

A description of this world as if you were someone else

Project Report

I started writing this nearly at the end of the research phase of the project and completed it a couple of weeks later. I thought that I would gather my thoughts together and start to document the process of working with the Mobile Bristol team and on the project itself. It's certainly been a steep learning curve both in terms of working on a project of this kind with this sort of technical complexity as well as working with the ideas in the way that I have.

One of the strengths of the project, for me at least, is that it has a clear vision of it's ultimate objective but that the objective is elastic enough to allow it to be delivered in a variety of ways. This is particularly important when approaching media that is, at times, unreliable and unstable. Naturally this is not at all a criticism of the excellent and intelligent work of the people building the application and setting up the systems. As an artist, I am accustomed to looking at what is available to me very critically and then finding ways of making it work for me. I think I share that approach with many artists.

The objective of the project is to give access to people's memories and associations of a specific place. Simple enough to state but with a spectrum of approaches. My considerations in delivering this have been to foreground people's stories and associations; to have it so that they accompany you as you navigate the territory. This has lead me to primarily use recordings of their voices made on location. There are a number of invaluable qualities I gained in taking people out into the landscape I want them to talk about. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly is the mnemonic aspect. Because of time constraints I worked with people I already had a relationship with. When I asked many of them to contribute, their first reaction was to say that they had no stories that took place in the location (Queen Square). I assured them that any association was within the scope of the project and convinced them to meet me or my partner, Sophia New in the square. Once there it was remarkable how prolific people were in terms of generating the sort of material that was exactly what I required. Almost every person generated three or four sound files that I could use. The other quality of note is that their voices are then recorded in the sound environment that they are intended to be listened to in. Here I should like to take a diversion into my technical recording considerations. If that's not for you, you should skip the next paragraph.

Before coming to Bristol I had decided to invest in a pair of stereo microphones which sit in your ears and look exactly like headphones, or rather those discrete ear pieces. Except that they are recording rather than playing: you hear nothing. The fact that they are extremely sensitive and picking up everything you hear where you hear it – in your ears, means that when played back on headphones, the immersive-ness of the sound is extremely

transporting. I had also decided that I would record the sound onto mini DV with a camera, this is because I knew that there was currently no way of transferring digital data easily from a minidisk to a computer (the protocol only exists to go the other way) and it would have the added advantage of documenting the places the people were talking about. This plan went astray because the microphones were too sensitive for the camera microphone input and distorted. This means I had to resort to minidisk and get it onto my computer with a new external sound card. If I was starting this project over again I would probably not use the microphones I bought to record people's voices – they were simply too sensitive to all the other sound in the square and at times, as in the case of two files where there is a man remonstrating with his child and another where a man calls his dog, they totally 'upstage' the interview you are supposed to be listening to. In the case of the dog being called, it is almost impossible to resist turning round to see where it is coming from, even if you know it is a recording. I would use a conventional stereo microphone or even mono microphone and overlay the ambient sound separately. The best laid plans....

One of my other concerns when approaching this project is to try and elicit information about as detailed locations as possible – i.e. it happened at that end of that bench and two things have presented difficulties in this respect, one I anticipated, one I suspected but have embraced. The difficulty in defining micro locations with a GPS (the technology Mobile Bristol most often use for location) was only too known to me – to sum up, you're lucky if you can rely on a 10 metre radius of error: much too big to define one end of a bench from another, let alone benches that may be 10 metres apart from each other. To overcome this there were many suggestions such as tagging and other technological ideas, most of which were unsatisfactory to me for the following reason: The beauty, for me, of the application of technology to a project like this is that it is capable of augmenting one's experience of navigating around a space you may know well or not at all without, and this is crucial to me, without leaving any trace on that landscape. In this way it is like the thoughts and associations that I want to tap into: transparent. In the end I decided that I didn't want to 'compel' the user/audience member/wanderer to be in exactly the right spot before he or she heard the story, I wanted to let them know what object it was that was being talked about so that they could approach it if they wanted. It became very important to me to stick to my guns about not directing people's wandering, but letting them navigate the landscape in the way that took them on the day. My solution to this was to have pictures show up when one is in the vicinity of a story which show where that story is located or being told from. In fact we took two pictures for each sound file, one from far, giving some context for the image, and one nearer, giving detail. Naturally the detail in the real world is so much richer than its representation on the LCD of the iPAQs that they really just serve as pointers to the real object and as such serve well.

The other aspect of difficulties with this type of location finding and the one that made me slightly change the scope of this research phase of the project came from the people I elicited the stories and associations from and this was that the type of story I secretly hoped for: one

tied in some way to as fine a location as possible, was quite rare and not the sort of things that people, on the whole, remember. Once I had accepted that and stopped prompting people for those stories, their material came out and it is this material that is, after all, at the heart of the project. Rather, I had to find a way of accommodating that material, rather than soliciting a certain sort of material. After suppressing my egotistical desire to stamp my idea of what a good contribution was I realised that what people were telling me was in fact much richer and closer to the overall aims of the project. At this stage though I haven't fully taken that on board. The implications are that not every story has a picture that can be taken of its location and that some stories are much more generally located than I was at first intending.

Another logistical problem I had to overcome was the fact that when contributions DID have a location, they were often clustered in the same area in a way that I wouldn't have distributed them if I was constructing the project with a blank canvas. This overlaying and richness is part of the point of such a project but it also presents difficulties. I was initially worried about not being able to hear two stories at the same time and tried to avoid that but I realised that I was just dodging the issue. In fact, when I tested this in the site it became clear that overlapping stories weren't in themselves a problem as long as you could choose to prioritise one. This was made possible by shaping the sound regions so that there was still overlapping but for each file, there was somewhere you could move to that gave you just that file without overlap.

I am aware that this is a short-term technique. I was only working with 21 sound sources (files) and even then, because of the size they have to be for the GPS to find them reliably, the square is pretty full. There are also clusters that I talked about but at the moment, they consist of three or four sound sources intersecting. What happens when one sound source is directly on top of three or four others, which could quickly be the case if the project develops? The large area of work following on, if at all, from this preliminary research would be into ways of letting the user choose from a potentially large list of files or perhaps some more intuitive way of channel flicking or surfing to find the story that interests you first, without this becoming an off-putting or onerous task. There is of course the opportunity to have this decision taken out of your hands, in more or less democratic ways. I mean something like a list of files which scroll down the list every time you enter the region, so you are served with the next file the next time you visit. By less democratic I mean some method of choosing that you have no control over like randomised selection. There could be a more subtle selection based on behaviour or factors you are not aware is controlling this i.e. enter from a specific direction at a specific time, date or light condition and hear a certain file. I am anxious about these types of decision making as I am all for making these things as controllable to the user as possible. I am intrigued by the last option though, as long as the user is aware of it or could override it if desired. In all these things, there is a balance between giving people many decisions that could stand in the way of delivering the actual material or content and giving enough control to users that are interested to engage in that way.

I should like to be able to make many other sound recordings of people's associations and stories and musings and really find out what is out there in the population. I suspect that if my extremely partial and not very balanced cross section is anything to go by, there is wonderful material in the human resource of our city dwellers that many people would delight in hearing, presented in this way. One interesting observation from a friend that heard about this project is that it would be most often 'used' by tourists encountering a city for the first time. They could use it like an audio guide. She said that this is because they are about the only people in the urban environment that consider themselves as having enough time to engage with this sort of thing. I think that if it is presented like an audio guide it will certainly have this audience. But I am very intrigued by the question that assumption poses because I want to augment the experience of people that go through the square every day. In one sense, the tourist audience is an easy one to get but I have to declare myself much more interested in the other type of audience member, the one that even though they may cross the environment every day, is opened up to a new experience of something that may have become jaded and worn to them. What is the nature of something that would engage this in one way, harder to access community and yet the community that represents (I assume) the largest volume of user of that environment? Is there something sufficiently easy to interact with and yet engaging that would entice their initial interest and sustain their interest even with their high level of local knowledge? I suspect that this is precisely where the normal audio guide fails and something like the territory I have been beginning to explore takes over.

Original Research Questions

I would like to review my original research questions now in the light of having completed the project

· Is the choice of location an important factor and if so, how? (Is a city centre a good candidate for the layering of these histories/stories? Is it's recent renovation a hindrance or an advantage?)

When I wrote this I was thinking that I would chose the city centre as the location. Because of several factors, I chose Queen Square to base the project. This was because of the other projects that Mobile Bristol were running happening in Queen Square and I was interested in that kind of layering of experience and the fact that it may make sense to a future audience to have a number of projects to take part in in Queen Square. As well as this, from a purely technical point of view, Queen Square is a much quieter location for my recordings of people's associations and stories. It is also a territory that neatly defines itself; the boundaries of the square are evident and this re-enforces the idea that it may be the location for a project. In terms of the space having recently changed, this is also true of Queen Square as it is of the Centre. I must say that it's recent transformations are only an advantage, partly due to the nature of QS getting quieter and partly because it gives another layer of reality that

people can engage with and forms a useful prompt i.e. 'Do you remember when the traffic went straight through?'. QS also provided a location which was sufficiently layered with different association and event for people as it is an attractive place to be in the summer, there have been a number of events in the square (film screenings, theatre productions) and it is a favoured route across the city.

- What kind of scale of location is best for this type of project. (How large/small an area is appropriate and what is the right balance of density of information)

In many ways, I don't think I got far enough down the line to answer this question. Partly because I think you would have to try different scales of location to answer it and we only had time to try one and partly because I only had time to get the stories I got and this meant that although I had to confront a certain amount of overlapping of sound recordings, I was able to squeeze them into the crowded areas so that there was always somewhere you could go to to just listen to one source. Any more sources and I would have had to get into some kind of choice or random decision making (see above). Unlike more constructed projects, this one is very responsive to people's stories and has to be. I can't place people's memories/voices where I like, it has to be relevant to what they're saying and so some kind of selection process will have to be implemented if the project continued to gather sources. I was just about to reach that point when I had to stop eliciting sources and make the project.

- What can the technology offer in terms of experience for the 'audience' and how is this best used? (If the landscape is populated by audio 'hotspots', what is the nature of those and how are they negotiated? e.g. volume/content change with proximity)

This was written before I had any idea about the Mobile Bristol editor and what you can do with regions and sources. It's interesting that I had already anticipated something that the editor has built in i.e. the ability for sounds to increase as you near the centre of a source. I think that the most valuable thing I learnt about negotiating a landscape of 'hotspots' is that overlapping, to some extent is rich and not to be avoided altogether. The modifications that Greg was making to the sound engine would have been important tools for me, had they been available earlier, especially pause and resuming.

- What are the boundaries of this kind of experience? How much information is necessary for a rich experience and is there a limit to the amount of information? Is there a strategy for sorting or layering lots of information?

This relates to the second question about density. The answers to this are the same as above. As I said I didn't get round to strategies of sorting or choosing sound sources, but I think one more interview and I would have so of course this impacts on any further development.

· Future application – would an audience want the ability to add their own waypoints/hotspots? How would they like to do that – then and there or with reflection? How could that be supported to obtain the best results for future audiences?

This also was outside of the scope of this phase of the project but obviously one which both Zoë, myself and it seemed, the Mobile Bristol team themselves were keen to develop – that of recording on the fly and of storing that either locally, on the iPAQ itself or streaming to a server for later retrieval, along with some location data. I have to say that by the time I'd finished the project, this was starting to look like a distant possibility, both artistically and technologically, however, I am certain that the aspect of recording like this, without input from myself, is one that I would have to try and test quite carefully before I let it have a life outside of me.

The Future

Writing this, I am unsure what the future of the project will be. This is because I don't have a very clear idea of the funding possibilities and this is the key to the next phase. But leaving funding issues aside for the time being, it would be useful to consider the parameters for any future life, albeit briefly.

From my point of view, I would be very interested in taking the project further and confronting the problems of choosing sources (recordings) in dense areas. At the moment, the project feels a little unfinished because I haven't dealt with this issue yet. I would like to know what happens when the area is really quite dense with stories and if this still prompts people to contribute or puts them off. Apropos contributing: one of the messages I got from the work in progress presentation was that hearing other peoples' stories did prompt stories and associations in the person experiencing the project and so the ability to leave one's own contribution is also something I feel the project needs to encompass and that could be in a number of ways, not just the technological solutions already mentioned, but a supported solution whereby someone was on hand to record the material just after the person had experienced the project.

But working with the technology inspired many thoughts for other projects, not just the one I'd proposed. This project comes out of a whole lot of work I've been doing in my solo practise around location, memory, dislocation, the marking of events and of ways of interpreting the urban landscape in terms of the histories and associations of the people that make it up as much as the more manifest, architectural objects. One of the things I do is to overlay cities I that I know and have lots of association for me, over other cities that I may not know well at all. And so it was extremely exciting for me to realise that with this technology, it is possible to realise that old Situationist dream of walking round one city as if it is another, or to confront stories from another city in the city you're in. In fact this was going to be a solution for me to work on my project from Berlin and the team seemed to think that this was going to be easy, which, although not in the end needed, still remains something I am very keen on exploring.

Just having the time to work with the technology has opened up avenues that I am keen on exploring but, once again, it is a matter of finding time and, for an artist such as myself who doesn't have an organisation behind me, that means finding money.

And so now I am in the position of having retained an iPAQ, the lead that links it to my own GPS and, I hope, a continuing relationship with the team at Mobile Bristol. Because I have been very busy travelling since the project I haven't really had a chance to push either 'A description of this place as if you were someone else' or any other projects further but I'm sure it's something I'll do.

Conclusion

The immediate question arising out of this research project is further funding to complete the project. Quite how, or more critically, when this is achieved is something that will effect the process very much. The technology is advancing all the time but there may be a time limit to the work of the Mobile Bristol team. Given this, I think it would be realistic to propose completing the project to the extent of making it robust enough, or self explanatory enough to be able to be leant out without too much explaining, from something like the Arnolfini Bookshop or the Architectural Centre and in such a state that I am happy with the way it looks and sounds. At this stage, I think that the ability to leave sounds would be outside of the timescale. The other projects that may arise from the technology are less clear in my mind at the moment.

The project was extremely interesting to work on and certainly pushed my practise in a direction I never anticipated. Perhaps because of this, I still, after a few weeks, find the experience difficult to quantify but I'm sure it will have an impact on my future work. Perhaps the most valuable thing is to work with a excellent group of people one wouldn't normally have the opportunity to work with and in a world and a language that is unfamiliar and therefore very interesting and challenging to meet.