Chapter 12

Virtuality and Multimedia for Digital Heritage:
Schifanoia Palace and Its Hall of Months

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter concerns the multimedia products related to Schifanoia Palace and its famous Hall of Months, some already completed and others still in the design phase. The building, fulfilling the role of museum, is almost entirely closed to the public following the earthquakes of 2012: access is possible only to the main hall, but it will shortly become unusable for a period of at least 12 months due to important works of consolidation, restoration and re-functionalization. The research project is split in stages, half of which have already been completed to date. Its objective is to provide support to visitors in this period of reduced use of space and to be one of the leading tools of communication for the new Schifanoia Civic Museum.

INTRODUCTION

Initially science museums, but now all kinds of museums have understood the importance of new multimedia modes of communication based on virtual models, interactive and non, to increase the number of visitors and their satisfaction through edutainment. Current trends show the gradual change of museums from places of conservation and management of tangible or intangible material, to active and inviting places aiming to provide the masses with access to culture through the extensive use of new technology and new interaction paradigms. The various forms of interactivity and immersion in use today are not only aimed at educating the audience, but also at increasing the enjoyment and quality of the visitor’s experience. International congresses and networks are being developed for this field of research. Among the most interesting Italian works presented at the recent “Digital Heritage” Congress of Granada (Tor-
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res et al., 2015), those produced by the museum of the city of Bologna (Guidazzoli et al., 2015) and for “Keys to Rome” international exhibition on Roman Culture (Fanini, D’Annibale, Demetrescu, Pagano, & Ferdani, 2015) are worth mentioning. A collection of the latest ongoing trials is also available on the website of V-MusT.net (“v-must | Virtual Museum Transnational Network,” 2015), Network of Excellence, funded by the FP7 European Network of Excellence (Grant Agreement 270404), focused on Virtual Museums.

Technical and digital skills are certainly very important in producing this type of product, but even more important is the ability to put the skills of researchers, historians, conservators, managers, media and communication experts into play. Their individual specialized contributions are fundamental to the construction of a tool for non-formal learning, able to allow the content, although layered and complex, to blossom and be engaging, effective, intuitive and customizable for the viewer.

PLAYERS AND EXPERTISE: INTEGRATION AND SYNERGIES IN OUR EXPERIENCE

It is important to emphasize that the spread of this technologies in the Italian museum panorama is deeply conditioned by the managerial, administrative and tax aspects of museum institutions. In the national setting and location of our experience, the largest investments in this field are undertaken by private museums (in turn funded by sponsors and foundations), which are also more agile from a design point of view. The amount of funds available to them, along with business reasons, have allowed privates to enhance their own tools and digital content for immersive enjoyment and depth of the goods.

Public museums are bound by legislation that precludes managers’ ability to program and manage resources independently. The new national reform, recently set up, allows hope for the future, a forward leap towards a “modern state museum system and dynamic” and towards “the full development of the national cultural heritage” (Ministro Franceschini, Roma, 28 ottobre 2015).

The average museum director still experiences difficulty in finding space and autonomy of investment for digital innovation, with the exception of new complexes built for purely scientific purposes, some of which are internationally known (see the Science Museum of Trento and the Galata Museo del Mare in Genoa). Unfortunately for the public museums that preserve and protect the historical and artistic heritage, the processes and possibilities are definitely more complex in terms of research sponsors and managerial autonomy of investments.

The experience presented here concerns Palazzo Schifanoia, a complex managed by the Civic Museum of Ancient Art of Ferrara, containing one of the best known cycles of paintings with profane Renaissance content in the world, primarily through the studies of Aby Warburg and Warburg Institute of London. This public body sought a partnership with the University with the purpose of making a functional disclosure project to transform a place of storage of goods into a place of cultural formation.

The professionalism and expertise of the research group involved, necessarily limited by the resources available, have directed the work not so much to the IT innovation process, but to the maximum exploitation of content and innovation of product quality. The objective of the study was to use the technology and software available on the market to create multimedia products, some of which are interactive, very accurate in terms of metric, formal and graphic data. It is in fact common to come across multimedia products, in museums and their sites, where digital models are simple boxes with no wall thickness, rough copies of the original subject merely coated with photorealistic textures. They are very agile and