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Traces - Olion: Creating a bilingual 'subtle mob' for National Museum Wales

Sara Huws, Digital Content Officer, Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales.

Alison John, Producer, yello brick.

Dr. Jenny Kidd, Senior Lecturer, School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University.

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Introduction

In 2016 we began work on a Welsh and English language digital encounter for St Fagans National Museum of History. The project was a partnership between Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales, yello brick, a creative marketing and street gaming company based in the nation's capital, Cardiff, and the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University. This was our second project together, following the creation of a prototype digital heritage experience in 2013 called *With New Eyes I See (WNEIS)*. *WNEIS* was a fragmented and nomadic experiment at the intersection of the digital and the analogue, which had involved (amongst other prompts and props) projections, voiceovers, found objects, maps and animations, with digital components triggered using radio frequency identification (see Kidd, 2017 for an overview).

Following *WNEIS* we were keen to use our findings about audience engagement with mixed-reality formats to develop a new kind of digital heritage encounter; subtle, quiet and invisible storytelling working at the interstices of fact and fiction. This chapter introduces the outcome of that endeavour - *Traces* - and offers our reflections on three core ambitions in that project. These were:

- (1) to disrupt and challenge the fact/fiction dichotomy, playfully exploring the ambiguities of museological representations.
- (2) to create a digital heritage encounter that was subtle, quiet and invisible, and which blurred perceived boundaries between digital and physical experiences. We found the

term 'subtle mob' (Speakman, 2009) useful in the design stages of work on *Traces*. A subtle mob is quiet, inwardly affective and *invisible*.¹

(3) to conceive of *Olion* as a dynamic narrative in its own right, and much more than merely a Welsh translation or copy of the English version.

Traces was designed for use at the St Fagans National Museum of History, one of seven museums which together comprise Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales. St Fagans, situated on the outskirts of Cardiff in South Wales, is one of Wales' most iconic heritage sites and its most popular tourist attraction. It is in itself a curious and fragmented storyworld (Kidd, 2018); an outdoor heritage site populated with buildings that have been translocated from across Wales which also houses a working farm, 'castle' and grounds. Its 20th century modernist visitor centre has recently undergone extensive redevelopment, to become a participatory display space which reflects the museum's continuing role in documenting the multiple histories of Wales.

In this chapter we offer a brief summary of *Traces* and then detail and reflect on the afore-mentioned ambitions for this project in turn. What emerges is a case study about the value of working *with* fragmentation and ambiguity in digital cultural heritage work (rather than trying to eradicate them), and about positive visitor engagements that have been facilitated around an intimate, intriguing and transgressive digital encounter. This work recognises that all of our digital interactions are experienced as embodied, felt, sensed and situated, and begins to demonstrate how heritage institutions can work sensitively and productively with those qualities.

Traces - Olion

Narrator: 'I have been called collector and guide, the unraveller of thread. Surrender yourself to this journey, to the order and disorder, the clarity and confusion, the artistry and chaos. See yourself reflected in the tales you hear, and the people you will meet. Agnes and Rose, and the others...These are the stories that make the trees grow, they nourish the soil.'

¹ In stark contrast to flashmobs, which are often noisy, performative and hyper-visible interventions in public space. For more on flashmobs see Nicholson, 2005.

Traces is not a straightforward audio guide. Nor was it conceived as a tourist guide. It is a site specific storytelling encounter which takes participants on a physical journey around the St Fagans National Museum of History, meandering between fact and fiction, past and present. As demonstrated in the above extract *Traces* is an artistic narrative interpretation or ‘composition’ which challenges visitors to experience the museum in a new way.

There are a number of possible user journeys structured into *Traces* (figure 1). A user can follow the narrative on their own (on a route that is also fully physically accessible), or they can choose the partner experience which takes two people on separate journeys that interweave in ways that are expressly performative (although invisible to other visitors). Alternatively, participants can choose either of these routes in the Welsh language (*Olion*).

Figure 1: Screenshot from *Traces*, choosing the partner or single journey

Given difficulties with mobile and wifi connectivity at the St Fagans site, *Traces* was designed as a self-contained mobile download (on Android or iOS). The audio material is therefore not location-triggered but manually controlled. There are four chapters, and visitors follow the route via directions in the audio, starting each chapter once in the appropriate location, and at the same time as their partner (should they be journeying with one). *Traces - Olion* is a mobile application, yet it should not be confused with museum/heritage mobile phone applications that serve solely a wayfinding or more straightforward interpretive function (Lagoudi and Sexton, 2010; Cromartie, 2012; Robson et al., 2016). Such mobile applications often remain ‘rooted in authoritative and didactic conservatism’ (Poole, 2017: 1) and are unlikely to reveal ‘dissonant histories’ (*ibid.* 2). *Traces* should be considered a more playful and complex elision of the digital and physical than the designation ‘museum app’ most readily calls to mind. Moreover, it has been our ambition that this not be a technocentric venture; the app is designed to encourage participants to put their phone in their pocket once they start their journey, rather than the phone continuing to occupy their line of vision. During the design process we were clear that the technology should enhance and enrich the experience and not *be* the experience. It should ignite the imagination rather than replace it. As Gerard Goggins (2012) has proposed, it can be more fruitful to see technologies not as ‘given’, but rather to understand them as an open set of questions. By mindfully designing in this way participants can take their place at the centre of the story, focused on their audio

companion, and the ways they are being invited to interact with the environment and (perhaps) their partner participant.

The *Traces* experience is linear yet fractured; moments come into focus then fade and blur. It is mostly an audio accompaniment² featuring the voice of an unidentified narrator and a bespoke musical score. The narrator - your guide - directs you around the site, whispering fragments of interwoven fact and fiction in your ear, and implicating you in the story; sometimes you are a listener and sometimes an invisible actor in this fragmented and fleeting narrative. For example, unbeknownst to you, in ‘standing at the gilded gate, face pressed towards the castle’ you have become an actor in the narrative as it is playing out for your partner, watching and listening whilst sat on a bench across the gardens. In the two-person experience you look into the eyes of your partner-participant, and are asked to feel, to look at them differently (figure 2).

Figure 2: Participants on the partner journey of *Olion*

Traces has other layers of composition that are just as much a part of the narrative as the spoken word. The music is deliberately composed to dictate physical pace and reflect mood that augments an alternate layer of reality in the space. We’ve employed the language of film by framing the space with different perspectives and angles; using parts of the narrative as ‘close ups’ to draw the attention of the listener to particular details of the space, or bringing their attention to a picture that encompasses a wider view (literally and figuratively). The narrative comes into focus and fades to create mood, pace and feeling through manipulation of our filmic perspective. This cinematic framing invites audiences to see through a different lens and to connect viscerally with the grounds of St Fagans. *Traces* also makes much of the natural habitat and centuries old built environment, and so the narrative is experienced differently depending on the time of year, the weather and the seasonal flora.

As such *Traces* is a unique assemblage of resources, and an attempt, quite intentionally, to unseat, unsettle and unravel. In the following sections we reflect back on our ambitions with *Traces* to account for how, in practice, we produced this subtler and more intimate (bilingual) digital heritage encounter. We also begin to articulate how users have responded to this more

² Although there are visuals and artworks on the accompanying app screen if people do choose to look.

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ambiguous mode of storytelling, introducing responses from an in-depth research project with 30 *Traces* and *Olion* participants completed in March 2018.

Playing with fact/fiction

Traces walks a thin line between fact and fiction. But what does that mean, and what are the consequences of that kind of ambiguity? The *Traces* experience is one constituted of myth, illusion and the navigation of fragments of story. This reflects the very real encounters of the writers and producers within the extensive St Fagans archives, and conversations that were had with those working on site whose stories are seldom told through the official channels of interpretation on site; the gardeners for example. *Traces* augments the site with 'what if's' and takes artistic licence with people who might have lived there, building on the knowledge of the structure of society at the time and the history of the site. For example participants hear the story of the man who 'visits Mametz Wood reluctantly every night, waking in a cold sweat before heading to breathe in the safety of the gardens every morning', drawing inspiration from the fact that parts of the St Fagans estate became a hospital that provided for injured soldiers during WW1. The hospital building, lost to fire long before the site became a museum, is now represented only by a set of steps, which seemingly lead nowhere. Mametz Wood is of particular significance in Wales, as the site of engagement – and devastating loss – for the 38th (Welsh) Division as part of the Battle of the Somme. We didn't want *Traces* to provide '(yet) More Information' or to duplicate other forms of interpretation which were being done perfectly competently through other means at St Fagans. Instead, *Traces* needed to be a different way of navigating the site, a means of creative wayfinding which might seed different kinds of experience, and different ways of being in the space of the Museum (as noted above).

Narrator: 'See yourself reflected in the tales you hear... In the people you will meet... You are at the centre of this journey. And at the centre, you will BE. You alone will hear what you hear and feel what you feel'.

As noted, we conceived of *Traces* as a 'subtle mob', oriented around deep and intimate entanglement in feeling, space and experience, rather than feeling this new (digital) encounter had to be hyper-visible or boisterous. Instead *Traces* holds you gently, lightly pressing you to

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perform your visitation to St Fagans differently. In our research interviews participants often responded emotionally to this quality, and talked about the experience in terms of their wellbeing, self-care and escapism; it is ‘calming’, ‘relaxing’, ‘energising’, ‘serene’, ‘hypnotising’, ‘soothing’, ‘spiritual’, ‘peaceful’, ‘dreamy’, ‘thoughtful’, ‘therapeutic’, and ‘rejuvenating’. One participant noted:

‘I loved the stillness, the peace, the story.....suddenly, I was small and part of the landscape - a piece of the picture. This is the quietest my inner to-do-list voice has been all day! Beautiful’. [Participant response to Traces, March 2018]

Traces deliberately slingshots back to the participant putting them at the centre of the journey, questioning and probing, and trying to make connections with their own narrative life. The stories are representations of the (often) shared experiences that constitute the human condition: love, grief, conflict, mortality etc, and so there are touch points with all of our lives:

‘It’s a meditation on the human experience’. [Participant response to Traces, March 2018]

‘The end was just quite emotional for me because I lost my mother recently and it was just, you know, it just kind of ... brought me back to you when it says ‘what do you see in your partners face?’’. [Participant response to Traces, March 2018]

We are aware, however, that our playfulness as maker-curators, and our risk-taking, is consequential. It seems people don’t trust politicians or journalists, but they do still feel they can trust museums (Dillenschneider, 2017; MA, 2013). Yet ours is not a ‘neutral’ museum voice in *Traces* (if such a thing exists). Instead the experience disrupts visitors’ expectations about the kind of voice and assertions they will encounter on site (as *WNEIS* actively did). We understand *Traces* as delicately and playfully activist in this regard, and hope that by inserting our fictions, and reveling in ambiguity, we unsettle processes of museum making that reify and attempt to sustain grand narratives of truth about the world, and about us as its inhabitants. Such an approach, we contend, could be further utilised to explore complex issues and amplify

marginalised histories; to make the museum a place for people rather than a monument to them. Digital media offer us powerful ways (potentially) of multiplying narratives, undermining received wisdoms and questioning authority, and we understand these as core parts of the twenty first century museum project, not as at odds with it.

Complicating the Physical/Digital binary

As has been noted *Traces* is a form of mixed-reality and multimodal storytelling.³ It is not a virtual reality or traditional augmented reality experience, instead relying on multiple modalities and resources in communication. These include digital resources in service of the narrative, but also cues from the natural and built environment, and sensorial and tactile prompts; an invitation to press one's hands deep into a cold stone archway for example, and to implant a memory there. In designing *Traces* we wanted to disrupt how people perform their presence in the spaces of St Fagans - a site that for many is subject to repeat visiting, often with the same route taken time and time again (as people told us in scoping discussions with visitors at the start of our project). We wanted to give people 'permission' to engage with this place in a different way; the app itself became a mechanism that encouraged tactility, moments of stillness, changes in pace, and to some extent a break in personal inhibitions. It offers a companion to those who are wary of visiting venues on their own and it encourages people to take the unexplored path, as one participant noted in our research; [*Traces* is] '*A beautiful journey that makes you look again at the smallest and most inconspicuous of corners of St Fagans*'. We wanted to defamiliarise the space somehow, and to encourage people to be more aware of their visit as a thing embodied and enacted:

'It felt like I was actually allowed to properly pay attention to the environment, rather than almost bypass things. It made me notice things that I didn't ordinarily notice. But also the way I was guided and the way the music affected me gave me permission to look and permission to spend time which, ordinarily, I think when you're with a big group of people like a family or walking your dog, you don't necessarily sit, wait and contemplate.

³ For more on multimodal heritage encounters see Ciolfi, 2015; Ciolfi & McLoughlin 2017; Damala et al., 2016; Kenderdine et al., 2014; Kenderdine, 2016; Kidd, 2017; Schraffenberger & van der Heide, 2014.

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It makes you have to connect with the space in a way I don't think you would ordinarily'.

[Participant response to *Traces*, March 2018]

These 'permissions' are a key part of the experience, and for many, changed the dynamic of their relationship with this public space, a space which comes with its own socially acceptable rules of behaviour. By shifting parameters participants themselves began to redefine their relationship with their surroundings and become part of a redefined choreography that challenges the 'norm':

'Enjoy the moment. Hear out the narrator. Close your eyes when you can. Act like you are in the play'. [Participant response to *Traces*, March 2018]

'Now I am a part of this place. I feel like I am more than just a visitor. It's quite powerful'. [Participant response to *Traces*, March 2018]

The design of *Traces* had to take into consideration certain constraints of the site; lack of wifi and technological infrastructure, and no available staffing to facilitate or maintain the experience. A mobile app as the delivery mechanism made sense in this setting as a way to facilitate our aims in the project; it might not have been preferable elsewhere. The audio and the simple visual interface are used in *Traces* to re-orient visitors. They don't digitally recreate space in the same way that virtual reality does or layer it in the traditional sense of augmented reality (AR), but yet, as is noted above, the audio powerfully and subtly enhances the space. In this respect we concur with others who have pithily asserted in the twitter threads accompanying #MuseTech events and conferences in recent months that audio *is* 'the new AR'. The digital resources become a prompt for more reflective and intentional journeying in the space, amplifying elements that are easily overlooked or passed by. We encourage the technology to be hidden so that it becomes an enabler of more human centered behaviours and responses:

'I generally didn't look at my phone unless I was skipping to the next chapter and I really liked that. I think technology is at its best for something like this when it's not all about everything that is on the screen, when it is more about the environment. This is more a tool for accessing it'. [Participant response to *Traces*, March 2018]

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We are used to thinking about much of our digital interaction as disembodied but it is not, as *Traces* reminds us. Digital interactions are felt, sensed and situated too. The digital enhances the physical and invites the audience to create their own memory and stories of the space:

'Dreamy, enchanting, escapism. We made some real memories, while listening to theirs'.
[Participant response to *Traces*, March 2018]

'A meandering journey through both the gardens and your imagination' [Participant response to *Traces*, March 2018]

'Beautiful experience for the imagination and sense. Amazing collaborative experience and a joyful way to spend some time here'. [Participant response to *Traces*, March 2018]

Through *Traces* visitors thus experienced the space differently, and they were *affected* differently by it also. In user tests they told us again and again how they had been encouraged to perform their visitation in new ways, often more purposefully and more emotionally. As we had hoped participants often ended up feeling their relationship with St Fagans had been in some way shifted, altered and reimagined. Ironically perhaps, our attempts to unsettle the prototypical St Fagans encounter by changing its focus, direction and intensity have often resulted in a more settled sense of 'being' in the place of St Fagans as a space of natural beauty, a dynamic ecology and seasonal environmental flux.

***Olion* and working bilingually**

Our third ambition in the project was to conceive of *Olion* as more than a 'Welsh language equivalent'; a functional, sometimes outsourced, translation of an English prototype as is often the case with digital heritage work in Wales. We wanted *Olion* to be closer in spirit and methodology to a literary translation; dynamic, playful and considered. The nuances and poetry of the stories in English had to be expressed in equal balance in Welsh for it to ring true with participants who choose to engage through that medium. We worked with bilingual writer Sara Lewis on the project who was passionate about catering for an underrepresented audience and to

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create another touch point for the project. She offers this perspective on bilingual artistic creation, development and delivery:

‘Welsh and English ‘sing’ differently as languages and so when I am tasked to write something bilingually, I will always write 2 versions as opposed to a translation of whichever version I write first. Often, a straight translation of a creative piece, will never work completely because the words that are used, are used not just for their meaning, but for their sound and rhythm and so, while the overarching story I created for *Traces* was the same, the language I use to tell that story was different in the Welsh and English versions.’ [email reproduced with permission]

Rather than deliver a Welsh ‘mirror’ version of an English digital product, with translated content dropped in towards the end of the process - oftentimes by contracted translators who have not been part of the product’s development - here *Olion* was a separate workstream within the creative process.

This approach develops on Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales’ previous pilot digital projects, which focus on discovering creative ways of engaging with digital visitors whose preferred browsing language is Welsh. Its @DyddiadurKate project, for example, sought to conceive of Welsh-speaking (or Welsh-browsing) visitors as an audience group with particular interests beyond their language choice, which resulted in over 280,000 impressions on a single, Welsh-language diary. The results not only informed the bilingual, parallel creative production model seen in *Traces*, but challenged more general, cultural assumptions about the strength of appetite for tailored Welsh-language digital content. Set against a popular perception that Welsh is both an ‘ancient’ and ‘useless’ language, projects such as *Traces* take the statutory requirement that the language is treated ‘no less favourably’ than English as a creative starting point, rather than a limitation.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored our initial design ambitions for *Traces - Olion*, and begun to reflect on how participants have responded to it. We wanted to (1) play at the interstices of fact and fiction, (2) complicate the binary between digital and physical, and (3) work bilingually with

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sensitively and dynamism. Against the often noisy backdrop of investment in virtual reality and augmented reality we have demonstrated that a focus on creating quieter, subtler and more intimate forms of immersion and experience can be both productive and insightful. The notion of the 'subtle mob' has been multiply instructive for us as we embarked on a project that was not technocentric, instead holding the digital and the tangible in delicate balance. It has helped us to challenge perceptions (perhaps even our own) about the screen as the principal agent of change in digital heritage work, and attuned us to the potentials of agency and self-direction in playful museum encounters. We have explored how to create new languages and dialogues with audiences that arouse the senses, engage the emotions and are attuned to the environment. In working bilingually we have been ethical and intentional, making more considered choices in the creation of accessible, relevant and empathetic work for a wider variety of audiences.

In user tests responses have been positive and energetic. With *Traces* subtlety, ambiguity, stillness and voice combine to prompt encounters that are powerfully felt, sensed and situated. Those who participate find that their patterns and practices of visitation at St Fagans shift, perhaps immutably. People talk about *Traces* as an intervention, as a way of seeing the museum differently and of being in it more meaningfully and purposefully. And they have found it transgressive. This is hugely rewarding for us as creative practitioners and researchers.

Project Credits:

Traces was produced by yello brick in collaboration with Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales and Cardiff University

Producer: Allie John

Application build: Hoffi

Writer: Sara Lewis

Composer: Jak Poore

Actor: Natalie Paisey

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Biographies

Sara Huws is a technologist and facilitator based in Cardiff, Wales. She specialises in digital skills, content and strategy. She is Co-Founder of East End Women's Museum, London's first museum dedicated to the history of women and girls.

Alison John is producer at yello brick (www.yellobrick.co.uk) a creative agency making immersive experiences through digital platforms and live events. In the past yello brick has made an epic urban adventure game in the streets of Cardiff, a site specific storytelling app for cycle routes in Wales and an online interactive event for new opera audiences. Alison is also co-producer of playARK Festival and was Director of ARK LAB, a company that creates projects for social good. She is recognised as one of a cohort of digital producers practicing in Wales by Watershed, National Theatre Wales and Arts Council of Wales.

Dr. Jenny Kidd is Senior Lecturer in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University. Her research interests are at the intersections of museums, heritage and new media studies. Jenny is a Managing Editor of the open access journal *Museum and Society*, author of *Critical Encounters with Immersive Storytelling* (with Dr Alke Gröppel-Wegener, forthcoming, Routledge), *Museums and the New Mediascape* (2014, Routledge) and co-editor of *Challenging History in the Museum* (2014, Routledge) and *Performing Heritage* (2011, Manchester University Press).