

EXPERIENCING MOBILE & LOCATED MEDIA – Developing a Descriptive Language: Bristol Seminars

In November and December 2004, Constance Fleuriot and Jon Dovey organised a series of five seminar discussions with a small group of invited participants. The series of five seminars was prompted by our practice of multidisciplinary working and the conversations we were having with collaborative partners on the Mobile Bristol project.

We wanted to explore our different understandings of the words we were all using; to explore ways in which people conceptualise and describe pervasive, mobile & located media applications; to create a common language from multidisciplinary confusion.

The aims were:

- to begin to structure a framework in order to evaluate new media experiences
- to create a conceptual mapping of the key terms and concepts in this developing field by experiencing, discussing and evaluating experiences
- to develop a vocabulary to improve the communication potential of work we have done in both critical or research and public, commercial and marketing fields.
- to identify recurrent themes common to the projects, and to discuss and develop future research questions.

The structure of the seminars was to discuss, describe and compare the following experience projects that have been developed in Mobile Bristol:

- Riot1831!
- Moulinex
- A Description Of This Place As If You Were Someone Else
- CitiTag
- Node Boat Tour.

(more information on the applications is available at www.mobilebristol.com)

These applications were chosen as they were familiar to most of us and they cover a range of different types of experience. They may not be representative of all kinds of mobile media in that these particular applications all use the geographical or physical location of the user of the kit as the context to trigger the delivery of the media content.

We discussed issues around seamless media mixes, what levels of data there were to explore, the degree of meaningful mapping of an application to its location, the quality of sound/image, the porosity between media environment and actual environment, that is whether they bled into one another, the balance of information and evocation in the content, and the narrative structure of the pieces.

The outcomes:

After each discussion we tried to produce:

- A **short description** of each piece that would be accessible to a general audience, for example to put in a press release or a listings magazine. Each of these descriptions included the location or place where it was available, the kit used, media of content delivery, movement, topic, genre, emotions evoked, and the social aspects of the experience.
- A set of **key words and search terms**
- A **description using a more specialist language** -we tried to stick to the words generated and used in the discussion sessions, and we felt that the vocabulary we produced was limited but perhaps that is to be expected when working across disciplines.

Discussions

As well as the general language descriptions, we had discussions on what it might be that controlled how **immersed** we felt in the various experiences, so for example is it sound that pulls you out of a space and into the other, from real to virtual or vice versa?

We also talked about **Magic moments** - those points of unexpected connection between physical and data worlds, for example when you hear a description of lovers on a bench and then you notice some in front of you, or you hear a seagull cry in the headphones and then one flies past. How do you design these magic moments without them appearing contrived? The pleasure in these moments correlated, in our sample, with a sense of unexpectedness.

We discussed the effects of **dissonance** or synaesthetic confusion between what you see and what you hear. Such as the sounds of summer in the winter, or footsteps and invisible dogs.

We came up with a set of **descriptive dimensions** which we felt are a useful checklist for authors to help conceptualise their projects, if they run them through some of these dimensions at an early stage in their design. The descriptive dimensions are being developed into a conceptual guide on how to control and determine users' levels of immersion, which will be downloadable along with the Mobile Bristol authoring tool.

Descriptive dimensions

This is a very brief introduction to some of the descriptive dimensions that we suggest that authors consider when starting to design located media applications.

Dimension : social

private-----public
solitary-----shared

How many people are you designing for, are they alone or in groups.

Is it different route - same media, different but related experience, or all get same media at same time

Dimension : production values

“professional” ----- “amateur”

The terms professional and amateur were problematic for us, but we took them to mean whether sounds and images, especially sounds, were 'polished/BBC'

How important is the sound quality - some content is so intriguing it doesn't seem to matter, other times the production values really enhance the experience

Dimension : relation to existing experience

augmentation----- 'complete'

Is the application an augmentation eg the boat trip was an extra layer on top of something you could do anyway as opposed to a standalone experience

Dimension : space

linearity-----non-linearity

Dimension : of time

fixed running time-----open running time

permanent installation-----one off event

Dimension : of data depth

one level of data-----several levels to access
through further interaction

Using the boat trip as an example, it had a fixed time, was linear, with one level of data, and would be a permanent installation if they had funding. You have no control over the experience, the length of time is determined by the length of the boat trip, it is the boat's position not yours that triggers the media you receive.

Dimension : immersion

surface-----depth

information-----evocation

can you deliberately create a more immersive experience,

what hooks can you use to draw the user back in to the piece?

A less immersive experience will concentrate on the physical surroundings of the user, and may be of a more informational than evocative kind. A more immersive experience would use data that complemented or in some way went beyond the physical environment, eg by evoking its history or other memories of it, or by using sound in very creative ways.

A different kind of immersion (closer to concentration or engagement) may also be created through the social interaction which an experience necessitates.

With deep immersion or concentration, a loss of sense of physical surrounding seems important and pleasurable to users. The sensation of moving through different levels of immersion seems to be very pleasurable, of surfacing - of course the sensation of movement through levels is relative, only noticed as it changes.

Dimension : user control

none-----complete

clear rules-----unclear rules

How does the application answer the question 'What am I supposed to do?'. Are the 'rules of engagement' made transparent for the user at the start or must they be experientially acquired in the application itself? An application aiming to offer complete user control should expect a longer user control learning curve.

Dimension : space/place

arbitrary mapping-----meaningful mapping

How far does the experience seek to facilitate emergent behaviours? What relationship is there between the location and the content? How important is the context to the piece?

This is a very brief introduction to ongoing research. We are hoping to publish the seminar results in more detail, as well as develop the conceptual guide to be available from the website as a download with the authoring tool at www.mobilebristol.com

We would also like to thank those who participated in the seminars.

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