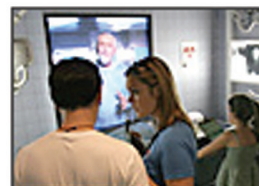




Museum of Science
Boston: A participant
in 'CSI: The
Experience' studies
a simulated crime
scene.

NICOLE HILL



AT SOME MUSEUMS, YOU'RE NOW EXHIBIT A

To draw fresh crowds, installations offer hands-on interactivity that turns visitors into spies or CSI investigators.

By Teresa Méndez | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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Washington, D.C. - Our entry point is a bus depot. But first we must figure out how to get in. The phrase, "All is not what it seems," runs through the International Spy Museum here as a sort of informal mantra. It certainly applies to the act of opening the door to enter "Operation Spy," the five-year-old museum's newest exhibit.

Passports in hand, we do finally pass into fictitious Khandar, designed to be ambiguous in origin: The city could be somewhere in the Middle East or North Africa or Asia. The smell of spices wafts through the air as we choose code names. Our group of spies select Falcon, Sniper, Snake, Queen Bee, and Cowboy. Being a reporter, I chose transparency as my cover and opt for the moniker Scoop. Our guide is a local actor.

Before long, we've climbed into a freight elevator, a motion simulator that creates the effect of a multistory drop. As "Operation Spy" continues, we'll crowd into the back of a surveillance van that brakes hard and bumps convincingly. During the next hour, our group of six will also work together to disarm surveillance cameras, crack a safe, and, ultimately, try to prevent a device that triggers a nuclear weapon from falling into the wrong hands. Not every team is successful.

In the era of movies with elaborate special effects and video games with graphics that cause players to marvel at the feeling of being inside the game, it's no wonder museums are scrambling to keep up. For many, the answer to a more sophisticated audience and one with, perhaps, a shorter attention span is interactivity and immersion. Science and children's museums have long trafficked in hands-on, sensory experiences. Now, with improved technology, the experiential exhibit is reaching new heights and turning up in a variety of venues.



Gumshoes: At the Museum of Science in Boston, participants dig in to 'CSI: The Experience.'
NICOLE HILL



After hiccups that led to a three-month delay the downside of high tech Operation Spy opened in September. This month, CSI: The Experience, spun off the popular CBS crime-drama franchise, traveled to the Boston Museum of Science as part of a nationwide tour. Even the new Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Ill., promises immersive exhibits," holograms, and actors in place of the traditional presidential museum dioramas.

"Based on anecdotal evidence, interactivity is a growing trend in the museum community," says Jason Hall of the American Association of Museums. While no formal studies have been done, he observes that such exhibits are geared toward a young generation that is much more tech savvy. If you don't want those folks zoning out, you better attune yourself to get in their head," he says.

Or, get them into the exhibit. Matt DuPlessie, president of 5 Wits, Inc., the company behind Boston's Tomb, which redefined the immersive experience when it opened in 2004, likens what he's trying to create to the feeling of being inside a Hollywood movie.

In the case of Tomb, that movie might be an Indiana Jones" adventure. But instead of watching Indie act out his exploits on screen, visitors play the role of archaeologists in ancient Egypt, attempting to rediscover lost artifacts.

Interest in interactive displays has been so great that Mr. DuPlessie, who was also involved in the creation of Operation Spy, recently started a company to conceptualize and create immersive installations for other museums.

"There is a culture in America today of aspiration, says DuPlessie. At this point, adults had video games when they were kids, and they like the experience of being able to twiddle their thumbs and be the hero. This lets them actually do that. Only it's not simulated. It's real.

Attractions such as Tomb or the International Spy Museum are often explicit about their mission to entertain, to place a visitor inside a popular movie or television show. But marrying pop culture and education can be more complicated for a science museum.

At CSI: The Experience, that means capitalizing on the way TV has made forensic science sexy, but without losing the instructive component. Museumgoers first gather in a room where they are briefed over video by Gil Grissom (William Petersen), the fictional head investigator on the CSI television show, along with Ron Singer, an actual forensic scientist. They then split off to solve one of three crime-scene scenarios.

"The challenge is to make sure you don't cross that line from education and artifacts to entertainment, says Geoffrey Curley, manager of temporary exhibits at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, which hosted the CSI exhibit before it traveled to Boston. That's the fine line that museums are going to be walking down: What's meant for a museum, and what's meant for an amusement park.

In Boston, the Museum of Science has added volunteers who give further explanations and answer questions about fingerprinting, forensic anthropology, and DNA evidence.

"Operation Spy is more unabashed in placing the visitor inside the narrative – in this case a scenario based loosely on the story of A.Q. Khan. Considered the father of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, Khan was caught selling nuclear secrets to other countries.

After our hour is up, a U.S. intelligence director informs our group by video that we've scored a 3 out of 5. We're not sure what we should have done differently for a better outcome. But Cowboy, aka. Austin Campbell, visiting from Memphis with his parents, is satisfied. It was better than I was expecting, he says. It looked real. It felt like you were a spy."