

Voices of Doom: When Colleagues Predict Disaster For Your New Exhibit

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Introduction

Janet Kamien

My name is Janet Kamien, and I was the Director of Exhibits at The Field Museum in Chicago. I was also the principal developer on the exhibit *Life Over Time*, which we'll discuss later. Eric Gyllenhaal was also a primary developer on this project and did most of the research discussed in this paper. Jeff Hayward, Director of People, Places & Design Research, was our visitor researcher and evaluation advisor. We each have our own viewpoints on this topic, so we'll identify our voices in the body of this text. This text also maintains the informal tone of the conference presentation, and the interactive nature of the middle of our program.

Voices of Doom are the predictions of disaster that echo in the heads of designers and developers as they go about the business of creating exhibitions. You have all no doubt heard them, for they are hard to miss: sometimes they are speaking in your own head. They speak of safety hazards, liability suits, ADA issues, rampaging vandals, claustrophobics, hysterical parents, maintenance nightmares, exhibit elements that are too scary, too forthright, too simplistic, too high-toned, too glitzy, or too provocative, and of the front-step picketers of various stripes: creationists, specific ethnic groups, skinheads, animal rights groups, veteran's groups, and the occasional anti-pornographer. We also all know that the voices are sometimes right. Just ask the folks at Air and Space.

The problem of course is how to tell the difference between the insightful and the merely paranoid. For if we can't, we may on the one hand allow our hubris to carry us to disaster, or on the other, we can create safe, boring exhibits guaranteed to neither offend nor delight anyone.

My closest brush with this dilemma occurred not with the exhibit we will mainly discuss today, but with an exhibit from ten years ago at The Children's Museum in Boston. It was in a project called Endings: an Exhibit about Death and Loss (funded by the Massachusetts Council for the Humanities). Though admittedly a tricky subject, I had no notion of how complicated and insistent Voice of Doom Radio could become until tackling this. Worried voices among the staff and board murmured about the choice of subject matter: Wasn't this really a science museum issue? Couldn't it be brought up in a gentler way as fragments embedded in other exhibit topics? A federal funder who had originally encouraged a proposal on the subject called to say that they couldn't send it for review: it was about DEATH! "Well, yes," we said. "We told you that." They replied that they had been thinking more in terms of Victorian death, or death in a remoter location, perhaps the Amazon?

As the institution was committed, and by this time, so was I, we forged ahead in spite of all this, and things went pretty well until the collections list appeared. Now, each object was the subject of scrutiny and there wasn't a single one that didn't put someone's teeth firmly on edge. The pictures of the Nepalese cremation were fine with one person, but jars of embalming fluid? That was fine with another, but the video segment of actors pretending to die had to go. No, said another, that was great, but the time-lapse decomposing mouse from *Nova* was horrifying. Meanwhile, various members of the security staff announced that they wouldn't work the "graveyard" shift with a coffin in the building, and a higher-up explained that she'd support the coffin staying, but it would of course have to be displayed closed. So that 9-year-olds could fantasize about who might be in there? I don't think so. The response of the housekeeping staff was to quietly stock up on that brown stuff you use to clean up vomit.

The best and worst was yet to come. We opened an intact exhibit that people visited, used well, and sometimes shed a few tears in. No one broke down. No one threw up. As Dr. Marty Norman, my bulwark from the children's psychology community, had assured me, the emotions everyone was afraid might be unleashed by a half-hour in such an exhibit were sometimes never uncorked, even through months and years of therapy. The Voices of Doom within the institution could not have been more wrong. The external Voices of Doom sang on for some time, however.

The chief proponent was the television news program, *Nightline*. Smelling a controversy, they sent a team to interview us and visitors and members of the local therapeutic community, hoping to nail us on national TV. They kept us on

tenterhooks into the night searching for a shrink to debate us. They never found one, and instead ran authors of books about grieving and loss against footage from the museum.

The most heart-wrenching consequences for me, however, were the ten or so letters I received as a result of the brief Associated Press item that was picked up all over the country. It was hate mail, nasty, personal and vitriolic. I somehow answered each one, and then went directly to that same therapist for an hour of comfort.

This is an extreme example, but one that illustrates the dangers of the Voice of Doom. We can shy away completely from an important and provocative subject matter, or we can dilute it so that no one will even know we are trying to deal with it. Although we used many of the strategies the panel will speak about to sort out the insightful from the merely paranoid, and to achieve some modicum of buy-in throughout the institution, this was still often an uphill battle. In this case, one of the most useful weapons in the good fight arsenal was missing: an ongoing evaluation strategy. In the next part of our discussion, this fortunately won't be missing.

Eric Gyllenhaal

If you don't know The Field Museum, let me just say that it's a huge natural history museum, with acres of exhibit space, in downtown Chicago, Illinois. The public knows us as the big, dark, dusty place with dinosaurs, mummies, and Indians—or, as my nephews say, “the dead zoo.” We who work here know it's a whole lot more—acres of new exhibits, scores of scientists, millions of research specimens that the public never sees, and hundreds of employees who are, to a large extent, isolated in their own departments, with little interaction with those of us who build exhibits.

Here are some things you ought to know about *Life Over Time*, the exhibit we'll be talking about during the middle part of this program:

- It's got dinosaurs and lots of other fossils, but it's really an exhibit about evolution.
- It's huge—23,000 square feet, which is half an acre—it fills three exhibit halls.
- It's full of stuff! There are more than 50 mounted skeletons, almost a thousand specimens in all, plus 67 flappers, 150 interactives, 9 video newscasts, 4 theaters, 7 computer games, 12 live exhibits, and almost 350 label panels of various sizes.

- It's arranged as a timeline beginning with the earliest life—it's a 3.8 billion-year, one-way trip through time. You don't see the first dinosaur skeleton until you've walked through 8,000 square feet of exhibits on life before the dinosaurs. Then there's another 7,000 square feet about life after dinosaurs, mammals (including humans), and the Ice Age.
- There is a gate at the beginning. You pay a buck or two per person to get in.
- Once you're in the exhibit, there are no restrooms, no food, and only one drinking fountain. The median visit is about an hour long.
- *Life Over Time* opened in two phases—the first two halls, from the beginning of time through the end of dinosaurs, opened 13 months ago, in June of 1994. The last hall, life after dinosaurs, opened last November.

About six months before the first phase opened, we started hearing staff members from other departments telling each other and sometimes even telling us about all the problems that this huge exhibit was going to cause. I had heard similar voices before when I worked at the Children's Museum in Indianapolis, and, as she's told you, Janet also had heard the "Voice of Doom Radio" before. Janet and I decided that, this time, we wanted to do something to meet the Voice of Doom Radio head-on. We decided to write down every prediction of disaster that we heard from the Voices of Doom, then call the Voices to account once the exhibit opened. As first, we kept fairly quiet about our Voice of Doom project—we collected 40 predictions without anyone knowing what we were doing. About a month before opening, we started *soliciting* predictions from Field Museum staff. In all, we wound up with a hundred Voice of Doom predictions about *Life Over Time*—and with eight to fourteen months of experience with the opened exhibit, we can now reveal how these Voice of Doom predictions turned out.

Of course, we started out thinking that the Voices of Doom were other people in other departments, and hoping that the Voices would have to eat their words. As it turned out, the primary producers of Voice of Doom predictions were members of the Exhibits Department—including the very people who were developing, designing, and building *Life Over Time*! We all had to eat many of our words in the end—but not all of them.

Jeff Hayward

When these exhibit developers started talking about Voices of Doom, I was sure that there was going to be an evaluator in here somewhere. Who better to shower tales of doom on the exhibit team, and to toss cold water on their

fantasies about creating an effective educational experience? Who better than an evaluator! (Just kidding.)

It's been fun to work with this team, because they never turned away from tough issues, and because they've been open-minded enough to listen to my questions and concerns (naive as they may have been), and because they've taken a serious interest in their visitors—from the beginning of their planning process. At least 4 years before opening, the team was serious about knowing their audience, and they're *still* interested.

There has been an extensive evaluation process for this exhibit. But this session is just about one part of it: the part of the summative evaluation that describes visitor experience in the completed exhibit. There were also three years of two other kinds of evaluation activities: the formative evaluation, and facilitated discussions about issues. Sometimes the facilitated discussions helped us decide whether to do a formative study or not, and sometimes they were just helpful in clarifying assumptions and expectations. There were also 10 formative studies on topics such as: expectations about dinosaurs, geologic time, gambling analogies, label annotations, branching and spindle diagrams, and ice age concepts. The summative evaluation used a two-phased, multi-season, multi-method approach, involving tracking, behavioral mapping, exit interviews, and 6-month follow-up contacts. We're not done with it yet. The results we'll talk about today are a few bits of the evaluation results, selected to show how predictions about success or failure often raise key issues that need to be addressed.

Actually, the whole evaluation process began by responding to an early Voice of Doom. Janet and others on the exhibit team had just visited other exhibits about similar subjects (at California Academy of Science, the National Museum of Natural History, etc.), and other exhibit planners gave her this advice: You can't do it all; you can't do an exhibit about 'process' as well as the historical 'evidence.' Don't tackle evolution *and* the chronological history *and* the scientific principles of change. Just do dinosaurs and dragonflies and leave well-enough alone; or go out on a limb and do evolution, and put your job on the line. Basically, a Voice of Doom. You can't do it. Don't try. Well, if you know Janet . . . a Voice of Doom just makes the challenge more interesting.

So this is an exhibit team that took risks, that tried to do a lot, and we should now turn to look at what the exhibition did accomplish.

Examples of the Voices of Doom

Eric Gyllenhaal

The middle part of our Visitor Studies Conference presentation was interactive—we asked the audience to take the Voice of Doom quiz and try to second-guess the Voices that we had heard during the development, design, and production of *Life Over Time*. The next section of this paper challenges you, the reader, to take the Voice of Doom quiz. First we'll introduce and then quote a Voice of Doom prediction, then you can record your guess about what actually happened once the exhibit opened. Just as we did during the VSA conference, we'll tell you how things actually turned out *before* moving on to the next prediction—and we'll tell you how the conference audience did on that question. Most of the answers to the Voice of Doom quiz are taken from the summative evaluation of *Life Over Time* (available from Eric Gyllenhaal). At the end of the quiz, you can compare your performance with the conference audience's results. (Thirty-one of the 40 or so audience members turned in their quiz sheets at the end of the program. Eighty percent of the audience had experience in museums, averaging 10 years duration. Twenty-three percent of the audience had experience as evaluators, averaging 4 years in duration.)

You might ask why are we presenting this program at a Visitor Studies conference? It turns out that two-thirds of the Voice of Doom predictions said something about visitor behavior in the exhibit! And, interestingly, 90% of those predictions said negative things about visitors—they told about all the awful things that visitors would do once we turned them loose in the exhibit. They would tear it up, injure themselves, walk right through without stopping and, in the end, not learn a damn thing. And that was the considered opinion of museum professionals with an aggregate experience of hundreds of years.

We will start with two predictions that should be right up the alley of a Visitor Studies professional—predictions about how visitors will spend their time in the exhibit.

Prediction 1—Visitors will race to the dinosaurs and not care about the first exhibit hall about life before the dinosaurs. All types of museum staff believed this would happen. The prediction, and thus your answer, has two parts:

- 1a. Did visitors race to the dinosaurs? ____Yes ____No
- 1b. Did visitors care about the first exhibit hall? ____Yes ____No

Prediction 2—Visitors will spend lots of time in the first two halls and be so tired that they'll blow off the last exhibit hall. This was an operating assumption

made by developers as we planned the Life After Dinosaurs hall. Did prediction 2 come true? ___ Yes ___ No

What really happened (Predictions 1 and 2): Where did visitors spend their time in *Life Over Time*? Figure 5.1 looks like the museum fatigue curves that we've seen in many exhibits—a lot of time in the first hall, less time in the second hall, and even less time in the third hall. So, did visitors race to the dinosaurs? No, not exactly. Did they “blow off” the third hall? Well, kind of—a lot of people walked through and sampled, and in some sections of life after dinosaurs, less than half of the visitors stopped to look at anything—the developers who worked on those sections felt blown off! However, it turns out that just walking through the last hall didn't mean that visitors failed to appreciate the exhibits there. There are many possible interpretations of Figure 5.2, but if “blowing it off” means visitors didn't care about the third hall, then that turns out not to have happened. And, although visitors didn't enjoy the first hall as much as they enjoyed dinosaurs, Figure 5.2 doesn't look like an outright rejection of life *before* the dinosaurs. So question 1a should be answered “no,” and question 1b should be answered “yes”—which means that Prediction 1, as a whole, proved false. Since this panel is dominated by developers, we'll say that Prediction 2 came true, at least in terms of how visitors spent their time. (Sixty-one percent of the conference audience were correct on question 1a; 81% were correct on 1b; and 58% were correct on Prediction 2.)

Measuring learning is much harder than counting or timing visitors, but it's very important to exhibit developers, nonetheless. And like everyone else, developers have a fear of failure:

Prediction 3—People won't learn a damn thing about evolution! A number of nervous developers, including Janet Kamien, made this prediction about their own exhibit! We reworded the prediction for the quiz:

In exit interviews, what percentage of adults said that the main idea of the exhibit was to teach evolution? a. 10% b. 20% c. 35% d. 50% e. 75%

What really happened: Here are some evaluation results that most closely address that issue. Asked in exit interviews about the main idea of the exhibit, people gave two common answers: One, to teach about evolution, and two, to show the history of life on Earth. Only 15% of adult visitors thought that the main idea of the exhibit was dinosaurs. Janet said to Jeff when we started this evaluation process, we're not going to use the “E” word, evolution, all the way through the planning process, and it's not going to be prominent as part of the title, but that's what the exhibit is really about. Visitors got that message—half of them (answer “d”) said the main idea was to teach about evolution. (Only

10% of the conference audience were correct in guessing “d” on this prediction. Forty percent of the conference audience guessed “b,” and 30% guessed “c.”)

Of course, when you do an exhibit about evolution, you have some other nagging worries: What about those fundamentalist Christian creationists? Here’s a prediction attributed to the paleontology curators:

Prediction 4—The creationists will be allowed to take over the world! Despite last November’s elections, that hasn’t happened yet, so we changed the prediction on the quiz sheet to,

“Creationists will picket the museum!” Did that come true? ___Yes
___No

What really happened: As 77% of the conference audience correctly guessed, creationists didn’t picket The Field Museum. Did *all* creationists stay away from the museum because they didn’t want to see an exhibit that put facts about evolution in their face? No, the talkback boards were full of statements about people’s belief in God as creator of all things. But how many visitors would we actually define as creationist? We asked three questions to triangulate onto this. One was, “Do you believe in the facts of evolution?” The next one was, “Do you believe in God?” And finally, “Do you believe humans are descended from animals?” About 14% of the sample could be defined as somewhat creationist by this measure (answering “no” or “not sure” to the question about evolution). Only 8% of the sample appeared to have strong creationist beliefs (often expressed when answering open-ended questions about the exhibit). In fact, 82% of adult visitors said they believed in the facts of evolution, while 88% said they believed in God, and only 62% said they believed humans descended from animals.

One of the recurring themes in Voice-of-Doom predictions about visitors is that they just cannot be trusted! They will run, mess up, mangle, steal, and otherwise misbehave in the exhibit, sometimes to the point where they may actually destroy themselves, as well as the exhibit! Let’s see what happened with some of these predictions. One of the most popular exhibits in the life after dinosaurs hall is a walk-in dwelling made of mammoth bones—the Voice of Doom had lots of things to say about that!

Prediction 5—The mammoth bone hut will be a nightmare with kids climbing to the top, then falling through the skin-covered hole. We’ll break that up into two questions:

5a. Did kids climb on the hut? ___Yes ___No

5b. Did kids injure themselves climbing on the hut? ___Yes ___No

What really happened: Well, of course, some kids climbed part-way up the hut every day—kids are born to climb! But it's pretty much self-policing—the kids back off, or a parent or volunteer stops them before they get to the top. No one has injured themselves, so far. Our security department originally planned to put an alarm system on the hut, but after 8 months, they still haven't gotten around to it. Climbing happens, but apparently security staff consider it less of a problem than, say, illegal parking in the lots. (Eighty-four percent of the conference audience correctly guessed "yes" on question 5a, and a whopping 97% correctly guessed "no" on question 5b!)

Now let's investigate visitor honesty. In the first exhibit hall, we put a drawer with five loose, fist-sized pieces of bone that visitors could pick up to see just how heavy a fossilized bone is. Let's hear what the Voices of Doom had to say about that:

Prediction 6—The loose bones in the drawer will disappear. . .

- a. during the first event
- b. before opening day
- c. within two weeks after opening day
- d. less than two months after opening day

What really happened: We heard the first three choices, in chronological order, as the opening events unfolded. *No one* predicted that it would be two months before *one* bone, a turkey bone that wasn't even a fossil, disappeared. We replaced it with a second turkey bone, which disappeared within a month, so we replaced it with a fossil. Today, more than a year after opening, the five fossil bones are still there. Why? Maybe the fossils are too ugly to steal, but there are many other loose objects in *Life Over Time*, and most have an exhibit-life of weeks, months—or perhaps even years. (58% of the conference audience guessed correctly.)

Field Museum visitors are pretty honest! But are they destructive of property? One of our major investments in *Life Over Time* was to build a walk-through Coal Age swamp forest. There are no glass or wire barriers separating visitors from the plants (just fallen logs and a little real water to slow them down). If they wanted to, they could walk off the path, climb the trees, take souvenirs, carve their initials—almost anything. So the Voices of Doom spoke loud and clear:

Prediction 7—They're going to rip the Coal Forest to shreds! Since we don't know how to measure "shreds" objectively, we waited until three months after opening and asked a group of 20 members of the Chicago Museum

Exhibitors Group to rate Coal Forest damage on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 the worst). Check what you think their mean rating was:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

What really happened: Damage was done to the forest, but “ripped to shreds” seemed to be a little extreme! The mean rating by our panel of Chicago area professionals was a 3, and an amazing 44% of the conference audience guessed correctly on the question! (Another 40% guessed 2 or 4). The patterns of Coal Forest damage are similar to what you see along a nature trail in a real woods—lots of damage right next to the trail, especially at places where people congregate, like near the logs that visitors can sit on. Unlike in real nature, however, almost no one leaves the path—just a few little kids who don’t know any better. Our overall impression is that most of the damage is done inadvertently, when people slip off logs or touch plants that should have been built of more sturdy materials.

Life Over Time developers consider one of the most attractive elements of the dinosaur hall to be the fact that big, huge skeletons are right out in the open, with just a low fence between visitors and the bones. No barbed wire, no glass walls—and no alarms. Well, the Voices of Doom *were* alarmed:

Prediction 8—They’ll jump the fences and attack the dinosaur skeletons! The paleontologists on staff were particularly panicked about this, but many others were concerned, as well. The quiz question was split into two parts:

8a. Did visitors jump the fences? Yes No

8b. Did visitors attack the dinosaur skeletons? Yes No

What really happened: We have a trick answer to 8a. As far as we have been able to discover, the only “theys” who have gone past the fences have been little kids who crawl *under* the fence! And parents, grandparents, gleeful older sisters, or, as a last line of defense, museum volunteers stop them before they can actually “attack” anything. This is another case where we’ve planned alarms, but nothing has ever actually been installed—it’s not a big problem. (65% of the audience was correct on question 8a, and 97% were correct on 8b.)

Now let’s look at an interactive with some real potential for damaging visitors’ fingers:

Prediction 9—Big brothers will put little brothers’ fingers in the Dimetrodon jaw and close it.

Yes, it happened No, it did not happen

What really happened: Visitors put their own and other people's fingers in the *Dimetrodon* jaw all the time! It's not just big brothers—it's sisters, friends, parents, and almost every other pairing imaginable. But, so far we haven't had anyone actually hurt! That leads us to a generality that Janet kept insisting was true during exhibit development, but we didn't quite believe her. Eric now calls it Kamien's Law: "If an interactive *looks* dangerous, it probably isn't!" The *Dimetrodon* jaw looks dangerous, so, even though people put fingers in it, they still treat it with enough respect that no one has been hurt yet. In contrast, a few feet away are some of the "flapper"-style labels on rotating wooden drums that look harmless, but can pinch fingers that get caught the wrong way. The drums can and do bloody children's fingers precisely because they look harmless. That suggests a corollary to Kamien's Law: "Things that don't look dangerous sometimes are!" (71% of the audience guessed correctly on question 9.)

We have to confess, there *are* Voices of Reason at The Field Museum, even outside the Exhibits Department. Here's something we heard from a long-time member of the Museum's Education Department:

Prediction 10—Visitors will love this exhibit and will be less aware of problems than we are! Again this is a two-part question:

10a. Did visitors love the exhibit? Yes No

10b. Were visitors less aware of problems than we were?

Yes No

What really happened: Of course, we didn't do a survey that said, "Don't you love this exhibit?" But we did ask them, "Did you find anything that was fun here?" and 79% said yes, they did, and gave an example. 66% said they found something that amazed them, 85% said it was worth the extra charge, and 65% of local metropolitan visitors said they intend to come back. So I think it's pretty fair to conclude that visitors *do* love this exhibit. Are they less aware of problems than we are? When we asked visitors if there was anything disappointing, 43% said yes. Of these, 12% said it was hot and crowded—and yes, there were lots of people and the air conditioning didn't always work that well. Six percent said there weren't enough dinosaurs. Five percent said it was too complicated or there was too much information, especially for kids. Three percent couldn't hear the audio. Two percent objected to the section on DNA and mutations, 2% said they were disappointed because they disagreed with evolution theory, and 2% said it was boring for kids, especially the beginning. For comparison, when Eric polled museum staff and volunteers about problems with *Life Over Time* (as part of planning from revisions), he came up with more than 20 pages of suggestions! So, sure, there were some visitors who were disappointed with some aspects of *Life Over Time*, but we would have to say that

most of them were less aware of problems than we were. So both parts of Prediction 10 were true. (Ninety-three percent of the audience guessed correctly on question 10a, and 81% were correct on question 10b.)

For those readers who are keeping score, the mean score achieved by the Visitor Studies Conference participants was 70%. The highest score was 93%, and the lowest score was 50%.

Analysis of the Voices of Doom

Eric Gyllenhaal

We could go on and on with Voice of Doom results, but, instead, let me give some summary statistics:

- Almost 70% of the 100 Voices of Doom predictions had at least a grain of truth in them—they don't necessarily happen all the time, and they aren't necessarily problems when they do happen, but things stated in the predictions did occur. About 30% of the predictions have not happened even once, at least not the ways in which the Voices phrased them. Most of these failed predictions fall into two major classes:
- Predictions that were phrased as absolutes: "All volunteers will have headaches," "All kids will run on the ramp," or "People will purposefully break all specimens in the exhibit." For the Voices of Doom, absolutes are always wrong!
- Predictions that show a *really* low opinion of our visitors (thinking they were really stupid, really destructive, or really dishonest). Our visitors are actually pretty smart, not very destructive, and very honest!
- Many of the Voice of Doom predictions that did come true weren't major problems—just because kids climb or run a little, it's not the end of the world. Problems come in all sizes, but most are not disasters. The Voices of Doom are, almost by definition, alarmist—just because they can predict something will happen doesn't mean there is cause for major concern.

Janet Kamien

Now let's talk in more general terms about the Voices of Doom. Just who are they, and why do they speak so loudly and persistently, at so many different institutions? The Voices of Doom come in many flavors. Their origin may or may not predict their utility.

Experience. In the Children's Museum example, two women on our board had the horrifying experience of losing a child, and both had other children to whom they had to explain the loss, and then with whom they had to live through the loss. Interestingly, one of these women was our greatest supporter, the other

our greatest opponent. I think similarly, in *Life Over Time*, some of the scientific staff most spooked by the threat of creationism were people who had seen the intellectual carnage firsthand. The hate mail I spoke of earlier was from the religious right, and I felt unafraid of taking them on again.

And then there is the more utilitarian-based experience. "We tried this before here and it didn't work." Or, "We tried that at the last place I worked and it didn't work." Or, at its simplest: "We don't do that at The Field Museum." These are hard words to deal with. Obviously, we all need to trust and learn from our experiences. The trick is to figure out when such commentary is just an obstacle.

Fear. What I mean by this is the polar opposite of experience: "We've never done anything like this before, and I don't know what will happen." This voice speaks equally inside the developer's head and outside it, and feeds on our inner anxieties about our own skills and competence.

Disenfranchisement. "Oh, it's *those* people again doing something lunatic. They don't know or care how hard their glorious exhibit is going to make my job." At the gigantic Field Museum, it's easy to feel (and be) disenfranchised, but it's interesting to note that this feeling played a big role at the warm, fuzzy, and family-like Children's Museum also. Creating a sense of "We're all in this together" isn't easy.

Advocacy. This is related to disenfranchisement, and sometimes trying to cure one seems to open the door to what may feel like misguided advocacy. This is, after all, their job: to make sure the visitors are safe, to make sure visitors come in the first place, to make sure the press does well by us, to assure scientific accuracy, to maintain the exhibit, and to clean up the vomit. If my job is security, that may be the only thing I see when I look at an exhibit, and right now I'm looking at a hut made of bones that I could imagine some kid climbing up and falling off. That's my job, I'm proud of it, and who are they going to blame if something does happen? You, for putting it up, or me, for not insisting it be safe?

Envy. This is also related to disenfranchisement. There are lots of totally necessary and totally unglamorous (to say nothing of low-paid) jobs in our institutions. Exhibit projects often get big slugs of money, hire additional staff, and get resources other departments in the institution may only dream about. Exhibit developers get their names and pictures in the paper, and especially at bigger institutions may not have to be engaged in the day-to-day slough of running and maintaining the thing after the hoopla is over. (Of course, they may also be unemployed at that point.)

All of these issues must be taken into consideration and somehow dealt with in sorting through the Voices of Doom.

Conclusions

Jeff Hayward

My first and most important conclusion: *have* an evaluation process. Don't wait until the end to use evaluation to point a finger or take a bow.

Concept planning studies ("front end") and formative evaluations are helpful in dealing with Voices of Doom. They help by raising questions early, and seeking information to find out not only whether there's likely to be a problem, but also what some of your alternatives might be in addressing that problem.

Don't shy away from predictions, but don't let them run the show either. Predictions are one way that you or your colleagues express their worries, their disagreements, and their thoughts about an ambiguous future. What's the alternative—people sitting around like Cheshire cats, smiling at each other but wondering if there's anything behind the smile? Let's face it: we *need* Voices of Doom to make sure we're doing something worthwhile. It seems to me that if there are no Voices, there's probably little or no risk, and that might mean little or no impact. But Voices of Doom—theirs, or your own—need to be put in a context. And that's one of the functions of evaluation in my opinion.

And just to give you a sense of the context for the Voices that we talked about today, I'd like to quote the main conclusion from the evaluation process so far:

Life Over Time tackles a tough subject—one which faces visitor misconceptions, differences in belief systems, and complex topics which are superficially familiar but not really understood—and it has provided a visitor experience which is engaging and effective. Beyond the specific information and concepts that people pick up, it gives people a sense of awe and wonder, and leads them to think about the place of humans in the history of life.

Eric Gyllenhaal

Here are some ways of managing and coping with this phenomenon at your own institutions.

Be self-conscious about the Voices of Doom phenomenon. When you or your team members feel a prediction coming on, say it out loud—identify it as a Voice of Doom to keep it in its proper place—then talk it out so you can decide what to do about it.

Talk to the so-called "little" people. Talk to the people who can't leave their stations to come to meetings—security guards, visitor services, volunteers in the exhibit halls, weekend staff. These folks represent the "not-so-silent majority" among the Voices of Doom. Talk to them before, during, and after the

opening. Carry a little notebook and write down what *they* say—they might be right, and at least it shows you are paying attention.

But also, talk back. Tell stories about the *positive* things that visitors do—and point out some of the negative things that aren't happening. I think that negative feelings about visitors are generated as staff tell and re-tell stories about the uncommon visitor behaviors—and bad news about visitors, the things they do wrong. And with thousands of visitors every day, there are bound to be a few “bad” stories every week. Staff feelings and beliefs about visitors are probably poisoned by these negative stories. So, let the Voices of Doom know how their predictions really panned out—but without nailing them to the wall by pointing out that *they* made the predictions.

Sometimes it pays to listen. We did listen to the Voices of Doom as we developed *Life Over Time*, and after we opened it, as well. Sometimes we listened by choice, sometimes because external forces were applied. Right now, we are in the revisions stage of *Life Over Time*, and a large part of that process is driven by comments from staff members and volunteers—the same people who spoke as Voices of Doom before the exhibit opened, but who now are making observations, not just predictions. I feel we've harnessed the Voices of Doom for practical and valuable purposes.

And above all, don't believe the nasty things that the Voices of Doom are saying about your visitors! If you're an exhibit developer, then you're supposed to be on the visitor's side—and that's a good side to be on, because museum visitors—even in a big city like Chicago—are wonderful human beings.

Janet Kamien

Here are my take-home messages from the Voices of Doom:

Let everybody in on what you are doing. Have staff meetings; listen to issues carefully; don't necessarily answer on the spot, but be sure to report back. Keep this up after the exhibit is open.

Form an advisory council. You don't have to like all your advisors, but you have to trust them. Don't put people on just for their political value, and don't allow them to think the process is democratic. They are advisors, not voters.

Use an evaluation and research process. Defuse impossible situations by doing the homework with the visitors, trying things out and getting feedback.

Save project money against revisions. We've been working with 10% of the production budget and that seems pretty comfortable.

Remain true to your instincts. If you think something is right, don't let anybody budge you. Compromise and give up on less important things. Make promises against the money you save for revisions to remove or change things if you turn out to be wrong after the exhibit opens.

Don't take it personally. When the Voices of Doom attack your best idea yet, re-examine the issue calmly. (In other words, don't behave like me.)

Watch out for the Voice of Doom inside your own head. That's the most destructive one of all, killing off ideas before they are fully born. Be brave and put them out there. Maintain your sense of humor. Ask yourself this question: did anybody die? No? Well then, how bad could it be?

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Figure 5.1: Where did *Life Over Time* visitors spend their time? (Based on tracking and timing studies)

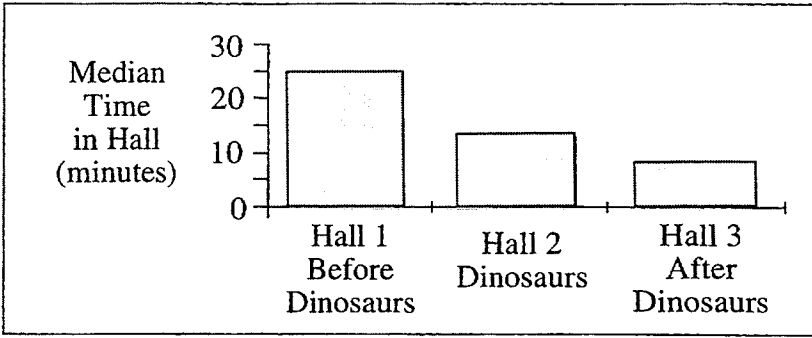


Figure 5.2: What part of *Life Over Time* did visitors say they enjoyed most? (Based on exit interviews with adults)

