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Excuse me, but do you have the shortcut-key to the restrooms?

http://www.tekka.net/01/?London

I've recently visited the London Science Museum and could not help but think that a large, encyclopedic museum is basically nothing but a CD ROM that covers the same subject - but with the contents all projected tangibly into three-dimensional space. You can walk your body among the exhibits and if the museum's a good one you may even touch certain specimens with your whole hand, not just your mouse finger!

Conversely, exploring a place like that, sore-footed, for half a day or longer, can teach you a bit about CD ROM (or digital space in general) design -- mostly about navigation -- and orientation-aids.

The Science Museum has 7 floors (one underground), connected by six staircases and four elevators. Most of them do not serve every floor. Not even the restrooms are in the same place on every level. The center of the ground floor is several stories high, so that the layout and the paths of the upper floors differ significantly from the one you learn upon first entering the museum. The top two floors only take up a tiny part of the Western wing. Furthermore, the various foci of the Science Museum are clustered in different spatial layouts, some open, some enclosed, some at floor level, some elevated. This means that getting to and from a certain point, finding the restroom or the elevators, involves endless, undirected circling. The Science Museum is amazing and exciting with the amount of technology and sociohistory it holds for you to wrap your mind and hands around. But prepare to be lost in exhibition-space, and limping.

Were I to produce a CD ROM or web-project with a layout like this, the reviews would be devastating. Imagine a website with a navigation that never stays in one place and where you learnt to expect the "more"-buttons, there's suddenly one that says "cancel". Imagine you just cannot find the button that says "quit" and Go Back just fails on you.

Good digital design involves planning a learning curve: the practice mode in a videogame, the first couple of easy puzzles in an adventure, the opening cut-scene that includes the different status and uses of the cursor, the overview-page of a website that already has the main navigation in place. If you stray from this established rule of conduct, you risk losing your visitors. For commercial projects, this would be something of a risk. In fact, there's a DIN Norm for ergonomic software. And just look how Flash-intros (even with skip-buttons in place) have gone out of fashion.

Given the choice, I'd rather be disoriented when navigating a CD ROM than in a museum. After all, with a CD and a laptop, you can sit back comfortably on the sofa, with a cafe latte, and even take your shoes off. And in digital art, a bit of a labyrinthine layout might even add to the enjoyment of your willing suspension of disbelief (and control). Still, the loss of orientation is a frequent source of complaint from readers of hypertext fiction while hardly anyone complains that museum-navigation is nowhere near as comfortable as browsing in an encyclopedia.
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