

James G. McClure.

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April 22, 2005

Exhibiting Software in Computer Museums

Dear CHM Colleague:

I am a graduate student in the Museum Studies Program at John F. Kennedy University, in the San Francisco Bay Area. I am also an intern at the Computer History Museum, in Mountain View, California.

I am studying the challenge of “exhibiting” computer software in science and technology museums. Software is, of course, intangible, and I am interested in strategies and techniques for effectively representing or manifesting it in a museum setting, “alongside” computer hardware.

I would be very grateful if you would take a few minutes to complete the attached questionnaire and return it to me.

I do not need any personal information from you. If you choose to add a note about yourself to provide context for your responses, I will not disclose any personally identifiable information.

Some of the following questions may not seem to apply to everyone who receives this questionnaire. In responding, however, please provide any information *or opinions* related to exhibiting software in museums, based on your background and experience. Even if your response seems incomplete, it will be helpful. Also, if you have information or opinions based on exhibits about, mathematics, psychology, or other intangible “material,” please respond on the basis of those other exhibits, as well.

Attach an extra page if you feel like expanding on a topic. If you really don’t have anything to say about a question, that’s fine, too; just move on. If you would rather respond by email, you don’t have to repeat the questions, just preface your answers with the numbers of the corresponding questions. Email can be sent to me at jamesmcclure@comcast.net.

Thank you in advance for your help.

Best regards,

Jim McClure

Software Exhibits Questionnaire: For Museum and Software-Industry Professionals

1. Please rank the following hypothetical types of information that museum visitors might want to know about software, or questions they might want answered, when they visit a museum that exhibits computers. Please rank each type of information or question in terms of the relative importance that you think a majority of museum visitors would place on it.

Please rank using a scale of 1 to 5, as follows:

- 1 = not important,
- 2 = somewhat important,
- 3 = important,
- 4 = very important,
- 5 = extremely important.

(More than one item can have the same ranking)

Types of information or questions	Rankings				
a. The professional careers of the people who created this software.	1	2	3	4	5
b. Personal anecdotes about the people who created this software.	1	2	3	4	5
c. The story of why and how this software was created.	1	2	3	4	5
d. The age of this software. Where and when it was created.	1	2	3	4	5
e. How this software was (or is) used.	1	2	3	4	5
f. How this software actually accomplishes its work (“How does it do that?”).	1	2	3	4	5
g. The computers for which this software was designed.	1	2	3	4	5
h. Whether this software was popular; sold a lot of copies; had a big market share.	1	2	3	4	5
i. Why the museum decided to collect this software.	1	2	3	4	5
j. Why the museum decided to exhibit this software.	1	2	3	4	5
k. “Nothing in particular” – “I just want the software identified, because I already know about software.”	1	2	3	4	5

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l. Whether this software replaced earlier software that performed a similar function, and if so, why.	1	2	3	4	5
m. Whether this software did something really new; something that had not been possible before.	1	2	3	4	5
n. Whether this software is related in any important way to other software.	1	2	3	4	5
o. Whether this software was developed because of some new development in computer hardware. (Would this software have been impractical on earlier machines?)	1	2	3	4	5
p. Whether the development of this software significantly promoted or discouraged the development of new computer hardware.	1	2	3	4	5
q. Whether there are any especially interesting or amusing stories about this software.	1	2	3	4	5
r. Whether I can try to operate this software while I'm here in the museum.	1	2	3	4	5
s. What is going on while the software is running? What is the computer doing? What does it look like when it runs?	1	2	3	4	5
t. Does the computer need to interact with a person while this software is running?	1	2	3	4	5
u. How many different kinds of software are there?	1	2	3	4	5
v. Are there any really fundamental differences between different kinds of software?	1	2	3	4	5
w. What is programming? Is programming different from making a spreadsheet or a database with commercial software?	1	2	3	4	5
x. What are programming languages, programs, and applications?	1	2	3	4	5

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2. Have you or your institution ever worked on a software exhibit? Yes or No

If you answered “yes,” please briefly describe your target audience:

And, please briefly describe what you did and whether you felt the exhibit was as successful as you had hoped:

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3. Do you think you or your institution might do a software exhibit in the future? Yes or No
If you answered “yes,” please briefly describe your expected target audience:

And, please briefly describe what you think you might do and why:

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4. If you are aware of any current or former exhibits of software, mathematics, or other “technical” but intangible material, please briefly identify and describe them. If you could discern the goal of the exhibit, please describe the goal, describe whether you thought the goal was effectively achieved, and describe any special feature of the exhibit that contributed to achieving the goal or interfered with achieving the goal.

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- Please briefly describe up to five of the most important facts or concepts that you think software exhibits could or should convey to computer-museum visitors who are not already knowledgeable about software. How many separate exhibits and how many museum visits do you think it would (or should) take to convey that information to “layperson” visitors?
- Do you think it is important for computer museums to exhibit software, or is it enough for museums to concentrate on hardware and leave software to libraries, archives, internet sites, and other types of institutions? Why?

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7. In your opinion, what are the most important goals when exhibiting software? Please describe any ideas you have about how to address those goals.