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Creative Practice and the Limits of Evidence in Journey to the Beginnings

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Creative Practice and the Limits of Evidence in *Journey to the Beginnings*

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Dr Magdolna Vicze is Director of the Matrica Museum and Archaeological Park, Százhalombatta, Hungary. She has been Director since 2005, having previously worked there as an archaeologist and museum curator. She co-directs the excavation at the Bronze Age tell settlement at Százhalombatta-Földvár, Hungary and was closely involved in the creative practitioner residencies during the Creative Europe project *Journey to the Beginnings*.

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Introduction

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The interplay between evidence and imagination is particularly alive in the context of prehistoric archaeology where the process of archaeological investigation and scientific evidence form part of the narrative that museums wish to convey, though there may be simultaneous gaps in understanding about the distant human past. The representation and reconstruction of prehistory has thus long been a matter for discussion (Duval et al 2019; Moser 1998). However, as creatives enter the museum space with their own agendas and take more of a front-line role in museum programming, these dynamics require us to reconsider our attitudes to authenticity beyond display.

The question we consider here is not whether staying true to data is important but, once we decide that it is, how museums can work together with creative practitioners to develop mutually beneficial outcomes. To do so we examine how attitudes towards archaeological evidence were addressed within *Journey to the Beginnings*, a Co-operation Project funded as part of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018. We reflect on the challenges and opportunities this posed, and how this led us to develop fruitful ways of working together.

Journey to the Beginnings

Journey to the Beginnings was a collaborative project involving four museums linked to key prehistoric sites, their archaeological parks and collections in countries along the River Danube: Matrica Museum and the Bronze Age tell at Százhalombatta, Hungary; Vučedol Culture Museum and the Eneolithic site of Vučedol, Croatia; Museum Lepinski Vir and the Mesolithic site of Lepinski Vir, Serbia; Iron Gates Region Museum and the site of Gârla Mâre, Romania. It brought together museum educators and curators from these institutions, the Association of Heritage Managers Hungary, an academic archaeological liaison (Joanna Sofaer, University of Southampton, UK), ProProgressione (an umbrella arts organisation), Novena Multimedia (digital multimedia specialists), and individual creative practitioners including a novelist (Balázs Zágoni), a theatre director (Máté Czakó), and a composer (Ljubomir Nikolić). It aimed to develop a new interpretive infrastructure for the museums and their

archaeological sites in order to enhance visitor understanding of prehistoric archaeology and access hard to reach teenage audiences.

The project ran for almost two years, ending in February 2020. During this time it developed a series of site specific, performance-based live games designed by the creatives. Partner institutions shared a common format although the content of these was bespoke. Each live game was based around a number of ‘escape room’ type challenges designed and staged by Czakó with a soundscape by Nikolić in which small groups of visitors solve a problem or make a prehistoric object in order to move on to the next stage in a story. Inspired by Zágoni’s interest in science fiction, the storyline revolves around an archaeologist trapped between time dimensions because she lost her mobile phone during a visit to the prehistoric past. Visitors need to find the phone in order to return her home. Each stage in the story takes the visitor through a different prehistoric setting in which, guided by characters played by actors (craftsperson, hunter, mother, shaman), they gradually gain the objects and skills to retrieve the phone. These settings reflect different aspects of prehistoric life including craft production, hunting and gathering, food consumption, cosmology and funerary rituals. Once the phone has been located, the game ends with a geocaching activity where visitors must find a time capsule, place the device inside, and follow instructions to return to the present where they meet the missing archaeologist - a real member of the museum staff. She is oblivious to having been freed and welcomes them to a genuine short archaeological talk and object handling session, as if that is what they had come to do all along. The activity is thus designed as a content-rich, active-learning experience. Participation requires visitors to move around the museum grounds or archaeological park thereby exploiting outside spaces beyond those usually used by most of the museum partners.

The live game was subsequently developed into a mobile game app in order to provide a sustainable, long-term outcome that could be used by the museums beyond the lifetime of the project itself. Game players solve problems and collect objects in similar scenarios to those offered in the live game, with different levels corresponding to the archaeological sites involved in the project. The multidisciplinary, multi-institutional, and multinational configuration of *Journey to the Beginnings*, as well as its long-term ambition, was therefore distinct to many education projects involving creative practitioners inasmuch as the majority of such interventions are often limited to a single site and temporary. Nonetheless, we focus here on the development of the live game as working through issues involved in its development underpinned the entire project.

Starting Challenges: The Nature and Role of Evidence

From the start, all the museum partners insisted that project outcomes had to be based on archaeological evidence in order to be of use within their education programmes. However, none of the creatives involved in the project had any previous engagement with archaeology or familiarity with the sites and collections involved; they had been selected for expertise in their own fields. The need for closeness to data – what we know about the distant past and what we do not – thus necessitated a different kind of model to that of a standard freeform museum residency where creatives are typically left to explore museum collections on their own and to develop their own interpretations. An archaeological liaison role was therefore built into the project at its inception in order to designate a main point of archaeological contact for the creatives,

provide scientific guidance across the project as a whole, and act as a bridge between the creatives and the museums. This also aimed to relieve pressure from museum staff who were already committed to day-to-day work in their institutions and were unfamiliar with the needs of creatives. The liaison was familiar with the archaeology of the Danube region, with previous experience of working with creative practitioners. She was therefore able to "speak the languages" of archaeology and of creative practice, to ease communication by translating between them, and to interpolate between the needs of all participants.

The project began by intensive working with the creatives to familiarise them with the archaeological data available at each of the sites, including material culture and environmental evidence. To this end they participated in an experimental archaeology camp at Asparn, Austria and were then to embark on a series of supported residencies in each museum being guided through the archaeology. During the first of these, held at the Matrica Museum, it quickly became clear that acquainting the creatives with archaeological finds and data was not sufficient on its own. Consistent with the project's agreed policy of closeness to data, as the creatives began considering ideas for the activity, they asked questions about the past that met with somewhat ambiguous archaeological answers ("its not preserved so we don't know"; "it could be this or that"). Understandably, such responses met with a degree of frustration. The partial nature of archaeological data was not giving them everything they thought it would; they could not straightforwardly take archaeological knowledge about prehistory and make a narrative out of it. This was compounded by an archaeological insistence that they could not make things up to fill the gaps. As prehistory has by definition no written record and is at some temporal distance from the present, the limits of archaeological evidence

were not immediately obvious to the creatives, who were unfamiliar with methods of archaeological inference. Archaeologists take for granted that there are things we know about the past and things we don't; it is implicit in the nature of archaeological enquiry to identify the latter in order to try to find answers.

Towards the start of the project it therefore became clear that we needed to engage in a series of conversations around the nature of the archaeological process in order to navigate where the possibilities lay for creative practice. In an addition to the planned programme of museum visits, the creatives were invited to participate in the archaeological excavation of the Bronze Age tell settlement at Százhalombatta so that they could better understand the systems of archaeology. In other words, to understand the nature and limits of evidence they had to understand how the evidence was generated. This was a formative experience in the creation of the final storyline. It led not only to an archaeologist becoming a significant figure in the narrative but, more importantly, to the central notion of problem-solving (articulated within the escape room format) as a concept that encapsulates the archaeological process.

Given the differences in the archaeology and collections between the four museums, the project also decided to focus on the material in the Matrica Museum as a practical means of developing modes of collaboration and trying out ideas on one set of data before working on the other sites. It was here that the concept of developing a single overarching framework for the storyline composed of a series of themed escape rooms into which the site specific archaeology held by each museum could be placed, was discussed, experimented with, trialled, and refined. We developed an iterative working process, with cycles of development and testing, central to which was continued

dialogue between creatives, archaeological liaison, and museum educators; each stage of the storyline was discussed not only in terms of filling it with appropriate archaeology but also in relation to its performance needs. The live game was trialled during the 2018 and 2019 summer seasons. Museum pedagogues and visitors were invited to the trials, and feedback from questionnaires and focus groups used to refine versions throughout.

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Through these processes of dialogue and iteration two distinct sets of spaces for creative practice gradually crystalized. On one hand there were areas for free creativity such as storylines, characters, or acting. On the other there were areas where the creatives responded to the site-specific archaeology such as costume, objects or environment but were constrained both by existing evidence and what is unknown about the past. Elsewhere, research on creativity indicates that it may be enhanced through the imposition of boundaries (Stokes 2005). In our case, once these different arenas and constraints were identified, this gave impetus to the creative process as the creatives felt freer to use their professional expertise. The project moved away from introducing them to archaeology with its “question and answer” mode, into a phase of practice-based research where archaeological and museum input became about verifying and reacting to content.

Working in these different kinds of spaces for creativity posed different sets of opportunities. To illustrate these we give two brief examples. The first relates to how

the visitor literally steps into prehistory at the start of the live game. It was essential to find a way for visitors to enter the past in a credible way in order to “buy into” the experience. Here the creatives had free rein and experimented with a variety of solutions. Zágoni’s dialogue made sense of the fictional interdimensional portal through which visitor and archaeologist alike pass into the past by reference to the principles of stratigraphy; going back through the layers of the past as you excavate as a form of time travel. He developed Czakó’s realization that the pits prehistoric people dug in settlements, which sometimes cut through hundreds of years of history, connect two different points in time at the same location; literal interdimensional portals. Czakó developed the scenography of the visitors’ entry to the past using VR. Participants are asked put on a VR headset, giving the impression of being assisted by technology to enter the past but they do not experience the past through it. Instead it is used as a ‘placeholding device’ with visitors seeing their surroundings as if continuous with the previous live narrative. While they are in the virtual world the scene is changed around them so that when they take off the headset they step into prehistory.

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words spoken by the actors are inspired by Zágoni's explorations of Proto-Indo-European language, some of which are deliberately taught to the visitor, notably through an original song composed by Nikolić. This also serves as a device to communicate the sophistication of prehistoric life, challenging stereotypes of prehistoric people as "primitive".

In addition to these spaces for creativity, ethical considerations emerged as a further discussion point. In an early version of the script participants were asked to pilfer an object. While dramatically interesting, this clearly created ethical issues around consent and the legitimation of antiquaries theft. The script was swiftly changed so that participants were in receipt of a gift. The importance of not taking anything from the past and the problem of antiquaries theft were then signposted in the activity as an education message.

Concluding Reflections

Journey to the Beginnings' commitment to closeness to data led to development of a partnership model of collaboration in which a parallel on-going commitment to trust and dialogue was vital. In developing the live game it was vital for all partners to understand where the spaces for creativity lay. These were twofold: in traditional areas of creative practice such as storylines or dramaturgy, and in responses to the past. In the case of the latter, it became clear that opportunities for creativity lay not in knowledge gaps about prehistory but in areas where archaeological evidence is strong. Conversations around the nature and limits of the data generated a productive dynamic

that facilitated creative engagement rather than stifle it. This became a fruitful way of working together, enabling creatives to explore the past in ways that add value to museum education in the present by linking data and imagination.

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