of exhibition development.

## 2.2 Approaches to narrative

### 2.2.1 Living stories

The first approach to narrative to be reviewed is the living stories of oral traditions - grand narratives that encompass knowledge of the larger world, and intimate details that define the particularities of the local. It is possibly more appropriate to understand living stories by directly experiencing them than by recourse to the literature. However two excellent texts provide a foundation for readers to base their explorations on.

*Decolonising Methodologies* by L. Tuhiwai Smith introduced concepts to inform understanding of indigenous cultures in general, and described practices *vis-à-vis* narratives.

Intrinsic in [living] story telling is a focus on dialogue and conversations amongst ourselves as indigenous peoples, to ourselves and for ourselves. Such approaches fit well with the oral traditions which are still a reality in day-to-day indigenous lives. Importantly, story telling is also about humour and gossip and creativity. Stories tell of love and sexual encounters, of war and revenge. Their themes tell us about our cultures. Stories employ familiar characters and motifs which can reassure as well as challenge. Familiar characters can be invested with the qualities of an individual or can be used to invoke a set of shared understandings and histories (Smith, 1999, p.145).

Focusing on Māori knowledge, Royal has written a discussion paper that is particularly relevant to New Zealanders seeking to make links between the traditional Māori world and professional practices, though it also informs the general reader. He draws the

reader into a reflection on the distinction, or rather the lack of it, between language, knowledge, taonga (treasures) and stories.

“Mātauranga Māori” is a modern term for a body of knowledge that was brought to these islands by Polynesian ancestors of present-day Māori. Here this body of knowledge grew according to life in Aotearoa and Te Wai Pounamu. Despite an initial period of change and growth, the arrival of European populations in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries brought major impacts to the life of this knowledge, endangering it in many and substantial ways. All, however, was not lost as new knowledge was created through the encounter with the European and through the experience of the creation of the new nation called New Zealand. Important fragments and portions – notably the Māori language – remain today. These fragments and portions are catalysing a new creative period in Māori history and culture and in the life of the New Zealand nation (Royal, 2007, p.9).

Living stories were regarded by indigenous peoples as being integral to their worldview, in contrast with Western conceptions of stories as fictional constructions.

The truth about stories is that that's all we are. The Okanagan storyteller Jeanette Armstrong tells us that “Through my language I understand I am being spoken to, I'm not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of Okanagan people and the land around them. I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns” (King, 2005, p.2)

Because of the centrality of these traditional stories to the identity of the person reciting them, it is inevitable that issues of identity and representation – of whose stories these are and who is telling them - come to the fore when they are incorporated into more complex polyphonic structures.

### **2.2.2 Classical/formalist narratology**

Classical or formalist narratology was the predominant approach to understanding narrative until the 80s. It was based on an underlying assumption that narrative was something produced by an author for presentation or transmission to an audience, to

communicate a change in the *status quo*. There were two significant features in this understanding of narrative.

First was the underlying assumption of narrative being something that was transmitted. Chatman reflected this attitude in his narrative communication diagram (1978, p.151) where he gives the impression of a simple, one-way passage of information from author to reader. The communications contained within the box are what he formally identified as the narrative – a subjective and potentially fictional version of the information that was being transmitted.

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graph LR; RA[Real author] --> IA[Implied author]; IA --> N1[Narrator]; N1 --> N2[Narratee]; N2 --> IR[Implied reader]; IR --> RR[Real reader];
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**Table 1: Chatman's narrative communication diagram**

The second feature was a quite restrictive definition of what constituted the narrative. "Narrative is broadly defined as a sequentially organised representation of a sequence of events" (Herman, 2003a, p.2).

In this context events can be understood as time- and place-specific transitions from some source state S (e.g. a battle is imminent) to a target state S (the battle has been won or lost). As Prince (1973) noted however, event-sequences are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for stories. What distinguishes the following statements from each other – what makes (2) a narrative instead of a mere agglomeration of unrelated elements, as in (1) – is the structure into which states and events are slotted in the second case but not the first:

- (1) The battle was over. The battle was imminent. The fight took place.
- (2) The battle was imminent. Then the fight took place. As a result, the battle was over.

In (1) two states and an event are presented additively, but in (2) the target state is an inversion of the source state, and moreover the inversion in question is caused by the event that intervenes between the source and target states. The difference between narrative and non-narrative sequences thus derives from the higher-order, supersentential structure

that can be discerned in (2) but not in (1). Inversely, humans' narrative competence stems from their ability to produce and understand representations of event-sequences in which higher order structure obtains – even if, in the case of verbal narrative, that structure is not explicitly signalled via temporal adverbs (e.g. “then”), causal connectives (e.g. ‘as a result’), or other linguistic means (*ibid.*, p.2-3).

Some scholars developed even more restrictive conditions on what constituted narrative. Todorov (1968) believed narratives followed a trajectory from an initial state of equilibrium through a phase of dis-equilibrium to an endpoint where equilibrium was restored. In other words a sequence of events would only qualify as a narrative if it involved disruption and change. Ricoeur summed this up as follows:

A story describes a sequence of actions and experiences done or undergone by a certain number of people, whether real or imaginary. These people are presented either in situations that change or as reacting to such change. In turn, these changes reveal hidden aspects of the situation and the people involved, and engender a new predicament which calls for thought, action, or both. This response to the new situation leads the story towards its conclusion (1984, p. 150)

This model of narrative provided a convincing sense of reality whether it was fictional or not. It was the model most likely to come to mind when narrative was mentioned outside academic circles – the compelling narrative characterised by conflict, resolution and closure.

### **2.2.3 Realist narratology**

Debate developed within classical narratology as to whether narrative was inherently a fictional form or could function as a vehicle for reality. Herman observed that “narratives are found virtually everywhere because the construction of stories lends crucial support to so many practices and types of activities” (Herman *op.cit.* p.3). These diverse areas included practitioners of history, law, medicine, and indeed most of the sciences, and they were polarised over the extent to which their discourses

were seen as resting on the “subjective interpretative knowledge” of narrative (Boje, *op.cit.*, p.15), preferring to stake their claims on ‘truth’ and ‘reality’. Of these diverse discourses, history is the one that has participated most actively in this narratological debate.

Carr reviews both sides of the discussion. On the one hand he identifies two scholars who have voiced doubts about narrative’s capacity to represent real events: he cited Mink’s claim that “...stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles or ends ... Narrative qualities are transferred from art to life” (Mink cited by Carr, 2001, p. 198). He also cited White, who characterised the aim of history as the “representation of reality”, arguing that the aim can never be achieved by narrative: “no given set or sequence of real events” has intrinsically narrative features; they acquire them “only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events” (White cited by Carr, 2001, p. 198).

On the other hand, Carr reveals his own stance at the opposing side of the debate.

In the case of history (as in fiction), narratives are centrally about human reality, i.e. about peoples’ actions and sufferings, projects and plans, feelings and experiences. And those can be shown to have an implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) narrative structure prior to and independently of their being recounted by a historian or any other narrator. If this is so, the “representational” pretensions of history can no longer be denied on purely formal grounds: far from differing in form or structure from the “real world”, narrative shares in that form, and can be viewed as an extension and refinement ... of the very reality it is about (*ibid.*, p.197).

In other words, Carr believed there was no implicit reason that narrative could not be used to describe reality because humans use narrative to construct all of their knowledge.

To the reader from a museological background this discussion may seem to have descended into the depths of nit-picking, and doubts may have come up about the relevance of this detail of narratological analysis to professional practice. But year

after year opinions are aired in letters to the editor of newspapers, on talk-shows and in exhibition team meetings, that scholarship is suffering in the story-telling context of literature and exhibitions, and that museums today are dumbing down the messages they deliver to audiences. Often these opinions are little more than hunches signifying the positions described by Carr.

## 2.2.4 Structuralist narratology

The structuralist approach to narrative rests on Swiss linguist de Saussure's theory of language. It identified narrative as a sign system, with narrative as the *signifier* of an underlying *signified* (the events it represented). To some extent the debate between 'realists' and 'fictionalists' was quietened when the focus shifted from the narrative-reality dialectic to defining the sign system.

Unlike traditional critics of narrative and narrative techniques, [structuralist] narratologists do not treat narratives as fictional representations of life or reality but as formal systematic structures. Their primary focus is to investigate the ways that narratives function and to identify the codes and tropes by which all (or most) narratives are governed (Childers & Hentzi, 1995, p.200).

Just as linguists reflected on the arbitrary relationship between signifier (the meaningful sound or text) and the signified (the socially constructed concept that the signifier evokes), narratologists saw the narrative as being a signifier of (as distinct from equating it with) an underlying set of events. The terminology varied from one scholar to another, but the following narrative model outlined by Bal presents one scholar's version: A *fabula* was described by her as material or content that could be worked into a story. It contained events, actors, time, and location. She cautioned that *fabula* was a useful way to understand the possibilities and potential of a narrative rather than necessarily being a stage in writing or interpreting narrative. A *story* on the other hand involved placing elements (events, actors, time, and location) into a

particular order, with a sequence that could differ from chronological sequence. In some respects the story was almost the same as the fabula - the amount of time which elements are represented as occupying in the story is in keeping with the amount of time those elements would occupy in the fabula; relationships existed between events, actors, time, and locations in the story that would correspond to those in a fabula. But in other ways the story differs. In particular, the actors were provided with distinct traits, individualising them and transforming them into characters; and a choice was made from among the different possible points of view from which the elements could be presented. The resulting focalization - the relation between who perceives and what is perceived – “colours the story with subjectivity” (Bal, *op. cit.*, p.7). Bal’s ‘story’ is the narrative signifier of the underlying ‘fabula’.

### **2.2.5 Contextualist narratology**

The contextualist model offered one explanation for the nature of the signifying relationship presented by the early structuralists – it was not an arbitrary relationship as was claimed about language. Rather it was a relationship negotiated among the people who shared the story. It was what Herman described as ‘situational achievement negotiated by participants’ (Herman 2003a, *op.cit.*p.7). In other words, understanding a narrative is not simply a matter of the author getting the form correct. Instead it is seen as the outcome of a transaction between two or more people.

Rather than follow Todorov’s proposal to draw up a timeless inventory of abstract laws and categories, [contextualist] narratology goes to considerable length to reconsider and redefine its units in the shaping contexts of historical, cultural and pragmatic parameters. ... One of the liberating consequences of situatedness is that texts and genres are no longer definable by specific sets of inherent qualities. It is a commonplace today that something can be read “either as literature or history” or that “the same sentence can have different meanings in poetry or prose” (Culler cited by Jahn, 1999, p.14)

The contextualist model of narrative has affinities with a number of disciplines other than literature, and could well bring to museologists new understandings of narrative in exhibitions that encompass their audiences.

### 2.2.6 Cognitive narratology

Cognitive narratologies developed in parallel to the formal models. Rather than conceiving narrative as something transmitted in order to communicate a story, the cognitive model focuses on narrative as an activity experienced by the author/narrator – who was often both author and audience alike.

... a number of philosophers of mind have argued that the portions of human consciousness beyond the purely somatic – self-awareness, self-understanding and self-knowledge – are products of personal narratives. “It is because of the nature of our minds” as Dan P McAdams (1993) claims “that we are impelled as adults to make sense of our lives in terms of narrative” (p. 134). This powerful role for narrative is realized by the linking of personal memories to present conditions and future hopes, by organizing, translating and providing continuity and coherence to experience. Self-awareness and self-knowledge are constructed, to a significant degree, through narrative as we compose and assemble stories for ourselves and our world. In a complex interplay between the experience that makes for the personal story and the personal story that structures the experience, the narrator discovers the meaning and significance of the experience. It is through narrating that we learn about our selves, our community and the social world (Bruner cited by Fireman *et.al.*, *op.cit.*, p.4).

Fireman *et al.* have opened a window into diverse areas (of memory, identity, autobiography and psychology) that were themselves impacted on by structuralist, postmodern and poststructuralist scholarship.

An implication this cluster of narratological approaches holds for museum professionals is that in order to engage audiences in narrative experience, we should concern ourselves with providing opportunities and stimuli to promote audience’s

narrative-making. Instead, exhibition development processes *vis-à-vis* narrative are usually focused on storylines, messages and learning objectives that the team wishes to transmit to exhibition visitors.

### 2.2.7 Postmodern narratology

A major outcome of the complex shifts of postmodernism has been that the unified, coherent worldview that framed human knowledge systems and understanding to date was re-cast as simply a framework of legitimising or master narratives. Lyotard was a prominent proponent of that thesis, and among his observations was that these grand stories embodied human beliefs – about Judeo-Christianity, enlightenment, Marxism and progress to name a few – had such broad acceptance within certain human societies that we generally naturalised them as ‘the way things were’. It was his vision that exposure of these covert narratives would trigger a postmodern state characterised by incredulity and resistance towards metanarratives.

Whether or not Lyotard’s vision was fulfilled, an impact on narratology was that attention was drawn to complex layered narrative forms. Boje has suggested the practice that became rampant within postmodernism and poststructuralism – of damming all metanarratives – may have gone too far. Framing narratives could contextualise the primary narrative in overt as well as covert ways, and Boje saw the potential of translating the meaning encoded in the metanarrative and bringing it into play to enhance understanding of the ‘local’ or primary narrative. He coined a term ‘antenarrative’ which accommodated a looser definition of narrative. Adopting the concept of antenarrative would encourage us to spread our attention beyond the strictly coherent linear narrative forms of the formal structuralist theorists, supporting the deconstruction of grand narrative. Boje noted that without a change in the way we thought of narrative, we risked a crisis of “what to do with non-linear, almost living

storytelling that is fragmented, polyphonic (many-voiced) and collectively produced” (Boje, *op.cit.*, p.1).

Whereas Lyotard and Boje were concerned with contextualising narratives, Nelles adopts the terminology of embedding narrative, evoking a metaphor of nested Russian dolls. Any given doll is contextualised by progressively larger narratives and embraces smaller ones. Nelles cautions that we should take care to maintain coherence between potentially different narrative forms and through progressive re-assigning of the role of narrator.

[In the written medium] the general narrator usually attributes sections of the text to other speakers by the use of conventions like quotation marks dashes or indentation, producing a text composed of both narrator’s discourse and characters’ discourse (Nelles, 1997, p.121).

But in media other than the written word, signals must be developed that are appropriate to the medium being used. The transition between the levels should be seen as a border of “interpretative significance” – that is, an area of the text where great care should be taken to achieve the intended relationship between the two narratives and maintain coherence of the primary narrative (*ibid.*).

Nelles suggested reasons for using this narrative strategy included to clarify or complicate a primary narrator’s motivation in telling a story; to allow multiple narrators to confirm each other’s stories, either reinforcing a single interpretation or forcing the reader to accommodate or choose between multiple viewpoints; and to create the illusion of verisimilitude through the depiction of a realistic chain of communication within the framing narrative (*ibid.*).

The reader with a background in narrative exhibitions will recognise in these developments the conditions on which successful museum practice rests today – the

layering of text, objects and electronic media to establish a narrative framework and within that to embrace diverse stories.

## 2.3 Intersections and convergences

In recent years the boundaries between different methodological approaches in narratology have been less marked and increasingly developments have arisen from convergences and collaborations. Gradually the gap between the approaches of narrative theory, where narrative was seen as flowing from author to audience, and those of cognitive theory, where narrative was seen as a shared human activity, has been narrowing.

A major shift was achieved when Barthes' work in structuralist semiotics – the notion of “death of the author” – took hold. Critical interest shifted away from the author as the power behind a work – its “author-ity” – and repositioned him as a scriptor whose intentions may or may not be realized when received by the audiences' re-readings. Barthes identified the origin of meaning as located in language itself, and the text as continually rewritten through its re-iterated transactions with readers (1977). The effect of Barthes' work was to shift the focus to encompass author and audience.

Jahn signalled ongoing limitations that Chatman's communication diagram presented in considering new narrative forms for new times:

Narratology's standard objects of analysis are stories which exist in some physically tangible form – “external” stories such as one encounters in novels, anecdotes, movies and plays. Postclassical narratology must wake up to the existence of “internal” narratives too – the stories which are stored in memory and performed in the mental theatre of recollection, imagination, and dream. While theorists from various disciplines – philosophy, anthropology, and cognitive science – have emphasized the psychological and cultural importance of internal stories, their narratological relevance has generally escaped notice (Jahn, 2003, p.195).

Jahn invited us to consider adding new slots to Chatman's taxonomy to accommodate not just new players but the additional dimension of internal narrative. He suggested considering stories and storytelling not simply as narrative *forms* (of communication or entertainment), but also as psychological and cognitive *forces* – activities that occur within characters including Chatman's narratee, implied reader and actual reader, constructing mental or untold stories within their field of reception.

New work by Herman followed this trajectory of integrating previous theories of narrative. He has described his approach as synthesising structuralist, contextualist and cognitive approaches. He pointed to a shifting emphasis in structuralism - from linguistics as a tool for translating narrative messages to investigating how a particular narrative produces meaning – that opened up the possibility of considering different ways of delivering narrative (including storytelling, various media of performance, film, photography, exhibition and written forms), thus clearing the way for interdisciplinary research.

...the project of integrating narrative theory and the cognitive sciences can be seen as an effort to understand how people weave tapestries of story by relying on abilities they possess as simultaneously language-using, thinking, and social beings. Or, to put the same point another way, a cross-disciplinary approach to stories ...may help reveal the extent to which intelligence itself is rooted in narrative ways of knowing, interacting, and communicating (Herman, *op.cit.*, p.11).

Herman's thesis holds particular promise for museum professionals: that we could engage as *co-producers* of meaning, on the one hand with scholars in the understanding of narrative, and on the other with our audiences as to the meanings in exhibitions.





## 2.4 Summary

Like critical theory in general, narrative theory has been made up of a mosaic of methodologies including formalism, structuralism, post-structuralism and post-modernism (see table 1) and disciplines including literature, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, communications and education, so it comes as no surprise that discussions and debates around optimising narrative practices require preliminary negotiation of terminology and strategies in order to avoid collapse. This chapter has endeavoured to provide an effective, though not necessarily comprehensive, foundation while representing approaches that view narrative generally as a product, a process and a behaviour, before moving on to a more specific review of narrative as it can operate in different media-constrained environments.

## Chapter three: Literature review & medium

### 3.1 Background

This second part of the literature review looks at scholarship from many different fields of application rather than through different approaches. Radical changes in technologies and lifestyles during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to a blossoming of the areas of practice in which narrative was applied; the means of delivering narrative were reinvented with the development of computers, internet and non-print media; the means of reception transformed as audiences adapted their lifestyles to these new possibilities. The development of digital and web-based narrative practices in particular gave rise to new and complex non-linear narrative possibilities.

Dr Marshall McLuhan was instrumental in developing a theoretical framework within which to explore these transformations. His catch-cry ‘the medium is the message’ gave rise to the new discipline of media studies, which in turn stimulated new areas of discourse including many in narrative scholarship.

The idea in “the medium is the message” is that the medium itself communicates messages that inform the content of the work and guide its interpretation. Studies of media therefore concentrate on the medium itself as a kind of language with its own conventions for generating meaning. McLuhan used linguistic theory, for example, to show that there is a language of print technology that makes the study of this medium different from the language of radio or live performance, and these differences are actualized through the rules and conventions of meaning that are built up around the medium (Gibson, 2008, pp 144-145).

A further feature of his theory was to identify ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ media. Hot media were those that required little input from the audience to determine meaning because of

their high degree of resolution; cool media transmitted 'low definition' data, requiring far more conscious participation by audiences to extract meaning.

Narrative theory had previously given little attention to mode of delivery. Linguistic-based approaches had distinguished utterances (spoken stories) from written language. But much of the literature naturalised the written word as the medium of delivery. McLuhan's impact was to trigger an interrogation of what this meant to other media of delivery where it was not so easy to order the sequence of events, or for the reader to flick back a page to review, or where the full narrative might be delivered in a single session with lifelike evocation of associated emotions. He also allowed that audiences to a greater or lesser extent participated in meaning-making to a greater or lesser extent (depending on whether the medium was 'hot' or 'cool'). Previous approaches to narrative had adopted a perspective either that audiences were receivers of narrative (as in a classical narrative approach) or that audiences were the active narrators (in psychological and constructivist models).

This chapter looks at scholarship that was more usefully contextualised within a media-specific context. For this reason, I nominate a set of criteria of narrative exhibitions, and map scholarship from many areas of practice onto these criteria. The criteria are based on "affordances" - a term coined by the Multimedia, Education and Narrative Organisation (MENO) project<sup>10</sup> - to describe possibilities that are opened up as a process unfolds (or in this case, as a 'medium' expresses its 'story'), "possibilities perceived from the point of view of the learner"<sup>11</sup> (Laurillard et al., 2000).

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<sup>10</sup> For further information see <http://meno.open.ac.uk/meno/default.html>

<sup>11</sup> For example, the affordances for learning provided in a lecture delivered to a large group, is contrasted with those provided by a tutorial:

In each case the features as perceived by an observer create the possibility for a certain kind of behaviour. We may like to think that a lecture affords learning, but the additional affordance of preparing to speak [by participants in the tutorial] creates the possibility that learners [in a tutorial] focus their attention and content processing in a way that is more productive for learning. Different learning media are likely to have different affordances for learning (Laurillard, 2000, p.3).

Five features of narrative museum exhibitions are identified. The first is that a narrative exhibition is a fixed configuration of exhibition components through which a visitor is free to plot a variable path; the second is that objects are a core component that museums use to support their story-telling in exhibitions and stimulate narrative meaning-making among their audiences; the third that visitors participate with each other in socially-based meaning-making processes; the fourth that an interpretive framework supports linkage between the narrative exhibition and the different communities interfacing with it; and the fifth is that narrative exhibitions afford meaning-making by different interpretive communities who engage with exhibition components and the narrative, in different ways. The distinctive communities I select for this literature review are the exhibition development team, Māori, art, history and science audiences. I select these to reflect stakeholder interests in exhibition development specifically at Te Papa. These divisions are fairly arbitrary, depending on the data being sought by the methodology. The audience could equally have been divided in terms of gender, age or class had they been of relevance to the underlying thesis.

A particular challenge in this more specific section of the literature review is to reflect a range of practices from production-centred models of exhibition development, where the museum is seen as leading narrative formulation for transmission to a passive audience, to an audience-centred model that views audiences as active co-creators of narrative, and a third “transactional” model, which straddles both (Feinberg & Leinhardt, 2002; Paris & Mercer, 2002; Stainton, 2002):

Transactions with objects might evoke tangential, unintended, or novel responses and might change the knowledge, beliefs or attitudes of the visitor. Learning about the object in a unidirectional manner from viewer to object is not as important as creating personally relevant transactions with objects that allow bi-directional influences (Paris & Mercer *op. cit.*, p. 401)

This transactional model resonates with Kristine Morrissey's directive that we balance the presentation of museum content with the creation of opportunities for the visitor to respond to objects (2002, p.297).

## **3.2 Specific features of the medium**

### **3.2.1 Narrative exhibitions are a fixed configuration of components through which visitors plot a variable path**

The characteristic that narrative exhibitions are physical, fixed configurations of components arrayed in three-dimensional space, where visitors are afforded the freedom to 'read' stories in any sequence or timeframe they wish, distinguishes this medium from most other narrative media . Both linear and non-linear paths through the narrative are afforded.

Just as providers bring specialised knowledge to the creation of exhibitions, visitors bring frames of reference through which they contextualise, interpret, and evaluate their experience. ...Visitors mis-interpret intended messages, use the exhibition space in unanticipated ways, and develop their own stories to explain exhibition contents (Wizevich, 1993, p. 16).

With the development of new media, non-linear paths have been a particular focus of research into narrative delivery by computers. The similarity between hypertextual paths in web navigation and non-linear visitor paths in exhibitions makes that research of considerable relevance to narrative exhibition developers who wish to form a clearer picture of exhibition reception.

Plowman has focused her interest in narrative on presentation by CDROMs. In her world, narratives consist of a large number of units of text, graphics, audio and video that are connected by hyperlinks, or navigated by making selections from menus.

Users select different routes through fields of information, much of which is composed as narrative. She has documented the 'lost in hyperspace' syndrome in which children confronting narrative material in a non-linear format underwent cognitive overload resulting in problematic orientation and navigation, losing track of thoughts and fracturing their learning experience. In order for non-linear narratives to stay comprehensible, they need to be supported by structural scaffolding that provides guidance and they need to be organised so that individual chapters or segments are not highly dependant on preceding ones in order to make sense (Plowman 1996, 1997).

In practice, exhibition narratives may be subdivided by chronology, geography or any meaningful theme, and each segment is presented at a different location within the exhibition footprint. Clearly risks have been associated with the coherency of chronologically segmented exhibitions where causal relations were compromised if segments were viewed in a different order, and in those cases supporting frameworks should be put in place<sup>12</sup>.

Non-linear visitor paths have produced alternative narrative readings while affording active (cognitive) construction of meaning by visitors within the exhibition. But it should not be ruled out that visitors may still perceive the 'intended' exhibition narrative in a non-linear reading. Ryan has described the concept of cognitive map as a "sketch-pad of short-term or episodic memory" that fed back into the global overview of the story being maintained in the long-term memory. She pointed out that even though a movie delivered non-sequential fragmented snapshots of a story, most plots could be followed because of a rudimentary sketching of global space (Ryan, 2003).

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<sup>12</sup> For example, in Te Papa's *Antarctic Heroes* exhibition that portrayed the race between Scott and Shackleton to the South Pole, a number of spatial configurations would have been possible. In fact one zone in the gallery was established to tell the episodes of Scott's journey, a separate one for Shackleton's. But a timeline that stretched along one wall aligned key events in the rival expeditions one above the other, imaginatively and spatially dramatising their relative progress. (Langridge, 2005).

A cognitive map is a mental map of spatial relations. ...The space represented by the map can indeed be real or imaginary. The representation can be based on embodied experience (moving through space, seeing, hearing, smelling the world) or on the reading of texts. The text can be a graphic map, or a verbal evocation. The verbal evocation can be narrowly focused on space (directions, descriptions, travel guides) or treat space as a stage for narrative events (*ibid.*, p. 215).

The narrative exhibition can thus be seen to afford variable visitor paths through exhibition components, accommodating passive, active and transactional models of reception.

### **3.2.2 Objects are a core component that museums use to support their story-telling and stimulate narrative meaning-making among their audiences**

The use of objects as signifiers sets narrative exhibitions aside from the spoken and literary narrative forms that narratology more usually refers to because the meanings of objects *per se* are variable and unstable. “Objects can be tremendous bearers of information, but not in the same way as documents and therefore the reading of material evidence has to take other forms” (Kavanagh, 1996, p.5). “When objects are read in isolation, like sentences that are not integrated into their meaning, the result is piecemeal or superficial comprehension of insular bits of information” (Van Kraayenoord & Paris 2002, p.226).

Among the different methods for “reading objects”, the most useful distinction for the present discussion is between models on the one hand that have conceived of the object as evidence of its own story, as bearing witness to the facts of its own history and provenance, and those on the other hand that envisaged meaning developing “as an interactive process between thing and viewer” (Pearce, 1994, p.19).

Historically, priority was given to the true meaning encoded by the object<sup>13</sup>, and this remained the basis for methodologies such as Elliot *et al.*, (1994). But increasingly the focus has broadened to include object and interpreter in partnership (Ames, 1994; Pearce *op. cit.*; Prown, 1994). Visitors were characterised as receivers and makers of narrative as they encountered objects in museums (Feinberg & Leinhardt *op.cit.*; Mason, 2005; van Kraayenoord & Paris, *op.cit.*).

The exhibition *Art/artifact*, presented in 1988 by The Centre for African Art in New York, dramatically demonstrated how context influences perceived meanings of objects. Four different areas of the exhibition reflected different paradigms of display, but the objects were not placed in their appropriate contexts. In a room identified as 'Art Gallery' a utilitarian object was reverentially displayed in a pool of light on a low platform. So convincing was the context that they "received inquiries from art collectors about where they might acquire such a marvellous item" (Vogel, 1989, p.198).

The layering of covert meanings of objects in 20<sup>th</sup> century displays was detailed by McCarthy (2007)<sup>14</sup>, and Haraway (1984)<sup>15</sup>. By the 1980s, considerable pressure was

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<sup>13</sup> See Realist narratology, Chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> McCarthy analysed a succession of paradigms within which Māori taonga were displayed within New Zealand's national museum from 1865 to 2001. He traced a particular waharoa (Māori gateway), from its contextualization as an ethnological specimen in the NZ International Exhibition in Christchurch, 1906-7, to its display as a symbol of one of the corporate principles in Te Papa today. McCarthy alludes to a certain irony between the creative improvisation with which Neke Kapua and his sons approached its making, and its representation as a traditional relic within the Māori Hall of the then Dominion Museum (2007). These different meanings of this taonga are not explicit claims, but are convincing readings of covert display contexts it was presented in.

<sup>15</sup> Haraway reviewed display styles at the American Museum of Natural History from 1908 to 1936, claiming that "behind every mounted animal, bronze sculpture, or photograph lies a profusion of objects and social interactions among people and other animals, which in the end can be re-composed to tell a biography embracing major themes for 20<sup>th</sup> century United States. But the recomposition produces a story that is reticent, even mute, about Africa" (1984, p. 21).

brought to bear on museums to apply critical practices in order to deconstruct these covert narratives. Breaking down the myth “that objects were being displayed simply to reveal their inherent truths”, a new model emerged in which the story became overt, and objects were incorporated to flesh out or illustrate the story (Bedford, 2001; Gurian, 1991, 1995). While overt narrative exhibitions were seen by some as a new paradigm, they were seen by others as simply another “fiction” presented by museums (Macdonald & Silverstone 1990). Different variations of these narrative formats persist in museums today.

Also, exhibition visitors bring thoughts of their own to enhance their understandings of the objects they are looking at (Falk & Dierking, 1992; Feinberg & Leinhardt, *op.cit.*; Paris & Mercer, *op.cit.*; van Kraayenoord & Paris, 2002;). A visitor might have personal memories of a similar object, knowledge of older technologies that allow them to imagine how something was used, or cultural experience that relates to the life of the object before it was brought into the museum.

Within these generalisations about affordances of objects, it should also be acknowledged that different kinds of objects can engage people in different ways. Artefacts, artworks and taonga<sup>16</sup> for example can be differentiated as separate object categories, produced by different kinds of makers, and made meaningful in different social contexts and communities prior to being brought into museum collections. Not only have these different categories now become integrated in many museums, but their respective communities are integrated into general museum audiences. There is a potential for tensions if their different conventions are not taken into account in narrative exhibition development and steps taken to manage this complexity.

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<sup>16</sup> See section 3.2.5

### 3.2.3 Visitors participate with each other in socially-based meaning-making processes

Affording collective audience participation distinguishes the narrative exhibition from many other media that are received by a solitary viewer/reader. Solitary and shared museum experiences, while both beneficial, are demonstrated to work in different ways (Packer & Ballantyne, 2005). Individuals learn *about* each other when they learn *through* each other (Morrissey, *op.cit.*, p.285).

“Reading objects together as shared experiences creates a co-constructed narrative among participants and the objects that becomes part of their shared autobiographical stories” (van Kraayenoord & Paris, *op.cit.*, p.227). Two ways of reading objects in social situations were noted: shared readings that included instructional episodes (for example those by adults which scaffolded children’s learning), or exchanges with “a range of personal emotions that are expressed or shared” (*ibid.*).

Patterns of social influence have been demonstrated in research and noted in the literature of Lynda Kelly:

Strong support emerged for learning as meaning-making; social learning; physical learning and learning based on a person’s interests, choices and motivations. ...In depth interviewees talked about interacting with *both* the content of the exhibition and the other people in the group they had visited with. (2007, pp.6 - 7)

Museums have the potential to take an active role in enhancing social interactions between visitors in exhibitions (Coffee, 2007; McManus, 1991; Morrissey, *op.cit.*)<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> For example the Family Learning Project in Philadelphia conducted a research project across four area museums, developing performance indicators that quantified interaction and generating seven exhibit characteristics that were effective in facilitating family learning. The first was that the exhibit was multisided so that the family could cluster around it; the second was that any interactive component be multi-user, allowing for several sets of hands (or bodies)

“It is up to exhibition developers to design for groups rather than individuals so that visitors can have lively and meaningful conversations as they look at or interact with museum objects” (McManus *op.cit.*, p.258). By acquiring new knowledge and developing a structure within which to place prior knowledge, visitors “can share that visit experience with friends in real time and in a later recounting” (Leinhardt & Crowley, 2002, p. 315). This conversational mode of meaning-making and elaboration may be externalised or internalised. In the absence of conversations with other people, many visitors would choose instead to carry out a dialogue with the exhibition, particularly the text of the labels (Rand, 1985; McManus, *op.cit.*; Keith, 2002).

The Museum Learning Collective used conversational elaboration as an index of learning in exhibitions, linking it in turn to the nature of visitors’ identity<sup>18</sup>, the structure of the learning environment<sup>19</sup>, and the degree of explanatory engagement<sup>20</sup> (Feinberg & Leinhardt *op.cit.*). The interconnectedness of the features of the exhibition medium became apparent as the discussion progressed.

Visitor research is seen to play an important role in fostering interactivity between visitors, as well as between visitors and the exhibition. It gives exhibition developers valuable insight into the “social practices of enculturation and cognition” that visitors are engaged in, while at the same time enacting interactivity between themselves and their audience (Coffee, *op.cit.*, p. 386).

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at once; the third was that the environment should be accessible (comfortable to use by adults and children); the fourth was to generate multiple outcomes (observation and interaction should be sufficiently complex to encourage group discussion); the fifth that the experience should be multimodal, appealing to different styles and levels of knowledge; the sixth that text should be readable and arranged in easily understood segments; and finally the seventh, that the exhibition components should be relevant, providing cognitive links to visitors’ existing knowledge and experience (Borun, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> See discussion 3.5 on interpretive communities

<sup>19</sup> See discussion 3.1 on exhibitions as fixed configurations affording variable visitor paths

<sup>20</sup> See discussion 3.4 on interpretive framework

### 3.2.4 An interpretive framework supports linkage between the narrative exhibition and the different communities interfacing with it

Ideas of what constitutes good interpretation have changed over time, although as with most chronologies, remnants of earlier stages persist.

The inventor of interpretation was Freeman Tilden, who expressed the seed of an idea that changed the face of exhibitions:

The word interpretation as used in this book refers to a public service that has so recently come into our cultural world that a resort to the dictionary for a competent definition is fruitless. ...To fill a hiatus that urgently needs to be remedied, I am prepared to define the function called Interpretation by ...museums and similar cultural institutions as: *an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information* (1957, pp. 3-8).

Tilden's ideas anticipated by decades the shift in emphasis from objects to 'experience' that would echo through museums around the world by the 1980s. A second phase of development was described by Ham in his overview of the history of interpretation:

Influenced by the Canadian media philosopher Marshall McLuhan, and the classic Shannon-Weaver communication model ...interpretive researchers set out to find the "best" interpretive media. ...We thought that the most preferred media were the most effective media because voluntary exposure and self-selection were requisite to any cognitive or behavioural outcomes interpretation might produce (Ham, 2002, p. 4).

Within this mindset, certain new media were seen as inherently better and were therefore incorporated into narrative exhibitions.

A third phase emerged as researchers determined that audiences were made up of groups with diverse learning styles, and that different interpretive strategies afforded learning through different learning styles (Cabon & Wilson, 2002; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Mason, 2005; Samson, 1995; Schaller, Borun, Allison-Bunnell & Chambers, 2006). In this paradigm, the best way to select media was to orchestrate a variety of media to engage a breadth of learning styles.

Commentators are divided as to whether interpretation, and the narrative structure it is linked with, is desirable in terms of public practice or not. In reaction to persistence of the earlier 'transmission' model, in which the museum determined exhibition narrative, there has been a swing in museological writing advocating a shift of narrative meaning-making to audiences. Gurian, who was formerly a staunch advocate of narrative exhibition, has changed her stance because of the potential conflict of interest between audience goals in museums and museum's narratives in exhibitions. She hypothesised a new museum model in which narrative organisation of exhibitions is replaced by "unfettered browsing" of very lightly organised collections (more like open storage) where visitors pursue the "satisfaction of internalised questions" (2006, p. 4).

For others however, there is the aspiration that narrative exhibitions could reach beyond the 'transmission model' and also afford visitors the opportunity to engage in active meaning-making (Hooper-Greenhill, *op.cit.*; McManus, *op.cit.*; Mason, *op.cit.*; Perin, *op.cit.*; Schiele, 1993). Models of *active narrative construction* by audiences and *narrative transactions* hold particular promise.

The interpretive media that have been discussed most often in the literature, in the context of narrative exhibitions are text & graphic labels, audio-visual media and computerised interactives.

Text and graphic panels are the longest established interpretive media in museum exhibitions. It was apparent as I reviewed the literature about labels that researchers' findings at times contradicted each other (particularly as to how much text visitors would read), and that much of the published research and analysis was completed prior to 2000. The inconsistency of results may also mean that visitor responses are contingent on time and place. Because knowing one's audience is of such importance to effective narrative exhibition delivery, then ongoing visitor research and evaluation of exhibition components is clearly of considerable importance.

Researchers' and writers' observations centred around two different affordances that text and graphic interpretation present to visitors – the affordance to receive visual messages and the affordance to read the label content. In a visual sense, the labels in an exhibition should be organised in a clear hierarchy<sup>21</sup> (Keith, *op.cit.*). Labels should have coherent fonts, layout and graphics (*ibid.*; Anctil, 1995; Rand, *op.cit.*); they should maximise reading comfort and be in keeping with the content of the text (Jacobi & Poli, 1995). Kelly (2007, p.6) cites the following points made by McLean: labels need to allow for simultaneous viewing by a number of people; they should be close enough to the area they refer to that the visitor makes the connection between what is on the label and what it refers to; and labels should allow viewing from a range of heights. The importance cannot be overstated that labels need to complement other components of the exhibition and encourage visitors to also interact with displayed objects and other media (Ferguson, MacLulich & Ravelli, 1995).

In terms of the written content of the label, there was agreement over the importance of a conversational 'voice' to represent the identity of the museum and link well with the visitors to the exhibition (Ferguson et al. *op.cit.*; Keith *op.cit.*).

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<sup>21</sup> The text & graphic hierarchy at Te Papa, developed by Keith as Head Writer, defines different classes of labels by their purpose (e.g. introductory, thematic, extended object label etc), by size, approximate word count, and font size. Designers maintain a similar design theme in each particular class of label, and position labels consistently with respect to access routes.

Label text can be thought of as rather like a speech bubble in a cartoon 'which happens to hold the words of the person who prepared the exhibit. Great care should be taken in the choosing of words as they will be dealt with in the museum when interpreters are not there and in a very real sense they are a substitute for their speaking presence (McManus, *op.cit.*, p. 39).

Coxall went further, suggesting effort be invested by exhibition developers to gain deeper understanding of the voices of their audiences and the communities whom they represent (*op.cit.*).

Clearly written language has features that have led to its persistent use in exhibitions: it delivers information in a linear order, which to some extent is needed to establish a coherent narrative framework, and its meanings are less variable than objects. However, if narrative exhibitions are to function in their own right, there needs to be some restraint so that text labels are supportive frameworks for other exhibition components rather than written narrative in their own right, distributed within a museum space.

For audio-visual and interactive computer media, there is a unique challenge to be addressed: integrating another person - a media producer - into the interpretive framework of the museum. In practice it has demonstrated benefits and risks. Many producers of audiovisual media came from the entertainment sector where they practiced an audience-focused approach that has since reinforced the team's commitment to active audience interpretation (Thomas, 1998). Computer specialists however were more likely to come from a work culture that didn't require them "to differentiate between a programming challenge that was fun to develop and an application that [specific exhibition] visitors enjoy using" (Mintz, 1998, p.32). In fact, a preferred starting point for developing media is for all participants in the exhibition design process to think about "how the visitor might use the knowledge presented in the exhibits rather than thinking about what objects to exhibit or what ideas to present" (Falk & Dierking, 1992 *op.cit.*, p. 142). Schaller et al recalled the importance also of all media producers reflecting a range of learning styles:

Developers ...would need to look beyond their own intuitive personal preferences to find ways to engage learners. Two different solutions to this problem are possible. First, developers can create custom activities for each learning style, offering a suite of a la carte activities ...Alternatively, developers can incorporate attributes that appeal to each of the learning styles into a single integrated activity (*op.cit.*, p.10).

Audio-visual displays in particular have often been prejudged by adult visitors as being mundane, in contrast to the authenticity visitors expected to find in a museum experience. It is up to exhibition designers and media producers to engage creatively with the differences afforded in the narrative exhibition environment. Technically they have been freed from many of the constraints (timeslots, goals, and genre) of broadcast television but in entering the museum context, must accept new challenges:

The museum exhibition is a site-specific, social experience. Visitors, whether they come in groups or singly, expect to walk through a gallery following narrative that is expressed by space and illustrated by objects. Visitors know that they are likely to encounter others in that space and these encounters provide opportunities to further explore exhibition themes. This is a social experience, one based on real people, real places and real objects. It is this reality that the media producer must acknowledge and address when designing a programme for museum use (Thomas *op.cit.*, p. 10)

“Good audio-visuals ideally afford choices not closure, and foster a closer understanding of the “real world” rather than simply representing it” (Semper, 1998). Interactive media not only *imply* choices; they are structured to *require* choices to be made by the visitor/user in order to progress to the next stage of the ‘story’. Interactive stories are designed as a branching narrative with multiple parallel sequences for getting from A to B.

Whereas in other media authors have to prioritise given narrative lines and relegate others to sub-plots or jettison them altogether, in interactive multimedia the author has the opportunity to explore a range of narrative choices, not necessarily privileging one over the others (Plowman, 2005 *op.cit.*, p. 6).

Interactives use narrative in different ways: firstly they contain linear elements in each section; secondly they have the organisation of a branching story; and thirdly they have the capacity to support non-linear meaning-making in visitor/users (Carlquist, 2002). This ability for narrative to migrate beyond the formal boundaries of the medium into the imagination and life-stories of visitors, is picked up by other scholars.

Although narrative exists within the [medium itself], within the reader's imagination it leaches out from there: by connecting with events in our own lives, by setting up a series of what if questions, by extending beyond the text so that we infer what led up to the start of the story and what happens after its conclusion (Plowman, 2005 *op.cit.*, p. 6).

Interactives also afford active interpretive construction by visitors/users, by presenting multiple points of view on a single topic. For example, Mintz described an exhibition where visitors could select one of four 'guides' to mediate their visitor experience. They could select one whose point of view was most compatible with theirs or seek out contrasting opinions. This encouraged multiple engagements by users who knew they could expect new journeys each time, and could discover the consequences of different decisions. (*op.cit.* p.26).

There were, however, risks associated with the use of interactive interpretive elements. Plowman documented the "lost in hyperspace" syndrome where "users find orientation and navigation... problematic, [losing] track of their thoughts" (Plowman, 1997 *op.cit.*, p. 2). She described the need for cognitive support and 'scaffolding'<sup>22</sup> to promote the considerable advantages that interactives brought to the exhibition environment. There was a further risk that an interactive could become an end in itself instead of a collaborating element in a narrative interpretive framework. Carlquist reported a shared concern among game theorists that the competitiveness of the

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<sup>22</sup> This echoes similar calls in the larger exhibition environment for text and graphic labels to establish a cognitive framework to support non-linear interpretations in the exhibition as a whole. See discussion of text and graphic interpretation.

game *per se*, and the increased freedom of engagement, might lessen users' engagement with the intended narrative content and context (*op.cit.*).

Interpretive media offered a variety of affordances and choices for visitors to narrative exhibitions providing certain conditions were met: there needed to be a balance between providing the freedom for active narrative interpretation to visitors, and providing cognitive support or scaffolding to maintain quality visitor engagement; there needed to be an appeal, as in other interpretive media, to a variety of learning styles<sup>23</sup>; there needed to be thorough evaluation to test visitor responses; and there needed to be a thorough integration of all media and components into the narrative content of the exhibition.

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<sup>23</sup> Schaller at al (*op.cit.*, p. 3), include the following suggestions of activities to suit particular learning styles:

<b>Activity type:</b>	<b>Learning style:</b>
<b>Role-play:</b> allows users to adopt a persona and interact with other characters	<b>Social:</b> might prefer this since information is gathered from other characters in the activity
<b>Simulation:</b> employs a model of the real world that users can manipulate to develop an understanding of a complex system.	<b>Intellectual:</b> Might find an abstract representation of the world more readily appealing.
<b>Puzzle-mystery:</b> Involves analysis and deductive reasoning to reach a logical conclusion. The user relies on evidence from people, nature or reference material.	<b>Practical:</b> Might be attracted to problem-solving in the real world.
<b>Design:</b> emphasizes open-ended enquiry and experimentation, with a personal creation as the product of the experience.	<b>Creative:</b> might be more engaged by the opportunity to create something unique.
<b>Interactive reference:</b> provides multimedia content in a topical or thematic structure, for self-directed browsing	<b>Intellectual:</b> might appeal to those with self-motivated research goals.
<b>Discussion forum:</b> facilitates interpersonal communication among users and subject experts.	<b>Social:</b> might be preferred as an opportunity to interact with other people

### 3.2.5 Narrative exhibitions afford meaning-making by different interpretive communities who engage with the exhibition in different ways

Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (*op.cit.*) engaged Stanley Fish's model of interpretive communities to highlight that *commonalities* among visitors to narrative museums need to be brought into play as well as their *diversity*. Groups of participants bring to the exhibition shared metanarratives that draw them together into an interpretive community.

Research into the strategies and repertoires of a range of interpretive communities enables museum producers to develop exhibitions that give individual members of those communities the opportunity to use their preferred strategies and their existing areas of knowledge. (Hooper-Greenhill, *ibid.*, p.3)

If we take as an example, the well-known portrait of *Ena te Papatahi* (portrait of a kuia with pipe) painted by Charles Goldie, we could anticipate that visitors' responses will vary depending on their knowledge of a Māori worldview, of art history, of oil painting, of colonial history, of portraiture, of moko, or whether they were descended from the subject, to suggest just some of the possible contextualising meta-narratives. Few would question what Goldie himself intended, and in an artwork of such excellence, few would fail to achieve some level of narrative interpretation.

Meaning will vary according to who is looking. The meaning constructed will vary depending on a range of factors which include sociological, epistemological, cultural and linguistic factors. The interpretation of any object will be constructed in relation to the personal biography of the observer, their position in history, culture and knowledge, their cultural competence, and their interpretive strategies, all of which will have been forged within a range of interpretive communities (*ibid.*, p.6).

The concept of interpretive communities supports democratic process between different stakeholder groups. The tendency for active interpretation to be the sole

domain of exhibition developers is mitigated and visitor communities are afforded more opportunities for active meaning-making.

Interpretive communities are not discrete groups. They overlap, interact, inspire, persuade, negotiate, transform, and operate in power relationships with each other. They have the potential for synergy. The challenge is for exhibition designers to provide for multiple interpretive communities to actively participate in narrative exhibitions

Nor are interpretive communities necessarily as coherent as this discussion may suggest. In fact the notion of interpretive community is easily problematised by pointing to the diversity of people subsumed within its ranks. But it does provide a workable construct that buffers between the extremes – of totalising participants into a homogeneous whole on the one hand, or individualising them to a degree that no point can be made on the other.

Five significant interpretive communities are nominated for consideration here in more detail: that of the exhibition development team, Māori, art, history, and science.

**3.2.5.1 The exhibition development team** acts as a bridge between the metanarrative of the organisation and those of its stakeholders, as well as among exhibition team members with different roles.

On the one hand the exhibition team needs to mediate between the mission or metanarrative of their organisation, and the metanarratives of visitor groups, so visitors can function as more active participants in meaning-making. Some interpretive communities may also have unique relationships to exhibitions (i.e. when they are participants in community exhibitions<sup>24</sup>, or the makers or source of collections (for example Māori with taonga, artists with artworks, or communities with artefacts).

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Te Papa committed to represent different ethnic community cultures in its Community Gallery to fulfil requirements in its mandating Act of Parliament. Comparing two reviews of a recent community exhibition – one from the point of view of Te Papa's curator of

Full consensus in exhibition development would be unimaginable. Differences between developers of exhibitions and other stakeholder groups inevitably need to be negotiated. But careful and creative negotiation should be carried out between the narrative constraints of the organisation and those of participant communities, to achieve as balanced a resolution as possible

Exhibition development teams have the advantage of stable unifying frameworks that transcend individual exhibition development projects. These include their organisation's mission, standards of good and best professional practice, codes of ethics, and requirements and legislative frameworks – that bring shared values and contribute to the coherency of their interpretive community. Nonetheless, tensions arise from the different functional responsibilities held by different team members (Lee, 2007, Wizevick, *op.cit*):

Conflict between the two main types of provider – designers, responsible for visual aspects, and curators/developers, responsible for content – was explicitly or implicitly evident in all case studies, and contributed to exhibition failure. Conflicts revolved around issues of power and priority, reflecting underlying differences in status, role within the museum organisation, and essential cultural values. In the hierarchy governing exhibition design, curators/developers (the 'high priests of culture' according to McDonald, 1991) have maintained greater decision-making power, despite institutional belief in the democracy of design 'teams'. Since the knowledge bases and cultural assumptions upon which these two sets of

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the exhibition, the other from a member of the community group – there were two different interpretations of whether Te Papa had fulfilled its obligations to bring communities' stories to a national and international audience. From within the museum's "interpretive community", curator Stephanie Gibson presented her view that:

Between the framework and the actual reality (created by the sometimes conflicting imperatives of a national museum operating within budget constraints) lies good faith on the part of all participants involved in community exhibition projects (2003, p. 73).

In contrast, the community group's "interpretive community", commented:

A truly representative advisory group needs to be established for each project. Lack of time or financial resources should not dictate the formation of such a group. Te Papa needs to be prepared to allocate extra resources if any gaps ... are identified (Wood, 2005, p.134)

professionals base their work vary in significant ways, exhibitions are embedded with inherently contradictory messages (*ibid.*, p. 183).

The exhibition team can thus be seen as a potentially centrifugal or centripetal force – able to draw diverse elements together but equally vulnerable to their internal differences.

**3.2.5.2 Māori** constitute a fluid and diverse interpretive community functioning in multiple roles around the narrative exhibition. Within the interpretive community

...there are at least three intersecting and interconnected worldviews, which can be associated with three periods in history: precontact (classical mythology); colonial/religious (emphasis on supreme being); and modern/postmodern economic (rise of the 'knowledge' economy/society). Today all three (and combinations of the three, plus a myriad of 'sub' worldviews) find expression in contemporary Māori culture. ...The key point here is that a fluid diversity of worldviews exists (Royal, *op.cit.*, p. 12).

There are two types of roles that should ideally be available to Māori within narrative exhibition development if issues of representation – of whose stories are being told by whom – are to be addressed. These roles are linked on the one hand to the distinctiveness of Māori knowledge and understanding; and on the other to the differences between taonga and artefacts in a Western sense.

There is a strong co-relation between the cultures of people developing exhibitions, the culture portrayed and the audiences who become engaged with the exhibition “Every exhibition, whatever its overt subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it” (Karp & Lavine, 1991, p. 1). If museums are to retain their role as presenters of culture to general populations, then they need to explore ways of increasing Māori participation in programme development to afford engagement by Māori audiences as well as non-Māori. At the very least, exclusivity should be avoided in the meta-narratives within which exhibitions are conceived.

Liu has described two dominant ways in which New Zealand culture has been represented:

...the psychological meaning of New Zealand history can be grasped from a bicultural perspective or from a liberal democratic perspective. The implications of the two ...are at times quite distinct and at odds with one another, and at other times fit like the pieces of the puzzle that complete one another (2005, p. 70).

In a *bicultural* metanarrative, the nation emerged as a partnership between Māori and the Crown (representing Pākehā/New Zealand Europeans and other groups). Māori and Pākehā were cast as the main actors in the national story. The *liberal democratic* metanarrative on the other hand, inherited from Great Britain, portrayed all people as equal. In practice this was only achievable within certain constraints, one of which was the relative population sizes of different constituent groups, and one of the outcomes of colonisation has been the dominance of the Pākehā voice (*ibid.*).

Although there can be considerable overlap between these two worldviews, research has demonstrated a consistent difference in terms of who supported which narrative, and how that affected prioritising of interests. Not surprisingly Māori have been far more likely to operate within the bicultural model while non-Māori favoured a liberal democratic model.

Within New Zealand, opinion has been divided about whether and how public museums can best balance public needs. Te Papa in particular has led the way by embracing biculturalism as a corporate principle, and thus a primary contextualising narrative. In terms of engaging more democratically within New Zealand by affording engagement with many Māori communities, as well as those non-Māori stakeholders for whom biculturalism is a preferred model of identity, their practice would be seen as a success. Inclusivity is a powerful tool in the affirmation of identity (Feinberg & Leinhardt, *op.cit.*; Paris & Mercer, *op.cit.*; Radley, 1990; Stainton, *op.cit.*).

A community preserves, or rather it remakes its collective past through commemorative acts, which include oral accounts making up what is termed 'popular memory'. This re-making of the past provides communities with their identity, establishing a continuity which is the basis for approaching the future (Radley, *op. cit*, p. 56).

But there are those who question whether this affirmation of traditional Māori identity has undercut Te Papa's mandate to the New Zealand population as a whole (Dibley, 1997; Williams, 2003). While Tapsell (2006) is concerned with "finding balance between customary values (lore) and policy (law)", this also requires achieving a greater balance between the museum's commitment to "normative biculturalism (as a guiding social policy principle)" and the "pragmatic multiculturalism" (Bartley and Spoonley, 2005, p.146) that is present beyond the museum and that takes account of the diversity of Māori, Pākehā and migrant communities within Aotearoa/New Zealand (Message, 2007, p.194).

Varying conceptions of New Zealand identities and the differing types of claims undermine a 'one-size-fits-all' solution (McIntosh, 2005; Barclay, 2005).

The exhibition *Te Māori*, which travelled to the U.S. in 1984, stands as a highly successful example of a narrative-rich exhibition of Māori culture that was developed and presented by a traditional Māori interpretive community for international, largely non-Māori audiences. It contrasted with previous exhibitions of Māori material culture driven by Pākehā.

Māori people had control of their artistic heritage ...defining, explaining, communicating and heralding the awakening of a new age. [Museums needed to] make Māoris the players in the script which informs, educates and communicates not only the museum profession, but also to the world at large (Hakiwai, 2005, p. 159).

There can be no doubt that the contextualisation of the exhibition within the living cultural practices of the Māori interpretive community generated an experience for

both Māori and non-Māori audiences alike, which professional excellence in exhibition development *on its own* would find hard to match.

The second role in museums for Māori interpretive communities to take part in is as kaitiaki of particular taonga with which they have historical associations.

...Taonga can play an important role in affecting the psychology and experience of Māori people (and others!). Taonga are not merely static, inanimate and hence, unloved objects. They are vessels and repositories of special essences, presences and mana. ...It is this potential of taonga to facilitate the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary that ...motivates many Māori in their handling of taonga (Royal, *op.cit.*, p. 25).

Furthermore, many taonga encode references to ritual, histories, and whakapapa (genealogy) (*ibid.*, pp 25 – 31). This suggests that when taonga are held in museum collections and displayed in exhibitions, a high priority should be given to affording participation by those Māori communities they are related to, not only in determining what contextualising narratives are appropriate, but also in handling the taonga themselves and providing protocols for others to follow.

There are no hard and fast rules to be followed, for “the implications for these ideas will be discovered only through the day-to-day activities of a working museum” (*ibid.*, p. 25).

**3.2.5.3 Art audiences**, more so than other interpretive communities, find themselves in limbo between modes of reception that were considered the norm in the mid to late nineteenth hundreds and the developments emerging in the past decade. In what has become a foundation text in museum studies, Duncan Cameron contrasted the rarefied atmosphere of earlier museums that catered to a well-educated, contemplative audience with a more frenetic democratised environment where visitors

were actively engaged in learning as part of their reception of exhibits. The choice between these styles has however been less straightforward than first seems possible.

The meanings of art according to Western art history are closely linked with narrative at different levels and in different guises (Steiner, 2004). Depending on the particular methodology of art history being used, different ways of 'reading' artworks emerge. Also different modes of display influence the way a work is interpreted.

Within medieval European art, for example, iconography assigned strict symbolic meanings to pictorial forms, so that looking at an artwork was akin to reading hieroglyphics (Adams, 1996; Panofsky, 1955;). In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, narrative paintings located in important civic buildings portrayed dramatic religious and secular events by depicting narrative tableaux from mythology, history and contemporary life (*ibid.*). These conveyed national narratives on which the state was founded.

But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Modernism triggered a progressive denial of narrative content in art in favour of form and process (Greenberg, 1961). Artist biographies and academic discourse took on the contextualising role in the absence of pictorial narrative. Under this influence, museums evolved to strongly reflect the anti-narrative stance of Modernism (Staniszewski, 1998; Vogel *op.cit.*). They therefore appealed to well educated visitors who viewed art in a contemplative, ritualised and internalised manner (Cameron, 1971). Museums and galleries have tended to avoid potential clashes in how audiences approach artworks by displaying them in spaces that contextualise covertly, leaving meanings and narratives unspoken.

Within this manner of display, art audiences developed in all countries surveyed, who were better educated and of higher socio-economic than their counterparts not only in the population at large but also in other kinds of cultural institutions (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991; Merriman, 1991; Schuster, 1995).

But since the 1980s, amidst the general pressure on museums to increase their fiscal responsibility by enlarging audiences (Hudson, 1977), art museums became more visitor-focused (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995), and aspired to become hubs of cultural activity that played “a vital role in the living identity of their community” (Worts, 1995, p. 164).

Narrative exhibitions with more overt interpretive material have been part of this thrust, reaching out to new audiences who are not necessarily educated in art historical discourse. But museums have faced a dilemma as to how much interpretation to provide in art exhibitions; on one hand it enhances the experience of novice audiences by providing vibrant narratives to contextualise the artworks and engage visitor perspectives, but on the other has been criticised as distracting some who come to view art with their context for viewing internalised (Rice, 2003). Zolberg points to

the persistently evoked danger that democratisation is being accomplished at the expense of the elite experience. Some fear that the museum may become, instead of a serious institution, a place for popular entertainment with no standards of quality to govern the selection of artworks.

Serota, Vogel and Staniszewski (*op.cit.*) emphasise that interpretation and contextualisation happens where art is hung whether or not there is text to guide the viewer. Design of spaces in which art is displayed, as well as other art works with which it is juxtaposed, heavily influence visitor perceptions. But some museum professionals advocate more types of guidance and education to draw less educated visitors into meaningful experiences.

Multimedia technology has the potential to provide a flexible, non-intrusive tool that novice visitors could use to develop context without radically altering the environment enjoyed by informed viewers. Kiosks and hand-held visitor guides would provide a virtual space where interpretation could be situated (Sayre, 1998). Axelson has looked at how audiences also used their attendance at associated public events to

improve their experience of exhibitions. She identified providing additional contextualisation, engaging in social connections within the art environment, and education as important motivators among visitors (2006).

The theme of two different components of the interpretive community of art – novice and educated – threads through the literature informing the reception of art in exhibitions. The need for plural systems in exhibitions to accommodate different sectors of the art community is clear.

In the new museum, each of us, curators and visitors alike, will have to become more willing to chart our own path, redrawing the map of modern art, rather than following a single path laid down by a curator (Serota, *op.cit.*, p. 55).

**3.2.5.4 History** has had a long-standing affinity with narrative, possibly more so than any other disciplines represented in museums. Although storytelling exhibitions *per se* are not problematic for this interpretive community, the question of ‘whose stories are being told’ holds potential difficulties for visitors accustomed to the authoritative curatorial voice.

Traditionally museums engaged with history by endorsing a narrative account of the past that supported prevailing ideologies (Crew & Sims, 1991; Kavanagh, 2004; Potter & Leone, 1992). A single authorised version of the past was sanctioned as truth.

New views of narrative have, however, opened up problems and possibilities. At the fore was an examination of the close relation that narrative forms have maintained with both fictional and non-fictional representations.

What should interest us in the discussion of ... ‘the fictions of factual representation’ is the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that

of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble or correspond with each other. Although [they] may be interested in different kinds of events, both forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same (White, 2004, p.22).

Two points followed on from White's observations. Firstly a narrative may be convincing simply because it was a *coherent* rather than an *accurate* reflection of observable events – what we might call 'the truth'. Because historical discourse formed around the core value of truth, it followed that narrative needed to be interrogated for the degree to which it reflected those observable events.

The second point is that the category of 'truth' itself needed to be examined to find a path between positivism at the one extreme, and a fog of relativism at the other (Carr, *op.cit.*; Carruthers, 2004; Kirshenblatt-Gimlett, 1994).

Questioning the singularity of truth opened the way for history museums to respond to their diverse audiences. To some extent the singular authoritative voice has been relaxed and new voices are being heard. Narrative structures, with their capacity for multiple characters and perspectives, have facilitated this.

During the same time, history museums benefited from a groundswell of interest in genealogy, antiques, and historical drama, which enhanced popular interest and opened up new ways for their interpretive community to engage.

Museums have also encouraged visits from more diverse audiences by 'giving voice' to indigenous histories<sup>25</sup> (Stone, 2005), to those of specific communities<sup>26</sup> (Gibson, 2003 *op.cit.*; Woods, 2005), and represented critical perspectives (Porter, 1991). A clear answer has not emerged as to what the place of truth will be in the exhibition of

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<sup>25</sup> See 3.5.2

<sup>26</sup> See 3.5.1

the future (Buckley, 1996). But a challenge remains for museums to mediate between different voices, and to balance the popularisation and relativism of exhibitions with appropriate levels of scholarship (Liu et al., 2005; Stone, *op.cit.*).

**3.2.5.5 Science audiences** have undergone a radical change in the past 30 years in terms of who participates and how they interact.

A general trend in museums and the broader context for interpretation to become more visitor-focused and more accessible for visitors to participate in meaning-making can be recognised in the science sector. “Science museums of the past aimed to convey information to an uninitiated public; interpretation was equivalent to presenting the scientist’s worldview” (Martin and Toon, 2005. p. 409). But this simple model of the transfer of knowledge from expert to novice has become recognised as an unacceptable vision of how people make meaning (Roberts 1997). As a consequence there has been a shift from museums as representers of science, to science centres where the phenomena of science could be experienced by visitors (Martin and Toon, *op.cit.*).

The interpretive community – including both those who formulate exhibitions and the audiences who view them – was reconstituted demographically. In terms of visitors, the number of schoolchildren and other students visiting science centres and exhibitions, both as part of educational programmes and in their own right, steadily increased (Donahue and Faubert, 2001; Hughes, 2001). Schoolchildren attending educational and recreational programmes became the major constituent of the science museum and science centre interpretive community. Staffing profiles in science museums and centres also reflected new approaches. Curators were displaced as the primary presenters of science in museums in favour of a team that usually included an interpreter and educator, and at times also included media developers and consulting scientists (Allison-Bunnell, 1998; Martin and Toon, *op.cit.*). Visits were more likely to

consist of structured experiences, and exhibits more likely to be engaged through hands-on interactivity (*ibid.*).

A precondition for many of these changes has been the deconstruction of the stereotypical idea of science as the domain of objectivity. “Until relatively recently, science was not portrayed as a cultural endeavour and certainly not as a process to be questioned by the lay public” (*ibid.*). Macdonald (1996) surveys the growing discourse of ‘public understanding of science’ that has questioned the value-free simplification of science in the broadest sense as well as in museums in particular. On the one hand she identifies ethical benefits of opening science up to public debate; but on the other hand she cautions that even if museums succeed in portraying science as part of everyday life, the more difficult ‘real science’ could remain still out of reach while “strategies of familiarisation and accessibility may act as a kind of intellectual narcotic” (p. 168).

Within the literature of museum practice, related questions about real scientific engagement centre mainly on interactive technology. While this technology was demonstrated to be a most effective way of gaining visitor attention, at least in its early days when there was a high degree of novelty, it needed to be coupled with expertise in scientific education if it was to be the most effective way of fostering scientific experiences. On one side of the debate, Hughes (*op.cit.*) identified what he termed the “fetish of the interactive exhibit”, suggesting that many science exhibits simply presented experiences of technological novelty and educational rhetoric rather than substantially increasing visitors’ understanding of science. On the other side Questacon, Australia’s National Science and Technology Centre recognised their interactive science games as utilising competition and fulfilling a quest (as was common in the entertainment industry)<sup>27</sup> but they saw the means of achieving success as ‘pure science’. Most programmes described in the literature intended to balance engaging visitors through fun experiences with enhancing education and providing

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<sup>27</sup> See Carlquist *op.cit.* and section 3.4

learning outcomes (*ibid.*; Arrowood and McLaughlin, 2001; Donahue and Faubert, *op.cit.*; Gilbert and Stocklmayer, 2001; Rennie and McClafferty, 2001), and the term 'edutainment' has been drawn into everyday use to encompass this balance.

Less has been written about engaging science audiences and promoting interactivity through narrative. Thorough groundwork in identifying and optimising narrative scenarios and characters for expressing science themes has been described however by Martin and Toom (*op.cit.*). They assembled scientists, science educators, science writers, creative writers, artists and performers of many ethnic backgrounds.

The groups came up with sketches of protagonists who would serve as narrators and with topics for those characters to recount. ...The African American group developed the concept of an animated photon, Ray-Ray, who would undergo rites of passage as he traveled from the sun and met various 'cousins' by transforming energy states. The Native American group proposed a grandfather character who would tell a tale about the land and the importance of the sun. The 'people with no technical background' group proposed having a car mechanic give advice and explain the science. Other characters were suggested ...including a nosy but knowledgeable neighbor who had a lot of practical advice to offer; ...a handicapped woman detective who had a MacGyver-like approach to problem solving; ...a rapper/poet who breaks down jargon in music; ...and a mother-in-law who offers sage advice (*ibid.*, p. 418).

The qualities sought were the ability to integrate authority with authenticity, relate practical to theoretical knowledge, and balance craft with explanation. The use of narrative to this extent would bring the science experience much closer to those of social history and indigenous communities. "The question is whether science centres could adopt an explanatory framework somewhere between the 'objective' end of the spectrum ...and the many truths of visitors' experiences" (p.422).

Like other educational narratives, science stories need drama and structure. They must be crafted into special cases of narrative that are themselves an abstraction of personal experience (*ibid.*, p. 420).

As in other criteria, no firm rules are established, but the strengths and weaknesses of each option are identified so the practitioner can make educated choices for their particular audiences.

### 3.3 Summary

This concludes the review of narrative literature to provide a context for the upcoming description of exhibition practices at Te Papa. In chapter two some key approaches to narrative were surveyed in order to establish a foundation of terminology and different ways to think about what narrative is. Chapter three followed up with a more detailed review of narrative scholarship mapped on the features of the medium of exhibition. The rationale for the different approach in chapter three was that narrative meaning-making has been demonstrated to be dependant on the medium in which the narrative is communicated, particularly in the past few decades when the relatively young discipline of media studies impacted on narrative scholarship. By mapping references onto the ways exhibitions afford and constrain narrative it has been possible to highlight those areas of narrative scholarship with greatest relevance to exhibitions.

In retrospect, two areas of scholarship stood out as being especially important to exhibition development practices – firstly the fruitful investigation of visitor-guided non-linear paths through narrative by researchers engaged in CDROM development, and secondly the growing recognition of the benefits of engaging visitors in active meaning-making through their internal narrative dialogue. The echo between these ideas and McLuhan's notions of hot and cold media suggest potential for new investigations that are outside the scope of the present thesis.

## Chapter four: Te Papa's approach to narrative

### 4.1 Aim

This chapter describes a shifting focus from collections to people in the museum sector internationally in the 1980s. Narrative practices were seen by many museum professionals as a strong way to engage with the shifting priorities. Changes within New Zealand are traced as the national institutions were restructured into a single museum that systematically embraced narrative. It describes how a new process for developing exhibitions was designed and the model that evolved.

This complex historical time has been traced with the help of institutional archives and reconstructions from interviews with staff still working at Te Papa.

### 4.2 Background

Questions that were raised in the 1980s about the need for change in New Zealand's heritage sector were not a local phenomenon, even though there were fundamental factors in terms of Māori cultural positioning that were specific to New Zealand.

Kenneth Hudson's publication *Museum for the 1980s* (*op.cit.* 1977) surveys world trends in the sector, and the presence of a well-worn copy registered in the library of the National Art Gallery since 1982, suggests it could have informed to some degree the re-thinking of New Zealand's institutions. It began

At the 10<sup>th</sup> General Conference of the International Council of Museums, held in Copenhagen in 1974, it was made clear that museums throughout the world are coming to regard themselves less and less as self-contained professional units and more and more as cultural centres for the communities in which they operate. One could summarise the change by

saying that museums are no longer considered to be merely storehouses or agents for the preservation of a country's cultural and natural heritage, but powerful instruments of education in the broadest sense (*ibid.*, p.1)

While this constitutes a swing from objects to people that was fairly radical for that time, it is not an unqualified re-alignment. He quotes museologist Dr Alma S. Wittlin as providing a 'negative' vision for museums – one that tells as much about what a museum is *not* as it does about what the museum could be:

Establishments [she says] in which objects are not used at all, or are not used as main carriers of messages, are not museums, whatever their qualifications may be otherwise. A place in which people are exposed to changing lights or to a galaxy of light and sound unrelated to objects may offer a new kind of symphony or carnival ...but it is not a museum. If a few objects provided by a museum or by any source are used in a club or recreation centre among other items on the programme ...the place still retains its identity [as a club or recreation centre]. The term museum is neither better nor worse ...but we dim the outlook on our goals if we instil terms with connotations of borrowed status. There is considerable scope for a combination of objects with other media, with brief motion pictures illustrating a single concept or with appropriately designed suitably sized and placed graphics, but objects have to remain the stars of the cast (*ibid.*, p.3).

A chapter in the publication was dedicated to advocating the use of visitor surveys in order to benchmark museum practices to better accommodate visitor needs.

Within New Zealand there were shifts in the political climate as a whole and also within the museum sector, in respect of Māori participation and empowerment. The exhibition *Te Māori* toured the U.S. in 1984, and throughout New Zealand on its return. By 1985, the government of the day had given its commitment for a new National Art Gallery as part of a major Pacific Cultural Centre, and appointed a project development team to consult and make recommendations<sup>28</sup>. The outcomes were

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<sup>28</sup> A simpler and more personalized view of the early conception of the new museum was given by Nigel Cox in an interview on 30/8/2005:

Ken Gorby tells the story of how Te Papa came to be as it is. He gives the credit to Peter Tapsell, Member of Parliament, who made two statements about the

published in the report *Ngā Taonga o te Motu* (1985). It described a concept for three separate public components (a National Art Gallery, a cultural centre/Te Whare Taonga Tangata Whenua and a National Museum of Human Society & the Natural Environment/Te Whare o Te Papa-tu-a-nuku) “each exercising a high degree of independence but occupying a single or series of linked buildings designed and structured to represent and express the unity of the total concept” (*ibid.*, p.3). A fourth component was a shared Museum Support Centre to house collections and collection services such as conservation, registration, security. This concept would promote and define New Zealand culture through a series of allied museum institutions, each with the resources to present a lively perspective on New Zealand and its place in the Pacific and wider world (*ibid.*, p.3).

As work progressed at all levels – the architecture and design of spaces, the organisational design and the exhibitions framework – certain notions recurred. Consultation was an important tool (being carried out with key professionals throughout development and with the public in 1996); conceptual development centred around audience experience, replacing an earlier museum sector focus on objects; and storytelling and narrative imbued discussions of exhibition development. This was truly a groundbreaking project by the international criteria of the time.

By 1991, the concept development team presented its conceptual framework for exhibitions. It outlined how the different elements of Māori art and history, cultural and social history, art, and natural environment would occupy the spaces of the Museum. Certain distinctions were noted in the role of narrative in each of the spaces. In Māori exhibition spaces, it was noted that care would be taken not to over-interpret. “Many collection items will, if it is so decided, speak for themselves

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Museum of New Zealand when it was first mooted. He said, one, it's going to be a museum for everyone. What Ken took that to mean was that it would be a new-style museum that would try to attract a broad audience rather than just a traditional museum audience. Then, two, it would tell all our stories. Ken took that to mean a narrative-based approach. So that's where the original idea came from that it would be inclusive and tell all our stories (Cox, 2005).

to Māori audiences” (MNZTPT,1991, p. 53). In the history spaces, unifying narratives of journeys, adaptation and encounter would underlie exhibits “which dramatise the successive waves of arrivals to New Zealand” (ibid., p. 55). In the art exhibition zone it was noted ‘some exhibits may be chronologically arranged, but space for thematically arranged displays of New Zealand visual arts in a variety of visual media will also be provided” (ibid., p. 59). Shared exhibition areas were defined that would provide opportunities for “innovative exhibits” on topics that may not fall within any particular discipline area (ibid., p. 63).

In the words of Senior Institutional Planner Ken Gorby, “some of the bigger exhibitions planned for the opening will take five years to be developed – for the storyline to be researched, for innovative ways of telling that story to be worked out” (MNZTPT 1992b, p.1).

Public consultation was carried out by Colmar Brunton to “identify the optimum product mix for the Museum of New Zealand (MoNZ) to maximise visitor participation” and to “look at the product mix MoNZ is intending to offer and ascertain if the optimum balance has been achieved” (Colmar Brunton, 1996, p.5). Specific objectives of the qualitative research were to identify the key motivations in the recreation and leisure market; to obtain reaction to the overall MoNZ concept; to obtain reaction to specific components of MoNZ product including exhibitions, facilities and services; to identify any gaps between audience needs and the proposed MoNZ product; and to determine what MoNZ needed to do to attract and encourage visitation (*ibid.*). The report provided a detailed profile of values for the new museum to carry into its ongoing practice. Of particular relevance to the present research are the eight key motivations that were identified for the recreation /leisure market: uniqueness, intellectual challenge, social image, social acceptance, individual physicality, group physicality, immersion and escapism. While most of these motivators can be generalised as desirable for museums, one ties specifically into narrative. That is

the motivator of immersion, which was defined in the report as “about being immersed in the experience e.g. it puts you back in history, places you there. It is about emotional involvement e.g. like being there, experiencing it” (*ibid.*, p. 15).

### 4.3 Narrative in the ‘old’ galleries

At the same time as the Project Team was beginning development of the new museum, its precursor organisations – the National Art Gallery (NAG) and the National Museum (NM) – were continuing to operate. It is useful to look back on what role narrative had in their exhibition practices.

History Curator Michael Fitzgerald recalled that exhibitions in the NM were considerably simpler than anything Te Papa practices today and with budgets that were far more limited. On the one hand he describes exhibitions that were simply displays of objects with a main title and object labels – including *Treasures of the Museum* in 1990. On the other, he describes a strong engagement with narrative in the *Te Kooti* exhibition of around 1972:

[The Te Kooti exhibition] stood out for two reasons. One was that we were pioneering the use of audio and visual technologies. That was quite a groundbreaker, given the social attitudes to technology in the 1970s. The second reason is that rather than being curator led, it was the first example I can think of where we hired an outside expert – a man named Frank Davis who had done a lot of research on Te Kooti and was married to a woman from the Tuhoe tribe. To some extent he had an insider’s view of the Ringatū faith, its history, and the personality of Te Kooti. He effectively supplied us with a package of research material, and he acted almost as a conduit to the Ringatū/Tūhoe communities. That experience was a very useful point of reference as to how we would one day develop community exhibitions based upon our relationship with communities rather than laying down the law to them. It was a storytelling exhibition. We were presenting an alternative story to the stereotypes of the time (remember this was the 1970s). We were looking not only at the military side of the story but the

spiritual and religious aspects too - the practice of the Ringatū faith and the position of adherents in society at that time (Fitzgerald, 2005).

So while narrative exhibitions were not the norm, there was certainly a dawning recognition that a good story was 'worth its weight in gold' in terms of visitor appeal. Tony Mackle was Curator of Painting and Sculpture from 1980 to 1985 at the NAG. He described a similar experience:

Curators presented ideas for future exhibitions. The exhibitions programme was busy for the small permanent staff of nine or so people so there were quite a number of purely 'gap filler' exhibitions. These were usually from the permanent collections and labels were purely object based.

Larger themed or period exhibitions were also drawn from the permanent collections with a few items borrowed from other centres. These exhibitions usually had extended labels which were based on a chronological / narrative interpretation giving information about the object and the artist and influences surrounding the creation of the object. Both sculpture and paintings were included in these exhibitions (Mackle, 2005).

*Art and Life in Georgian England* used this more comprehensive 'contextual' interpretation. It drew on the rich narratives presented *within* artworks of that time, associating them with items of clothing, furniture, china and glassware to give a richer sense of the period. Low-life depictions by William Hogarth made "incisive political and social comments on the people and events of the times" (National Art Gallery, 1986).

For example, his engraving *Marriage-a-la-mode*, plate 1, subtitled *The marriage contract*, was included. It showed an opulent drawing room scene that would dampen any romantic notions of marriage: the husband-to-be sat with one bandaged foot raised on a footstool, his crutches resting on either side of him. Judging by his luxurious frock coat, breeches, wig, and his generous belly, we can assume that his affliction is gout rather than a war wound. Three men, who appear to be an astrologer, an accountant and a lawyer, consult obsequiously with him on what the engraving title

suggests is the marriage contract. A young woman sits forlornly across the room, separated from her soon-to-be spouse by the large male figures. Her gaze is downcast as an advisor bends to speak in her ear. We surmise the news is not good. Nearby, two dogs echo the theme - one pert, upright, confident and proud, the other lying submissively with tail and gaze falling slackly onto the floor-rug.

This wealth of detail wove a narrative that lavishly and ironically contextualised the historical pieces of furniture and *objets d'art* drawn from the NM collection, displayed alongside the artwork. Narratives that were implicit in the exhibition were described more explicitly in articles and floor talks that functioned as a commentary to the display itself.

So it can be seen that exhibitions prior to the development of the new museum had a 'relationship of convenience' with narrative. When it seemed like an appropriate vehicle and when resources were available, it was a strategy that was employed. It was an exception rather than a rule.

#### **4.4 Taking narrative to a new level**

As work towards the new building progressed, the first project undertaken by the combined organisation, still in its old premises in Buckle Street, was the *Voices* exhibition.

It was known from the beginning that *Voices* would be narrative-based. It had been posited by the new Museum of New Zealand working group that exhibitions would have a greater currency and a wider appreciation if they were narrative-based. I'm not sure that we fully defined what that would mean to the extent that we have done it now (Smith-Kapa, 2006).

*Voices* was intended as a prototype of a new style of exhibition product and process for the new museum.

Film-maker Graeme Tetley was brought in as concept developer because of his particular understanding of narrative. He was new to the museum world and was taking on a hybrid role that was likened to that of a film director. The initial exhibition concept description could be likened to a film treatment. “There are two main characters in the story – the land and the settlers. The first were Polynesian, the second were European” (Tetley, 1991a). As the concept developed, various “courts” were described – stages in the history of Aotearoa New Zealand - that were described as though they were different sets or acts in a play, at once physical constructions and imaginative frameworks within which the narrative would be staged.

It is an exhibition about history – its raw material and the way we all take that material and shape it. It takes stories and objects from our past, places them together, and invites visitors to the Museum to consider them in the light of their own experience. In doing so we have the chance of hearing stories that have been untold and songs that are unsung in our public histories and institutions – the voices of those who are not part of the dominant culture – that “master narrative” that has provided our historical perspective up to the present (Tetley, 1991b).

As the development of the concept proceeded, the complexity of the task and the size of the team grew. People had joined the team with what some staff members identified as “television mentality”. This manifested in questions like “If you don’t know, why can’t you just make it up?” and “Why have things in cases when you could get something that looked as good for \$60 and people could handle it?” (Davidson in MNZTPT, 1993a). New media of communication and interpretive devices were being engaged that required creative and technical resolution. There was the challenge of blending the contributions of an increasingly disparate team of people.

*Voices* exhibition Project Manager Raewyn Smith-Kapa has presented an overview of issues arising during exhibition development. She distinguished between two types of

issues, the first of which emerged directly from the different kind of exhibition – a complex narrative exhibition – that was being developed.

We realised that exhibitions could no longer be two-dimensional. In a new world, works on paper on walls and extended labels were not going to be enough, so we started thinking about how the public would experience an exhibition which is somewhat different to how a curator or an academic would experience an exhibition. We put the visitor more to the fore, giving priority not only to academic veracity but also to visitor engagement. We had to create tableau and craft experience. We started to learn about pace, and ‘high experience’ and ‘low experience’ in an exhibition – intensities of sensory engagement and excitement balanced with quieter contemplative opportunities – so that people would leave the exhibition feeling elated, empowered and informed. The visitors’ experience became crafted instead of left up to chance. To this end we developed new language and incorporated sound and other modern technology into the exhibition. It was necessary for us to think outside of what had been a small traditional square (Smith-Kapa *op.cit.*, 2006).

The second type of issue may seem, on first consideration, to be less linked to working with exhibition narrative and more concerned with management styles. But as the approach to exhibition development shifted from curator-led displays to complex, multi-disciplinary team processes, management became a critical ingredient.

The involvement of project management in the development of the new museum building gave us new ways of looking at the exhibition development process too. By that time Carson Mills – project managers for the base building – had also been appointed as project managers for the development of the new exhibitions. It had not been really formulated how they would work, though it was generally accepted they would take the building management model and adapt it to exhibition needs. They agreed to look over the *Voices* exhibition where it was and they reported to management that certain processes were not being implemented in a way that they would have done, so they volunteered assistance. They gave us the recognition that we had to have a defined, fully articulated, agreed to, and well understood – even if not well-loved – process (*ibid.*).

The Voices exhibition opened on 17 December 1992. Information was interleaved with stories that had immediacy and an almost dramatic specificity that had not been previously experienced within the Museum.

There was this girl in Trieste. Tall, sophisticated, very good looking. We were friends. She was always getting me to take her to dances and the odd party. She was 26 and well past the age she should have been married. But her fiancé had marched off with the doomed Italian Division that fought in Russia. Very few of them ever returned. Gina would have liked very much to become a New Zealand war bride. But I couldn't handle it. I couldn't see myself married to this dashing beauty, back in New Zealand, coping with jobs, housing problems, language difficulties, the Catholic church and the babies she would want to produce and all the serious business of normal, humdrum, peaceful life. The very things we had been fighting for, I suppose (Exhibition label, *Voices*, MNZTPT, 1992a).

In retrospect, *Voices* stood out more for its innovative qualities than its content or development process. Within the Project Office, the Board and the Museum, the *Voices* process was subjected to intense scrutiny. A comprehensive report was presented to the board of MNZTPT in December 1993 by a review team consisting of museum specialist Jenny Cave, artist/curator Alexa Johnston, the then Director of the Waitangi Tribunal Buddy Mikaera, education specialist David Murray, indigenous art specialist Rangihiroa Panoho, and Māori language consultant Miria Simpson. This team was selected to bring a wide-ranging perspective to the review, ensuring that the areas of Māori language, biculturalism, history, education, project management, design and exhibition presentation were represented (MNZTPT, 1993). Subsumed within this extensive document are no less than 5 other reports, prepared by then Project Director Graeme Tetley, the Carson Mills Project Management Team, the editor of the publication *Midwest Three*, an internal staff forum, and visiting US museum consultant Elaine Gurian's peer review. Other reports are found in MNZTPT archives, suggesting they too informed the analysis, including one by Jim and Mary Barr.

The lesson that MNZTPT derived from this exercise was the need for an effective model of management for a project with such complexity of roles, interests and processes. Raewyn Smith Kapa was seconded to the Exhibitions Project Office and asked by Project Managers Ken Gorbey and Sean Sweeney (from Carson Mills) to start working on an exhibition development model that would be used for the exhibitions in the new museum (Smith-Kapa, *op.cit.*).

#### 4.5 A new exhibition development model

By 1994 a final model was completed and adopted by Senior Management (Perkins, 2006). It incorporated two different approaches (that correspond to Smith's earlier comments about two distinct types of issues arising from the exhibition development process). A first cluster of documents address Project Management frameworks and is referred to as The Blue Book because it is distributed to staff in a distinctive blue folder; a second cluster of documents addresses the development of exhibition content and is referred to as The Red Book for similar reasons. Some changes and variations in actual practices have emerged over the intervening years. However, without trivialising the refinements that have been made to achieve greater efficiencies, it is remarkable that exhibition development continued to conform so closely to this template over a period of 12 years.

The model consisted of descriptions of different elements of an exhibition development process. The first element that defined the model was a list of **phases of development** of an exhibition: these were concept description, concept development, concept design, developed design & documented design (followed by production & installation). The second defining element was the list of **roles** within an exhibition team. These were referred to by the position title of the person responsible - concept developer, curator, interpreter, designer (2D and 3D), writer and project manager, though in fact they were differentiated by the advocacy required of the person –

concept developer advocated for the concept of the narrative, curator for scholarship and collections, while the interpreter and designer particularly advocated for audiences. The third defining element was the **documentation** of each phase and included schedules of objects, media and text/graphic labels. A new document was developed for each sign-off, although in practice the first document was added to or refined for consequent sign-offs. The fourth defining element was the schedule of **milestone presentations**. These would be made to three different committees - a Core Projects Strategic Delivery Team (CPSDT), Core Projects Approvals Team (CPAT) and Exhibitions Assessment Team (EAT). The first two would be related to the core projects strategy – a framework aligning different activities in the Museum, including research and exhibition development, with the Museum’s mission. CPSDT and CPAT were made up of members of the Te Papa senior leadership team including heads of the relevant Māori, art, history, and natural environment directorates. EAT included managers from the various teams contributing to the visitor’s experience within Te Papa – including marketing, funds development, education, and events. The frequency of presentations varied with the complexity of the project, and consisted of documentation of the exhibition development to date, which was circulated then presented by core members of the exhibition team. Until an exhibition had been approved and signed off at one level, it would at least in theory, not proceed to the next level of development (MNZTPT, 1994a).

## 4.6 Tracing narrative through this process

Because the stages of narrative development were not specifically described in the documentation, the following summary has been derived from staff interviews<sup>29</sup> and from my observations while I worked at Te Papa:

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<sup>29</sup> In particular, concept developers A. Langridge and E. McCleary spoke about the development of narrative. See section 4.7 for more detailed description.

In the early stages of concept development, the narrative focus was on the scaffolding on which ideas for the exhibition were organised; an appropriate type of narrative (chronological, anthology of smaller related stories, themed treatment etc) would be selected that oriented the efforts of team members in a common direction. Once formal approval was gained for this framework, it then acted as a blueprint, keeping the team on track.

As development progressed, the number of team members would increase and their roles would diversify. The narrative framework then acted as a tool for navigation and communication between team members with diverse interests. For example the 3D designer apportioned gallery space to different sections of the narrative structure, enabling the interpreter to engage imaginatively with how sensory experience of certain exhibition components would unfold within those spatial constraints. With the progression of research and decision-making, the outline was 'fleshed out' until it became more like a story summary. By the completion of concept design, the narrative closely resembled a literary or film plot.

Because thinking in narrative structures is such a widely shared human capacity, people with very different roles – such as senior management, research and design – were able to participate, using a shared discourse to debate the diverse interests informing exhibition development. The team was also able to share a strong and vivid sense of what the exhibition would be like, and this motivated forward planning for such functions as marketing, events, and education.

As the project advanced to developed design and documented design stages, the challenge for the team was to translate this imagined narrative into an exhibition where visitors would experience the narrative presented to them. Highly specific skills of design and building, filming and editing, sound and lighting, writing, mount-making and graphic layout were all brought into play. The experience of the visitor took precedence as the guiding principal.





Evaluation was employed in the final stages of developing a narrative exhibition to confirm that visitors were in fact engaging in intended ways, or identify ways in which the exhibition can be refined to make it more effective.

#### 4.7 Implementing the process:

A framework of this complexity was ambitious. But Smith-Kapa has pointed to the strong commitment that the organisation had for the model, and the advantages it presented:

At first there was arguing back and forth as to whether some exhibitions should follow a different model. For example the concept leader for the natural history exhibitions made a case that their exhibitions should be exempted from this model. Then there was another colleague who I have high regard for, who said “you know me Raewyn, you know I always deliver. So, for the exhibitions I am responsible for, I’d like to follow my own way and everything will be fine”. To both of those I had to say no and bring those staff around to acceptance. What convinced me that this was the correct path is that at this point I recognised that we had all developed a common language that identified where an exhibition was in terms of all aspects of its development. If someone told me they were at 30% concept design, then without checking the details of where they were I knew exactly at what stage each aspect of development should be. If a signoff was required, then there were very clear criteria for the exhibition team and the reviewers to evaluate whether that signoff was warranted and they could move on to the next phase. This ensures that we have a concurrent and iterative process and that no one team member – say a concept developer or a curator or a designer – is high-jacking the process and leaving other members of the team behind (Smith-Kapa *op.cit.*, 2005).

There were times when the exhibition indeed unfolded logically as intended, and layer upon layer of narrative detail was laid on a conceptual skeleton. Concept Developer Andrew Langridge described a development such as this for the new *Mana Pasifika* exhibition:

The existing [*Mana Pasifika*] exhibition is arranged in a thematic way. Different areas are arranged around the themes of sport, dance, immigration etc. But the new narrative we are developing is much more like a big historical narrative told through many smaller stories – like a pointillistic approach where you are telling the big narrative through a lot of smaller personal narratives. In this case, the overall narrative is a chronological story of the relationship between New Zealand and other Pacific Islands. We begin with the original settlement of New Zealand; we move through to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and finally the present day. One of the real challenges here is that we have a lot of really strong and important stories for which there are not necessarily strong and important objects. In each of those cases we try to think of what is the most appealing and appropriate way of telling those stories. In some cases the lack of objects is significant in itself. A good example of this is Tupaia, who was the first modern Pacific visitor to New Zealand. He came with Cook. But one interesting thing about him is that there is no visual record of what he looked like even though there are all sorts of visual records of what happened on the trip and what Cook saw. For some reason Tupaia wasn't considered significant to actually draw. The only relic we have is a plant that was named after him. There are also some recently discovered drawings that may have been drawn by him. So we are considering making a display based on that absence. Another example is that there are very few objects associated with the Melanesian Mission in Auckland. However the Pacific islanders who came to New Zealand have left their mark on the landscape because there are streets named after them. In this case we are thinking of making reproductions of the street signs so we can show what marks were left on the landscape by these early visitors. In the third segment of the exhibition, which is looking at the period of mass migration in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have some really great stories like the dawn raids, experiences of house-girls coming to stay in New Zealand, but very few objects. What objects we do have are often quite banal and don't have anything like the impact that the stories themselves do. In that area we want to focus on the stories and on the people, so we will be telling a lot of first person narratives. Because of that we will be relying on a lot of AV. The objects will be within that space but not spaced out in an attempt to tell the narrative through them. The objects will be in the centre to add an extra texture to the narrative (Langridge, 2006).

Langridge's account of conceptual structure in this example unfolded with the precision and veracity of a blueprint. But in practice, each exhibition developed in varying degrees of 'obedience' to the template. Inevitably, at times conflict

emerged and the process needed careful facilitation to progress. The role of Project Manager – holding responsibility for facilitation and mediation – proved critical to this style of exhibition development.

One of the sources of potential conflict was earlier alluded to by Smith-Kapa. Team members were expected to advocate for different interests. So it proved difficult for a sound conceptual framework to be developed consensually by a large team of people. From a concept developer's point of view

...if we can reach a consensus opinion about what the exhibition narrative is and how it is broken up at that early stage when there are only a couple of people engaged in the process, and it gets enshrined in the Concept Description and Business Case documents, that really helps the exhibition development. It's something you can always go back to - you can test whether what you are doing is going to deliver what you set out to do (Langridge, 2006).

A second possible source of conflict arose because Te Papa's underpinning values (collectively expressed as 6 corporate principles) have at times operated in tension with one another. As much as one might wish that all team members reflected all six principles, some were more relevant to one area of practice than another. Oriwa Solomon, Curator Māori, described his frustration in advocating for biculturalism<sup>30</sup> in exhibitions when he was brought in too late to make a difference (i.e. after concept development has proceeded too far). He has also encountered narratives that were just not compatible with mātauranga Māori, or Māori understandings. He saw his involvement at times as little more than an attempt to 'brown' some shows by inserting Māori content – whether stories or objects – into a larger European narrative that wasn't an appropriate context for them.

Western art history is concerned wholly with the history of Western civilisation and culture. The art gallery is their traditional arena of

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<sup>30</sup> The MNZTPT Statement of Intent states that Te Papa is Bicultural. Te Papa values and reflects the cultural heritage and diversity of Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti (MNZTPT, 2006).

‘representation. So when we put art on display in Te Papa we are doing it in that historical and cultural context.

But Māori culture, and the role that Māori art has in our world, is so very different from that. Why would I insert my Māori-ness into that environment when it is so wholly European? As far as I am concerned it is fine for Europeans to have their sacred cow – their painting, sculpture, and architecture - and everything that can be encapsulated within the broad definition ‘fine arts’. I am happy to keep our taonga in the Mana Whenua gallery where it can be accommodated under an identifiably Māori construct of reality. That is where our customary art resides - in a Māori world and space albeit constructed within a European museum space.

It is possible however to accommodate Māori and Pākehā art in the same exhibition space, but it shouldn’t be a political imperative. In contemporary history exhibitions it is easier to integrate different cultural perspectives because the stories themselves are about actual meetings and cultural exchanges between people. The stories of Māori within Qui Tutto Bene for example – about the Māori Battalion overseas and about intermarriage - worked because it was about Māori and European people themselves interacting. I also think it can work in the area of contemporary art because conceptually it draws from both worlds. It worked in Out on the Street where the same themes – of protest and creativity – were being experienced by both Māori and European. It’s not about simply tacking on another perspective to make the mix ‘right’ (Solomon, 2005).

Athol McCredie had also experienced that at times there was insufficient involvement of curators at an early enough stage to achieve a fit between narrative and objects. He believed the result was that objects had to be ‘shoe-horned’ into the exhibition narrative and as a result were shown in a context that conflicted with the meaning system in which they were created.

As art curators we have often thought about the notion of mana taonga<sup>31</sup>. We feel it should be applicable to all art, not just Māori taonga, that we really need to respect the creator of art and the mana of each artwork in its own context rather than as a piece of social history, used to tell a story. When we show art in a different

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<sup>31</sup> Mana taonga acknowledges that the people or communities among whom taonga and other objects evolved have a particular role in enhancing the care and understanding of those objects.

context I sometimes feel uncomfortable because it shows disrespect to the artist.

At another level, I think this re-contextualising sometimes works against the success of the narrative exhibition. Artworks, especially larger paintings, can be powerful and experiential, and so despite some words on a label on the wall that might try to link them into the narrative, they have a strength of their own that over-rides the narrative device of the text. Sometimes it depends on what sort of visitor you are – a reading person or visual person – which of the contexts becomes more meaningful to you. But it is possible we fool ourselves entirely to think that the narratives actually work in this situation.

Concept description is the stage of exhibition development when discussions should happen about the rigour of the narrative. But at this point it is mainly concept developers and representatives of marketing, events, funds development etc who are giving feedback on the exhibition concept – although it may also be circulated to senior curators and collection directors. So the curatorial issues about the structure of the narrative do not have much chance to be debated by true peers. The formal process may intend for the narrative to be debated at this early stage, but in practice it is those broader issues of the exhibition such as sponsorship potential or appeal to schools that often displace much-needed consideration of exhibition concept, narratives and content at a time when it matters (McCredie 2006).

From the point of view of the concept developer, however, a tension traditionally had existed between the curatorial team's desire to present scholarly and academically precise information appropriate to a specialised audience and the visitor experience team's goal of making messages accessible to non-specialised visitors. "Though I don't agree with the view, it sometimes seems that if it is really accessible it's not good scholarship. That is one of the eternal battles in our exhibition development" (Langridge, 2006).

Possibly because of his long and productive engagement with narrative as an author as well as a writer for Te Papa exhibitions in the early days, and later a head writer, Nigel Cox presented a more comfortable and pragmatic attitude to narrative in exhibitions, and the new Te Papa process for developing them. For him the process made sense because it was similar to other contexts in which he had practiced.

By the time I arrived, the decision had been taken and those things were in place. ...When I worked on the development of exhibitions for Day One [the opening of the new museum], one of the elements we had to write was a storyline (which is also a thing from the movies) and then we wrote a storyboard which was a series of pictures with words underneath (exactly as they do in developing a movie), and then we wrote a visitor experience, which was a walkthrough that damn near had act one, act two and act three in it. So you can see that the process related very closely to what went in to making a movie, and I gather, was consciously so. I used to hear Ken Gorby speak of the things that were done to make movies, as the things we could learn from. We do a whole bunch of things that parallel the writing of a novel. There is a synopsis at the beginning, and that is the concept outline, and then there is the storyline, and the editorial process. They are consciously articulated (Cox, 2005).

But irrespective of peoples' acceptance or resistance to the model, the process was implemented and the culture of exhibition development has undergone a steady transformation to accommodate it.

## **4.8 Summary**

This chapter looked first at changes in museum practice internationally that saw museums becoming more visitor-focused, and using more media alongside objects to tell stories. In many instances museums and their exhibitions were specifically restyled as narrative projects in order to accomplish these goals. New Zealand's response to these trends, and to shifts in local priorities, was to combine its collections, services and programmes under the single umbrella of a new national

museum - Te Papa. Narrative played a strong role in this new museum at all levels, including exhibitions. A new model for exhibition development was designed to reflect this. The way it was developed, and the detail of what was developed, is described.

The main sources and inspirations for adopting this narrative approach have been shown to be the example of other (international) museums, and professional practice in film and television production, screenplay and novel writing. Media studies and narrative scholarship in media-specific contexts had not yet blossomed, providing a broader context for looking at these changes.

## Chapter five: Case study *Qui Tutto Bene*

### 5.1 Background

Two case studies of exhibition development at Te Papa have been carried out as part of this thesis in order to flesh out the model described in the previous chapter, and provide an opportunity to test the relevance of narrative scholarship reviewed in Chapters two and three.

Even though a consistent model for exhibition development is used at Te Papa, each exhibition process is unique. Two case studies were carried out in order to demonstrate the variation and also to profile a wider range of practices.

This first case study looks at the development of *Qui Tutto Bene*, an exhibition developed for the community gallery in partnership with the Italian community, demonstrating how Te Papa's model accommodated collaboration and integrated a consultative framework.

Te Papa's community gallery was established within the long-term exhibition *Passports*, which tells the 'big story' of Tangata Tiriti – the people who have migrated to New Zealand over the past 200 years or so. Since the opening of the new museum, the community gallery housed a different exhibition every two years in which a specific migrant community told its own stories to Te Papa visitors. This was seen as a way of “enlisting the energies of minority ethnic groups who would not otherwise be represented in the museum”<sup>32</sup>. The exhibition and an associated programme of events were developed in partnership between the museum and the community.

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<sup>32</sup> Email from Jock Philips to Bronwyn Labrum, May 2000

Before the Italian community was selected for the exhibition, the relative merits of three communities were compared and presented to the Core Projects Assessment Team (CPAT). They were the Greek, Italian and Jewish communities. Each community was researched, an analysis of risks, issues and alignments was carried out, and possible ideas for an exhibition were identified. So in early 2003 (about 20 months before the exhibition was due to open), when Te Papa decided to focus on the Italian community, the initial scoping stage of concept development had really already begun. Te Papa had developed a sense of the distribution of Italian people throughout New Zealand, and of the family and cultural linkages through which they networked.

## 5.2 Terms of engagement

One of the first priorities was to develop a framework within which Te Papa and the Italian community would proceed with exhibition development. Te Papa had previous experience with building community partnerships, and the community had previous experience being the subject of an exhibition<sup>33</sup>. But the Italian exhibition at Te Papa would be a unique synthesis of Italian stories framed within Te Papa's strategic vision.

There had been ongoing debate among staff at Te Papa as to how much ownership they should assert over the exhibition development, and how much they should empower communities in the exhibition development process<sup>34</sup>.

One issue that arises for community exhibitions is the notion of consultation vs collaboration. I think that in Te Papa's case the community exhibitions straddle both. The value of the terms of reference is that they set out at the beginning of the [exhibition development] process how Te Papa envisages it working, and asks the community they agree (Jacob, 2005).

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<sup>33</sup> A smaller group from within the Italian Community had previously presented an exhibition at Petone Settlers Museum.

<sup>34</sup> The wishes of staff to empower communities seem to come from their individual aspirations. For while Te Papa has obligations to communities embodied in its legislative framework and Statement of Intent, the degree of autonomy of communities in exhibition development is not formalised as a measure.

The terms of engagement proposed by Te Papa were firstly, that a workshop be held at which a draft concept proposal would be presented to about 25 Italian people from around New Zealand, who would identify issues and concerns, or identify an alternative proposal. Invitees would reflect the demographic diversity of the Italian population in New Zealand, and include key community members. Then a Community Advisory Group (CAG) representing the diversity within the Italian community would be formed, and work closely with Te Papa in their processes and decision-making. Community attendees at the workshop could nominate themselves or others for inclusion and Te Papa would select about six from those nominated. This CAG would then act as a conduit for stories from the community, help identify suitable objects for display and participate in certain sign-offs for the developing concept and exhibition.

When the workshop was held, 3 months into the 20 month exhibition development period, attendees were presented with a draft concept proposal. Te Papa staff were introduced and outlined their roles and responsibilities. Community members were shown the exhibition space and then separated into individually facilitated focus groups as well as participating in an open forum. Outcomes of the workshop were that the draft terms of reference and draft concept description were accepted and a significant level of feedback and information was shared that would inform the developing narrative. A CAG was appointed.

Several weeks later the CAG membership was confirmed and met with the exhibition team and a representative of Te Papa senior management. The draft terms of reference were discussed and a concept description presented that incorporated much of the community feedback from the workshop. This concept description included the big idea and segmental breakdown, storylines, lists of possible objects and images that aligned with those storylines, a brief interpretive strategy, a profile of Te Papa's target audience, communication goals and delivery schedule. The substantial fleshing out of the exhibition narrative in this concept description, based on input from the

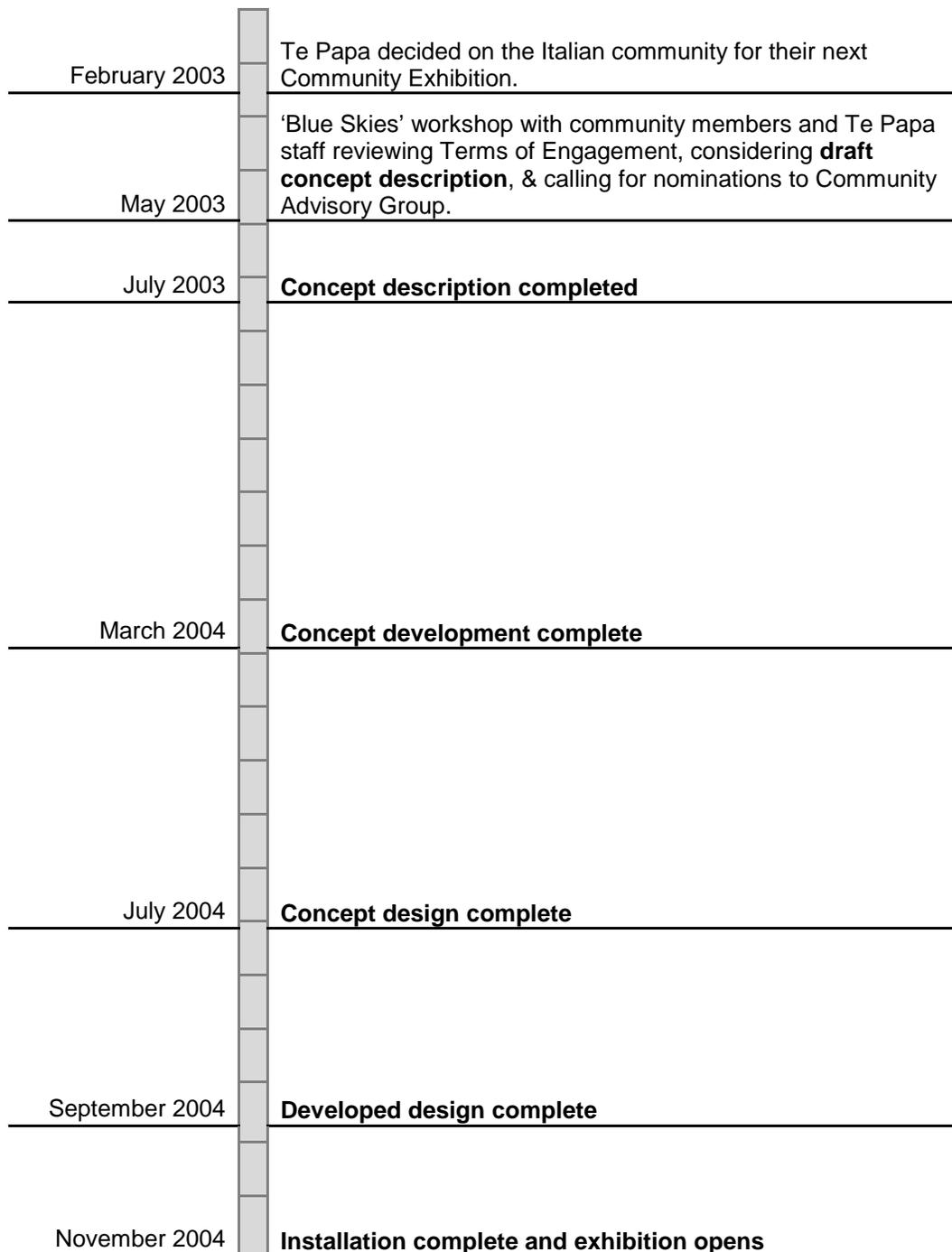
community in the first workshop, suggests that the power-sharing at least in terms of narrative production was successful. Again, the outcome was not simply a matter of the CAG affirming Te Papa's proposals; their shared feedback deepened the engagement of both parties.

The concept description was presented to CPAT 5 months into development, and was approved for exhibition development. It identified an overarching exhibition theme of 'connections' to be discussed from three different perspectives over time (exploring both historical and contemporary immigration). The first perspective would be Italian Roots, which would explore connections between Italians and the Italy they departed from. The second perspective would be New Zealand Ground which would look at how new Italian immigrants connected with, or felt disconnected from, New Zealand society and culture. This segment would also touch on how New Zealand attitudes towards Italian arrivals, and other immigrants, had changed. The third perspective would look at cultural offerings, asking how the New Zealand and Italian cultures were connected through the ideas and material culture brought here by the Italians, and by the ongoing connections between Italy and New Zealand (MNZTPT, 2003). At this point the narrative 'springboard' for the exhibition had been set in place<sup>35</sup>, although details of sub-narratives or themes were yet to be put in place.

Once the concept description had been approved, the focus shifted to preparing the business case. A full exhibition team (including project manager, two curators, collection managers and conservators, an interpreter, one 2D and one 3D designer, an educator and events manager) was assembled to meet on a regular basis. People with different roles then moved forward on different aspects of the exhibition.

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<sup>35</sup> Interestingly the Italian community held an exhibition at the Petone Settlers Museum in 1995 that looked at Italian Settlement in the Wellington area. That exhibition was very different from the concept, narrative and final exhibition that emerged from the Te Papa process. The differences could be accounted for by looking at the different terms of engagement between the museums and the community, at the breadth of representation sought in the Te Papa process, and at the importance of Te Papa's existing target audiences in configuring the narrative rather than it being solely driven by and for the Italian community.



**Figure 3: Timeline *Qui Tutto Bene***

Interpreter Sarah Morris has emphasised the importance of moving forward in a timely manner. She cautioned against rushing into decisions about how the narrative would be delivered before the overall content and messages had been finalised:

The first thing is to determine the content. In this exhibition we are looking at Italian roots and the immigration stories; at the experience of the immigrants (both early and contemporary); and lastly at how Italian settlers influenced New Zealand culture. Only [when we have determined the content] do we decide the most appropriate means or medium to deliver that content. I think it is bad practice to think of the method of delivery – say we'll have an A-V here – and then find content to fit it. In museums these days with all the whiz-bang technology available, it seems tempting to say I want a computer interactive and 4 AVs instead of looking at content and thinking about what would be the best means of disseminating a particular story to our visitors (Morris, 2005).

The curatorial focus changed at this time. It shifted from the broad research scoping of the concept description phase into a more probing research style, driven by a formal research plan that was based on the storylines identified in the concept. Interviews were planned that would serve two purposes – to yield information and to identify interviewees for later recording and use in AVs in the exhibition.

Curator Michael Fitzgerald described his research role evolving from initial scoping to more penetrating research that would flesh out storylines. He conveyed how interaction with community members during this time shaped the emerging narrative:

Working with community exhibitions, we need to use models of communities rather than community. It is hardly surprising when you consider what a large country Italy is – there are about 80 million people living there – that there are considerable regional and political differences and a variety of class and cultural backgrounds.

There were issues that emerged in meetings with the community around political sensitivity – issues around unification, right-left political divisions and fascism. No one was going to say don't talk about this, but there was a tension about how references would be nuanced, how we would talk about the experiences of Italian people in New Zealand during the war. After all,

those people did suffer and some were interned. There were families who suffered a lot, and women and children, simply because they were on the wrong side. The CAG on the whole was open to our touching on this and some, quite bravely I thought, dug around in their family collections and produced evidence that certain uncles, fathers and grandfathers had been to some extent involved in the Fascist Party both in Italy and in New Zealand (there was an active Fascist Party in Island Bay for example).

We said to them that this really was an important part of their story. It explained what was going on in the thirties, it explained why the authorities thought of Italians in a certain way in the 1940s, and why quite a number of Italian men were interned on the island. It explains now to the wider range of exhibition visitors what was happening in New Zealand at that time, and it also helps to exorcise the experiences for the Italian families who were involved, allowing their stories to be told. To the credit of these families, this situation contrasts strongly with the situation back in Italy where the past is officially sanitised and these things are not openly discussed.

Some tensions did arise between members of the community as to what versions of history should be presented, probably because they came from different family backgrounds in Italy. Some tended to lean to the right, others may have been involved with partisan activities during the war. Certainly there were issues of class and regional difference. I think we resolved satisfactorily in the end, which Italy would be represented. We used discussion to mediate those differences, reference to textbooks and other neutral sources (Fitzgerald *op.cit.*, 2005).

As this phase continued, Morris described formulating progressively more detailed communication goals, and finally developing a sense of what media would be used for 'telling' the planned stories, and why:

People learn and experience exhibitions in different ways. It is the interpreter's responsibility to make sure that information and stories are presented using a variety of media so that visitors' different styles of leisure and learning are engaged. Some people read, some touch, some view. There are people who need to be doing something, others who need to be immersed.

So we try to limit the amount of text – especially in a community gallery where we have versions of text in English, Māori and the language of origin, which in this case is Italian. We can layer a lot of information instead on

interactive computer kiosks. Te Papa uses the Tai Awatea knowledge net, which can present more detail about the objects on display and the narratives. If an object has an icon on its label, then more detailed information can be found about it on Tai Awatea.

The objects though are our primary medium for telling stories because collections are the museum's point of difference from other leisure activities (Morris *op.cit.*).

Curators and Collection Managers carried out assessments of Te Papa's collections as well as objects being offered by the community.

During this time the CAG were actively consulting with the Italian community at large. They also met with Te Papa's events team to plan a programme of supportive public events for the 2 ½ year duration of the exhibition that would key in to the concept and narratives being engaged in the exhibition, and they met with Te Papa's funds development people to explore opportunities that might benefit both the exhibition and Te Papa. As the business case development came close to completion, the CAG met with the exhibition team for a report on research, to fine tune the storylines, to finalise the selection of 12 interviewees for audiovisuals to be displayed in the exhibition, and to hear recommendations on the look and feel of the exhibition.

The business case was then presented to CPAT, underwent some revising and was approved 10 months prior to exhibition opening. This marked the completion of concept development. A written narrative had been developed, and resources assembled that would enable it to be translated into the gallery context.

### **5.3 Translating a written concept into an exhibition**

During the concept design phase, the task of the exhibition team was to begin translating the narrative from a conceptual or written form to narrative in the medium of museum exhibition.

Te Papa's lead designer Lesley Fowler described how the exhibition designer becomes more active at the concept design stage of exhibition development.

I make a point of sitting down at this stage with the concept developer and lead curator. We usually start off with a blank floor plan. We have a list of the segments and themes, and I try to draw out of them what their wishes are for the exhibition. It's not that what they say is set in stone but it is a point of reference to work from.

The process of dividing up the floor space is partly governed by gleaning the object list. During this process the designer is not simply looking at quantities and dimensions of objects but also at status and significance to the story. There might be many more things you would want to include to tell the storylines than there is room for. Or there might be such iconic objects that you would trade half a theme to keep them in.

Decisions are not taken by the designer alone. The exhibition team as a whole has to look at the possibilities, and at the implications for other parts of the story. It takes a while for people to come to these decisions too because they have been carrying around their idea of the exhibition for quite a while – especially the curator and concept developer who were imagining the exhibition long before they entered a process with the designer (Fowler, 2005).

During this phase the concept developer's role was to keep things on track and bring the concept alive for team members, such as the designer, who were really just beginning their engagement with the team. The curators similarly supported the consistent application of the concept as it had been signed off.

In the case of *Qui Tutto Bene*, there were three elements that influenced design. Firstly the concept, with its central idea of connections and three segments of 'Beginnings', 'the NZ Experience', and 'Cultural Offerings' was a strong starting point. Secondly the context of the Passports exhibition within which *Qui Tutto Bene* would fit, dictated the footprint of the community exhibition space as well as its functional and aesthetic context. It was an essentially long rectangular space with an established point of entry on the short east wall (see figure 2). Thirdly there were five iconic

objects that had by this time been selected to anchor the main ideas: a modern artwork of interlinked semi-translucent units by Chiara Corbelleto (Connections); an old trunk with photographs (Beginnings); a statue of Santa Barbara used by Turangi tunnellers and a painting of Island Bay fishermen by Rita Angus (the NZ Experience); and a collection of Italian hand-crafted musical instruments (Cultural Offerings).

Designer Clayton McGregor came up with a strong, modern design that integrated these elements. The walls of the exhibition space were designed with curved interlocking panels that echoed in three dimensions the two-dimensional design ethos of Corbelleto (see figure 3). Four of these panels within the long south wall created display alcoves that would accommodate key iconic objects in such a way that museum visitors outside the exhibition could glimpse them at the same time as visitors inside the exhibition could view them (see figures 3 and 4). Corbelleto's artwork would hang in a window on the shorter west wall, creating an allusion to a stained glass window. The architecture and window together would function as a screen through which connections would be made between the exhibition and the broader Te Papa environment.

Inside, the 'look and feel' of the space would reflect the need to distinguish between the three segments as well as allowing connections to be made between them. An interior with clean lines and clear sightlines between different segmental areas was planned. The space would be divided into three zones, each covering the full width of the exhibition. A narrow line of waist-high display cases would stretch along the centre of the space, establishing a u-shaped passage within the exhibition (see figure 4).

Visitors entering through the east wall portal would pass through segment one, then two, then three as they penetrated the space (with the Corbelleto artwork at the far end functioning as a main attractor). The other key iconic items would be located in the alcoves along the left hand (south) wall, signifying the segment of the exhibition being traversed. Visitors could then return along the north wall, back through

segments two and one, encountering the audiovisuals and interactives before exiting. (Alternative paths through the exhibition were possible also.) Segments would be distinguished from each other by tile treatments on the floor and by the textures and colour of the labels.

Within the central line of display cases, tighter narratives would be developed to inform the segment they were aligned with. These stories would be told using objects, images and text labels. One example would be the story of Italian men interned on Somes-Matiu Island in Wellington Harbour during World War II, told within the New Zealand experience segment, using a map, paua shell items made by the men (and borrowed for the exhibition), a card for the fascist youth club in New Zealand and a photograph of some detainees to lend meaning to the story outlined in the interpretive text.

But because there were many more stories to be told than would fit in these cases, audiovisuals were added along the right hand wall of the gallery in which many other stories could be layered. Visitors could then exercise an element of choice as to which ones they would explore and in what order. Two short wing walls were planned to intrude into the space from the right wall, with a screen mounted on each side. Among these four screens about fifteen video clips were distributed featuring community stories that supplemented the central messages. The small space extending off the right side of segment one would be used to house computer interactives that would provide opportunities for visitors to explore in a more active and self-directed way a larger body of information (see figures 5 and 6).

As the space within which the narrative would operate became more defined, exhibition components (objects, labels, graphics, audiovisuals and interactives) were reconsidered and placements were explored. In deciding placements, the designer and interpreter each brought key perspectives to the process. The designer advocated for what was physically and aesthetically desirable while the interpreter functioned as audience advocate. She referenced the learning objectives of the

concept description, the exhibition narrative, and her understanding of learning styles, to ensure the best experiences for visitors.

For example, one of the primary objectives of the exhibition was to indicate the regional differences in Italy and to show where some of the broad groups of Italian immigrants came from. Figure 5 shows a view of the interactives that achieved this by visual means (showing a map with light at certain geographic locations), by kinaesthetic means (by having a roller ball that allowed certain locations to be selected), through pictorial means (by showing photographs of families from different regions and videos of locations), and through language (by having label text with those photographs).

As concept design progressed, preparation moved ahead on all components that were confirmed for inclusion in the exhibition. Images that would be exhibited or used in the graphic design process were sourced and permissions obtained for publishing, or new photography was commissioned. Storyboarding for the audiovisuals was completed and filming of interviews began.

The development of text and graphic labels progressed in several different functional ways. One function of the labels was to reinforce the structure of the space, so labels of a certain type – like all segmentals for example – would all be the same size and have a similar graphic and font design. Graphic designer Emily McElroy was working at this point on design templates for the various types of labels, and for the title signage, which would fit with the emerging look and feel of the exhibition. A second role of labels was to communicate the scholarship and research that underlay the narrative. To this end, curators who were immersed in that scholarship wrote briefs for the writers. A third function was to engage those people who like to read, and within this group to also provide translations of text where appropriate, between English and Italian and Māori.

Te Papa writers began to work on the exhibition at this point, developing a written 'voice' to engage visitors and fulfil the curatorial and interpretive briefs. While bilingual (Italian and English) labels were included, and some trilingual (Italian, English and Māori), the 'implied narrator'<sup>36</sup> was consistent with other Te Papa exhibitions - without use of first person pronouns, there was no sense that the Italian people were the ones telling the stories. Exhibition text was subject to signoff by the CAG.

Michael Keith, then Head Writer, provided insight as to how the team conformed to the concept and narrative logic of the exhibition:

We start writing at the 'bottom' of the hierarchy – with the object labels and the small stories about objects and people that are attached to them. Then we work up to bigger stories like, say, a biography that relates to a whole group of objects. In this way we work up through the details of the exhibition to become absolutely clear about where they are leading us. Then we approach the segmental labels and the very last label we write is the introduction. It's not that we didn't know where we were headed. Of course the label briefs had already been written. But it gives correct form to the high-end text so that it really floats the big idea – it gets the expression right (2005).

Software for the interactives was commissioned and developed, including software for Tai Awatea, Te Papa's interactive learning kiosks. Usually Tai Awatea was used to provide another layer of detail about certain objects in the exhibitions. When a particular icon appeared on an object label, visitors were cued to the possibility they could go to a kiosk and retrieve more information. Interpreter Sarah Morris developed a new feature – a 'digital album' – for *Qui Tutto Bene*.

The digital album allowed us to publish many of the community stories we couldn't accommodate in other ways on the exhibition floor. But it also had another component called 'What about my family'? This offered visitors the chance to send in a photograph and a 100-word story with a consent form. Quarterly we could add those stories to our digital album, which would eventually become a piece of archival material and a resource for the Italian people. This feature had two objectives. It was to include those stories that

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<sup>36</sup> See Chatman's model in 2.2.2

the Advisory Committee really wanted but that couldn't be fitted into the structure we were working to – key stories like the first Italian in New Zealand. But it also gave us the chance to be inclusive of visitors who were not part of the exhibition development process (Morris, *op.cit.*).

The new level of exhibition planning was documented using text, updated tables of components, illustrations, and plans. These were integrated with the earlier concept document to generate an up-to-date snapshot of exhibition development. The team then presented to the CAG, the Exhibitions Assessment Team (EAT) and CPAT, integrating recommendations at each stage and obtaining sign-off.

By this point in exhibition development the challenge of producing a narrative was largely complete. The task remaining was to ensure that the narrative concept designed by the team was translated into experience for exhibition visitors. Because reception of an exhibition is guided so strongly by sensory response, front-end evaluation was a key feature of this phase, confirming that when the exhibition opened, it would indeed deliver the messages in the way that had been anticipated. Audiovisuals and interactives were a particular focus of this evaluation.

## 5.4 Summary

This case study traced the development of an exhibition that was in some respects complex and in others straightforward. It was more complex than many other Te Papa exhibitions because it involved collaborating with the community through the CAG, and obtaining signoffs. The spirit of the narrative collaboration was that Te Papa would provide the organisational context and expertise for formatting the exhibition while the community would bring their stories and artefacts. In fact, some stories that were not introduced by the community were broached by the exhibition development team<sup>37</sup> in the interests of presenting a balanced historical view of the community. Issues of

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<sup>37</sup> For example, recall M. Fitzgerald's discussion of the theme of Fascism.

reflecting a balanced view of a diverse community also arose in translating this intention into action<sup>38</sup>. Exhibition development was made more straightforward than some Te Papa exhibitions because this show reiterated a format that many of the staff had worked on before and they were a well-knit team<sup>39</sup>. Also, compared with many Te Papa exhibitions, this one was relatively small.

The exhibition narrative was structured in a layered way<sup>40</sup> with a scaffolding narrative structure that could be read in a non-linear way, within which more classical, linear sub-narratives were framed. This structure is typical of many Te Papa exhibitions. Sub-narratives were 'told' using objects, photographs, interpretive labels, videos and text. While most of the stories were those of the Italian community members, the overall narrator<sup>41</sup> was Te Papa, in keeping with all Te Papa exhibitions.

Overall, development of this exhibition proceeded much along the lines intended in the Te Papa process outlined in Chapter 4, providing an interesting contrast with the second case study that follows.

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<sup>38</sup> While examining community experience in the development of the Italian exhibition is beyond the scope of this thesis, the experience of the Indian community who were the participants in the previous community exhibition were outlined in Dr. Pushpa Wood's article *Community consultation: Te Papa and New Zealand Indian communities – the other side of the coin* (2005).

<sup>39</sup> For evidence see Michael Fitzgerald's quotes in section 4.3 of this thesis and Stephanie Gibson's paper *Te Papa and New Zealand Indian communities – a case study about exhibition development* (2003)

<sup>40</sup> See Table two – a typology of narratives.

<sup>41</sup> See Table one – Chatman's narrative communication diagram.



## Chapter six: Case study *Out on the Street*

### 6.1 Beginnings

Even though Te Papa’s exhibition development process has been guided by a consistent template for a decade, each exhibition presents unique challenges. This second case study contrasts markedly with the first, looking at an exhibition in which development was plagued by divergent opinions on narrative and exhibition content. *Out on the Street* was a challenging exhibition to work on, sparking debate among staff about the fundamental value of narrative and concept description. Nonetheless, once it opened to the public it proved to be a highly engaging exhibition<sup>42</sup>. This seeming paradox suggested a need to reconsider the parameters of successful exhibition development. On the one hand it was important to look at how effective an exhibition was in engaging visitors with exhibitions in general, and in drawing them into meaning-making through narrative activity specifically; but on the other, it was important to look at how constructively staff members engaged with each other, especially in terms of collaborating in narrative production, in order for the process of making exhibitions to remain viable.

*Out on the Street – New Zealand in the 1970s* opened in November 2004 after an unusually long development period. The idea for a show about the 1970s was first

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<sup>42</sup> Visitor Marketing Research at Te Papa confirmed by exit interviews that the exhibition exceeded performance targets (Owen, 2009):

<b>Exhibition Performance Indicator:</b>	<b>Target:</b>	<b>Actual:</b>
Visitor awareness of exhibition	50%	50%
Penetration	16%	44%
Satisfaction	>80%	85%
Visitor numbers	n/a	314,913

mooted in a strategic document in 1999 titled *Core Projects – Exhibitions and Research 2000 to 2006*. Te Papa's leadership team and its core projects strategic development team (CPSDT) had commissioned a working party to draft a strategic approach to research and product development, to coordinate research with visitor experience. One of the core project areas identified in the document was *Life in New Zealand*, and included among its key research themes *Party at our place: leisure, creativity and cultural activities*. "Research findings from this core project will contribute to several major outputs. ...Smaller short term exhibitions which showcase our collections include...*The 1970s Show*" (MNZTPT 1999a). This exhibition and its associated research were thus slotted into the long term programme.

## 6.2 Developing a concept

No concept description was developed for this exhibition at the time *Core Projects – Exhibitions and Research 2000 to 2006* was developed, even though it had been carried out for many of the other exhibitions detailed in that document. So as the research programme advanced, curators started researching the idea without a concept description to focus on.

Art curator Athol McCredie recalled:

At first there were mainly curators working on the concept. Natasha Conland and I – both art curators – started working on it by doing research to list the works in the collection that were produced in the 70s.

I developed a framework for the show derived from the comments that Bill Oliver made in the Oxford History of New Zealand in the chapter called The Awakening Imagination. I wanted to typify New Zealand Culture in the 70s. The term 'disturb and disquiet' came from him. It was quite an abstract idea but it could project into a lot of areas like visual culture very well. But I found it hard to get buy-in from the other curators. I think they found my ideas too abstract (McCredie, 2006).

Robin Anderson was the history curator for the project and her approach to the research was based on archives, which brought very different social history themes such as politics, popular culture and feminism to the surface.

So by the time a concept developer was assigned to the project, some staff had already established divergent ideas about the focus of the exhibition. As the formal development process proceeded and more team members became involved, directions for developing this very compelling 'big idea' multiplied even further.

We were unable as a team to agree on a well-defined narrative structure, so Desmond Brice [Manager Concept & Product Development] facilitated a meeting where we did settle on a structure that, though not set in concrete, certainly was roughly what we worked on for the rest of the exhibition development. This shows that sometimes the team has to reach outside the usual process to keep things on track (*ibid.*).

The concept<sup>43</sup> targeted an audience who had lived through the 70s, who would participate in the exhibition by “recognition and response”, also a younger audience who would enjoy the retro-chic appeal of the exhibition objects. Visitors would include “people interested in popular culture, famous New Zealanders and events, fashion, music, design and photography” (MNZTPT, 2002).

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<sup>43</sup> In brief it outlined 4 segments, each with 2 – 3 subsets:

- *Disturbance and disquiet* would look firstly at changing social structures *vis-à-vis* women, family and the workplace; secondly at Māori protests over cultural, social, economic, land & sovereignty issues.
- *Changing New Zealand identity* would look first at a growing sense of local New Zealand identity and secondly at a new internationalism where New Zealand shifted its attention from the UK as 'motherland' to its place in a global framework.
- *New idealism* would explore authority/protest, new media in art, and freedom of expression
- *Critique of 'progress'* would look at moves towards back-to-nature/cooperatives/communes, the second-hand culture and contemporary retro.

For the full text of the concept, see appendix 1.

Objects relevant to the stories of the 70s were listed and as narrative development progressed, the objects were organised within that conceptual structure. The earlier vision of a collections-based exhibition had by now broadened to include material relating to TV and film, popular music and fashion. Considerable gaps in the object list were identified and people mobilised to identify where items could be borrowed or purchased.

As the exhibition concept was readied for presentation as a business case to CPAT, additional staff members were brought onto the exhibition team. The team was enlarged to include an interpreter, designer, more curators, as well as representatives of visitor experience, education and events teams. Social history curator Robyn Anderson was appointed lead curator. The concept, together with recommendations from all contributing teams, was presented to CPAT where the strategic fit was examined<sup>44</sup>. Comments reflected a wide range of opinions that referred mainly to the exhibition content.

Lead designer Lesley Fowler pointed in retrospect to other issues that may have gone unnoticed and led to later difficulties:

Business case is very much about feasibility, and in this exhibition there were challenges from the early stages. The scope of this exhibition idea

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<sup>44</sup> The comments of senior leadership members who made up CPAT reflected the breadth of visions for this exhibition that were held by different people at the time:

- I think that the popular culture of the Seventies needs further exploration, but this can be developed through concept design. Please remember to have some fun – our audience will expect to see some of their favourite things from the seventies that strike a nostalgic chord as well as an earnest social analysis of what was happening here
- The weighting towards academic interpretation needs to be made more explicit in the title and tagline so that visitors are made more aware of what to expect to see in the show
- It is important people are not expecting to come and see a fun show about flares and big hair
- A section on humour would be good – to look back and laugh at ourselves. Focus on some major comedians, and comic strip artists from the era in major newspapers

(CPAT comments about *Out on the Street* business case, 2003).

and the number of objects we were thinking about were more in keeping with [a larger gallery] charging for entry. But it was allocated to the Boulevard [gallery space] where the entry is free, and because it wasn't earning revenue, it never really had the resource to do it justice (Fowler *op.cit.*, 2006).

Fowler identified at this early stage a flaw that would haunt much of the exhibition development – that eager to maximise this engaging idea, people lost sight of fundamental factors such as resourcing, which can be less flexible and more critical in shaping a viable project. Indeed further down the track insufficient funding was available for new, uniformly designed display cases, so several different kinds of cases had to be re-used. Also there were times later in concept design when the decision about what objects could be displayed was constrained by what cases were available, and instances where the location of certain cases was driven by the need to cluster cases of similar design, instead of the narrative guiding the layout.

Inherent in the decision to use the Boulevard gallery was difficulty in adapting the concept structure to the physical space (see figure 9).

The Boulevard Gallery is a very difficult space for many reasons. It is a long narrow shape that you enter via a bridge, which leads into the middle of the gallery. The rationale of this lovely floating bridge is to attract people in. But straight away, when you move through the entry you are at a T intersection<sup>45</sup>, and you have to make a decision whether to turn right or left. That has an impact on how the narrative plays out in the space... In effect we had to split the narrative in two halves (*ibid.*).

It is interesting to consider whether an appropriate spatial solution would have been easier had it been sought at an earlier stage in exhibition development, before the possibilities of the exhibition had asserted such a hold on peoples' imaginations.

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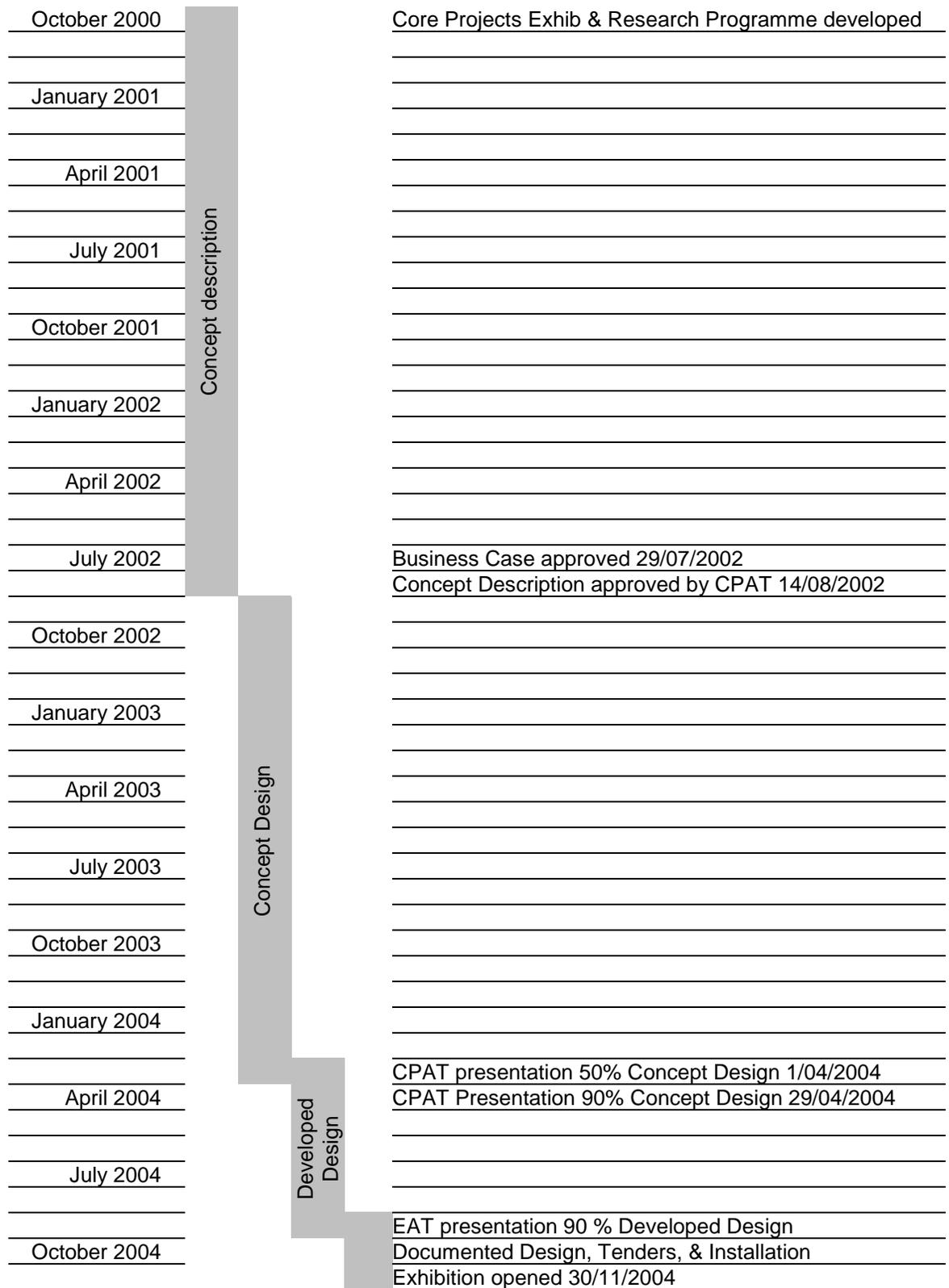
<sup>45</sup> See Figure 11

### 6.3 Translating a written concept into an exhibition

One of the characteristics of the Te Papa exhibition development process is that it is intended to be iterative – the whole exhibition being developed as a concept description, then as a concept design, then as a developed design and so on. Each stage is subjected to one or several approvals processes before the next level of work is undertaken. But one of the features of the *Out on the Street* development process was that under the time constraints the team was working to, and given the lack of buy-in to the concept by many on the team, some parts of the exhibition moved forward to resolution far quicker than others. As a result it is difficult to distinguish the different phases, in particular concept development from concept design.

Once the business case was approved, a team would usually focus on sub-dividing the conceptual framework, into themes and assigning content within them. But in the case of *Out on the Street*, the object list and other content had not yet been fully identified. So there was a real need to galvanise the team to agree on a concept at this point and catch up with the tasks that should have already been under way, in order to progress with the usual tasks of concept development.

It is difficult even in retrospect to pin down the over-riding factors for peoples' reluctance to commit to a concept. Speaking from his position within the Mātauranga Māori team, curator Oriwa Solomon pointed out that despite Te Papa's commitment to biculturalism, and despite the prominent role of Māori during that decade, no Māori specialist had been part of the development team up until this point, so no systematic treatment of Māori issues had been integrated into the original concept description. It was not until Claudia Orange (Director of History and Pacific Cultures) joined the project at a later stage that she and Solomon undertook a systematic review of Māori



**Figure 8: Timeline *Out on the Street***

activity in the 70s and fitted it into the existing concept description. The long term outcome was, in his view, favourable.

[As it turned out], the kinds of events that affected Māori in the 1970s were the same kinds of events that affected New Zealand society as a whole, issues like feminism, racism and the socio-political climate of change. Our work fitted quite well into the existing concept description because at this point it is really just a framework, a scaffolding to hang your ideas on (Solomon, 2005).

The point of view of the curators of Art & Visual Culture at the time was that

... [we] were still having private discussions that we did not want to have a narrative structure at all in the exhibition. None of the possible structures worked well; one way or another they did violence to some aspect of the concept; it was just too hard. Particularly from an art point of view we were hoping, perhaps unrealistically, that we might be able to mount a show without much structure at all (McCredie *op.cit.*).

McCredie looked back at the dilemma of integrating artworks within an exhibition that was increasingly embodying a narrative framework of popular culture and retro design. While the subject matter of figurative works might easily have been assigned to the themes of these narratives, there was the added context in artworks of form and medium to be considered rather than simply what was depicted by the artwork.

There was a major discussion as we developed the segmental structure – should art go in a section about art or should it be integrated into each appropriate theme? We decided that for some themes it fitted in easily, like within the Disturb and Disquiet segment, where there was a theme on how the arts expressed a sense of freedom and social satire, and visual art in the 70s that was experimental fitted well into that (*ibid.*).

At issue was the principle of respecting the creator of the artwork and viewing the work as art in its own context rather than as a piece of social or popular history, used to tell a story.

When we show art in a different context I sometimes feel uncomfortable because it shows disrespect to the artist. That's what I mean about a violence done to the work (*ibid.*).

Fowler however pointed to team members' different relationships within Te Papa's organisational structure to account for the lack of cohesion. Te Papa staff worked within a framework of directorates. The specialty discipline areas of Mātauranga Māori, Art & Visual Culture, History & Pacific Cultures, and Natural Environment each had their own director. Curators worked within their individual directorates where exhibition development was just one of their areas of responsibility. They operated in a tradition of specialisation, scholarship, research and professional advocacy. All other members of the core exhibitions team worked under the 'umbrella' of the director of the experience team who was responsible for exhibition development among a range of responsibilities all related to visitor experience. Exhibition development was a primary work focus for these team members. Within the experience directorate there was a strong commitment to exhibition milestones and shared responsibility between staff - what Fowler referred to as 'cross-pollination' between roles.

In *Out on the Street* we would hear from curators "well, I'm doing costumes" and "I'm just doing the home-ware" and "I'm taking care of photography". They did not share a common vision of what the exhibition was about or a shared responsibility for advancing the exhibition as a whole. Nor were there shared management structures to address these issues through (Fowler, *op.cit.*).

Nonetheless, the development of the narrative and the exhibition content did advance, albeit in a less methodical manner than would be ideal, and at a slower pace.

At this stage the narrative was being worked on at two different levels. Issues to do with the narrative structure that had been put in place at concept description were what staff called the 'high end'. The detailed content of that framework could be called the 'lower end'.

At the 'high end', curators and the 3D designer returned to the task of allocating space in the gallery to sections of the concept. Working with floorplans and the concept description, the first task was to split the segments into the two halves of the Boulevard space. The team opted to put the more political content – the segments that were by now known as *Disturb and Disquiet*, *Battle of the Sexes*, *Tino Rangatiratanga*, and *Shaping New Zealand Identity* – on the right hand side as you entered the space. On the left they assigned *Suburbia and New Idealism*, and *Back to Nature* (see figure 9). They were joined by the 2D designer and started engaging with the placement and design of high end labels from the Te Papa text hierarchy – title sign, introductory label and Segmentals.

The 'lower end' of the narrative was slower to come together. By this point in exhibition development, themes should have been set up within segments, and stories, objects and other media should have been at least tentatively put in place. In order to progress interpretive issues around the exhibition, interpreter Charlotte Crichton took a more pro-active role in setting up the thematic breakdowns than would usually have been the case (curators would normally lead this task). A positive outcome of this was that work could progress on more detailed aspects of the narrative, especially interpretive tasks; the downside was that curatorial work on the content of themes that should have driven this process was deferred, causing delays later.

The interpreter's role in this exhibition was made challenging by having to move visitors through a potentially difficult space, as well as by the considerable quantity of audio and electronic media being used in *Out on the Street*. Not only would she be kept busy preparing all the media content, but she would need to navigate a fine balance between the mood of 'Disturb and Disquiet' and cacophony. She also worked closely with AV technicians testing technical feasibility and affordability. She prepared and administered the text & graphic schedule – the table listing every label that would

appear in the exhibition; assigning its type according to the text & graphic hierarchy; and identifying which segment, theme and component each belonged with.

The designer also worked with the interpreter and curators at this more detailed level, at the same time as she was resolving the high-end layout. Using floorplans, wall elevations, the object list and text & graphic schedule, she joined with the interpreter and curators exploring positioning of iconic items and different media in order to ensure the efficient attracting of visitors into all parts of the exhibition, keeping visitors flowing between segments and themes, and also slowing their onward movement by engaging them at other points.

During this phase of exhibition development, curators and the interpreter also worked with the writing team on the lower end labels. Using the text and graphic schedule prepared by the interpreter, the curators began preparing writing briefs that outlined what facts each label should contain. This information would help the writers imagine the emerging exhibition, while the text and graphic schedule would guide word counts and font sizes.

As *Out on the Street* moved into the stage formally called concept design, all aspects of development were still not equally on track and on time. The exhibition segments had been well-defined and had been allocated space on the floorplans (see figures 10 to 14). Themes had been identified, but distribution of content among those themes had still not been finalised. In many areas there were more objects than required, but in others there were themes without content. Also many of the support systems in Te Papa were feeling the stress of the escalating amount of content to be included. It was inevitable that some objects and images would become unavailable, changes would need implementing but timeframes would have to become more rigid.

However, themes could not just be removed from the exhibition at this stage without damaging the narrative cohesiveness. Fowler describes how some of the team

engaged with the gaps and carried out a role that would usually be done by the curators, particularly in the *Back to Nature* theme and the architecture story.

I had anticipated the dilemma we had reached, and I had allocated a blind end of the gallery to the architecture theme, recognising that if there was no content the space could be walled off. It didn't come to that. Instead I went to our sources – especially Adfield and Associates, and their archives ... and selected material that our local audience would be familiar with, which would balance the other themes in the exhibition, and would fit within the resources such as matting and framing that were available. Other members of the team contributed to other gaps in the exhibition. The curators and interpreters were given the chance to assess what we were doing. But in truth we were past the point of no return (*ibid.*).

Alongside these catch-up jobs, there remained the real challenge of concept design, which is the development of physical solutions in order to adequately realise the planned exhibition concept and narrative. Visitor flow between the two halves of the exhibition had already been noted as a challenge, as had encouraging penetration by visitors into the long narrow left hand side of the gallery. Fowler identified key iconic objects and sightlines as valuable tools in the designer's toolkit, and described examples:

Sightlines are one way that a designer can contribute to keeping the narrative and the audience moving forward and engaged. Once the themes, and types of objects that will sit in them, have been identified, I look for vistas in the exhibition space that will help exhibition visitors anticipate what other areas of the exhibition have to offer.

Keeping in mind that most of our adult exhibition visitors were actually children back in the 70s, we mounted a chopper bike at quite a rakish angle near the end of the long left wing of the Boulevard, where it was clearly visible from the entry point. The intention here was to draw people down into this area where a *Family Corner* had been set up with a wealth of material to appeal to adult's memories of the 70s as well as children's curiosity about how it was for their age-group back then (*ibid.*).

Links were also made between adjacent themes or segments using several large see-through display cases. The chopper bike would be installed in one of these, and Michael Smithers' *Big Occity* – a larger-than-life domestic painting – would be seen through the case, on the wall beyond (see figure 18).

Another example is in the *Back to Nature* segment. You approach a case flanked by labels dealing with the Department of Conservation and the Takahe Development Programme. Within the case is a chainsaw, a tree branch and a taxidermied takahe. But as you look through the case, you glimpse on the wall beyond Don Binney's painting *Puketotara, twice shy* (1976), of a larger than life bird in flight over a distant landscape<sup>46</sup> (*ibid.*).

Work continued throughout the exhibition in these ways to optimise the placements of labels, display cases, objects and other media as well as finalise design plans. The exhibition was readied for presentation to EAT for 90% concept design approval. Ideally by this point narrative development should cease. Decision-making about content and placement should be complete. But this was not the case with *Out on the Street*, and as at other stages of approvals, the milestone marked the continued support of Te Papa for the exhibition rather than the attainment of a particular level of development before moving on.

As the exhibition entered the developed design phase the object list included over 500 elements (including taonga, objects, artworks, film and video, but not interpretive graphics) and was still growing. Exciting new possibilities were opening up as staff monitored 70s memorabilia available (for example on the website TradeMe). Clearly there was a strong groundswell of fascination with 70s material culture in society at large that the exhibition was answering.

But as the exhibition development entered the “home straight”, the infrastructure was strained. Staff were under considerable stress, but to their credit continued to work

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<sup>46</sup> See figure 20. Don Binney's *Puketotara, twice shy* is mostly obscured behind the pillar in this photograph, although it is fully visible to someone standing directly in front of the case.

with flexibility and attention on the final goal. Some problems were retrospectively identified during debrief. The object list – a central tool for the exhibition team in Te Papa – failed to operate as well as it should because of the volume of data entered. Beyond a certain data volume, Excel ceases to be efficient. But in addition, some staff deferred the task of updating the list which meant that others did not have the data to plan their work schedules. The text and graphic schedule listing all labels, their communication intentions and word count, was revised when it was realised there was too much to achieve in too little time. A flow-on effect of this was that label briefs already prepared by curators for the writers to work from became redundant or required reworking. In general the increased pressure of tasks to complete left the team with less time for quality communication, and conflict emerged.

Attention to the narrative of *Out on the Street* was by this stage mostly eclipsed by the sheer challenge of getting the work done. The exhibition was completed on time and opened to the public by whom it was well-received.

Michael Keith, who worked closely with the *Out on the Street* team as Head Writer, sums up the process from his perspective:

Whatever you are trying to do in exhibition development, you are driven by the big idea. Concept description defines this big idea in a formal way. Unless you can boil it down to 10 or 15 words about what you are trying to do, and tell it to your fellow team members in that immediate way, then you haven't got there yet. In *Out on the Street* nobody could articulate a big idea with any sort of coherency. It was a fascinating and wonderful exhibition in many different ways, but it was a great rambling, sprawling, ramshackle sort of structure and nobody came up with a focus. If they had, then the aim would have sprung from that focus.

If it had a big idea it would have been different structurally from the point of view of the subject experts. There would have been a sense of continuity. Instead, the interpreter and writer were making it up on the fly as the exhibition was being written. Staff were pulling their favourite items in, as long as they had any connection with the 70s material culture, instead of

object selection happening in response to a planned concept or way of looking at the decade.

It might not have made any difference to the audience and how they felt about the exhibition, but it certainly would have had a big impact on our process in Te Papa. Even with a poor process the product can still be loved by people. But in thinking about what makes people work well together in a team, you know behind the scenes, that exhibition had people saying 'never again'. In one sense it is sad because an opportunity has been lost. It was a great exhibition idea that could have given us a great opportunity to engage people in a relationship, in a closer way. It was a big exhibition that should have been on display for longer. But still, something can be gained if it makes people learn the importance of the process we have, and remember in future the importance of focus and a big idea. Hopefully in process terms, we will have learned how to do things better next time (Keith, 2006).

## 6.4 Summary

As a narrative exhibition, *Out on the Street* was less satisfying for the staff developing it than it was for its visitors. A chief factor was that research began without a clear concept. Without that agreed concept to drive the exhibition, curatorial staff tended to revert to the leadership role they held in the days of the NM and NAG, even though other exhibition staff were conforming to a new model of project management. Staff from different disciplines had different ideas of what constitutes narrative, in fact some people who saw themselves as resisting narrative in the exhibition were themselves advocating a covert narrative structure of a different type. Without shared vocabulary to debate their varied opinions, differences remained unresolved, obstructing the development process.

Between them the two case studies demonstrate the very different challenges that narrative exhibitions can pose, and the complexities that Te Papa's robust template for narrative exhibition development has been designed to negotiate.



## Chapter seven: Concluding discussion

### 7.1 Overview

In the course of this thesis, a review of narrative literature has been juxtaposed with an outline of narrative practices at Te Papa with the intention of demonstrating links with potential to benefit exhibition practices.

A narratological overview was developed through a review of the literature. Within narratological literature a variety of ways of viewing narrative were found, starting with the classical narratology we are familiar with in everyday written and audiovisual media – someone’s fictional or non-fictional accounting of events that suggested a state of change or conflict resolution, and ended with some degree of closure. Other approaches were also identified including indigenous (mythological), structuralist (semiotic), constructivist (sociological) and cognitive models. Some of these focused on the story that is told and how it was received, others looked at the psychological implications for the person who was developing the story. New approaches to narrative were described that have come to the fore during recent decades. During this timeframe attention focused increasingly on layered and complex frameworks within which narratives could be assembled. A metaphor of nested Russian dolls suggested how some kinds of narrative framed other kinds (as for example when a mythological story, or even a significant movie, could become nested as a memory or parable, within someone’s narrative of their own identity). Narratologies were shown to operate in overt and covert ways by post-modernist scholars who pointed to the covert overarching narratives (or ideologies) that frame human knowledge. These scholars advocated deconstruction to reveal how these higher order narratives impacted on our personal stories and indeed on human knowledge in general. Practices of deconstruction have since opened the way for poststructuralist scholars to identify and promote the full complexity of multi level and multi-vocal forms of narrative

in a range of media that account for the experiences of both storytellers *and* audiences.

Experience at Te Papa, and at its precursors the National Museum (NM) and the National Art Gallery (NAG), was traced as it gave rise to a strong commitment to narrative by the mid to late 1990s. The iterative model of exhibition development Te Papa subsequently adopted has been described. In this model the full content of the planned exhibition was worked through at a conceptual level, then at a design level and finally at a physical level, in order to specifically translate the conceptual vision into the physical reality of the medium – a display of objects, signage and other media within which visitors would construct their experience. Two case studies have revealed very different versions of how this model unfolded in practice. All aspects of the description of practices have been informed by interviews with staff who were still working on exhibition development within Te Papa.

The focus of this discussion is to suggest ways in which the literature could inform and improve exhibition practices. The intent is not so much to critique current practices at Te Papa, which are seen to be remarkably robust given they were set in place at the beginning of a decade that has seen such exciting developments in narrative scholarship. Indeed, within the staff interviews that enriched this research are some insights that anticipate some of the recent approaches to narrative heralded in the literature. It is clear that intelligent reflective practice and observation of audience responses is an important ingredient in striving for improved practice. Enhancement inspired by the literature should be viewed as an addition, not a substitution for reflective practice.

It is suggested that familiarity with narrative scholarship holds potential benefits for staff and for audiences. Narrative is a shared human activity, and the operations that work in one area of activity inevitably reflect in others. Three specific spheres of benefit are suggested as a result of reviewing the case studies within the context of

the literature review. Firstly it is anticipated that within the exhibition team, shared language around narrative will broaden the understanding of staff and enable them to better negotiate how they can best use narrative in their exhibition development. Secondly, it is hoped that they can use that broader understanding to craft more audience-focused narrative forms that support collaborative meaning-making by visitors. Thirdly, it is possible that staff will use broader understandings of narrative to improve their group dynamics, since narrative has increasingly been used as a tool for team-building and communication.

## 7.2 Developing shared language of narrative among staff

The most far-reaching way in which narratological literature will potentially enhance exhibitions is by building a shared language of narrative among staff to improve their ability to craft useful narrative forms. Staff interviews carried out as part of this project reflected remarkably disparate understandings of narrative. While the typology of narrative supports the validity of these different approaches to narrative, scholars such as Nelles devote considerable attention to ensuring care is taken in embedding different stories within a larger framework. The integrity of both the overarching story and the embedded story must be maintained, and the role of narrator clearly re-assigned. Similarly, within an exhibition we could conclude that care should be taken in layering different *types* of narrative.

The instance where Solomon resisted inserting his “Māoriness” into a context that was “so wholly European”<sup>47</sup> can be interpreted as resisting slipping a living story into a classical framework. McCredie observed that at times there was insufficient involvement of curators at an early enough stage to achieve a fit between narrative and objects<sup>48</sup>. He felt that objects sometimes had to be “shoe-horned” into an

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<sup>47</sup> Refer back to section 4.7

<sup>48</sup> Refer also to section 4.7

exhibition narrative and as a result, were shown in a context that conflicted with the meaning system in which they were created. The lack of fit he describes can be interpreted as a lack of care in integrating the covert narratives of art history, and the individual stories artists attach to their creations, with the narrative concept of the exhibition they are being displayed in.

In choosing to combine objects from different disciplines – taonga Māori, art, history and natural environment – in their exhibitions, Te Papa has made its task of constructing narrative more difficult, because staff in each of those disciplines favours different types of narrative. Without a strong understanding of different types of narrative and a shared language to negotiate across that diversity, the tasks of developing sound concepts that accommodate those differences, and of negotiating differences within the team as exhibition development proceeds, is hampered.

One of the main purposes of a shared language is to allow exhibition teams to engage with greater complexity in exhibition development. To effectively provide the best experiences for visitors, development teams need to work together in an integrated and methodical way at the same time as they create diverse opportunities for visitors to engage with the exhibition.

### **7.3 Developing more audience-focused narratives**

Various types of visitor diversity have been discussed in earlier chapters. Visitors shape their experience in part by receiving stories transmitted by the museum, but also by making their own narratives in response to exhibition elements and collaborating with the makers of exhibitions in order to negotiate shared meanings<sup>49</sup>. Visitors interact with exhibition elements using a range of learning styles<sup>50</sup>. Different

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<sup>49</sup> See section 6.1

<sup>50</sup> See section 6.5

interpretive communities respond to exhibitions in different ways<sup>51</sup>. Different visitors respond to different ‘voices’ and perspectives within the exhibition<sup>52</sup>. Many visitors make their own path through exhibitions, and a non-linear narrative field can better accommodate varied paths<sup>53</sup>

Diversity among team members developing the exhibition works in favour of diverse visitors, because different styles are advocated by different team members. However if the best range of opportunities for visitor meaning-making is to be achieved, team members should be aware of their intended narrative as well as being open to alternative opportunities for visitors who range more freely. The museum’s intended narrative assures cohesiveness within the team as they use it to navigate a logical path for themselves through the concept; but many visitors are keen to uncover that intended logic for themselves, and follow cues in interpretive signs in order to achieve that. Other visitors explore the exhibition in more impulsive or intuitive ways, and are more strongly engaged when material is included to accommodate their ‘grazing’.

For some staff, the ability to construct less linear narrative-rich opportunities comes naturally. Fowler’s consideration of sightlines through cases and her identification of the power of iconic objects as attractors<sup>54</sup> falls within this category.

The notion of antenarrative<sup>55</sup> - a sketchy and less ‘finished’ narrative form – has potential to broaden the view of staff developing narrative exhibitions.

Antenarrative is the fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted and pre-narrative speculation, a bet. To traditional narrative methods antenarrative is an improper storytelling, a wager that a proper narrative can be constituted (Boje, *op.cit.*, p.1).

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<sup>51</sup> See section 6.6

<sup>52</sup> See section 5.8

<sup>53</sup> See section 3.2.1

<sup>54</sup> See section 6.3

<sup>55</sup> See Boje, *op.cit.*

Unlike the coherent narratives on which staff are usually focused, ante-narrative suggests a range of material from which different people will sample different parts<sup>56</sup>, an assemblage that can accommodate any number of visitor paths.

The challenge for exhibition teams is therefore to explore opportunities within a coherent, linear conceptual structure *at the same time* as they remain open to ante-narrative possibilities. Word-based elements have literal meanings and are useful for providing scaffolding, navigation, and coherent interpretation of the exhibition concept or embedded story. But other exhibits such as artefacts and artworks can be understood in different ways, and therefore have the capacity to provide alternative meanings to different visitors, or to visitors taking different paths through the exhibition (see figure 17). The challenge is to provide a balance between the two modes.

Another instance in which narrative scholarship can potentially enhance the effectiveness of exhibitions is when museums develop exhibitions about specific communities among their audience. In the case study for *Qui Tutto Bene*, Te Papa staff noted that there was ongoing debate as to how much ownership they should assert over the exhibition development, and how much they should empower communities in the exhibition development process<sup>57</sup>. Te Papa faces a potential dilemma in seeking to empower communities to tell their own stories<sup>58</sup> while maintaining some level of strategic control in order to integrate community exhibitions into its overall exhibition programme. Irrespective of the balance it actually negotiates, the exhibition team can influence visitor perceptions about community empowerment by crafting how they present those stories.

William Nelles' writing explores the complexity of telling the stories of others, and of embedding other stories within a larger narration. He identifies the border between

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<sup>56</sup> See Plowman, *op.cit.* in section 6.2

<sup>57</sup> See section 5.2

<sup>58</sup> See section 5.1

one narrator (for example the *Passports* exhibition where the implied narrator is clearly Te Papa) and another (for example *Qui Tutto Bene* where the Italian people are meant to be telling their stories) as requiring careful navigation. He points to the syntax of quotation – of devices like quotation marks, phrases like ‘he said’, or conventions like italics or bibliographic references – as useful to transfer the story-telling responsibility to someone else. These signals cue the audience that the narration is being deferred to a new character, and that they should pay attention to whose story is being told and who is telling it. In *Qui Tutto Bene* the label text consistently referred to Italians in the third person – as ‘they’. Irrespective of whose information the label was based on, the impression to the uninformed reader was that Te Papa was telling Italian stories rather than that Te Papa was presenting Italians telling their own stories. The video interviews on the other hand showed members of the community enunciating their own words, and irrespective of what editing processes the footage was subjected to by Te Papa staff, the impression was undeniably Italian people telling Italian stories.

To its credit, Te Papa invested considerable energy in developing terms of engagement that were acceptable, and in robust consultation with the community it was representing. Further engagement with Nelles’ ideas could generate writing strategies that better reflect their collaborative spirit to the uninformed exhibition visitor.

For some of the wrong reasons, the exhibition *Out on the Street* came far closer to being an exemplary narrative by post-modern standards. It was unfortunate that it took the level of conflict within the exhibition team to act like a prism in diffracting the exhibition concept into a highly pluralistic environment for audiences. A second factor was more acceptable, though probably equally incidental: the inclusion of so many elements that brought with them their own narrative and consequently their own narrating voice. A large number of archives – including video footage, booklets, persuasive posters, films, documentary photographs, magazine articles and cartoons – told their own stories using an encyclopaedic array of rebellious, gay, creative, experimental, theatrical, materialistic voices. The narrative voice of the museum

functioned through the signage and structure of the exhibition as an effective navigation aid through a contested site, but deferred frequently in the detail to exhibition elements that spoke for themselves.

The challenge remains for museums to form cohesive teams that can work in orderly and effective ways to achieve dis-orderly outcomes.

## 7.4 Using narrative to hone team dynamics

Narratives influence exhibition staff in the same ways they do exhibition visitors. This section examines how the narratives staff carry within their own consciousnesses impact on how they respond to the exhibition narrative and to each other.

If we recall the complex layered narrative model of Lyotard, Boje and Nelles<sup>59</sup> it is possible to consider four levels of narrative operating for staff at any given time.

The first and most unique levels of narrative are those that constitute personal identity. In the past traditional scholars imagined an essential unitary identity for each individual, though more recently the notion of multiple, hybrid, fluid identities has taken hold.

It's the story we tell about the self in order to know who we are. Narratives of selfhood provide templates for orienting and acting in the world: by differentiating between good and evil, by providing understandings of agency and selfhood, and by defining the nature of social bonds and relationships (Jacobs, 2002, p.205).

Exhibition team members are influenced by the differences of class, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation that inevitably demarcate any group of people, though they are more likely than many people to engage also with debates around biculturalism,

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<sup>59</sup> See section 2.2.7

representation, appropriation and national identity because of their particular position in the cultural community.

Secondly exhibition team members are influenced by the organisational narrative of the museum that employs them. Te Papa's narrative is described by its mission: "Te Papa is a forum for the nation to present, explore and preserve the heritage of its cultures and knowledge of the natural environment in order to better understand and treasure the past, enrich the present and meet the challenges of the future" (MNZTPT). The narrative is also informed by the values embodied in its corporate principles: Te Papa is bicultural (valuing and reflecting the cultural heritage and diversity of Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti); it speaks with authority<sup>60</sup> (underpinning activities with scholarship, drawing on systems of knowledge and understanding including mātauranga Māori<sup>61</sup>); It acknowledges Mana Taonga<sup>62</sup> (recognising the role of communities in enhancing the care and understanding of collections and taonga<sup>63</sup>); it is a waharoa (serving as a gateway to New Zealand's natural and cultural heritage and providing a forum in which to explore and reflect on our national identity; it is committed to excellent service (seeking to meet the needs of audiences and the communities); and it is commercially positive (seeking to achieve successful financial outcomes and offering experiences and products that contribute to the sustainability of the Museum). Because there are potential tensions between different corporate principles<sup>64</sup>, strategic alignment across these values should be explored.

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<sup>60</sup> See discussion in section 6.6.4

<sup>61</sup> See discussion in section 6.6.2

<sup>62</sup> See quotes by Oriwa Solomon and Athol McCredie in case study for *Out on the Street*

<sup>63</sup> See section 6.6

<sup>64</sup> See quote by Oriwa Solomon in case study of *Out on the Street* for comments about whose knowledge system constitutes scholarship; also "disputes in the collaborative development of exhibitions are typically discussed in terms of tensions between scholarship and popularization" (Lee, 2002, 184)

Thirdly, within the exhibition team different exhibition staff are influenced by different professional narratives, depending on their role and position, which underscore these different prioritisations of corporate values and different views about how exhibition development works. Professional narratives are often reinforced within collegial networks and manifest through what conferences different staff attend. The way to address this conflict is not to impose a one-size-fits-all solution that suppresses diversity, but to build a team culture where different kinds of expertise are embraced.

Differences between participants unique life-worlds lead to misunderstandings, conflict and uncertainty, and participants appear to contest, or challenge, each other's contributions. The situation is exacerbated because, while the need to collaborate with other groups requires participants to gain an understanding of one another's life world (including language, expectations, and normative behaviour), participants must focus on their specialized language, knowledge and normative behaviour to solve design tasks. The types of conflicts encountered in team-based museum exhibition development are universally experienced by other types of multi-disciplinary collaborative development projects. What seems like conflict is, at least in part, a process of learning and a dialogue of exchange (Sonnenwald, 1995 quoted by Lee, *op.cit.*,p.186).

Fourthly the exhibition team works within the exhibition narrative itself. A robust, well-crafted exhibition narrative will have an integrating effect on team members who work on it. It will provide a shared umbrella under which all team members can and will fit.

[Shared] narratives help individuals, groups, and communities to "understand their progress through time in terms of stories, plots which have beginnings, middles and ends, heroes and antiheroes, epiphanies and denouements, dramatic, comic, and tragic forms" (Alexander & Smith, 1993, p.156). By arranging characters and events into stories, people are able to develop an understanding of the past, an expectation about the future, and a general understanding of how they should act. ...The fate of the group – whether large or small, long-established or still in formation – depends on its ability to marshal and maintain a shared story that allows potential members to feel at home (Ronald Jacobs *op.cit.* p.206).

The current challenge in exhibition development is to achieve cohesiveness in a context of diversity. The tension between these qualities means that exhibition teams inevitably operated in a contested domain, and some level of conflict is inevitable. A

challenge exists for museums to manage this conflict in inclusive and productive ways and the model of layered narratives provides a tool for this.

## 7.5 Conclusion

Because narrative is the lens through which humans organize their experience, it almost seems to be everywhere and be able to do anything. This ubiquity explains why narrative is such a versatile tool. Once its logic is understood in one domain of practice, it is possible to apply it in others.

Narrative is not inherently beneficial, but there are such things as good narratives. This thesis has focused on uncovering how we can use theory to improve our ability to craft good narratives. As a rule, they are cohesive (weaving disparate people, components and ideas into a collective framework), coherent (making sense), and compelling (drawing audiences strongly into engagement and meaning-making).

In looking at narrative scholarship, it has been seen that ways of understanding narrative logic and operations have varied at different times and in different areas of practice. In the 10 years since a traditional notion of narrative was first drawn into museum practice in order to make museum exhibitions competitive with forms of entertainment such as theme parks, there have been radical changes in how narrative is understood academically, but there has not been an equivalent rethinking within the museum sector. Within narrative scholarship, multi-vocal non-linear narratives have evolved to accommodate new notions of postmodern and poststructuralist representation and engagement. Audiences have been shown to engage by actively collaborating in meaning-making rather than being recipients of transmitted messages. This thesis has highlighted ways in which these new notions might shift thinking about exhibition development.

The central question around which the thesis was shaped was whether narrative practices in museum exhibitions could be improved by drawing on developments in narrative theory and narrative practice in other media. Evidence suggests it can – but only if we are willing to put new ideas of narrative to work in our exhibition development processes.

## **Appendix 1:**

### **Concept description - *Out on the Street***

#### **8.1 Description of Exhibition**

The 70s show will provide its audience with a comprehensive visual and historical exploration of this era. It will be rich in objects and ephemera drawing on the design values and artistic production of the decade.

This exhibition will take advantage of Te Papa's integrated collections to examine the culture of a decade that is now viewed through a lens of nostalgia. It will challenge some of these memories and misconceptions, focusing on the tensions and contradictions brought about by the dispersal of the 'radical' sixties into family life, popular culture, and the market place.

The exhibition will explore some of the major contributions to contemporary New Zealand artistic practice within the context of the larger social changes that characterised the era. This approach will allow a dialogue between art and history within the exhibition.

The audience will see a mix of social history objects and art works presented in a rich and complex exhibition with neither approach dominating the visitor experience.

#### **8.2 Storylines and themes**

The exhibition will be organised around four larger themes in which discussion of the particular social, political, cultural, and artistic movements of the seventies will be

placed. These historical themes will be tracked by the objects and artworks in the exhibition.

### **8.2.1 Disturbance and disquiet: discomfort at the lack of social change and countervailing disquiet at challenges to the status quo.**

- Changing social structures: The changing role of women in the family and workplace; the presence of liberation movements; pro- and anti-abortion movements; the changing role of religion in society and the family; a growing class of singles. Key artists: J. Fahey; M. Smither; S. Siddell; T. Fomison; M. Clairmont; B. Killeen; Alexis Hunter; Jeffrey Harris; Ian Scott.
- Whenua: Māori protests; voicing of Māori cultural, social, economic and sovereignty issues. Key artists: emergence of Nga Puna Waihangā in 1973 and hui to reinforce contemporary art; Paratene Matchitt; publication of *Māori Artists of the South Pacific*; Gordon Walters (*Te Ao Hou*); Dick Scott; Mural/poster art; Diane Prince.

### **8.2.2 An altered sense of New Zealand Identity, and desire to see a unique expression of that identity.**

- New Zealand Identity: In defining aspects of New Zealand culture as represented in film, TV, literature and music, this section will also track some major pop culture events. Key artists: Stanley Palmer (early printmaking); Michael Illingworth; Robin White; Brent Wong; Wong Sing Tai; Nigel Brown; Don Binney.
- New Internationalism: An historic challenge to New Zealand's relationship with the United Kingdom as motherland. Key artists: a new breed of abstract artists who opposed NZ's previous linkages to figuration, fostering a relationship to global practice: Mrkusich; Walters; Hotere; Peebles; Drawbridge.

### **8.2.3 New Idealism: unity, multiculturalism, self-expression, and rights for everybody.**

- Authority/Protest: a more widespread attempt to change institutional inequality; issues of overstayers, individual liberties versus police powers; environmental protest e.g. Manapouri, West Coast beech forest, Mururoa; growing social awareness expressed in print, the media, and 'natural' lifestyle choices. Key artists (photography dominant): Maddox; Friedlander; Westra; Hotere.
- New media: Interdisciplinary artistic activity, and the broadening of avant-garde activity into the mainstream. Key artists: The interchange film/video/theatre/poetry – Blerta, Red Mole. A belief in democratic arts – printmaking (Barry Cleavin, Vivian Lynn); pottery; photography; fibre-art; mixed media art becoming particularly associated with women's artistic practice; performance art/sculpture (Jim Allen, Dadson, Nick Spill, Andrew Drummond, Don Driver, Warren Viscoe).

### **8.2.4 Widespread critique of material and industrial progress; the counter position, a return to nature and its associated sense of nostalgia.**

- Back to nature and co-operative ventures: the natural, and emphasis on the organic. Community-focused projects, co-operative living, crafts and recycling.
- Second-hand culture: student culture and 50s retro. Key artists: Artist's collections, junk-shop aesthetic; market life; Teuane Tibbo; John Perry's collection or similar.
- Contemporary retro: in order to incorporate a present perspective on this era, a small section of artists' work that has a 'retro' attitude will be included to define the nature of retrospection: Ann Shelton; Stella Brennan; Judy Darragh.



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