December 2016

Teens Use Tech to Talk Art: Amplifying Teen Voice and Art Interpretation

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Abstract

According to a 2015 Pew study, 88 percent of teens have cell phones, and 73 percent have smartphones. Tapping into teens' extreme familiarity with mobile, the Seattle Art Museum has found a synergy at the intersection of its dual goals of increasing technology and youth voice at the museum. Using Interpretive Technology is paramount for SAM's vision "to be a great art museum for the 21st century." With a new website in 2013, increased digital interactive experiences in the galleries, and expanded interpretive offerings on mobile, SAM constantly considers how technology can achieve the museum's mission of connecting art to life. In 2014, SAM invited the 25 visionary high-school-aged teens who comprise Teen Arts Group (TAG) to write and record their own permanent collection cell phone tours for the general public. This fall, teens will be building their own augmented reality tour for the permanent collection. With both projects, SAM is leveraging existing interpretive mobile platforms to deepen the ways that it can meet the goals of its Teen Programs: to cultivate the voice and leadership of diverse young people throughout the museum. The permanent collection cell phone and augmented reality tours have not only increased available interpretive content, but also have given TAG teens a lasting presence in the museum for all visitors.

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Tasia Endo is Museum Educator for Interpretive Technology at the Seattle Art Museum. Since she joined the Education team in 2011, she develops educational content for platforms like audio guides, smartphone apps, and touchscreens installed in the galleries. Tasia graduated with a B.A. in art history and journalism from Santa Clara University, and a M.A. from the University of Washington Museology Program.

Introduction

The Seattle Art Museum's vision articulates many museums' goal for maintaining relevance in an increasingly digital age. SAM's vision continues to define itself "by its outstanding collections, dynamic and inspiring programs, and innovative uses of technology to engage audiences and supporters with great art" (Seattle Art Museum, 2014). With an institutional focus on the young adult, eighteen- to forty-five-year-old audience, wherein 98 percent (ages eighteen to twenty-nine) have cell phones, ubiquitous mobile technology makes an opportune inroad to engage a broad public.[1]

SAM also is committed to the development and engagement of teens through free out-of-school programs, which connect young people with the arts in ways that are relevant to their lives and help them to develop skills necessary for success in high school and beyond. Teen programs have been a core offering since the establishment of the department in 2007. The inaugural and now award-winning program the Teen Arts Group (TAG) consists of twenty to twenty-five high-school-aged teens who meet weekly for nine months with the goal of cultivating the voice and leadership of diverse young people throughout the museum.

Engaging the Teen Arts Group to create two mobile tours of the museum's global collection, SAM has struck a synergy in addressing the tech-savvy young-adult audience with increased art interpretation using technology, while amplifying teen voice at the museum. Returning TAG members created the first of the tours in fall 2014, as they researched, wrote, and recorded audio stops of selected artworks across the museum's collection areas. Added to the existing Guide by Cell platform, the teens' content refreshed available cell phone stops. Building on the successes of the first tour, in fall 2015 TAG teens created content for a smartphone collection tour using augmented reality. From these two teen interpretive technology projects, SAM has established institutional processes that include sustained cross-departmental buy-in, leveraging existing resources and strategies specific to working with teens.

Process

The structure of TAG, which convenes returning members in the fall before new high schoolers apply and are selected through a rigorous interview process in January, necessitated a special project like the mobile tours. From January to June, the main project of TAG is to plan a teen-only event at the museum, Teen Night Out. While the fall session also produces a Teen Night Out, returning teens already familiar with the museum, the collection, and how to give in-person tours were a ready group to create tours using digital media.

Curatorial buy-in for teen-produced interpretation for their collection areas was essential from the outset. Relying on the 2014 Strategic Plan goal of developing effective interpretive material for collection displays and special exhibitions, with greater use of digital media, both mobile tour projects' process started with curators' selections for permanent collection objects for the teens to interpret.

The first fall session kicked off the project with a contextualizing discussion about what makes for an engaging audio tour. Framed around samples from both SAM and other museums, teens each picked one of the objects preselected by the curators. The teen's subsequent research, writing, and content review mirrored the museum's typical practice for content development. SAM staff provided institutional object files of existing

scholarship on the selected objects for teens to begin their research, which they supplemented with their own findings using the SAM library and teen program iPads. After drafting their audio scripts, which followed review routing through the education and curatorial departments, museum staff recorded the teens' narration and post-produced the audio tracks in-house and uploaded to the museum's existing Guide by Cell platform.

Figure 1: Teens testing augmented reality in SAM collection galleries. *Mme. H and Her Children*, 1815. Louis André Gabriel Bouchet. Oil on canvas, 65 1/8 x 48 1/4 in. Seattle Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection, 62.75. Photo: Brenna Darroch.

The second fall session had a similar process, from objects selected by curators, framing discussions, to research and writing. The primary difference in the two project years was that instead of developing a cell phone tour, the teens developed an augmented reality tour using the Layar app. Teens crafted the content—text and found digital media like images, videos, and audio—and worked with museum staff, who produced the teens' collection tours for the augmented reality platform.

Results

Given the handful of stops that remained from the museum's original permanent collection audio tour, the teens' ten audio stops created in the first project year (2014) increased offerings more than twofold. Similarly, the second year's (2015) teens' eight stops for the augmented reality tour broadened the museums' offerings using this new technology for the special exhibition to include the permanent collection, further incentivizing visitors to download the Layar app.

Both projects not only add to the overall number of interpretive offerings for the collection, but also add variety in voices. This aligns with the museum's existing interpretive strategy for special exhibition audio guides, which feature multiple voices from varying backgrounds, whether academic, art historical, creative, or cultural. Though produced by teens, the content for the two mobile tours is intended for all visitors. Museum staff gave teens creative freedom in how they drafted their audio guide scripts, and though the final tracks are in teen voices, the content still matches the tone and depth of the rest of the museum's collection cell phone tour offerings.

Since adding the teens' new content to the SAM Collection Cell Phone Tour, visitor usage has exponentially increased. Doubling visitor usage in the first year, and already having doubled that number midway through the second, the TAG Cell Phone Tour has contributed to the increased ways visitors connect with art at SAM.
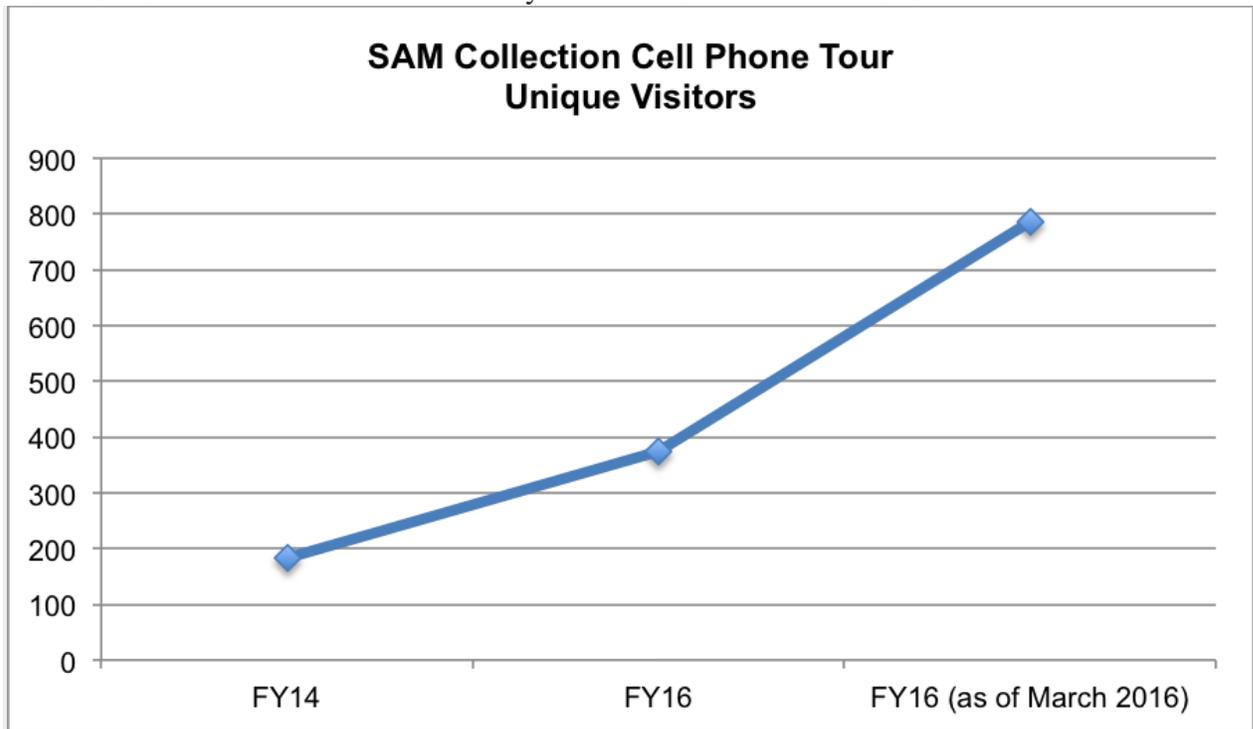

Figure 2: SAM Collection Cell Phone Tour unique visitors

	FY14	FY15	FY16 (as of March 2016)
Unique visitors	183	375	787
% Increase from previous year		204.9%	209.8%

Table 1: SAM Collection Cell Phone Tour usage data points

While SAM has limited visitor evaluation of the TAG Cell Phone Tour specifically, some feedback from larger, museum-wide surveys can give insight to the primarily positive impact of this project on museum visitor experience. From a survey for visitors to the summer 2015 exhibition, *Disguise: Masks and Global African Art*, respondents who had used the TAG Cell Phone tour during their visit were asked how this audio tour enhanced their museum experience on a scale of one to five (one equaling "not at all," and five for "extremely"). Six of those seven respondents rated the TAG Cell Phone Tour as a three or four. Somewhat reliable, these findings represent visitor sentiment from just three months of the cell phone tour's fifteen-month-long and ongoing existence.

Though the two project years with the fall TAG teens significantly increased mobile interpretive offerings at SAM, other factors may have contributed to the increased usage. Most likely, the incorporation of both the cell phone and augmented reality platforms into special exhibition interpretation inherently increases visitor awareness. With each special exhibition, all pre-visit emails, exhibition-focused booklets, the museum's map and guide, exhibition webpages, and signage at the admissions desk and entrance to the special exhibition galleries encourage visitors to access the free interpretive tour on their own device. Encouraged by the majority of communications for special exhibitions, visitors are likely to use the same platforms to also access the content for the SAM collection.

As the second project occurred in the fall of 2015, visitor data has yet to be collected to compare usage of the augmented reality experience with the first year's cell phone tour from 2014.

Figure 3: Teens listening to TAG cell phone stop in SAM collection galleries. *Mount Rainier, Bay of Tacoma—Puget Sound, 1875*. Sanford Robinson Gifford. Oil on canvas, 21 x 40 1/2 in. Seattle Art Museum, 90.29. Photo: Natali Wiseman.

Given that one of SAM's goals for TAG is to connect teens with art and empower them with relevant skills for success in high school and beyond, this mobile tour experience achieved all of that. In open-form reflections at the end of the first project year, teens were not specifically asked for feedback on the mobile tour project, but they still cited it as their top experience:

"One of my favorite [TAG experiences] was doing the audio guides in the fall. I have never done something like that before and it taught me a lot about the writing, editing, and recording process. I also gained an enormous amount of respect for people who create audio guides. In the very beginning of my TAG journey I was very shy and I didn't talk much…TAG and everyone involved in it have really helped me find my voice."
— Twelfth-grade student at Woodinville High School

"Out of my three years as a TAG member, working on the audio guides in the fall was the coolest experience. I loved learning about each of the pieces in depth and the opportunity to contribute something permanent and useful to the public through the museum!"
—Twelfth-grade student at Forest Ridge School

"Working on the fall audio tour stop was one of the most intensive and fun things I have done. I want to learn so much more about [Native American] art now!"
–Eleventh-grade student at University Prep

Reflection
Challenges and Strategies

Though ultimately navigated successfully, institutional support for new projects that use technology can be challenging, let alone with non-staff who are teens. Relying on the museum's strategic plan to align senior staff on why engaging teens meets interpretive goals for the permanent collection proved useful in answering initial questions on why this project was more than a learning exercise and also a publicly available resource.

The teens from both projects outputted new interpretive resources for eighteen collection artworks, but many hours of staff time facilitated that content production. An unavoidable cost to any new project, the extra staff time used for these teen mobile tours certainly required first-time facilitation: in addition to the teen program staff who typically lead TAG meetings, the museum educator for interpretive technology facilitated the content development with the teens. Aside from the extra staff time, typical processes for content review and post-production for existing platforms used the necessary time most efficiently.

For the second project year, the widespread unfamiliarity of augmented reality made understanding the scope of this project more challenging for the teens. Without other museum examples to reference, the teens developed the augmented reality content for the SAM collection in tandem with the museum's development of an augmented reality experience for the exhibition, *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic*. Despite the inexperience inherent in working with new technology, developing the *Kehinde Wiley* augmented reality tour alongside the teen's project was beneficial in doubling the learning from two experiences at the same time. Conversely, any roadblocks addressed for one tour resolved the issue for the other. With both development experiences informing one another, it was possible for the museum to experiment with new technology and deepen engagement with teens at the same time.

Figure 4: Teens testing TAG augmented reality tour in SAM collection galleries. *Dr. Silvester Gardiner, 1772.* John Singleton Copley. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in. Seattle Art Museum, 2006.125. Photo: Natali Wiseman.

The two project years elucidated the differences in working with high-school-aged youth with varying experience. Eight of the ten youths in the first project in 2014 were in their second full year of TAG and were more familiar with the museum, its collection, and talking about art. In contrast, the second project year in 2015 had only one youth in the second full year of TAG, as the remaining seven youths had only joined earlier in 2015. The varying levels of youth development between the 2014 and 2015 teen project groups certainly correlated to the ease in the overall project execution. The 2014 project teens were self-motivated, self-critical, and committed to a quality output, so much that one teen even did two audio stops to make up for another teen who had dropped out midway through the fall session. The 2015 project teens were also generally engaged, but required staff to more closely facilitate for effective use of meeting times for research and writing, to more directly guide the content production to align with existing scholarship, and even to repeatedly follow up with teens for finishing unfinished tasks outside of scheduled sessions.

Considerations for the future

As both mobile tour projects mostly focused on teens' content development, it is worth considering broadening their exposure to other aspects of interpretive technology production. Perhaps with more time and technically inclined participants, the project could expand to include a teen's own post-production, such as editing their own audio recordings to create the final audio stops. Similarly, as the museum also produces verbal

descriptions of artworks for low/no vision visitors as typical practice, teens could take on this aspect as well.

Conclusion

   These two teen mobile projects exemplify how the museum can efficiently and effectively align strategies of both visitor and youth engagement to meet institutional goals. With returning teens in the fall session primed for such a project, the museum leveraged existing processes and technology platforms to engage teens and amplify their voices in the wider museum experience. As a result, the museum increased the interpretive technology offerings around the permanent collection and subsequently strategically broadened the ways that visitors, particularly the tech-savvy young adult audience, can engage with the art on view.

   Museums increasingly seek to understand how technology fits into their mission. Since the first edition in 2012, all years of the American Alliance of Museums TrendsWatch reports include technology-related visitor engagement, from augmented reality to the Internet of Things. Whereas the interpretive technology department creates engaging experiences for all audiences using technology, this model of collaboration with the teen programs department could apply for other specific audiences and will be considered in the future.

Notes
[1] Monica Anderson, "Technology Device Ownership: 2015." (Pew Research: October 29, 2015).

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