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Living history at Egeskov

The decision taken by Egeskov in 2010 to introduce role play – i.e. to give visitors the opportunity to meet people who speak, dress and act as if they were figures from a bygone age – must be termed “courageous”.

Successful attractions usually build on what they have or follow the latest trends. In the tourism sector, the latter generally centres on the approach that Michael Ahlefeldt states that he will not take, namely “higher, faster and louder attractions”. As so many times before, it appears that he may succeed by following an unconventional route.

The reason for the success is the capacity of dialogue-based mediation to provide a “living history” experience. Meeting the past from the same contemporary perspective as our own existence, with a future just as uncertain as our own, brings us closer to history. Quite simply, it provides us with a real sense of being transported to a different age, like time travellers.

Successful role play can actually rouse history from its slumbers. Visitors can be given an experience to cherish, something to think about and discuss afterwards, which in turn can encourage them to visit the attraction again. An added advantage is the fact that very few competitors are making a serious attempt to apply this method.

However, it is not at all easy to pull this off, as it is essential to avoid damaging the sense of authenticity that is the ace in Egeskov’s hand. And this is not the only difficulty. That is why it is important to discuss what the change may lead to in the longer term. Will visitors learn more, and will they return more often? Unfortunately, no studies have been completed that provide unambiguous answers to these questions.

The performance of historical roles can trace its roots back over the centuries in the context of theatre and religious ceremonies, particularly those of the Catholic church. During the 1700s and 1800s, it was common for participants to dress up to represent historical figures on days of commemoration and at other festivities. Charades was a popular party game, and historical environments were reconstructed at the world exhibitions.

All this took place on individual occasions, but it may well be the case that the custom of organising one-off historical displays gave rise to role play as a method for bringing museums and cultural memorials to life. One of the first attractions to develop the method was *Plimoth Plantation*, just outside Boston in the United States. This is a reconstructed town on the site where the Pilgrim Fathers made their landfall in 1620. Here, the locals have long celebrated historical festivals with pageants in which they dressed up as figures from the past. Many of the people who worked at *Plimoth Plantation* had taken part themselves.

The numerous role play associations that had been set up to re-enact historical events on the battlefields and elsewhere provided another rich source of inspiration.

Towards the end of the 1970s, *Plimoth Plantation* decided that all public activities within the reconstructed town should take place as role play. Around the same time, the method was introduced at the *Conner Prairie Settlement* open air museum near Indianapolis and at several of the National Parks' historical monuments in the United States and Canada (1).

The result was widespread euphoria. The method was praised in newspapers and books, and more and more historical attractions followed suit. Anyone interested in returning to the pioneering spirit of the time would do well to read historian Jay Anderson's books about living history from the mid-1980s.

In Europe, the method was greeted with more scepticism, and serious museum operators accused their American colleagues of "Disneyfication". Gradually, however, some open air museums and cultural monuments began to experiment with role play. In Great Britain, for example, several role play groups were established and toured the country performing at a variety of sites – primarily castles and manor houses.

At sites run by amateurs, almost all inhibitions were lost. In Sweden it reached the point where no matter where conferences were held, the conference delegates hardly had time to walk in the door before they were surrounded by people in period costume bearing wooden platters laden with food and spouting carefully rehearsed historical quotes. As a result, the role play method began to fall into disrepute before it had even been properly tested.

The “Golden Age” of the role play method was also brief on the other side of the Atlantic. Many attractions tried it for a short while and then gave it up. There were several reasons for the backlash. While it is true that visitor numbers remained high, the method encountered practical difficulties and fundamental concerns. The attempt to create living history environments had already attracted a storm of criticism from academics and “museologists”, and role play was naturally the most provocative approach of all. Only the most committed and convinced performers succeeded in weathering the storm of prejudice against all attempts at theatrical performances and historical reconstruction (2).

Here, we encounter a problem common to all businesses that focus on mediating history. Almost everything written on the subject has to do with what should be taught, and about the misconceptions that can arise. Some works include descriptions about how the project should actually be approached, but the financial and pedagogical results are only rarely discussed. So how can Egeskov’s prospects be judged? Allow me to refer to three separate and encouraging examples, chosen for the simple reason that they have the best reports on the experience associated with each (3).

A laborious method

Plimoth Plantation became world famous through role play and made role play world famous. In just a short time, a visit to the museum became almost compulsory for anyone wishing to study the new way of bringing a cultural monument to life (4).

The approach involves resurrecting the year of 1627, seven years after the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers in the New World. Everything is to show how things actually were in that year: the buildings, the plantations, the work and the tools, the animals and the people representing the members of the community at that time.

The intention is to transform the visit into a voyage through time. Nothing is to reflect the contemporary age. The people visitors meet do not give any indication at all of knowing anything about the years after 1627. In contrast, though, they are happy to relate previous events that they have experienced themselves or heard about from others.

The recipe for success has often been described. Good archival sources have facilitated the reconstruction of the inhabitants of the colony. Each and every one of them has a personal history and personal qualities. Great efforts have been made to ensure that all the actors feel at home in their time and their roles. There is a great deal of knowledge that must be learned – in particular the appropriate “world view”,

i.e. the way of thinking that constitutes a framework for the way people think and act during a given period.

It is important to work very methodically and in depth on contrasts, comparisons and differences. "It should be a kind of culture shock," wrote the anthropologist James Deetz, one of the leading figures in the 1970s. Every effort is made consciously to create the same kind of misunderstandings and surprises that arise when you visit a contemporary foreign culture. A single phrase can be enough to make visitors instantly experience an unknown context.

It is important to work with emotional dialogue. The role players' personal contradictions and widely different opinions of the events and relationships of their time bring the visit to life and make it exciting. The intention is not to tell the visitors what they should think – rather, it is to allow them to draw their own conclusions. This makes every visit a unique experience.

For this to function, it is essential to find the balance between the intellectual and the emotional, between the serious and the playful. Not everyone can manage this, and the visit will be perceived differently depending on which day or in which season it is made. However, a positive note in favour of role play is that the museum seems to have been less affected than most other open air museums in the United States by the drop-off in visitor numbers that has distinguished the past decade.

Everything rests on the capacity of the actors to improvise. It is stressed that role play is not theatre. No scripts are used. Instead, "our interpreters function in something like real time, capable of being surprised by life." (5) The continuous adaptation to the visitors ensures that the activities and the individual actors are constantly developing.

What is important to note from Egeskov's perspective is that despite the fact that role play takes place as verbal interaction between actors and visitors, Plimoth Plantation still manages to accommodate several thousand visitors every day. A number of commentators have remarked on the actors' skill in adapting their message and performance so as to suit different situations and different types of individuals and groups of visitors.

At the same time, the actors are limited by being unable to communicate and answer questions from a contemporary perspective. Several attempts have been made to provide such information before and after the visit to the fortified town, but neither Plimoth nor any other attraction seems to have found a really good solution to the problem.

Conner Prairie Interactive History Park, as the museum is now called, is built up around a preserved manor house. There is no role play *per se*, but everything takes place in a reconstructed town from 1836. In contrast to Plimoth, the people here do not have actual role models. Instead, archival sources have been used to reconstruct personalities typical of the age from various communities.

From the very start, it was assumed that visitors would not come to the attraction in search of knowledge, but rather for entertainment, and “Education through entertainment” became the motto of the museum.

The museum set itself the goal of attempting to surprise the visitors, to have them experience “unexpected historical truths”. More specifically, the museum also strived to create emotionally charged situations and topics of conversation. The visitors were to feel personally involved.

Gradually, however, difficulties began to arise and with them an endless discussion about which path to follow. At an earlier stage than at the Plimoth attraction, the museum encountered the problem of the visits not being sufficiently exciting. The everyday life it was attempting to present was not particularly dramatic, and, in the same way as most museums in North America, there was a deep-seated fear of contentious subjects; it was crucial to ensure that visitors did not take offence at anything.

The solution was precisely to bring such topics to life in the role play, particularly topics that are important today, such as issues of racial discrimination and alcohol abuse. The museum gradually pushed back the boundaries. In fact, there is even a nightly programme in which the visitors themselves take part as runaway slaves.

However, the problem was not identified at an early stage, it only became apparent in more recent years when methodical work was done to study the reactions of the visitors. By videotaping the role play, interviewing the visitors and recording their conversations with one another, it became shockingly apparent that the museum had reached an impasse. The actors were far too concentrated on what they had to say and the role play had become a type of “lecture” without sufficient attention being paid to contact with the visitors.

As the museum seems to be the only one that has dared to publish such studies, this is an important source of material for discussion (6). The solution at Conner Prairie was to change the principal task of the actors, altering the primary focus to that of attempting to stimulate the visitors. The dialogue is to be carried on in such a way that it encourages conversation between the visitors – particularly in the family groups – both in connection with the meetings with the actors, and when they subsequently tour the facility for themselves, and ideally after they return home.

Jamtli Historieland was my own attempt to convert a traditional open air museum into a role play attraction. The objective was rather like that at Plimoth Plantation, i.e. that nothing should reference the modern age.

With the introduction of role play, Jamtli became one of the most important summer attractions in the region, and it has remained so ever since. To encourage visitors to return, new themes and approaches are tested each year. In parallel with the role play, Jamtli has focused increasingly on children. This has paid off, and Jamtli has reaped the reward in the form of a higher proportion of children and families than at other Swedish museums. A visit to Jamtli has become a social activity, something to do for the whole family, children and adults together, and often involving three generations (7).

However, it took some time for the operation to function. Experience taught us the same lessons as were learned at Plimoth and Conner's: if the role play is to work, it has to be kept at a certain distance. If visitors are placed face to face with a person who insists that the year is 1785, things can quickly become very confusing. It is better to attempt to promote the sense that the whole thing is a game that visitors are invited to join in.

We also came up with other ways to deal with the difficulties. The lively conversation during the "History walks", when one of the actors guides visitors around the different farms and interacts both with them and with other actors, has proved to be an effective way to make the audience feel at home. A voluntary work project and a now-discontinued youth club made it possible for visitors to meet actors of all ages, from children to senior citizens.

Through challenges such as placing a scythe in the visitors' hands, or asking how many horses they are travelling with; by meeting the visitors as if they are everything from starving unemployed people looking for work, to travelling members of the upper class, the actors have succeeded in encouraging the visitors to join in the game. If, at the same time, the encounter results in the people standing nearby starting to laugh, the ice has been broken and the actors can delve deeper into the action.

An experience we share with other places is the fact that it is easiest to encourage the audience to join in if two or more actors interact. If the actor is alone, he or she is more dependent on his/her individual skills, and it takes much more to put the visitors at ease. If things go really badly, it can even happen that the visitors simply stop and listen for a while out of pure politeness.

We have never succeeded in measuring how much history we actually succeed in teaching. On the other hand, studies have been completed of what the audience experiences and how their visit affects their view of people from ages past. It is pleasing to note that increased respect for people from the past seems to be the most usual result (8).

Egeskov's opportunities

What separates Egeskov from, first and foremost, the American examples is the fact that the role play is simply intended to be one of several methods for reaching the audience. But this is likely to be a major advantage. This approach neatly avoids two of the common objections: that role play only suits some people and not others, and that only some kinds of knowledge can be communicated as historical dialogue.

There is much to suggest that historical attractions gain by offering a variety of types of experiences. However, this demands that they are kept in clearly separated areas. Following the lead of animal parks and theme parks, it has become common to divide the entire site into clearly separated areas for different types of activities.

Another important difference is that the "role models" work with role play in reconstructed environments. Egeskov is authentic. Role play in furnished environments with original items has sometimes been tried, but this approach is not recommended as it usually results in experiences colliding. As a result, Egeskov has decided that the role play is to take place outdoors. But even outdoors, it is not possible to avoid disruptions of external impressions completely. Therefore, it may be even more important to stress that the role play is a mutual undertaking.

The first season has every opportunity of being a success. The "newness", the unexpected and the opportunity to feel like a visitor in another age can all stimulate joy and delight. Looking to the future, however, what is required? I think that Egeskov is facing four challenges.

The first challenge has to do with the ability to develop and vary the activities. Regular renewal and, at least, new themes are essential in encouraging repeat visits. A tempting solution would be to switch ages between 1875 and 1935, with role play about other areas of the castle's history – perhaps even going back to the period of construction. Nevertheless, the difficulties increase for every new age added. There is more knowledge to unearth and learn, there are more clothes and props to make, and there is a greater risk that the visitors will be confused and have trouble keeping the different ages separate.

So the best approach for Egeskov may well be to stick to the age it has begun with and bring in the older history of the castle by having the actors talk about it. They could, perhaps, even take visitors on guided tours as if the year were 1875. In this way, it would be possible to achieve an exciting historical double perspective, where the visitors could compare their own experience of the past with that of visitors during the historical period in question.

The second challenge has to do with attempting to build up a core of actors who return year after year, who learn more and more about this special form of communication, and who find out more and more about the historical period they are to present. As the dialogue should build on improvisation, knowledge has to be practised from a long-term perspective, so that the actors feel increasingly comfortable with how people behaved, thought and spoke, with practical tasks, and perhaps even with a specific profession.

This is not something that can be learned overnight, nor can it be learned through visiting a theatre or attending a university. It may well be that Egeskov discovers that using professional actors is not exclusively an advantage. Attractions that make a serious attempt to use role play usually discover that they need employees from different backgrounds and with different experience. Only in this way is it possible to assemble competence with sufficient breadth.

Everyone needs to learn to act for and with the visitors, but must also be prepared to acquire the in-depth knowledge that the activities demand. At successful attractions, where I studied training and recruiting, I was almost always told how a conscious effort had been made to hand-pick actors (or guides) with different backgrounds. The defining factors are normally their personalities and the question of whether they seem to display the enthusiasm necessary to learn and to share their knowledge.

As the examples demonstrate, the third challenge will involve successfully finding the balance between seriousness and entertainment. If the actors concentrate too heavily on the knowledge they are to communicate, the performance will be lifeless, and there will be a risk of losing contact with the audience. If, on the other hand, they focus too concertedly on amusing the visitors, then the performance will be devoid of content. The actors have to master both arts.

Many attractions make the mistake of setting unrealistic goals about the knowledge they want to communicate. They find it difficult to realise that, just like all other forms of mediation – including guided tours, exhibitions, films and books – role play has its limitations.

The special feature of role play is that it appeals to both emotions and empathy, and can make the visit a more powerful experience. You cannot teach how people lived

in 1875, but you can reveal glimpses of the age, and, through individual phrases, you can communicate the sudden and surprising discoveries – the “Aha!” experiences – that visitors will remember and talk about again and again.

Humour is one of the most important tools in this balancing act. It is humour that can overcome the visitors’ reservations; however, it has to be an understated humour, one that forms part of the historical illusion. As soon as the joke becomes a goal in itself, the magic is lost. What we in Sweden call *bondkomik* (slapstick) has no place at a serious attraction. The balancing act is therefore very tricky and demands constant practice and continuous experimentation.

The fourth challenge involves succeeding in committing the actors to ongoing development of the activities. One way to do this can be to hold evaluation meetings during and after the season. Here, the actors and the management can discuss good and bad experiences and make proposals for improvements. For the same reason, it is important to nurture a sense of community within the group, perhaps even setting up an association for the actors to belong to, an association that voluntary or semi-voluntary employees could also join.

If, over the years, Egeskov attracts more actors than the original five, a full-time, active manager will be required, someone to spend the winter planning and laying the foundations, and the summer participating and observing. A smart move would be, from the very start, to follow Conner Prairie’s example of studying and discussing the visitors’ reactions on an ongoing basis.

Role play and children

Yet another challenge has to do with Egeskov’s goal of using the role play method to make the castle and the region attractive to children (9). Here, the conditions are slightly different.

Skilled actors quickly learn to involve children in the conversation. In fact, they often turn to the children first to break the ice with the adults. Children are not as easily embarrassed as adults, and they are quick to join in the game. As a result, the adults relax and begin to take part. However, once the conversation is well underway, it can easily become interaction between the adults, passing over the children’s heads.

Children rarely have a sufficient frame of reference to keep up. As the literary role models are just as familiar to children as to adults, role play operates without problems at Astrid Lindgren’s World and other amusement parks. At museums, however, the message has to be simplified and prepared for the age group in

question. As I understand it, this is what Egeskov intends to do in the automobile museum.

Role play is often used in programmes for schools, and at Jamtli, special “voyages through time” are organised for children aged 5–12. Outside the world of museums, there are many popular role play associations for children and young people, but these are generally based around “fantasy” or sometimes the Middle Ages, which provides more space for free imagination than more recent history.

Despite these limitations, the objectives of the “Play and Learn” project can be achieved because even though the role play may not be directly prepared for children, it can become an experience for children and adults together. Conner Prairie’s conscious attempt to stimulate conversation within the families is an appropriate pattern to follow. A successful voyage through time with the parents can be an interesting and different experience that whets the appetite for historical events and casts an enchanting glow on the visit to Egeskov.

And this is what appears important in modern society. Families need activities that they can enjoy together, as well as shared topics of conversation. There are all kinds of places – such as beaches, ski slopes and amusement parks with soaring attractions – for sharing physical activities, but there are very few really large and “weighty” intellectual family attractions.

This may well be a niche that Egeskov can exploit. If Egeskov wants to follow this path, it may be worthwhile to expand the range and study all kinds of activities for children and families with young children that are to be found at open air museums with similar objectives. If the organisers are bold enough, there may even be an opportunity for a facility of Egeskov’s size, through successive initiatives, to take on a national role in the area of children and history – particularly through the school system.

However, size is not the crucial factor for successful role play. As long as there is sufficient power to ensure the quality required, role play is a method that can be used by smaller attractions, too.

1) For information about development of the method within National Parks, see Knudson-Cable–Beck 1999.

2) Anderson 1991 is a collected edition of important articles containing arguments for and against role play. A summary of the discussion is to be found in Roth 1998, p. 21.

3) For sources and literature other than those mentioned here, start by referring to Rentzhog 2007, which also contains a summary section about role play as a method.

4) For information about the establishment and development of Plimoth Plantation, see, for example, Baker 1997 and Deetz & Deetz 2000.

- 5) Yellis 1989. The same article contains an excellent summary of the practical setup of the role play. How the actors work and perceive the operation is described in a number of works including Snow 1993 and Roth 1998.
- 6) Rosenthal & Blackman-Hetrick 2002, Rentzhog 2007:356. The museum website periodically publishes articles on the same subject by authors including Ken Bubp.
- 7) Sandström 2005. The same observation has been made in other academic studies of Jamtli's operations, and is confirmed by the museum's own surveys of its visitors.
- 8) Sandström 2005, page 149.
- 9) For information about living history for children, see Roth 1998, chapter 13, and Rentzhog 2007, chapter 16. The latter work also sketches out possible business opportunities.

Literature quotes

For additional information and overview, see Rentzhog 2007 and the sources quoted in same. Valuable articles have been published over the years in *ALHFAM Proceedings, Papers from the ALHFAM annual conferences* (see the ALHFAM website).

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---> Read some examples from the book here: [Open_Air_Museums_example.pdf](#)

Studied at Uppsala University (history) and University of Oregon (economics, BA 1960). Ph.D. and docent in art history at Uppsala, 1967. Books and articles mainly on building history, cultural history, and museum theory.

Museum director 1968-2002. Active in the significant development of the Swedish regional museums, in particular as director of *Jamtli/Jämtlands läns museum* and as a strategist within their national organisation.

Has also held positions within The Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs, and has been troubleshooting director of the Nordiska Museet, developing its national role. At present he is the working chairman of a national research school at the Nordiska Museet, which he has initiated.

Sten Rentzhog has been an innovator and organiser of nationwide cooperation in fields such as open air museums, documentation, exhibitions and the adaptation of museums and heritage sites to children and families.

Other special fields of interest are role play and interpretation, education, cultural heritage tourism, and analysis of future trends.

For many years he has travelled in both North America and Europe, establishing contacts and studying the development of museums and open air museums in an international perspective.

His experience might also be of interest in other fields where the ability to see problems and opportunities in a broader time perspective may give rise to fresh ideas, for example in business development and entrepreneurial management, tourism and education.

How to make use of his experience:

- Lectures

- Advisor to committees and managerial groups
- Guest partner in planning discussions
- Analyses and recommendations
- Training
- Mentorship

Suggestion for effective use of a visit to a museum or tourist attraction.

Day 1: Analysis of the museum. Public lecture.

Day 2: Seminar with staff and/or board members. + lecture or discussion on future strategies.

Languages: preferably English or Swedish