

2013

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## Recommended Citation

Rose, Ashley (2013). Plimoth Plantation: Producing Historical Knowledge Through Performance. *Undergraduate Review*, 9, 141-144.  
Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad\\_rev/vol9/iss1/28](http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol9/iss1/28)

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# Plimoth Plantation: Producing Historical Knowledge Through Performance

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*As one of the earliest living history museums, Plimoth Plantation has recently been criticized by museum and performance theorists for maintaining its reliance on first-person role playing. It has been suggested that these practices help codify the history that Plimoth represents to visitors. The Mayflower II, Hobbomock's Homesite, and the Seventeenth Century English Village are the three distinct museum sites that Plimoth Plantation uses to help present an important period of European colonization in American history to their visitors. Each of these three sites uses interpretive methods differently to reflect their individual goals. First-person interpretation works to bring history alive for museum visitors, allowing them the opportunity to touch the crumbling walls of a replicated seventeenth century Colonist's home and to help its owner grind meal to make dinner. Third-person interpretation and guides work differently to present historical information. Unlike role-players, third-person interpreters are able to present information from our contemporary understanding of history, and this new perspective changes visitors' ideas of the past. Second-person interpretation allows visitors to become role-players and historians, as they help create their own interpretations of history, for the duration of their visit. It is a more active kind of learning which allows visitors to not only become aware of historical construction as a process, but also to participate in it. Then visitors can take the critical skills they have learned and their experiences with them as they visit other museum sites around the world.*

Museum and performance theorists have recently debated the balance of first, second and third person interpretation that should be incorporated into living history exhibits. This delicate balance must be established at Plimoth Plantation, in order to foster critical museum goers of the future. Once enough visitors have experienced historical interpretation for themselves, then they will be prepared to view other exhibits critically as well. Then even traditional museums will be free to shift their goals towards a more interactive experience. I have interviewed several staff members at the site in order to examine the effects of these emerging interpretive methods. Museum and performance theorists put pressure on Plimoth's staff and administration to abandon first-person role playing entirely. The museum does not see such a drastic change as an immediate solution. The decision to incorporate both second and third person interpretation at Plimoth Plantation will change the ways in which museum visitors think about history as they explore museum exhibits in the future because the combination of the two will

foster the understanding, in visitors, that history is a complex arrangement that is constantly being reevaluated.

Visitors are currently more responsive to the first-person interpretive model; some even pay more for guided tours. This kind of performance experience is based on limited visitor input and interaction. Incorporating third-person interpretation and second-person experiences would suit the needs of the critical museum goer that theorist Margaret Lindauer describes:

The critical museum visitor notes what objects are presented, in what ways, and for what purpose. She or he also explores what is left unspoken or kept off display. And she or he asks, who has the most to gain or the most to lose from having this information, collection, or interpretation publicly presented. (Lindauer 204)

The museum hopes to encourage visitors to approach the exhibits differently, and encourage them to interact, instead of passively observing at each of the sites. Involving visitors in the process of constructing history is something that cannot be addressed by role-players or museum guides alone. However, as museum theorists Michael H. Frisch and Dwight Pitcaithley state, their reactions are difficult to interpret accurately. “The audience, ironically enough, is perhaps the most consistently overlooked and most poorly understood element in contemporary discussions of public history and interpretive strategy” (153). There has been an obvious lack of visitor support for these new methods since they have begun including them within the various sites. Staff, visitors, and museum partners each have specific expectations for the museum to uphold and not all of them align at the moment.

Incorporating first-, second-, and third- person interpretation into all the sites would encourage visitors to become much more involved in a history that they can create together. Visitors can then gain a better understanding of how historical narratives are created and based on research. Visitors need to be made aware of the fact that historians do not simply discuss and write about facts which have already been agreed upon by other historians and cultures. This notion reinforces the idea that there is only one factual history and that any others must simply be inaccurate. History enthusiasts or descendants of English colonists are often baffled or enraged by the narrative presented at Plimoth Plantation if it varies from family stories or the narrative that they have been taught. First-person interpretation alone does not allow staff to address these questions about multiple possible narratives the way that a combination of interpretive styles would.

The Mayflower II seems to have the most clearly defined goals directing its interpretive methods. This site is unique in the fact that it employs a staff of fifty percent first-person and fifty percent third-person interpreters every day. According to Tom Leahy, one of the interpreters on the Mayflower II, the museum ultimately decided that a completely immersive experience was impossible to achieve at the Mayflower II because of its location. The Mayflower II is located in the center of a very busy port within the town of Plymouth and visitors constantly ask questions about their surroundings. Unlike the Village, their surroundings do not coincide with a seventeenth century dialogue.

I was surprised to find that the staff of the Mayflower II are not so strictly tied to the first-person interpretive model. Leahy felt that the immersive experience never truly lasts at any of the sites. Visitors bring cameras and cell phones, and are aware that they have not stepped back in time. A limitation of this is that they are expected to interact with the past, but without permission to discuss any questions which might arise from our twenty-first century perspectives. Without the distance of third-person interpretation, staff and visitors become limited in their discussion topics.

Third-person interpretation allows staff members to discuss the story of the Mayflower II as well as the original story of the Mayflower. The Mayflower II was built overseas and made a journey all its own around fifty years ago; the staff onboard are proud of that fact. If the site used first-person interpretation alone, then its story would be lost to visitors. Through the implementation of both first- and third- person interpretation, the museum’s history can be explored as well as the colonists’.

At the Mayflower II and Village, staff represent specific European sailors or colonists of the seventeenth century. This is unlike the staff at the Wampanoag Homesite, who are both in character and out of it through a combined first- and third-person interpretive style that is unique to the Homesite. Staff are stationed in replications of traditional Wampanoag homes and wear traditional clothing, but they speak from a twenty-first century perspective. While each staff member might not be of the Wampanoag tribe, they do identify themselves as Native Americans and their cultures are hardly long gone. The staff refuse to limit themselves to a seventeenth-century dialogue by role playing alone.

Through first- and third- person interpretation, the staff are able to discuss what happened after the early years at Plimoth, when the native tribe helped the Colonists survive. Bob Charlebois, a Native interpreter at the site explains, “This is the most symbolic place for two people and for two very different

reasons. One is the story of the English and of the ascendance of the English way in North America, a victory if you will, and the other is of my people, and it is a colossal Greek tragedy. If we can't tell that story here, then where else can we tell it that is so symbolic?" (Charlebois). At the Homesite, staff are able to address these issues along with modern political and racial issues which often arise. These questions often lead to higher understanding of both the Native cultures and of the visitor's own limited education. This initial confusion often sparks questions about the past and the present. Visitors are encouraged to join in many of the activities that Native staff have started for educational purposes. This also brings in a bit of performance theorist Scott Magelssen's idea of second-person interpretation. On a cold day, visitors strolling through the Homesite do not need to be told how important fire would have been to the tribe; they can experience it for themselves. The Homesite staff hope to teach visitors that there is indeed more to the story than what is explained at the Village and Mayflower II in first-person interpretation.

It seems that only the English Village shies away from this idea of varied interpretive styles, despite the museum's desire to address the limitations of a strictly first-person site. A first-person interpretive model does not encourage visitors to ask questions about the construction of history or the changes that the museum has undergone over the years. Visitors are not reminded that the historical documents that have been used in research are limited, since some documents haven't survived the centuries for researchers to work with. It also does not promote any questions or dialogue about the current state of racial or political matters, or the ways in which these issues would have severely impacted the events of the seventeenth century.

The most recent attempt to change this has been to place a third-person interpreter in a house at the very edge of the Village. The house was chosen because it was the earliest reproduction of a cottage that the museum has constructed, which is still standing. With a third-person interpreter in this house, visitors often ask why it looks different than the other homes that they visited. For a third-person interpreter, this sparks questions about the building processes and the ways in which the museum's ideas about history have changed over the years. A first-person interpreter would have been forced to avoid the question, so as not to break character. This is a lost opportunity to discuss the construction of history. However, visitors are told upon entering the house, that for a brief time, they have re-entered the twenty-first century, implying to visitors that their immersive experience will continue once they leave the staff member. The visitors' opportunity to ask questions which are unrelated to Plimoth's historical narrative is limited by the walls of the unique cottage.

Awareness of the different materials used to build these homes could create an important concept in the minds of visitors. Learning from a twenty-first century staff member that the original Village was built out of concrete, simply because the materials were cheaper and the goal at the time was only to *look* like a seventeenth-century home, changes the visitors' views concerning museums as historical authorities. When a third-person interpreter openly admits that the museum she works for has had to make interpretive and administrative changes over the years, visitors begin to rethink their earlier assumptions about an unchanging historical narrative. The opportunity to learn and explore a vast and conflicted history is presented to visitors, along with the chance to learn about the museum's shifting goals as time has passed.

However, only a few visitors took the time to speak with the staff member during my visits. A large number of visitors struggled to come up with a question upon entering, usually one about history after 1627 or why the building looked different, and then the visitors thanked her and left. Some thanked her and left without a single question. Clearly, the third-person interpretive model, alone, is not sufficient to encourage museum goers to think critically about history's construction.

Reimagining the Village as an interactive experience which is focused on *using* the interpreters' skills rather than relying on them to present a story could have the effect that critics are looking for. If the goal of first-person interpretation is to create situations where visitors can meet and discuss racial politics, the seventeenth-century economy and the daily issues that the colonists faced, then why not expand on this idea through second-person interpretation? These issues are relevant to a modern audience. Present visitors with the opportunity to make choices and discuss their opinions with staff members, whether or not they might have been historically accurate opinions. Second-person interpretation gives visitors and staff the chance to explore other possible narratives through performance and experiential learning. The goals of first-person interpretation would remain, allowing the museum to keep their financial draw, but there would be a significant expansion of these ideas. Simply expecting interpreters to present information and historical narratives to visitors reduces the interpreters' abilities to teach through any higher order of learning. Combining their first-person interpretive skills with second-person interactive methods could create a very productive environment where visitors participate and use the staff as resources to help create history.

Second-person interpretation creates a place where accurate historical information is not the goal. Instead the goal is for visitors to learn by doing. Racial and social issues can

be addressed in real time and with immediate reactions or consequences for visitor-performers. Visitors will be considering why they chose to behave differently than the historical figures they are exploring, and how history might have turned out differently if this hadn't been the case. Primary documents (copies, of course) could be provided to visitors and they could be allowed to interact with interpreters. They could write their own versions of history and learn the way historians do, by piecing together the puzzle of documents, thereby gaining a better understanding of the construction of history. The focus could be on what this modern interaction teaches them about what might have happened in the past. This kind of learning helps prepare visitors to change their misconceptions about where history comes from and who decides what is included in it. Visitors will eventually embrace the notion that there are many ways of interpreting history, if they continue to have positive and educational experiences while practicing that theory first-hand.

Starting at the Village will be crucial. Plimoth's two other sites have successfully included different methods of interpretation, making the shift to include second-person rather simple. To maintain an entirely first-person interpretive experience at the Village is to sacrifice the changes and goals that the museum hopes to emphasize in the future. Visitor involvement is the key, as it has always been at Plimoth Plantation, but presenting an accurate historical narrative must no longer be the only means of involving visitors. Visitors should be encouraged to become active participants, rather than active audience members while at the museum.

Thanks to visitors' suggestions, critical analyses and staff input, Plimoth Plantation has decided that a first-person interpretive Village does not suffice to support a clearer understanding of how history is created. A combination of first, second, and third person interpretation that emphasizes visitor involvement will help the museum take the first steps to fostering critical museum goers, who will then seek out intellectually challenging exhibits and interactive programs. If visitors are not yet receptive to these new concepts of history or these interactive exhibits then the museum's next important step is to show them how multifaceted history can be, and how their input can be both enjoyable and useful. The environment described here, where second- and third- person interpretation will emphasize, not only, events found within history books, but also the events left out of history books, will only be successful if the visitors and staff work together to create it.

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