The On-Line Museum: Off and Running

A grant from the National Science Foundation is supporting the first phase of a three-year program to develop an On-Line Museum accessible via the Internet. The Museum's Web site is up now (http://www.net.org/) and under construction, and the formal launch of the first phase of the On-Line Museum is planned for March 1996.

Advisors from the computer industry and museum worlds met in April to initiate the planning. Ed Belove, AT&T Interchange, a Museum Board member who chaired the advisors, noted, "The ability to build community is what makes this medium unique."

The other advisors and Museum staff included Michael D'Alessandro, The Virtual Hospital Project; Gwen Bell and Sari Boren, The Computer Museum; David Farber, The University of Pennsylvania; Diane Franklin and David Greschler, The Computer Museum; Paul Helfrich, The Franklin Institute; Brian Lee, The Computer Museum; Bob Metcalfe, InfoWorld; Lincoln Millstein, The Boston Globe; Ellen Pack, Women's Wire; Rob Semper, The Exploratorium; Lee Sproull, Boston University School of Management; Oliver Strimpel, The Computer Museum; and Bob Tinker, TERC.

The advisors concurred with Belove that the On-Line Museum should not only provide information, but enable people to interact with the exhibits and each other. They also agreed that the On-line Museum was a natural place to showcase the Museum's collections and experiment with interactive informal learning.

Goals

The results of this meeting and interviews with other networking experts are being incorporated into a plan for the On-Line Museum. The goals are to:

•build a dynamic site about computing and its history, valuable to users for its information, interactive opportunities and community-building experiences;

•create a living laboratory for studying and experimenting with on-line informal education.

The On-Line Museum will combine the Museum's unique approach to informal education with distance learning that exploits the special nature of networks. It will consist of experiences of interest to its various audiences—including educators, technology-oriented scholars, industry professionals, parents, students, and children. These experiences will involve interactive and other exhibits, access to databases, real-time data and historical information, opportunities for building

Above and bottom right: Icons from the Museum's current Web site.

community, and the ability to download a variety of print and software resources.

Information Desk at http://www.net.org/

The Web browser will provide an overview of the features of the On-Line Museum via both an image and text-based map. An Information Desk will explain what's available in the on-line and on-site Museums. An early version is now viewable at the Museum's Web site. Visitors will be able to move through the site in ways that match their interests. They will also be able to take guided tours, conducted by a text-, audio- or video-based tour guide.

Galleries

The heart of the On-Line Museum is a series of virtual "galleries," accessible using Web technology. The Collections Gallery will offer access to an index of the collections catalog—with complete copies of the catalog available electronically; a sampling of the photograph collection; pointers to other computer history sites; a "this day in history" feature; and hot links to interactive simulations of historic machines, to the Museum's Occasional Letter on the Historical Collection and to the collectibles section of the Charity Auction.

A Kids' Software Gallery will integrate visitors' evaluations of software into The Computer Museum's *Guide to the Best Software for Kids*. Visitors can read updated reviews, interactively sample software and hotlink to the Museum Store, where either the book or software can be ordered. A community of interested parents, teachers and children will be encouraged to form around this topic.

Interactive experiences central to the on-site Museum will be adapted or else developed especially for the Web. For example, the (local area) Network Puzzle game may be reprogrammed to work across the Internet, while an artificially intelligent Strawberry Vendor might be adapted for the Web. A new version of the healthy computing interactive may be developed uniquely for the On-Line Museum.

Other features of the On-Line Museum might include a virtual meeting room for visitors and members, a resource center, a site for special events and conferences, and an education center with on-line courses and other resources for teachers.

To reach these parts of the On-Line Museum, technologies such as FTP and listservs will be used, in addition to Web technology. But all components will be hyperlinked through the initial Web interface.

To measure how well the On-Line Museum is fulfilling its mission, formative evaluations will be conducted, asking both the On-Line Museum's advisors and current on-line users to participate.

Partnerships

The On-Line Museum offers partnerships to educational or other organizations, as well as opportunities to volunteers interested in developing project components. For more information, please e-mail Diane Franklin (franklin@tcm.org) or call (617)426-2800 x332.