

# From Heritage to Gameplay: Developing an Educational 3D Experience for Museum Learning at the Monastery of St. John in Müstair

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**Abstract:** This study outlines the development process of an educational video game within the context of museum education. Specifically, it details each phase of the project, beginning with the visit of the joint research team to the Monastery of St. John in Müstair, founded in the 8th century, where they conducted scans of the mortar used in its legendary construction, which is traditionally attributed to Charlemagne himself. Since 1983, the monastery church and the Chapel of the Holy Cross have been recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. A temporary exhibition narrating aspects of this heritage was originally held at the site and later relocated to the Castle of Bellinzona. The present work describes the process of converting this exhibition into an interactive 3D environment, developed using Unity 3D and compatible with the Meta Quest headset. This initiative is framed within an open education perspective, aiming to share research processes as a contribution to the broader community of scholars and developers engaged in the creation of educational video games.

**Keywords:** 3D Reconstruction, Immersive Learning, Open Education, UNESCO World Heritage, Educational Video Game.

## 1. Introduction

Over time, museums have evolved from static repositories of artifacts into dynamic environments that foster learning, dialogue, and critical reflection. As educational paradigms shift toward more interactive and participatory approaches, museums increasingly adopt digital tools to enhance visitor experience and broaden outreach. Within this framework, the integration of video games and immersive technologies represents not just a methodological innovation, but a means to reimagine the museum as a site of open, collaborative, and experiential learning. Before exploring the role of technology in museum education, it is important to briefly contextualize the historical relationship between art, museums, and learning. The art as experience remains foundational in framing aesthetic experience as a



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dynamic process rooted in human perception, emotion, and social context. This perspective redefines museums as active educational spaces, where engagement, accessibility, and transformation converge.

In line with this view, recent studies emphasize the museum's potential as an inclusive learning environment enriched by digital innovation. Since 2016, research conducted at the University of Salerno has explored the design of virtual and mixed reality museum settings, allowing students to engage in curatorial practices that reflect principles of new museology (Di Tore, Todino & Sibilio, 2019). These environments aim to enhance visitor experience by supporting personalized, interactive pathways through digital tools such as augmented reality and edugames (Schiavo et al., 2023). As it is possible to note, inclusive technologies can transform museum spaces into adaptive and participatory contexts, fostering meaningful cultural interaction beyond the limitations of physical exhibits (Todino, 2023).

## **2. The Temporary Exhibition at the Monastery of St. John in Müstair and at Castel Grande in Bellinzona**

### *2.1 The Monastery of St. John in Müstair*

The Benedictine Monastery of Saint John the Baptist in Müstair, located in the Val Müstair in the Canton of Grisons, Switzerland, stands as one of the best-preserved early medieval monastic complexes in Europe (Todino, 2025). Traditionally attributed to Charlemagne and founded in the eighth century, the monastery has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1983 for its outstanding historical, artistic, and architectural value. A stucco statue preserved within the abbey church bears witness to the legend that the Frankish emperor himself was its founder (Stiftung Pro Kloster St. Johann, 2025). Strategically positioned along an important transalpine route connecting the Germanic regions with the Italian peninsula and, from there, with Mediterranean ports, the monastery served not only as a spiritual center but also as a place of political and cultural observation. Its foundation reflected the Carolingian vision of combining territorial control with the intellectual authority of monastic scriptoria, where monks recorded events and transmitted knowledge. In this sense, its function recalls that of Montecassino, with which it shared the Benedictine Rule and an analogous role in safeguarding faith and learning. Continuously inhabited since its establishment, Müstair represents a rare example of uninterrupted monastic life for more than twelve centuries. Since the twelfth century it has been home to a female Benedictine community that continues to live according to the principles of *ora et labora*, balancing prayer, work, and spiritual reading. The nuns, assisted by collaborators, engage in gardening, church and sacristy management, administrative duties, and hospitality, maintaining a small guesthouse for pilgrims and visitors. Their way of life, marked by fraternity, humility, and contemplation, embodies the Benedictine ideal of seeking God through communal and personal dedication. Architecturally

and artistically, the monastery preserves exceptional Carolingian frescoes from the ninth century (among the most complete mural cycles of the early Middle Ages) alongside Romanesque and Gothic additions. Over the past fifty years, the Pro Monastery Foundation of Saint John in Müstair has promoted extensive programs of research, restoration, and preservation, ensuring the protection and study of the site. For completeness of information, within the monastery, the SAVAIR Center (from the Romansh word *savair*, meaning “knowledge”) functions as an interdisciplinary platform for disseminating the results of archaeological, architectural, and conservation research conducted over the past half century. Today, Müstair is not only a monument of exceptional historical significance but also an active research laboratory dedicated to the study of early medieval heritage. Through archaeological excavations, structural analyses, and art-historical investigations, scholars and conservators contribute to understanding the evolution of the site and its regional significance (Ibidem). This interdisciplinary collaboration between art historians, archaeologists, architects, and restorers seeks to ensure the long-term preservation of the monastery’s murals, sculptures, and architectural fabric. As such, the Monastery of Saint John in Müstair remains both a living testimony of the Carolingian era and a dynamic symbol of knowledge, spirituality, and cultural continuity in the modern age (Ibidem).

## *2.2 Malta. History and Science in Fragments: An overview of the exhibition's key themes*

The exhibition dedicated to the archaeological excavations of the Monastery of St. John in Müstair, notable for its extraordinary historical stratification and its role as a privileged laboratory for studying early medieval construction techniques, is structured as a journey of knowledge that leads from the fragment to the global understanding of the building process and its historical dimension. The exhibition begins with the elementary archaeological datum, the seemingly marginal object, to show how it is transformed into a source of information through scientific observation. The mortar fragments, numbering over five thousand, constitute the thread that guides the visitor: their analysis makes it possible to reconstruct the methods of selecting and employing raw materials, to recognize technological and organizational variations, and to understand the evolution of construction expertise over time. The exhibition illustrates how the study of mortars, through physical, chemical, and microscopic investigations, reveals not only technical data but also social and cultural insights, positioning the building material as a mediator between science and humanism. Particular attention is paid to the mortar mixers found during the excavations, which are extraordinary evidence of technological innovation that attest to the presence of mechanized production procedures as early as the 8th to 10th centuries. This finding suggests the complexity of medieval construction sites, where empirical knowledge was combined with specialized organization of the workforce. Through this progression, the exhibition invites visitors to rethink the Middle Ages not as an era of backwardness, but as a time of intense experimentation and the elaboration of construction languages that unified

practical, aesthetic, and spiritual aims. The museum journey is founded on a strongly interdisciplinary approach, thus becoming a paradigm for a research methodology capable of combining archaeology, materials science, and art history within a unified interpretive framework, in which every fragment is not merely a material remnant, but a key to understanding the relationships between technology, society, and culture.



### 3. Conceptualization and Design Principles

Once the physical exhibition concludes, the logistical process begins, which involves relocating the artifacts to suitable conservation environments, often different from the display areas. Simultaneously, all equipment and support materials used for content presentation undergo disposal or repurposing. While some of these resources can be easily repurposed, the process is more complex or even impossible for others. Consequently, the specific educational activities and interactions created for the physical exhibition risk being irretrievably lost, unable to be updated for future use, or becoming unsuitable for audiences with diverse needs. Therefore, the virtual museum experience being developed shouldn't be seen as a mere digital replica, but rather as a strategic experience aimed at preserving the central themes of the exhibition and proposing new, effective interactions for content comprehension. To achieve this goal, specific principles were defined, capable of paraphrasing the meta-objectives and serving as primary reference points for designing the virtual experience.

#### 3.1 Design according to the constructivist museum model

In order to create a product consistent with current museum education proposals, the Constructivist model, one of the four models identified by Hein (Hein G. E., 1999), was chosen. The Constructivist museum positions itself as a place capable of presenting its artifacts in a way that is functional to an agile and meaningful interaction for its visitors, who are interested not only in acquiring new knowledge but also in entertainment within a non-formal context. From

this perspective, the potential information intrinsic to the artifacts cannot be expressed through description alone. Pairing the artifact solely with descriptive material, even in various forms such as text, video, or audio, might not be sufficient to achieve both primary objectives, resulting in an outcome not dissimilar from other sources like books or documentaries. However, while this type of material might be commonly considered primary for accessing information in a school setting, in the museum context, it assumes a role of in-depth study following an interest that has already been established. For instance, when standing before a painting, we instinctively admire it as a whole before delving into all the aspects connected to the work in order to appreciate it from different perspectives. It follows that engagement must occur more quickly, and this phase certainly cannot be postponed until after the comprehension of a textual or multimedia content. Artifacts should therefore be presented in such a way that they manage to convey something to the observer from the very first moment, making part of their information participatory (Todino, M. D., & Campitiello, L., 2025). Once the display case separating the artifact from the visitor is "broken," it becomes necessary to encourage the phase of information seeking by structuring activities that investigate the artifact on different levels. These activities effectively seek to reproduce the various contexts to which the artifact belongs, and these contexts, in turn, become the environments where the visitor extracts meanings and constructs knowledge.

### *3.2 Use of guides and mediators*

The constructivist vision recognizes the existence of crucial dimensions such as the practical, sensory, and emotional, considering them essential for the learning process. In formal contexts, the responsibility for addressing these dimensions falls almost entirely on the teacher who, by getting to know their students day by day, must handle the complexity arising from their cognitive singularities (Sibilio, M., 2014). To make these interventions effective, the teacher's role cannot be understood as a mere channel of information between two isolated entities, the environment and the student. Thus, by moving away from an approach based on their own learning style and communication methods, the teacher must become a facilitator of the student's learning style and a communicative common denominator among the students. Through this redefinition of the teacher, it becomes possible to overcome the separate environment-student conception toward a context-knowledge dualism, and to promote the evolution of students' actions from an observational to a manipulative nature. Despite this successful model, the hypothesis that, by analogy, the museum guide can assume the same responsibilities and facilitator functions for their visitors as the teacher does for their students is not sustainable for multiple reasons. Firstly, unlike the teacher, the museum guide is very often an optional choice for the visitor. Furthermore, the museum guide does not know their visitors, nor do they have the same opportunity to get to

know them as the teacher does, due to the interaction time being limited to the duration of the museum visit. Finally, while not being required to evaluate the learning of their audience, which on the one hand exempts them from one of the most complicated tasks, this simultaneously precludes them from important tools for self-assessment and calibration of their own activity. These differing initial conditions might be sustainable for a process aimed at promoting cultural heritage, entertainment, and the economy linked to the museum, but they are insufficient for the acquisition of new knowledge. In response to these potential shortcomings, the use of different types of mediators is more justified in this context. Damiano's classification of mediators (Damiano E., 2013) posits the existence of two types: hot mediators, which are better at eliciting motivation and activating emotional and affective factors, and cold mediators, which are more suitable for processes of exposition, synthesis, and content organization. Once the characteristics of the two types of mediators are isolated, the choice of their use becomes simpler based on the activities planned in a given pathway. Given the plurality of learning styles and learning phases, the only potentially effective strategy is the structured alternation of the two types.

### *3.3 Immersive technologies as facilitators of engagement and meaning-making*

The virtual experience to be created cannot dispense with any of the mediators, also because the museum pathway from which it draws inspiration offered not only diverse mediators but also content of varying "temperatures." In fact, a vertical panel may contain both technical details about a chemical process and the evocative image of a story. The same observations hold true for all other mediators used in the museum pathway, ranging from audio and video content to real 3D models and virtual scenes. The new virtual proposal must, first and foremost, seek to functionally and coherently integrate all the 2D content that provides consistency to the pathway and continuity to the themes, but it will also strongly leverage the immersive attribute. It is precisely in this context that immersion finds its ultimate justification. In immersive virtual environments, corporeality becomes fundamental. Immersion, defined as the simulation of real-world phenomena through the use of sensorimotor devices, proves to be a powerful tool for bridging learning gaps, as it simultaneously engages the practical, sensory, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (De Simone, G. et al., 2017; Aiello, P., & Sibilio, M., 2012). Simulations, by allowing learners to autonomously explore the relationships between complex variables, foster the development of decision-making abilities that go far beyond simple causal understanding, maximizing the effectiveness of hot and active mediators.

In other words, one of the cognitive processes crucial for human beings is stimulated: vicariance. According to Berthoz (Berthoz A., 1997; Berthoz A., 2013), vicariance is the capacity to substitute one process with another while still achieving the same result. This substitution is a fundamental tool for living

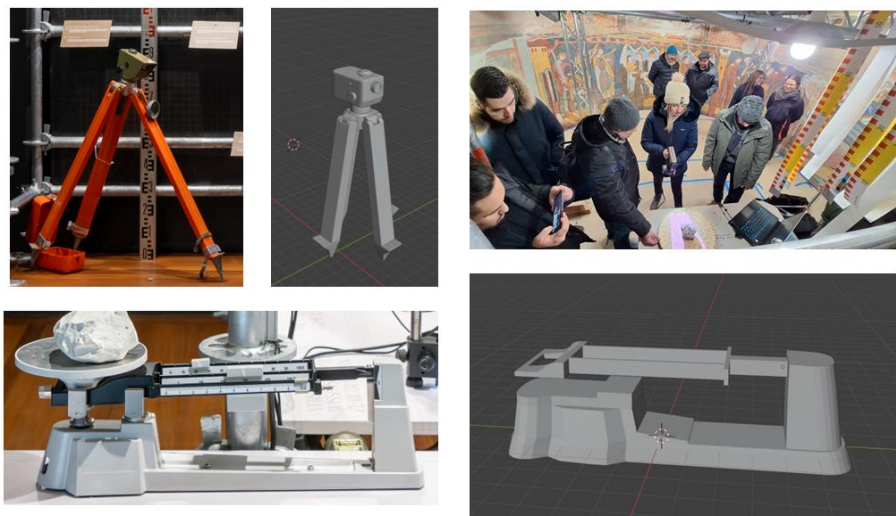
organisms, as it enables the powerful possibility of creating, innovating, and interacting with the world in a flexible, tolerant, and generous way. The immersive environment, therefore, does not merely present information; it offers the student alternative (vicarious) pathways to reach the learning objective.

#### 4. Virtualization of the exhibition

##### 4.1 Creation of new digital assets

The first necessary step for creating a virtual environment capable of reproducing some of the experiences presented during the exhibition was certainly the recovery of certain archaeological finds and artifacts displayed in the various rooms of the museum path. To this end, it was decided that some virtual objects would be obtained through a 3D scanning process, while others, deemed too complex to scan, were reconstructed from scratch using photos and videos as reference. Given the central role of the mortar fragment within the museum pathway, every effort was made to achieve the most faithful result possible through high-resolution scanning, followed by a process of sculpting and texture extraction that preserved the highest possible number of details, given the team's available instrumentation and technical skills (Campitiello, L. et al., 2023). The result is an object with a complex geometry, consisting of a large number of polygons varying in shape and size, capable of expressing its composite and heterogeneous material nature. The mortar fragment can thus be observed closely, anticipating some of the information that will later be explored in depth by different research fields. The spread of highly user-friendly software and the greater economic accessibility of 3D printing technologies have extended interest in 3D modeling. This, combined with the increasingly shared philosophy of open source, has led to a much wider availability of digital assets compared to the last decade. However, to the best of our knowledge, many other objects that could not be scanned for technical reasons were not found available online, or at least not for free. For these objects, which were deemed necessary for carrying out certain activities, particularly those of a laboratory nature, an approximate but functional realization was pursued. This is the case for the structures created using the typical scaffolding of construction sites and archaeological excavation sites. On the one hand, these structures have a strongly evocative function, recalling both the archaeologists' workspace and the multiple manual laborers and artisans who succeeded one another in various construction sites across different eras. On the other hand, their versatility of use was extensively exploited in the museum pathway, allowing for the creation of different modules based on various needs: serving as tables for laboratory activities, walls for displaying vertical panels, shelves for the conservation and cataloging of finds, and truss and tower truss structures for positioning multimedia technologies. Their creation and use in the virtual transposition of the exhibition is, first and foremost, justified by the desire to inherit this evocative functionality. Furthermore, each of these structures intrinsically

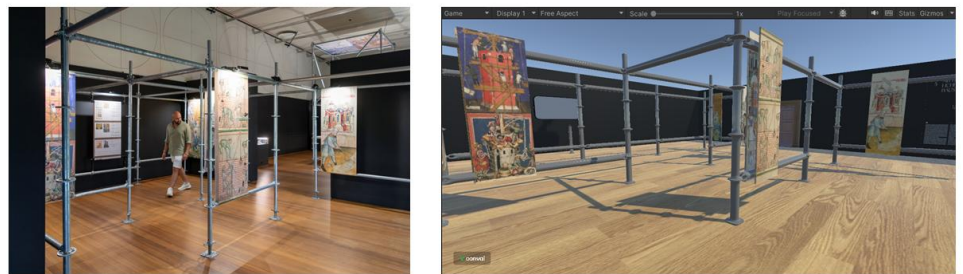
possess characteristics that refer to a precise spatial placement; in other words, even during the design phase, one of the primary objectives was to furnish an exhibition-educational space, an objective that is reconfirmed in the virtual case. Finally, the creation of these new digital assets proved advantageous from the outset in terms of 3D modeling, as a good approximation of the elements constituting the structures could be achieved even by composing elementary geometric figures.



#### 4.2 *Virtual room design*

The initial phase of prototyping the digital assets, which involved both refining existing 3D scans and reconstructing elements *ex novo*, led to the standardization of processes and a more rapid production cycle. With the progressive availability of the new digital assets, the project to convert the museum pathway into a virtual experience was launched. The working group first had to identify which of the two available temporary exhibitions would serve as the primary reference. The Bellinzona exhibition setup was chosen due to the more evident modularity of its thematic sections. For this reason, the virtual experience was structured as a sequence of rooms, accessible to the player at any time, while still maintaining the sequential thematic order originally established for both exhibitions. The virtual environments were designed to maximize clarity and a sense of spatial order. The virtual rooms were constructed by applying textures that aim to approximate the colors and materials of the corresponding physical elements, such as the walls and floors. Despite this, their dimensions were slightly increased—a deliberate choice made to optimize the perceived space and improve visitor orientation. The arrangement of the main display cases faithfully reproduces the real-world setup. It was necessary, however, to adapt the associated descriptive panels to ensure full legibility and accessibility within the virtual context. Since non-vertical panels

proved difficult to read in the virtual environment, an adaptive interaction logic was introduced. When the user interacts with horizontally placed descriptive panels, they automatically rotate by 30° relative to the resting surface, a dynamic tilt that facilitates reading and text consultation. For panels integrated into tables designed for laboratory activities, often obscured by other objects, interaction triggers the appearance of two-dimensional elements on the screen (via Canvas UI). This solution offers effortless reading of the textual content while simultaneously allowing the interactive objects, such as tools or artifacts, to remain on the virtual table.



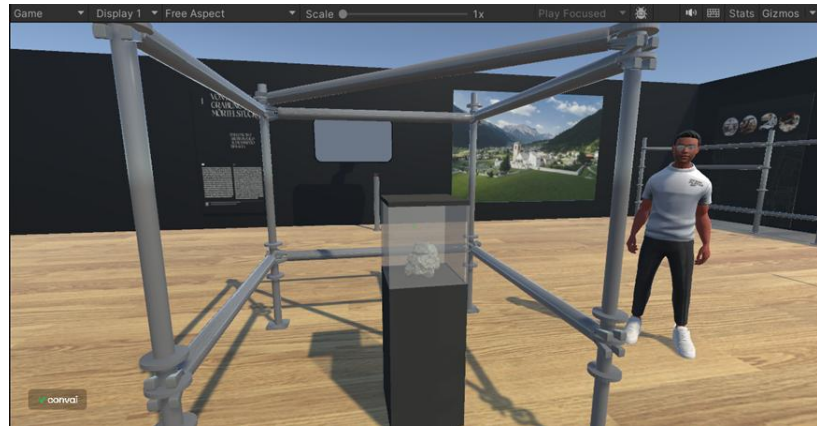
#### *4.3 From Museum Guides to Non-Playable Characters*

The virtual experience we developed, while not a mere digital reproduction of the temporary exhibition, significantly benefited from its original constructivist nature. The design choices of the physical exhibition, in terms of artifacts, activities, and interactions, validated a large part of these components, making their transposition into the new expressive paradigm straightforward. One of the fundamental pedagogical components of the exhibition was the museum guide acting as a facilitator of the communicative process. It was essential to recover and implement this function in the virtual experience as well. Therefore, we chose to integrate a Non-Playable Character (NPC) that could accompany the visitor through the pathway (Bilotti, U. et al., 2025; Campitiello, L., Beatini, V., & Di Tore, S., 2024). To equip the NPC with advanced functionality, a solution based on a modern AI-powered chatbot was adopted. Specifically, responses are generated by a Large Language Model (LLM). Recognizing, however, that generic LLMs can sometimes struggle with knowledge-intensive tasks, producing inaccurate responses (a phenomenon known as "hallucinations"), which is critical in an educational and museum context, it became necessary to ensure the accuracy of the information. To address this issue, a Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) process was integrated (Lewis, P. et al., 2020). Thanks to RAG, the NPC can draw upon and integrate its responses with an authoritative knowledge base composed of selected references and content created directly by museum professionals or

specialists in a precise scientific or disciplinary field. To emphasize the inherently multidisciplinary nature of the exhibition, the initial choice to implement a single NPC as a museum guide was revised. Instead, we opted for the creation of several NPCs, each corresponding to a specific professional figure, thereby offering the visitor multiple perspectives on the content. The virtual experience was thus enriched with thematic guides associated with each room, as specified below:

- **First Room (Introduction – Archaeologist)** The choice of the Archaeologist is fundamental to setting the narrative. This NPC facilitates the understanding of the context of excavation and recovery of the mortar fragments, explaining field research methodologies and the importance of stratigraphic contextualization, thereby introducing the subject of the exhibition.
- **Second Room (Mortar Composition - Chemist and Geologist)** The introduction of two distinct professional figures; the Chemist and the Geologist, emphasizes the scientific analysis of the material and helps trace the "Path of Lime" and the "Path of Sand." Specifically, the Chemist focuses on the production technology (the firing of lime) and the chemical reaction (carbonation) that bonds the components, while the Geologist addresses the origin and provenance of the raw materials (sands, aggregates), connecting the construction history to the geological formation of the territory.
- **Third Room (Medieval Construction Site - Master Carpenter)** This figure offers a practical and technical perspective. The Master Carpenter is ideal for explaining the organization of work, the construction techniques used in the Middle Ages, the use of period tools, and, crucially, the role of mortar not only as a binder but as a structural element of the construction site.
- **Fourth Room (Construction Phases of the Müstair Monastery – Historian)** The Historian is essential for framing the artifacts within a broader chronological and cultural context. This NPC links the archaeological discoveries (and the resulting scientific data) to the eight construction phases of the Monastery, explaining the rationale behind the structural changes and the building's significance in the historical context of the Early Middle Ages.
- **Fifth Environment (Reproduction of an Ancient Lime Kiln - Master of the Kiln)** The Master of the Kiln provides a specific focus on the ancient lime production process, offering an experiential perspective on the labor and craftsmanship involved. They are the most suitable person to describe the functioning of the ancient kiln (calcara), the temperatures,

the firing times, and the impact of this technology on local resources, thereby completing the cycle from raw material to finished product.



## 5. Conclusion

The project presented in this study demonstrates how the integration of immersive technologies and constructivist pedagogical principles can contribute to redefining museum education in both physical and virtual environments. Starting from the temporary exhibition dedicated to the archaeological findings at the Monastery of St. John in Münstair, the development of a virtual counterpart has shown that digital reconstruction can serve not merely as an act of preservation but as a transformative process that enhances accessibility, engagement, and inclusivity. By translating the exhibition's interpretative framework, rooted in the interdisciplinary dialogue among archaeology, materials science, and art history, into an interactive 3D experience, the project has provided a concrete example of how knowledge mediation can evolve from static display to experiential learning (Cantoni, L., 2020). The inclusion of non-playable characters representing different professional figures has allowed for the simulation of authentic museum mediation dynamics, supporting learners in constructing personal and contextualized meanings. Beyond its technological value, the initiative underscores the importance of open education as a methodological and ethical stance, promoting the sharing of research data, design methodologies, and digital assets to foster collective innovation within the educational game development community.

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