

Connecting with Van Gogh through his Letters

Master thesis by **Bingyan Ding**



The cover is a work by illustrator Tournesol

Colophon

Connecting with Van Gogh through his Letters

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03 October 2019—23 March 2020

Master thesis

Design for Interaction

Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering

Delft University of Technology

In collaboration with Museum Future Lab and the Van Gogh Museum

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Acknowledgement

I'm grateful to have the opportunity to conduct this project for my Master graduation. It is during this project, I see clearer what I can achieve as an experience designer and what I'm really passionate about in research and design. Therefore I want to say thanks to:

My supervisors - **Arnold, Jeroen** and **Harma**, for guidances, trusts and encouragements through the whole project.

Colleagues at VGM - **Sanneke Prins**, for giving me the opportunity to take this nice project; **Ann Blokland**, for perceptive feedbacks on my concepts; **Joy Ravenswaaij**, for great help in making the letter booklets; **Koen Snijders**, for considerate assistance in visitor research in VGM.

Roel van Erp and **Boaz Bar Adon**, for the inspiring conversations and professional suggestions to my design.

Lyu, the pilot participant in all my research and design activities, for all-time listening and support.

All the participants in my research, who shared with me their thoughts and gave me the most important insights that form the design. And special thanks to **Tournesol**, for sharing with me her lovely illustrations (the cover of this report is her work!)

My parents, brother and **dear friends**, who shaped me into the designer and the person today.

And the "old chap", **Vincent van Gogh**, for having been in this world (and having written so many letters), thus I have the opportunity to know this beautiful soul.

I enjoyed this project, and hope you will also have an enjoyable experience reading this report.

Bingyan Ding.

Delft, 15 March 2020

Dear *report readers,*

It is good to go on
believing that everything
is miraculous.

Van Gogh letter #143 | to his brother Theo |
Amsterdam, 3 April 1878



Ever yours, *Bingyan*

Executive summery

INITIATE | Chapter 1~3
Understand the backgroud of this assignment.

DISCOVER | Chapter 4~7
Literature and user research in broader and narrower scopes.

DEFINE | Chapter 8~10
Redefine the project goals and deconstruct a full design solution.

DEVELOP | Chapter 11~12
Generate and evaluate concepts of two kay parts of the full solution.

DELIVER | Chapter 13
Put together the different parts of the full solution.

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Entrance hall of Van Gogh Museum, photo by Hans van Heeswijk Architecten, 2015

1.1 Vincent Van Gogh

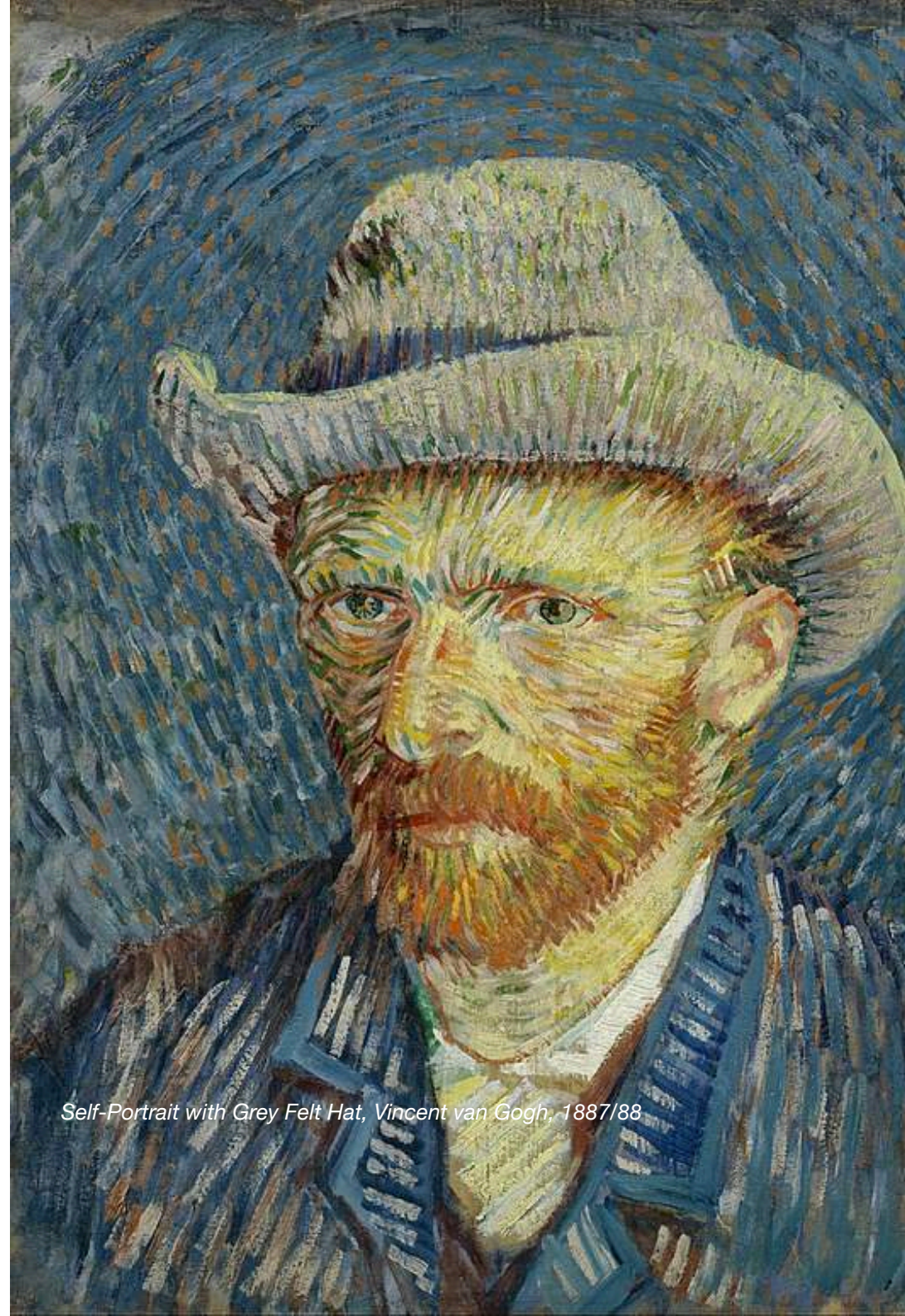
Vincent William van Gogh (1853–1890), a Dutch post-impressionist painter, is among the most influential figures in western art. Vincent was a pioneer of expressionism and has been inspiring people around the world from the beginning of the twentieth century.

What touch people all around the world through generations are not only the **paintings** but also his **unique life stories**. The large number of **letters** during his life took us inside these life stories, and this project is going to research and design for this significant legacy of Van Gogh.

Before going into that, let's first know about Van Gogh. The following stories are retrieved and adapted by Ziyi Zhang, a previous student who also did graduation project at Van Gogh Museum, from a column called "Van Gogh's Life, 1853–1890" on the museum website (Zhang, 2019). This is a good summary for readers who don't know much about Van Gogh to take a quick glance at his life stories.

“

Vincent began his artistic career late at 27 and ended when he committed suicide 10 years later. Born in a protestant minister family in 1853, he used to be a junior clerk at an art firm, a teacher, and a preacher like his father, but none of these positions had lasted for a long. At the age of 27, Vincent finally decided to be a full-time artist owing to his strong passion for art and the full support from his brother Theo. Vincent practiced fanatically and created about 2100



Self-Portrait with Grey Felt Hat, Vincent van Gogh, 1887/88

paintings in 10 years, including 860 oil paintings.

Vincent suffered from mental illness and often felt emotionally unstable, but his eye remains brilliant in seeing and painting the world. In 1888, He cut off his left ear after a fiery quarrel with his good friend Paul Gauguin in their yellow house. Afterwards, Vincent voluntarily admitted himself to a hospital in Saint-Rémy, and then had a peaceful time in Auvers-sur-Oise near Paris. During his illness, he continued progressing his personal style and kept creating masterpieces like the Almond Blossom and the Wheatfield with Crows. But his illness came back to him when he saw the financial uncertainty and fear about the future. (Van Gogh Museum, 2018) He committed a suicide in his beloved wheatfield in 1890.

The widely recognition of Van Gogh's work came after his death. Six weeks after Vincent's death, Vincent's best friend and lifelong supporter Theo organized an exhibition of his brother's works, through which Theo aimed to prompt to more people. His wife Jo van Gogh-Bonger inherited this work after Theo's death. And so did Jo's son, Vincent Willem van Gogh, who shared the same name with his uncle and loaned his uncle's paintings to the Stedelijk Museum in 1930, later succeed in raising resources for a dedicated museum, the Van Gogh Museum we are talking about today.

Vincent van Gogh created his unique way of painting: showing the world in his eyes by using his bold strokes and complementary colors. His stories are written in the history books, in the songs, and in the movies all over the world. He

inspired numerous people in their lives and their artistic creations.

”

This is just an introduction of Van Gogh in a nutshell. But in Amsterdam, there is a whole museum dedicated to him - the Van Gogh Museum.

1.2 Van Gogh Museum

The Van Gogh Museum (abbreviated as VGM) is dedicated to the works of Vincent van Gogh and his contemporaries. The museum contains the largest collection of Van Gogh's paintings and drawings in the world, and is one of the best and most popular museums in the world (Van Gogh Museum, 2018).

History

VGM has been preserving, researching on and presenting Van Gogh's legacy for nearly half century since it first opened in 1973. Up until Van Gogh's death in 1891, control of the collection was in the hands of Vincent's brother, Theo van Gogh. His widow, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, subsequently took over the management of the collection. Following her death in 1925, her son, Vincent Willem van Gogh, assumed responsibility for his uncle's works. In 1962, he reached an agreement with the Kingdom of the Netherlands to transfer control of the entire collection (the paintings, drawings and letters) to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation. In return, the State arranged for the Van Gogh Museum to be built, helping to ensure that the collection always remains accessible to everyone. In 1973, VGM opened its doors to the public. (Van Gogh Museum, 2018)

Visitors

For several years, the VGM has achieved visitor numbers above 2 millions. In 2017, the museum even welcomed approximately 2,260,000 visitors, of which circa 85% travelled from abroad. This makes the VGM the most visited museum in the Netherlands in 2017, with a place in the top-25 most visited art museums in the world. (Van Gogh Museum, 2018)

Meanwhile, to extend the reachability, the VGM is also active on social media channels. At the time of writing this report, the official VGM Instagram account (@vangoghmuseum) had 1.5M followers, and almost 44K members in the Van Gogh Inspires Facebook Group.



Figure 1.1. Visitors in VGM, photo by Jan Kees Steenman

VGM mission

In *VGM Strategic Plan 2018~2020*, VGM has determined the following mission:

The Van Gogh Museum makes the life and work of Vincent van Gogh and the art of his time accessible and reaches as many people as possible in order to enrich and inspire them.

The mission forms the foundation for the organization's vision and strategic objectives. I view this mission as two dimensions for VGM to create impact, as is illustrated in the graph at right:

1. **Width:** reach as many people as possible
2. **Depth:** enrich and inspire the people reached

We'll take a closer look at this leading mission when discussing the assignment goal in Chapter 3.2.



Figure 1.2. Analysis of VGM mission

het niet als een engel... dat het zoo
gelaopen is onbegrijpelijk ontvankelijk allerlei emoties
voel de loch een zekere koelmte.

There is safety in the midst of danger.
Wat zou het leven zijn als we niet wat durfden
aanpakken.

Chapter 2 Van Gogh's Letters

Ik heb evenal rondgelopen om dat alken te vinden
jaanse... Schermerijer is... het alken...
maand 7. - per maand maar de meubels

maken het moeilijk. Toch heeft men een eigen
gedraante dan loopt dat ook niet meer weg, en
heeft men meer vrolijkheid onder de vellen.

Het licht is van 1 zuiden zo ongeveer maar het
raam is groot en laag en ik heb hoop het er even
eenigen tijd wat aardig ook wel een.

Je kunt denken dat ik mij zeer geïnteresseerd gevoel
hoe zoek het over een jaar zijn met mijn werk?

Kom ik maar uitdrukken wat ik veel - nu Maava
begrijpt door alles van en hij wil me zoveel
technische werken geven als by kan - 1 geen
waarvan mijn hoofd & hart vol is dat moet er
uit komen in tekeningen of schilderijen.

Maava zelf is druk bezig een een groot doly
man en pink die met paarden tegen de duimen
opgeleekt wordt. Ik vind het heerlijk te s'lage
te zijn en ik vind het zoo onbegrijpelijk veel
maais en ik moet daarvan als zoeken weer te geven.

Drie keer ontvraag een handdruk
in gedachten... Van Gogh letter #194

Veel groeten van M. J. 1. - 1.
Ik heb mij een bestgeld maar heel lang zoek ik
... Tot 1 January

Ik was te Ellen terug toen ik uw brief ontving
ik u schreef volgens uw brief met Maava. Maar nu gaat
gebruik ik ook weer te s'lage terug.

Op kerstmis had ik nog al een heftige scène met Pa
en het liep zoo laag dat Pa zei: 'Heter was ik 1' huss maar
zou verlaten. Nu, het werd zoo gelaand gelyk
dat ik nu nog denzelfden dag werkelijk verlate.

Het kwam eigentlijk aan door dat ik niet maar de heft
ging en ook jaide dat als het maar de heft kwam
als gedwongen was ik ik naar de heft moest ik en
geen zeken zelfs moest meer uit heftigheid zou
kengwan zo als ik degen heft 1/2 dat ik te Ellen
was my gezegd deed. Maar ook, eigentlijk zat
er veel meer achter, o.a. de heft geschiedenis van
1 geen degen zamen voorvele lasten my en k.v.

Ik was zoo droeflyk als ik me niet herinneren wou in
mijn leven geweest te zijn, en ik heb eenduid
tegen Pa gezegd dat ik het heel doly een van die
godsdienst afschuwelyk vond en juist omdat gedurende
een misvatels 1/2 van myn leven ik mij te veel in
die dingen verdiept heb en niets meer mee wil
te maken hebben en mij er voor wachten moet als
voor als futuurs.

Ben ik te droeflyk te heftig geweest - het zij zoo
maar al ware dat eens het geval dan is 1 nu
meteen voor goed uit wate.

Ik ging naar H. terug en zei hoor eens H. te
Ellen kan't niet gaan en ik moet ergens anders
hiefot hier gaan wonen.

Ma H. zei dan maar hier. En dus ik heb
hier een atelier gehuurd n.l. een ^{allong} kamertje en
die en voor geschikt te maken zijn. goedkoop genag
en en buiten de stad op de Schenkweg een moment of
10 achter H.

verklaren en zeggen houd op. Dit en dat heb ik gedaan.
Begrijpt gy hier iets van -
Zoodat ik nu ik schrijf zoo als ik u
staure toen by jui 's glad uit -
uit d'agend - op 't ergste bereid - Ko
Sarkastisch - en loch doodelyk
ik niet sparend ik hekelend en
vormen niet lichtzinnig maar
in dam met earne
Verstaal genu - pas doorg
hebbende die vreeslike spinners
maar zy gered zegde nu my verk
zeggende: Heeren: zieh
niet - ik verklaren my sch
m zou en dat ik voor u alleen
achterwege gehouden heb dat
gekant heeft maar er was een
even te redder doch
spieken doch
maai nu -
my verwoordde
niet protesteer
ik heb werk ma
bew ik ik schied
geven - Ik he
Doch niet op
Daar heb ik s
weet niet hoe ik
ik heb my bereid op het

mon cher frère - c'est toujours en haut de la main
que j'écris - je laborie comme un vaillant
Et j'écris que ça conduira à une guérison
Pourtant c'est un miracle - il y a des choses comme celle
dont parle Cay Delacroix - il y a des choses comme celle
lorsque je n'avais plus ni dents ni souffle - dans ce
sens que vous - c'est malade me fait travailler
avec une justice sévère - les larmes - mais
du matin au soir sans lâcher - et - c'est
probablement lui le secret - travailler long
et lentement - on a sans je crois que
j'ai une ou deux fois en train plus tôt mal
D'abord le puchier dans les bras jaunes
et le posteur sur fond clair - c'est pour
les photographes si travaillent si minutieusement de nos
nos jours - mais on ce qui serait absolument
égal mon préféré je n'ai pas d'ailleurs
Parce que moi je n'ai pas l'inspiration
que cela me donne de me laisser aller
souvenir de certains belges - c'est la lapidation
et le reste - tellement répétitive
On vous voit très en septembre - il n'y a pas
un plein autunno - et puis l'hiver
je suis toujours à travailler - très vite et sans si
sans neuch le cœur et sans se soucier de ce qu'il
alors je n'y viens pas d'immédiatement à ce propos
tous les diables - l'indivision - et de revenir dans
le monde plus ou moins longtemps - c'est
le monde plus ou moins longtemps - c'est

Mon cher frère. Tout ce que j'ai écrit est écrit
des choses que tu m'as dites à Bruxelles - je n'ai pas
encore répondu - d'abord que tu aies tenu une
chambre dans la maison de Zwijper à qui mes
lettres sont la c'est fort intéressant - pourvu que
ce ne soit pas cher que tu payes - les frais
contenaient toujours et les lettres d'abord
à rapporter cela m'a fait plaisir -
Et puis qu'il en soit je trouve que c'est une
maison - et je te remercie comme de tout d'être
ohé - c'est curieux que Mous en l'état
à voir le petit Bernard à moi pour prochain
exposition des vingt-cinq - je voudrais bien
l'aurait fait mon infirmité à côté de tant
de Belges - pour qui ont anormalement de talent
D'ailleurs ce Mellay est un grand artiste - et il se
trouve ainsi d'être dans le monde d'aujourd'hui
mais je serais de mon mieux pour tout cela
pour et certainement que ça ne coûte rien de
je travaille d'ailleurs plus dans ma chambre
ce que mon père de bien et c'est de ce que je
m'imaginais ce n'est pas abstrait
C'est par rapport à tout ce que je
souhaite - c'est la seule chose que
des nouvelles - elle a été peinte si vite et
si bien que l'estime s'évaporait
la peinture ne s'est pas de
plus dans les lettres - cela sera
D'autres études de mon cœur
je peins très vite et
mon travail est après que
je t'ai écrit tout ce que
rapporter beaucoup de p
l'habitants chez les sacristains
et de ceux qui ne peuvent
mais que les lettres - et que
à ce propos - et que
mille et mille - et que
plus et je pense que
vraie - et que
nd - peut-être



prettige Kerstdagen
zou als ik -
heb het goed - schrijf
ik heb je in deze
just wat my in de
- ik hoop je en uit
kennem worden
welke dan allen
als iemand anders
vraagt - vooral ook
naar alle by hand - by hand
Kerstdagen

Je vous remercie bien obligé de votre
amicale et bienfaisante visite que
m'a causé d'habilement contribué à ma
remonter le moral
Je vous bien maintenant et je travaille
à l'hopital ou dans les environs.
Ainsi je viens de rapporter deux
études de vergers.



Londres Janvier 1874
mon cher frère,
je vous remercie
de votre lettre
et de votre
amabilité
je vous envoie
ce que j'ai écrit
à propos de
la peinture
et de la
peinture
et de la
peinture

Jaeger, Schreijer, Lumbing
travaux de la se hand, want
zo als Mousen zegt, dat is het
ja, dat heb ik van Middel, dan
gafes die dat - dat is het
dat is rijk, dat is goed -
Wat zou ik graag nog een

Figure 2.1. Some of Van Gogh's letters

2.1 The great legacy of VGM

The legacy of Van Gogh is not just a great number of beautiful paintings and drawings but also the letters. For more than a century, readers and art lovers have been getting inspired by the artistic and philosophic ideas in Van Gogh's own words.

A Large number of letters

During Van Gogh's lifetime, he wrote thousands of letters to his families and friends. There are **902 letters** remain til now, among which 819 were written by Van Gogh and 83 written to him by others. Since Theo van Gogh, Vincent's brother, was for years his great confidant, approximately 650 letters are addressed to him. The other roughly 170 known letters were to others, including his parents, his sisters, and friends in different periods of his life. If every recipient had saved Van Gogh's letters, and if he had not thrown away any of the ones he received, the correspondence might have numbered well over 2000 letters. Approximately 95 percent of Van Gogh's surviving letters are now preserved in the collection of VGM.

Discovery of this legacy

We will never know exactly how many letters have been lost, but thanks to Theo, who seems to save almost everything, there are still a large number of letters survived. After Theo died in January 1891 - only six months after he Vincent - his widow, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, found in a cupboard around 650 letters that Vincent had written to

Theo between September 1872 and July 1890. In 1914 she published these letters as *Breven aan zijn broeder (Letters to his brother)*, completed with a full introduction - a milestone for the biography of Van Gogh.



Figure 2.2. Van Gogh's brother Theo (left) and Theo's wife Jo (right)

Significance

The letters are such unique legacy for VGM to present to the public because they tell these unique life stories with valuable **first-hand witness**. Moreover, Van Gogh was a born writer. He used the **evocative and direct language** of a strong personality, drawing readers into his thoughts and feelings. Also the many sketches and his own annotations on the later-on masterpieces in letters provides us **insights in his art**. One cannot really step into Van Gogh's world without reading his letters.

2.2 A life in letters

What did Van Gogh write in such many letters? During the up and downs in his life, the tone and content of the letters was also changing, reflecting his life traces, thoughts and feelings in different phases. The following introduction about the letters in various phases is adapted from the book *Vincent van Gogh and his Letters*, by Leo Jansen (2017).

The early years

At that time, young Van Gogh was working in Den Haag as a trainee of the internationally active French art dealer Goupil, followed by three years of alternating between London and Paris. His letters passionately expressed his love to certain artists and artworks as well as literature. It was also in this period he wrote of his profound love of nature and landscape. This was a period of self-education, by using art, literature and nature to discover and define himself who became the artist later.

Hard time

In 1874-75, the tone of his letters became increasingly gloomy, making the prelude to the religious period of Van Gogh, who was dismissed from his job at Goupil in 1876. His religious fanatics caused Van Gogh to drift further and further away from his friends and families, and the distance became physical as well as emotional when he moved to Borinage, a poor mining district in Belgium where he



An envelop of Van Gogh

lived in poverty. In such struggling experience, his letters became longer and writing letters took on a new meaning: to formulate and develop his own thoughts rather than merely exchanging ideas.

The emergent artist

The crisis ended in the summer of 1880, when Van Gogh suddenly emerged from his cocoon of uncertainty and despair. Under Theo's suggestion he resolved to be an illustrator for magazines. Because of Theo's financial support, Van Gogh felt obliged to make regular progress report through letters. Every letter from the early 1880s testifies his total emersion in art.

The French years

Van Gogh's so-called Dutch years, which can be considered his period of training, came to an end in late 1885 when he moved to Paris with his brother, who was working in Paris as the manager of Goupil. In Paris Van Gogh got to make friends with the Parisian avant-garde and made decisive artistic transformation. However, there's a scarcity in letters of this period because he didn't need to write to his brother distantly.

Then, here came the bright Arles period, when he travelled in the south of France. The number of letters intensified again, showing that he had matured as a self-assured artist. It was also in Arles when Gauguin moved into the Yellow House to live together with Van Gogh then left after only two months, following a violent outburst due to incompatible temperaments between the two.

The last days

The left of Gauguin ushered in a period of disappointment when Van Gogh was suffering from mental instability. In May 1889 he admitted himself to the psychiatric clinic at nearby Saint-Remy. The letters presented us the suffering soul with alternating depression and flickering hope. Finally, we know the distressing end of Van Gogh: in July 1890, he shot himself in the field of Auvers-sur-Oise and died two days later, with Theo at his side.

2.3 The letter presentation in VGM

Currently, quotes from his letters can be found in various locations in the museum: labels of artwork explanation, walls of exhibition halls, text or audio pieces of the multimedia guide, ... Still there is an independent section called “a life in letters” as a part of the permanent exhibition. To see how this letter section is placed in the experience, let’s first take a look at the storyline of the whole VGM.

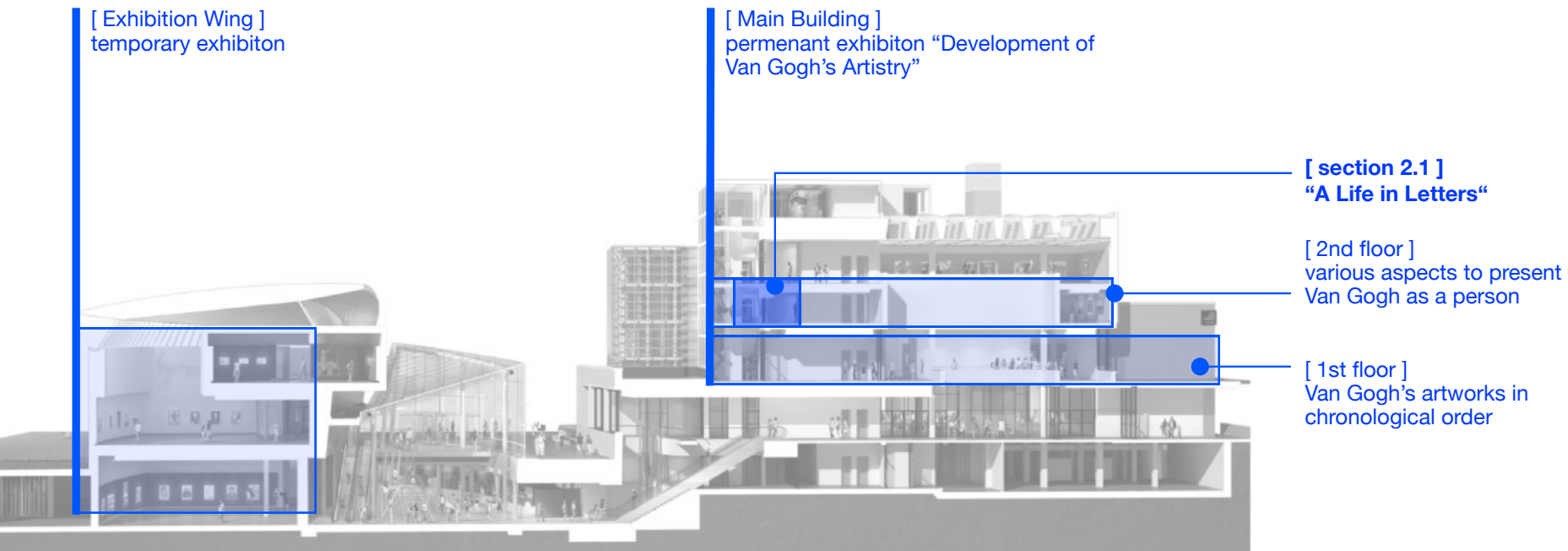
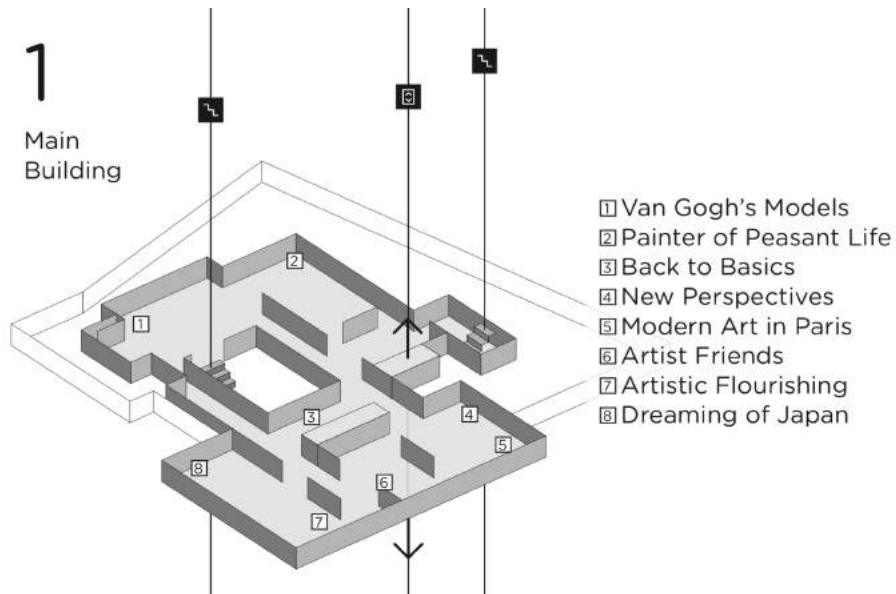


Figure 2.3. VGM space and exhibitions

The permanent exhibition

“**The development of Van Gogh’s artistry**” is the common thread in the whole permanent exhibition. Everything revolves around the importance of Van Gogh, the ideas behind his works of art, and their emotional impacts on visitors and other artists, right up until the present day. The chapters are in a chronological order and include not only Van Gogh’s paintings but also his works on paper, his letters and the work of his contemporaries.



The 2nd floor

The 2nd floor focuses specifically on “**Van Gogh as a person**”. The chronological story is interrupted to explain aspects such as his friendships, the ear incident, the letters, his family and Vincent and Theo’s collection.

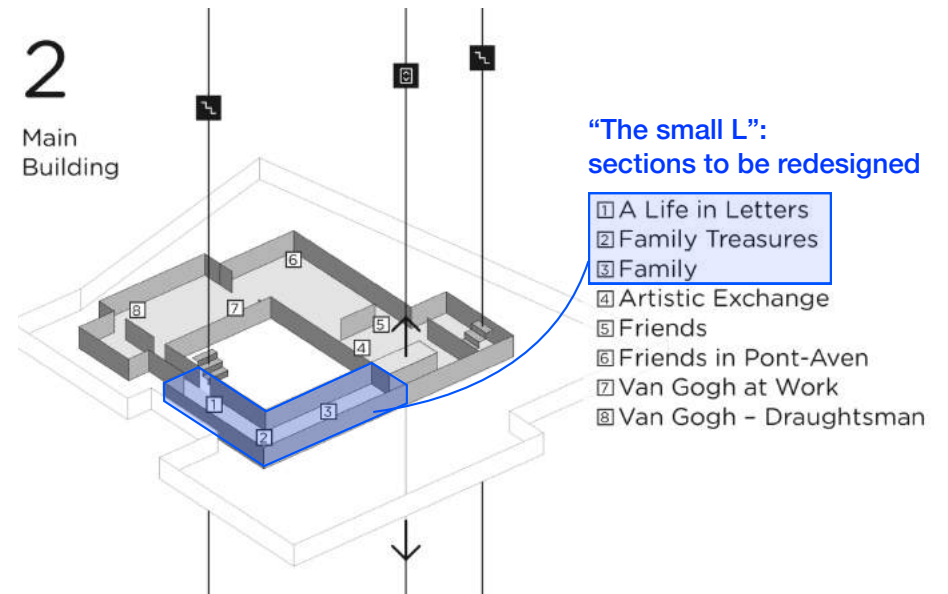


Figure 2.4. Current narrative in first and second floor of VGM

The letter section

The letter gallery called “**A Life in Letters**” is meant to focus on the letters, where visitors can see the original copy of two letters, the cabinet which stored the letters and listen to audio letters installed on the wall. However, currently there are several side-paths leading to other stories. For example, it explores the ties with his family (Theo in particular), the art collection belonging to the two brothers, Jo van Gogh-Bonger and the history of the museum... Although it's called

“the letters of Van Gogh” on the floor plan, it's difficult for visitors to really experience and learn about the letters.



Figure 2.5. Current presentations in the letter section

2.4 Other presences of letters

Apart from the museum space, there are also various presences of the letters lead by VGM, from traditional book to social media, to reach audiences worldwide.

Letter highlights

<https://vangoghmuseum.nl/en/highlights>

The letter highlights website is part of the official VGM website. There are 81 letters in Dutch and English - not that many comparing to the total 902 - but readers can interact with the letter by underlining quotes, sharing comments, and marking the emotion of the quotes.

Academic letter database

<http://vangoghletters.org/vg/>

This website is the outcome of a thorough study by letter experts. The website holds the completion of letters arranged by period, correspondent, place, or with/out sketches. For each letter you can find the original text, facsimile, notes and related artworks, all available in Dutch and English.

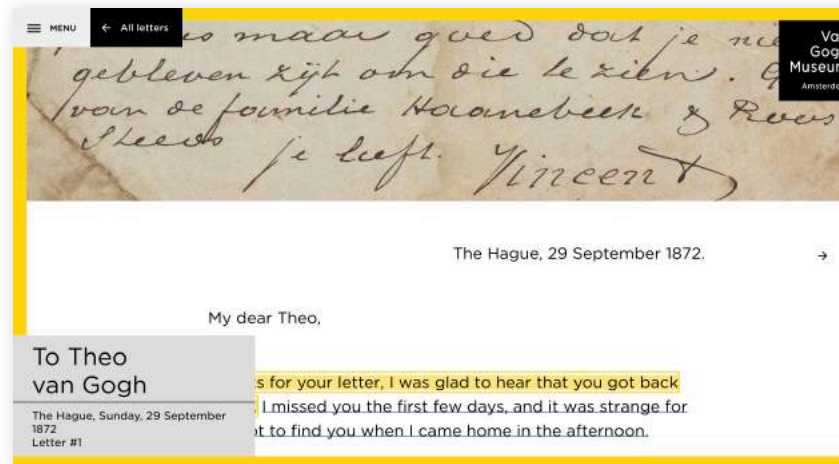


Figure 2.6. Letter highlights website

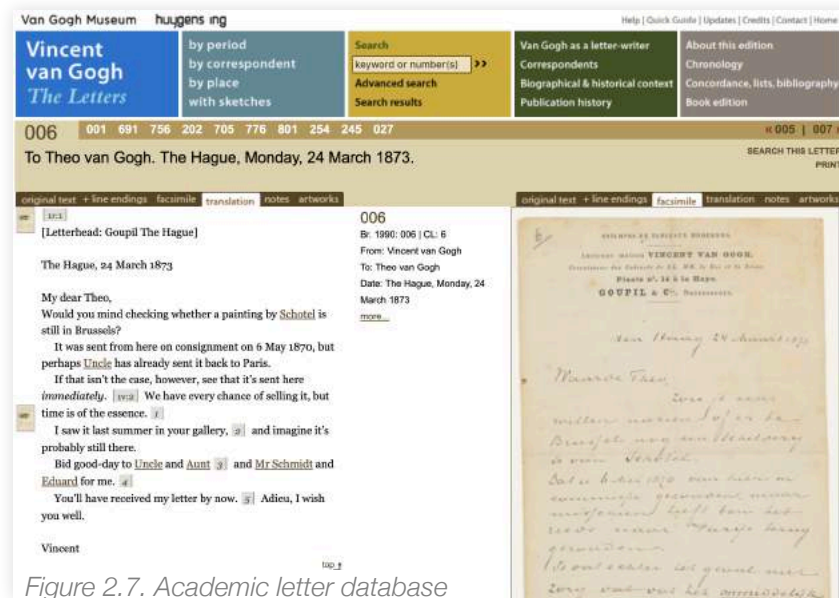


Figure 2.7. Academic letter database

Social media

By the moment of writing this chapter, the official account of VGM (@vangoghmuseum) has 1.5M followers, and almost 44K members in the Van Gogh Inspires Group on Facebook. The letters are perfect materials for posting on social media, because of their authenticity and intimacy. Sometimes the posts even feel like that they are posted by Van Gogh himself. After all, letters and social media are both tools for communicating and expressing.

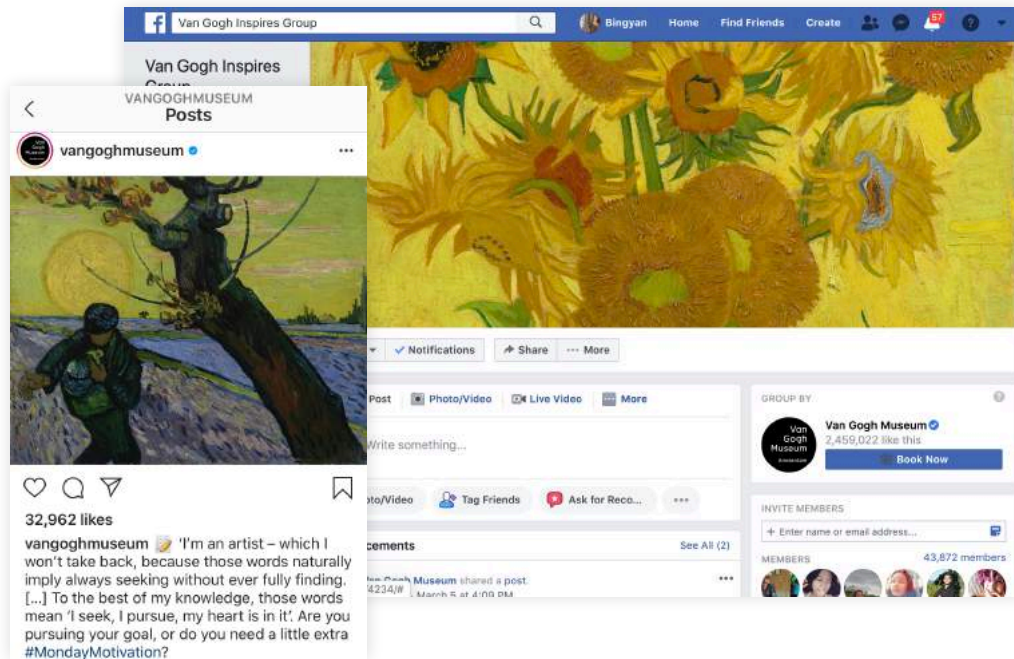


Figure 2.8. Instagram and Facebook group managed by VGM

Books of the letters

The letters were first published in 1914, and since then there are different editions and languages coming out. Currently the most comprehensive version is the 6 volumes edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, Nienke Bakker of the Van Gogh Museum in association with the Huygens Institute, richly annotated and illustrated.

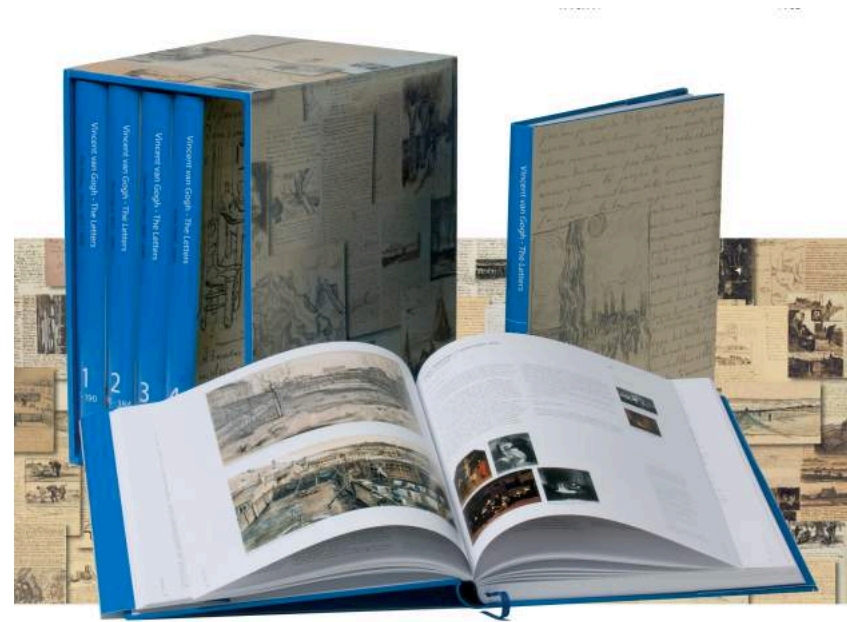


Figure 2.9. The series of letters in six volumes

VGM multimediatour guide (MMT)

The MMT is a tablet visitors can take with them during the visit, presenting rich-media content about Van Gogh's paintings, letters and stories. There are audio clips of the letter quotes read by a narrator, giving MMT users a plunge into Van Gogh's life with first-person tone of the letters.

In a research done during the winter of 2018-2019, around 30% visitors chose to use MMT, and the number is continuously increasing. (Van Gogh Museum, 2019)

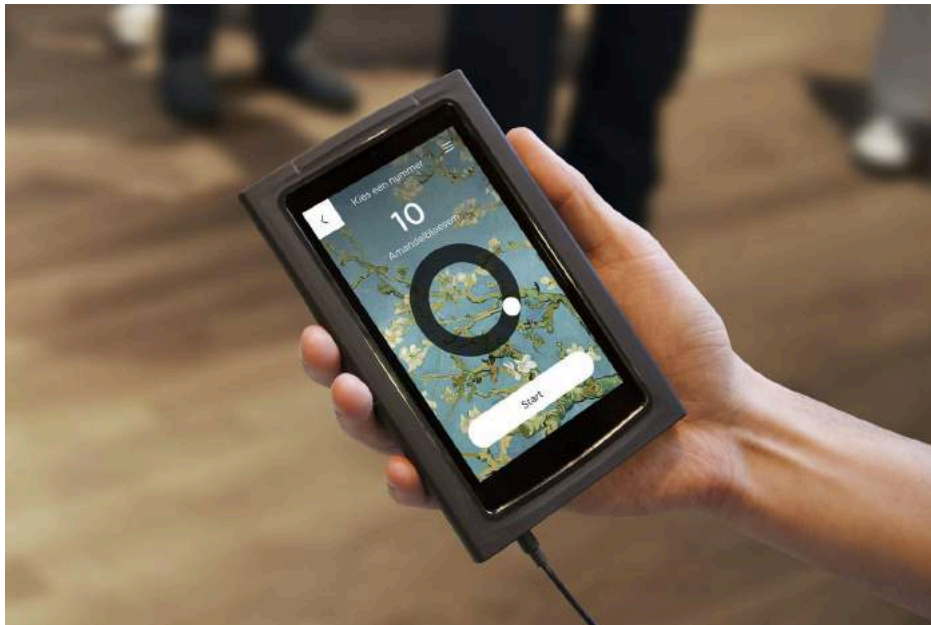


Figure 2.10. VGM multimediatour (MMT), photo by Fabrique

Podcast

The podcast *Van Gogh belicht: de brieven* (Van Gogh illuminates: the letters) is a series of podcast consisting of nine episodes. In each episode, a guest talks about Van Gogh's letters and his/her own related personal stories. Currently the podcasts are in Dutch and are only visible on VGM website if you set the language to Dutch.

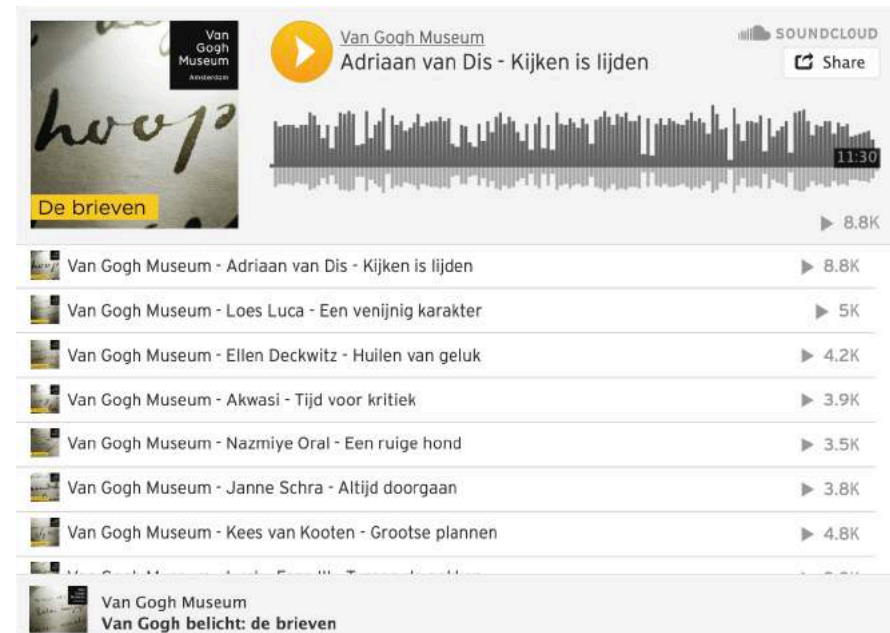
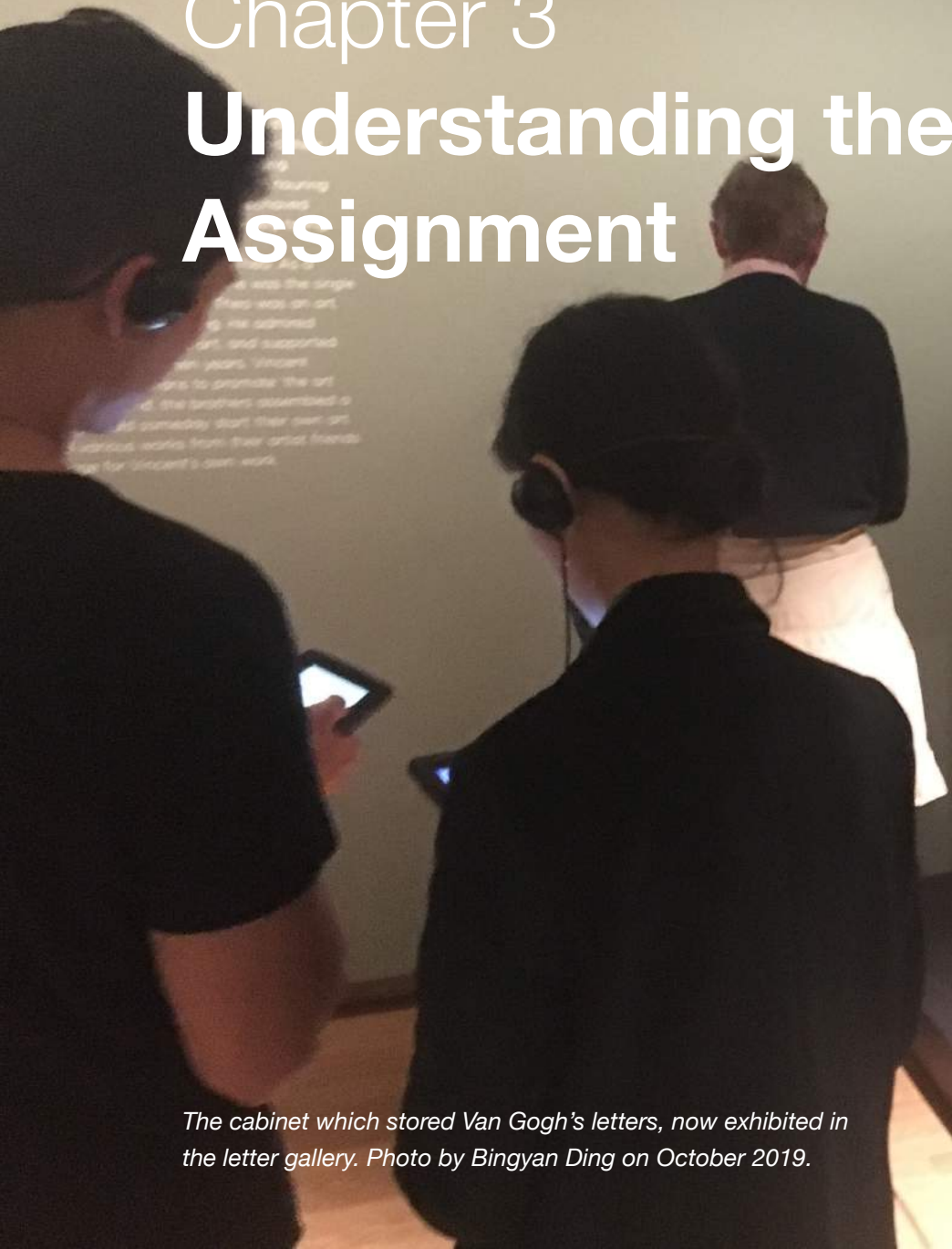


Figure 2.11. 'Van Gogh belicht: de brieven' podcast on VGM website

Chapter 3

Understanding the Assignment



The cabinet which stored Van Gogh's letters, now exhibited in the letter gallery. Photo by Bingyan Ding on October 2019.

Assignment from the Van Gogh Museum:

Redesign the letter section to create personal connections between visitors and Van Gogh.

3.1 Assignment background

The current lay-out used for the permanent collection has been in place since December 2014. Although visitors are still positive about the presentation, the museum thinks that after four years, it is time to evaluate the presentation and see where can be improved (Appendix 1). The letter section on the 2nd floor is one of the aspects to be tackled.

Current problems

The previous research about the 2nd floor shows some problems in the current letter presentation, such as being static and passive, only 8 audio letters, just 2 languages, only one multimedia form (audio), and the valuable original letters are completely missed. Moreover, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, the current letter section consists of several “side-paths” leading to other stories, and the museum now intends to condense all the different storylines in the presentation into a single all-encompassing storyline, namely “the letters of Van Gogh”, which will give visitors a glimpse of Van Gogh’s inner thoughts and feelings.

Plan on a new gallery

In line with the all-encompassing objectives of the entire permanent collection, the goal of the letter section is to **take visitors into Van Gogh’s mind and thoughts, so that they feel a personal connection with the man who was Vincent van Gogh.**

Sub-aims include:

1. To stir visitors’ emotions;
2. To introduce visitors to Van Gogh as a person (as well as Van Gogh as an artist);
3. To draw the public’s attention to original works of art and documents.

The museum will ask for third party designers to redesign the letter section in 2020, but before that they would like to involve visitors or even audiences outside the museum to generate insights for the definitive design. Thus, they initiated this graduation assignment.

3.2 The assignment

The goal of the letter section is to create personal connections between visitors and Van Gogh, then the assignment is to research on how to achieve this and to make design exemplifications.

There are two main parts in the assignment: **letters** and **personal connection**. Letters, of course, is in the goal because the museum wants insights for the redesign of the letter section; but why should there be the letter section in the first place? And why does VGM want to create personal connections?

Also, there are two perspectives in each design: the **design provider's** and the **users'**. The museum, as the design/service/experience provider, is eager to present letters to the public, but will visitors be interested? Will they say, "I just came here for the paintings and that's enough"?

Let's look at the questions one by one.

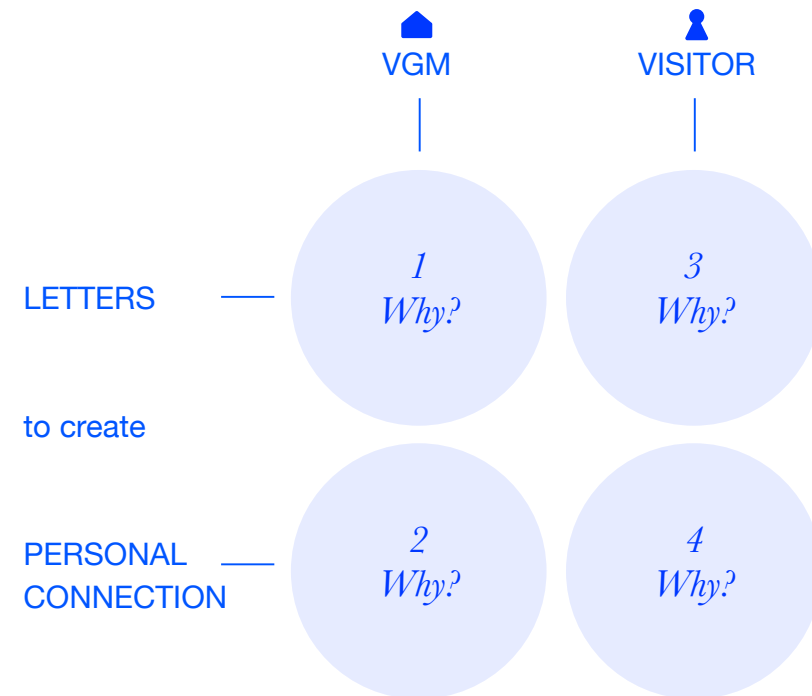


Figure 3.1. Investigating the value of the assignment

1. Why does VGM want to present letters?

It fits the VGM mission that aims to inspire people.

One doesn't have to be a fan of Van Gogh to appreciate his letters. The unique life stories are **intriguing and inspiring by themselves**, and the sincere words and strong emotion never fail to touch the audiences. Thus, it fits the VGM mission of "**enrich and inspire people**".

It embodies the unique value of VGM.

Although we can easily access the full content of the letters online, the original letters still worth special appreciation. The content itself bears the valuable first-hand witness of his life, and the **materiality of the original letters** brings people even closer to the real person Van Gogh. As the holder of the majority of the letters, VGM shows their unique value by presenting the letters.

It enriches the VGM experience.

VGM is renowned for the largest collection of Van Gogh's art. Since it's not likely to substantially extend the art collection, curators are striving to **enrich the VGM experience to continuously attract new visitors and re-visitors** -- and the letters of Van Gogh is just a hidden treasure to dig deeper.

2. Why does VGM want to achieve personal connection?

The answer seems obvious: **it helps to leave something in visitors' mind after their visits, thus makes the museum more impactful**. But I felt this might not be enough; there can be other alternatives to achieve such impact, such as "relevance", or simply "fun". I tried to find more concrete reasons to justify the starting point of personal connection.

First, let's look back at the mission of VGM, which aims at the width and depth of its impact:



Figure 1.2. Analysis of VGM mission

Based on this, we can see how PC echos with the mission:

PC can include more people (width).

The width can be achieved by **inclusivity**, as is stated by the direct client of the project - Education Department.

VGM not only wants to be the a pilgrimage site for art lovers; moreover, it “strives for **inclusivity**: making Van Gogh accessible to as many people as possible.” (Van Gogh Museum, 2017) If the museum can encourage people to **connect personally** with the art or ideas of the artist, it will be able to **connect with more** people.

PC can trigger deep feeling in audiences (depth).

Personal connection sounds ideal as the goal of this project because it makes impressions in audiences mind. But can there be other options? Why personal connection, not fun, or surprise, or any other ways to impress audiences?

As Nina Simon indicates in her book *Art of Relevance*, fun and sensation do stimulate visitor, but do not create deep and enduring emotional effect (Simon, 2016). They might even distract audiences away from the essence of what to be presented by attracting attentions to shallow levels. **Only when visitors find something matters to them personally, they will remember and get inspired from the museum experience.**

PC is more about the real person.

Now we have analyzed how PC fits the mission of the VGM, and there’s one more question in my mind: why **personal connection**, not **relevance** or other similar terms? This question might look word-splitting; but there is difference between PC or relevance. The phrase “personal connection” reveals that the desired connection is ultimately between visitors and **the person Van Gogh**, instead of between visitors and **the Van Gogh Museum**.

From the mission we can tell that the impact VGM wants to make is not limited in the physical space of the museum; **as long as something is about the person Van Gogh, there are opportunities for the museum to enrich and inspire them.** Then the museum, as the representative of Van Gogh, can better reach people all around the world, inside and outside the physical museum space.

Thus, a personal touch is stressed by setting “personal connection” as the goal.

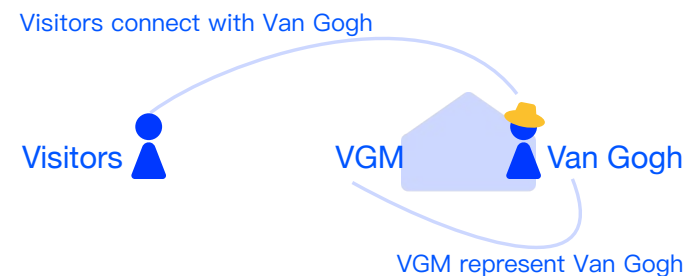


Figure 3.2. Relationship between visitors, Van Gogh and VGM

3. Why do visitors want to see the letters?

This question was overlooked in the beginning. Later it was addressed in a conversation with VGM curators Harma van Uffelen and Ann Blokland, then examined and answered in a visitor interview, which will be presented in Chapter 6.

Here's a preview of the answer: visitors are interested because they come to VGM for enjoying art, and **letters can help to understand art better.**

4. Why do visitors want to feel a personal connection?

When investigating user needs in product design, users usually don't know what they want, but they do know what product they like and dislike. Similarly, visitors don't have to actively "want" personal connection to enjoy it. **Inherently, human need to feel connected with others.** The connection with Van Gogh, who is so space-time-remote to us, is something beautiful by itself.

- 1. Letters fit with VGM mission that aims to inspire people.
- 2. Letters embody the unique value of VGM.
- 3. Letters enrich the VGM experience.

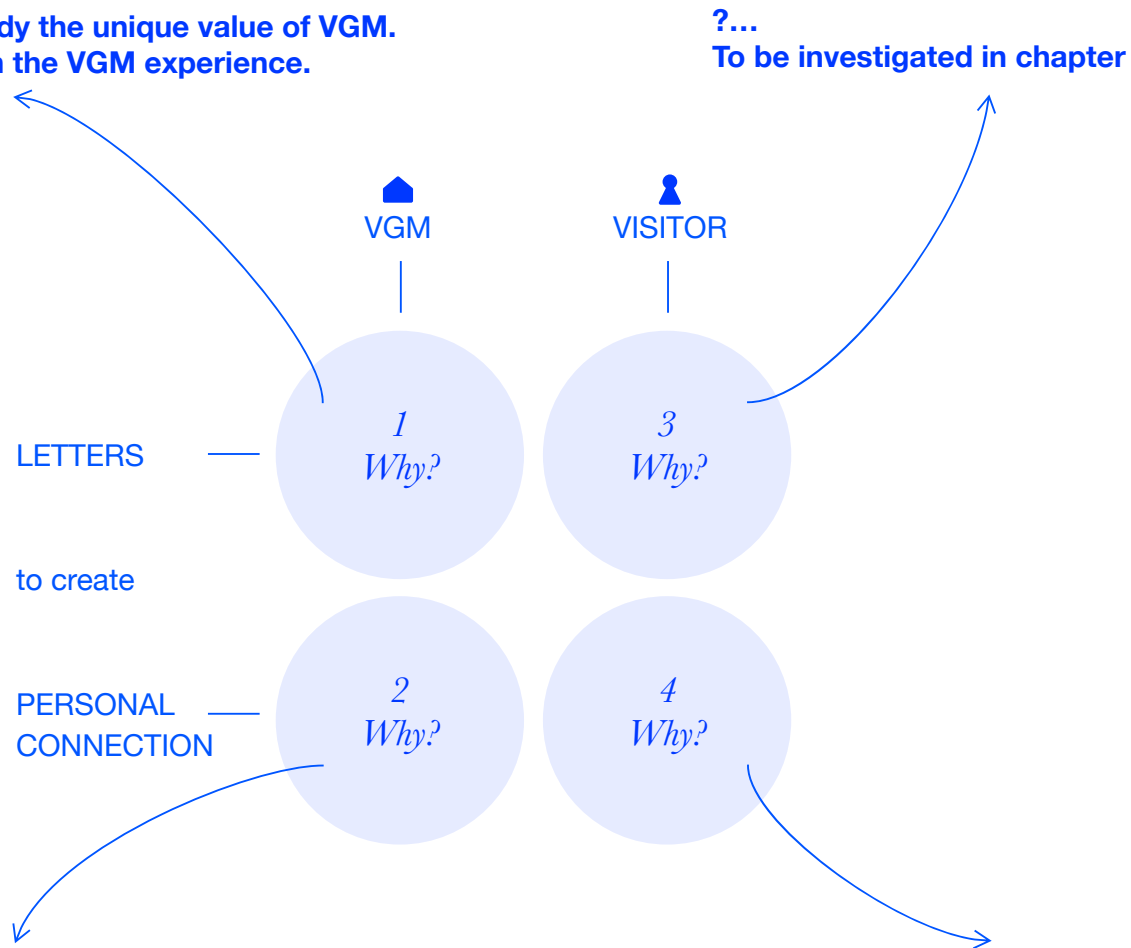


Figure 3.3. Analysis of the assignment in the perspective of VGM and visitor

- 1. PC can include more people (width).
- 2. PC can trigger deep feeling in audiences (depth).
- 3. PC is about the real person Van Gogh.

Because feeling connected is a basic human need.

3.3 Project scopes

This assignment will:

1. research on what is personal connection and how to create it;
2. research on how to create personal connections with Van Gogh;
3. generate practical suggestions on the designing for personal connections through letters;
4. generate design examples revolving around the letter section.

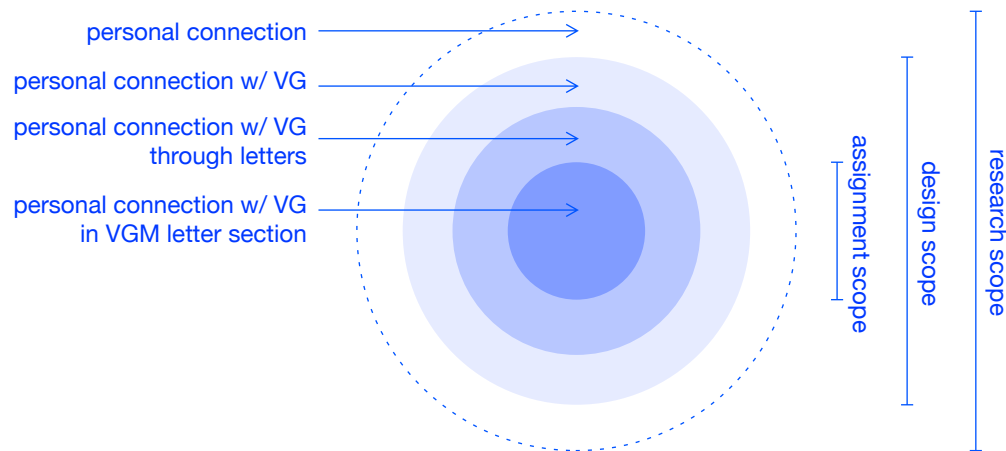


Figure 3.4. Scope of the project

Next, we'll take the first step into these scopes by reviewing related literatures.

Chapter 4 Literature Review

10:09 AM Fri Mar 13

THE ART OF RELEVANCE

Our differences are like individual keys crowding our key rings, bouncing around in our pockets. They open certain doors and not others.

We start with the keys we were given, by our parents, teachers, and peers. They are partly internally defined and partly determined by societal norms. These norms define what doors we see as appealing, or open to us, as we navigate potential experiences. This doesn't mean we can't transcend these categories and acquire new keys. We can and we do, every day. But we continue to carry the keys given to us, even if they're not the ones we would have chosen.

"Art of Relevance" by Nina Simon, a book that discusses the relevance of cultural institutes to their audiences.
That's why many bids for relevance start by appealing to the keys we already have. These are the front doors, the obvious ones. Harley motorcyclists. Pub science for engineers. African-American Month. Rock concerts for Christian "Hey number threes!

that experience would be relevant to me? Why didn't it yield to of meaning I had hoped for? If that Latina mom encounters uninspired, superficial cultural festivals, she may opt out in the no longer assuming they are relevant or valuable.

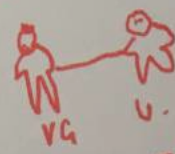
But if she walks through the door and the experience she'll keep the key. She walks out satisfied and appreciative.stitution as a place that offers satisfaction. She walks out of what else it can offer her.

The more you start to matter to people, the more opportunities to go deeper into the room of what you come back and ask for more. They will demand their own doors.

If you are struggling with this tension, rejoice. It means you want to go further with you. It also means they expect people experience relevance gradually over time, them back to the same room again and again, for different times. Institutionally, we cultivate relevance people to go further with us, deeper into the room.

That's what happened with Sangye Hawke. She came to MAH as a visitor through the front door. She participated in an interactive exhibit, and it unlocked a digital archive to make

Use VG
Sticker in
booklet:



Do you want

4.1 Previous research in VGM

Visitors' concerns in visiting VGM

In a previous design project at VGM, four types of visitor concerns - the motivations for them to visit VGM - were defined based on the visitor research (Zhang, 2019). The four concerns are:

1. Understand Van Gogh
2. Learn Art Techniques
3. Enjoy an Aesthetic Experience
4. Find Out the Landmarks

The visitors' concerns are rooted in every aspect of their VGM experience, including the letter section experience.

→ How to satisfy visitor concerns in letter section? (Note: the text in blue means a translation from research findings to design guidance.)



Figure 4.1. Four main concerns of VGM visitors (Zhang, 2019)

4.2 Emotion and Personal Connection

If you search for “personal connection” or “emotional connection” in Google scholar, you will get results from various fields. Taking a closer look, you will find the same term has been used in distinct contexts and meanings. For example, papers about “personal connection” can describe the benefits to create bonding between salesmen and customers, or how to design branding strategies that will make target groups like and trust the brand.

Maybe it's because emotional impacts and personal connections are so important in various fields, that people are using them without unitive definitions. So I looked at theories about **emotion** and **personal connection**, to understand what exactly is the impact I'm going to research and design for.

Relevance Theory

Relevance theory is a framework for understanding utterance interpretation (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). This theory aims to explain the well recognized fact that communicators usually convey much more information with their utterances than what is contained in their literal sense - in the case of this project, the museum is the communicator while the visitors being receivers.

Wilson & Sperber study how we transmit and receive information, mostly through speech. They argue that there are two criteria that make information relevant:

1. How likely that new information is to stimulate a positive cognitive effect — to **yield new conclusions that matter to you**.
2. How much effort is required to obtain and absorb that new information. **The lower the effort, the higher the relevance**.

→ There are two part to work on: to make the letters easy to comprehend, and to help people identify information that matters to them.

Emotion and Concern Model

Personal connection is an emotional experience; as the connections that people feel vary, they will get different emotions. Thus, I looked at the concern model that explains emotion elicitation, adapted by Desmet (2007).

The concern model indicates that emotions arise from encounters with products/designs/information that are appraised as having **beneficial or harmful consequences for the individual's concerns**, that is, his or her major goals, motives, well-being, or other sensitivities (Desmet, 2017).

Adapted to this project, the products/designs/information would be the letters, and when visitors/readers encounter it with their own concerns, appraisals will happen, then emotions will be triggered (Figure 4.2).

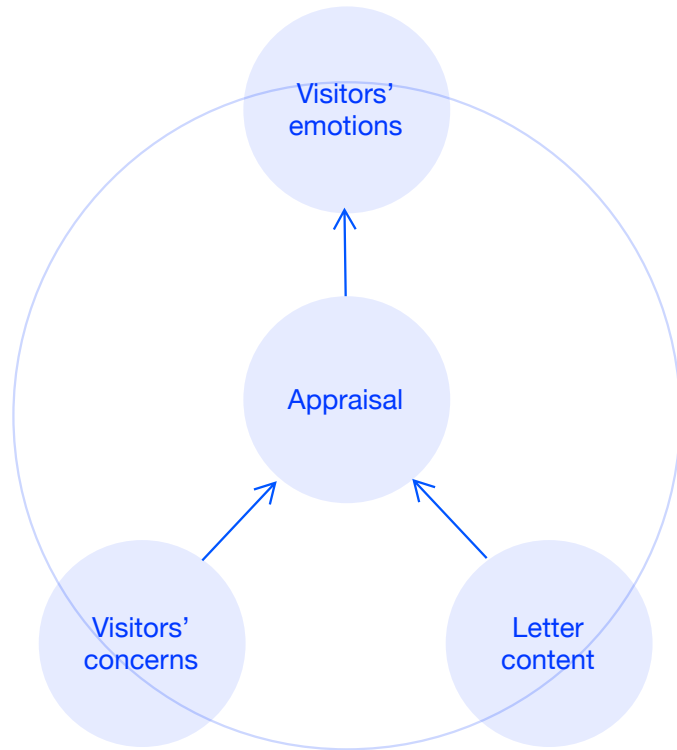


Figure 4.2. Concern model in the context of letter project, adapted by Bingyan Ding

The word “concern” is already mentioned when introducing Zhang’s research about **visitor concerns in VGM**, but it’s different from the one in the **concern model**. The visitor concerns in VGM are **contextual concerns** in the context of VGM (e.g. visitors feel satisfied when seeing *The Sunflower* painting, because the concern of “finding out landmarks” is enhanced), while the concerns in the concern model are abstract and **universal concerns**(e.g. visitors feel loving when seeing the story between Van Gogh and Theo, because

the visitors echo with the family love, and the concern of “seeking security” is enhanced).

Here we can see, visitors’ contextual and universal concerns are the key to trigger the “positive cognitive effect”, namely “feeling that something matters to us” in Nina Simon’s words in her book *The Art of Relevance*.

→ What universal concerns of visitors/readers can be found in Van Gogh’s letters?

Empathy in Psychology

Empathy is **the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference**, that is, the capacity to place oneself in another’s position. (Bellet & Maloney, 1991)

Without defining the relationship between personal connection and empathy, we can already say that this is obviously (one of) an effect we would love to achieve in this project. There are thousands of research examining this concept; in the quick literature review, I learnt that there are **two layers in empathy: understanding and feeling** the emotion of others.

→ Would “Van Gogh’s emotions” be the key to trigger empathy, thus personal connection?

4.3 Inspirations from other fields

Character Identification in Screenwriting

Create personal connections between the character and audience - this is what the novels and films strives to achieve, as well as this assignment. Such practice is called **character identification** in screen writing. So I was curious to know if there are some common techniques or classical principles to achieve this.

Screen writer Michael Hauge (2011) suggests to put the character who shows likable traits and power in inner flaws or outer struggles. Another professional in this field, John Truby (2008) concludes that audiences will be engaged with a character chasing his/her goal while get hindered by unmet needs due to his/her flaws.

From this glance at screenwriting, I found **the power of conflicts** when telling stories about a person. There's no scarcity in Van Gogh's goals, struggles and conflicts to present to the audiences, however, should we present a Van Gogh as a well-drawn character, tailored by the museum, or it's more meaningful and sincere to give people the freedom to identify the Van Gogh in their mind?

Social Penetration Theory in Sociology

In the above description, the relationship between Van Gogh and visitors is like between a story character and the audiences, but it can also be among real life individuals. Then I looked at theories explain the connecting process in interpersonal interaction.

Social penetration theory was first formulated by psychologists (Altman & Taylor, 1973) to understand **relationship development between individuals**. It states that the relationship development occurs primarily through **self-disclosure** - intentionally revealing personal information such as personal motives, desires, feelings, thoughts, and experiences to others. Through self-disclosure, relationship development follows particular trajectory, moving from superficial layers of exchanges to more intimate ones.

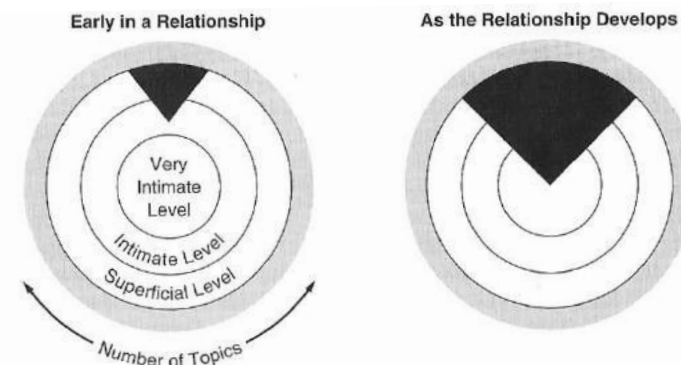


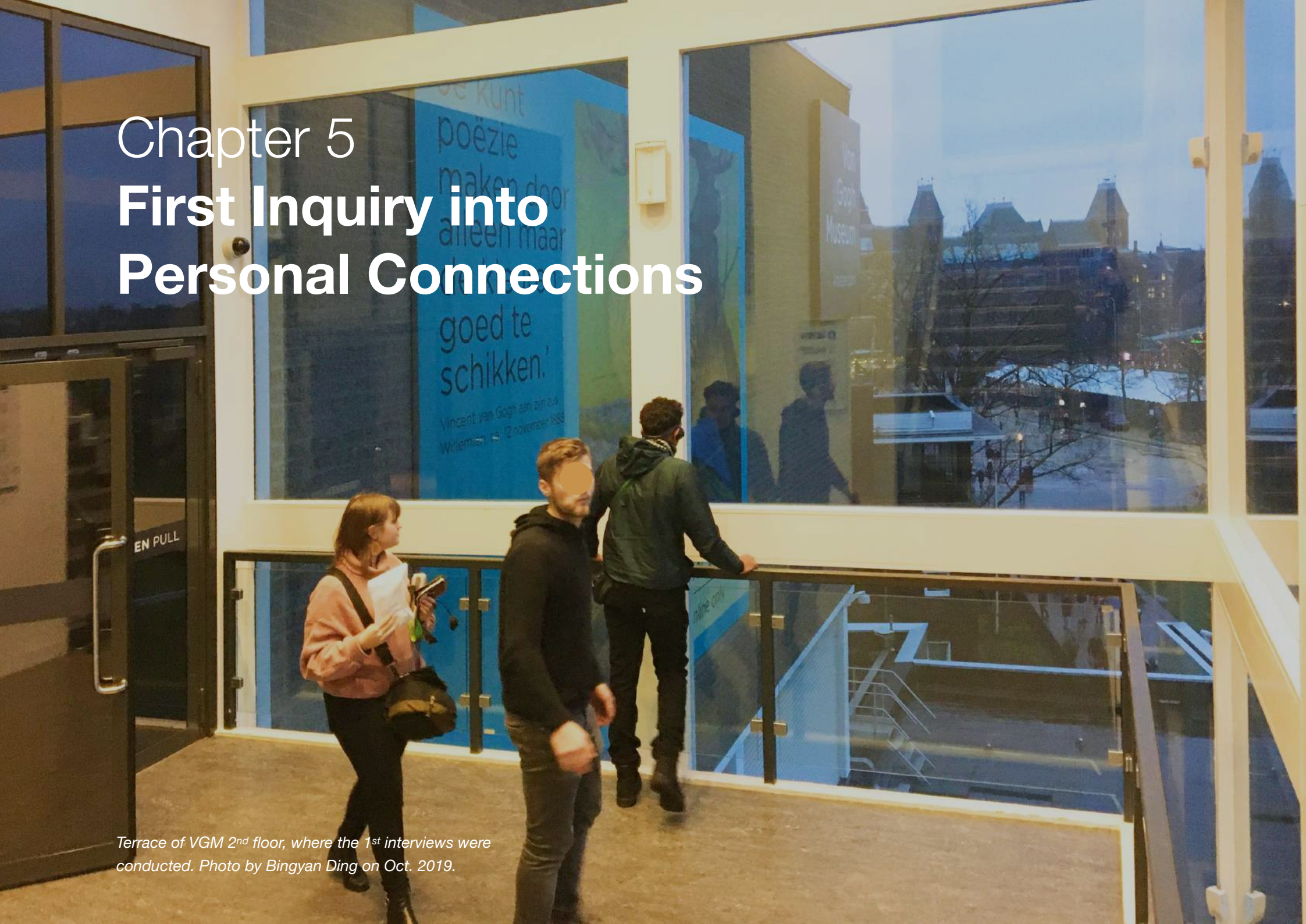
Figure 4.3. Altman and Taylor's social penetration theory, 1973

The mutual self-disclosure might not be feasible in the case of connecting with Van Gogh, but I'm inspired by the idea of interpersonal interaction:

→ If visitors can intentionally share something about themselves or at least interact with Van Gogh, they might feel more connected.

Chapter 5

First Inquiry into Personal Connections



Terrace of VGM 2nd floor, where the 1st interviews were conducted. Photo by Bingyan Ding on Oct. 2019.

5.1 Overview of user research activities

The next chapters will discuss the following user research activities in different scopes:

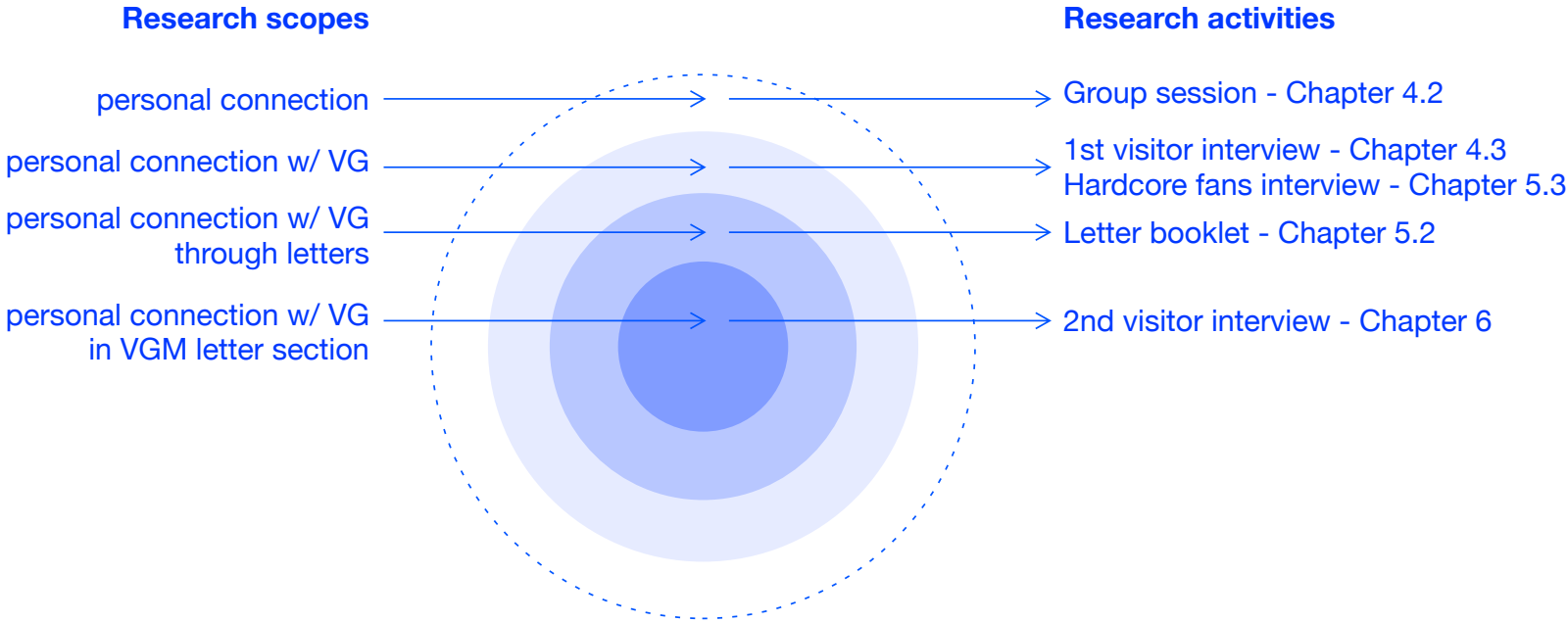


Figure 5.1. user research activities in different scopes

5.2 Group session

Research Goal

To define personal connection in a bottom-up way.

Method

Focus group × 4 participants

Research Questions

When do participants feel personal connection and why?

First I want to know: what exactly is personal connection? In the literature review I didn't find a concrete definition, but it's something we can all tell when we have the feeling. So I decided to understand personal connection in a bottom-up way: ask about it first, then find patterns to define it. I invited four friends of mine to discuss:

1. Can you think of people who is not your real life acquaintance that you feel personal connection with? e.g. celebrities, film characters, strangers on streets, ...
2. Why do you feel it?
3. Based on what you recalled, can you describe the feeling of personal connection?

The answers to question 2 "why do you feel the personal connection with certain person" were clustered together with quotes from other

research in the next chapter. The following quote cards are their definition of personal connection.

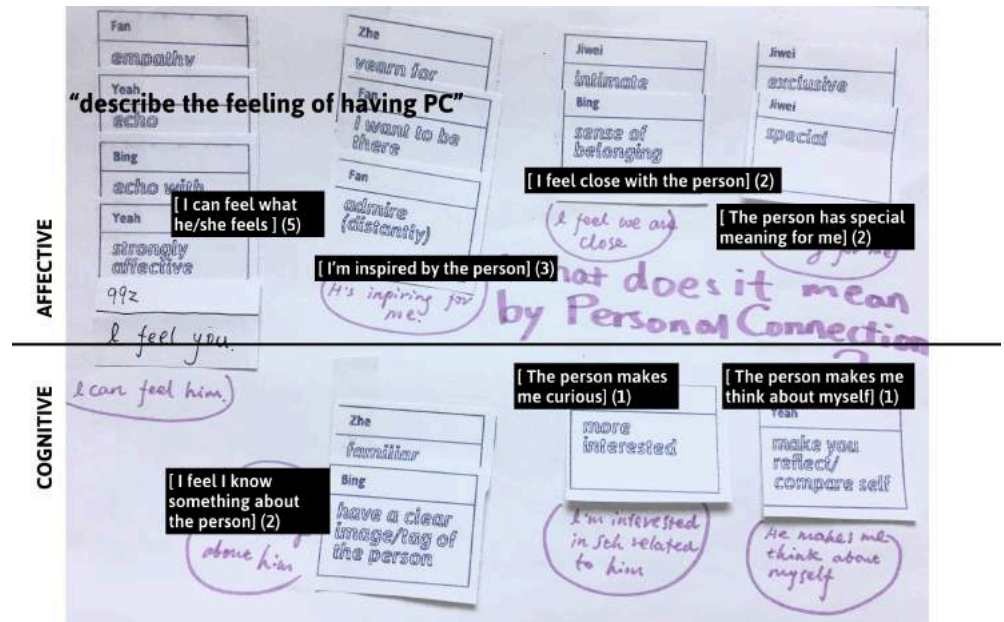


Figure 5.2. Clusters of description of the feeling of personal connection

Participants' answers gave me some keywords about personal connection, which can be used for inspirations in future designs:



Figure 5.3. Keywords that describes what's personal connection

This session discussed about the abstract concept of personal connection, which is not directly related Van Gogh. Next I went into the museum to understand the current visitor experience about the letters and connection with Van Gogh.

5.3 First visitor interview

Research Goal

To find out the current experience of the 2nd floor which tells Van Gogh's life stories, and their impression about letters.

Method

On site interview × 10 visitors

Interview questions

1. What's most impressive in the 2nd floor and why?
2. What interest you about Van Gogh's letters and why?
3. Do you feel a personal connection with Van Gogh in your visiting so far?

I had planed to conduct a 10-minute interview per participant in the museum cafe, however none of the visitors was willing to sit down for a talk. So I had to change to stopping visitors at the terrace of second floor with very short questions. A floor plan with photos of different sections were presented to help visitors recall their journey.

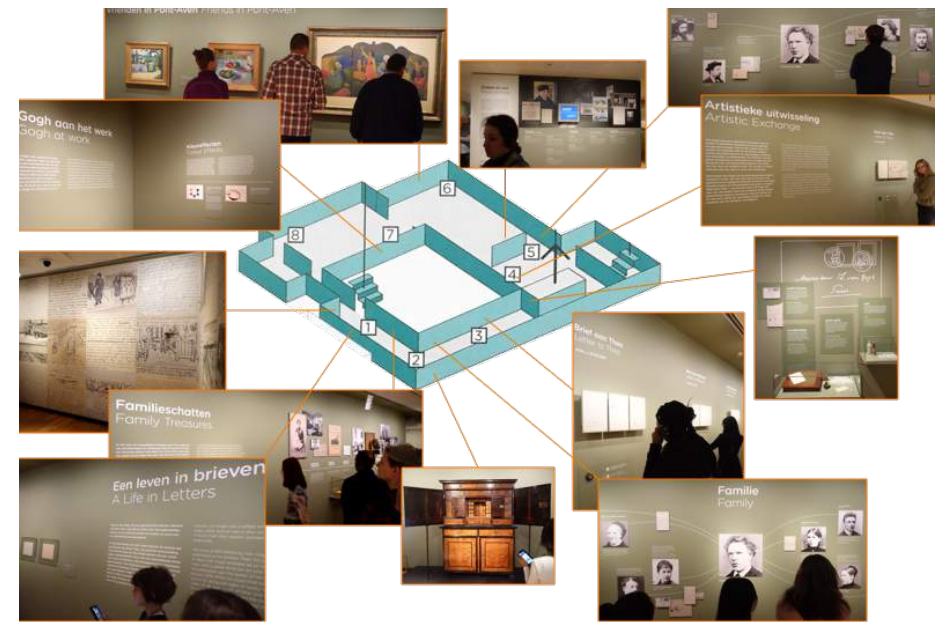


Figure 5.4. The floor plan of 2nd floor was used in the interview

Takeaways

1. Letters are overlooked due to effortful perceiving, which makes it hard to create further emotional impacts, including the feeling of personal connection.

When asked about what's most interesting about the letters, 6 out of 10 person said they didn't pay attention to the letters.

→ Easy perceiving is the first step for further impacts.

2. Handwritings are real and direct that give visitors a feeling of "a real person".

Among the few answers to "what's most interesting about Van Gogh letters", 3 person mentioned the handwriting, because "it reflects emotions", "it represent the real situation", "it's just beautiful".

→ Emphasize Van Gogh's handwriting in some way, e.g. animate it and project it as immersive patterns.

3. Relationships with others triggers visitors' interests in Van Gogh as a person.

Two visitors mentioned his friends or families are interesting, as relationships with others is something everyone can relate to.

→ How to tell Van Gogh's stories through his relationships with others?

4. The emotional side of Van Gogh impresses visitor.

They mentioned "the cut ear", "strong emotion in the color", "passion showed in his paintings and stories" as the most impressive things in the 2nd floor.

→ Highlight Van Gogh's emotions.

5. Having expectations makes the visit more fulfilling.

When asked about the personal connection, visitors mentioned what they know about Van Gogh before their visits. Having expectations about something is already a kind of personal connection.

→ Trigger visitors expectations before they come to the letters section.

5.4 The process of creating personal connections

So far, the visitor interview and group session have revealed a general path of forming connections with a person who is not a real life acquaintance, shown in the flow chart below.



Figure 5.5. Process of creating a personal connection

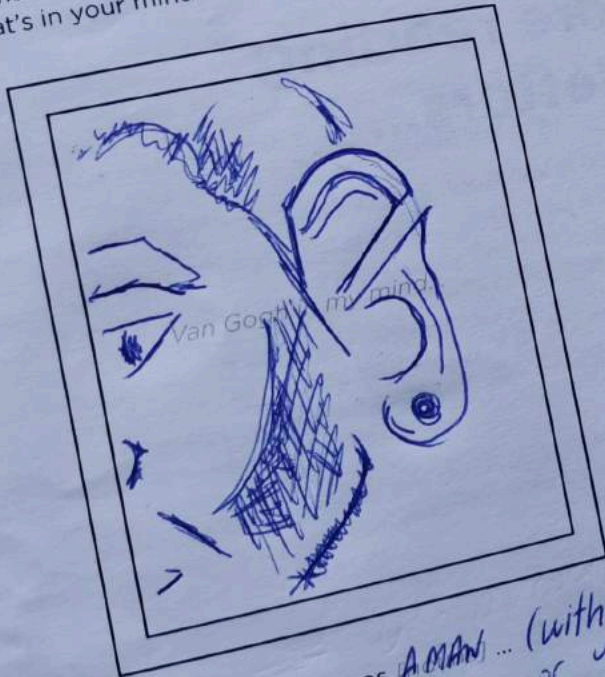
However, the quick session and the short interview didn't tell us much about how it would be like to connect with Van Gogh, because the participants so far haven't connected with Van Gogh yet. The research activities in the next chapter will step closer to the topic, looking into people's thoughts and feelings about Van Gogh and his letters.

Chapter 6

Dive Deeper in Letters and Personal Connections

How do you see Van Gogh?

What's your impression on Van Gogh? Draw a portrait for him (no need to make arts, scribbles are good enough ;) You can also describe what's in your mind with nouns, verbs, and adjectives.



I see him as A MAN ... (without an EAR or with a broken ear)

Mike person...

How do you see Van Gogh's art?

How do you feel and understand these paintings? Describe it on the "before reading letters" column on the postcards.



BEFORE
I'm feel SAD.
There is something
more big of our lives
that we are not able
to understand.

AFTER



Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890) Head of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette
Antwerp; January - February 1886, oil on canvas, 32.3 x 24.8 cm
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

6.1 Letter Booklets

Research Goal

To find out how readers connect with Van Gogh by really reading the letters.

Method

Letter booklet, finished by 10 participants

Research Questions

1. What are participants' expectations to the letters?
 2. What do they find interesting in the letters?
 3. What themes do they like most and why?
 4. How can letters affect people's understanding of VG and his art?
 5. What personal connections can they find after reading his letters?
-

To understand how people think about the letters, the most direct way, of course, is to let people read the letters. I made a booklet consisting of eight letters of different themes and some related questions to fill in (Figure 6.2; see the full booklet in Appendix 4).

The themes and corresponding letters were selected with the help of an intern at VGM, Joy Ravenswaaij, who is working on classifying the letter content. As mentioned in the first chapter, the museum has

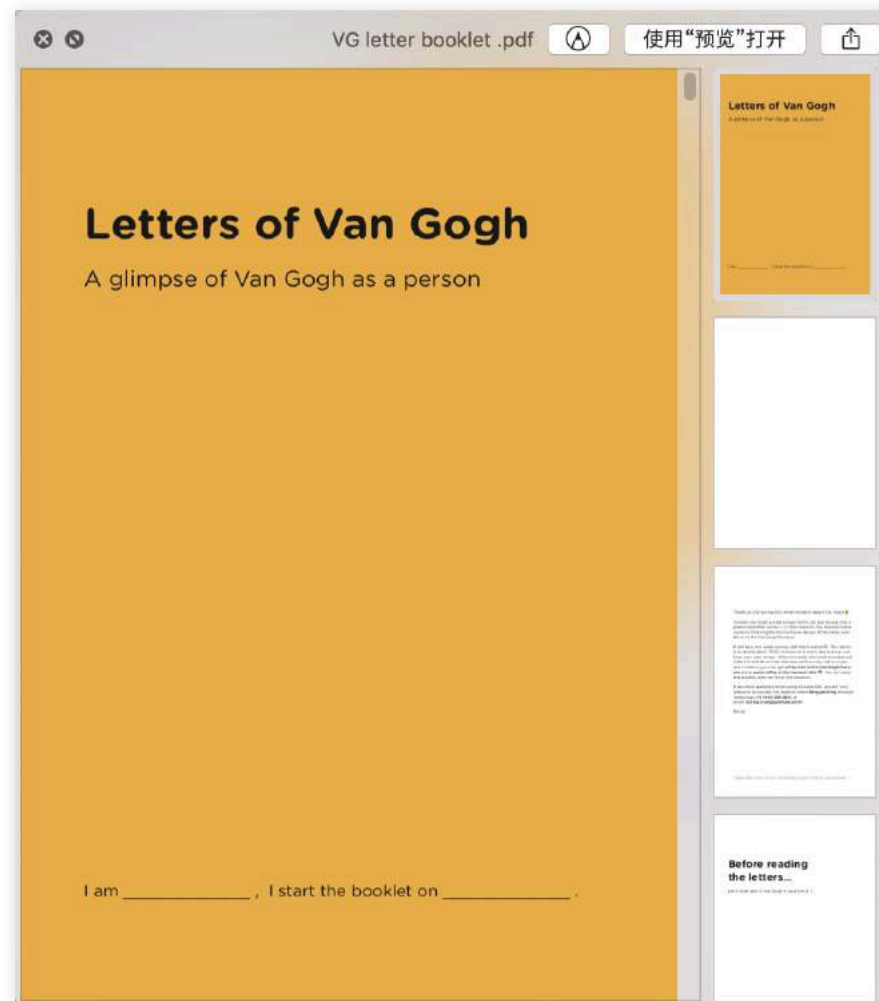
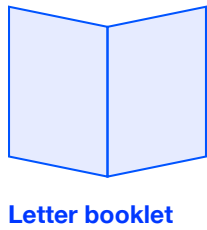


Figure 6.1. Pages of the booklet

defined some themes of the letters. Joy and I adjusted and selected the eight themes to present in the booklet.



<p>Part 1. Questions before reading letters</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understanding of Van Gogh and his art? 2. Expectation of the letters?
<p>Part 2. 8 letters of different themes</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inspiration 2. Family 3. Struggle 4. Romance 5. Perseverance 6. Art creation 7. Friendship 8. Illness
<p>Part 3. Questions after reading letters</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Any new understanding of Van Gogh and his art? 2. Any personal connection?

Figure 6.2. Structure of the booklet

A discussion on the subjectivity of the booklet content happened between me and Joy. I wanted to know people's opinions on letters based on these selected themes and the letter of each theme are not representative enough to stand for the letters in general (e.g. a Family letter about the fight between Van Gogh and his father and one about his homesickness communicate distinct information and feelings). However, it can be argued that since the research looks for more abstract patterns rather than feedbacks to specific content, the lack of representativity would not be a problem.

The booklets were distributed to 10 participants, who vary in nationality, gender, profession and familiarity to Van Gogh, and then collected one week after. Then half of them were followed by a short

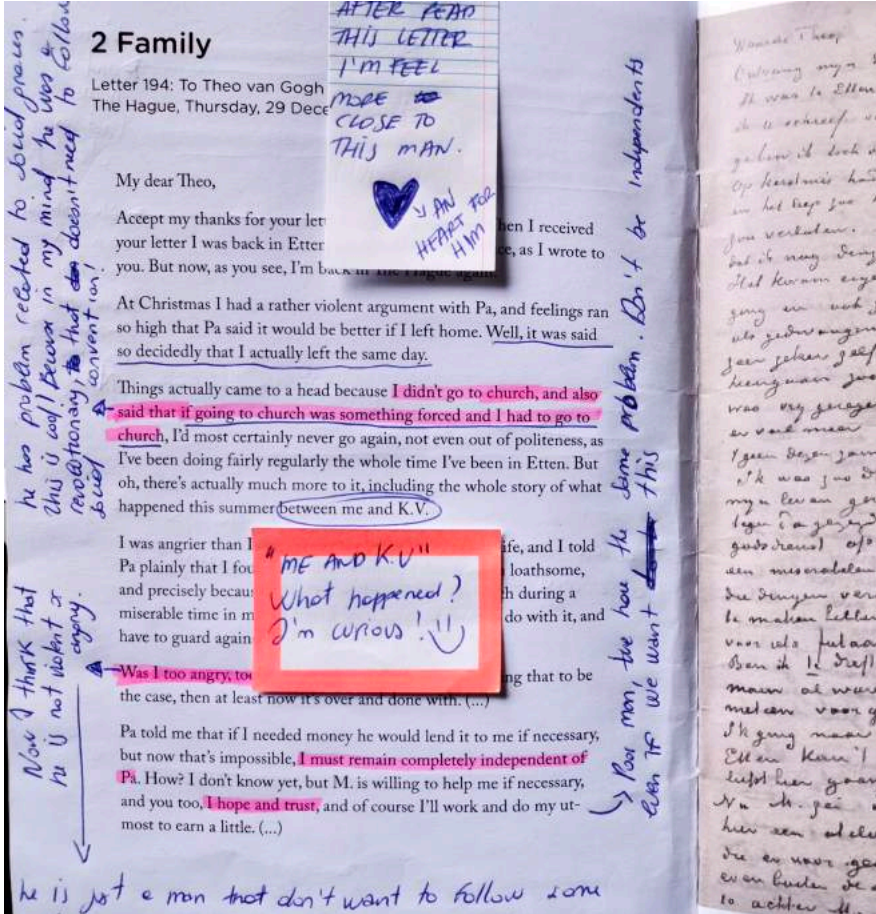


Figure 6.3. A participant's notes in the booklet

interview to go through the booklet to explain the highlights during the working on this booklet. (see Appendix 5 for the results of the main questions).

Takeaways

1. Readers are interested in the art-related letters, because art is the most familiar theme to them.

Surprisingly, although more people said they are interested in his life, most mentioned letters that they like are art-related (Backstories of artworks/Inspirations) (7/10: 7 out of 10 participants). They like such themes because “it’s something to expect because audiences already know paintings as a part of the stories”, “it’s interesting to actually SEE what he described”.

2. Negative emotions bound people.

Themes about negative feelings (Struggles / Illness / Perseverance) (6/10) are also popular. They like them because the struggles, no matter inside one’s heart or from outside world, are common in everyone’s life, and when they see it happened to a great artist, they feel relatable, relieved and encouraged.

3. Social relationships of Van Gogh can make him more real, but require contextual information.

Themes about his social relationships (Family / Romance / Friendship) were reacted differently. Some participants directly skipped them because “they are too personal to relate”, “you need more contextual information to read those stories”, while other participants liked them because “such stories made him more human”.

4. People tend to see the most relatable aspect to them in Van Gogh.

People change their views on Van Gogh after reading letters, and the changed views are different from people — they tend to find the most relatable aspect in Van Gogh.

In the beginning, their understanding of Van Gogh were quite consistent: He’s an “artist/painter” (8/10); he is a crazy/weird(4) creative(3/10) passionate(2/10) person. But after reading letters, the answers to the same questions varied: a designer (participant 1) found Van Gogh as a designer, and participant 2 who values family and friends found Van Gogh as a caring person.

Everyone has their own perspective - obvious as the statement is, I was still surprised when seeing participants’ diverse answers.

→ [How to facilitate people to explore the letters by themselves?](#)

5. People love to say “me too!” to what they resonate with.

Looking at the notes participants made between the lines, it’s interesting to see how they were eager to express the same experiences or feelings shared between them and Van Gogh.

→ [Could the design facilitate readers’ behavior of expressing resonance?](#)

6.2 Interview with Van Gogh fans

Research Goal

To find out how those deep personal connections with Van Gogh are developed.

Method

Online interview × 4 participants

Research Questions

1. How was your first encounter with Van Gogh?
2. How is the connection between you?
3. When did you feel this personal connection and why?
4. How did the letters play a role in your connection with Van Gogh?

The booklete participants have different familiarities and “fan level” to Van Gogh, which can represent VGM visitors to some degree. But I’m also curious about how those “hardcore” Van Gogh fans have developed connections with the person. If we know the answers, maybe we can grab the essence and incorporate it in the museum experience. Next, I interviewed four Van Gogh fans, trying to find out what makes Van Gogh so important to them.



Figure 6.4. My post in the “Van Gogh Inspire” Facebook group

The initial plan was to find Van Gogh lovers in “Van Gogh Inspire” Facebook group, a group officially created by VGM, in which people all around the world share their creations and thoughts inspired by Van Gogh. I posted about my project, asking if they are interested in sharing with me their personal stories with Van Gogh through online interviews.

Several people reacted, but I only successfully interviewed one person. Then I found three more Van Gogh lovers among my personal network.

In each interview, participants openly talked about their connection with Van Gogh. I recorded the special moments in developing attachments to Van Gogh and asked them to describe their connection with him.

	Fan 1 Indian, artist, 56-y-o	Fan 2 Chinese, designer, 26-y-o	Fan 3 Chinese, illustrator, 28-y-o	Fan 4 Chinese, engineer, 37-y-o
Starting point	Got attracted by Bedroom in Arles	Had a dream like VG's Starry Night in childhood	Knew his art and stories as a kid, attracted but not touched	My friend said my painting style looks like Van Gogh's
Special moments	(This participant didn't talk about other the moments, only mentioned many scattered life stories about Van Gogh: ear accident, "his desire to love and be loved, he wanted to destroy himself, ...)	Read about his biography but not touched due to lack of authenticity Visited VGM and saw his authentic works with real stories (a sand in a painting) Read his letters and find other side of VG	Read his letters in English which felt so much more vivid than Chinese version Some personal experience made me start to really understand VG's feelings His description of loneliness relieved me when I was alone in France	After knowing much about him, I start to view him as a very normal person, an old friend But I still find something new about him every year... Go to MoMA and see his paintings again and again Read his life stories and be touched by the contrast between his struggling life and his passionate art
What connect you and VG?	Both of us don't fit into the society	His courage of being real and persuing his dream inspires me. What if I can be like him...	My personality was partly impacted by him when growing up. I aspire his being on the road thr whole life. I aspire his being on the road thr whole life.	I want to be couragous and determined like him in my dream of making art.

Figure 6.5. Memorable moments mentioned by four Van Gogh fans



Figure 6.7. Works of illustrator Tournesol, one of the interviewed fans

Takeaways

1. Deep connections are based on deep understanding of the person.

The 4 fans didn't merely talk much about his art nor his well-known stories, but expressed their understandings of Van Gogh thoughts and feelings beneath the fact.

→ How can we present deeper reasonings beneath the fact to visitors effortlessly?

2. Deep connections take time.

The 4 fans have known Van Gogh for a long time, allowing them to build deep understandings mentioned above .

→ How can the museum reach visitors after their visit in VGM, to create long-term communication?

3. In deep connections, Van Gogh usually means an idealized self.

Fan 2, 3 and 4 are surprisingly similar in their connection with VG: "I want to be like him."

→ What are most inspiring features of Van Gogh? Can we concentrate such features in the exhibition?

6.3 Understanding the connections better



Figure 6.8. Clusters of quotes about personal connection from previous research activities

What exactly are the connections with Van Gogh and how does that happen? I clustered all quotes that explain why certain connections happen, and the quotes with yellow highlighting bar are from booklet research and interview, which are directly about Van Gogh. Then four types of connections were defined — people connect with Van Gogh who is:

1. An inspiring model
2. A suffering soul
3. A likable mate
4. A real person you can reach

These four types are explained in the next page.

| AN INSPIRING MODEL



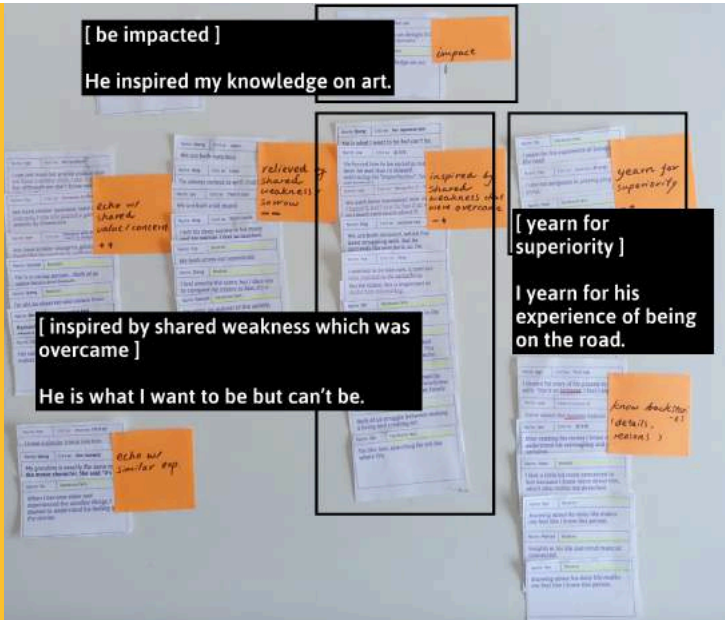
You are inspired by him because he overcame your shared weakness or he had your desired ability. He is your idealised self.

You feel ...

inspired / admiring / courageous

about VG's ...

goals
e.g. pursuing art
perseverance
e.g. courage in difficulties
talents
e.g. thoughts on art



[be impacted]
He inspired my knowledge on art.

[yearn for superiority]
I yearn for his experience of being on the road.

[inspired by shared weakness which was overcome]
He is what I want to be but can't be.

shared weakness

relieved shared weakness / sorrow

inspired by shared weakness which was overcome


yearn for superiority

know backstories (details, -es, -ness)

echo w/ shared value / concern

echo w/ similar exp.

| A SUFFERING SOUL



You feel relieved when you found you share the same weakness/sorrow. He triggers your self-pity.

You feel ...

sad / compassionate / accompanied

about VG's ...

inner struggles
e.g. mental issues
outer difficulties
e.g. short of money, conflicts with families & friends



[relieved by shared weakness/sorrow]
"His description about loneliness gave me courage when I was lonely in France."
"I'm artist, an outcast of the society, just like him."

shared weakness

relieved by shared weakness / sorrow

inspired by shared weakness which was overcome

yearn for superiority

know backstories (details, -es, -ness)

echo w/ shared value / concern

space for self-compass

| A REAL PERSON YOU CAN REACH



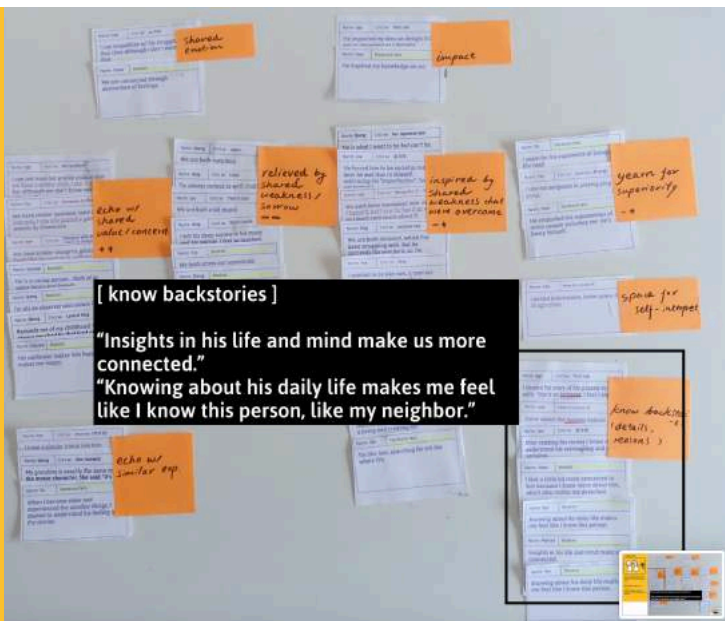
You know something intimate and authentic about him. You feel you have an insider point of view about his life.

You feel ...

reachable / close / familiar

about VG's ...

daily life details
e.g. a walk in London
social relationship
e.g. families & friends



[know backstories]
"Insights in his life and mind make us more connected."
"Knowing about his daily life makes me feel like I know this person, like my neighbor."

shared weakness

relieved by shared weakness / sorrow

inspired by shared weakness which was overcome

yearn for superiority


know backstories (details, -es, -ness)

echo w/ shared value / concern

echo w/ similar exp.

space for self-compass

| A LIKABLE MATE



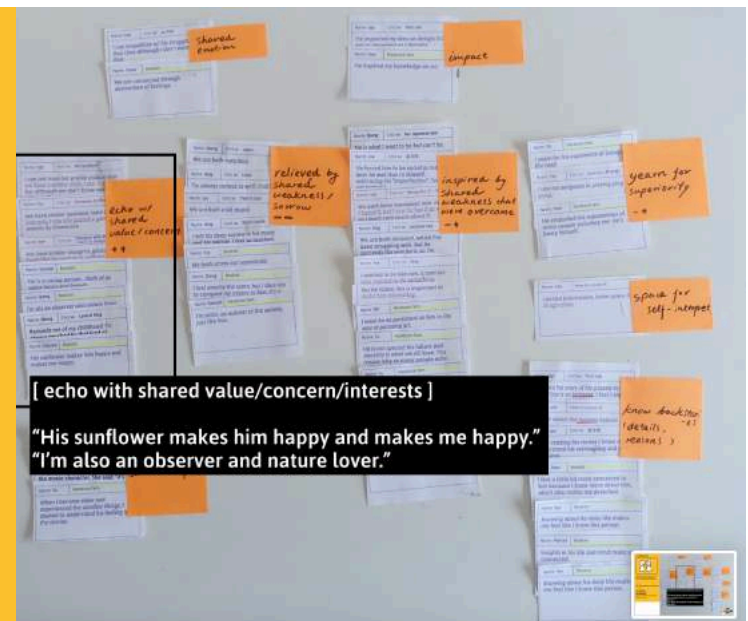
You like him because you have similar value and concerns. You know you can understand each other and become good friends.

You feel ...

like-minded / lovely / trust

about VG's ...

values / concerns / interests
e.g. love for nature, compassion for peasants



[echo with shared value/concern/interests]
"His sunflower makes him happy and makes me happy."
"I'm also an observer and nature lover."

shared weakness

relieved by shared weakness / sorrow

inspired by shared weakness which was overcome

yearn for superiority

know backstories (details, -es, -ness)

echo w/ shared value / concern

space for self-compass

Figure 6.9. Four types of connections with Van Gogh

Takeaway

Connection comes from comparison

The previous three types presented on the last page reveals an interesting mechanism of why personal connections happen: there is a process of judge, compare and connect:

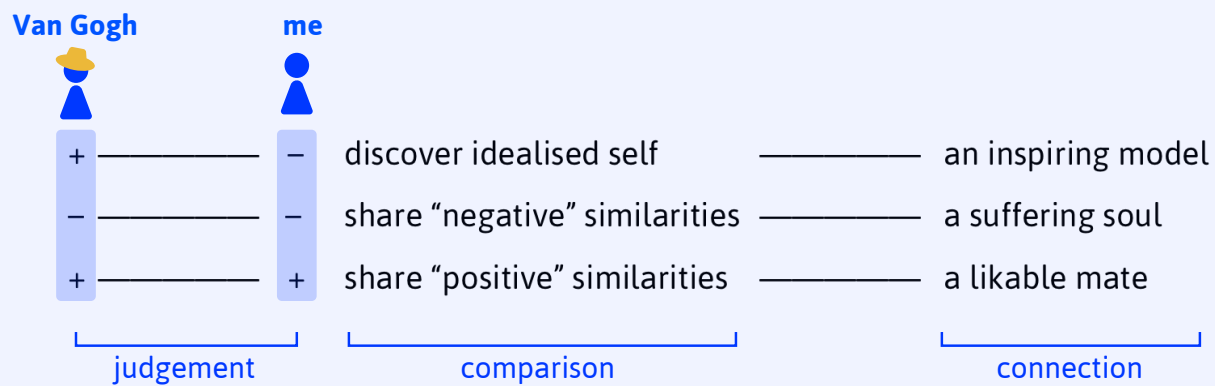


Figure 6.10. Process of "judge, compare and connect"

Firstly, people judge traits/experience about themselves and Van Gogh as negative or positive; then they compare the negative and positive points of their own concern, then get connected.

→ How can we trigger visitors to intentionally compare themselves to Van Gogh?

Chapter 7

Into the Context of Letter Gallery in VGM

What will interest you about Van Gogh letters? or something else?

IS IT ABOUT

"Painters understand nature and love it, and teach us to see."

feel #inspired

PIRATES/AVANCE

"I want to reach the point where people say of my work, that man feels deeply and that man feels truly."

feel #determined

Facts about the letters

- 902 letters remained til now
- 650 lettersto Theo and 170 to others
- ...

feel #passionate

ROMANCE

"To express what I felt for Kee Vos, I said plainly: she and no other."

feel #loving

FAMILY

"At Christ...

④ What's important for you to visit Van Gogh museum?

○ Understand Van Gogh's life
not important 1 2 3 4 5 very important

○ Learn art techniques
not important 1 2 3 4 5 very important

○ Enjoy an artistic experience
not important 1 2 3 4 5 very important

○ Find out the famous paintings and stories
not important 1 2 3 4 5 very important

○ Others

What leaves in your mind about 2nd floor?

I've learned many things about artist's life. How important was for him to have and meet his friends. How he faced his illness.

Are you interested Van Gogh letters, why?

I am more interested in his paintings and the stories behind them. The message he wanted to give.

[back]

Interview sheets of the 2nd visitor interview.
Photo by Bingyan Ding on December, 2019.

Second visitor interview

Research Goal

To understand why visitors come to the museum to find out how letters can meet their main concerns in visiting.

Method

On site interview × 9 visitors

Interview Questions

1. What's important for you to come to the Van Gogh Museum (rate in the concern scale)?
 2. Are you interested in Van Gogh's letters (show the related items) and why?
-

In chapter 2, I raised the question “will visitors care about the letter”. The first visitor interview in VGM showed that in the current exhibition, there is hardly personal connection because the stories failed to reach visitors. Apart from the practical problems causing their overlooking, such as tiredness, language barrier and dark light, is there also a possibility that most visitors are just not interested in the letters?

Such question was brought in a conversation with VGM curators Harma van Uffelen and Ann Blokland. Since the initiation of this project is the plan to redesign the letter section, the research should really step into the real context of the VGM 2nd floor.

VGM concern scale

I did the second visitor interview with 9 visitors to know about visitors' interests in letters. Like the first visitor interview, I asked them at the terrace of 2nd floor, where people just finished their visitings of that floor with fresh memories. I also considered asking people before they enter the 2nd floor to know the initial expectations, but it's highly possible that they won't have any answer. Thus, the interviews were done retrospectively rather than predictively.

First they were asked to score “what's most important for them to visit VGM” (see the scale below). The four options are from the previous research about visitors' concerns in visiting VGM (see Chapter 4.1). By asking this question I want to see if people with different dominant concern will show different interests in the letters.

What's important for you to visit Van Gogh museum?

- Understand Van Gogh's life
not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | very important
- Learn art techniques
not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | very important
- Enjoy an artistic experience
not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | very important
- Find out the famous paintings and stories
not important | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | very important
- Others

Figure 7.1. Scales to understand visitor's contextual concerns

Letter related elements

After understanding their concerns, the questions moved to letters, such as “what leaves in your mind about the letters” and “are you interested in Van Gogh’s letters and why”. To get more specific answers, I asked about their interests in possible elements in the letter presentation, such as themes, facts and real artifacts (Figure 7.2).

What will interest you about Van Gogh letters? or something else?

INSPIRATION
“Painters understand nature and love it, and teach us to see.”
 feel #inspired



PERSERVERANCE
“I want to reach the point where people say of my work, that man feels deeply and that man feels subtly.”
 feel #determined

Facts about the letters
 - 902 letters remained til now
 - 650 lettersto Theo and 170 to others
 - ...


ROMANCE
“To express what I felt for Kee Vos, I said plainly: she and no other.”
 feel #loving

FAMILY
“At Christmas I had a rather violent argument with Pa.”
 feel #disturbed

Real objects

real letters original envelop



Van Gogh’s pen and ink

FRIENDSHIP
“The best consolation, if not the only remedy, is profound friendships.”
 feel #joyful

ILLNESS
“This inevitability of suffering and despair.”
 feel #depressed

Figure 7.2. Elements relevant to the future letter section to ask about their interests

Takeaways

1. Visitors come to VGM mainly for art (general artistic experience or specific artworks), and they are interested in the letters because letters help to create better understanding of the art.

In the concern scales, the most mentioned concerns are C. "Enjoy artistic experience" and D. "Find out famous paintings and stories".

When explaining their interests in the themes, 7 persons mentioned they are interested in the letters because of the letters can help to understand his art: how different themes in his personal life "related to / affected / influenced / made / inspired" the art.

→ Connect art to letters.

2. As is mentioned in the first takeaway, visitors want "experience", instead of learning. Being easy-to-experience is important also because when visitors arrive at 2nd floor they are already tired of reading.

→ Make the 2nd floor immersive and interactive.

3. Visitors would like to know more about what they already know.

3 persons mentioned they are interested in stories they heard before.

→ Prime them with stories before they come to the letter section?

Chapter 8

Small Ideas along the Research



An ideation session with four design students.
Photo by Bingyan Ding, on December 2019.

Design and research should not be two separated phases. During the research period, I had been collecting small ideas by myself and from an ideation session with friends. These ideas will be inspirations for the later conceptualization and moreover, create the basis for discussions between me and the client to make their needs clearer.

8.1 Four small ideas

Idea 1: Letter readers

In this idea, VGM will call upon the enthusiastic letter readers all around the world to record themselves reading the letters, then submit the audio clips online. The selected clips will be played in the museum gallery, substituting the current audio letters read by an unknown and neutral narrator.

Idea 2: A real letter for you

Visitors in the museum can input their information and preferences online to get a letter based on their inputs. Before they leave the museum, they can get a printed version, just like receiving a real letter from Van Gogh.

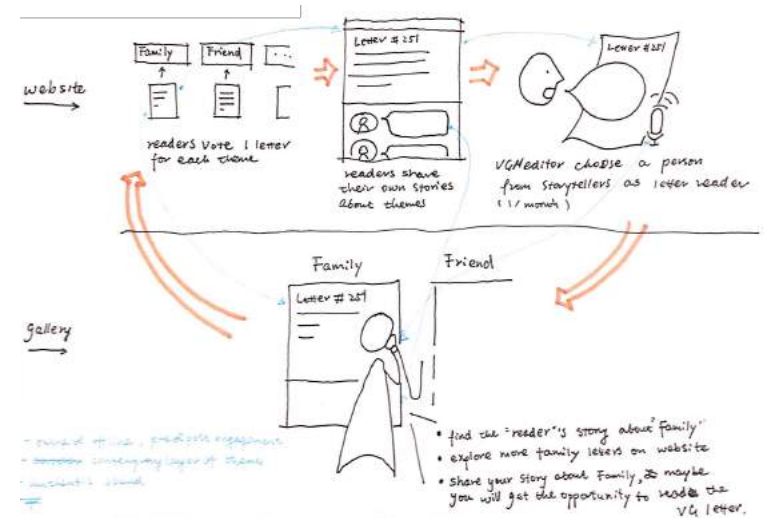


Figure 8.1. Idea 1: Letter readers

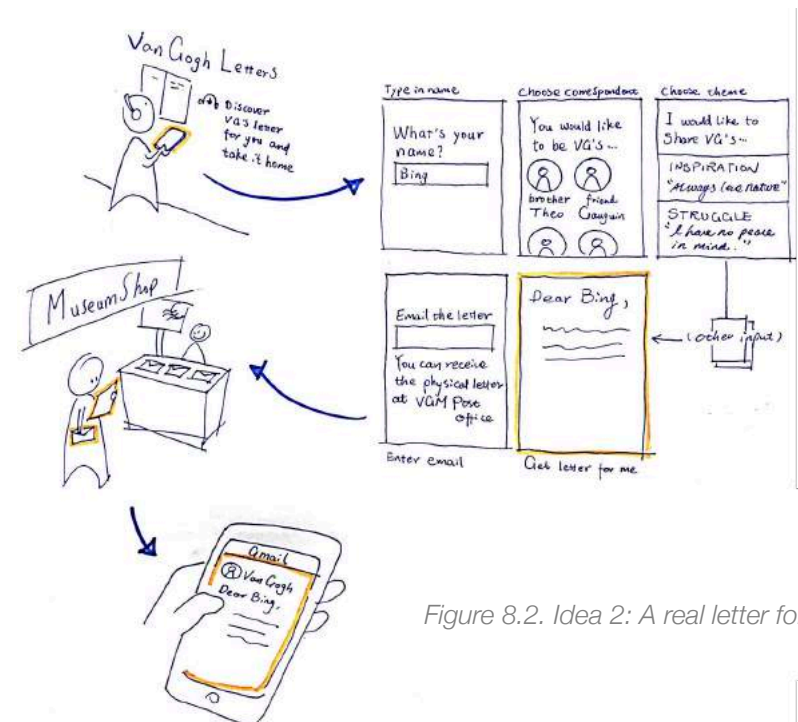


Figure 8.2. Idea 2: A real letter for you

Idea 3: Themes as the common thread

The universal themes of the letters will appear from the beginning in visitors' experience - when they buy tickets online, and will recur during the whole experience. This idea aims to give visitors an impression of the universal theme, to prime them for further connections.

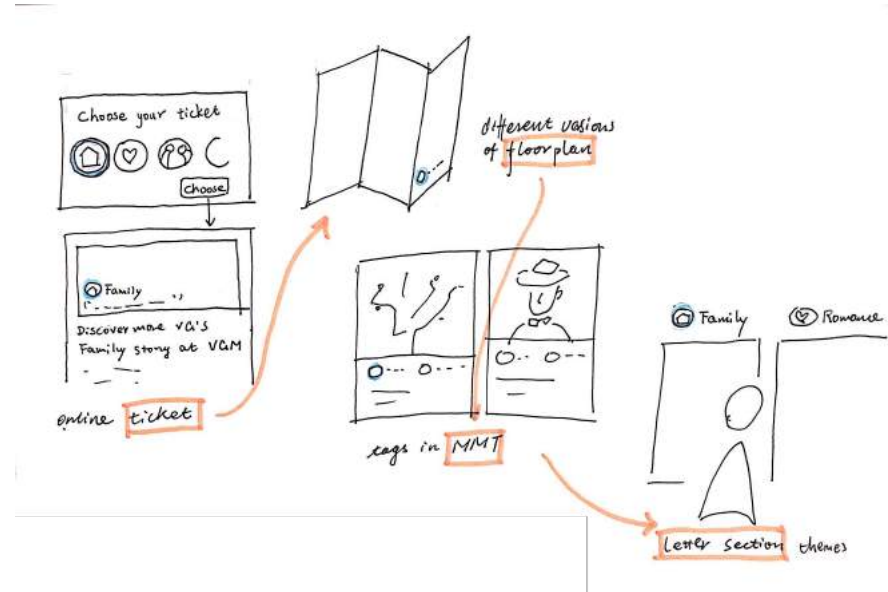


Figure 8.3. Idea 3: Themes as the common thread

Idea 4: Van Gogh felt, we feel

There will be film clips in the gallery that illustrate feelings in Van Gogh's letters. The film clips are shot in contemporary settings, to show that although time passes, we still share the same feeling with Van Gogh.

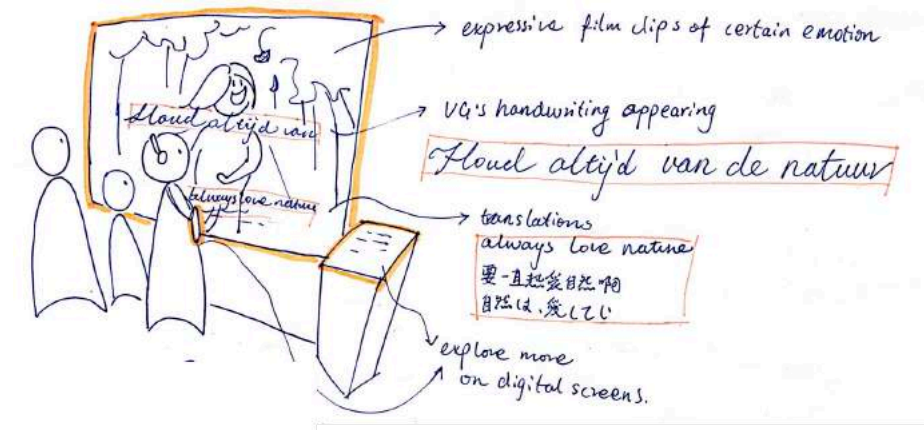


Figure. 8.4 Idea 4: Van Gogh felt, we feel

8.2 Research (on client needs) through design

The comments from the museum on these small ideas have made their needs and requirements more explicit. I found that it's important to make the concept:

- 1. be within a feasible scope.** Museum is a big organization with various departments, if the scope is too broad, the concept might end up nowhere.
- 2. address the letter gallery.** After all, it's the starting point of the assignment, flexible as it can be, the design direction shouldn't deviate from the initial intention.
- 3. consider the huge flow of visitors inside the gallery and the whole museum.** VGM is proud to be one of the most visited museums in the world, but the huge number of visitors also becomes a practical challenge for every activity happens there.
- 4. require little maintenance effort.** This one is also a practical consideration given the big crowds.

Obviously, above four ideas were not generated systematically. They are of diverse form, scope and accessibility, which makes it infeasible to evaluate them together, although they all serve the purpose of personal connection.

A framework is needed to summarize the research insights and guide that conceptualizing. This is what we will discuss in the next chapter: bridging the research to the design.

Chapter 9

Bridging Research to Design



9.1 Redefine design goals

Different Layers of Personal Connection

With the all the research in different scopes, we now have an overview of the topic. Let's come back to the assignment: create a personal connection between visitors and Van Gogh through his letters.

Based on the research, a process of connecting with Van Gogh was concluded, in which **people go through different levels, from shallow and general, to deep and personal** (Figure 9.1).

It's like a funnel: in every layer there is something that triggers people to go to the next level; some people will continue to go deeper while some will not, due to increasing effort needed. Finally, only few will reach the deep and personal connection, like the hardcore fans.

In the Scope of the Letter Gallery

The above frame describes an abstract process which is not defined by any certain form or scope of design. On the other hand, there is **a specific scope** to deal with in this project: **the letter gallery**. We aim to be more ambitious and extend the scope prescribed to this assignment, with the main focus still on the gallery.

How far can we achieve in developing personal connection in the letter gallery? Looking at the layers in the process, three layers are identified as being within the reach of letter gallery (Figure 9.2).

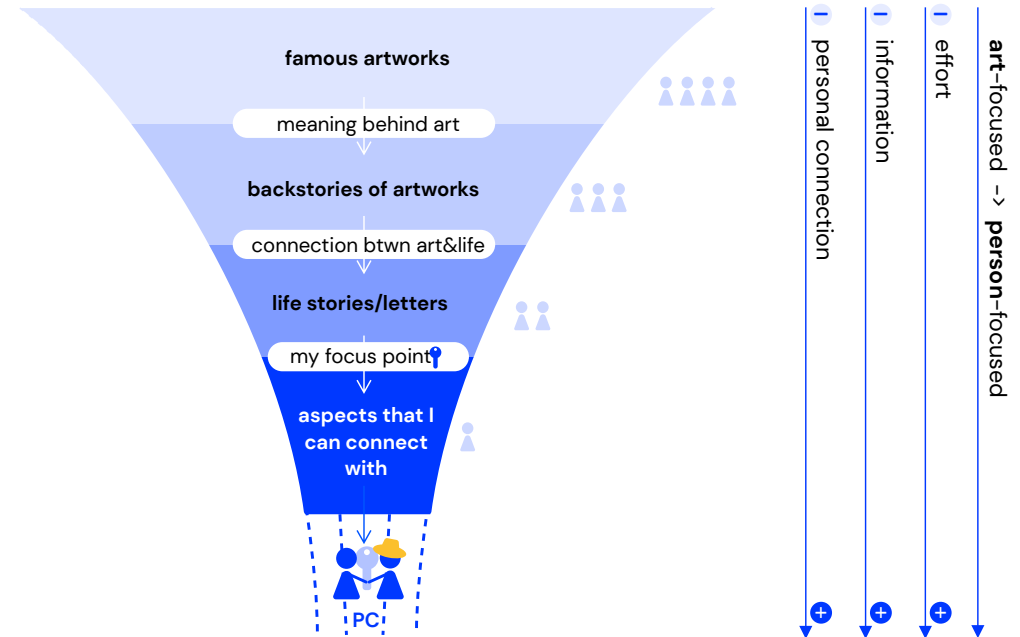


Figure 9.1. Layers of connection with Van Gogh

Redefine Design Goals

Thus, the design goal can be redefined from the vague “create personal connection”, to **three specific sub goals** (Figure 9.2), namely the **design strategies of the letter gallery**:

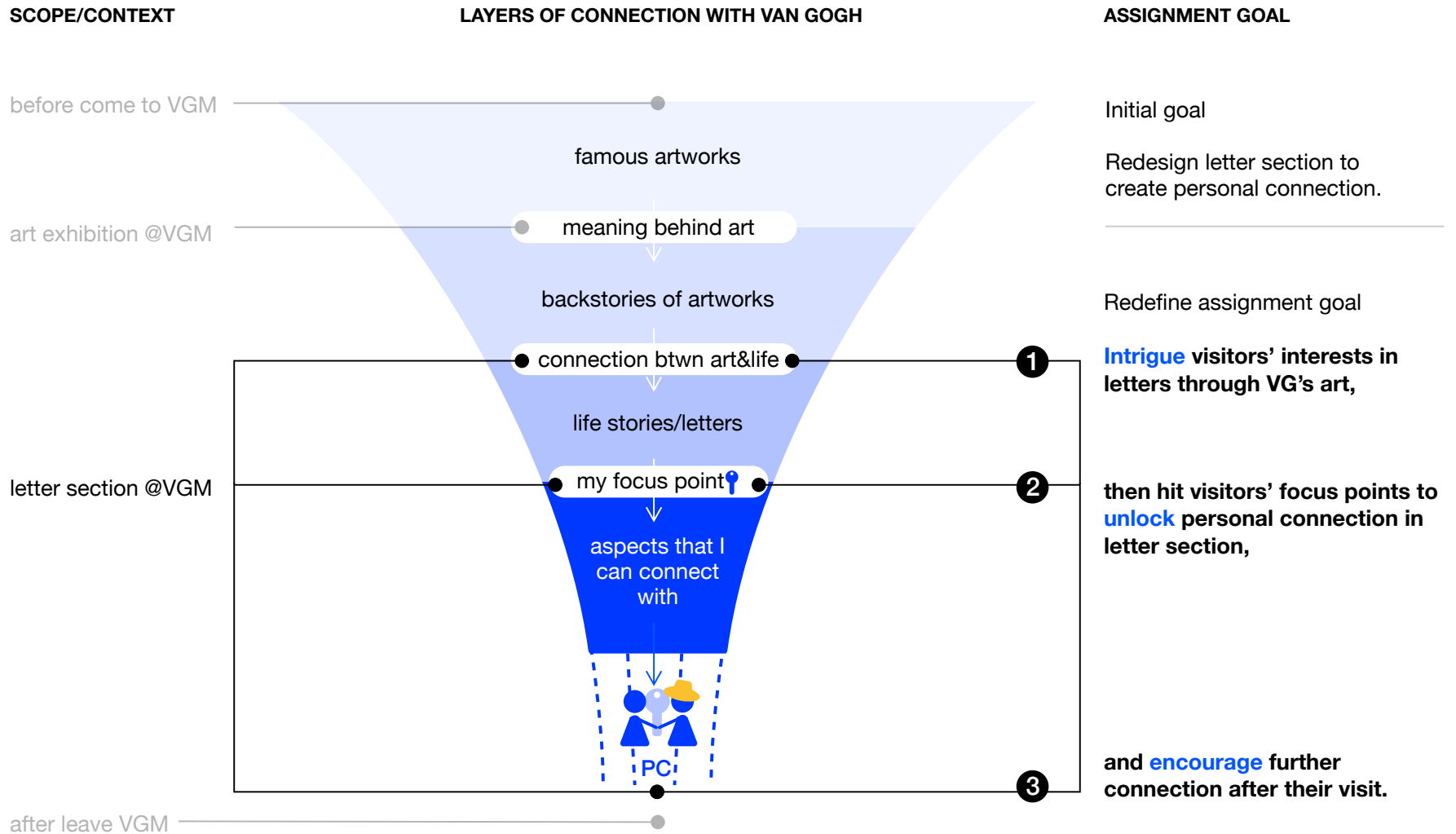


Figure 9.2. Redefine assignment goal in the scope of letter section, based on the connection layers model

9.2 Design principles and requirements

Having clarified the design goal, I made a list of design principles and requirements to take into consideration in later design.

Design Principles

Rephrasing the critical research insights into actionable design guidelines, I got the design principles.

In order to better achieve the design goals, the design will:

- 1. Be immersive and interactive, because visitors are tired at that moment.**
- 2. Use flexible medium, to be able to adjust the content based on data input. This is also a way to involve user in design.**
- 3. Visualize the information to make it more accessible.**
- 4. Guide users to the online source of the letters.**
- 5. Connect art and letters**

Design Requirements

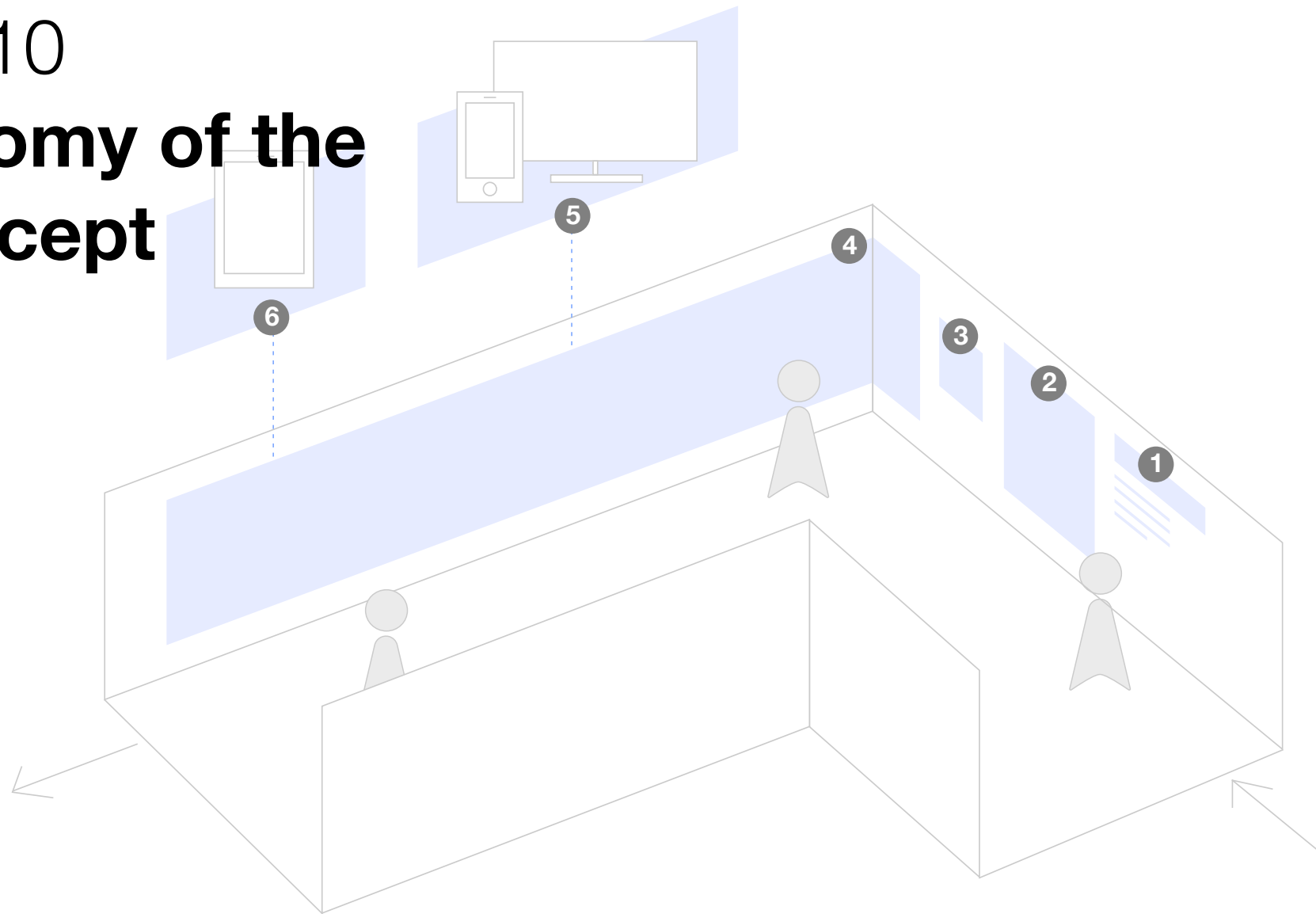
While design principles help to generate ideas, design requirements set necessary restrictions to make sure the solution is feasible. Some requirements were already discussed in the previous chapter, and others are added here.

In order to get feasible outcomes, the design should:

- 1. Be within a practical scope.**
- 2. Address the letter gallery.**
- 3. Consider the huge flow of visitors inside the gallery.**
- 4. Require little maintenance effort.**
- 5. Should reach visitors of different engagement.**
- 6. Perform well under language barriers.**

Chapter 10

An Anatomy of the Full Concept



10.1 Why giving a full concept?

Various touchpoints...

In the last chapter three specific design goals were set. So the next question is: **what should I design, since various touchpoints can all realized or partly realize such goals?** Should I pick a sub goal or an independent touchpoint to dive deep, or should I generate a system which to draw a complete picture?

The design strategy I proposed consists of three sub goals. If I want to illustrate how the strategy might work, I need to build a full concept. Not every part in the full concept requires detailed design, but all should be there to show how they connect to others.

Various visitor behaviors...

The other question is: what types of visitor/behavior should I design for? And even before this question, what are the types?

Let's first look at one requirement in the design requirement list: **The concept should affect visitors of different levels of engagement** (Chapter 9.2). When visiting the museum, some visitors are highly engaged who pay close attention to objects and contents, while other might just walk through the space (Figure 10.1). Then the design should consider people in different engagement levels and respective behaviors.

Above discussions make it clear that **I need a complete structure to cover the variety in goals, touchpoints and visitor behaviors.**

In this chapter, I'll give an anatomy of the full concept before diving into the details of each part afterwards.

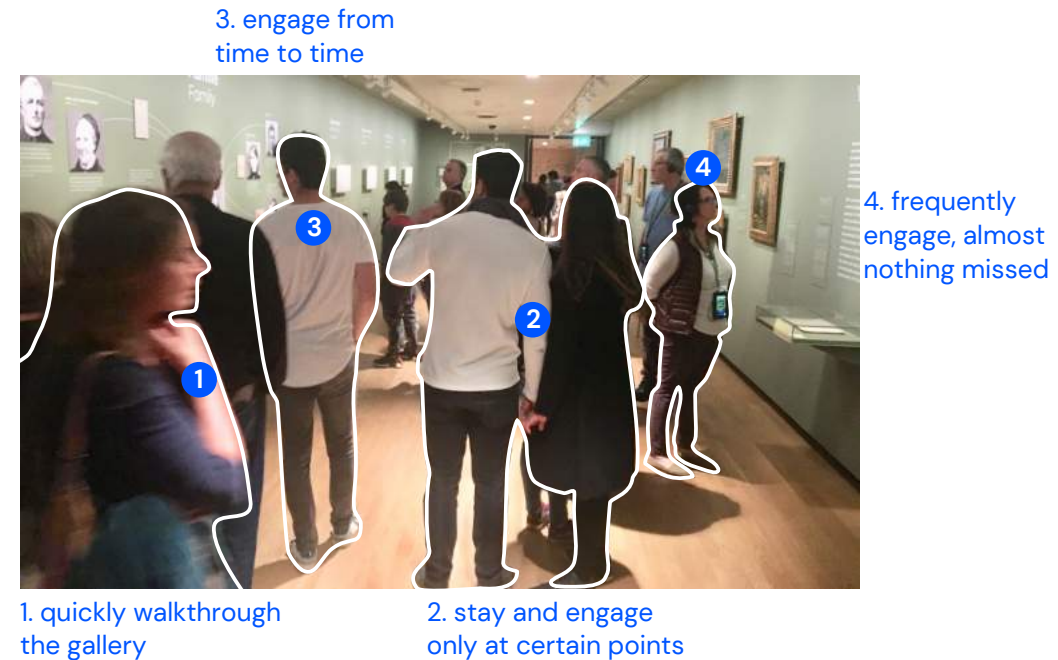


Figure 10.1. Different behaviors of visitors in letter gallery

10.2 Different engagement levels of visitors

From observations in the gallery, visitor behaviors can be classified into four engagement levels:

- 1. quickly walkthrough the gallery**
- 2. stay and engage only at certain points**
- 3. engage from time to time**
- 4. frequently engage, almost nothing missed**

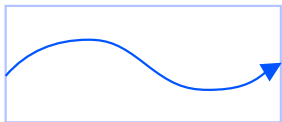
Such behaviors depend on a series of subjective and objective factors, such as visitors' interests, time plans, fatigue, crowd level in the space,... Also, visitors with or without the multimedia guide engage with the objects/contents/experiences differently. Having an overview on the typical behaviors, we can generate designs that benefit more visitors.

ENGAGEMENT LEVEL

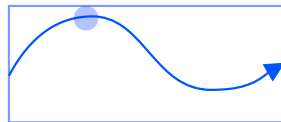
low

high

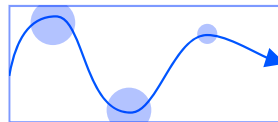
1. quickly walkthrough the gallery



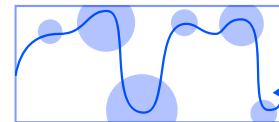
2. stay and engage only at certain points



3. engage from time to time



4. frequently engage, almost nothing missed



□ gallery space → visitor flow ● engagepoints

Figure 10.2. Four engagement levels of gallery visitors

10.3 An anatomy of the full concept

Based on above discussions, I proposed the full concept as the first step of design (Figure 10.3). Each part in the full concept correspond to certain design goal and visitor engagement level, making the solution comprehensive as possible.

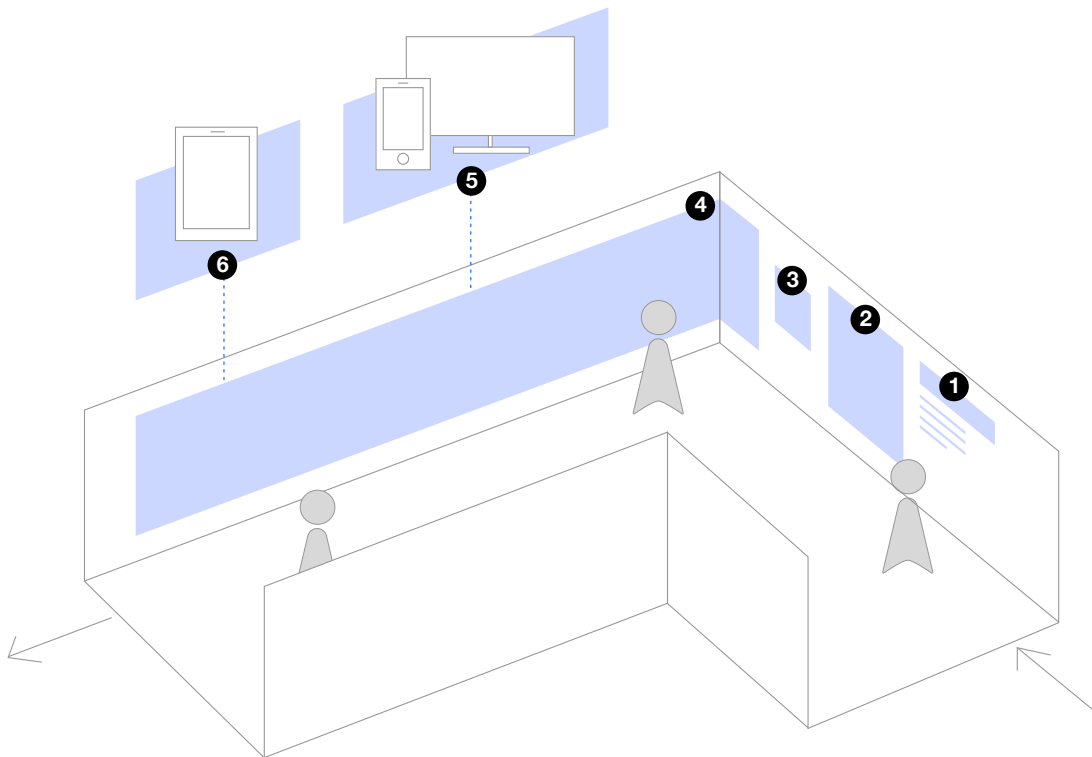


Figure 10.3. Anatomy of the full concept

Parts in blueprint

Design goal (Chapter 9.1)

Visitor engagement (Chapter 10.2)

1 Introduction

To give a summary of the letters.

2 Trailer

To trigger visitors' interests in letters in general.

3 Interactive programme

To let visitors to engage and play without having to dive into the whole story.

4 Narrative structure

To provide an overview of the gallery. The design of it should consider visitors of all engagement level - even the visitors who just quickly walk through should be able to perceive crucial information about the letters.

5 Online arrangement

To give visitors opportunities to explore more after they leave the gallery. By linking online we can also gather data for future iteration.

6 Link to MMT

To provide an integrated experience to the increasing MMT users.

1

1, 2, 3, 4

2, 3

2, 3, 4

1, 2, 3

1, 2, 3, 4

3

2, 3, 4

1, 2, 3

MMT users

Prioritizing the Tasks

Although this project will not tackle all the parts within the limited time, it's helpful to have the full concept structure to see what to focus on or not to.

I decided to leave **part 5 Online Arrangement** and **part 6 Link to MMT** for now, because they depend on the other parts, and will not affect the basic experience. Comparing to other parts, part 5&6 are in minor places in terms of **execution order** and **priority**.

For the same reason, I put the design of **part 3 Narrative Structure** in the first place. In the following chapters, I will present the design exploration on it, followed by the first visitor evaluation.

Chapter 11

Designing the Narrative Structure and 1st Visitor Evaluation



Current narrative in the gallery. Photo from “VGM Letter Gallery Design Briefing”, 2019.

11.2 Three narrative structures

Theme structure

Theme structure came from VGM's enthusiasm in structuring the letters by themes. Colleagues in VGM have already defined some universal themes in the letters which might be concerns for everyone (see Chapter 5.1).

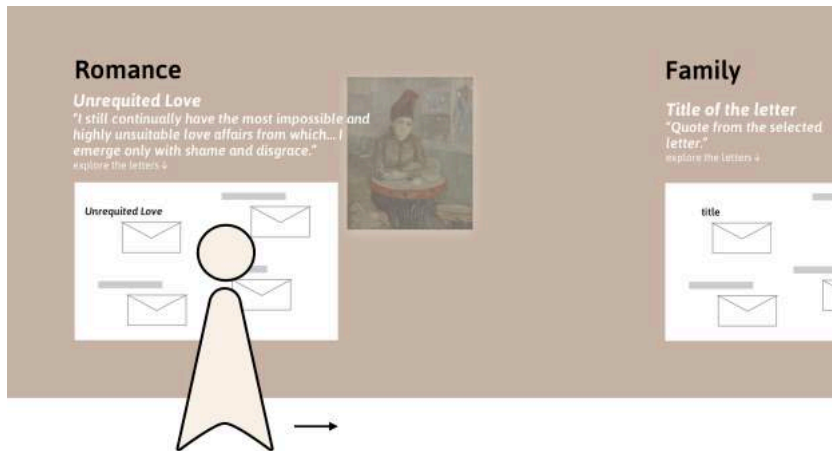


Figure 11.2. Theme structure

Age structure

The Age narrative is arranged by different phases of Van Gogh's life, headed by his ages. Such kind of chronological order is common, or even platitudinous in museums. In VGM itself, timelines have appeared several times including in the core exhibition about the paintings.

But a small feature here is to use the Van Gogh's **ages** instead of objective **years**. Van Gogh is a real person who had his younger and older days. Age is not only a clear structure but also a type of focus point. One might look at Van Gogh's 29-year-old letter and think: what was I doing when I was 29?

Meanwhile, themes still appear here. They are incorporated in this structure, recurring in different life phases.

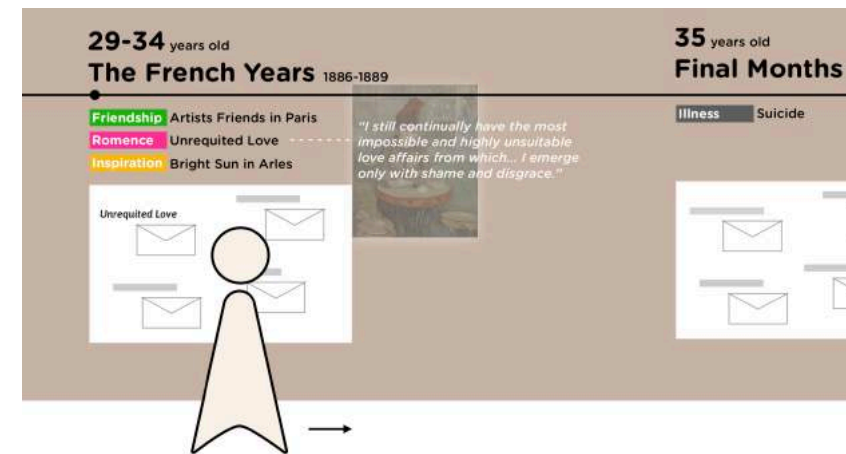


Figure 11.3. Age structure

Emotion structure

This structure came from a research insight: strong emotions in the letters catch readers' attention because emotions are universal and directly depict the intimate side of Van Gogh.

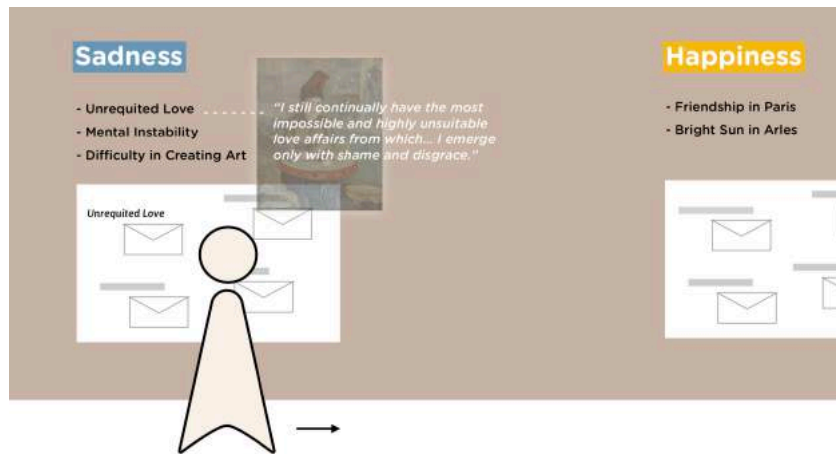


Figure 11.4. Emotion structure

11.3 First visitor evaluation

I shared the concepts with museum colleagues and received informative feedback. Considering that visitors might have different opinions on the concepts due to distinct prior knowledge and contextual experiences, it's necessary to hear what real visitors say about them. Thus I did an evaluation with visitors and in the end, some unexpected findings came out.

Research Goal

To comparatively evaluate the three narratives to find out which will engage visitors more.

Method

On site interview with concepts × 11 visitors

Research Questions

1. Which structure interests visitors most?
 2. What are good and not so good about the three structures?
-

I invited 11 participants who just finished their visits to sit in the museum cafe, and talked about the concepts. They were randomly chosen and vary in age and nationality.



Figure 11.5. Visitor evaluation in VGM cafe

The interview started from a short recap of their experience in current letter exhibition (“What leaves in you mind about the letters? What do you like and dislike? And do you feel connected with Van Gogh?”)

Then I showed the three concepts on my laptop.

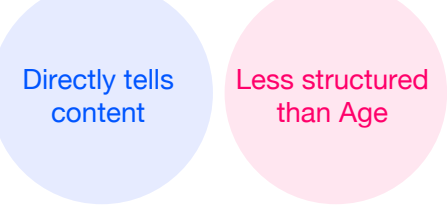
Finally I asked them to rate the three concepts between 1~5 on how much the concepts interest them.

Pros & Cons of the three structure

After the rating, visitors were asked to give explanations, which illustrate the pros and cons of each structure. In general, Age is the most popular one, as 6 visitors among 11 rated it the highest in triggering their interests.

Theme

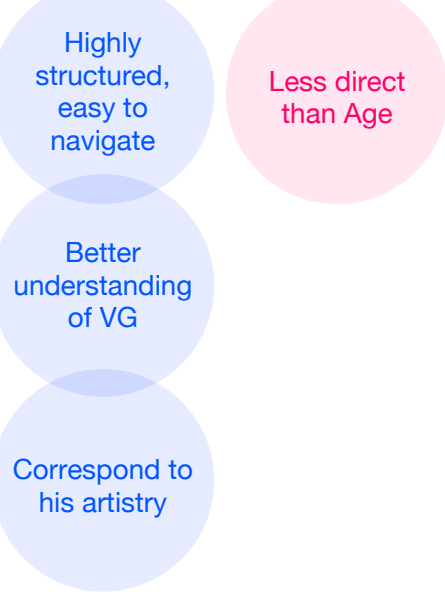
Romance
Unrequited Love
"I still continually have the most impossible highly unsuitable love affairs from which... emerge only with shame and disgrace."
 explore the letters ↓



Age

29-34 years old
The French Years 1886

Friendship Artists Friends in Paris
 Romance Unrequited Love
 Inspiration Bright Sun in Arles



Emotion

Sadness

- Unrequited Love
- Mental Instability
- Difficulty in Creating Art

"I still con impossible love affair only with"

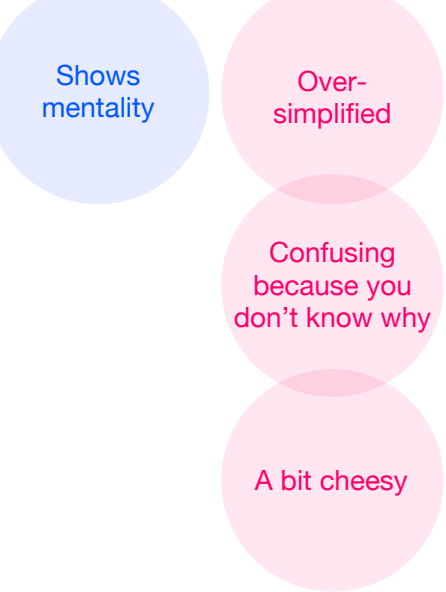


Figure 11.6. Pros and cons of the three structure

Different preferences of visitors and non-visitors

For visitors, Age structure works best in getting visitors' interests. Among the 11 participants, 6 voted for Age as the most intriguing one, while 3 for Theme, and surprisingly, only 1 voted for Emotion.

However, for non-visitors, Emotion structure is the most attractive, which is the least for museum visitors. Apart from the visitor evaluation, I also showed the concepts to my thinktank - 8 friends, and asked how they think. The results are interesting: in contrary to the visitor evaluation, 5 friends prefer the Emotion most while only 2 like the Age. Although the sample is small, we can still see a pattern opposite to the visitor evaluation.

Takeaways

1. Clarity is the priority in museum context, not connection.

"I like Age structure because it is a good navigator, not a connector. And clear navigation is what I need most."

The biggest learning in this visitor evaluation is that context can greatly influence the experience. In the real context of the museum, people strive for security when loaded with unfamiliar information. The needs for clear navigation, overview and easy meaning-making are prior to the need of emotional impact. This might explain why most visitors prefer the Age structure, while my friends prefer Emotion.

2. Emotion should work, but in a low-pitched way

"I'd like to know about his emotions, but printing it on the wall maybe too much..."

The Emotion structure or other "less conventional" structures still have potentials in achieving the goal of personal connection when they don't conflict with people's eager for clarity.

Next, the full concept will be developed based on the Age structure, and try to incorporate theme and emotion in less leading positions.

11.4 Detailing one narrative section

In the evaluation we compared the three narrative structures and found Age works best in the museum context. The details of each section in the Age narrative structure are to be designed in this chapter.

Six sections in the Age narrative

Referring to the chronology on VGM website (<https://vangoghmuseum.nl/en/vincent-van-gogh-life-and-work/van-goghs-life-1853-1890>), I proposed 6 sections in the Age narrative:

1. Young Vincent 1853–1881
2. First steps as an artist 1881–1883
3. Developing artistry 1883–1888
4. South of France 1888–1889
5. The Final Year 1889–1890
6. After Vincent's death

The website presented nine phases, and I compacted them to six considering the limited space and information overload for visitors. In the last section called “After Vincent's death”, there can be letters to Van Gogh from his audiences. In this way, writing letters, as a means of communication, becomes bidirectional.



Young Vincent

1853-1873 >



Looking for a Direction

1873-1881 >



First Steps as an Artist

1881-1883 >



Peasant Painter

1883-1885 >



From Dark to Light

1886-1888 >



South of France

1888-1889 >



Hospitalization

1889-1890 >



Vincent's Final Months

1890 >



After Vincent's Death

1890-1973 >

Figure 11.7. Van Gogh's life stories on VGM website

Arrangement of a narrative section: concept 1.0

Among the six sections I proposed, I took the life phase “First steps as an Artist” for an example to design the arrangement inside each section. There are three letters in each section, with their captions and themes printed on the wall. A quote from each letter is projected on the wall and switches every several seconds. If the themes or captions catch visitors’ eyes, they can explore more on the screen at

the left bottom. The original letter and objects are also presented in this design.

The feedback I got from VGM supervisor Harma include:

1. Theme tags before letter captions are too prominent, which might cause unnecessary cognitive load.
2. Too little presence of “letters”.

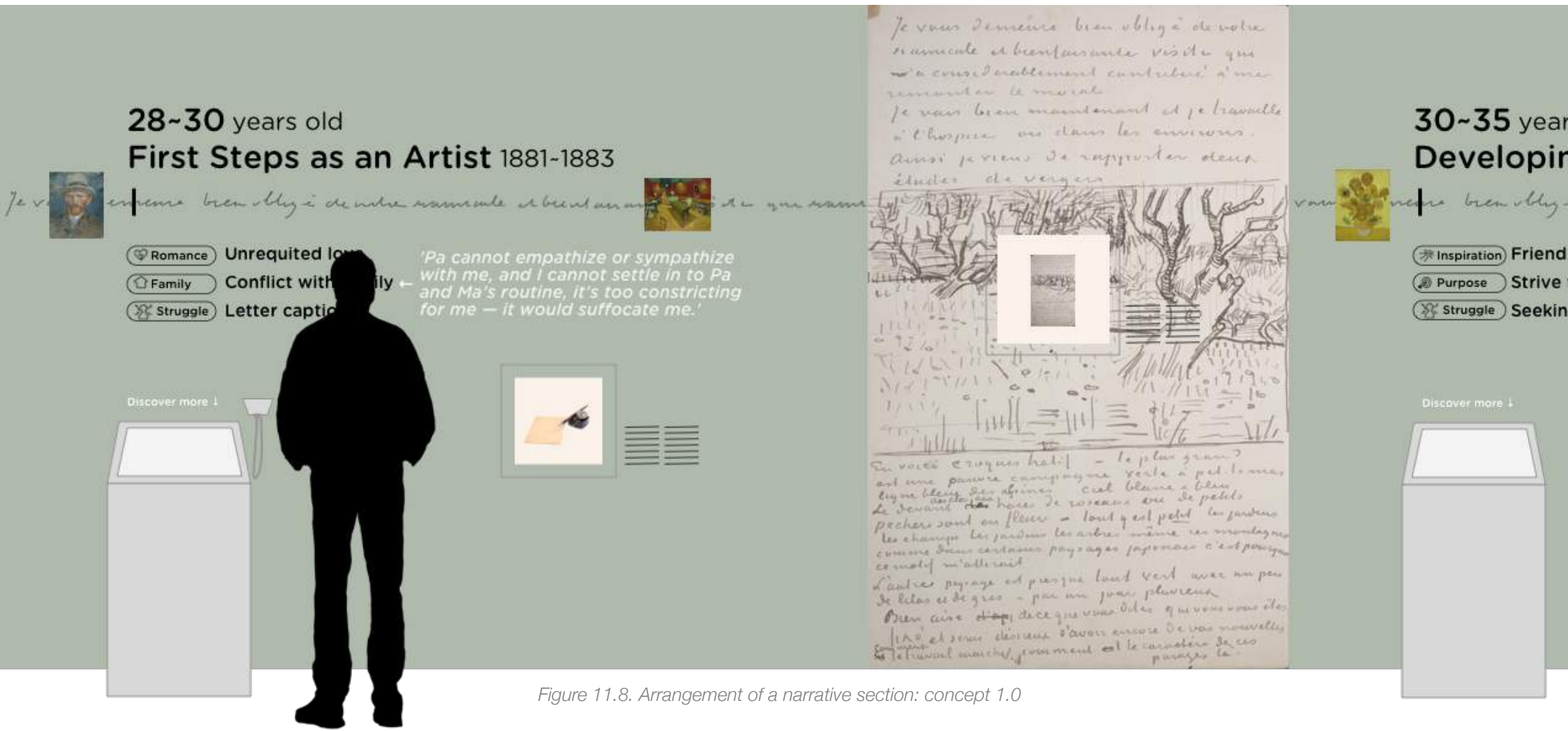


Figure 11.8. Arrangement of a narrative section: concept 1.0

Arrangement of a narrative section: concept 2.0

Based on the feedback I got, I iterated the design: use the image of envelop and put themes on “stamps”. A QR code is also added so people can read more when the screen is occupied.

Regarding the iterated design, both Harma and visitors mentioned the problem: there’s no actual content on the wall, so visitors have no way to know more about their interested stories, unless they go to the

touchscreen or take out their phone to scan the QR code, which is effortful in a busy gallery. So the next iteration will leave space for more content, which will be further described in chapter 11.4.

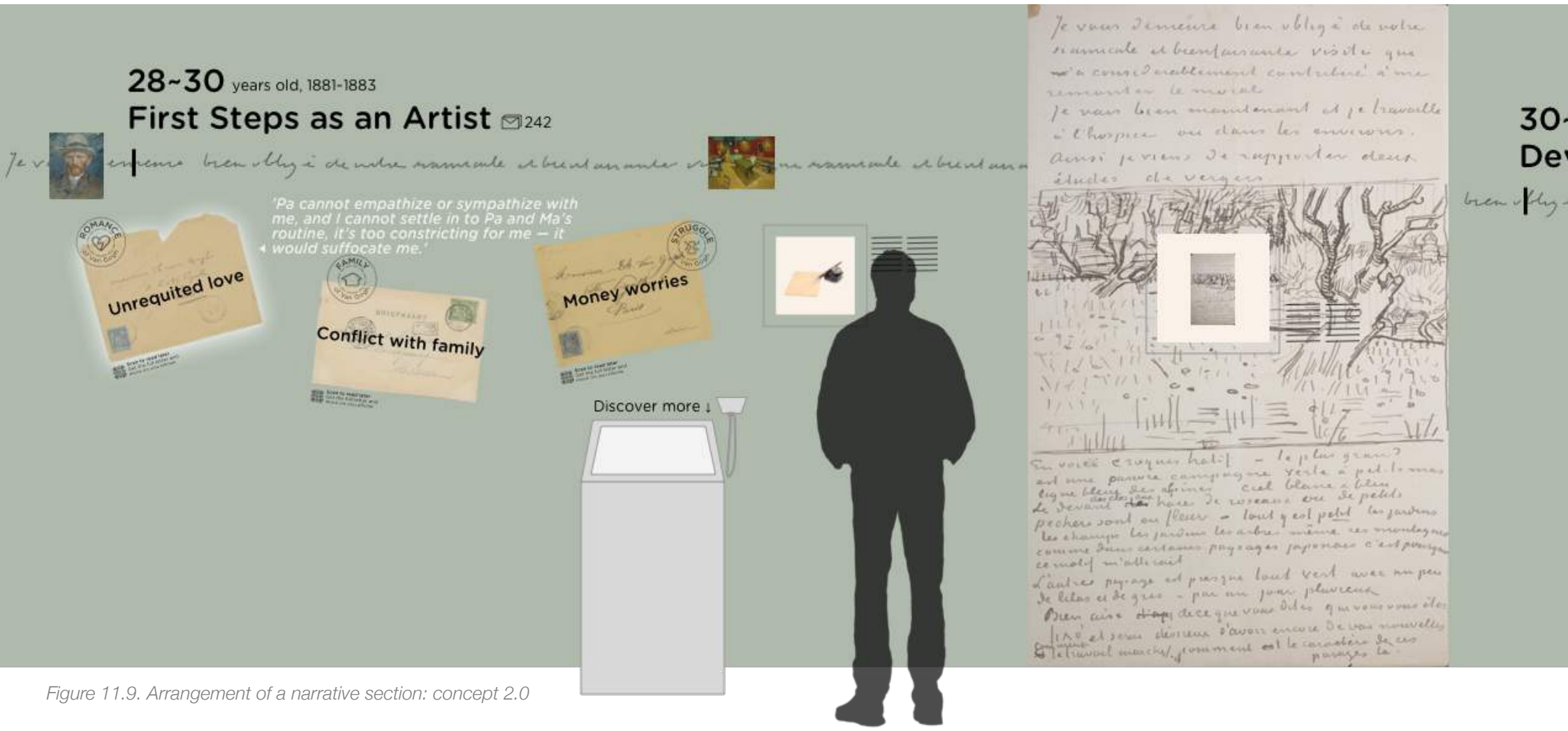


Figure 11.9. Arrangement of a narrative section: concept 2.0

Chapter 12

Designing the Interactive Programme and 2nd Visitor Evaluation

Two participants in the 2nd evaluation. Photo by Bingyan Ding on February 2020.

12.1 Three concepts of the interactive program

This chapter presents the design exploration of part 4 Interactive Programme, which aims to let visitors engage and know about the letters without having to dive into the whole story.

The interactive programme takes the form of a touchscreen in the gallery. It can appear in the permanent letter exhibition or other locations in the museum, or even go totally online.

There are three concepts generated and evaluated.

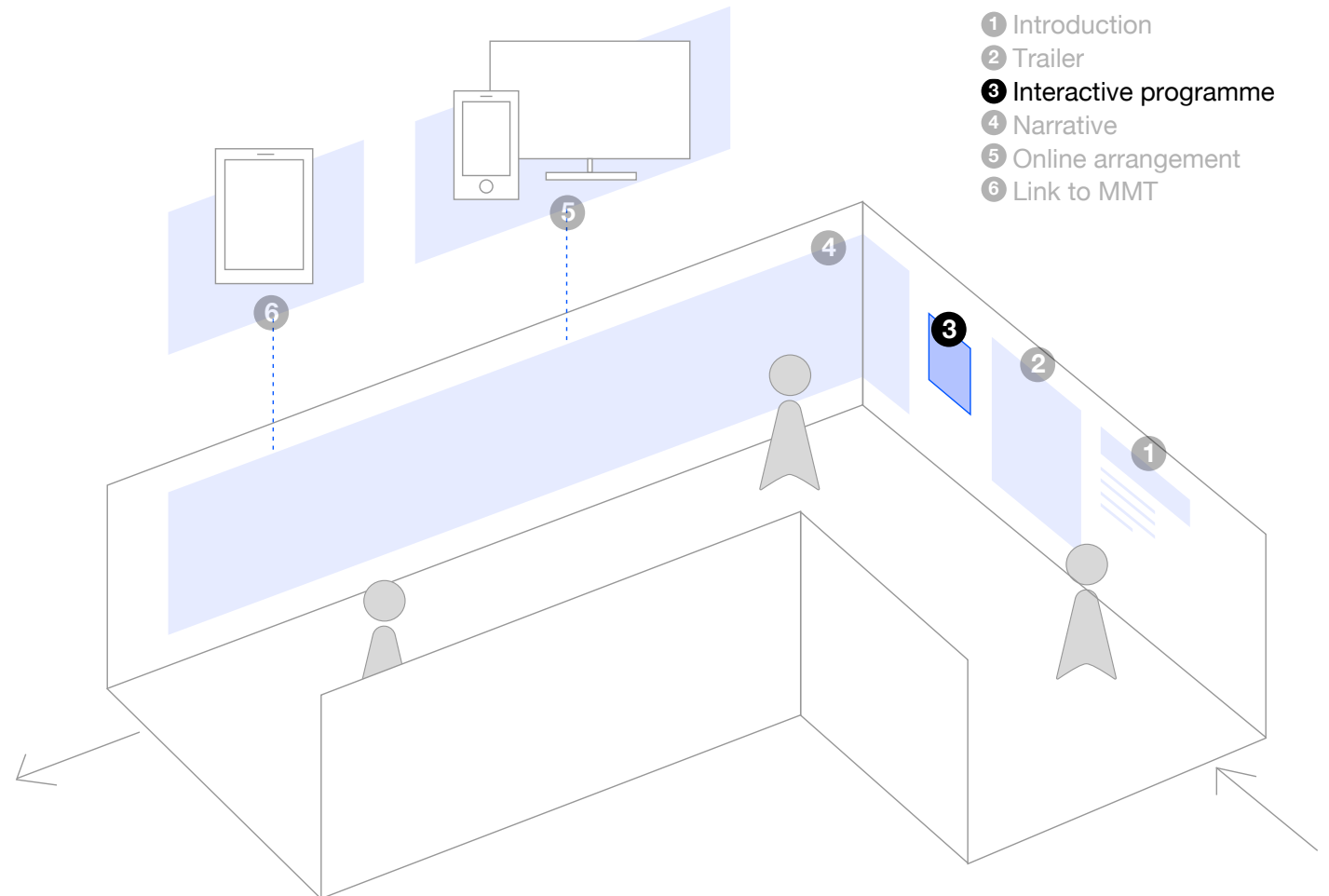


Figure 12.1. Part 3 Interactive Programme highlighted in the full concept

Concept 1: You and Van Gogh

Most people know Van Gogh's art and maybe some famous personal stories. But in the letters there are much more about this person, in which you might find something in common with you. This concept presents the multiple facets of Van Gogh, letting people discover their most relatable Van Gogh.

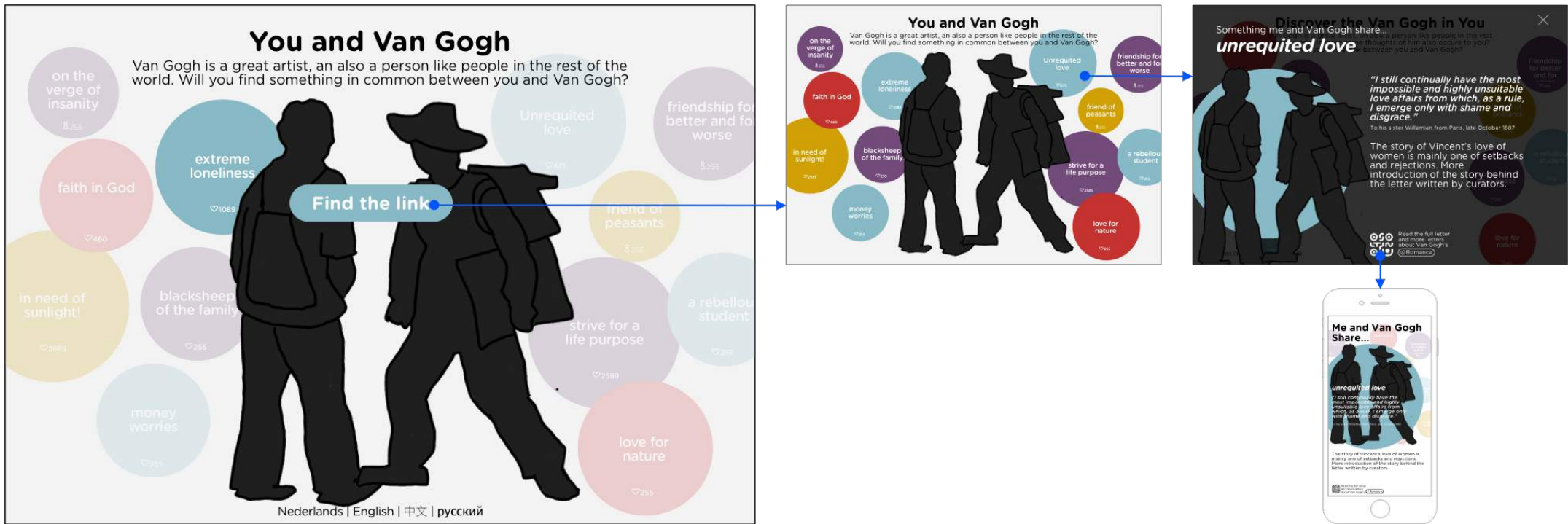


Figure 12.2. Interaction flow of concept 1 "You and Van Gogh"



Figure 12.3. Letter topic bubbles that user can choose

The bubbles are in four colors, representing four types of emotions of the different letter topics. The classification is adapted from the circumplex model of emotions (Russell, 1980), and such color coding is to provide an intuitive hint of emotional tone of the message.

Also, the number on each bubble and the size of it mean how many times this bubble has been chosen. In this way I hope to create a sense of community, so people will know that they share the same feelings and thoughts not only with Van Gogh, but also with many other people around the world.

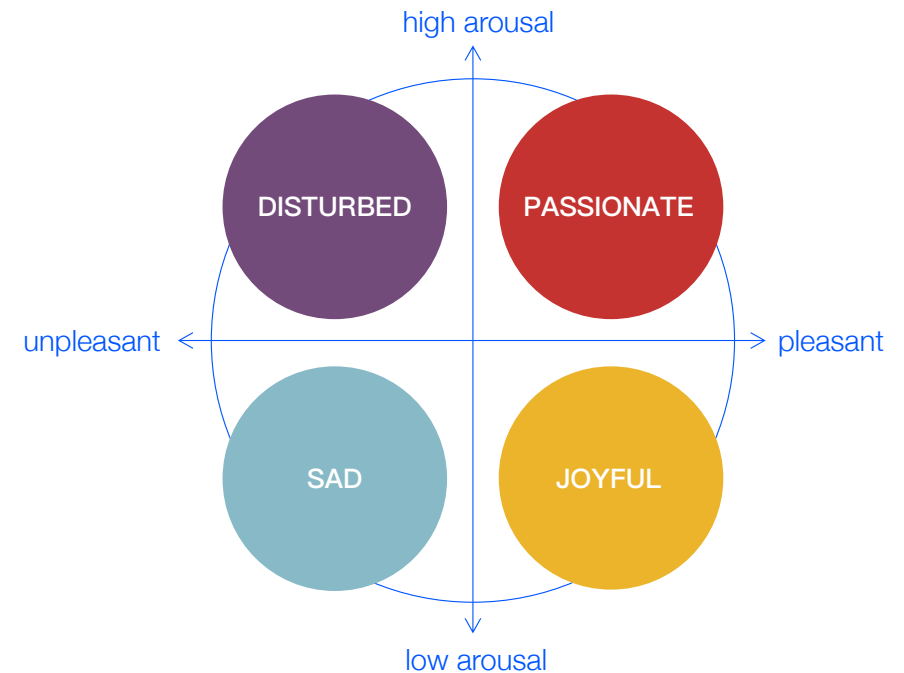


Figure 12.4. Four emotion types of Van Gogh's letters in the circumplex model (adapted from Russell, 1980)

Concept 2: Feel Van Gogh's Writing

Van Gogh's handwriting witnessed the authentic moments when he wrote. It's also interesting that the style of his writing differs in the letters, baring his diverse and strong feelings in those moments. This concept aims to connect visitors with these feelings through the authentic handwritings.



Figure 12.5. Interaction flow of concept 2 "Feel Van Gogh's Writing"

Concept 3: Create your Van Gogh letter

We share not only the universal themes and emotions in the letters, but also the behavior of expressing to someone through letters. Why not use what Van Gogh had expressed to express ourselves? This

concept derives from the basic idea of a letter: write and send it to someone. Reader can create his/her own letter to someone, by using the content of Van Gogh's letters.

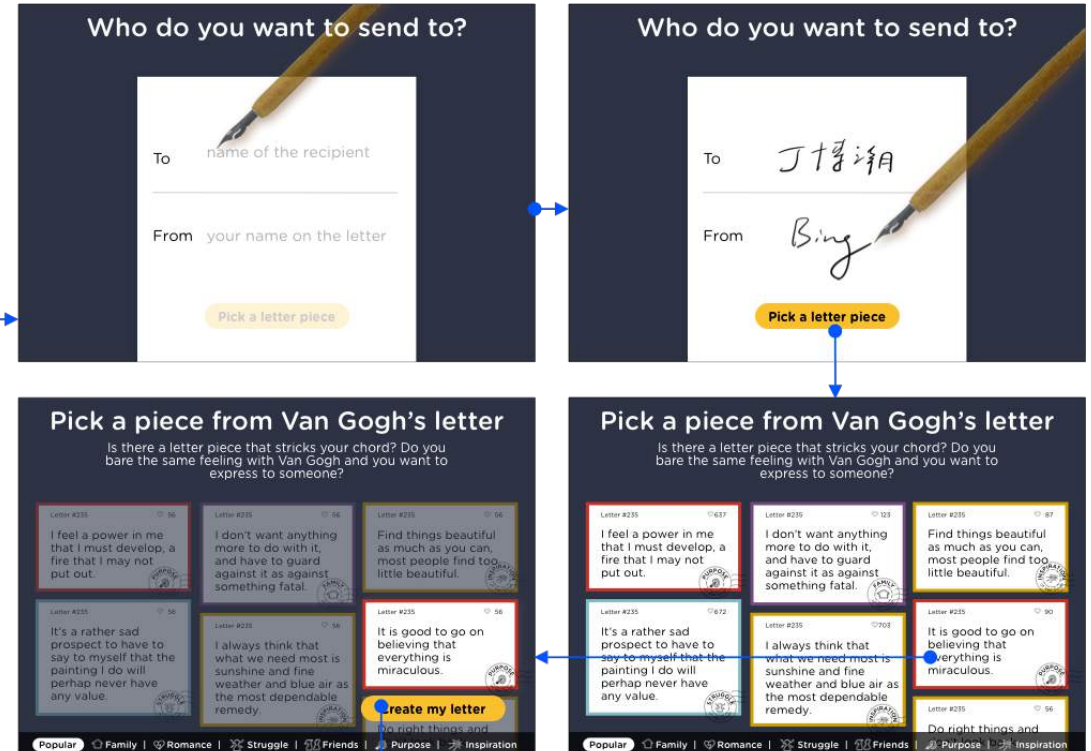


Figure 12.6. Interaction flow of concept 3 "Create your Van Gogh letter"

12.2 Second visitor evaluation

Research goal

To get feedback on part 1~4 and compare the three concepts of part 5 to merge them into one concept

Method

On site interview with prototypes × 9 visitors

Research Questions

Following three questions respectively address the three sub goals in Chapter 9.1:

1. Which one better attracts visitors to try? - trigger interest
2. Which one makes visitors feel connected? —unlock personal connection
3. Which one can better reach visitors after they leave? - extend connection

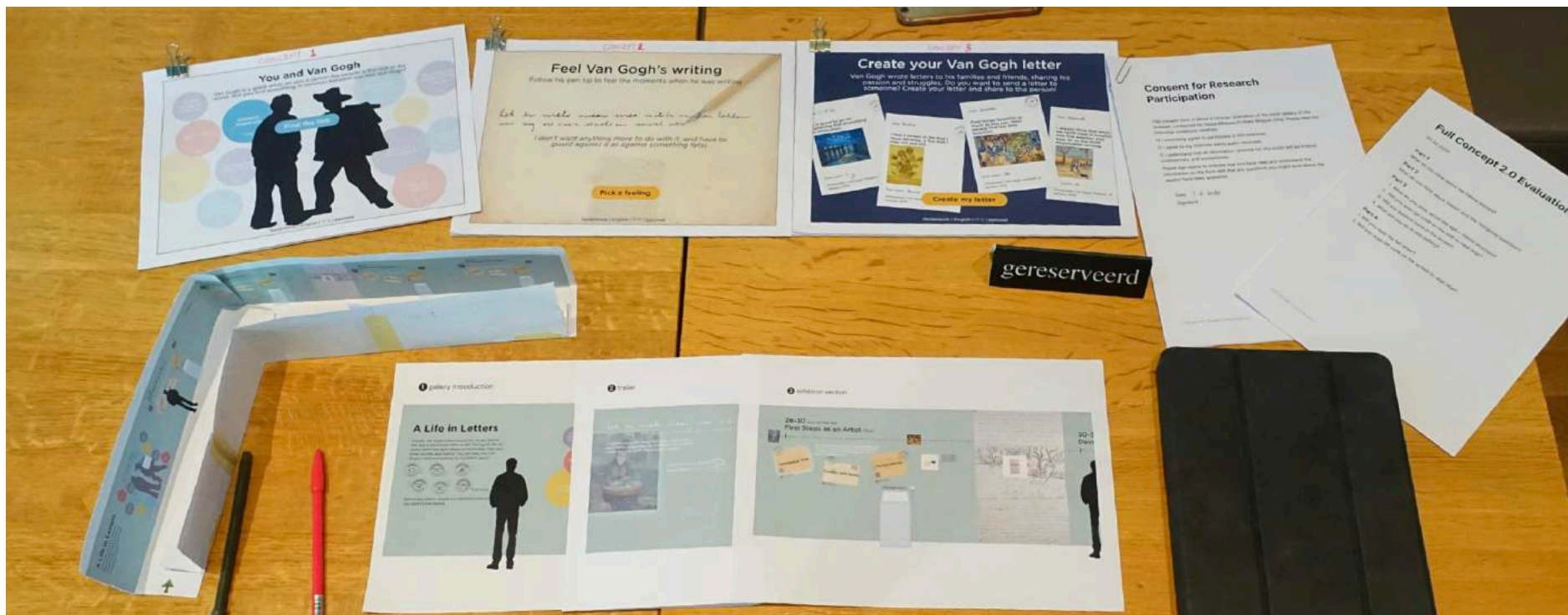


Figure 12.7. Materials for evaluation

And the last question asks about the general preference.

Like the previous evaluation, I invited 9 participants who had finished their visits, to sit in the museum cafe and talk.

After showing the three concepts on iPad, I asked them to rate from 1~5 on four criteria:

1. How much will it attract you to try?
2. How much will it make you feel connected w/ VG?
3. How likely you will scan the QR code?
4. Which one do you like most, in general?

Ratings for the 3 Concepts

Although the ratings cannot give us too many quantitative conclusions because of the small sample size, it provided qualitative insights by facilitating the reasoning behind the scores.

No.	Age, Gender	Nation	Part 5. Interactive game											
			How much will it attract you to try?			How much will it make you feel connected?			How likely you will scan the QR code?			Which one do you like most, in general?		
			1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
1	M, 20	England	2	3	4	3	3	3	1	1	4	2	3	3
2	F, 20	Taiwan	5	4	1	5	4	2	2	5	5	4	2	5
3	F, 70	NL	2	4	4	-	5	5	-	-	1	-	5	4
4	M, 70	NL	3	4	2	3	4	2	3	4	2	3	4	2
5	F, 30	Mexico	5	4	3	5	3	4	5	5	5	5	4	3
6	M, 30	Mexico	5	4	3	5	4	4	5	3	5	5	4	4
7	M, 20	NL	2	2	4	2	2	4	1	3	4	2	2	4
8	M, 20	NL	1	3	5	2	4	4	2	4	4	1	3	5
9	M, 20	China	4	4	5	4	2	3	2	2	3	4	2	4

Figure 12.9. Ratings for the 3 Concepts by 9 visitors

Pros and Cons of the 3 Concepts

Concept 1 You and Van Gogh



Appealing form of the colorful bubbles

Interaction and information are too simple

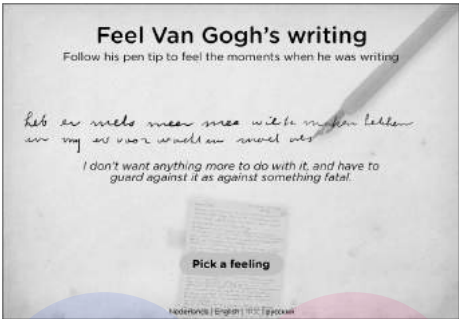
Clarity in structured information

Silhouette is confusing

Pros

Cons

Concept 2 Feel Van Gogh's writing



Depth in Van Gogh's feelings

Intimate feeling might lost due to language barriers and busy crowd

Rich interactivity

Abrupt quotes will cause confusion

Concept 3 Create your Van Gogh letter



Strong call-to-action

Overwhelming

Creating something by and for yourself

Abrupt quotes will cause confusion

Social factor: share it with others

Figure 12.10. Pros and Cons of the 3 Concepts

Takeaways

1. Accessibility of the information overweighs the depth of it

"I think visitors can really learn something in C1." — Harma, VGM curator

"C1 is clearer with the titles on the bubble. Only after I know what happened I can connect, right?" — P10, a Chinese visitor who is not familiar with Van Gogh

"I think C1 is a bit childish. Teenagers will like it, but it's too simple for us." — P3, an elder Dutch visitor

Visitors vary in how much they already know, how much they want to know and how deep they want to go. When the accessibility and depth of the experience contradict, we should prioritize the accessibility, for people who want depth are already inside Van Gogh's world even without our guidance. E.g. two elder Dutch visitors prefer C2 "Feel VG's writing", while other visitors are less enthusiastic about it.

2. Let visitors experience on the spot

"I came to the museum to experience here, not when I come back to the hotel."

Visitors like to learn and interact on the spot, otherwise they might just give up.

3. Give visitors takeaways

"This is a postcard I made! I'd love to take it home."

There are different ways to reach visitors after they leave. e.g. providing them with takeaways to bring back home, or intriguing their curiosity in the content that they will look at it later. The first way works much better than the second.

4. Interactivity and engagement are valuable for museum experiences.

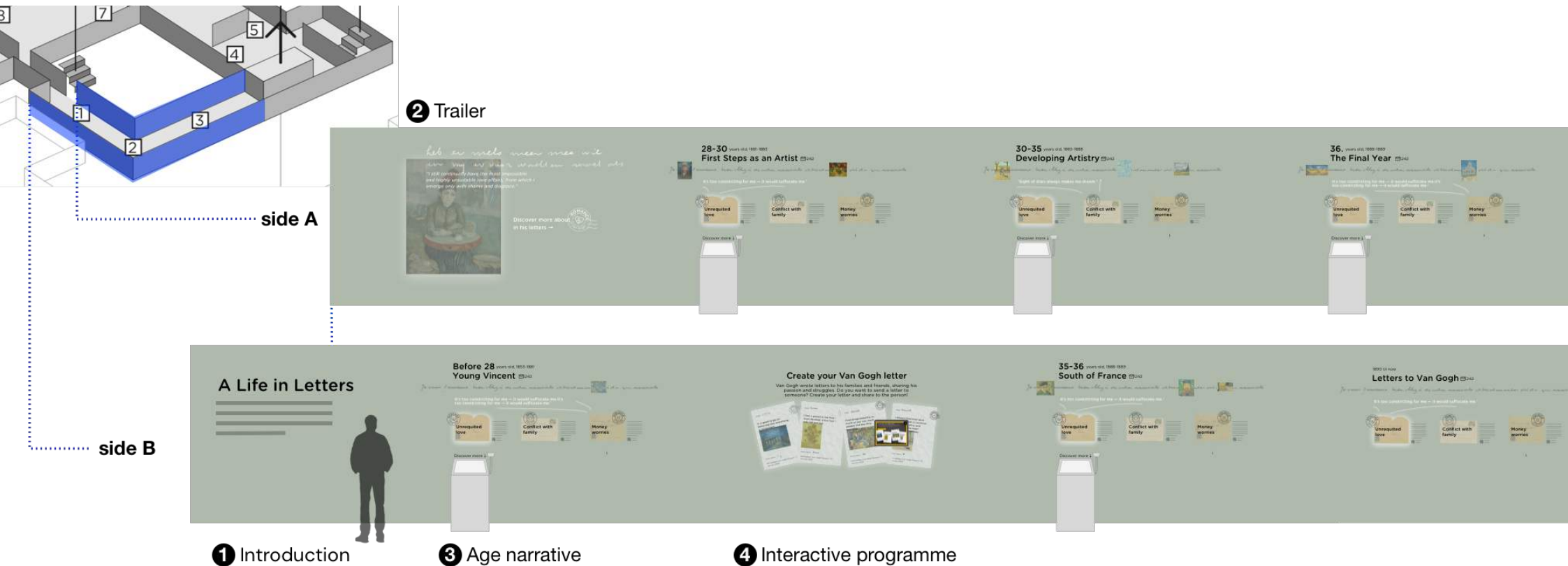
"If I'm just here reading the information, what's the difference between reading a book at home and visiting the museum here?"

C2 & C3 of part 5 are favored over C1 because of better interactivity and engagement.

Now we have finished the design explorations of Part 3 Interactive programme and Part 4 Narrative structure in the full concept blueprint. The other less focused parts are also designed to make the complete story. Next, we will come to the final concept.

Chapter 13

The Final Concept and Discussions



The flattened elevation of the “small L” gallery, in which we can better picture how the design will be like in the actual space.

13.1 Overview of the final design

We have explored Part 3 and Part 4 in the previous chapters. In this chapter, the final concept will put all the parts together to see how will the gallery achieve the design goals - trigger visitors' interest, unlock personal connections and encourage further exploration on the letters.

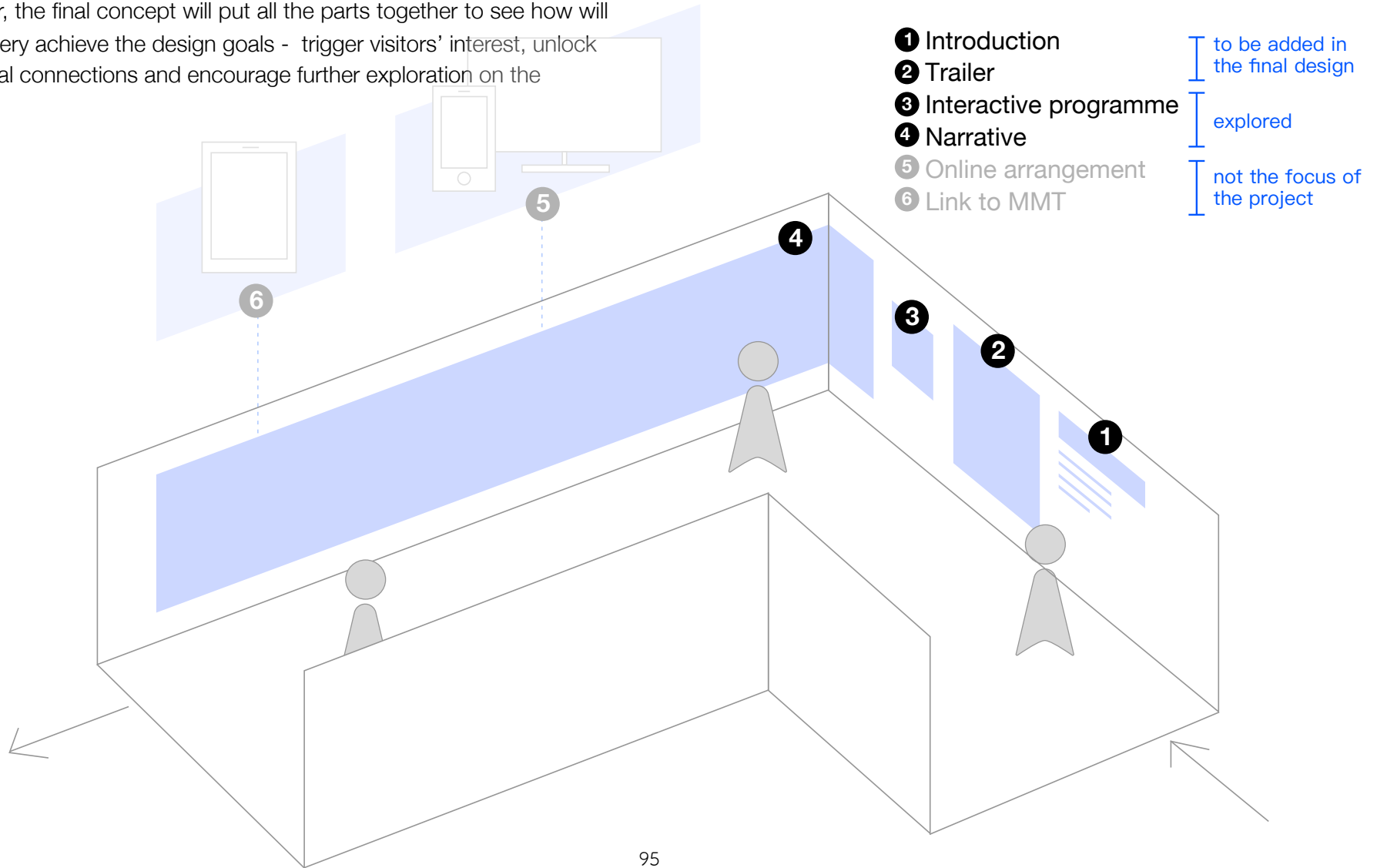


Figure 13.1. Coverage of the final design

13.2 Part 1_Gallery Introduction

Introduction is a conventional part of exhibitions, which tells visitors what to expect in this gallery. In this case, it will talk about the history and significance of the letters. However, the design here is not the copywriting - curators will have more expertise on that; it is the form of "theme stamp", which visualizes the themes of the letters to make the possible focus points in the letters more identifiable, especially for visitors with language barriers. Also the form of stamps emphasizes the topics of letters. These stamps will re-appear in the gallery and online.



Figure 13.3. Themes stamps of the 6 themes of the letters

A Life in Letters

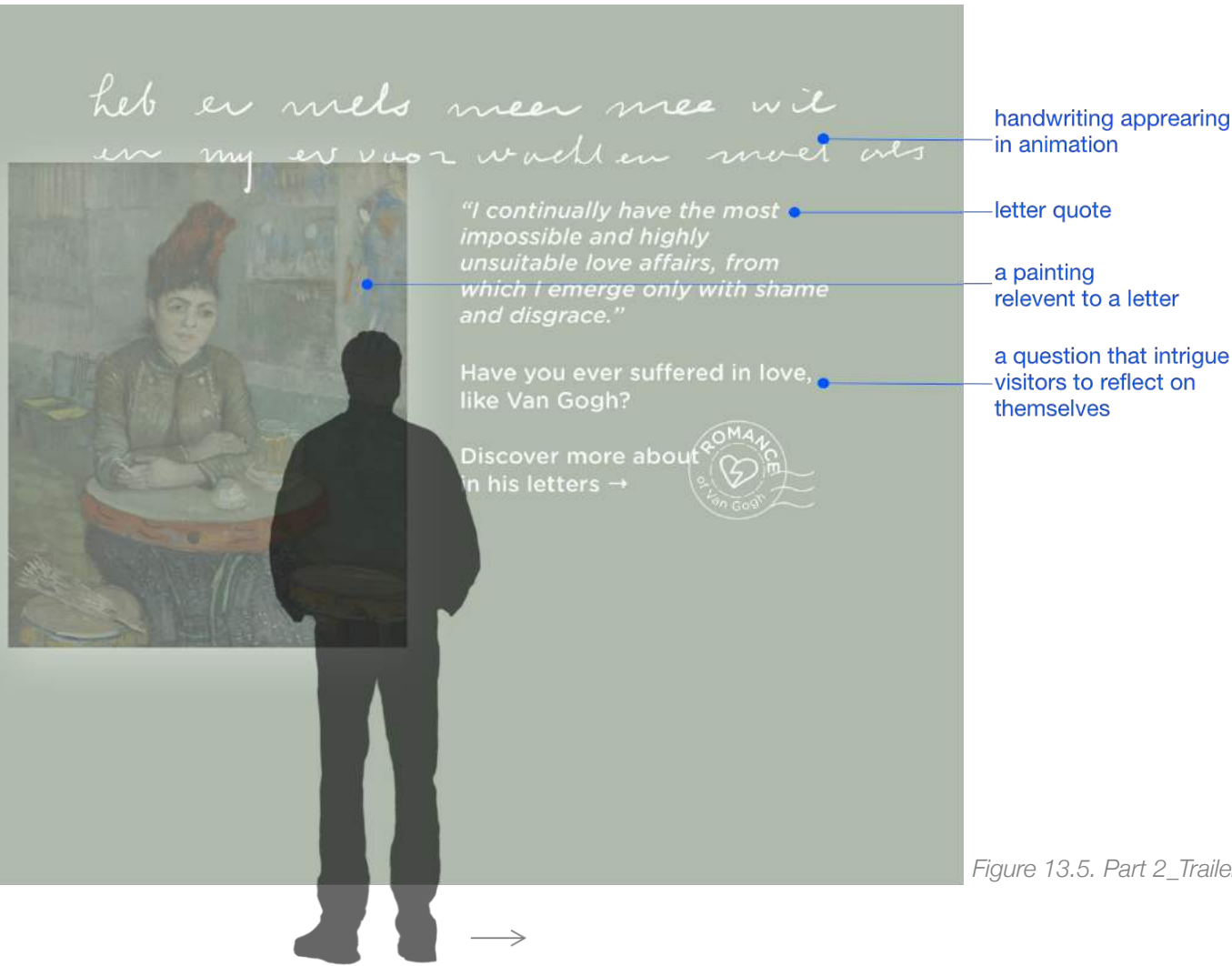
Vincent van Gogh is best known for his art, but he was also a passionate letter writer. During his life, he wrote more than 800 letters to his brother Theo and other families and friends. You can step into Van Gogh's mind and feelings by his letters about:



Behind the letters, maybe you will find a Van Gogh you didn't know before.



13.3 Part 2_Trailer



This part is projected on the wall next to the introduction, consisting of a painting, a quote and an intriguing question, all related to the same theme. The content switches to the next theme every several seconds. In this way, when visitors first enter this gallery, they can already get a sense of the connection between Van Gogh's art, his letters and their own experience

Figure 13.5. Part 2_Trailer

13.4 Part 3_Age Narrative

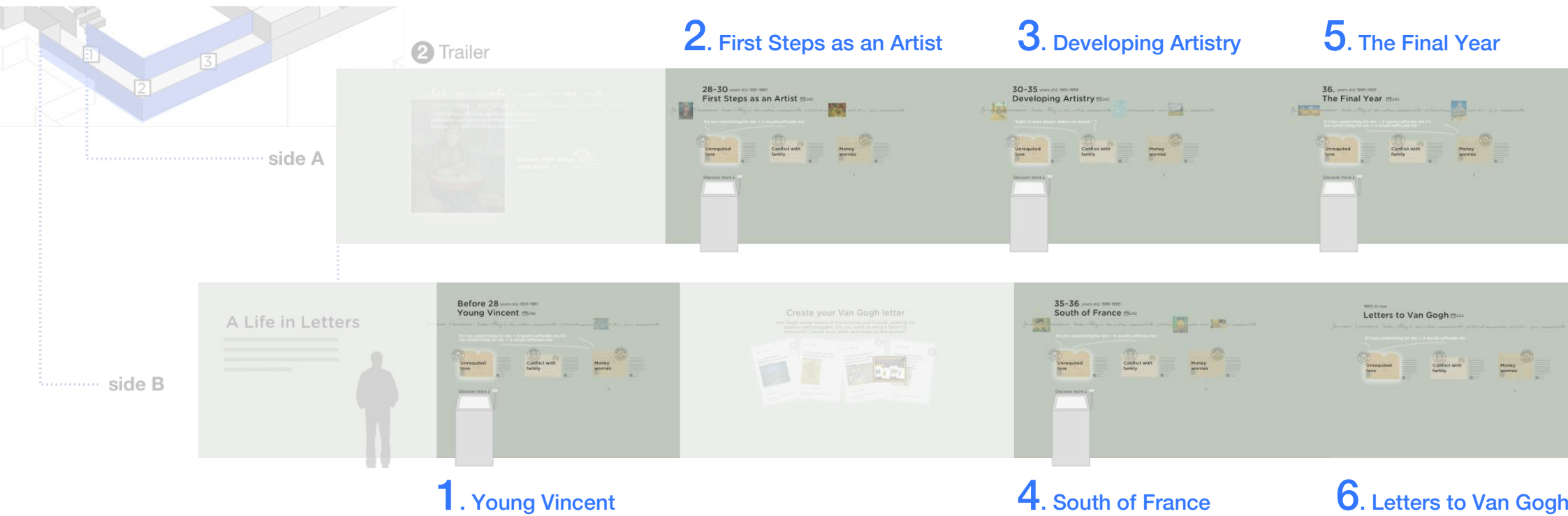


Figure 13.6. Six sections of the Age narrative

Arrangement of a narrative section

In Chapter 11.4 I presented two versions of the design of section arrangement and made iterations based on the feedback from museum supervisor and visitors. This is the second iterated version.

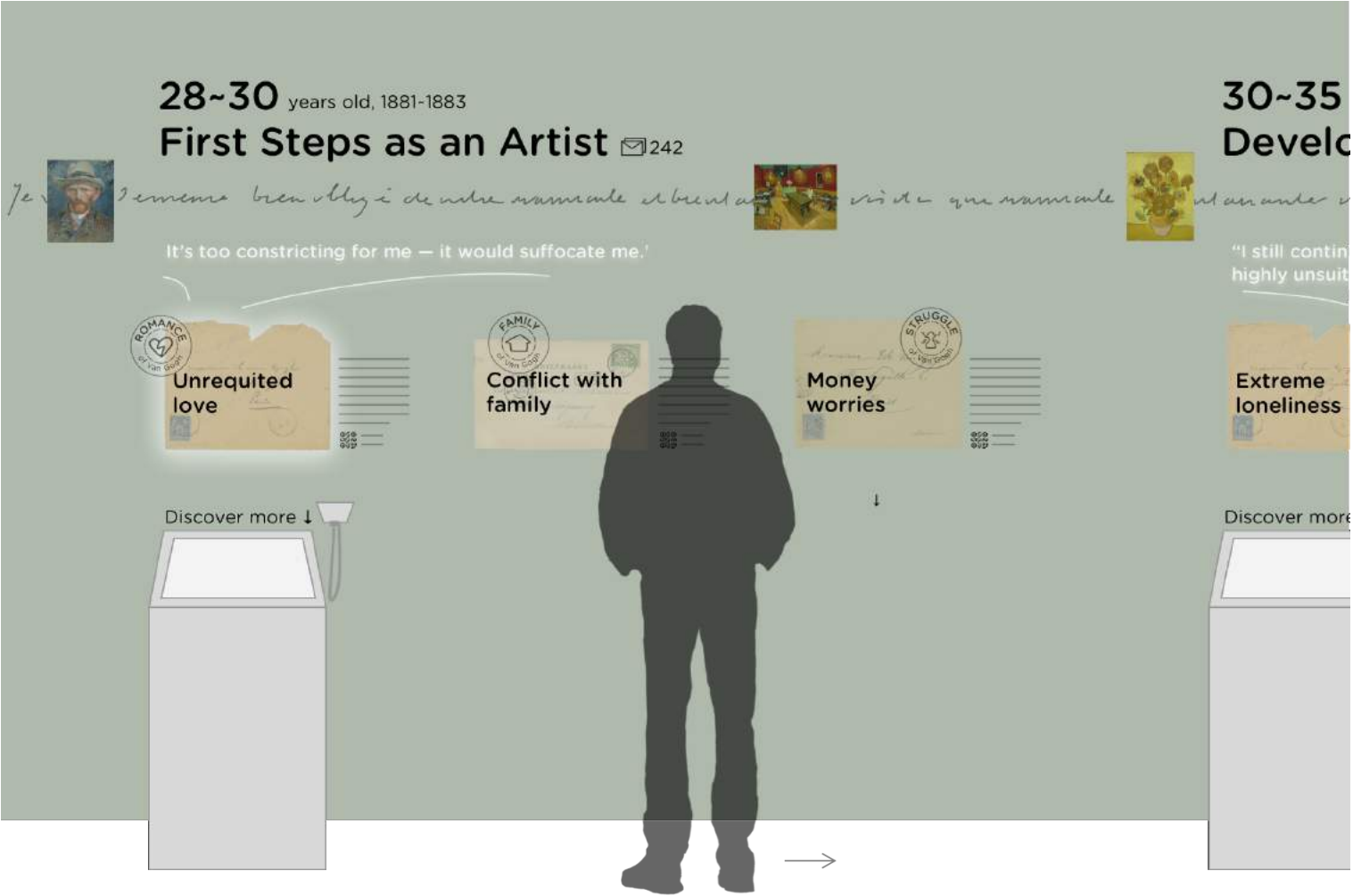


Figure 13.7. Final design of the section arrangement of Age narrative

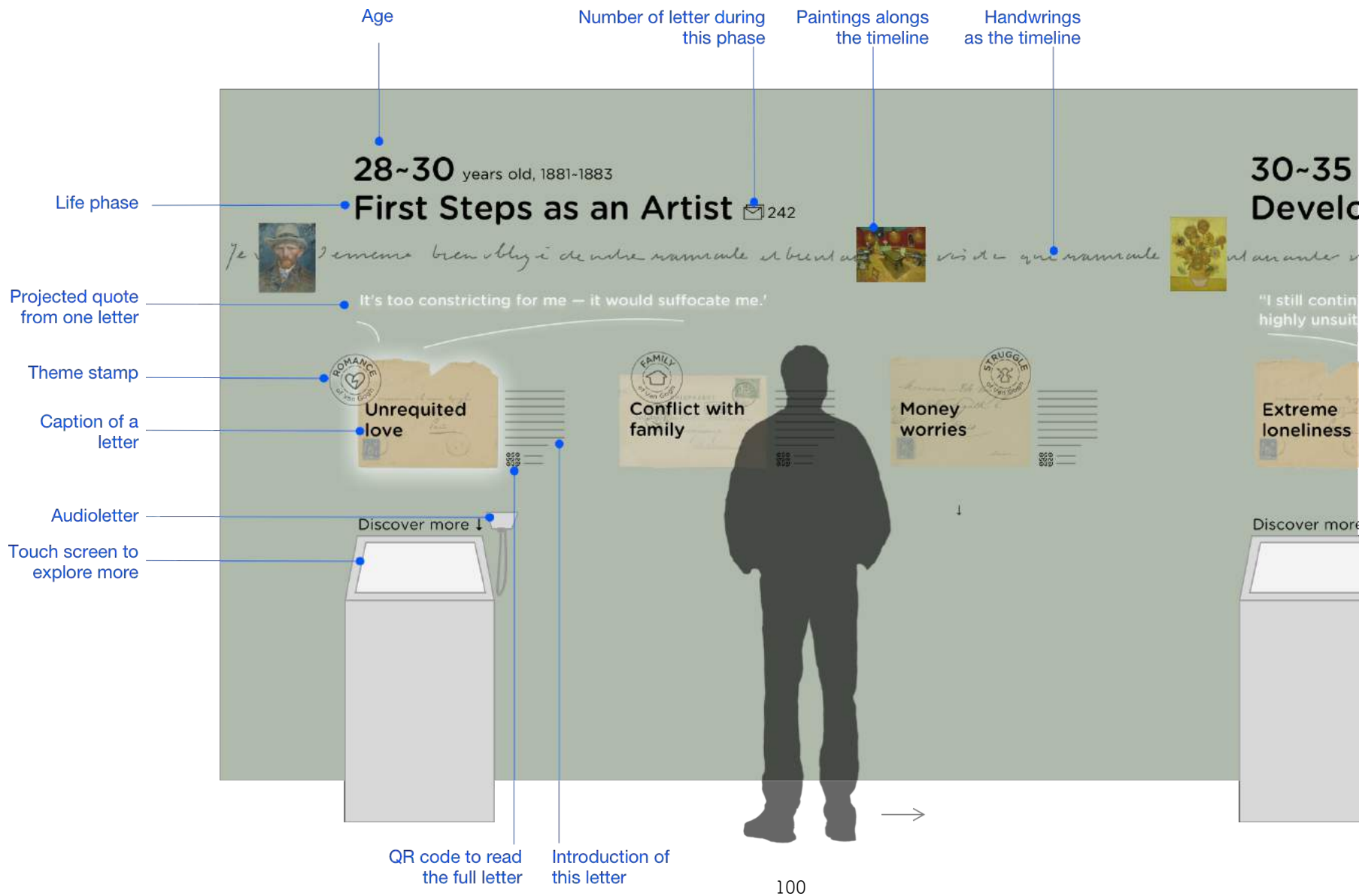


Figure 13.8. Information elements in section arrangement of Age narrative

The original letters consist of intimidating large pieces of text. If people take time to dive into the letters, they will find it worthy, as was shown in the booklet research. But how to present the beauty of the letter content, in the busy gallery? I designed the layers of information

to break down the bulk content and help visitors find their own focus points easier.

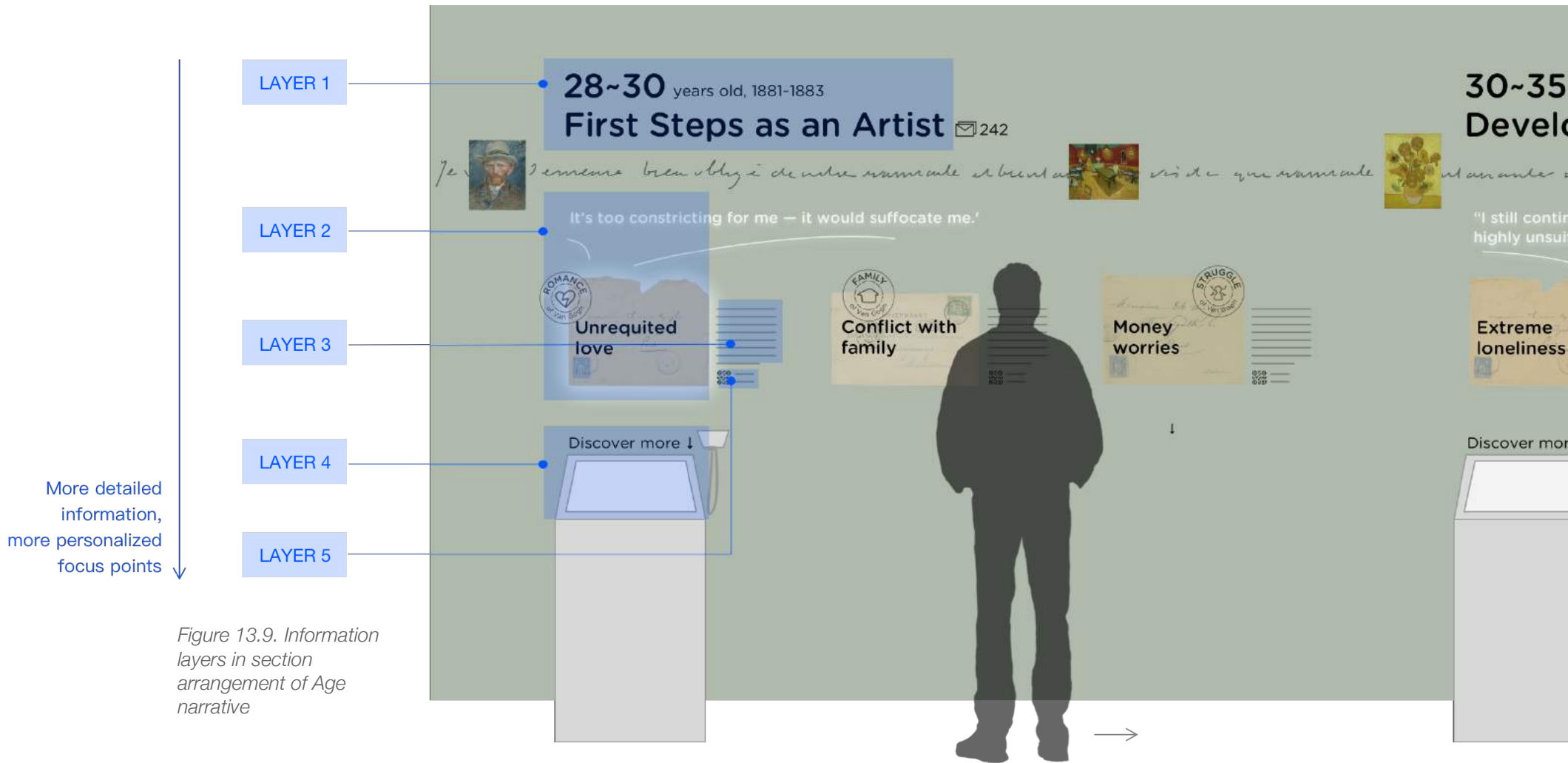


Figure 13.9. Information layers in section arrangement of Age narrative

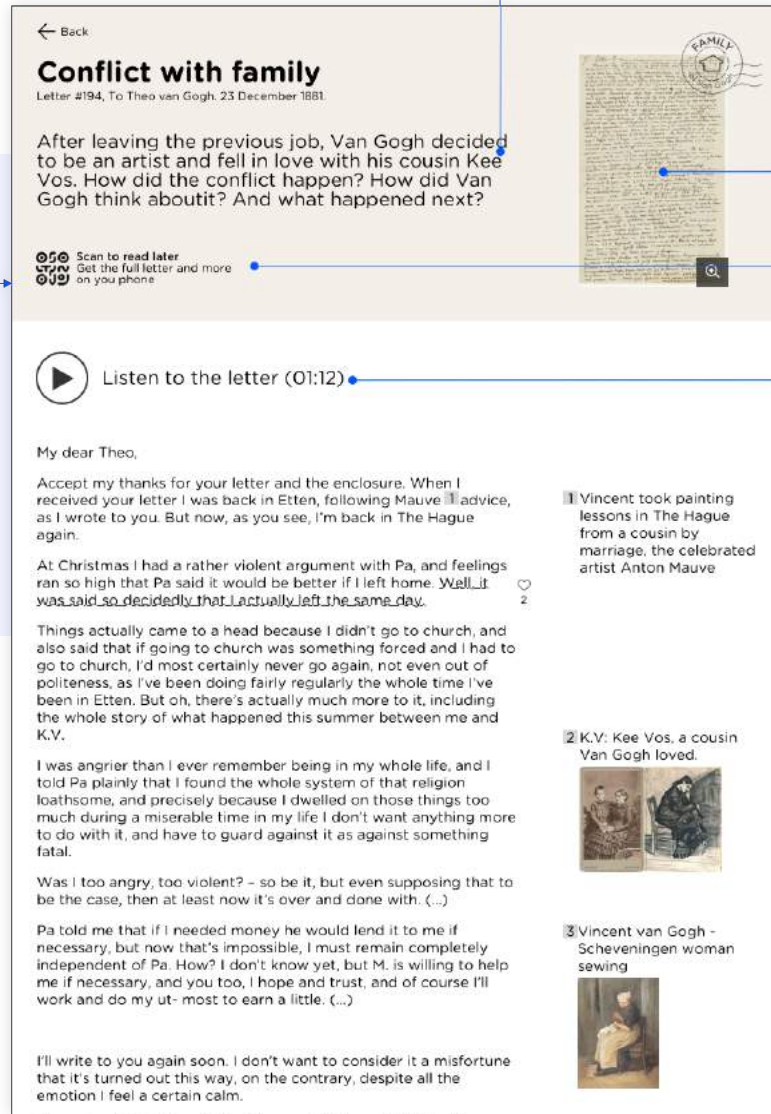
Screen in a Section

Visitors can explore more in the screen in each section with interactive and multimedia content. It plays a similar role to the MMT, but is accessible for visitors without MMT.

Main page of the screen

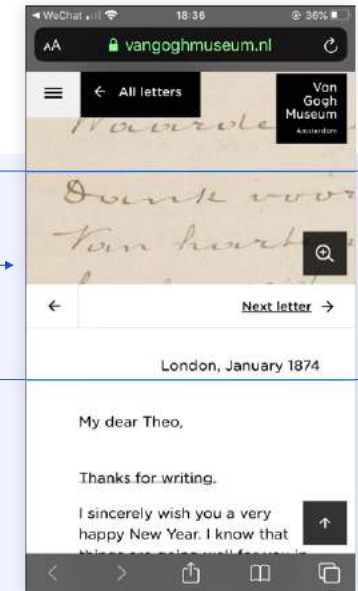


Letter detail page



Summary of the story to give a quick view

Letter page on phone



Enlarge at the facsimile

Play audio letter

Discover more ↓

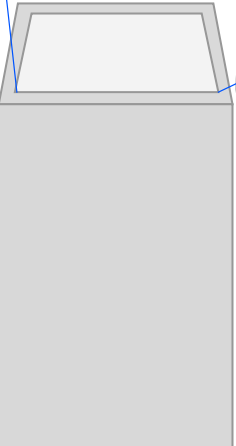


Figure 13.10. Interfaces of the screen in each Age section

13.5 Part 4_Interactive Programme

In chapter 10 the three concepts were compared and the pros and cons of each were concluded. Merging the key points together, we get the final design which is mainly built on concept 3 “Create your Van Gogh letter” while incorporating the **information structure of concept 1** “Me and Van Gogh” and the **rich interactivity of concept 2** “Feel Van Gogh’s pen tip”.

Wall projection

The interactive programme is on a screen, but if the screen is occupied, visitors can also see some projections on the wall. The projections are meant to attract their attentions more boldly and make sure when the screen is occupied, the large crowd can still partly engage with the programme.

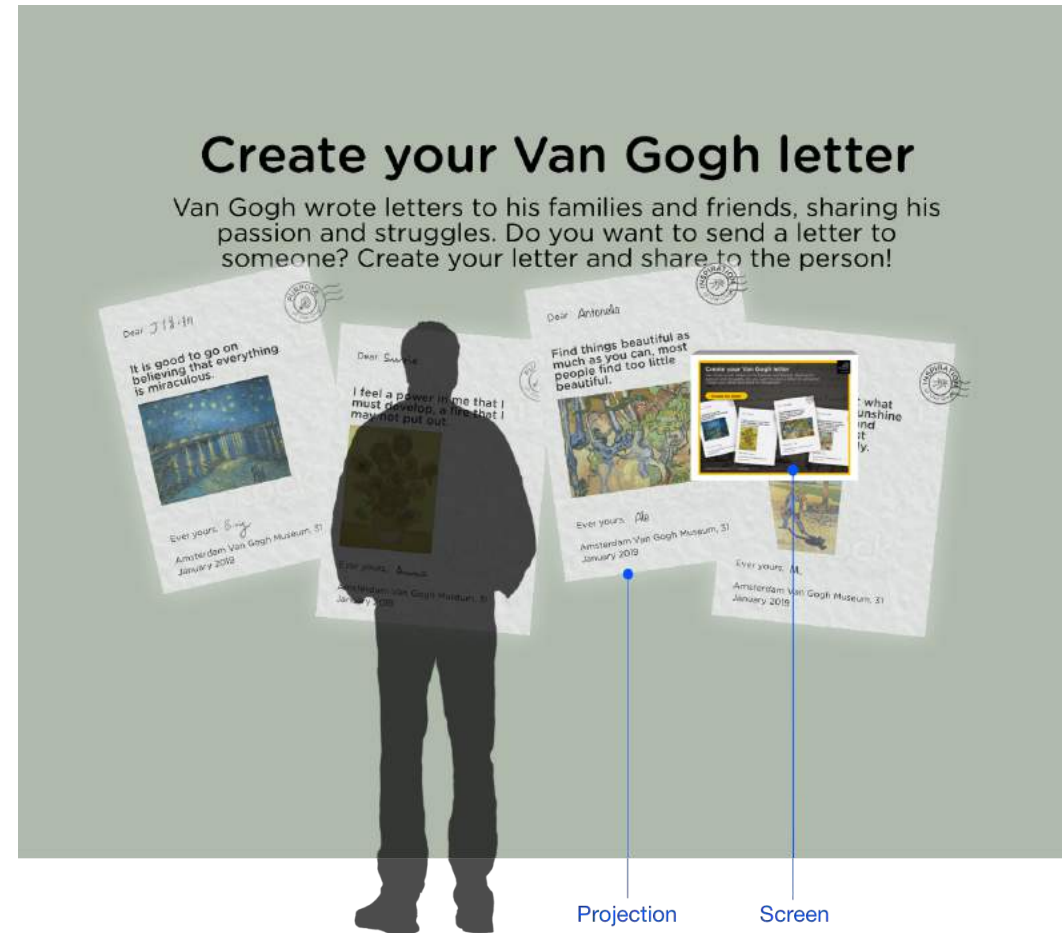
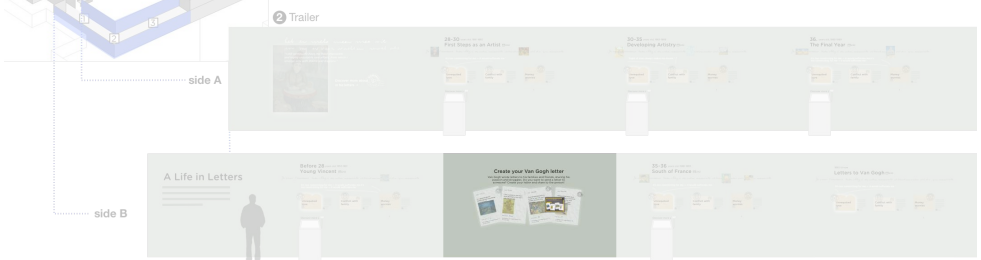


Figure 13.11. Part 4_Interactive programme on gallery wall

Create your Van Gogh letter

Van Gogh wrote letters to his families and friends, sharing his feelings and thoughts. Do you also want to send a letter to someone? Create your letter and share to the person!

Create my letter

The image displays four sample letters created by users. Each letter features a reproduction of a Van Gogh painting and a handwritten-style message. The letters are: 1. 'Dear 丁博洋' with a quote about believing in miracles and a reproduction of 'The Starry Night'. 2. 'Dear Susie' with a quote about a power in me and a reproduction of 'Sunflowers'. 3. 'Dear Antonella' with a quote about finding beauty and a reproduction of 'The Sower'. 4. 'Dear Hannah' with a quote about sunshine and fine weather and a reproduction of 'The Sower'. Each letter includes the sender's name, the museum name, and the date.

Nederlands | English | 中文 | русский

Van Gogh Museum
Amsterdam

Figure 13.12. Main page of the final concept of the interactive programme

Main page

Create your Van Gogh letter

Van Gogh wrote letters to his families and friends, sharing his feelings and thoughts. Do you also want to send a letter to someone? Create your letter and share to the person!

Create my letter

The page displays four example letters with handwritten text and Van Gogh's artwork. The letters are addressed to 'Dear Susie', 'Dear Antoinella', and 'Dear Hannah'. Each letter includes a date and location from the Amsterdam Van Gogh Museum. At the bottom, there are language options: Nederlands | English | 中文 | русский.

Use your finger to write down the name of the recipient.

← Who do you want to send to?

Dear Who do you want to write to?
Write the name here

Next →

Finish writing and click [Next].

← Who do you want to send to?

Dear Susie

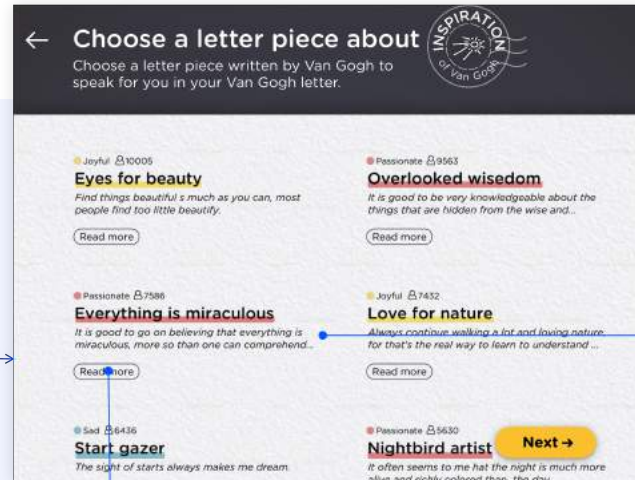
Next →

Choose a theme



Choose a theme of the letter. The name just written will appear at the left bottom, to maintain the personal feeling.

Choose a quote of a theme



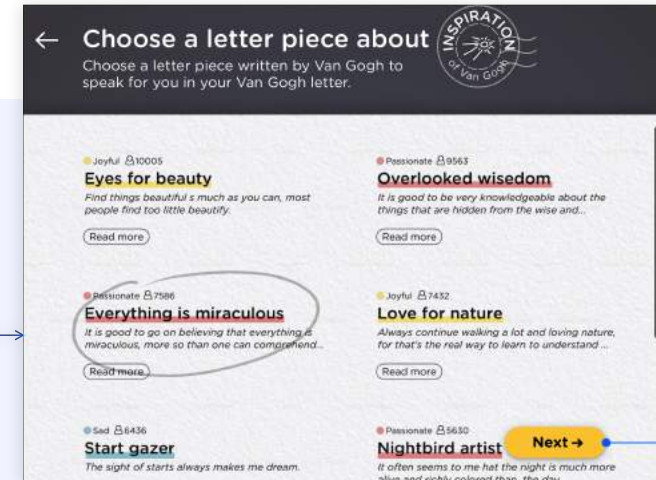
Every quote has a caption to help visitor understand at a quick glance. Four colors represent four types of Van Gogh's emotions.

View the quote details

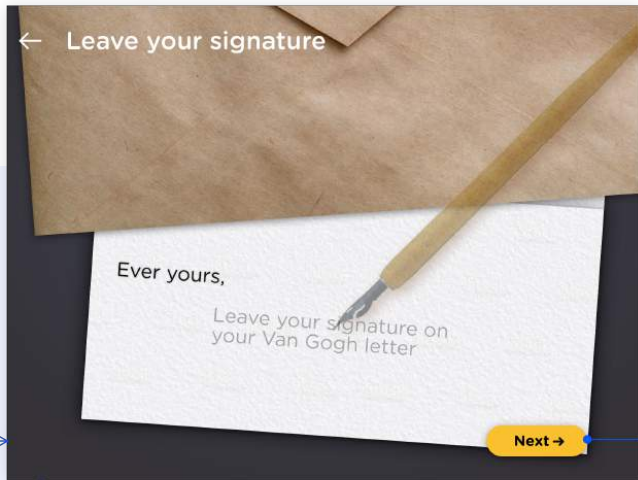


Users see the full quote and the story summary written by curators, as well as the related pictures.

A quote is chosen



Leave your signature



Your Van Gogh letter is made



The letter is put in an envelop



Scan QR code on your phone

The original letter of Van Gogh



On the "back" of MY letter there is Van Gogh's original letter, with the facsimile as the background, creating a sense of connection.

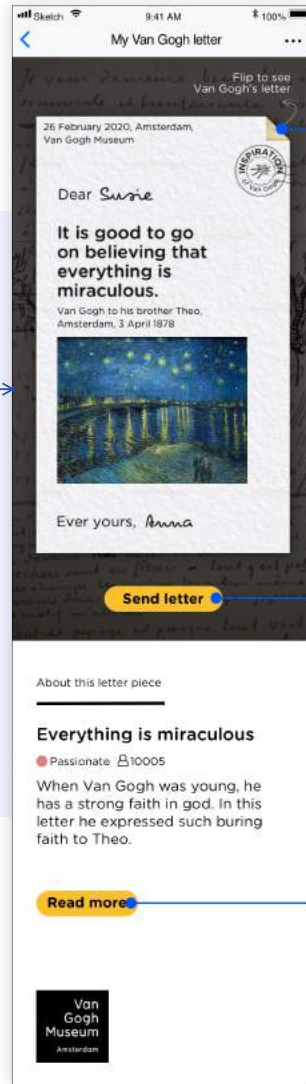
Receive letter on phone



Scan QR code on your phone

Tap to open the envelop

Letters on phone



Read more

Go to the letter page on VGM website

Share in various ways



Save picture to album social media sharing

13.6 Discussions

The full concept was discussed with Harma and 3 friends of my “think tank”. Based on their feedback, I proposed following recommendations for the future design:

Choice of themes

The current 6 theme chosen in the final concept are just exemplifications. For future implementations, the museum still need to discuss which themes to present, according to how much they can reflect Van Gogh's life and how much they are intriguing to visitors. A detail needs to be noted: the word choice for themes should be really simple. For example, in the 2nd visitor interview (Chapter 7) very few people were interested in "Perseverance" possibly because the word sounds unfamiliar.

Should we define the emotion of letters?

Direct and strong emotions are an intriguing trait in Van Gogh's letters. Designers see the potentials of using such universal emotions in designs about letters, including the Letter Highlight website (Chapter 2.4) and my designs (Chapter 12.1). Indeed, explicating emotions will expose the inner side of Van Gogh and sometimes will work for creating personal connections. However, pre-defining the emotions of certain letters can be confusing, rigid, or even cheesy. So in the future design, it would be recommended to use emotions in a low-key and open way.

Amount of text

The current design only uses English (except for designs on screens in which users can choose their own language), but in the real situation it will be at least bilingual: Dutch and English, which means, some of the visual design might have to be adjusted to different layouts that can contain more text. Considering this, the amount of text in the final concept should be reduced, and the museum should use easier ways to convey meanings, such as infographics, illustrations and videos.

Online content

One of the redefined goal is "to encourage them explore more after they leave the letter gallery." Transferring this goal to design solution, it would be "to direct them to the online letter library" where they can find more about the letters. However, the current online contents are not prepared for this yet. To connect the gallery and online experience smoothly, there should be more letters with more annotations on the website, as well as the consistency in narrative and structure.

Chapter 14

Personal Reflection

Delft, 18 March 2020

Dear *Bingyan*

Do right and don't look
back, and things will turn
out well.

Van Gogh letter #22 | to his brother Theo |
London, 30 April 1874



Ever yours, *Bingyan*

This is the first time I did a real project with thorough research and design explorations, independently. Looking back, I not only enriched my skillset, but also knew about myself better. At the end of this report, I'd love to share these reflections that will continue inspiring me in the future.

Don't look for the perfect archetype

In the early stage of this project I got stuck when trying to look for a precise definition of PC, and caused the toxic frustrations. Later on I found that a perfect definition / principle / model is not necessary for creating good designs. It's an illusion to think that there is something perfect to DISCOVER. Instead, the task of researchers and designers is to ORGANIZE the fragments we can grasp, and that's the way we work, as human, not as machine or God.

Organize and document research data neatly.

From every research I got some insights, but usually in a loose way — only write down what I thought interesting, without the accurate process of transcribing and interpreting. On one hand, it saved my time; on the other hand, the details and reasoning became irretraceable. This problem emerged especially when I wrote the report and tried to make everything coherent and convincing. In the future I need to be more attentive to the research data processing and documenting.

Just dive into the context.

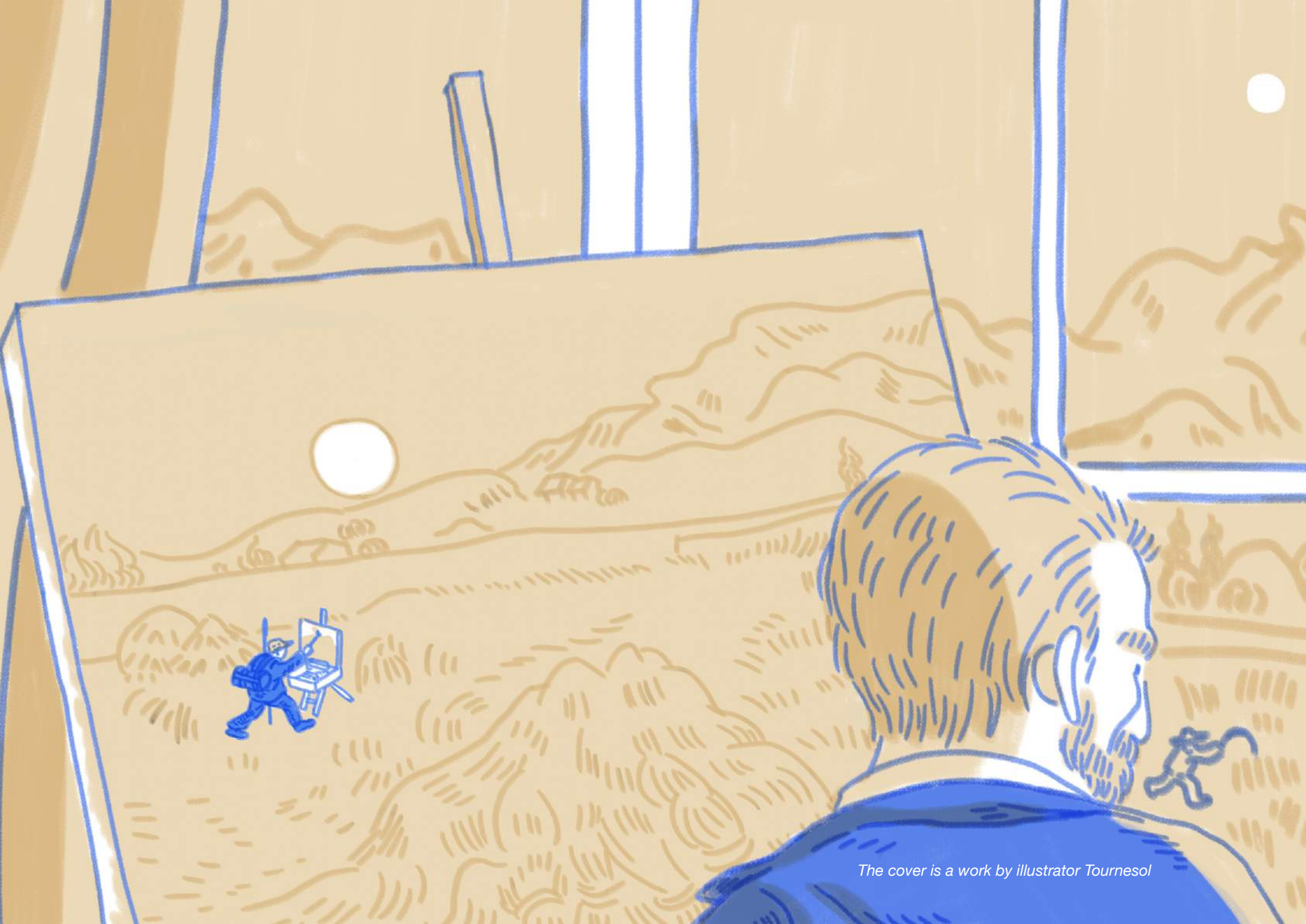
If I will be asked what's the most interesting finding in my research, I will say the one in the first visitor evaluation: among the three concepts of the gallery narrative, the seemingly most traditional "Age" wins. My interpretation is that the context of museum makes the visitors strive for security when facing information overload. This finding was surprising to VGM colleagues as well. Diving into context, the researcher will step closer to unexpected insights and further from false assumptions.

Deal with complexity.

I was always wondering what unique value I can bring as an "experience designer", comparing to professional user researchers, industrial designers or graphic designers. After this project, I believe that a core ability of an experience designer is "dealing with complexity", making the complicated simple, and the simple extensive. I'm proud that in this project I have shown this ability : starting from a vague goal, I concluded the various research findings to the three simple design goals, then generated extensive concepts. With this ability, I can step into future research and design practice confidently, independent of forms and fields of the projects.

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The cover is a work by illustrator Tournesol

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Appendix 1_Design brief of letters on the 2nd floor by VGM Education Department

Reason (definition of problem)

The current lay-out used for the permanent collection has been in place since December 2014. Although our visitors are still positive about the presentation, we think that after four years, it is time to evaluate the presentation and see where we would like to improve it. One of the aspects we want to tackle is a section on the 2nd floor. This section focuses on Van Gogh's letters, but there are several 'side-paths' leading to other stories. For example, it explores the ties with his family (Theo in particular), the art collection belonging to the two brothers, Jo van Gogh-Bonger and the history of the museum and the Van Gogh legacy. Visitors can look at paintings, read and listen to letters and investigate the so-called 'family wall'.

We now intend to condense all the different storylines in the presentation into a single all-encompassing storyline, namely *the letters of Van Gogh*, which will give visitors a chance to find out who he was. We believe that this will give the presentation more composure and focus. The audio letters are very popular, but would benefit from an upgrade. We currently use wall-mounted consoles and would now like to make a more modern version, one that would provide more interaction, enabling visitors to choose different forms

and possibly respond themselves. One aspect that we are keen to retain is Theo and Vincent's own collection and the display of several works of art from this joint collection. The collection, like Vincent's artistry, was a joint project and the subject of much correspondence between the brothers. It is therefore relevant to the all-encompassing storyline.

Background information

The following basic principles were used to compile the current collection presentation in 2014:

The aim of the new lay-out is to find a fresh, new way of presenting the permanent collection. It must be an innovative presentation of the life and work of Vincent van Gogh, within the context of his predecessors, contemporaries and followers. The presentation must:

1. fully satisfy the expectations and wishes of our visitors;
2. expand upon the story we are currently telling;
3. demonstrate the importance of Van Gogh's art;
4. present the life and the man behind Vincent van Gogh;
5. focus on the art;
6. stimulate visitors and encourage dialogue;
7. teach visitors how to view art and give them something that will help them in other areas.

These were linked to the following educational objectives:

- To encourage (and teach) the public to view authentic works of art.
- To present the collection at different levels to suit different

audiences: from easily accessible art to art that requires more thought.

- To inspire a broader public by providing a mix of learning styles (reading, listening, looking, doing, experiencing) and resources. This is also important in terms of the language barrier that is experienced by some visitors.
- To meet the demands and wishes that emerge from public surveys (such as the TNS NIPO survey) and questions received by Education and the Visitors Service. Such as information about *the person* Van Gogh.
- To present knowledge about Van Gogh by drawing attention to research and new developments.
- To improve accessibility to our range, including for visitors with physical or sensory disabilities (wheelchair users, the blind & visually impaired, the deaf & hearing impaired).

Storyline for the permanent collection

The 'development of Van Gogh's artistry' is the common thread. Everything revolves around the importance of Van Gogh, the ideas behind his works of art and their emotional impact on visitors and other artists, right up until the present day. The chapters are in chronological order and include not only Van Gogh's paintings, but also his work on paper, his letters and the work of his contemporaries.

The 2nd floor focuses specifically on Van Gogh as a person. The chronological story is interrupted to explain about aspects such as his friendships, the ear incident, the letters, his family and Vincent and Theo's collection. This follows on from basic principle numbers 1, 4 and 5, as defined on the previous page. On this floor in particular, we

provide a mix of learning styles. It is important to ensure that the new presentation of the letters fits in with the existing objectives and storyline.

What is the aim of the new letter presentation?

In line with the all-encompassing objectives of the entire permanent collection: We want these letters to take visitors into Van Gogh's mind and thoughts, so that they feel a personal connection with the man who was Vincent van Gogh.

Sub-aims:

- To stir visitors' emotions
- To introduce visitors to Van Gogh as a person (as well as Van Gogh as an artist) - To draw the public's attention to original works of art and documents.

Why do we want to make these changes?

First inventory of the needs of the museum and the visitors (by means of a small-scale study with observations and interviews):

Negative/points for improvement: too many storylines, too widely-spread across the floor, too static & passive, only 8 audio letters, in just 2 languages, one multimedia form (audio), original letters were completely missed (they receive little attention).

Positive/retain: > Listening, becoming absorbed via audio, easy to operate, combination of original objects & 'interpretations', feeling emotionally involved.

What do we want to show visitors?

- Original letter cabinet + original writing desk
- Approx. two original letters
- Approx. four original works from Vincent and Theo's collection
- Digital presentation (based on the letter cabinet), allowing visitors to listen to fragments of letters relating to a specific theme
- Digital writing desk enabling visitors to reply to the letters (participation)

How do we want to show this?

The basic premise is a room revolving around Van Gogh's letters. We want to create a room that is inviting, aesthetic and inspiring. The narrow space in relation to large numbers of visitors is an important point for consideration. How can we prevent congestion or only one person at a time being able to enjoy the installation?

We hope that by making the presentation more digital and interactive, we will enable visitors to get to know Van Gogh and his letters based on their personal preferences, and allow them to respond to his letters. We want visitors to feel emotionally involved, to get them thinking. We would prefer to develop this interactive letter installation in phases, so that we can tailor it to the public's needs and actively involve them in its design. We will test new elements with visitors to the museum; what do they like the best? Which type? What else would they like? In addition to their requirements regarding content, we want to involve visitors in the design process. We must focus on encouraging participation in a group that varies in age, cultural background etc.

But within this digital, interactive presentation, we must also ensure that visitors can admire the original objects in peace, and that they continue to draw attention; these are the 'jewels in the crown' of this floor, not simply illustrations of the story.

The idea is to design a test lay-out with prototypes first, and use the letter exhibition in 2020 to decide on the definitive lay-out.

Initial ideas

A multimedia installation based on the letter cabinet will allow visitors to 'open' digital drawers, listen and look. The cabinet is divided into themes. To avoid chaos in this relatively small room while still allowing visitors enough choice, we will select 5 to 7 themes. The small room while still allowing visitors enough choice, we will select 5 to 7 themes. The themes will correspond with the content of the letters. Exploring the letters will bring visitors closer to Van Gogh; they will learn more about his interests and motives. At the same time, these are universal themes with which visitors can identify. They are personal and appealing. To give visitors a chance to reflect upon what they have heard and seen, we will set up a digital writing desk, loosely based on Van Gogh's original writing desk. Visitors will be able to share their reactions, reply to each other and rate one another's responses. In this way, responses will be filtered, making it easier for the museum to manage.

Possible themes

- Family
- Friends

- Collections
- Determination/resilience - Admiration/examples
- Believe in yourself
- Love
- Self-knowledge
- How to act as a person

Content of a drawer

- Fragments of letters from Van Gogh
 - Compilation of fragments lasting max. 1 minute
 - Images, such as documentary photos, pictures of paintings, pictures of prints etc. (particularly as these were actually stored in this cabinet!)
- Infographic illustrations à e.g. family cloud and friend cloud - Music and/or soundscapes, used to create an atmosphere.

Conditions

Content:

- Composed
- Reflects the possibilities of multimedia
- Shows distinctive features of the letters, such as the writing paper, Van Gogh's handwriting, postage stamps
- Is personal
- Includes original objects (some letters and works from Vincent and Theo's collection), which reflect the magic of the originals and add something, more than is currently the case

- Shows the abundance/richness of the content of the letters, geared towards visitors depending on the theme chosen
- Is a mix of reading, listening, watching, doing and experiencing - Allows visitors to experience them individually or in groups
- Includes an element of participation

Practical

(With regard to captions and texts, installations and integration of multimedia):

- There must be enough room for visitors to see and use the educational resources (text, installations). They must meet the requirements for fire safety and crowd control.
- There must be a smooth transition between 2D and 3D design.
- The use of colours must not interfere with legibility. Colours on the walls or floor can

have a strong negative or positive effect on legibility. VGM prefers dark letters on a pale background. Be careful about the saturation of colours (of the letters and the background), as this also affects legibility.

- The designer must submit designs digitally.
- The designer must ensure that the educational texts are properly integrated into the

works on display. He will advise the educator and curator in this respect. If the designer lacks the knowledge/know-how for a

particular aspect and needs assistance from an external party, he must always inform the VGM beforehand.

- The designer is responsible for providing (or helping to provide) budgets for the costs of implementing/producing the educational resources he designs.
- If art is involved in, or placed in the vicinity of, an educational end product, a clear distinction must be made between the work of art (which may not be touched) and the distinction must be made between the work of art (which may not be touched) and the added educational resource (which may sometimes be touched).
- The works of art must have enough space around them to be admired in peace, separately from the educational resource.
- In the case of A and/or B room texts, there must be plenty of opportunity for the public to stand in front of or around the texts to read them. Readers must not stand in the way of those viewing the works. This means that gallery texts must not be placed in narrow corners.
- The design must comply with the corporate identity guidelines of the Van Gogh Museum. The design must also be suitable for digital media.
- The design must help to highlight/emphasise the themes within the presentation. The gallery texts must also be well lit/highlighted.
- The design must be in keeping with the look and feel of the rest of the permanent collection.
- It must also satisfy the requirements for accessibility (see the accessibility of exhibitions protocol).

- Minimum of two (Dutch-English), but preferably several or 11 languages (like MMT).
- The multimedia elements of the presentation must be:
 - o Simple to use
 - o Technology that will stand the test of time
 - o Stable and durable

Points for concern

- The narrow space and large numbers of visitors. There must be enough room for people to look at and use the digital letter wall. How does this affect the opposite wall? Can it be used to exhibit work?
- Several people must be able to use the digital letter wall simultaneously.
- The room must also allow space for a few original works from Vincent and Theo's collection.
- There must be a natural, logical link between the original works of art on display in the room and the digital letter cabinet/wall.
- It would be a bonus to come up with a 'children's route' through the letter cabinet/wall, to make it suitable for younger visitors. Possibly two children's themes at the right height for children?

Appendix 2_First visitor interview results

age	nationality	occupation	what's most interesting in 2F	what connection do feel	why	know letters before?	what's interesting about letters	why	expectation	suggestion
20-	Germany		Friendship with Gauguin	her friendship	have friends who are not always agree with you	no	hand writing	it reflects how he felt at that moment, because how a person writes can reveal info like feelings	-	-
20+	China		Paintings	watched the movie, get touched by his stories	-	no	- didn't read, language barrier	-	-	-
50+	Italy		Family "why didn't have a wife?"	no	-	no	- didn't read	-	-	-
40+	Japan		Passion from his stories and paintings; Conflicts, his ears	no	-	yes	- didn't read letters because of children	-	-	-
20+	China		Paintings	reminds her of how she take photos of scenarios	-	no	original handwriting	it reflects his feelings and the real situation when he wrote, make me feel "it's real"	want to buy letterbook translation of text and sketches	add chinese translation
30+	Germany	nurse student	- vibrant colors - famous paintings like sunflower	no	-	no	- didn't read much because of crowd different views on this person, know more	-	put the letter in MMT. now there's too crowded to listen to the audio letter. in general, didn't pay much attention to letters	
20+	Amrica? Indonesia?		- know how emotional he is - how he and his art changes in different period of his life	no	-	no	what a simple life he has, unlike nowadays	-	-	-
40+	China		Even w/ MMT it's still too much info	no	-	no	handwriting looks beautiful (although don't understand)	-		2F needs guiding signs for a complete story, like IKEA
50+	Germany		Paintings are more interesting; Cabinet is interesting	the oil painting film	-	-	- didn't read, more focused on paintings	-	-	-

Appendix 3_Letter booklet

Letters of Van Gogh

A glimpse of Van Gogh as a person

I am _____, I start the booklet on _____.

Thank you for joining this small research about Van Gogh 🌻

Vincent van Gogh is best known for his art, but he was also a passionate letter writer 📧. In this research, the booklet maker wants to find insights for the future design of the letter exhibition in the Van Gogh Museum.

It will be a one week journey with this booklet 📖. The advice is to spend about 10-20 minutes on it every day, but you can have your own tempo. After one week, the booklet maker will collect it and do a small interview with you by call or in person. In return, you can get a **free visit to the Van Gogh Museum** and a **warm coffee in the museum cafe ☕**. You can keep this booklet after we finish the research.

If you have questions when using this booklet, you are very welcome to contact the booklet maker **Bingyan Ding**, through WhatsApp (+31 645 399 086) or email (b.ding@vangoghmuseum.nl).

Enjoy!

*Special thanks to Joy for helping with making the booklet :)

Before reading the letters...

Let's recall who is Van Gogh in your mind →

How do you see Van Gogh?

What's your impression on Van Gogh? Draw a portrait for him (no need to make arts, scribbles are good enough ;) You can also describe what's in your mind with nouns, verbs, and adjectives.



I see him as *[nouns]* ...

He is a *[adjectives]* person...



I feel *[adjectives about feelings]* about him...

How do you see Van Gogh's art?

How do you feel and understand these paintings? Describe it on the "before reading letters" column on the postcards.

The letters

» There are 8 letters in this booklet for you to read and mark. You don't have to do all of them if you don't have time for that; at least 5 letters would be appreciated.

» Please mark what's interesting to you (can be anything) and explain a bit why. Capture the voices in your mind, just like thinking aloud on the paper. There might be a lot catching your attention; you can mark them all with the normal pen  while highlighting the most interesting parts with the highlighter  in the envelope.

» Have a look at the original handwriting of each letter. Any thoughts or feelings pop out? Write it down.

» Before reading, can you think of what you would like to know from the letters?

I'm curious about...

1 Inspiration

Letter 17: To Theo van Gogh
London, January 1874

My dear Theo,

Thanks for writing.

I sincerely wish you a very happy New Year. I know that things are going well for you in the office, because I heard as much from Mr Tersteeg. I saw from your letter that you have art in your blood, and that's a good thing, old chap. I'm glad you like Millet, Jacque, Schreyer, Lambinet, Frans Hals &c., because – as Mauve says – 'that's it'. Yes, that painting by Millet 'The evening angelus', 'that's it'. That's rich, that's poetry. How I'd like to talk to you about art again, but now we can only write to each other about it often; find things beautiful as much as you can, most people find too little beautiful.

I'm writing below a few names of painters whom I like very much indeed. Scheffer, Delaroche, Hébert, Hamon.

Leys, Tissot, Lagye, Boughton, Millais, Thijs Maris, Degroux, De Braekeleer Jr.

Millet, Jules Breton, Feyen-Perrin, Eugène Feyen, Brion, Jundt, George Saal, Israëls, Anker, Knaus, Vautier, Jourdan, Jalabert, Antigna, Compte-Calix, Rochussen, Meissonier, Zamacois, Madrazo, Ziem, Boudin, Gérôme, Fromentin, De Tournemine, Pasini, Decamps, Bonington, Diaz, T. Rousseau, Troyon, Dupré, Paul Huet, Corot, Schreyer, Jacque, Otto Weber, Daubigny, Wahlberg, Bernier, Emile Breton, Chenu, César de Cock, Mlle Collart, Bodmer, Koekkoek, Schelfhout, Weissenbruch, and last but not least Maris and Mauve.

But I could go on like this for I don't know how long, and then come all the old ones, and I'm sure I've left out some of the best new ones.

X 13
Londen Januari 1874

Waarde Theo,

Danke voor je schrijven.
Van harte wensch ik je een
heel goet nieuw jaar toe.
Ik weet dat het je in de zaak
goed gaat, want dat hoor
de ik van den Mr Tersteeg.
Uit je brief zag ik dat je
hart hebt voor kunst, &
dat in een goed ding, kerel.
Ik ben blij je van Millet,
Jacque, Schreyer, Lambinet,
Frans Hals te hoord, want
zoo als Mauve zegt „dat is het”
Ja, dat schij van Millet. „Van
gelus die soir” dat is het.
dat is ryk, dat is poesie.
Wat zou ik graag nog een

Hierby een meerdeje swaig - de Knaus.

The other 7 letters are omitted in this appendix, please find the complete booklet here: [://drive.google.com/open?id=1E9_BOa9NmOwY_jhxtb3s3lhLCi6UX2OR](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1E9_BOa9NmOwY_jhxtb3s3lhLCi6UX2OR)

**Would you like to write a letter to
Vincent Van Gogh?**

**After reading
the letters...**

Dear Vincent,

Now, how do you see Van Gogh?

Is there anything new or changed in your impression on Van Gogh? Close your eyes, think about it... and draw/write here.



I see him as *[nouns]* ...

He is a *[adjectives]* person...

I feel *[adjectives about feelings]* about him...

And now, how do you see Van Gogh's art?

You can write on the "After" column on the postcards or write it here.

	Jiwei	Kamdin	Vysali	Claudia	Marcel	Kristy	Qiong	Caesar	Antonella	Alexandre
		[1] Why nature is beautiful? [2] His rebellion [3] I used to do the same thing [4] He's truggling w/ so much [5] So many dark colors in his paintings. [6] Story if white frame [7] LOve how he describe things he sees	[1] Too many names; I related to him because I'm in NL; This letters seems not like giving news but keep a conversation going [2] sounds intense; souns like his talking to him self [3] I want to know what made him miserable; this page is giving me tension; I can relate to his being under pressure [4] ... [5] what illness does he have?					[1] can i identify w/ he saying "love nature" [2] can identify w/ he being miserable on the bed [3] likes his metaphor of fishermen's danger		
interested letter pieces	[1] He's a rational thinker. *4 [2] I will be the same situation soon. [3] I feel exactly the same.	[8] I admire that although in his condition...	[6] Good description. It makes me imaging the artwork.				[ommit]	[4] identify "difficult goal" for his graduation		
Handwriting	didn't pay attention because it's Dutch	didn't pay attention because it's Dutch	hsndwriting changes, seems like riting in intense mood							
PC	Struggle between making a living and creating art "I feel a little bit more connected to him because I know more about him, which also makes me detached."	Value families and friendship	under pressure; knowing about his daily life makes me feel like I know this person	"he's a poor man but made something. his painting makes him happy." "his sunflowers make me happy."	Insights in his life and mind	we are opposite	same concern (observer & beauty seeker); same negative emotion; see him as a normal person instead of an artist, but "this count as connected?"	abstraction of feelings are their connection	Yes, because I know Van Gogh as person (his humanity) not as an artist. For me the word artist means someone so smart, so far to me.	
	"I feel a little bit more connected to him because I know more about him, which also makes me detached."									
Other comments	"I can see a more trustworthy figure of VG through his own tone, instead of tailored by curator." "Thoe is like a trash bin of his negative feelings. I wonder how he relied VG." "Museum's strategy of sensaton is biased, they don't show the rational side of VG."		"All letters to Theo felt like there' not response, and he's writing journals."				"Letters about families require contextual info so I didn't read."	"I like abstract themes b	I think there are different layer of relationship (like in life). We can be strangers / acquaintance / friends or in a relationship. Sometimes you are acquaintance with one person and only when you have the opportunity to know better him/her you became friend. And it's amazing that everybody want to make a different relationship or link with Van Gogh, maybe you can think of a system where you can choose how much deep you want your connection with Van Gogh! For me, for example, was surprising to know that Van Gogh is human, not the stereotype of the artist who has a wild life, without rule, who is self-confidence and doesn't care about money and society rules. But I found out thanks to the letters, and If I had not read the romance letter or the family letter I would never have found out.	
Write to Van Gogh	"Becoming artist after passing away, does it make you more or less artist?"	Address feelings of VG a lot	Don't be bothered, things will be fine.	emotions	-	" I felt a lively you from the letters, not the person from wikiedia and documentaries anymore"				

Do you now feel more connected with Van Gogh?

If so, what's it that makes the connected feeling?



Appendix 4 Booklet

participants information

Familiarity to VG

- 1: Only know the existence of this person
- 2: Know few of his representative works
- 3: Know some of his works and famous stories
- 4: Know many of his stories and general life path
- 5: Know extensive details about his life and art

Name	Nationality	Age	Profession	Familiarity to VG	Distribute date	Collect Date
Claudia	Dutch	40+	Afterschool supervisor	2	30/10/2019, Wed	08/11/2019, Fri
Marcel	Dutch	40+	Teacher	3	30/10/2019, Wed	08/11/2019, Fri
Jiwei	China	26	Interaction designer	3	30/10/2019, Wed	07/11/2019, Thur
Kristy	China	28	Engineering communication	2	31/10/2019, Thur	09/11/2019, Sat
Kamdin	Iran	28	Engineer	1	31/10/2019, Thur	7/11/2019, Thur
Vys	India	23	Interaction designer	2	2.11.2019, Sat	09/11/2019, Sat
Qiong	China	27	Interaction designer	3	3.11.2019, Sun	14.11.2019, Wedn
Cesar	Peru	33	Interaction designer	2	4.11.2019, Mon	14.11.2019, Wedn
Antonella	Italy	27	Graphic designer	3	4.11.2019, Mon	14.11.2019, Thur
Alexandre	Italy	30	Communication manager	2	4.11.2019, Mon	14.11.2019, Thur

Appendix 5 Booklet results

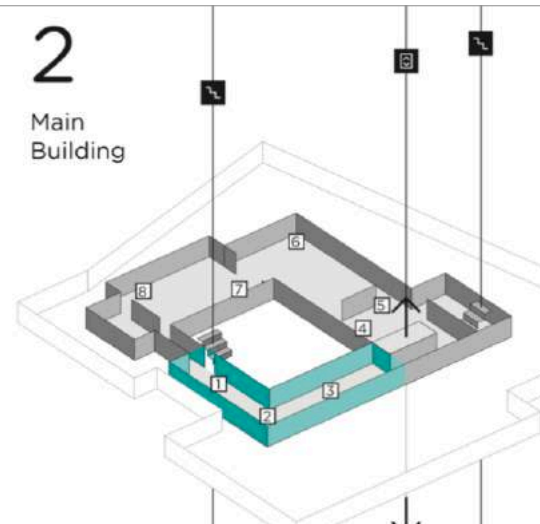
Please find the https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1476YN3e-HV7Z33-sK4f4rCGGU7gqFdvbOHP_gvkKRQ/edit?usp=sharing

	Jiwei	Kamdin	Vysali	Claudia	Marcel	Kristy	Qiong	Caesar	Antonella	Alexandre
familiarity	3		1	2	2	3	2	3	2	4
I see him as	artist	artist, Dutch	artist	artist	paint musician, Dutch, not understood, rebel	painter	smoker, artist, genius	rebel, artist, thinker	a man w/ a broken ear	visionair
He is a	painful	no idea	serious, tough	creative	creative	talented but a bit weird	passionate, neurotic	passionate, weird, funny, 100% crazy	stange	introverted
I feel ... bt him	respectful	no idea	no idea	respectful	sorry	knowing limited	-	inspired, astonished	uncomfortable	emotional
I see him as	designer	valuable person	regular people "he's like evrybody else"	great artist	normal human with normal faults but also creative genius	a person with art blood and bc	a common guy w/ talent; an observer; a nature lover	crazy	a friend	Vincent
He is a	purposeful/ambitious	caring	fragile, so many emotions, self-centered	very lonely	normal, get mad because of his brilliancy	persevering	sometimes weak sometimes strong	curious, normal	great person	unique
I feel ... bt him	detached	admire		compassion	same	respect but sad			more close	in love with him
Art before		(attention to physical details)		physical description	He's very important because he's one the inventors of a new generation of painters.	colorful, beautiful; limited info	color and strokes; feeling secure about the bedroom painting		-	colorful... Almost joyful w/ all the colors.
Art after	See more rational part in these paintings	"Now that I know the back stories I pay attention to his paintings more." describe emotion and meanings	describes feelings she has towards the paintings. Din't change much after reading his letters.	emotion description	-	"love, passion; put all his hope and positive parts into his art"	he's organized and in control in his way of painting (he's personality); confirm his talents	it's a mirror of himself	-	caustrophobic
Interested themes	Backstories of paintings	Illness	Backstories of paintings & Struggles	backstories, perseverance	backstories, illnesses		inspirations & backstories; then romance and friendships; lastly struggles	backstory of art, struggles	inspiration and family; more family	-
why	"Coz it can only be revealed in the letter. Artist's own explanation is much convincing than interepretation."	"Seeing how he struggles encourages me. I'm also seeking motivations."	"I like the masterpiece one because I would imagine it even if there's no post card; he seems very passionate about it." "I got most of him from this letter because it's what a normal human being experience, being not able to sleep... I fell I most relatable."				backstories -- it's something to expect because audiences already know paintings as a part of the stories; then romance and friendships -- makes his picture vivid; lastly struggles -- because it's sth she already know	he likes backstories and struggles, because he can relate to these stories. families, relationships are too personal that Cesar feels irrelevant and impolite to look at.	because I understood that he had the some problem that I have in normal life! Like to follow a mass just because someone decides for you!	-
Expectations to letters	His writing styles (to see how it relates to drawing styles); His murmuring; Personalities; Feeling of his time of being.	Motivations of paintings; What styles he likes.	life details	what kind of life he had	About his mind who is known as a mad man cutting his ears. Interested in real stories. Interested about his feelings.	to whom? what happened to his life?	how he think of his own work? relationship w/ Gauguin? thoughts about paintings?	topics, arthor's way of writing	what happens in his everyday life	connection between VG's personal life and his inspirations

Appendix 6 First visitor evaluation material

Thank you for joining!

- Consent form
- Think aloud
- Still rough concepts, please use your imagination...



- Where are you from? Do you have language barriers in VGM experience?
- What leaves in your mind about letters?
- What would you like to see about letters?
- Do you feel connected between you and Van Gogh?

Concept 1: Themes

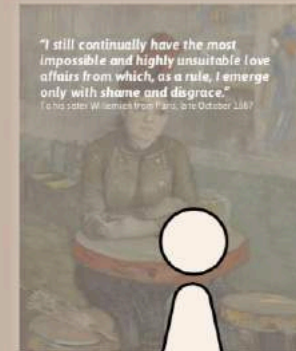
A Life in Letters

The legacy of Van Gogh was not just a great number of beautiful paintings and drawings but also the letters. For more than a century, writers and art lovers have been inspired by his poetic and philosophic ideas in his own



A Life in Letters

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A Life in Letters

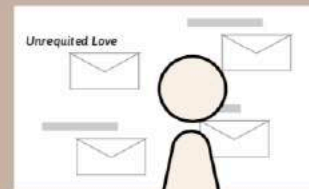
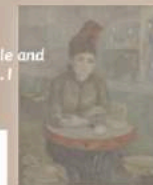
The legacy of Van Gogh was not just a great number of beautiful paintings and drawings but also the letters. For more than a century, writers and art lovers have been inspired by his poetic and philosophic ideas in his own



Romance

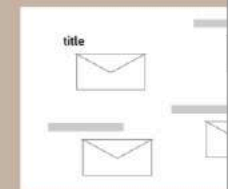
Unrequited Love

"I still continually have the most impossible and highly unsuitable love affairs from which... I emerge only with shame and disgrace." explore the letters >




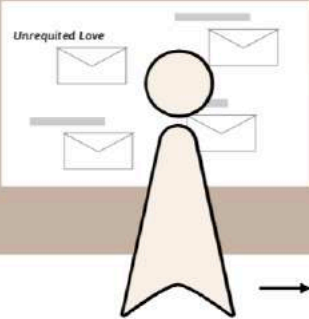
Family

Title of the letter
"Quote from the selected letter."
explore the letters >



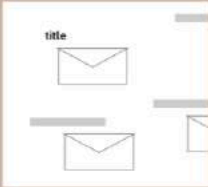
Romance

Two Unhappy Souls
 "She and I are two unfortunates who keep each other company and bear the burden together."
explore the letters 4


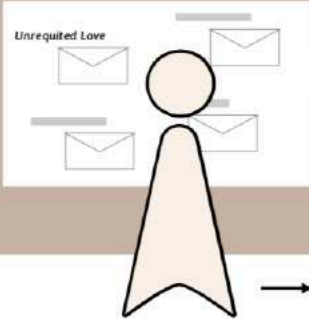
Family

Title of the letter
 "Quote from the selected letter."
explore the letters 4



Romance

Two Unhappy Souls
 "She and I are two unfortunates who keep each other company and bear the burden together."
explore the letters 4

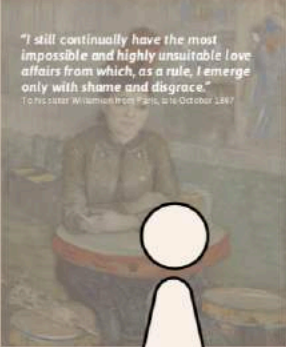
other possible themes:

- Friendship
- Inspiration
- Struggle
- Illness
- ...


Concept 2: Age

Life in Letters

Life of Van Gogh was not just a great life of beautiful paintings and drawings but also in his letters. For more than a century, art lovers have been inspired by his poetic and philosophic ideas in his own words.



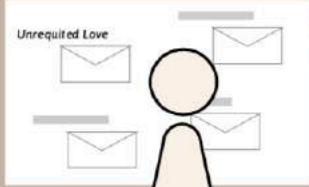
*"I still continually have the most impossible and highly unsuitable love affairs from which, as a rule, I emerge only with shame and disgrace."
To his sister Wilhelmina from Paris, 20th October 1887*



29-34 years old

The French Years 1886-1889


- Friendship Artists Friends in Paris
- Romance Unrequited Love
- Inspiration Bright Sun in Arles



35 years old

Final Months

Illness Suicide

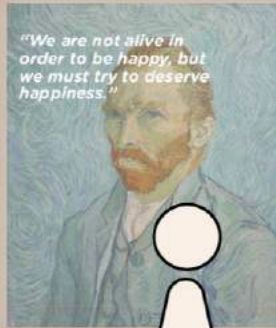


"I still continually have the most impossible and highly unsuitable love affairs from which... I emerge only with shame and disgrace."

Concept 3: Emotion

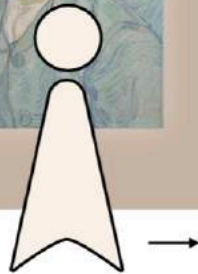
Life in Letters

Van Gogh was not just a great painter of beautiful paintings and drawings but also a great writer of letters. For more than a century, writers and art lovers have been inspired by his poetic and philosophic ideas in his own



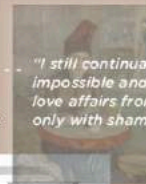
Will you share the similar **sadness** with Van Gogh?

Discover more about Van Gogh's **sadness** in his letters →

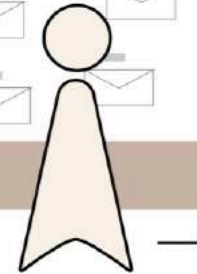
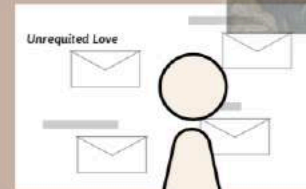


Sadness

- Unrequited Love
- Mental Instability
- Difficulty in Creating Art

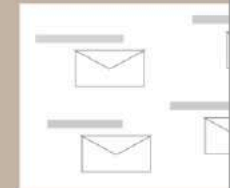


"I still continually have the most impossible and highly unsuitable love affairs from which... I emerge only with shame and disgrace."



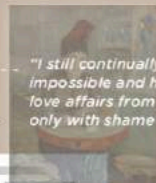
Happiness

- Friendship in Paris
- Bright Sun in Arles

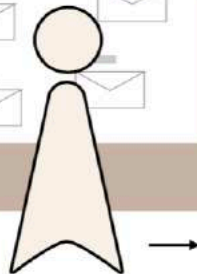
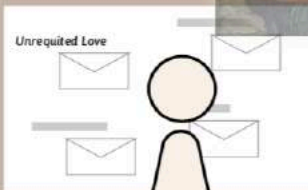


Sadness

- Unrequited Love
- Mental Instability
- Difficulty in Creating Art



"I still continually have the most impossible and highly unsuitable love affairs from which... I emerge only with shame and disgrace."



other possible emotions:

- Loving
- Hopefully
- Angry
- Desperate
- Peaceful



- What do you think about the "trailer"? Will it intrigue your interest in letters?
- Which concept will makes you want to explore more? (1-5)
- Which one will make you feel connected with Van Gogh? (1-5)
- If you are the designer, how would you design?

Appendix 7 First visitor evaluation results

No.	Age, Gender	Nation	MMT	Which interest you more? (1-5)			Which make you feel more connected? (1-5)		
				C1-Theme	C2-Age	C3-Emotion	C1-Theme	C2-Age	C3-Emotion
1	30, F	Italy	-	-	-	5	-	-	5
2	40, F	China	Y	5	4	2	not answered		
3	40, M	China	N	4	5	2			
4	50, F	Spain	Y	4	5	3	not answered		
5	50, M	Spain	N	4	5	3			
6	20, F	NL	Y	4	5	3	4	3	5
7	20, F	NL	Y	5	4	3	2	4	5
8	20, M	US	Y	4	4	3	not answered		
9	20, M	US	N	5	4	2			
10	20, M	US	N	2	5	1	2	5	1
11	20, M	US	N	3	5	2	3	5	2

Appendix 8 Second visitor evaluation results

No.	Age, Gender	Nation	Part 5. Interactive game											
			How much will it attract you to try?			How much will it make you feel connected?			How likely you will scan the QR code?			Which one do you like most, in general?		
			C1	C2	C3	C1	C2	C3	C1	C2	C3	C1	C2	C3
1	M, 20	England	2	3	4	3	3	3	1	1	4	2	3	3
2	F, 20	Taiwan	5	4	1	5	4	2	2	5	5	4	2	5
3	F, 70	NL	2	4	4	-	5	5	-	-	1	-	5	4
4	M, 70	NL	3	4	2	3	4	2	3	4	2	3	4	2
5	F, 30	Mexico	5	4	3	5	3	4	5	5	5	5	4	3
6	M, 30	Mexico	5	4	3	5	4	4	5	3	5	5	4	4
7	M, 20	NL	2	2	4	2	2	4	1	3	4	2	2	4
8	M, 20	NL	1	3	5	2	4	4	2	4	4	1	3	5
9	M, 20	China	4	4	5	4	2	3	2	2	3	4	2	4

No.	Age, Gender	Nation				Part 1. intro	Part 2. trailer	Part 3. section
			C1: You and Van Gogh	C2: Feel Van Gogh's writing	C3: My Van Gogh letter			
1	M, 20	England	-	like the interactivity, not just	can really send it to sb	stamps make the	w/, coz it makes you	- not interested
2	F, 20	Taiwan	modern tone doesn't fit w/ this		nice to keep it as souvenir	-	w/	no
3	F, 70	NL	it's for people under 16. We	It's nice, you can go very deep	you come to the museum, and	missed Religion	w/ (but for younger	-
4	M, 70	NL	it's a good education game	-	I have problems w/ this becuse	I seldom pay	-	-
5	F, 30	Mexico	looks colorful! will attract me	I don't think I will feel exact	maybe will send to friends	themes made the	- the painting makes	- will scan QR cod
6	M, 30	Mexico	-	-	-	-	w/out	-
7	M, 20	NL	- too easy, not deep enough to	- like the idea might not sure if	- like it! nice to take sth w/ u	-	w/. it provoke you to	- maybe will scan
8	M, 20	NL	- i don't feel I can get info that	- it's nice coz you not only know	- best idea! coz you can make	-	w/. it provoke you to	- maybe will scan
9	M, 20	China	- i like the clarity of the	- I don't understand Dutch, so	- I like it, it's the most personal	- it's a good intro on	w/. it makes me feel	- I will actively