

The Virtual Reality Experience

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Background

The role of museums and heritage sites as conservators and collectors of records and objects and as visitor attractions is the subject of regular debate. Some may say a conflict of purpose sometimes exists. However museums and heritage sites operate in a competitive commercial environment and have to constantly look for ways to attract both new and repeat visitors.

The Welsh Highland Railway Porthmadog, North Wales is developing a museum on the themes of narrow gauge railways and slate. These were both of crucial importance to the economic growth of the area in the 19th and 20th centuries and indeed in the 21st century still play key roles in the tourist market and the economic well being of the area.

A version of the following article appeared in 1996 in the Journal of the Welsh Highland Railway. The purpose was to highlight the need to create a visitor attraction and museum that was different and provided an "ambient experience". At the time, it was directed at a particular readership but it should still have a resonance currently for museums and visitor attractions hoping to create that reason of "worth leaving home for."

The Welsh Highland Railway Experience

"You're always meddling in other people's areas," said The Critic. "Why don't you get on with your job and let others get on with theirs! It isn't any of your business!"

A few moments earlier I was standing outside the café, watching potential customers hovering in the car park, hoping they would become actual customers. They had reached the point of committing their money, had a quick look in the shop and up the line but then turned away. When I pointed this out to The Critic and from my observations, my reasoning why they had gone away, his reply was exactly the words in the opening paragraph.

So what went wrong - no not my altercation with The Critic - but with the lost sale? It wasn't real enough.

Two lovebirds held hands and cooed at each other. They were riding in a brown and cream painted Collett 3rd class coach hauled by a green painted steam engine somewhere in Worcestershire. The words "Great Western" were on most things including the locomotive. I was glad the war was over and that I had been demobbed. How wonderful that she had come to meet me at the junction and we were to travel home together. I felt it was a new beginning and that I knew her already. After all we had written to each other enough times.

I shook my head in disbelief. I was born in 1958 and it was 1996 and not 1945. Full marks to the Severn Valley Railway. I'll go there again.

I stood in a dim vaulted corridor surrounded by mining vehicles. The corridor was narrow and there wasn't much space to squeeze past the train. The air tasted of coal dust and it was cold. The tubs were rusty and battered and had seen better days. But where were all the miners? Still at the coal face I suppose.

"Come on Nick, its time to leave. Everyone else has moved on - we're the last ones." We weren't actually underground but in a sort of Nissen hut sticking out of one of the main exhibition buildings. It had me fooled though. Full marks, Armley Industrial Museum in Leeds. I'll go there again.

I stood on the platform at an urban station, in bright sunshine, waiting for my train. Luggage was stacked on a barrow waiting to be loaded. Further down the platform, a black tank engine with "LMS" on the side was taking water from a water crane. The smoke she was making wafted towards me. I coughed. In a few moments she would be backing down on to the train in the platform for the journey home to the Bristol. I fired off a few shots with the camera. It felt like Gloucester, but was in fact Loughborough on the Great Central. I've been there a few times.

What I'm describing is Virtual Reality. Although it's a term more usually associated with computer driven systems, there's more to it than that. It's a label for an illusion that is so realistic that the mind buys into the experience totally convinced that the illusion is reality.

So what has that got to do with my opening paragraphs? I was a customer in each of the illusions I have described. I bought Virtual Reality. I paid for it! Equally I have been on other railways that are either very slick and provide a pleasant ride through nice scenery but have no atmosphere or are amateurish, dirty and untidy and usually fail to provide the answer to the question "Why do they bother?"

Running a train is only part of it, a point The Critic missed at the time of our discussion. We operate in a fiercely competitive market, where our customers are becoming increasingly sophisticated consumers and who have been to Disneyland, Alton Towers etc. For them the ride is only part of it. They are looking for that ephemeral thing known as "ambience" or "magic" - apart from plenty of clean loos, somewhere to eat and drink and to buy souvenirs.

What was it really like to stand in the sunshine (or rain) at Beddgelert waiting for "Russell" to appear on a train to Dinas? What did the weighbridge actually weigh? Who built the railway? What did it carry apart from passengers? Where did Mr Gladstone sit in the coach? What did he look like? Who was Mr Gladstone anyway?! What was the Baldwin like to ride on? So the Welsh Highland Railway really was the pioneer in catering on narrow gauge railways - and we have the buffet car to prove it!

This is what the Welsh Highland Railway Experience concept is about. Creating an illusion on the train and on the site tour. Something that is so different and so evocative that customers/passengers will come and linger on the site for longer, come back and/or tell their friends about it. Clough William Ellis did it with Porthmerion and it can be done with a little bit of help - at Porthmadog.

Author's note

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