

Butterflies in the Garden: some reflections on interdisciplinary collaboration in the arts (0324)

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In 2012, a REACT Heritage Sandbox partnership between Splash & Ripple, the Holburne Museum and myself, an historian of popular movements in the long eighteenth century, was challenged to conceive a visitor attraction for a site of vanished heritage at Sydney Gardens, a genteel Georgian Vauxhall at Bath. This collaborative project was unconventional, bringing together the interests of an historian (the location, selection and analysis of newly sourced content), a creative designer (affect, empathy and experience) and the museum (changing the audience demographic, redirecting footfall etc). In more conventional models for work of this kind, stakeholders might commission a design company to shake up the visitor offer, and designers might consult historians over questions of accuracy and content but are rarely asked to share management of the project. In full partnership however, designers and historians are obliged to square the form and content circle, and consider a variety of delivery methods from a stakeholder's point of view. Such a process places the academic partner in a stronger position than usual to influence the deployment of scholarly research by heritage site managers.

This co-design principle produced a partnership of peculiar ambition and a series of self-imposed challenges which, ultimately, and almost without our realising it, organised themselves into a manifesto for new heritage experience design that were most unlikely to have emerged if we had not been working together and had the benefit of REACT funding. Funding secured the partnership as a research project and cushioned it from more customary employer/client business models in which owners of heritage assets invest money in a project and manage its direction and delivery in their own commercial interest.

Ghosts in the Garden was built on some key principles. Researched content would shift the conventional heritage emphasis away from elite and celebrity users of public space, and settle instead on the quotidian lives of lower social groups (performers, pickpockets, police constables). Interpretation would be narrative-driven and delivered aurally on mobile devices via GPS, preferably for group use, but technology would remain hidden/disguised. Interpretation would be non-didactic and led by dramatic scripting to test the value of immersive adventure and decision-making over top-down authoritative instruction as a learning medium. This allowed us to experiment with game via a real world 'choose your own adventure' mechanic, and surprisingly perhaps, this aspect emerged as a factor of primary importance for both sides in the partnership. It would discourage visitor passivity and prompt a form of democratising co-design where visitors curate their own visit, absorb knowledge without didacticism, make evidence-based choices and draw their own conclusions. I was interested in the capacity for game to reflect the uncertainties of historical writing and research by drawing attention to the process of constructing narrative and meaning from diverse and sometimes conflicting fragments of evidence. Game, as Ken Eklund puts it, is really just a device for putting people into a state of play, and play allows us to change the rules around interaction with evidence.

REACT's privileging of process over output was refreshing in an HE environment where funding tends to be dependent on tangible outcomes and often regards process as a means to an end rather than a 'product' in its own right. REACT allowed us to develop a product through an experimental series of sensory and narrative workshops where ideas could be fully explored rather than driven toward cost-efficient productivity. And crucially, REACT gave us the opportunity to build a prototype with which

to go out and test the principles on which it was built. Post-project, we took our offer (the 'manifesto' brief plus process as integral to product) to industry business seminars and trade fairs and ultimately won a highly prestigious commission (value £100k) from the National Trust to build some fresh interpretation at Bodiam castle, Sussex. Despite some tensions between the NT's emphasis on 'value for money' and our determination to hold on to creative processes of design and development, *A Knight's Peril* was unveiled at Bodiam early in 2015.

Splash & Ripple's unique REACT partnership with a university history department has proved itself attractive and bankable in the commercial heritage sector and the company is currently working with Historic Royal Palaces in central London. My own practice continues to be influenced by the REACT experience. I continue to work with S&R but have also collaborated on co-designed projects with other artist professionals including Antony Lyons (conceptual artist) on Tidal Reachings, an environmental project exploring water heritage in the Somerset Levels, Ralph Hoyte (poet) and Michael Fairfax (sound artist) on Romancing the Gibbet for the Being Human festival, a project about the spectral traces of public execution at 18th century crime scenes, and Tom Marshman (performance artist & curator) on The Bad Taste of the Town, a series of museum interventions conjuring Hogarthian England for Museums at Night. These collaborations in my own professional practice, all of which embrace new ways of 'publishing' and disseminating scholarly historical research as affective performance, are unquestionably a legacy of involvement with REACT.

However, although academics in the humanities – particularly those in the post 1992 sector - are increasingly urged by managers towards business/community engagement and cross-disciplinary collaboration, process-based shared-IP outputs in non-traditional fora are not always easy to submit to subject-specific REF panels by academic partners. Scholarly recognition for work of this kind cannot always be guaranteed and, even if critically written up for a good peer-reviewed journal, may not be welcomed by editors seeking more traditional, empirical work. Unless REF is remodelled then, collaborative work pioneered by initiatives like REACT will inevitably take second place to traditional research and publication to many academics in the humanities. Academics will also have to steer a careful course through interdisciplinary collaborations to ensure that the core subject expertise that brought them into partnership in the first place is protected and nurtured. Work of the kind described here should not be seen as a substitute for the production, for example, of rigorous monographs, but as a way of working beyond the limits imposed by traditional scholarship after traditional scholarship has taken place. Neglect of the core disciplines may lead only to a situation in which academic butterflies flit remorselessly through a word of post-disciplinary relativism, rarely settling for long, and ultimately undone by amnesia over who they once were and what they once knew.