Local Heritage As a Participatory Digital Culture: The Rise And Fall of “Anglesey: A Bridge Through Time” Website

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes a PhD research project that applies models of participatory online cultures to local heritage tourism, in partnership with local agencies and the local authority. Funded by a public-private EU scheme, the researcher designed a 25,000-word “virtual museum” to draw more visitors to lesser known heritage sites on Anglesey, one of the UK’s poorest counties. Inspired by other online participatory heritage communities, the website is a hybrid of new and old. It augments expert-vetted interpretation with lively narrative and people-centred photos, incorporating Web 2.0 features like photo-sharing, user comments, and social media campaigns -- to be monitored and updated by a dedicated team of vetted volunteers in a model of “distributed curation” that would insure sustainability without draining paid staff time. Initial testing demonstrated the website’s efficacy; it outperformed the council’s website on user engagement and brand personality scales, plus it increased intent to visit. Due to legal concerns over user-generated content, however, on handover to the local authority for long-term hosting, access to the website’s backend and analytics were disallowed to the researcher and volunteers, rendering updates and complete analysis impossible. The project reveals that on the local level, especially in rural or conservative areas, designers of digital media for participatory heritage still face significant challenges on issues of multivocality, authority, and control.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
H5. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI), H5.2 User Interfaces: User-centred design; Evaluation/Methodology.

General Terms
Management, Design, Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords
Participatory Cultures, Heritage, Communities, Websites, Web 2.0

1. INTRODUCTION
New web applications and online services that enable mass information-sharing, collaboration, content creation and publishing have given rise to a new information age characterized by unprecedented levels of participation and interaction. The impact on heritage discourse and practice will be profound [6]. As yet, few studies examine the diversity of ways non-experts can now use technology to engage with heritage projects -- both in the formal constructs of the museum sector and the informal, wider social practices that use memories, material traces, digital artifacts, and performative re-enactments to derive meaning in the present from our understandings of the reality of the past.

At the same time, the very definition of heritage has shifted, from a centuries-long traditional focus on preservation of physical monuments and artifacts, as safeguarded and interpreted by authoritative experts, to a fluid, postmodernist understanding of heritage as a universal human process whereby individuals continually (socially) interpret their past [19].

In this context, inspired by examples of participatory cultures as outlined below, the current researcher began an Action Research collaboration with local stakeholders to determine and implement a digital media strategy for increasing heritage tourism to Anglesey, one of the UK’s poorest counties. Working directly with an archaeologist/heritage officer at the county’s enterprise agency who won EU grants to hire a professional software developer, the researcher designed a participatory “virtual museum” to introduce non-enthusiasts to lesser-known heritage sites on the island.

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In addition, to develop and test theories related to “personal welcome,” “distributed curation”, and multivocality, the researcher recruited a team of 10 local heritage enthusiasts to serve as “co-curators.” They would host pages related to specific heritage sites, contribute interpretation, and monitor/spark online conversation. Intentionally seeded as an experiment in multivocality and participatory heritage culture, the website was designed to be self-sustaining: the researcher trained the volunteers to monitor and update the website, its user-generated content, and its affiliated social media accounts.

Initial research showed the website to be both engaging and effective. In a study it outperformed its predecessor, the heritage section of the county council website (as it was then configured), on user engagement, brand personality, and intention both to visit and recommend. However at launch, council representatives, who had participated in all planning meetings and had previously signed off on the design, bowed to concerns that users would post inappropriate content or comments critical of the council. It cancelled the participatory functions of the website, disallowing both the pre-vetted volunteers and the researcher access to the website backend and its analytics. The council would allow only council employees to approve comments or add updates, and since no one was assigned to this job detail, changes occur only sporadically and according to variant design principles. As a result, user engagement cannot be fully examined or evaluated: 18 months post-launch, many articles still show zero comments.

Even after 15 years of Web 2.0 ascendency, digital designers -- especially if they partner with risk-averse local authorities -- will face significant challenges when they attempt to widen the discussion in local heritage. If they would build for widescale user participation, concerns arise surrounding issues of multivocality, authority, and control. Who will shoulder the risks of controversy?

2. PARTICIPATORY CULTURES

What do participatory cultures hold in common? According to theorist Henry Jenkins, a participatory culture is one in which “not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued”[12]. In such communities, members teach and learn how to produce and share content and together build vast resources and teams both to conquer problems and to catalog data. Media theorist Clay Shirky calls this possible flood of volunteer time devoted to collaborative projects in science, journalism, and knowledge-sharing a “cognitive surplus” with the potential to transform the human knowledge base[20].

While many commentators hail participatory cultures as pathways to global cultural democracy, others caution that they are not in a superficial, diminished definition of personhood. As early attempts to digitize music culminated in the now-ubiquitous-but-inadequate MIDI code, other nascent digital designs threaten to “lock-in” limiting representations of human creativity. The social-media derived culture threatens to lock-in a superficial, diminished definition of personhood.

These critics remind us that membership in participatory digital cultures will be self-limited – by who can find them and who can find them interesting – and participation may also be limited by unspoken norms and by short-sighted design. Still almost any public heritage discussion that opens participation will represent a step toward democratization and the reclaiming of heritage as a universal human process, rather than an expert-owned product. No matter how flawed then, such a discussion is worth mounting, even Lanier might admit, in order to further defend and protect human diversity and complexity.

3. PARTICIPATORY HERITAGE CULTURES

In line with the cultural shift toward participation, professionals in the heritage and museum sectors have experimented over the last ten years with digitizing or organizing vast museum databases or creating new digital collections. While such projects take advantage of the free labor represented by the Cognitive Surplus[20], they can also serve to preserve older power structures and traditional definitions of “heritage,” maintaining expert curatorial control over collections and interpretation: traditional heritage set up in a trendy “participatory” packaging.

A few others have experimented with more community-driven models, creating socially interactive, grassroots heritage processes. Silberman and Purser describe the Levuka Cultural Landscape Project[21], in which Purser helped community members in Levuka, Fiji, to use GIS technology to create a multilayered digital map of memories of their town: “Out of the rich interaction of these distinct but connected and overlapping ‘memory communities’ came an increasingly clear demand on the part of town residents to be given a greater voice in the next phases of the heritage nomination process.”

Exhibition designer and theorist Luigina Ciolfi creates and studies heritage installations that encourage visitors to share ‘social traces’: “ideas, opinions, physical trajectories and collaborative practices that embody the presence, activity and agency of multiple participants”[3]. Along with others of the Interaction Design Centre, Ciolfi designed, for example, the Shannon Portal installation at Shannon Airport, where passersby could interact with a wall of digital images, changing and annotating the display for subsequent visitors, in an ever-changing configuration of shared contemporary heritage. Ciolfi stresses that truly competitive and interactive social experiences can be built from both high and low tech; applying pre-fab social media applications can dangerously limit and proscribe creative social interactions.

Tales of Things is another design that encourages people to add interpretive and personal layers to physical objects in public, creating a social heritage experience in surprising spaces[23]. Via an app that connects QR codes on object labels to a database of stored data, people can both experience and share alternate storylines. The Tales of Things tags were appended to objects displayed at the National Museum of Scotland in 2011, and it was also used to annotate donated objects at a Manchester charity shop in a project called RememberMe. These two projects “offer a different connection with history, the ability to ‘write’ to an artifact, offer new histories, contest the veracity of any history that is presented to us, and offer alternative associations and pasts.”
4. PARTICIPATORY HERITAGE WEB PROJECTS

The MUVI project, an early (1999) experiment in building participatory digital heritage in Lombardia, Italy, collected family photos (and related audio-recorded stories) via a combined website and series of radio broadcasts. “MUVI transforms its audience – the local community – into active heritage, and makes it the main actor in the construction of the museum” [7].

In 2003, CFC Media Lab helped to establish the first installation of the [murmur] project, a digital, locative oral history project, in Kensington Market, Toronto [16]. Researchers posted ear-shaped signs with phone numbers on street corners. Passersby with mobiles could phone the numbers and hear a personal recollection about that place – and they could upload their own stories. “It’s history from the ground up,” claims the [murmur] website: “By engaging with [murmur], people develop a new intimacy with places, and ‘history’ acquires a multitude of new voices.” From 2003 to 2009, [murmur] spread to 7 other neighbourhoods and then to 11 other cities around the world.

In 2004 a retired Dutch professor approached the Amsterdam media collective Mediamatic with a database of the names, ages, occupations, addresses, and personal effects of Jews living in Amsterdam in 1940. He asked the collective to help him build a digital memorial. In 2005 Mediamatic designed and launched a website of interactive coloured bars, each tiny square representing a person [14]. When a user clicks on the square, the database reveals a name, an address, and other sparse bits of information. Public response was swift and overwhelming; people deluged Mediamatic with photos, letters, and other memorabilia related to their former neighbours and friends. From there Mediamatic developed a new website, the Jewish Community Monument, which now contains rich, crowd-sourced information and memorabilia related to 105,000 people who perished in the Shoah [15]. Literally a whole nation’s tribute to a lost community, the website continues to collect and innovate. Mediamatic recently announced plans to create a mobile app that allows users to access a database of Amsterdam addresses from which Jews were deported; the whole city becomes a walking tour memorial.

In the UK, a few communities have built collaborative heritage communities online. In 1995 a local heritage group in Brighton and Hove began collecting stories and building a website around them. In 2002, it launched My Brighton and Hove, which now boasts over 11,000 crowd-sourced pages of photos, stories, and tours of the area [17]. The project also spawned a software development company that now builds community heritage sites for groups around the UK [4].

Such projects demonstrate not only that humans across the world long to preserve, and share their stories, but that the digital revolution is making possible unprecedented participatory interventions. Could a similar project drive new interest – and therefore new footfall, new investment, and new vitality – to an underserved (but historically rich) corner of the UK?

5. DESIGNING A PARTICIPATORY WEBSITE FOR ANGLESEY HERITAGE

In 2010, the researcher of the current project first met with the heritage officer of Menter Môn, the enterprise agency for Anglesey, which draws down European funding for heritage on the island. After investigating the creation of mobile apps for heritage walking tours, they decided on a larger strategy: first to create a “heritage gateway” website for the island, to preserve extant digital heritage artifacts (e.g., heritage reconstructions, photos, drawings, and videos), to showcase acquisitions such as apps and/or MP3 tours, and to engage new audiences.

Inspired by the Dutch and English community websites described above, a proposal was considered to create a similar volunteer-driven effort for Anglesey. However since no strong local group existed and funders would likely demand professionally-authored, expert-vetted content, in line with traditional models of heritage interpretation, a compromise was struck. Original content would be authored primarily by the researcher, a former journalist, and vetted for factual accuracy through local experts from stakeholder groups – but text would emphasise evocative human-centred heritage stories over dry dates and artifacts.

On the completed website, along with an image-based interactive Timeline feature, six “Themes” essays (on topics such as Romans, Saints, and Industry) provide the larger historical context, in line with then-developing Cadw’s Pan-Wales Heritage Interpretation Plan [2]. While using Cadw’s icons to link with other heritage sites relevant to the theme, the Anglesey essays are original, narrative-based, and specific to the island. The heart of the website are 10 “Key Places” pages that introduce heritage sites by augmenting large photos and factual-yet-engaging, people-centred heritage narratives with transport directions and relevant links.

In 2013, working with a Liverpool-based software developer, the researcher completed the 25,000-word website.

6. PLANTING A COMMUNITY

Importantly, the website was meant to seed and develop a participatory heritage community, both local and online, by recruiting a team of contributor “hosts,” incorporating user-generated content, and connecting local groups and schools. With the heritage officer, the researcher sought out and trained one local heritage enthusiast, usually an expert on that site, to serve as “co-curator” for each of the 10 “Key Places” pages (see Figure 2). This co-curator advised on content – even contributing personal reflections, documents or expertise into the main offering, moderated Comments via Disqus software, and importantly, served as a visual “host” to the page. In the top right corner, a photo of the smiling host (with a short bio) provides a genuine local welcome to the page, a virtual version of the heritage site. Hosts were also meant to converse with users and local people via the website’s connected Facebook community and Twitter accounts. Some actively shared and commented on local news and heritage stories.

Figure 2. A “Key Places” page, with “your host” to right.

For example, the daughter of the man who discovered the Iron Age horde at Llyn Cerrig Bach serves as host for that page. Her face welcomes people there, where the main essay warmly relates
her father’s dramatic discovery and his subsequent work to preserve the artifacts. A local archaeologist and Blue Badge tour guide hosts the page on Din Lligwy, a Roman-era Celtic settlement, which for him represents “a connection with my ancestors.” Other pages are hosted by long-time activists in groups that work to preserve those specific sites. The ten hosts, with other supporters and stakeholders, met with the researcher on several occasions.

Council management expressed concern that users would voice criticism of the council via the Disqus-powered Comments section, or upload inappropriate photos or videos. More than once, the researcher demonstrated the robust filters; a moderator has to approve every comment, photo, or video before it appears. The researcher then proposed that they jointly develop a protocol for volunteers to follow when moderating comments and content, which involved polite responses and forwarding comments to relevant council employees; the council declined to participate in protocol development.

Just before launch, however, the council declared that, since the website would live on its servers, the council would be legally responsible for all content, so it could not therefore allow moderation by non-council employees. Updates and moderation therefore would become the responsibility of the council’s overtaxed, two-person marketing division, who have made sporadic updates and changes contrary to the design intent. Because it relies on the council’s partnership for most of its funding, the development agency chose not to question the decision.

Today, two years later, the website remains online, though seemingly dormant. Most articles still display “0 comments,” as they may for another three years. Funding contracts require a 5-year lifespan to justify the £35,000 spent.

7. EVALUATING THE WEBSITE

In July 2012, before the new website’s public debut, the researcher conducted a study to evaluate the efficacy of its approach. Based on previous research, an instrument was developed to compare the new website to its functional predecessor, the heritage section of the council’s tourism website, as it appeared at the time.

After providing demographic information, the 94 respondents were split over three conditions: those who looked at the researcher’s website, those who viewed the council’s heritage pages, and those who looked at no website (control). The first two groups gave first impressions of the sites, then completed four simple heritage tasks that were accessible on both sites (e.g., “name the saint who founded Penmon Priory”). They then evaluated the website they had visited, based on an established User Engagement scale (see below). At end, all three groups completed questions designed to assess their impressions of Anglesey’s “brand personality” and their intentions to visit or recommend the island.

7.1 User Engagement

In 2009 O’Brien and Toms [18] performed a large multidimensional cluster study to develop a scale to measure website user engagement. They propose an instrument to measure user engagement on shopping websites across 6 factors: Perceived Usability, Aesthetics, Focused Attention, Novelty, Endurability, and Felt Involvement. For the current study, the researcher chose two of their questions to measure each of the 6 factors across the two websites, adjusting them slightly to reflect tasks related to heritage instead of shopping.

In the study the participatory website consistently outscored the council website in all factors. For example, on the Perceived Usability scale, 75 percent of users of the newer website “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the indicators, versus 57 percent of council website users. On the Aesthetics scale, 93 percent of users affirmed the participatory website, versus 90 percent for the council. Fifty percent “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the

Figure 3. Some of the website’s volunteer team at a planning meeting.

In addition, the researcher populated a “Voices” section of the website to publish various blogs that contained personal reflections about the island’s heritage. Historical pieces by Charles Dickens, RS Thomas, and medieval poet Daffydd ap Gwilym mingle with recent essays from a modern Druid, a retired minister, and a local Second World War memorist, among others. It was hoped that the section would attract subsequent contributions from other local bloggers, heritage writers, and memoirists.

There were also several pathways to user participation. An About Us page invited new volunteer curators and contributors. After registering, users could upload photos from Flickr, embed videos from YouTube, or add comments on pages (all pending moderation). Via buttons in the top right corner of every page, a user could connect to the integrated Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube accounts, which were maintained by the researcher and meant to be excerpted in a livestream to the website’s home page. In addition the home page was to feature an active heritage-focused Events list, drawn from the council’s larger list, and supported via the community growing through social media. More community-building was planned: hosting stalls at schools, markets and fairs; photo contests; tagging ‘drives,’ to encourage sharing of annotated photos and memories; mounting monthly online heritage quizzes, all in an effort build a local and global Anglesey heritage community.

The vision did not hold. The development agency sponsoring the projects works almost exclusively in short-term schemes; it draws down funding, supervises development, files paperwork, and then hands off assets to other agencies or volunteer groups for long-term caretaking. It has no web server. So the agency intended only to develop the website, in collaboration with other stakeholders, then hand it off to the local council for hosting on its web server, alongside other county assets. Representatives from the council’s IT and marketing divisions therefore attended all the planning meetings for the website project, over a year, where they discussed and approved the community aspects and the provisions for user-generated content.
Focused Attention indicators on the researcher’s website, versus 26 percent of the council users.

On the Novelty scale, 71 percent affirmed the researcher’s website, while 58 percent affirmed the council’s. For Endurability, 78 percent “agreed” or “strongly agreed” on the researcher’s website, versus 63 for the council. On the Felt Involvement scale, the researcher’s website again outperformed the council’s: 74 percent of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the indicators, versus 42 percent for the council.

7.2 Destination Brand Personality

Using insights drawn from the seminal work on “brand personality” in the field of marketing, tourism researchers have begun to assess the brand personality of destinations. Using a scale developed by Ekinci and Hosany [5], the current research team asked respondents – both website users and control group members who didn’t use a website – to rate Anglesey for 12 personality attributes, on a five-point scale, “agree” to “disagree.”

In general, using either of the two websites improved personality perception dramatically, compared to the control. For the statement “Anglesey is . . . exciting,” for example, users of both the researcher’s website (55.9 percent) and the council’s website (54.5) marked “agree” or “strongly agree,” versus just 16 percent of those who did not see a website. Also users of both websites found Anglesey similarly “sincere” (52.9 and 54.5 percent), versus 38.5 percent of the control. A similar dynamic occurred with “charming.”

However a marked difference between the websites showed on attributes such as “spirited,” “daring,” and “original.” 82.4 percent of users of the new website “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that it was spirited, versus 63.6 percent for the council. For “daring,” the percentages were 35.3 versus 15.2 percent. For “original,” they were 67.6 versus 42.4 percent.

7.3 Intention to visit and recommend

Lastly the survey instrument investigated respondents’ desire to follow up by visiting or recommending the destination. Again, the newer website performed better overall than the council website. 90 percent of users of the new website “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they would like to visit, as opposed to 80 percent of council website users. 88 percent of the users of the researcher’s website would recommend Anglesey to family and friends, versus 70 percent of the council’s website users.

8. DISCUSSION

Although innovative and successful with users, “Anglesey: A Bridge Through Time” did not find its audience, due to a series of fatal but not uncommon institutional failures, both of management and of vision. First, the project lacked sufficient institutional support, in the form of buy-in, commitment, and professional liaisons. Led by a transnational student affiliated to a nearby university, someone from outside the local, the project was supervised only temporarily by the enterprise agency. Unlike similar successful projects (run by established museums or long-standing community groups) this digital strategy did not include -- or better yet, evolve from -- a process of buy-in at all levels. Despite partaking in several planning meetings, stakeholders could still misunderstand the technology, its purpose and use. In addition, had the strategy been initiated or supervised by a professional museum director, for example, someone with long-term interest in protecting digital assets, she or he may have known to advocate for a website wholly independent from the local council, as encouraged by the museums group Collections Trust as early as 2007 [19]. “Where the museum has direct responsibility for its own web presence and is able to control elements such as layout, design and information architecture,” its report concluded, “they very often respond with considerable flexibility and creativity. The ability of a museum to express its core offer to its target markets (as distinct from those of the Authority) is likely to be a deciding factor in its success and sustainability in the years to come.”

Second, the project suffered from the widespread, documented failure of local governments to accept and embrace the whole Web 2.0 ethos, including social media. For example, in 2010, when the project began, the local council in question was just initiating its first Facebook page. An employee in the marketing department remarked that, as “owner” of the account, he’d just been allowed to access Facebook from a council computer. Considered a timewaster, it was blocked for all other employees. Such practices were common in 2010, when a systematic survey of 75 local governments across the EU found that almost half of the largest cities had no active presence on major social media sites [1]. While many had developed e-government capabilities in order to receive payments, very few had incorporated any public commenting or participatory elements: “In general the concept of corporate dialogue and the use of Web 2.0 to promote e-participation are still in their infancy at the local level.”

So in this instance, as in many others, lack of institutional support rendered the project vulnerable to mistrust, and lack of relevant
experience and knowledge by decision-makers rendered it vulnerable to misunderstanding.

Third, misanthropy – a distrust of the social.

While not an organically community-driven effort, the website meant to seed multivocality. It represents a heritage that is diverse and person-centred, inviting interaction and user-generated content. Moreover, the project was meant to evolve further – to portray more heritage sites; to involve more local people in the heritage process; to host stalls at schools, markets and fairs; to solicit and catalog tagged vacation photos and memories; to showcase panoramic videos; to hold monthly online photo contests and heritage quizzes; to build with social tools a local and global Anglesey heritage community.

But multivocal heritage as a process conflicts with well established Authoritative Heritage Discourses (AHD), primarily the traditional view that “heritage” is a product, an expression of physical monumentality and expert knowledges, as described by critical heritage theorists like Laurajane Smith [22]. The ubiquitous, totalizing AHD serves to obliterate alternate discourses: “Naturalization of the AHD tends to not only restrict the ability of competing discourses to be heard and dealt with equitably within heritage management processes, but also requires the maintenance of a consensual view of the past and its meanings for the present.” This consensual view, dominant within local heritage management, often blinds stakeholders to the value of multivocality. Participation, especially in the form of trendy but risky social media applications, can easily be dismissed as trivial.

As a website, “Anglesey: A Bridge Through Time” represented an evolutionary step: innovations in narrative, co-curation, and participation proved successful with survey respondents, across dimensions. Yet the website failed to find its audience; participation ebbed away when it was disconnected it from its volunteer base. An outsider intervention echoing paradigm shifts in culture and technology, the project threatened the status quo. Without adequate institutional backing, its innovative approach could be devalued and disallowed.

Clearly, heritage innovators working with local agencies still face significant challenges to opening participation. Those without long-term connections or champions in local power structures should proceed with caution.

10. REFERENCES


[16] [murmur] http://www.murmur加拿哒


