Experiencing the afterlife

Formative evaluation of Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead

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Experiencing the afterlife: Formative evaluation of Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead

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An exhibition on Ancient Egypt is certainly an appealing proposition, but visitors are initially unsure of what an exhibition centred on the Book of the Dead will entail.

Given the broad appeal of the subject area, the interpretation and marketing communications will need to strike a careful balance to ensure that the needs and expectations of different visitor groups are met.

Visitors see the theme of ancient Egyptian spiritual journeys as an ideal opportunity for the Museum to provide a multi-sensory exhibition and experiential visit experience.
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The British Museum wanted to explore expectations and responses to a future exhibition to be held in the Reading Room: Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead from November 2010 to March 2011. The exhibition will be the first in a series of three exhibitions that will share the theme of spiritual journeys.

The exhibition draws on the Museum’s unequalled collection of Book of the Dead manuscripts on papyrus and the huge appeal of its ancient Egypt galleries. The Museum anticipates that an exhibition centred on the Book of the Dead will have a broad appeal, and in particular will attract family visitors and school groups. It is estimated that over 10,000 school children will visit the exhibition and schools, along with families and general visitors will be able to benefit from exclusive time slots.

1.2 The brief

Specifically the research aimed to explore visitor expectations of the exhibition and measure their reactions to proposed themes, content and presentation. Their reactions are to be assessed in order to establish whether any changes should be made to the planned approach to make the exhibition more appealing and stimulating to the target audiences.

1.3 Our approach

In order to address this brief we recruited five different groups to participate in an audience forum.

- Family visitors who had visited a recent special exhibition (one of the Great Ruler exhibitions, Babylon: Myth and Reality or Gardens and Cosmos: The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur)
- Family visitors who had never visited the Museum as a family
- Independent adult regular visitors to the British Museum who had been to at least two recent special exhibitions
Experiencing the afterlife: Formative evaluation of Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead

- Independent adult visitors who first came to the British Museum to see a recent special exhibition
- Independent culturally active non-visitors or lapsed visitors who had not been to the British Museum within the past 5 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>No. of attenders</th>
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<tr>
<td>Family visitor</td>
<td>6 (3 adults, 3 children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family non-visitor</td>
<td>4 (2 adults, 2 children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent adult – regular attender</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
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The forum was held at the British Museum on Sunday 7th February and lasted 3 hours. The forum was observed by members of the British Museum staff and members of the external design team. Attenders had a variety of tasks to do within groups, plenary discussions were held as well as a number of small break-out focus groups.
Key findings and implications

‘Book of the Dead’ is not a subject matter with instant ‘blockbuster’ appeal

Certain aspects of ancient Egypt might be thought of as blockbuster material, but visitors do not have enough existing background knowledge of THE Book of the Dead for this to be true of this particular subject matter – in the same way as they might for Tutankhamun. Furthermore, for those with limited knowledge, the immediate association is one of an academic, dense, text heavy exhibition tackling a rather morbid subject area.

In addition, the topic of ancient Egypt can be explored elsewhere within the British Museum itself for free, so marketing communications will have to work hard to convince prospective attenders of the significance, and therefore value, of this particular exhibition.

Once visitors are familiar with the exhibition’s content, the variety of artefacts, ‘otherworldliness’ and the ways in which the Museum intends to build up the narrative, they find the exhibition to be a highly engaging proposition. It is therefore important that the Museum communicates a visually compelling proposition that ensures visitors do not misjudge the exhibition as text-heavy and two-dimensional, but instantly recognise it for its mythical, spiritual and visually stunning content.

There is a perception amongst independent adult visitors that this exhibition will appeal to large numbers of family and school groups.

This in itself is off-putting for two reasons, firstly potential visitors may think that the level and quality of information will be diluted in an attempt to cater for younger visitors, or worse that the style of interpretation will be ‘dumbed down’ or ‘Disneyfied’. Secondly, that they may find that groups of younger visitors impact negatively on their visiting experience, encroaching on the space that they need to successfully engage with the exhibition.

Whilst the Museum is indeed planning to allocate specific time slots for family-only visits and schools visits, there are currently no plans to hold specific adult-only time slots. Given the perception of the huge appeal that this exhibition will have with family and schools markets amongst the independent adult market, without an exclusive slot for adults-only, they may be deterred from visiting and feel that the exhibition is not aimed at them.
Striking an interpretative balance

Different visitor groups see different areas of potential within the Book of the Dead exhibition, and it is unlikely that the Museum will be able to completely satisfy all groups. For example, families might be seeking a highly experiential adventure or learning experience that links to their children's studies, whilst independent adults might be seeking the type of intellectual outcomes they have previously experienced at British Museum special exhibitions, and may frown upon information being delivered via, for example, computer interactives. One way in which the Museum could alleviate the problem of competing forms of interpretation is through providing break-out spaces or zones which can be avoided or sought out depending on visitor needs and preferences.

Despite this concern, the majority of visitors feel that this exhibition lends itself to a multi-sensory experience, and most were highly receptive of the elements of exhibition design that could generate an immersive effect such as passing through gateways, contrasts in lighting and even certain smells being recreated. However, if the exhibition is marketed on this premise this may alienate independent adult visitors who will interpret the exhibition as being solely aimed at the family or schools market. Thus different groups require targeted marketing in which they can easily recognise how this exhibition will deliver specifically to their needs.

Visitors are seeking an experiential encounter, the sense that the exhibition is taking them on their own journey through the afterlife

One area in which there was general consensus was the sense of the perspective that visitors are hoping to gain from the exhibition. Importantly visitors are not seeking an overview of ancient Egyptian practices or their belief system, but they want the spiritual journeys to be put into a human context, they want to follow the journeys of specific individuals and be given the depth of understanding and empathy that allow them to reflect on and imagine their own spiritual journeys.

There is the potential that this sense of perspective could be used provide a unique selling point for this exhibition, adding a new layer of insight and differentiating this from the ‘normal’ curating of the subject of ancient Egypt.
3

Existing knowledge and expectations

After a brief introduction to the concept of an exhibition focusing on the Book of the Dead, attenders were asked to answer a series of questions relating to their current knowledge on such subjects, their expectations, hopes and fears for such an exhibition.

3.1 What do visitors understand by the ‘Book of the Dead’?

We firstly wanted to test potential visitors’ top of mind associations with the proposition the ‘Book of the Dead’, in order to establish how much assumed knowledge interpretation and marketing communications can rely on.

Many visitors interpret the proposition literally – as a book recording the deaths of key figures in ancient Egyptian society:

- A book of all the people who have died Child visitor
- A written book, maybe a list of people Family non-visitor
- Book with dead pharaohs Family non-visitor
- A ‘how to’ – Ancient Egyptian beliefs – ‘roll of honour’, of those who’ve died (of higher class only or course) Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor
- List of famous dead Egyptian people and their cause of death Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor
- ‘The Mummy’ I don’t know much about Ancient Egypt but I assume it’s a list of Egyptian kings / queens who have died Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition
- Those who’ve passed through the gate of death, and the death process Independent adult – regular attender
Experiencing the afterlife: Formative evaluation of *Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*

Other potential visitors assume the book contains **instructions** for carrying out funerary procedures:

*Egyptian beliefs re. afterlife, recipes for preserving bodies. Is it on scrolls?*
  *Family visitor*

*Religious funerary rites* *Family visitor*

*Prescription for how to approach death, burial instructions / customs, papyrus manuscripts, clay tablets* *Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor*

Others identified the book as depicting **ancient Egyptian beliefs** in relation to the afterlife:

*A book on what Egyptian[s] believe about the afterlife* *Child non-visitor*

*I know it is the scrolls and papyri records. An interest in the Ancient Egyptian beliefs of an afterlife. Death, rituals, burials, wealth, grave goods etc* *Independent adult – regular attender*

Whilst others perceived the book to be form of guide used at the time to help people enter the afterlife:

*It’s a manual to the afterlife* *Independent adult – regular attender*

*The journey of the dead into a new world; with certain levels of tasks to fulfil along the journey* *Independent adult – regular attender*

*A guide book to entering the afterlife* *Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor*

*The Mummy films – Book to help in the afterlife* *Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor*

*A book of spells / instructions and prayers for the departed* *Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor*

The ‘Book of the Dead’ **proposition should not stand alone**, and requires a qualifier in order to more accurately communicate to potential visitors what the exhibition would be about:

*It only made sense with the second sentence journey through afterlife* *Family non-visitor*
3.2 What do visitors currently know about ancient Egyptians and their ideas about the afterlife?

Ancient Egypt is a topic area of general interest to a large number of people, consequently the Ancient Egyptian galleries are one of the British Museum’s most popular exhibits. All the respondents at the forum exhibited at least a basic knowledge of ancient Egypt and its burial customs:

- Cult of death, built pyramids as tombs, complicated embalming techniques, take things with you to afterlife Family visitor

- Believed in animal gods, believed would be reincarnated Family non-visitor

- They thought that when you are buried your possessions that you are buried with come back with you in the afterlife Child non-visitor

- Reasonable amateur interest but little beyond that Independent adult – regular attender

- Not a lot. Pyramids contained tombs full of things needed in the afterlife (they could take things with them) Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

- That life goes on and need to be prepared for it Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

- Very little! Ancestor worship i.e. mummification and pyramids and the very idea of having a book of the dead Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

- A little – not much. Only that the burial process was important in ensuring souls passed to the afterlife – mummification and sacred objects aided this process Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

Family attenders in particular expressed an interest in expanding their knowledge of the subject:

- Not much but I’m interested Child visitor

- Not much but I want to find out more Child visitor

- Wishy-washy. Know they believed in an afterlife. Would like to know exactly what Family non-visitor
Experiencing the afterlife: Formative evaluation of Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead

Some attenders had more in-depth knowledge as a result of visiting Egypt, previous experiences at Egyptian galleries in museums or reading around / researching the subject:

I’ve been to Egypt on an educational tour and have a general overview of dynasties and gods Independent adult – regular attendant

Saw recent TV programme on Rameses the Great. Egyptians believed pharaoh had to answer a series of questions to ensure eternal life and the survival of the Egyptian kingdoms Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

I know a fair bit about Ancient Egypt and the various kingdoms and their beliefs of the afterlife Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Quite a lot, because I went on a Nile cruise led by two Egyptologists. At the same time I bought and read many books on this subject. But I never read a translation of the Book of the Dead Independent adult – regular attendant

Quite a lot, visits to Egypt and various museums throughout the world Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

3.3 What would visitors expect to see and do in the exhibition?

When we asked potential visitors about their expectations for the exhibition, some expected to find objects typical of an exhibition with an ancient Egyptian theme, with no mention specifically of the actual Book of the Dead. This was particularly the case for families:

Mummies Child visitor

See pyramids, mummies, understand lives of pharaohs Family non-visitor

Mummies, tombs, pharaohs Child non-visitor

Mock-up of some of the Ancient Egyptian tombs e.g. Nefertari and Rameses II Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

To see tools and materials used for preparing the mummy Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor
However, many placed more of an emphasis on actual **textual artefacts** - the book and papyri - when articulating their expectations for the exhibition:

*The actual Book of the Dead. Context. Examples of artefacts that show the main themes. Its influence in the development of Middle Eastern religions*

**Family visitor**

*See many papyri and mummies. Learn a lot about the beliefs of an ancient civilisation Independent adult – regular attender*

**Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition**

*Learn about funeral ritual and see corresponding artefacts and exemplar of Books of the Dead Family visitor*

*Lots of papyrus! Hieroglyphics with translation. Process of embalming Independent adult – regular attender*

*Papyrus, translations, maybe an audio guide to explain background - objects that go with the dead e.g. urns, jewellery Independent adult – regular attender*

*See: manuscripts, texts, enlargements of manuscripts. Do: look, think, absorb Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor*

Some respondents expect the exhibition to explain how the Book of the Dead’s theories were put into practice, presenting information on ancient Egyptian **beliefs and processes**, from death through embalming to the funeral ritual:

*View how Egyptians prepared for the afterlife. Read about their beliefs Independent adult – regular attender*

*To see various stages of the process Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor*

*See Egyptian artefacts like spells and mummies. Maybe demonstration on how bodies were prepared for the afterlife Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor*
3.4 Visitors’ hopes for the exhibition

Overall potential attenders express predominantly intellectual hopes for the exhibition, seeing it as an opportunity to learn about an ancient civilisation and belief system:

To learn more about the beliefs and society of ancient Egyptians **Independent adult – regular attender**

There would be a chance to really explore ancient Egypt with a bit of interactivity **Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor**

To find out a bit more about the real people and their beliefs **Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor**

Hear a lot about something I know little about **Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor**

Hope to learn a lot and be reminded of the myth / history I studied at school **Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition**

An insight into the religious theories of the Afterlife. Hopefully some mummies! **Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition**

Historical context **Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition**

For families in particular they hope that the exhibition will provide an educational experience:

Leave knowing more! **Family visitor**

Learn more about this very important and influential belief system **Family visitor**

I would like to hear loads of facts **Child visitor**

Potential attenders hope that visiting Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead would be distinct as an exhibition experience, that it would be captivating and provide them with new perspectives:

That it will think outside of the box. That it will be engaging, not dumbed down. Will make me look at ancient Egypt in a new light **Independent adult – regular attender**

That it would be imaginative, enlivened and engaging **Independent adult – regular attender**

Different approach **Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition**
Experiencing the afterlife: Formative evaluation of Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead

Others take a somewhat paternalistic view and hope that the exhibition will serve as an accessible way to encourage wider interest in the topic amongst the general public:

I hope lots of people will attend. They will enjoy the exhibition and get... a far better understanding of this aspect on an Ancient Civilisation Independent adult – regular attender

Be good to spark a wider interest. Something not overtaken by recorded tours and merchandise Independent adult – regular attender

3.5 Visitors’ fears for the exhibition

When we asked potential attenders about their concerns for the Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead exhibition, parents are worried that the exhibition would not include interpretation targeted at children, or that it would not be sufficiently engaging for younger visitors:

That it would be dull, dry and insufficiently a) interactive, b) child friendly Family visitor

Needs to be accessible on lots of levels Family visitor

Boring exhibitions with not lots to see Family non-visitor

Not good for children Child visitor

Independent adult visitors also raised concerns that the interpretation would be ‘dry’, perhaps too academic and text-heavy:

It would be ... full of dusty old books behind glass cases Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Maybe too academic and dry or too ‘flashy’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Too much detail Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

Dry and dull Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

That it would be un-interactive. Lots of information but little or no artefacts (or gory details!) Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition
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Yet others fear that it may be taken too far in the opposite direction – with too much emphasis being placed on interactivity or that the broad appeal of the subjects covered would result in too much commercialism surrounding the exhibition:

To have the topic taken over by merchandise Independent adult – regular attender

Too superficial. Attempts to make things interactive Independent adult – regular attender

In addition the fact that the exhibition centres on the topic of death may deter some people from visiting:

Some religions may not come because of the word ‘dead’ Family non-visitor

People will think it is all about death and therefore avoid it Independent adult – regular attender

None – unless anything’s particularly gory Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Whilst others are concerned that the exhibition space would be overcrowded:

Very popular and difficult to move through. Too much text. Not enough interpretation Family visitor

Too packed Independent adult – regular attender
Marketing and communications

4.1 The proposition

The British Museum’s perception that there is broad interest in ancient Egypt appears to have been confirmed by this research:

‘It’s much more accessible as a subject than most ... even Hadrian you would imagine would be, but he wasn’t as accessible, it wasn’t something that children would have immediately said “oh well, let’s go and see that:’
Family visitor

‘I would [go] ... I’m fascinated by ancient Egypt’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

No obvious ‘gateway’ or star object

Potential visitors did, however, feel that the Book of the Dead does not leap out as a subject within its own right from the overall umbrella of Egyptology; the unique selling point of the exhibition is not that easily discernible:

‘I’ve seen the Egyptology in lots of places and if I had a day then I might come, but I wouldn’t make the effort to come’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

‘We went to see the Moctezuma exhibition ... my sister and her husband came down from Birmingham to see it, but I can’t see them coming down to see this, unless you manage to find an incredibly unique selling point or something which popularises a rather academic subject’ Independent adult – regular attender

‘I think the Chinese Emperor one is different, Egyptology isn’t different, you can see it anywhere, at any museum, and it has to be different if you’re going to get people paying in droves ... the only difference we can see was this 37m thing ... so you’ve got to sell that somehow. You’ve got to see how magnificent that’s going to look when it’s laid out side by side and you can see it, like the Bayeux Tapestry’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition
Whilst potential visitors have a clear sense of the ‘blockbuster’ status of other exhibitions focusing on Egyptology – such as those exhibiting Tutankhamen – or other temporary exhibitions held at the British Museum – such as The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta army – this is not the case with this exhibition. Potential visitors feel that it will be harder to convince people to come, particularly given the two-dimensional papyri which is perhaps harder in some ways to appreciate than iconic, highly aesthetically pleasing artefacts:

‘I went to the Tutankhamen exhibition in ... 1972, which was probably ... the exhibition wow of my life. It was stunning. People queued. I queued for hours to see it. This is much more ... on the surface, it’s got to be drawn out I think .... [the Tutankhamen exhibition] was actually spectacular. By the time you got to Tutankhamen’s death mask that was just like a knock out blow. I couldn’t stop looking at it ... this is probably significant, but it’s not as visually enticing’ independent adult – regular attender

Needs a ‘wow’ factor, big papyrus may not be enough [for me to attend]

First-time Great Ruler Visitor

‘The Terracotta Warriors, you’d actually got the original figures in the centre ... everyone is very close to them. You feel ... very much sort of part of it and that builds on the excitement ... that sort of pivotal item for this exhibition ... [is] perhaps more difficult to see’ Independent adult – regular attender

‘If you looked at it from a point of view of a sound bite on the news, you saw Tutankhamen’s mask of the burial chamber, and people have just got to go and see that, and then they go through all the other supporting stuff to get to that. I mean, the 37m papyrus can be a little bit harder to sell’ Independent adult – regular attender

‘I wouldn’t class it as a blockbuster, so I wouldn’t pay for seeing that’ Independent adult – regular attender
4.2 Marketing copy

We tested two short paragraphs of marketing copy, asking attenders which they found most compelling and thus which then would be the most effective in attracting them as potential visitors to the exhibition.

Text 1: ‘This major exhibition will explain how the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead was thought to guide the deceased safely through the dangers of the underworld, ultimately ensuring eternal life. Illustrated manuscripts of the Book of the Dead on papyrus and linen, will be displayed, many for the first time, alongside funerary statuettes (shabtis), amulets, jewellery, coffins and sarcophagi’.

Text 2: ‘Discover how the ancient Egyptians made sure they arrived safely in the afterlife. They believed that the Book of the Dead would help them because it contained spells and illustrations showing the fields and rivers of the underworld, and the gods and demons waiting for them. Explore the Egyptians’ journey from death to the afterlife through a variety of new media with Books of the Dead on papyrus and linen, as well as funerary statues (shabtis), amulets, jewellery and coffins’.

In terms of preference, adult visitors were nearly equally split across texts 1 and 2, whilst family attenders showed a preference for text 2. There was a general consensus that text 1 was aimed at a more intellectually motivated audience and used more academic language, whilst text 2 was thought to be more accessible and potentially more successful in attracting new audiences:

Text one is suitable for ‘serious’ audiences, text two for popular exposure

Independent adult - non / lapsed visitor

Text one - only because text two is ‘Disneyfied’ and aimed at the lowest common denominator Independent adult - regular attender

The artefacts do not really have a meaning until we understand the ancient scripts of the ‘Book of the Dead’. [Text 1] is good for a high-brow newspaper / magazine such as the Time, Telegraph, Guardian. [Text 2] is best for ... the general public. Independent adult - regular attender

Passage from life through death and afterlife. Examine, understand, rich visual language and imagery. [Text one] seems a bit stodgy and academic. But on the plus side, more serious. [Text 2] feels much more active and alive. Will appeal to a wider less academic audience. Independent adult - non / lapsed visitor
What are the most important elements to communicate?

As revealed in the previous chapter, marketing cannot presume that visitors will have adequate background knowledge of the Book of the Dead to fully understand the proposition:

Knowing it would just be bits of paper behind glass [would put me off from attending] Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

‘I think it does sound dull and I think the only thing that worked for me was when you said it had to do with Ancient Egypt and then the two ideas came together’ Family non-visitor

‘I didn’t realise it was what it was. I’d heard of it but I didn’t actually know what it was. Now I do know what it is, I … find it more interesting and would probably go’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

Whilst expectations must be managed, potential visitors felt that marketing should bring the ideas portrayed in the book to life, focusing on the **mythical and spiritual aspects**. This they felt could form the focus of a visually compelling marketing campaign that conveys the subject’s imagery rather than reinforcing the perception of a text-heavy exhibition:

‘You wouldn’t want to oversell, it is what it is, you can’t shy away from the fact that it is essentially an exhibition about a book and you don’t want people to come here expecting something else … you have to manage expectations’ Independent adult – regular attender

‘The Book of the Dead. For people who don’t know what it is it does sound like just writing … I think a lot of people who don’t realise about all the lovely drawings and all of the images and so I think in your promotion you’re going to have to do a lot to … show the images and make sure that that comes out’ Family non-visitor

‘The fact it’s a lot to do with spells and more mythical things is even more interesting because I had thought it was much more stale … a lot more of these awful gods who had these books of rules, rather than the idea that there was any choice in the matter and that you could become a crocodile or a bird’ Family non-visitor

‘I think for me if I saw a poster … in the Tube it would probably hit me as ‘oh I think I’d like to see that’, because I find there is something quite compelling about [the subject], I find it really bizarre’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Families in particular would be attracted by a sense that the exhibition would recreate an **experiential adventure**:
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Follow XXX on his/her journey into the afterlife and on the perilous journey to the other side. Will they make it? Using their special powers and avoid the disaster of being devoured by the monstrous XXX Will they finally get judged ‘good’ and enjoy the perfect afterlife? Visually interactive with fantastic displays of the book of the dead Family non-visitor

Bright and colourful world of the ancient Egyptians through their death, past the dangers of the underworld with the Gods but also the demons waiting for them and safety to the fields and rivers to the perfect afterlife. View from the vast collection of the British Museum the real funeral statues, amulets, jewellery and sarcophagi - make that journey! Family non-visitor

Coupled with an opportunity to learn:

Learn, artefacts, come and explore / see etc... First time experience, never before seen, adventure of the afterlife Child non-visitor

Linking with schools’ curricula, Unique, Groundbreaking, Multi-media, Interactive Family visitor

Learn exciting facts and see the most amazing objects Child visitor
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Some visitors state that they would be attracted to attend by understanding how the exhibition will deliver on an aesthetic level or understanding how they will gain deeper insight from the exhibition:

Need to refer to the age of the items, e.g. ‘over 2,000 years old’ ‘3,000 years old’. Need to refer to the beauty of some of the artefacts. Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Explore. Experience. See eternal life. Stand at the crossroads/fork of eternal life and eternal death, and await your judgement. Independent adult – regular attender

Contemporary touch / feel. Captivating, extraordinary, netherworld, relation between history and contemporary world Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Again, it’s important that marketing campaigns communicate the exhibition’s unique selling point – visitors want more than an introduction to ancient Egypt as this they feel they can experience free of charge in the Museum’s permanent Egyptian galleries, or elsewhere:

‘Have not seen anything that would guarantee my presence. (Seen lots of Egypt exhibitions)’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

‘Promise new exhibits, promise new interpretations, add to existing British Museum exhibition’ Family visitor

‘Be controversial’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

‘World of spells, vibrancy of the life before and after’ Family non-visitor

As stated above, visitors feel that in order for them to pay marketing material attention, and potentially invest their time and money in actually visiting the exhibition, it is imperative that the exclusivity and ‘once in a lifetime’ nature of the exhibition is communicated from the outset:

‘The main exhibition draws on previously unseen items from the museum’s collection to explain how the Egyptians supported their dead through the challenges of the afterlife. Why not also say that the world’s longest book of the dead will be displayed in its entirety for the first time in an exhibition?’ Independent adult – regular attender

‘Only chance to see / first and last chance to see/ Avoid a second death / monsters, demons, spells. How to serve the afterlife’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition
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‘See exhibits you can’t have access to otherwise. So there is something which is really special, then I’m prepared to pay, otherwise I go to free exhibitions, and that’s one of my points with the mummies, why should I pay for mummies ... it’s a free exhibition [elsewhere]’ Independent adult – regular attender

‘The First Emperor ... the publicity was very strong, the fact that you might actually never get to see this again ... the whole exclusivity thing is quite a big draw for people, and the fact that it’s never been seen before, and who knows when, or if, it will be shown again’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

‘You went to the Louvre, you wanted to see the Monets ... you came to the Chinese exhibition and you’d see all those Warriors ... we saw in this place a 37m long papyrus split up ... that’s what probably would sell us to come along and see this, you’re not going to be able to see something like that ... that would be the focus, that would be the sort of thing you feel would make you spend £12 ... if you built up ... saw how important it was, and what a magnificent thing it’s going to look like at 37m long’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

4.3 Brand perceptions of non or lapsed visitors

When talking about their relationship with the British Museum, some non-visitors or lapsed visitors simply stated that the venue was not on their radar; it is not a place that they would consider turning to if they are seeking an exhibition experience. For some this is a due to a perception that the Museum is mainly for tourists:

‘I think something like the British Museum is more on the radar for tourists and school groups than for people who actually live in London’

Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Others still view the Museum as being too traditional and conservative – they feel that topics will be presented in a dense, academic and predictable way:

‘You sort of fear that they’ll dry it up a little bit, it might be too academic ... it may not be true but that’s the initial impression a lot of people get of the British Museum’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

‘The thing with the British Museum I think is that it feels so British and so kind of one of the old fashioned ... institutions ... I’m trying to put it in my head with the British Library, it’s like somewhere you’d go and be very, very quiet and creeping around and looking at stuff which isn’t how a museum should be and I think that’s part of it, it’s just such an institution
Experiencing the afterlife: Formative evaluation of Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead

in my head that it just doesn’t seem friendly’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Others simply seek experiences elsewhere, they feel that in London they are spoilt for choice and that there are numerous other cultural venues they would rather visit:

‘There are blockbuster exhibitions all the time ... you can be here and you are never going to run out of something to do ... you come to London and ... nothing is a blockbuster in the way it might be say if London were a smaller city’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

‘I go somewhere regularly, most weeks and I’m prepared to travel to it and pay to get in, but there’s always something I want to see more [than at the British Museum]’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Could this exhibition attract non-visitors who perhaps feel that the British Museum ‘isn’t for them’?

If successfully communicated to lapsed or non-visitors, Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead does have the potential to trigger or reactivate a visit, and potentially encourage such visitors to reassess their perceptions of the British Museum:

‘I would now come and make a special effort ... It’s actually hearing about this exhibition, making me think that I’ve misjudged [the Museum] ... it’s more accessible than I thought it was and maybe not as dusty as I thought’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

‘I’ve forgotten that you’d have this glass [Great Court roof] inside ... it’s quite stunning when you come in the door now, the last time I came here I think that it was probably all open ... maybe that is something to see in itself, the architecture ... the Library this is where the exhibition is going to be ... I’m really impressed with that’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

‘I’ve never particularly seen anything that’s made me want to come here ... when you’re travelling around London or hear word of mouth about an exhibition and you see a big poster and you think ‘oh that looks interesting’, I’ve never seen anything ... but now actually hearing more about it I think I really do want to come and see this’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor
Experiencing the afterlife: Formative evaluation of Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead

But actually successfully reaching lapsed or non-visitors and convincing them that a special exhibition at the British Museum is a viable proposition through marketing may be incredibly difficult, particularly given the brand perceptions mentioned above. Overcoming this problem may necessitate a departure from the Museum’s traditional marketing communications:

‘I wouldn’t go because it’s just really bland ... it’s not controversial, mind blowing, it’s not edgy enough and maybe I would think the whole exhibition does sound interesting but the way they’re going to arrange it would just be the same kind of boring way’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

‘There is something about the British Museum having such an august reputation and [for] some reason they don’t seem to be able [to get] their publicity over in quite the same way as other people do’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

‘What I’ve realised through this today is that it not necessarily would be boring, it is just unfortunate the posters just seem to fade ... I really can’t remember the British Museum [advertising]’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor
5 Interpretation

5.1 Focusing on the Book of the Dead

The idea of taking one aspect of a topic that is perhaps widely covered in Museums across the world and exploring this in detail does appeal to visitors. It provides a new angle and focus on a subject that may, for some, have been exhausted on previous experiences at ancient Egypt galleries and exhibitions.

‘... big selling point ... is that you start off by saying, why did they mummify? Why was so much effort put into death? ... You don’t really understand it and here is the answer ... normally it’s a bit neglected, but there’s your chance to really get into it’ Independent adult – regular attender

‘The Terracotta Army is, I have the experience of having ... seen it for real, [in China] but when I came ... it far outstripped my experience of China, it was like I saw the Terracotta Army in a new way, in a very focussed way ... you got up close to it and there were people explaining it to you and it was an utterly different experience’ Independent adult – regular attender

The focus of the exhibition may also provide a ‘way in’ for visitors who find the actual quantity of information and exhibits within the British Museum daunting:

‘It’s sort of one area of Ancient Egypt which you can concentrate a little bit more when you come to see an Egyptian exhibition you rush through all the different aspects, here you can just see one thing’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

‘You get carried away thinking it’s so huge and full of old things when actually you don’t have to do the entire museum in one day’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

‘I haven’t been here for many years ... the thing about the British Museum that’s been rather daunting ... they’d have just too much ... in those days I was working and didn’t have the time to really go around now I’m retired I think I’ll come out and just concentrate on one area at a time’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor
5.2 Providing wider context

Visitors find interpretation that helps them gauge the historical context of the subject particularly useful. Information such as timelines, maps and brief details on contemporary civilisations would immediately help visitors to place the Book of the Dead within their existing frames of reference, and provide the background context that allows deeper engagement:

“What’s the historical context of this? ... What did the Greeks feel at the time, what did the Romans feel at the time? Why did anyone think that this was a good idea?” Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

“When I came to the Shah ‘Abbas exhibition, one of the very first panels was a world context timeline ... [that would be useful] because the Olympic games was going on, that was a different culture completely. These people were focussed on keeping their wealth in the afterlife, and Greeks were perhaps a little bit more sort of philosophy” Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

Placing the Book of the Dead in a religious context may also aid understanding:

“In this ... background [text] ... the word used is mindset. Now that takes us way away from religion ... I can see why you don’t want to mix it up into religion, but it was the religion of the time ... clearly the reason why it happened and sort of why it died, would be quite handy in context”

Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

Some visitors would appreciate references to modern Egypt in order to appreciate the lasting impact of the Book of the Dead and ancient Egyptian beliefs in the afterlife:

“I’d like to see it being more linked to today, people’s beliefs ... there is still City of the Dead in Cairo ... that does exist and people look after all those places” Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition
Multi-layered information

The anticipated broad appeal of this exhibition will require a multi-layered approach to interpretation. For example, family visitors require information specifically designed for younger visitors, whilst independent adults might seek a more academic interpretation of the subject:

‘A kind of trail for all the kids ... particularly younger kids, you know to keep their interest ... they’re looking for things ... it’s sort of a quest ... (this exhibition) lends itself to doing something like that. It would be quite fun’ Family visitor

‘It’s probably a broader array of people ... some people coming from a position of quite a lot of knowledge to see an exhibition that they have a particular interest in, and some people coming for much more general interest, and it has to therefore appeal across quite a wide boundary’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

‘I think a very high level of scholarship ... although sometimes you don’t get the information that you want to get ... for instance, the Shah ‘Abbas exhibition, I thought it was a great shame there was nothing about how anything was made ... obviously in this exhibition that’s been addressed which is really good’ Family visitor

Interacting with curators

Forum attenders were given a presentation of the current plans for the exhibition by one of the Museum’s curators. This experience of hearing an expert discuss the exhibition immediately sparked interest, as though the curator’s passion for the subject was ‘infectious’. This highlights the visitor ideal of having opportunities to engage with curator staff throughout the exhibition:

‘I was very inspired listening to John [the curator giving the presentation] talking and it transformed me, because for me the Book of the Dead had been a little bit boring ... If somebody introduces me to something that captivates them and took us through it ... I want to see that ... I think that it needs something like that to catch people at the beginning that hits his [the curator’s] interest, that’s going to take you along this journey, and take you through it ... If I wanted to know about the Book of the Dead I [have] got a book at home, I could sit down and read it, what made the difference was that the Egyptologist got excited about it ... I thought ‘yeah, I want to know more about that’” Independent adult – regular attender
Human contact can help open up a subject that might seem too dry or text-heavy and which otherwise might result in visitors skimming through the exhibition at a surface level only:

“You need to have ... groups of ten people out at a time with a guide and that person going to make it into interactive as you walk around ... I think without that ... it's a bit of a five-minute wonder. You could get through that in thirty seconds and think ‘well what have I spent my money on here?’” Family non-visitor

‘I think a tour guide would be a good idea. If there’s a lot of reading it kind of gets boring, reading, reading and reading. You don’t want to just go round and read what the translations of this papyrus’ Family non-visitor

5.5 Multi-sensory interpretation

Providing visitors with a variety of ways in which to soak up information is particularly important given the amount of information that the Museum is covering in the exhibition. Potential visitors are generally of the opinion that the subject matter lends itself to providing a multi-sensory experience where visitors not only read about ancient Egypt and the afterlife but they could touch and feel replica tools, watch visual presentations of the surrounding landscapes, listen to sounds of a funerary ceremony, or smell the smells conjured during the mummification process.

Whilst such forms of interpretation are crucial to parents who want their children to have a hands-on experience, independent adults were also receptive of this approach and made several suggestions on ways in which it could be achieved:

“[Children] also like touch and smell ... we went to the Imperial War Museum where it smelt like in a trench, it was particularly rancid but ... all those types of things to touch and smell, the sounds” Family visitor

‘I think for him there’s got to be stuff that he’s got to be able to touch, feel, play about with, do something with’ Family non-visitor

“They could have some papyrus made ... have something to hold and feel and write” Family non-visitor

“[In Shah’ Abbas: The Remaking of Iran] that was really good ... that middle bit where you have a slide show ... the children would love that ... even though it was just modern visual technology and not actual objects, it worked really, really well” Family visitor
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"If you went to a funeral you would want to understand the sounds and the sights that you feel on the day of burial and whether they were cheerful or sad or whether there was incense burning, whether there [were] animals in the background, whether there [were] lots of slaves. It would just be a nice experience to go there and you've got the burial all laid out, you've got the sarcophagus and the various icons, what are the noises that were going on? You've got the visual ... the hearing, what would you smell?"

Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

"It's hard ... there's a lot of information involved ... what ... brings a certain amount of that through ... a sensory thing ... because there's a lot of information to ... take in" Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

"What does a mummy smell like? ... does it smell like death? ... There must be a sort of a smell that you could lift up something or sniff ... this is a stale smell, this is a fresh smell or it's all covered in oil so a beautiful smell" Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

Interactives

Interactive computers and films proved popular with family visitors, although parents did express concern that if features such as computer terminals were scarce, visitors may be forced to queue to use them or not actually get the opportunity to use them at all:

"I like the films ... how you would imagine it and like actors doing it" Child Family visitor

"If there was a movie, I would actually like to see how they actually went through the questions ... they could start it right off at the beginning when you're dead, ask all the questions and to the happy life" Child Family visitor

"It ... splits it by age... the crinklies are sort of staring minutely at the detailed stuff and anybody who is under the age of 15 is immediately drawn of course to computer graphics rather than actual real things, so it's a balance between the two" Family visitor

"Absolutely mobbed, it's how you manage that because we've been to places where you just can't get to them" Family visitor
Experiencing the afterlife: Formative evaluation of Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead

Audioguides

Some visitors see audioguides as an ideal medium for the Museum to provide multi-layered interpretation, forming a channel to give targeted or more detailed information. Other visitors, however, do not like getting information in this way and tend to resent audioguide users as they feel that the accumulation of visitors around certain objects impedes on the visit of non-users:

‘[Audioguides] keep [younger visitors] engaged actually ... you can press buttons to get extra things ... learn something extra ... some process for making the Book of the Dead. I like the fact that they sometimes play music’ Family visitor

‘My ... pet hate are the recorded things as people go round ... it just means that certainly everyone’s standing there and suddenly they all move on to this ... I just think, if you’ve got to have something talking into your ear to tell you what you’re doing, what’s the point of coming? ... You should look at it and appreciate it and understand the context’ Independent adult – regular attender

‘I don’t like audio in exhibitions at all ... I find it really off-putting’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

5.6 Balancing forms of interpretation

Some potential visitors did express their doubts over whether the Museum would realistically offer such a multi-sensory, interactive experience. They felt that this would perhaps be going too far in breaking its traditional approach to curating and may actually upset the core audience of exhibition attenders who are used to and expect a more serious and academic approach within British Museum exhibitions:

‘We were saying if it was the Science Museum, they’d go to town ... but obviously this is a more serious museum ... we weren’t sure whether they do ... smells and things ... for different rooms ... we’re not sure how far they’re going to go’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

‘[Visitors] might perceive it as dumbing down ... the Science Museum is pretty much for kids, people who come to the British Museum don’t necessarily want sort of things in boxes and press buttons and stuff’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition
However, others felt that a balance could be easily achieved:

‘I think artefacts [are] a key thing, you expect to see solid things ... you still have the artefacts but you could then put something round it ... not in every room ... not like the Science Museum where every room you go into you open a box or you lift something up, if you did it sparingly, you would probably get away with it quite well’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition
6 Layout and display

6.1 Exhibition space

Upon entering the exhibition space, visitors want to feel that they are crossing a boundary into another world, that they are immediately plunged into an immersive experience. They feel that this could be achieved through the exhibition opening with bright colour, the ‘hustle and bustle’ of life, which is immediately contrasted upon entering the Crossing Boundaries section where there is a sense of mortality and transition:

‘I liked what the curator was saying about there’s this huge divide between the busy, bustling world that is Ancient Egypt and the fact that the moment they go through the door and they’re dead and they go onto another world they had such huge belief that it was all going to be so wonderful. And to me as you’re coming up those steps you’re still alive, you go through the tunnel, I think that’s good, that crossing over. That’s quite important’ Family non-visitor

‘I do think leading up to the steps to the floor you do need a lot of colour, life ... people in costume of the period, lots and lots of ... green ... you’ve got to kind of feel that it was all bustling and light and bright and exciting as you come in ... noise, maybe the hustle and bustle’ Family non-visitor

Potential visitors responded very positively to the idea that the exhibition space will recreate passageways and gateways, creating a sense of being inside a tomb, crossing over to the afterlife:

‘I loved [the idea of going through passageways], I thought that was a very, very good idea because that is their theme isn’t it, you’re passing through a series of gateways so ... that is really important’ Independent adult – regular attender

These passageways do, however, generate concern about visitor flow, with visitors seeing them as potentially restricting their movement inside the exhibition space:

‘I do think that the gateway idea is very good but you are in a sense funnelling people around, so I think that what you need to do is make sure that you’ve got ... some exhibits and some areas where you almost take people slightly out of the flow’ Independent adult – regular attender
This concern was reiterated by the request from visitors that there are
breakout spaces, areas to step out of the visitor flow either to relax or
concentrate specifically on certain objects. Such spaces could also function as
informal activity areas:

‘I find it helpful when I can step out of the flow, let everyone pass and then
I come back and hang over an object again for another hour or so’
Independent adult – regular attender

‘It’s like you almost needed ... a breakout space, a more informal space
... activities perhaps’ Family visitor

‘Having the place to sit and to look really carefully, relaxing and sitting
down’ Family visitor

6.2 Lighting

Lighting effects could play a key role in generating atmosphere within the
exhibition space, and this is explored further in chapter 7. Whilst low-level
lighting will help conjure the sensation of making a spiritual journey, some
visitors may find this claustrophobic if it is not contrasted with light areas
interspersed throughout:

‘I go to the royal Academy a lot, and what I like about that I ... it’s quite
light so you have a lot of access, you don’t get that sort of oppressive
feeling ... But here it’s slightly different because you’re dealing with
delicate ... you have to protect but I don’t think everything has to be dark
... one imagines that places of Egypt [were] indeed full of sunshine most of
the time ... if it’s dark from the beginning it really would be like sending
people into potential death’ Family visitor

‘That dark low-level lighting is lovely for concentration, it just brings you
into it really’ Independent adult – regular attender

6.3 Displaying the Papyri

Potential visitors expressed concern over the way in which the Book of the
Dead would be displayed. They were unsure whether it was the scale that
would be the most appealing aspect of this artefact, that they could stand
back and admire the complete 37 metre papyri, or if in fact that they would
want to get up close to the text, perhaps to decipher some parts or read
translations alongside the hieroglyphics. Generally visitors felt that it would
be hard to achieve both, to take in both the scale and the detail since people
closely studying the text would obscure the impressive scale of the papyri:
'I was just thinking, what's interesting about a 37m piece of text? If it's the content, do people need to go up close and read it or is it the scale in which case they don't need to read it at all ... would people form an orderly queue and just walk along and read everything?' Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

'If it's about what's written on the paper, do you need to be up close and personal with a piece of paper just to read it, because you're not actually looking at the actual paper itself, you'd be looking at the words, you can't understand it so you'd be reading interpretive text anyway in a pamphlet or something ... what actually is the motivation for people to actually go through and read the whole 37m thing, I don't know' Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

A suggestion to overcome this problem was displaying the full text above head height and guiding visitors through certain features of the text, magnifying specific extracts on a large scale that perhaps exemplify certain writing styles or spells, or using certain extracts to train visitors in the basics of deciphering hieroglyphics:

'It will be very difficult to do that with writing, but I'm assuming it's the scale that's going to be impressive so anyway they can magnify that ... that's going to be what's going to make people think they've come all this way to see something truly special' Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

'If you display [the papyri] above you can see what it's like and then have bits of it ... taken out, so you can get up closer at those places, so anyone can see above and then people could read fairly sparsely, but it does seem to me to be that is the focal point of the exhibition ... that explains the whole exhibition' Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

'You need to ... take it down to the micro level, that that hieroglyphic actually means that ... further along, this bunch of hieroglyphs actually means this kind of spell, so you have three types of interpretation being the actual papyrus itself, what each selection of individual hieroglyphs means and what a complete spell would look like in English' Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

The area in which the papyri are displayed should have plenty of seating areas that allow visitors to stop and reflect:

'[In the Greenfield section] Lots of seats where you can sit, and if they can have stuff up on ... screen behind it whether it's replicated of it, as well as perhaps translations and pictures of the Nile, you can sit and actually zone out for a bit and then move on' Family visitor
Potential visitors acknowledge that the whole exhibition has been building up to this moment and that their experience of the papyri is key in consolidating their understanding of the exhibition overall. Some visitors may be concerned that the exhibition will build up slowly and could potentially lack punch in the final stages, perhaps with visitors finding the sheer amount of information to take in overwhelming.

“What was essentially the most impressive point of the exhibition ... because it had been a slow process getting through and I think this one will have potentially a problem with it being quite a slow process ... that end point is then nullified a little bit” Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition

6.4 Artefacts potential visitors want to be included

In terms of objects, variety is key for visitors. They want colourful three-dimensional objects to support the two-dimensional displays of papyri.

Visitors were asked to select the most important and appealing objects that should be included in the exhibition. Alongside the papyri, below are some of the most popular objects selected.

“What were pigments gathered from and how were they made – scarcity / value etc?”

‘Good example of unexpected object, liked colour’

‘Wall mounted – head height. What’s it made of?’

‘Iconic, eye-catching, crowd pleaser’

‘Mystical, focal point. Need to see through a gateway’

‘360 degree access – illuminated. Beautiful craftsmanship – what’s it made of? What’s the theory / thinking behind it?’

‘So important, expected to be displayed. Its function? Its value in religions sense. How it was placed in mummy’
'Beautiful and striking objects lead to visitors wanting to understand more about the Book of the Dead'

'Should form a focal point – who was the person / their background / life / how they died etc'

'Expected to be displayed – need explanation of owner and translation of spells'

'Spectacular, good condition. Colours. Who made it? Where does it come from? Date? Explanation of Shabti'

'How they helped the dead person – it's colourful, 3-D, playful'

'How many usually in a box? [What's the] most ever found with one mummy?'

'360 degrees access – make a replica model for handling'
6.5 Concerns around over-crowding

Visitors with prior experience of exhibitions in the Reading Room, or a perception of the popularity of ancient Egypt as a topic, are concerned that the exhibition space will be so crowded that they will not be able to adequately engage with the artefacts:

“You’ve really got to be careful about how many people are being pushed through, because I do feel that from some of the big exhibitions that I’ve come to see here previously, you’ve got people rammed through it … with some of the key parts of this exhibition, you’re going to need a bit of time to reflect’ Independent adult – regular attender

Difficulty in booking, long queues, crowded [puts me off coming] Family visitor

What puts me off – Don’t ram huge numbers through – allowing sufficient time is vital, without this would be very difficult Independent adult – regular attender

“Sometimes when you go to the Egyptian rooms, I’ve said “oh let’s not bother”, because it’s just so mobbed. It’s a question of making that timed entry work’ Family visitor

Whilst timed entry is in theory a way of easing visitors’ worries about potential over-crowding, visitors need to clearly understand if timed entry will function through entry slots – in which case they may feel pressured having to complete their visit in a certain amount of time – or if visitors will simply be given an entrance time and allowed to spend as long as they need within the exhibition space:

‘I think the problem with timed entry is you feel as though you are gong to be under pressure. You’re not but you feel as though you are. So in some ways it’s better if you can encourage people to move through quicker … Buckingham Palace does it well, in fact they have timed entries, but they constantly are moving people gently along’ Independent adult – first attracted by special exhibition
Visitors were asked to take each section of the exhibition in turn and articulate how they would hope to feel and what they would like to be able to see and do in that space.

**What they think this room should be like...**

In this section they want detailed information on the processes of preparation - they want to see the artefacts, tools and canopic jars, amulets, maybe even reconstructions of benches with half completed mumification, or films demonstrating the removal of the brain from the skull.

Families in particular would like interactive touch screens allowing children to choose a spell and what they would like to be - a bird, crocodile, duck, dog,...

Gloomy lighting and burning incense smells would help set the mood.

**Visitors would hope to feel ...**

‘Awe and gore’

‘Safe at this point’, ‘ready for a journey’

Apprehensive - aware of a chance of potentially experiencing ‘something good’

‘Awe at the human element of death’

**Visitors would hope to see and do in that space.**

Crucially visitors want ‘enough information to be given the context for the rest of the exhibition’. This room should have information on those who died, providing a perspective and characterisation so that visitors can identify with the deceased: ‘I would like to know who I was, what was my world’, ‘did I have friends, is anyone coming with me?’. Visitors may find it easier to identify with the journey of one person and a detailed understanding of their family, their political and economic situation.

They want to actually be given the sense of crossing a boundary, an immersive experience generated by ‘lights behind you - dark in the middle - light you are going to, maybe ... temperature changes’. 
Experiencing the afterlife: Formative evaluation of *Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*

Visitors would hope to feel ...

*Hopeful, lighter in spirit*, that they can *succeed to a beautiful place*

Visitors would hope to feel ...

Again visitors are hoping to share a sense of perspective with the deceased:

*That people have come to see you and written letters* that *I am well prepared, my pets are with me and my jewelry and clothes*, *Farewell and the start of a journey*
Visitors would hope to feel ...

‘Surprised, worried’, ‘like I was experiencing the real thing’, ‘scared, astonished, revolted, excited’, ‘awed at the thought of death’, ‘Hopefully experiencing what the ancient Egyptian was feeling’, ‘the sense that error could mean doom. And the fear it could be too late’.

What they think this room should be like...

Visitors want ‘sufficient time to appreciate the exhibits in an unpressured learning environment’. Some would like ‘lots of audio’, but others only want written spells, they want ‘non-dramatic, not “Disneyfied” interpretation’.

Some visitors want the lighting to be carefully placed on each artefact and ‘as little distraction around the pieces as possible ... a calm room highlighting the beauty of each exhibit’, but other visitors want ‘flickering light to make it more atmospheric, touch screens, films of the spell in action, large panels with translations and explanations’.

What they think this room should be like...

Spells should be included in a variety of forms in this room - translated texts on laminated sheets, pictures of spells being carried out, audio sounds of spells being cast.

Families might want costumes to enable children to transform into animal or a write-your-own spell corner.
**Visitors would hope to feel ...**

‘Poised on the edge of judgement; am I going to be passed as virtuous, or am I going to be condemned to obliteration?’. Visitors hope to understand ‘the journey and the hopes and fears of those who went on the journey’, they might feel scared of the monsters, resolution of the journey and empathy for the travellers.

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**What they think this room should be like...**

Visitors want to fully understand the decision making process - the room could be ‘set up like a “court” with judges on the wall saying what they are considering’, and there should be ‘a clear link to the moral element behind the decision process’. Some want a ‘quiet, thoughtful environment’, others want ‘something gruesome / realistic like the London Dungeons’. Visitors want ‘strong visuals’ and ‘dramatic lighting’.

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Visitors would hope to feel ...

‘Pleased to have got that far, content, sense of exhilaration’, ‘sense of calm, relaxed, heavenly’.

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What they think this room should be like...

This may be a natural area to pause and reflect in the exhibition - it may not be as text-heavy as other areas, but create ‘an image of what success would look like’. It should be a space for peaceful contemplation, with ‘natural soundscape e.g. wind and ibis calls’, a ‘mellow and sunny’ lighting, ‘representation of the natural environment, perhaps even a film of the Nile. Relaxing, subtle audio could be playing: ‘soft music, Egyptian lute, distant cymbals’.
Experiencing the afterlife: Formative evaluation of Journey through the afterlife: the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead

Visitors would hope to feel...

- 'Amazed', 'thrilled at seeing the whole thing in one single display. Excited that I now understand something about the Book of the Dead'; 'overwhelmed, awed, the feeling I'm seeing something unique'

What they think this room should be like...

Visitors expect an impressive display of the complete Book of the Dead at eye-height, with several seating areas allowing visitors to reflect and contemplate.

 Visitors would hope to feel ...

- 'Informed' with a 'sense of the wider cultural context at the end of the journey which has previously been empathetic'

What they think this room should be like...

This room lends itself to hands-on activities such as draws with papyri and inks for children to create their own papyrus, whilst adults can study the more technical aspects.

This room should be brightly lit, and visitors may appreciate a film showing papyrus preparation.

Visitors would hope to feel...

- 'A sense of history', 'educated, that I learnt something new', 'embarking upon a great journey'

What they think this room should be like...

Visitors hope to be made aware of the different historical interpretations of the Book of the Dead in this section, placing ‘the research of last 20 years in context’. They would like to see drawers full of conservators’ tools, and maybe a film of them at work with audio explaining the process of conservation.

This room should be quiet, sombre and reflective. It might have an academic edge, with ‘examples of academic study throughout the world with a strong emphasis on Egyptian interpretation’.

MORRIS HARGREAVES McINTYRE 18/3/10 43 out of 49
The results from this exercise highlight that although there is a general consensus to a certain extent on the type of information and objects that visitors would want in each room and the type of feeling they are hoping to experience, there is less agreement on the ways in which the interpretation and exhibition design could achieve this. Again, this highlights the challenges posed from different groups of visitors, with some expecting a more formal, traditional visit experience and others expecting an immersive journey involving multi-sensory and interactive interpretation.

This exercise did, however, reveal a key finding with regards to the perspective visitors are hoping to gain from their visit experience. There is an overwhelming interest and expectation that the exhibition will be personalised, that it will focus on key individuals and explore their life, death and subsequent journey.

Visitors do not want just an overview of this ancient Egyptian process, they want the journeys put into a human context, and for this context to allow them to place themselves in the position of the departed, allowing space to imagine and reflect on their own spiritual journeys. This experiential approach is an area that the British Museum has begun to excel in through recent exhibition schemes.
Meeting the needs of different visitor groups

Perhaps the most significant finding of this research is the conflicting interests and expectations between family visitors and independent adult visitors and the challenges that this issue presents for the British Museum in designing and marketing this exhibition.

8.1 Huge perceived appeal for family visitors and school groups

Amongst independent adult visitors there is an overwhelming perception that an exhibition focusing on ancient Egypt will appeal strongly to family visitors and to school groups:

‘I think it might have the appeal to children because it’s Ancient Egypt and it’s mummies and the dead and children love that kind of thing and it’s great and it’s … family friendly’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

“I think this is going to be something of a populist exhibition. I’m sure it’s probably on the National Curriculum … so you’re going to have lots of school parties’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Whilst some independent adults welcome the opportunity that this exhibition will present to such visitors, the overriding opinion is that with school groups and family visitors being a target market – if not already adversely effecting the way the Museum conveys information – large numbers of such visitors would negatively impact on the visit experience of independent adult visitors:

‘[Being suitable for families] doesn’t worry me, I think exhibitions operate on many, many levels … I’d be very sad if it was an exhibition and the kids weren’t excited at going around. It’s for them as much as for the parents and whilst I think that there is a limit to how … gory you would allow it … nevertheless, the bits that the kids are going to find interesting have to be illustrated as well and brought out’ Independent adult – regular attender

“I think the last time I came here and tried to look at some Egyptian stuff it was full of school children and I thought, I can’t cope, it was hot, it was all these children who were noisy’ Independent adult – non / lapsed visitor

Hoards of school groups, children generally [would put me off coming] Independent adult – regular attender
8.2 Family suitability

Both family visitors and independent adults feel that the British Museum would have to change its curating style in order to successfully engage the wider family and schools market.

‘If you think about the children ... certain exhibitions are just going to be for a certain age group and above. Not because of behaviour, but because they haven’t reached that point where their minds are more academic, because this is more academic’ Independent adult – regular attender

After being given an overview presentation of the exhibition plans, a general concern was raised amongst family visitors that, although as adults they would find the topic area appealing, they did not view the exhibition as a viable experience as a family as there is not enough material and aspects aimed specifically at younger visitors. This view was more pertinent for non-visitors:

‘I’ve been to Cairo recently so I’ve kind of seen some of this ... But I’ve never really did much about understanding this Book of the Dead and to be taken through various things ... was quite interesting. The main thing for me is that I don’t know what is in it for [my son] at all. From what I’ve seen there he would be bored in about 30 seconds’ Family non-visitor

‘It’s far too advanced what [the curator’s presentation] was talking about there. It’s not going to keep a child of that age [7] interested enough’ Family non-visitor

‘When you’re looking at these things, you’re seeing the real things, this isn’t pretend, and I think that’s very important ... I’m quite fascinated in your exhibition you’re going to have about the indigenous Americans and to me just gazing on the turquoise and the old costumes, that’s quite enough for me ... but for the little ones unless they’re all dressed up as Indians and they’re running round and they’ve got their cooking pots’ Family non-visitor
‘It wouldn’t be value for money. I would enjoy going, I would go because I would like to understand what it was all about. He would not comprehend that at his age … he’d just follow us round’ Family non-visitor

‘You’re in competition in a way with … Alton Towers … Disney. People who are used to going as families … then when you get in people are used to … thrills and spills. Which is very difficult here … these X-box games and all the things that he’s got and they get exposed to these days are very much more glossier’ Family non-visitor

One visitor also expressed a concern that the subject areas might not be completely suitable for younger visitors:

‘I think there’s a danger too don’t forget that there are demons on the other side too and that it could get scary for the kids’ Family non-visitor

8.3 Dedicated family and school groups time slots

Currently visitors accompanying children do not automatically feel welcomed in the Museum, certainly compared to experiences at other venues, and they would greatly appreciate dedicated time slots in which they can relax and behave as a family without having to worry about the impact this will have on the experience of independent adult visitors:

‘It is going to be so popular with primary school children … having gone to lots of museums, we had quite unfavourable experiences, having been asked to leave the gallery because my daughter was crying here, as opposed to somewhere like the National Maritime Museum where … they’ve got that relatively new … children’s area’ Family visitor

‘[Dedicated time slots for families are] a great idea … for the families it makes it much more fun’ Family non-visitor

‘Can you make one day a week specifically for schools because actually I have to say that we felt really unwelcome and I think the children were behaving fantastically … when I took them round the Shah ‘Abbas exhibition … some of the public were automatically saying that they were being a bit of a pain, and they weren’t. You know, they were kids’ Family visitor
8.4 Will the target markets compromise the visit experience for independent adults?

Generally independent adults feel that specifically targeting family and school markets would have a negative impact on the tone, depth and medium via which information is communicated. They fear that information would be ‘dumbed down’ if these two markets are the primary targets for the exhibition:

‘I’m not sure you can do it for children at all. Unless you get Madame Tussauds and build it … I don’t see why it should be necessary to have to appeal to children at all … it would definitely put off me because I don’t like this merchandise kind of plastic … audios like while you want to concentrate on some reading, some translation in the background and some funny voices in the background, might draw your attention away from it’ Independent adult – regular attender

‘It’s being sold as a family exhibition, that’s exactly the reason I wouldn’t go and see it personally. It would be lots of screaming kids … it would be really dumbed down, lots of interactives’ Independent adult – regular attender

Thus the interpretation and exhibition design needs to strike a careful balance involving multi-layered forms of interpretation and varied modes of delivery, and the marketing campaigns need to be targeted to ensure that different visiting groups recognise that their particular needs and expectations will be met by the exhibition.
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