

Pervasive media: Cultural Engagement and Experience of the Ambulant Landscape.

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Presented at the EMUA Postgraduate Research Students Conference
Perspectives in Society: Health, Culture and the Environment
Nottingham Trent University, 14th September 2010
Session: *Residential Building and the Environment*

"Pervasive Media is often summarised as the right media, in the right place at the right time".¹

As computers and sensors have moved off the desktop and into the all-encompassing environment, portable and locative, media-rich experiences have flourished in the last decade.

Location based services², may span the urban and rural with guided tours or similar. Yet they commonly deliver information as non-negotiable 'play on enter' content³ which, it could be argued, dominates the visual experience, and dictates the individual's journey of exploration.

Philosopher Bernard Stiegler, writing on the constraints of mass media for our society in the technological age, stresses the vitality of seeing technology, 'technics', as part of humanity – our progression of evolving tools – not as separate from us, and therefore any forward movement of society needs to embrace such tools.

Foresight consultant Andrea Saveri, urges that '*communities that thrive in the future will be the ones who can create new patterns of learning, relationship, and value creation*'.⁴

In Bristol, development of the Mobile Bristol toolkit⁵ and subsequent mscapers platform⁶ has facilitated the making of mediascapes by a local and international community of non-specialist programmers including artists, poets, storytellers and school children.

*'Mediascapes infuse the landscape of our everyday environment with digital content and services. They deliver compelling user experiences when the user interacts with the physical world.'*⁷

Applications are often triggered by gps (satellite tracking) and may combine other sensors.

As Miskelly and Fleuriot write, in their paper 'Layering Community Media in Place':
*'Location sensitive media leads us to 'scrawling' on our physical environment as a way of articulating and sharing itineraries and spatial stories that might otherwise be invisible within that public space.'*⁸

¹ Description often used at the Pervasive Media Studio, Bristol and referred to by Professor Jon Dovey in his opening speech for the DCRC at the PMStudio

<http://info.uwe.ac.uk/news/UWENews/article.asp?item=1660>

² <http://www.placr.co.uk> and <http://www.camineo.com/index-en.html>

³ <http://www.nodeexplore.com/intro/index.html>

⁴ Foresight consultant Andrea Saveri, Berkely, California, discussing the importance of RESILIENCE as keynote speaker for the Amplified Leicester showcase, Phoenix Digital Media Centre, 2010.

⁵ <http://www.mobilebristol.com/flash.html>

⁶ <http://www.mscapers.com>

⁷ Stenton, S.P.; Hull, R.; Goddi, P.M.; Reid, J.E.; Clayton, B.J.; Melamed, T.J.; Wee, S.; Hewlett-Packard Labs., Palo Alto (2007) p.98 Mediascapes: Context-Aware Multimedia Experiences. Multimedia, IEEE Vol. 14 No.3, pp. 98 – 105

⁸ Miskelly, C, Constance Fleuriot, C (2006) Layering community media in place. Digital Creativity Vol.17, No. 3, pp. 163-173

Interesting examples of pervasive media artwork include that of Matt Green, overlaying sound from unbuilt or previously demolished spatial features, which he describes as “*an augmented, Hyper-real urban experience*”⁹

In Hear, Out There: Madrid, 2008 takes the park of AZCA as “*an uncompleted canvas*” and “*injects the sensation of three public amenities into AZCA: an Opera House, a Botanic Garden and a Library*”.

The amenities were planned for the park, but never built there.

Duncan Speakman’s soundwalk, **always something somewhere else**, 2007, presents authored stories whilst allowing the audience to locate the ‘structures’ or way-markers of the piece where they choose – The walker is engaged in a narrative focused around these places, which progresses with apparent synchronicity as they, asked to retrace their steps, return through the places chosen.

In Speakman’s recent **Subtle mobs** the route - no longer gps-dependent - is prescribed in a ‘secret’ pre-recorded mp3, downloadable prior to the event. The narrative is both instructional and evocative; the walkers themselves become actors, moving into the frame of these “films without cameras”¹⁰ - as he calls them, “blown-away by mobile participatory theatre”¹¹ - as one walker tweeted.

In contrast, the **Southville Stories** project, 2004¹² ran a series of community workshops, creating and mapping personal accounts of locality which would play to the listener when walking by specific local sites. The research team observed that “*located media introduces new issues and practices to do with orientation and the rooting of representations in place. ...different stories appear to emerge from considering maps or being in the place.*”

These examples interest me in that they ask the walker to change their expectation of the story in a place in some way, moving beyond the linear experience of time and place. It is this potential shift in perspective that may offer an experience of creativity to the ‘user’.

‘... Creativity is a process of seeing new possibilities. Realising these capacities relies on being in control of the medium – on having the necessary skills – combined with the freedom to take risks.’¹³

In their early work on developing a language and design guidelines for mobile or pervasive media, Dovey & Fleuriot¹⁴ note “*the idea of Magic Moments, when particular convergences or overlaps between the media environment and the physical environment were generated.*”

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges in working with pervasive media is the newness of the medium, achieving a balance of control with simplicity of use and robust technical performance, whilst delivering sufficient complexity to be interesting and to stand alongside more mature mediums.

The paradox which I seek to explore in my own practice is the extent to which pervasive media can facilitate a significant awareness of their relationship with place. And whether such an experience is

⁹ In Hear, Out There: Madrid March 2008. <http://greensonic.wordpress.com/> accessed 23/8/10

¹⁰ <http://subtle.mob.com/?p=21> accessed 23/8/10

¹¹ *MuseumMobile Wiki, Twitter, January 5, 2010 at 10:24 am* archived at <http://subtle.mob.com/?p=3> accessed 23/8/10

¹² Miskelly, C., Cater, K., Fleuriot, C., Williams, M., Wood, L.
Locating Story: collaborative community-based located media production
<http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit4/papers/miskelly.pdf> accessed 23/8/10

¹³ Sir Ken Robinson (2001) p.137. *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative*, Capstone Publishing, Oxford

¹⁴ Dovey, J., Fleuriot, C., *Towards a Language of Mobile Media*, in *The Mobile Audience*, Ed. Rieser, M. p.107

transferrable beyond that place. I am interested in the relationship of the individual with the collective, what philosopher Bernard Stiegler describes as the process of *individuation*.

Steve Lash's opening address *To Infinity and Beyond: Experiment/Experience* at the conference *The Experimental Society*¹⁵, argued that we are moving from subjectivity and experience to subjectivity and experiment. Referencing Stiegler, Lash suggested that the place of a positive and healthy experimental society is the place of phenomenology of consciousness as expressed in socio-technical systems. Three of my own recent projects, e-merge, Ambience and Soundlines, seek to encourage reflection and awareness of individual relationship with place, with delayed-playback mechanisms of non-linear film triggered by walking through different landscapes, and varying levels of 'user-generated content' - participatory creative input.¹⁶

A feature of each work is that, as well as existing as a pre-arranged event, it is also recorded and re-presented as a collection, open for participants and public to revisit, reflect on and engage with at leisure.

Each of the projects use mscape and gps with headphones and PDAs, moving image and music, to offer an interactive and experiential interpretation of a specific place.

e-merge_a filmmaking mediascape¹⁷ was commissioned for Birds Eye View film festival 2009 to appeal to a public family audience as well as festival delegates. Walkers explore St James's Park listening to music composed for the mediascape. They choose where and when to watch a short film - artist video made by myself in response to the location, 'edited' by their movements - on the PDA in the park.

The walks and resultant films were uploaded to a website, celebrating the diversity of individual journey within collective experience.

A review of e-merge, by Alexander Starritt, reflects on memory - seeing the mediascape as "a confrontation with the total subjectivity of our perception." "...It also implies that if we remember a place in terms of the incidental observations made there, a subsequent absence of those things would make it a different place in our minds." Starritt suggests that "... a greater temporal dislocation would have been an interesting addition to the mediascape."

This dislocation happened inadvertently when e-merge returned to the ICA for a Sandpit games evening, six weeks later.

e-merge toured to locations in the SouthWest and proved a versatile tool for introducing pervasive media triggered by gps, and also for triggering reflection by participants on the elements of their own local environment – similarities and differences from the iconic images of central London – as localised as the changing of the Guard at Buckingham palace, and as globalised as a plane flying behind clouds.

Ambience¹⁸, commissioned for the Bristol Festival 2009 with support from Pervasive Media Studio and Watershed, launched with a public call for content – resulting in short film clips submitted by 25 local filmmakers and music by 6 bands collected by public call for the Bristol Festival.

It uses a similar structure to e-merge, however the films were designed to play back on public screens around the festival site, so that the walkers become part of the spectacle, a network of individual yet related film-makers, 'editors' and viewers. As a collaborative documentary the short films create a characterful snapshot of a unique time and place within the city.

¹⁵ Institute for Advanced Studies, Lancaster University, July 2010.

¹⁶ 'Something More' MA Media (Interactive Arts) UWE, 2008.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=GB&hl=enGB&v=vPBUJnlabyM&feature=channel_page e-merge_a filmmaking mediascape, commissioned for Birds Eye View film festival at the ICA, London March 2009. www.e-merge-walks.com Ambience 2009, for the Bristol Festival 2009. www.ambience2009.blogspot.com

¹⁷ www.e-merge-walks.com

¹⁸ <http://www.ambience2009.blogspot.com>

"A new way of seeing where you are.... Limited only by technology!"¹⁹

Soundlines²⁰, an innovative media arts project with Strata Collective and North Somerset schools, aimed to promote a sense of community cohesion and a deepened understanding of local place by using *'democratic forms of cultural participation through the potential for dialogue about that which is being made...'*²¹.

Weaving together threads of story, animation, film, photography, music, mapping and walking, Soundlines experimented with a range of creative processes to explore the potential of pervasive media and the web as transformational tools for students from three schools and the wider community.

Young people involved were encouraged to reflect on the histories and myths of Sand Point– a stunning finger of the Mendip Hills which divides the Severn Estuary from the Bristol Channel. They created interpretative music in an improvisation workshop with professional musicians which was recorded, post-produced, and mapped to the topography of the landscape.

The participants were invited back to Sand Point, this time with PDA and headphones, to explore the landscape through the sounds they triggered – sounds they participated in the making of. Young people completed paper word-storms after the walk – in which heavy rain and winds featured strongly!

The walks were reproduced through an experimental process, and collated in a web-gallery that also plays back 'boiling animations' of the landscape as the gps trace and unique composition play out in real time. Students watched their walk on the web gallery some weeks later, completing a further word-storm and then reflecting on the project before writing a short text to accompany their walk on the webpage.

Soundlines has been a complex project, not least because of the many strands, age groups and communities involved, but also because innovation is hard to convey before it has been completed. The final event, a community Premiere, was a key success in bringing all the strands together, screening a documentary film, and allowing participants to become guides to the guests who experienced the work on PDAs and headphones, walking in the school grounds, Sand Point re-mapped to Worle School.

The conversation here is on many levels - between age-groups; across schools, museum and community; narratives and impressions across time - the layered history of the landscape; between technologies and platforms; and an iterative process of creation inspired by the place.

*'Reality is conjunctive, a complex movement where each one tries to "find one's place." ... I must have intelligence about it, that is, be in excess of it, and by that same fact already be, in advance, inventive.'*²²

To return to my initial questions, there is still further work to explore the matrix of factors that may optimise the user experience, and fully understand the design dimensions at play. Practical issues have major impact on projects: such as weather, ease of access to equipment, demonstrating form, whilst maintaining an approach of improvisation.

Evidence suggests that pervasive media can enhance our cultural experience, our sense of community, sense of place, and can contribute to an evolving sense of technicity, of participation and of relationship – when used to facilitate rather than dictate a focus of attention for the individual on the *'onward propulsion of life'*.

Displacing part of the reception of such media perhaps serves to facilitate *'understanding the links between the emergence of new things and the effort to achieve permanence.'*²³

¹⁹ Feedback comment from Ambience walker.

²⁰ <http://www.stratacollective.org/soundlines>

²¹ Hall, R (2005) p.32. *The Value of Visual Exploration: Understanding Cultural Activities with Young People*, The Public, Birmingham

²² Bernard Stiegler (2008) p.73. Trans: Barison, D. *Acting Out*, Stanford University Press

²³ Hallam, E., Ingold, T., (Eds.) (2007) p.31. *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, Berg, Oxford