

Ghostly spirits

*In the first of a new technology column, **Suzanne Keene** wonders where is the virtue in virtual visitors?*

First published: **Museums Journal** July 1996, p37.

As we consign to the waste basket the latest article hyping hyperspace, even the most sceptical of us must harbour, deep down, an uneasy feeling that we are binning the future of museums. Funding bodies are apparently longing to dish out the dosh for digitising the catalogue cards, the photographs, the exhibitions. And that's just the start. Click [<http://www.rom.on.ca/evisit/vrtours.htm>] and you can have a gallery in the Royal Ontario Museum presented as virtual space; click [<http://galileo.imss.firenze.it/museo/r/IV05>] to find a working model of a clock pendulum from the Galileo Museum in Florence ; and [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/Family/>] will offer you a little sound clip of Socks, America's first cat, miaouing.

But although World Wide Web visitor clicks run into millions a year (about 10 clicks per visit), hyper visitors count for about as much as catalogue or book sales: that is, very little. There are no virtual league tables, no electronic access statistics in performance indicator reports. And can you imagine the 'save the Little Sodbury Web Pages' campaign? Visitor numbers are the way to earn Brownie points, so why don't virtual visitors count for as much as actual ones?

Maybe the virtual experience is less worthwhile. Certainly virtual visitors are likely to spend less time at a web site than an actual visitor spends at a museum or exhibition. Then there is the need to justify exhibition space. Virtual visitors do not occupy it. Nor do they use lavatories, cafes or shops.

Undoubtedly, virtual visitors have huge implications for access to collections. The information dimension of collections has scarcely been recognised. For the first time it can be realised using remote access in combination with collections databases like Multi MIMSY. Now we can build collections knowledge bases, linking to the objects the complex web of people, places, events and concepts in the historic or cultural world that the collections represent. While we will never be able to exhibit or offer access to more than the tip of the physical collections iceberg, the virtual visitor can be given the chance to explore the whole scope and rich complexity of the information collections in a way never before possible.

Museums' role is to inform, entertain or educate about cultures, ideas, and history. Traditionally, this has been through physical exhibitions. Extending this to millions worldwide must be a good thing. And, as information technology zooms ahead, museums should also be able to generate income, as well as help in kind. It will be possible for people from Transylvania to Timbuktu to actually contribute to the information collections from their own special knowledge. This could result in constituencies of support from all over the world.

The phenomenon of virtual visitors is a highly important development for museums. It can only be a matter of time before we're anxiously clocking up those virtual Brownie points as eagerly as the actual ones.