

The storytellers of NorthernLight

They designed the Rijksmuseum app, which this year won several awards, and will release what they believe is the new standard for museum apps in October. TU alumni Steven Schaeken and Peter Slavenburg talk about their passion for design and technology.

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Industrial designers Steven Schaeken and Peter Slavenburg fell into the specialist field of interactive exhibitions quite by accident, but are now taking the world by storm.

Museums boring? For industrial designers, they are a source of many innovation opportunities, believe Steven Schaeken and Peter Slavenburg, founders of the creative design agency NorthernLight. They fell into the specialist field of interactive exhibitions quite by accident, but are now taking the world by storm. 'I don't think there is a single continent that we haven't visited', says Schaeken. The industrial designers met during a study trip in Barcelona and became colleagues at the Science Center NEMO in Amsterdam, in 1993. NEMO was being built at the time and was looking for designers. For both of them, the attraction was that the interactive exhibits were about science and technology. This is why the field suits industrial designers 'incredibly well', says Slavenburg, despite the fact that they do almost the opposite of what industrial design is, in other words design a place for the general public to visit rather than a product to take to the public.

Visitor's centre

After the opening of NEMO Schaeken and Slavenburg created NorthernLight in 1998. One of their first projects was for a visitor's centre for the then still national post delivery company PTT

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Post, to help people understand the operational processes involved. The 'interactive experience' that they developed was almost unheard of in the Netherlands at the time, but turned out to be an up-and-coming field. They worked on projects for numerous science centres outside the Netherlands, initially by simply travel-



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ling around the UK, where cities wanted public attractions for the turn of the millennium. It was later that they also started to work on digital exhibitions for museums. For the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, for example, they used radio-frequency identification (RFID) in 2004 to allow visitors to make a digital record of their visit.

Children's book

Two years later, they used PDAs (personal digital assistants, the personal computers that were the precursor to the smartphone) for Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow. Teenagers used them to go on a digital tour and record the tasks they carried out along the way in a personal finale. 'It was very ambitious', says Slavenburg now. 'Technically speaking, it led to the idea that you could do things in the museum using a mobile, intelligent device without needing to make any physical changes.'

A multimedia experience, therefore, without the need for screens on the wall. The rise of smartphones offered new opportunities. In 2012, NorthernLight produced an interactive children's book for the iPad for the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. And then the Rijksmuseum app was released this year, with Kiss the Frog from Delft responsible for the techno-

logy. Through audio and short films, the visitor is given information about the various museum pieces. Users can follow a tour, search for a specific collection number and play a family game.

It is all based on storytelling. 'Cross an architect with a game designer and you get us', says Schaeken. As engineers, however, they couldn't resist adding all kinds of new technology to the app, such as photo navigation to show people the way in the building, and 3D audio, which allows visitors standing in front of a winter landscape to actually hear the skaters passing them by.

iBeacons

The app has won several prizes, including the Heritage in Motion Award. NorthernLight will also launch an app for Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden in October. This app should set the new standard for museum apps in 12 different ways, but in particular with its indoor navigation using iBeacons: small boxes that emit a signal so that you no longer need to point your smartphone in a certain direction or type in a number to receive information. This opens up the way for a new 'hey, come here' function, for if you want to show something you have seen to someone else in a different room. There is already international interest in the idea.