



Museums: agents of social change and development

The Tech Virtual: Digital Democracy in Exhibit Design

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How can museums become venues for social change? We typically think about museum impact in the context of our products—exhibits, programs, research—and how those products engage, challenge, and stimulate visitors. When we talk about change, we generally think of how our content might change our visitors' perception of the world and their role within it. But at **The Tech Museum of Innovation ("The Tech")** in San Jose, California, when we talk about change, we aren't just talking about visitors. We are talking about ourselves—the museum community—and innovating the techniques and processes by which we create exhibits.

> In this networked, digital age, there is no reason for museums to remain as individual islands of content, each a repository of idiosyncratic processes and expertise. To broaden our world and challenge the traditional methods of creating new museum content, we created "**The Tech Virtual**," a virtual exhibit creative initiative in **Second Life®** funded by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation. Tech Virtual allows people to conceptualize and prototype exhibits online. This means that the exhibit design process can be both distributed and collaborative, allowing curators to blur institutional lines and work together to create superlative visitor experiences. We are tearing down the silos that divide educators from artists, scientists from exhibitors, visitors from designers, inviting creative contributors from around the world to collaborate on the development of new exhibit



Simon with Marie Crandell, an SL exhibit creator in Plymouth, England.

bits in a virtual community. The goal is both to democratize and to innovate the exhibit design process, opening doors to a virtual space where creative leaders can work together.

> The Tech Virtual project is an online platform comprising two key elements: a website, www.thetechvirtual.org, where all projects originate; and a Second Life presence ("The Tech" in Second Life), where participants can communicate

in real-time, share ideas, and build virtual prototypes. Second Life is a **3D virtual world** in which users are represented by avatars (personal character) which move through spaces, interact with objects, and communicate with other users. Many museums have explored using Second Life as an outreach platform for remote visitor experiences but have been dissuaded by the technical and cultural challenges of working in such an uncontrolled creative space. However, the creative tools of Second Life turn from a topic of concern to one of opportunity when used not as a visitor space, but as a designers' space. The Tech has created a virtual museum workshop in Second Life, in which participants can brainstorm with each other, experiment with interactive scripted objects, and share exhibit configurations and designs. Because Second Life is a social platform, remote designers don't have to email their work to collaborators for review; instead, teams can meet in real-time in the virtual workshop to work through their ideas both orally and visually.

> The Tech Virtual project is committed to an open-source, transparent model that supports maximal participation by a wide range of contributors as well as flexibility in terms of how the content is used. All participation is under a **Creative Commons attribution license**, which means that all ideas are available for use by any institution with no financial obligation—only an obligation to credit the originators of said ideas. This means that the virtual workshop can become an exhibit resource for institutions of all sizes around the world—and that the physical substantiation of a virtual exhibit in one museum might look very different than that in another. This is not a project aiming to create a network of identical museum exhibits; rather, to provide the core expert content, interactions, and design for a wide range of exhibits and visitor experiences. In this way, emerging and established museums can work together to develop content that can then be integrated into the unique exhibits and programs at each institution.

> For The Tech, this project is part of a larger vision to transform our museum into one that embraces and reflects the spirit of Silicon Valley and the innovative businesses in our backyard. Toward that end, we have an ambitious goal to replace all of the exhibits in our 132,000 square foot institution in the next five years, to produce a steady flow of cutting edge, educational exhibits that are as forward-thinking as the Silicon Valley innovations they elucidate. Moving quickly means we must find new ways to develop exhibits in parallel, to draw on



Peter Friess standing in front of The Tech in Second Life

talents outside our own staff to bring the most innovative exhibit ideas to the table. Under the leadership of Nina Simon and Rob Stephenson, The Tech Virtual is growing into a **thriving creative community, a new breed of exhibit makers**. In the first two months of its existence, The Tech Virtual has attracted a community of 260 participants developing 55 virtual exhibit projects.

> As Philip Rosedale, Founder and CEO of Linden Lab, creators of Second Life, put it when we opened: "The Tech has captured the essence of Second Life with this initiative: leveraging the ideas of an entire community to build and create an experience for others to enjoy. I am confident that it will bring curators and developers together in an exciting blend of creativity, talent and interactive, online collaboration." The Tech Virtual has digital media professors collaborating with composers, exhibit designers working with engineers. Exhibits range from an exploration of synaesthesia to a demonstration of nano-fabrics to simulations of flight and interactive musical instruments, such as the Wikisonic, architect Jon Brouchoud's invention for developed in Second Life and soon to be on the floor of the real Tech Museum in San José. All of these partake in **the spirit of Silicon Valley**.

> But this project is not only for The Tech; it is **for all museums** that want to use technology to collaborate and use the collective wisdom of the field to reach new heights. How can we intelligently include outsiders' and visitors' voices in exhibitions? Where do we need to lead them, and when do we need to let their interests and abilities lead us? If museums can come together through The Tech Virtual process and others, sharing our best practices, we can become leaders in collaborative, distributed design. Working together doesn't just mean better exhibits and experiences for our visitors. It means new networks, new ideas, and new opportunities for us—and for the future of museums.

Website: <http://www.thetech.org>