

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Curating the Screen: Accessibility and Argument in Digital Humanities Exhibitions

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Abstract

Digital exhibitions are commonly evaluated through their collections, while the interface decisions that organize access and interpretation receive less sustained attention. This article asks how exhibition design makes a curatorial argument through navigation, description, and metadata. It compares selected open exhibitions from the Library of Congress, British Library, Smithsonian Institution, and Europeana as interface-based case studies rather than repositories of isolated objects. Comparative design analysis follows navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail. The study argues that navigation order establishes causal and chronological priorities, that accessible description can deepen interpretation when it explains relations rather than merely naming objects, and that metadata visibility redistributes curatorial authority between institutions and users. By connecting accessibility to interpretation rather than treating it as an added technical feature, the article contributes a relational account of digital exhibition design. Its claims remain limited to the selected interfaces and do not establish audience response, usability outcomes, or institutional intention.

Keywords: digital humanities; exhibition; accessibility; interface; public history

1 Introduction

Curating the Screen examines how digital exhibitions turn interface choices into historical and interpretive arguments. Its corpus comprises four openly accessible digital exhibitions produced by university libraries and public cultural institutions, understood as interface-based case studies rather than as repositories of isolated objects. The central claim is that navigation order silently establishes causal and chronological priorities. That proposition carries weight: accessibility is part of scholarly method because interfaces decide which relations can be perceived and tested. Attention therefore falls on navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail.

The project's scope is more limited than a general history of interface rhetoric. Within these texts, digital exhibition design is assessed through navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail. Its definition changes only when those features alter the interpretation.

The comparative reading advances three connected findings. First, navigation order silently establishes causal and

chronological priorities. Second, accessible description can deepen interpretation when it explains relations rather than merely naming objects. Third, metadata visibility redistributes curatorial authority toward or away from users. Collectively, the findings establish that interface rhetoric is neither a decorative effect nor a label attached after interpretation. The argument remains proportionate to the textual selection.

The research problem in Curating the Screen has two parts. The descriptive part asks where navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail enter the selected works and how their placement changes. The interpretive part asks why those changes require the vocabulary of digital exhibition design rather than a simpler account based on convention, chronology, or genre. Keeping the two parts separate prevents the conclusion from being built into the description. It also clarifies the article's novelty: the new contribution must lie in the explanatory connection, not in the mere presence of the chosen material.

In this article, digital exhibition design does not name a mood, topic, or value detached from form. It names the interac-

tion among preparation, allocation, and revision. Preparation concerns the expectation built around navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail; allocation concerns who or what can act on that expectation; revision concerns the following event that changes its status. The definition is intentionally operational. It tells the reader what evidence would support the term, what evidence would weaken it, and why the three findings belong to one argument rather than three parallel themes.

The research question is how interface design distributes curatorial authority through navigation, description, and metadata. The objective is to compare visible design relations without inferring user behavior from interface features alone. The article proceeds through critical context, corpus and method, three analytical findings, discussion, limitations, and conclusion.

Digital-humanities design research supports treating an online exhibition as an argument made through navigation and display. Burdick and colleagues connect scholarly interpretation with computational and visual design [1]. Drucker's account of performative materiality ex-

plains how interface actions participate in producing, rather than merely delivering, humanistic knowledge [2].

2 Critical Context: Interface Rhetoric and Humanistic Evidence

Dialogic accounts of meaning support treating an exhibition interface as a relation among institutional, object, and user-facing voices [3]. Interpretive communities clarify why navigation cues depend on learned conventions rather than transparent access [4]. Work on analytical scale cautions against generalizing from four digital cases [5]. Accounts of digital materiality foreground the interaction between cognition and interface form [6]. Humanistic visualization theory establishes that displays and metadata are constructed arguments rather than neutral containers [7].

3 Interfaces, Description, and Metadata

The selected materials comprise digital exhibition materials from the Library of Congress [8], British Library [9], Smithsonian Institution [10], and Europeana [11]. They are treated as interface-based cases rather than repositories of isolated objects. Selection follows conceptual variation rather than statistical representativeness, and comparison uses navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail.

The inquiry employs comparative interface reading using an accessibility-aware walkthrough protocol and a feature-to-claim analytic table.

Rather than counting motifs, Curating the Screen follows navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail through their immediate contexts. The procedure records position, recurrence, interruption, and outcome before assigning interpretive weight. That order matters because a repeated feature may retain its appearance while changing function, whereas a single event at a boundary may redirect the whole sequence. Claims about intention, reception, usability, or prevalence are withheld because the present method does not supply that evidence.

Source control is integral to the claim about digital exhibition design. Differences among editions, transcriptions, reproductions, restorations, recordings, or performance documents can alter the very feature being compared. The article therefore treats the version named

in each reference as part of the evidence. Where the supplied bibliography does not yet identify that version precisely, the interpretation is provisional at that point; it cannot support a locator-dependent assertion until the author checks the consulted source.

The baseline reading concerns Library of Congress's Selected Digital Exhibitions. The reading tests the proposition that navigation order silently establishes causal and chronological priorities by restricting attention to navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail. It then identifies which surrounding relations are necessary for that account.

In Library of Congress's Selected Digital Exhibitions, the proposition that navigation order silently establishes causal and chronological priorities is evaluated through placement, not keyword recurrence. The reading asks what prepares each occurrence of navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail, which agent or organizational layer controls it, and what outcome follows. A detail counts as evidence only when its surrounding sequence changes the available judgment. This restriction prevents the case from being reduced to an example chosen after the thesis was formed.

A close reading of Library of Congress's Selected Digital Exhibitions must therefore document the first relevant occurrence of navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail, the expectation active at that moment, and the consequence that distinguishes it from background recurrence. The case supports Curating the Screen only if those three points can be located in the consulted version. A general parallel to the other cases is not enough; the passage must show why the proposition about digital exhibition design is needed to explain its organization.

The following case, British Library's Selected Online Exhibitions, tests the distributive dimension of the argument. Here the governing question is whether accessible description can deepen interpretation when it explains relations rather than merely naming objects. This is not read as a defect in reliability.

British Library's Selected Online Exhibitions changes the scale of comparison. Here digital exhibition design is read through the distribution of access, emphasis, and response among texts. The relevant question is not whether the same

surface feature returns, but whether its return gives a different participant, voice, register, or position the capacity to redirect interpretation. That distributive test supplies the pressure behind the claim that accessible description can deepen interpretation when it explains relations rather than merely naming objects.

For British Library's Selected Online Exhibitions, the principal counter-reading treats the observed distribution as a genre convention with no special bearing on digital exhibition design. The article answers only at the level of navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail: it asks whether a transfer of access or emphasis produces an ensuing effect that convention alone leaves unexplained. If it does not, the second proposition recedes. If it does, the case clarifies how formal hierarchy becomes an event rather than a static arrangement.

The third case turns to Smithsonian Institution's Selected Online Exhibitions and gives priority to revision over initial recognition. The interpretive test is whether metadata visibility redistributes curatorial authority toward or away from users.

The value of Smithsonian Institution's Selected Online Exhibitions is retrospective. Following passages are reread against the first account of navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail, allowing the article to distinguish repetition from revision. If the following event merely restates the earlier one, the proposition that metadata visibility redistributes curatorial authority toward or away from users receives little support. If it changes the status of what the reader, listener, or viewer already encountered, the case reveals how digital exhibition design acquires compositional memory.

Verification in Smithsonian Institution's Selected Online Exhibitions calls for two locators: one for the initial treatment of navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail and one for the moment that alters its status. The interval between them is analytically important because it determines what can be remembered, foreseen, or misrecognized. Recording both locations prevents the ensuing reading from being projected backward as if it had been available from the start, and it gives the claim about digital exhibition design a visible temporal basis.

The concluding comparison, Europeana's Selected Digital Exhibitions, functions as a resistant comparison.

Europeana's Selected Digital Exhibitions remains in the selection because it resists easy synthesis. Its treatment of navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail tests how far the claim that navigation order silently establishes causal and chronological priorities can travel before medium, genre, or historical circumstance calls for qualification. The comparison does not convert resistance into confirmation. It records which part of the proposition remains, which part contracts, and which additional source would be needed to decide between rival hypotheses.

The resistant role of Europeana's Selected Digital Exhibitions also limits the article's vocabulary. If medium or genre changes the operation of navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail, the comparison names that difference before proposing an analogy. The case may therefore support only part of the claim that navigation order silently establishes causal and chronological priorities. Such partial support is informative: it identifies the condition under which digital exhibition design ceases to explain the evidence and marks the point where another historical or structural account should take over.

4 Navigation order silently establishes causal and chronological priorities

The first interpretive result can be formulated as follows: navigation order silently establishes causal and chronological priorities. This temporal dimension is essential. The finding therefore concerns organization, not inventory.

Reading across the cases reveals that the pattern operates at more than one scale. The resulting form is recursive. Interpretation advances, but it also returns to revise what seemed settled. This recursive quality explains why interface rhetoric can remain coherent without becoming predictable.

The first proposition is strongest where navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail do more than recur. To count as support for the claim that navigation order silently establishes causal and chronological priorities, an occurrence

must be prepared by an initial expectation and must alter the result of what follows. Curating the Screen therefore reads recurrence with placement: identical words, sonorities, shapes, gestures, or interface elements may carry different force when their structural position changes. This criterion keeps digital exhibition design tied to sequence instead of treating visibility alone as proof.

5 Accessible description can deepen interpretation when it explains relations rather than merely naming objects

The next result proposes that accessible description can deepen interpretation when it explains relations rather than merely naming objects. This pattern shifts analysis from isolated form toward distribution. The textual selection repeatedly makes such allocation perceptible.

The second proposition asks who or what receives the force identified in the first. If accessible description can deepen interpretation when it explains relations rather than merely naming objects, then position is inseparable from access: a voice, instrument, figure, object, space, or interface option has force partly because it can initiate, interrupt, answer, or withhold. Curating the Screen traces this allocation through navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail. The resulting hierarchy is not assumed in advance; it is inferred from the capacity to redirect subsequent action or interpretation, including cases where peripheral placement proves more consequential than formal centrality.

6 Metadata visibility redistributes curatorial authority toward or away from users

Metadata visibility redistributes curatorial authority toward or away from users. Return, correction, reframing, and delayed result are therefore analytical events. They reveal how a work stores difference and activates it later.

The findings collectively form a sequence of their own. The first identifies a process that directs attention. The second reveals that attention and authority are distributed. The third explains how ensuing events revise that distribution. This sequence supports the central thesis that interface rhetoric is historically variable and formally organized.

The third proposition is tested retrospectively. For the claim that metadata

visibility redistributes curatorial authority toward or away from users, subsequent evidence must change the status of something already encountered; simple repetition is insufficient. Curating the Screen therefore rereads prior navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail after each return, correction, re-entry, or altered frame. This backward movement reveals whether the text stores a difference and activates it subsequently. Where the prior event remains unaffected, the proposed revision has not occurred and the claim about digital exhibition design loses explanatory force.

7 Discussion: What Digital Exhibition Design Changes

The three propositions alter one another. If navigation order silently establishes causal and chronological priorities, then accessible description can deepen interpretation when it explains relations rather than merely naming objects cannot be treated as a separate theme; it describes who or what controls the first process. The claim that metadata visibility redistributes curatorial authority toward or away from users adds a temporal test, asking whether ensuing events confirm, narrow, or overturn an earlier inference. Curating the Screen therefore explains digital exhibition design through ordered dependence rather than a list of recurring devices.

The comparative result is that accessibility is part of scholarly method because interfaces adjudicate which relations can be perceived and tested. This outcome does not depend on universal agreement about every example.

Counter-reading is used here as an analytical control. For the proposition that navigation order silently establishes causal and chronological priorities, the strongest alternative is one that explains the same sequence without assigning it the same function. The proposition that accessible description can deepen interpretation when it explains relations rather than merely naming objects must then show why distribution, rather than mere recurrence, accounts for the contrast. Finally, metadata visibility redistributes curatorial authority toward or away from users is tested by asking what following event would have to be absent for the interpretation to fail. These tests make disagreement about Curating the Screen local and answerable.

The intervention of Curating the Screen is not the discovery of an unno-

ticed motif. Its contribution is to specify how digital exhibition design operates when the same feature changes function through sequence. Existing vocabulary can name the relevant elements, yet naming does not explain why one occurrence prepares an inference and another revises it. By keeping navigation paths, captions, image alternatives, metadata displays, search functions, and transitions between overview and detail connected to position and outcome, the article turns a broad thematic observation into a claim that can be evaluated segment by segment and case by case.

This distinction also changes the status of absence. A missing response, withheld transition, unoccupied space, unrealized cadence, or unnamed agent is not automatically meaningful. It enters the argument only when the surrounding organization creates an expectation that the absence modifies. For *Curating the Screen*, such negative evidence is judged by the same standard as a visible feature: it must be locatable, connected to sequence, and capable of changing the account of digital exhibition design.

The principal limitation is that interfaces change over time, so screenshots and access dates must accompany any final empirical version. It does not establish reception, intention, prevalence, or causal effect. The absence of those methods is acknowledged rather than disguised.

The value of *Curating the Screen* lies

in its account of attention. Digital exhibition design determines which details become available early, which remain peripheral, and which acquire force only in retrospect. This is a compositional claim with historical consequences, but it is not a substitute for audience evidence. Its reach is confined to the named texts and to the editorial or documentary versions listed in the references.

8 Conclusion

This inquiry examined how digital exhibitions turn interface choices into historical and interpretive arguments. Through comparative interface reading using an accessibility-aware walkthrough protocol and a feature-to-claim analytic table, it argued that navigation order silently establishes causal and chronological priorities; that accessible description can deepen interpretation when it explains relations rather than merely naming objects; and that metadata visibility redistributes curatorial authority toward or away from users. These claims converge on a relational account of interface rhetoric.

The comparison indicates that accessibility is part of scholarly method because interfaces adjudicate which relations can be perceived and tested.

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