

CIDOC 2018 Conference Submission Abstract

Title: Simulating Serendipity: Information Systems, Chance Encounters, and Cultural Memory

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The evanescent flow of the World Wide Web has ushered in a greater tolerance for transience in cultural phenomena broadly. Its distributed networks facilitate gleaning information from data, favoring temporal, chance discovery across many sources over prolonged, explicit inquiry within one. This paper investigates serendipity as an emergent digital strategy – once a wonder, now a methodology – and situates the efforts of museums and other cultural institutes to optimally coordinate collections metadata with the saccadic movements of the web within a theory of simulated serendipity. Drawing a line from sociologist Robert K. Merton’s attempt to hammer out “The Serendipity Pattern” in empirical research in the 1940s to the use of the term as a tag for Google Cultural Institute’s own “Experiments,” serendipitous information behaviors can either open new pathways of intuition, or leave a world that was “meaning rich, data poor” in the hapless state of being “data rich, meaning poor.”¹ As unmistakable momentum builds behind Linked Open Data initiatives in museums, this paper speculates how to leverage the precedence of chance encounters – and the confluent predilections of individuals and machines upon which those encounters are built – to find and foster meaning in a data-driven Web.

¹ Daniel Boorstin, “The Age of Negative Discovery,” in *Cleopatra’s Nose: Essays on the Unexpected* (New York: Random House, 1994), 3–17.