

Building a Digital Park: Recontextualising Lived Experiences at Towneley Park, Burnley

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a research project exploring the effect of digital heritage creation and interpretation on park space meanings. Adopting a multidisciplinary and practice-based approach, this project engaged directly with local park users through interviews, field visits and the development of a website. The aim of this project was to explore how the research process and website development affected the participant's perspectives on the park space.

The paper will discuss the key themes of the data and how the multiple participant narratives traverse space and time within the park. The thematic structure and premise of the website will be detailed before discussing some of the issues which arose during the digital development process. Finally, participant's reactions to the project will be explored showing that space and time in the park, and the website representation of it, are related less to linearity than to the *habitus* and rhizomatic forms.

KEYWORDS

Digital Culture; Digital Heritage; Heritage; Phenomenology; Habitus; Rhizome

Introduction

Recent research has highlighted the processual nature of heritage and its links with performativity and use (Bagnall 2003; Smith 2006). Both the intangible and the tangible (Dudley 2010) aspects of heritage experience are therefore important in exploring heritage values both of the everyday and those of an elicited few. It is with the democratising aim of revealing everyday heritage values that digital heritage is often championed, but the effect of digital media on heritage interpretation still bears scrutiny. In particular the role of digital representation of heritage sites in outdoor contexts is under-researched.

This project explored the heritage meanings associated with a park space from the perspectives of its users, directly engaging with them through interviews and visits to the park. The research project was focused around Towneley Park, which is situated on the outskirts of Burnley in Lancashire and takes its name from the Towneley family who owned the park until its sale to Burnley Council in 1902. Towneley Hall, which is found within the park, now houses a museum, while the park land includes woodland, flower gardens and sculptures as well as play areas for children and numerous sporting facilities (Figures 1 & 2). Using Towneley Park, this research project has therefore been able to investigate the effect of digital heritage in both traditional (historical and tangible) and non-traditional (affective and intangible) heritage contexts. The result has been a series of narratives based on different modes of using the park; historical, social, family or spatial narratives. These narratives were transcribed and creatively interpreted to include them in a website called Digital Towneley¹.



Figure 1: Towneley Hall [photo: the author]

¹ <http://www.heritagemeanings.com/towneley>



Figure 2: Wilderness woodlands at Towneley Park [photo: the author]

Digital Towneley functioned as part of the project to represent the meanings expressed by the participants about the park, but also functioned as a means of exploring the effect of digital media representation on the interpretation of heritage. The project has identified how people use the physical park and has found that the participants' perceptions of space, place and time depend on their own continual relationship with the park. In many cases these perceptions do not conform to traditional western representations of space or dominant spatial epistemologies. Instead they fit more comfortably with the non-linear notions of the *habitus* insofar as it both defines and is defined by phenomena (Bourdieu 1977) and the rhizome insofar as it is a complex network that represents the multiplicity of reality and our connections within it (Deleuze & Guattari 2005). It was for these reasons that I developed a rhizomatic and *habitus*-based structure for the website.

This paper details findings from the data co-created with 25 local park users. It will start with some background to the project in the area of heritage, followed by an overview of the methodology and aims of the project. I will then summarise the initially collected data collected and the participants' understanding of the park will be explored in terms of their lived experience. The paper will then detail the development of the thematic structure used in Digital Towneley before highlighting the intentions of the website. Following this the paper will identify some of the difficulties of developing Digital Towneley in terms of democratisation and power relations. Reactions of the participants to Digital Towneley will then be discussed in terms of space and place. Finally I will draw some conclusions on the effect of Digital Towneley and its use in the wider context of heritage interpretation.

Background

Within heritage a dominant discourse permeates artefacts and sites. Laurajane Smith (2006) has identified this as the 'authorised heritage discourse' and argues that it privileges the stories and accomplishments of the rich and powerful over the stories of everyday people and the subaltern. During the growth of the heritage industry at the end of the twentieth century these notions of heritage did not sit well with some commentators (Hewison 1987 & 1989; Lowenthal 1998) who saw the everyday lives portrayed in heritage sites as a distraction from a more objective pursuit of history. More recently however there has been a strong focus on the everyday, the performative and the intangible aspects of heritage (Bagnall 2003; Smith 2006; Dudley 2010; Schorch 2014). This draws our attention to the way that heritage is formed through the use of objects or places and so highlights the importance of embodied or intangible heritages like dance or oral history. Numerous intangible qualities may exist for a heritage object, such as its sentimental, cultural or spiritual value (UNESCO 2003). These qualities are different for each person and so intangible heritage must be approached within the context of subjective feelings and meanings (Schorch 2014).

Parks function as heritage sites, though the categorisation of parks and gardens is defined in most cases through reference to historical landscapes. One of the drawbacks to this approach is that the focus on historical contexts can override their 'aesthetic and cultural value' (Goult 2003, 41). Such an association of parks and gardens with historical narratives may overlook the use of parks as a creation of history itself; its 'presentness' and continuing role in the process of historical narrative. Even the non-historical aspects of natural or outdoor environments like parks and gardens may be 'museumified' with their controlled layout being analogous to curated spaces (Gobster 2007). Much as visitors to heritage sites may perform their own heritage experiences (Bagnall 2003), visitors will engage with park space in their own ways by mapping their understanding (Lynch 1960), or performing their own spatial narrative within the park landscape (de Certeau 1988; Tilley 1994). Visitors may experience the park as a whole rather than as discrete features or places (Burgess et al. 1988) and in this sense park spaces may be set apart as having a 'heterotopic' quality similar to museum spaces (Foucault 1986).

If a park is museumified then there may be an authorised heritage discourse dominating its representation as with many stately home landscapes (Smith 2006). While users of parks may still be able to decide how they use those spaces, or at least what meanings those spaces will have for them, there are still organising official bodies who control or curate those spaces (Gough 2007).

Communities, groups or individuals may use digital media to become enfranchised through the prospect of contributing their own opinions or recoding digital formats to tell their own stories of history and culture (De Groot 2009; Apperley 2013), a process similar to what Walter Benjamin (1999) identified as removing the aura from works of art. These digital formats and the development of social media have helped to blur the line between official and unofficial heritage (Giaccardi 2012) and it is in the light of these new digital possibilities that heritage meanings attached to park spaces may be explored.

Methodology

The aims of this project were:

- (i) to co-create narratives of Towneley Park's heritage meanings from the perspectives of local park users that go beyond and include authorised heritage discourses
- (ii) to create a central role for these heritage meanings as a basis for developing a digital heritage representation (Digital Towneley)
- (iii) to explore the effect both of digital media representation and of its process of creation on the interpretation of these heritage meanings

For the purposes of this project, the term 'narrative' identified in the first aim refers to spoken stories and experiences about the park as well as the spatial narratives that may arise from movement within the park space (de Certeau 1988; Riessman 2008). In this regard the phenomenological approach of Barbara Bender et al. (2007) is an important influence on this research project. Following their work at Leskernick this project's research methodology has been designed to help identify the phenomenological aspects of being in the park. Despite heritage focuses on traditional architectural constructs and historical associations, 'the environment is not a monolithic entity' (Bandura 2001, 15) and the multiple subjectivity of the natural environment (Dwyer, Schroeder & Gobster 1991; Schroeder 1996; Harvey & Riley 2005) provided a rationale for a constructivist approach to this project.

This research project did not attempt to capture a full understanding of heritage meanings at Towneley Park. Rather, the project aimed to acknowledge the subjectivities of the research participants as valid data and to use postmodern approaches to inform the analysis (Bender et al. 2007; Charmaz 2000).

Since an aim of this project is to explore heritage meanings from the participants' perspectives rather than from perspectives of traditional authorised heritage discourse (Smith 2006), the project involved a Grounded Theory based approach (Glaser & Strauss 1999). This approach intended to encourage the development of theory based on data rather than based on pre-existing and often dominant theory. This approach therefore made it possible for the participants steer the course of the project by focusing on what the park means to them. Consequently the development of Digital Towneley was based on how the participants value the park.

In order to help capture the subjective experiences both of the participants and myself as researcher, I also kept a reflective journal throughout the research process. This had the benefit of acknowledging emotions, power structures and the research environment as significant influences during the project (Bender et al. 2007; Trussell 2010). The adoption of a reflective journal throughout the research process helped me to look back on the process and recall the social, environmental and sometimes emotional contexts in which I engaged with participants. Not least, the journal helped to identify some of my own issues and biases, such as preconceptions of my own role and the extent of my own creative input to Digital Towneley.

The project's analytical approach was three-pronged. First of all, discourse analysis (Foucault 1980; Bourdieu 1986) proved to be relevant based on the power relations revealed between park users and park management. Secondly, the narrative nature of the data highlighted the relevance of using narrative analysis (Tilley 1994; Riessman 2008) to explore the meanings behind the participants' spoken and performed narratives. Finally, a multimodal approach (Jewitt 2013) was shown to be useful based on the different modes in which the participants engaged with both the park and Digital Towneley.

Participant recruitment and engagement

Twenty-five participants were recruited through leaflets and contacts within the park including friends and family. I did not intend the participants to be statistically representative of park user demographics. Rather, in this project they represent subjective human reactions to both the park and Digital Towneley. I interviewed all of these participants in a location of their choosing using an open-ended conversational format which was prompted only by the question 'What do you feel is important about Towneley Park?'. The interviews were digitally audio recorded and I transcribed these recordings for analysis.

Nineteen participants returned for the second stage of the data collection and visited the park with me. The participants were free to choose where to go on these visits. During these visits I took photographs to document our route and took written notes on the participants' comments, body language and actions within the park environment. I used these notes and photographs to write a creative account of these visits.

From the transcripts and creative accounts I identified a series of excerpts that could be used as content for the website and I contacted the participants to provide them with the opportunity to withdraw or edit this content.

Finally, twelve of the participants agreed to meet with me and discuss Digital Towneley once it had been made available online. This involved a semi-structured interview which was intended to help focus on participants' reactions to the website. I recorded and transcribed these interviews as per the initial interviews.

Digital Development

I developed the narrative content from the interviews and field visits and entered these as excerpts into a database. These excerpts were coded according to themes that I had identified during the analysis. The Digital Towneley website (www.heritagemeanings.com/towneley) accessed this database and populated text fields on screen with the narrative data contained in the relevant database node (Figure 3). Although the primary influence on the structure of the website came from the initial data analysis from which the thematic structure was developed (Figure 5), a strong influence on the nature of the website was the hypertext novel '253' (Ryman 2015) which offered a non-linear approach to narrative expression.

Photographic images were sourced both from my own and the participants' photography of the park (e.g. Figure 4). The map (Figure 7) was hand drawn by myself as a representation of a part of the park. I took inspiration for the overall design of the website from Tang

Museum's 'Classless Society', which offered an accessible interface, had content similar to the project data and was a recent winner of the Museums and the Web Awards².

Initial Interview and Field Visit Analysis

Using meaning condensation and data analysis software I thematically coded the texts of the interview transcripts and the creative accounts of the field visits. The process identified a series of popular themes upon which to base the Digital Towneley representation. This paper will explore aspects of space and place which featured heavily among the themes of 'self', 'family', 'community' and 'history'. The theme of 'time' was also identified as a separate theme.

The park space functioned in many different ways for the participants, offering leisure, healing and work spaces all within the boundary of the park. Movement through the park was a clear aspect of the participants' relationships with the park space and was demonstrated by every participant, whether that involved walking the whole of the park space (Participant 14) or only the relatively small area of the football fields (Participant 21).

However, movement was not the only means by which participants linked the various places within the park. What the park had come to represent for the participants over the course of time was an amalgamation of physical experiences, memories, historical associations and even plans for the future:

P5 touches a yew tree branch, holding the green fronds between her fingers. [Creative account: Participant 5]

[P15 says] walking in the park is nostalgic for her, saying that she always has children in her head. [Creative account: Participant 15]

When you're looking down at the hall from that point of view you can perhaps envision it as it was perhaps, you know, several hundred years ago [Initial interview: Participant 19]

[P3 is] looking forward to bringing his grandson to see the park and ride a bike. [Creative account: Participant 3]

It was clear from the data that individual places as well as routes through the park were associated with memories. These multi-temporal understandings of the park space were common to all of the participants. In this way their perception of the park resonates with the intertwining of space and time (Massey 2012). The participants nonetheless offered views which also present the park as a static landscape; a presence which, relative to their own lives, has remained constant even if its features have changed. This static landscape is therefore linked through time, with places or routes connecting across layers of memory that the participants have made in the park (Nora 1989; Smith 2006). These subjective links are inadequately expressed on a conventional two-dimensional map which cannot convey the poetry of movement, the emotions attached to a place or the multiple ways of reading and

² <http://mw2014.museumsandtheweb.com/bow/tang-museum-classless-society-exhibition-website/>

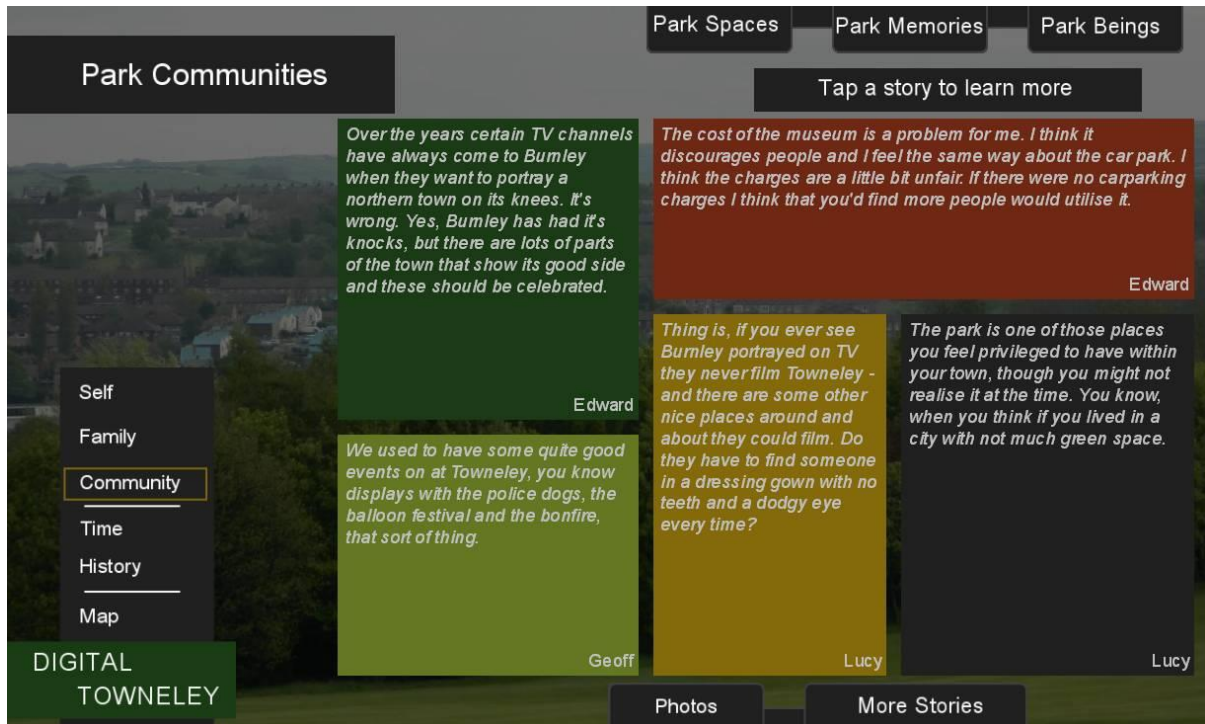


Figure 3: Digital Towneley narratives themed under 'community'

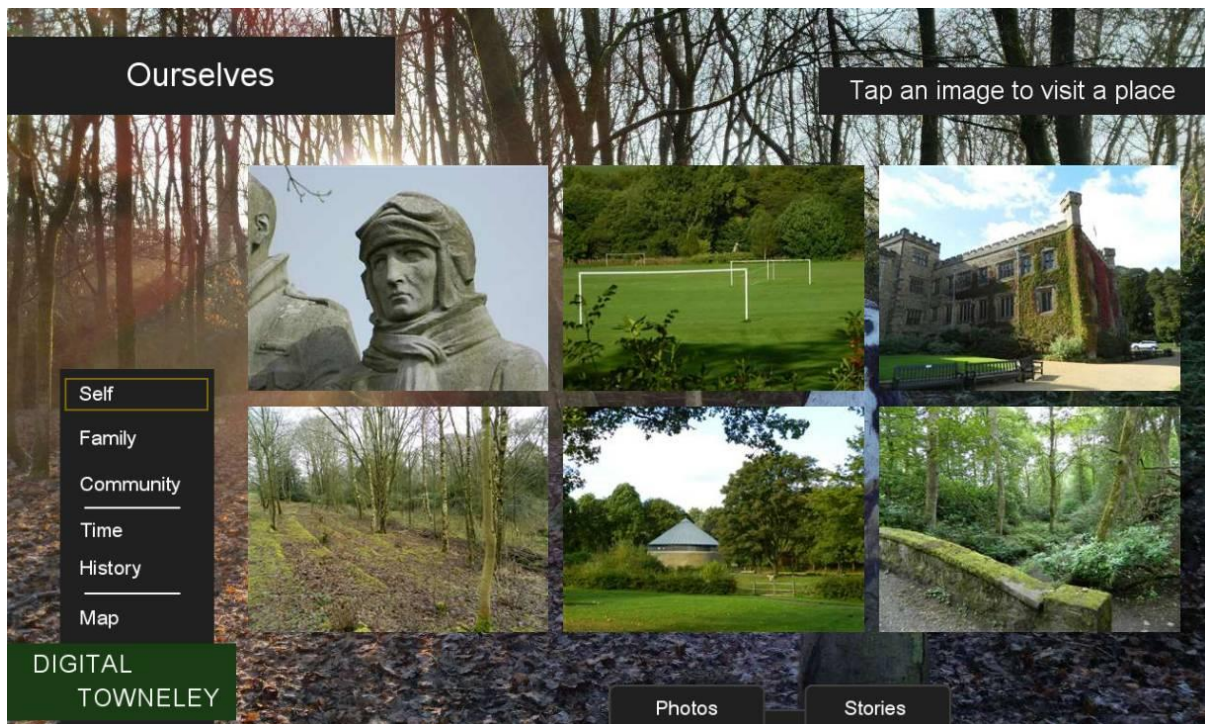


Figure 4: Digital Towneley images themed under 'self'

writing landscapes (de Certeau 1988; Tomášková 2007; Bidwell & Winschiers-Theophilus 2012). The participants' use of the park space does not generate and revisit associations in a linear fashion like the branch of a tree, but instead consists in a complex network of experiences and memories. The meanings attached to the park therefore resonate with the multiple connections and (re)creative processes found within rhizomatic networks and the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977; Deleuze & Guattari 2005).

Freedom of choice was a strong theme among the participants, referring mostly to the variety of routes through the park, but also to activities within the park. During the field visit with Participant 2 he became frustrated with how the project's approach seemed to work against his normal engagement with the park space:

He says that it is difficult because it is not usually how they use the park; it is unnatural. It is frustrating, he says, to have to think what the important parts of the park are. [Creative account: Participant 2]

This response may have been avoided if the aims and expectations of the field trip had been clearer for the participants. However, this experience raises both the way participants may wander or explore the park (Lynch 1960; de Certeau 1988) and the potential for researchers to disrupt a person's usual use of a space.

Taking these aspects into account, it was clear that the park was linked in a network of some complexity. In many ways this network resonates with the multiple nature of archaeological artefacts (Hodder 1986), the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) and the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari 2005). Analysis of the participants' memories revealed that the representation of the park in Digital Towneley would need to address this way of understanding the park.

Digital Towneley – structure and intention

In order to categorise the content of Digital Towneley to aid navigation, a contextual thematic framework (Nicks 2002) was developed using the themes identified from the initial interviews and the field visits (Figure 5).

The project aimed for Digital Towneley's structure to mimic the participants' associations with the physical park. The database and the links within Digital Towneley itself provided this network of associations. The result was a network which allowed the user to access places within the park through a range of associations (Figure 6). As such the contextual thematic framework and website structure represented a non-linear rhizomatic digital space.

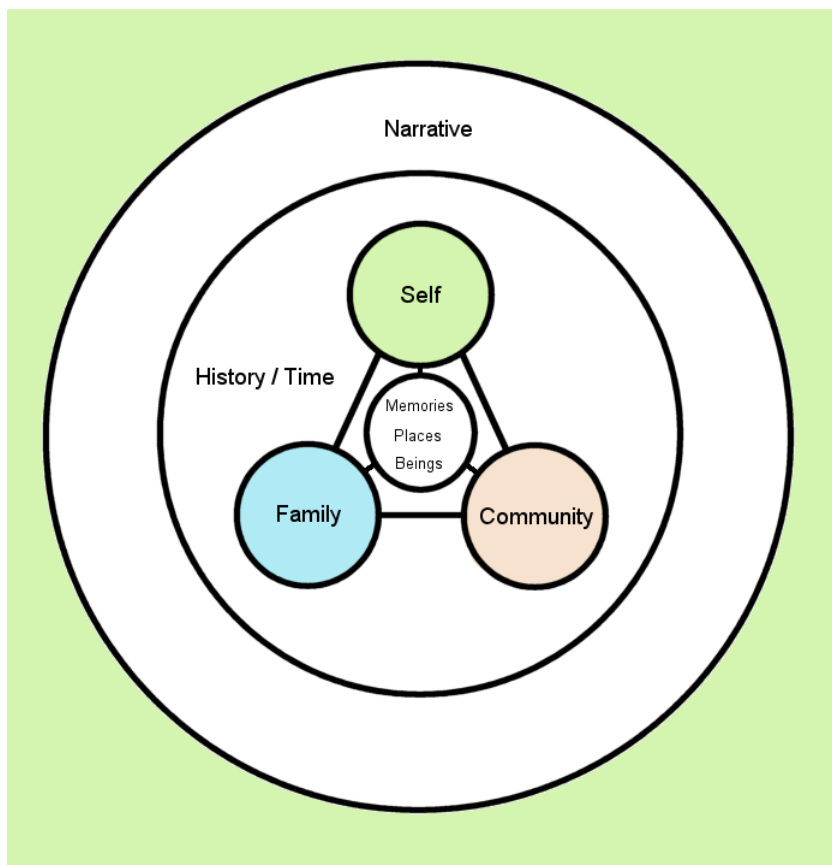


Figure 5: Contextual Thematic Framework for Digital Towneley

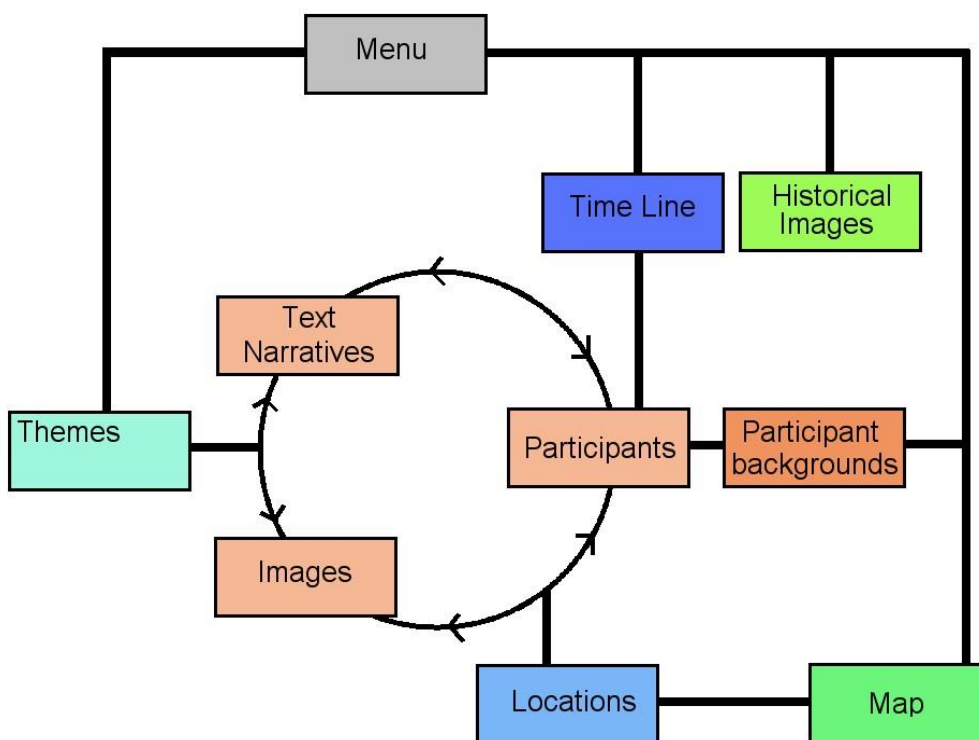


Figure 6: Structure of Digital Towneley

Some challenges in the development of Digital Towneley

The database was not able to translate all of the meanings that the participants expressed about the park. Consequently, the meanings expressed through Digital Towneley are limited to the nature of the tools used in its creation. These limitations relate to the power relations which are embedded within technology, being rooted in patriarchal capitalism (Wajcman 1991) or simply predisposed to privilege particular discourses over others (Shanks 2007; Bidwell & Winschiers-Theophilus 2012). Various issues of exclusion and othering are therefore still present in digital contexts such as Digital Towneley.

Issues of digital exclusion may also breed distrust in technology and this was expressed by several of the research participants. In particular Participant 4 had no access to digital technology in the home and identified a fear of it; even other participants (e.g. participants 1, 2, 5, 11, 16) with regular access also expressed unease with various digital contexts. Attempts to address this inaccessibility can be made through programs to educate communities in the use of digital technology (Van der Elst et al. 2011), but a problem still remains if the aims of the technology have not been developed by the communities. Without addressing a community's own agenda, education in this sense may serve only to reinforce established dominant heritage discourses (Waterton 2005; Smith 2006), arbitrarily decided by an elitised cultural few (Bourdieu 1994; Fyfe 1996).

The participants' ability to be directly involved in creating Digital Towneley was limited for reasons of skillsets and time, so they were excluded from the development process and reliant on me to faithfully represent their viewpoints. The project therefore compounds notions of exclusion from digital creative processes (Schradie 2011; Brabham 2012), resonating also with barriers of academic jargon (Samuel 1994). The participants may have effectively been excluded behind a wall of technological jargon and software.

The project nonetheless took steps within the methodology to help tackle these power imbalances. Participants had the opportunity to comment on or change the website content. Indeed, participants indicated that this approach was genuinely valued, with some thanking me for letting them read the material (Participant 5), others making minor changes (Participants 4 & 17) and some completely rewriting the content (Participants 9 & 10). Furthermore, the reflective element of the project offered a level of transparency with regard to some of the digital development processes.

Participant reactions

Overwhelmingly, the most popular feature of Digital Towneley was the map (Figure 7) and participant comments about it resonated with the effects of the panorama and georama in museums of the past (Kenderdine 2007). Participants were taken with how it offered a snapshot of the park or allowed them at a glance to see the whole park.

I could see the park at a glance and straight away see what was new [Feedback interview: Participant 13]

The map's good as well because it, although you've got a map in your mind, it's different to the map that you see, you know, the diagrammatical map. And you sort of, it's easier to connect things when you see them laid out on the map [Feedback interview: Participant 5]

The effects of the panorama and georama can be linked to the sensation of travel as they feel like visiting distant lands or places by seeing their images (Kenderdine 2007). Time is a crucial component of travel and so this highlights how time can be conjured up from seeing spatial images (Massey 2012). Images of places therefore contain potential spatial narratives (Riessman 2008) and in this sense the Digital Towneley map offers a representation of narratives both in the depiction of paths and in the links from the map to other park places. Just as Michel de Certeau (1988) discusses the ways in which we write our own stories as movement through the city, so too does the user of Digital Towneley have the potential to enact their own spatial narrative by interacting with the map.

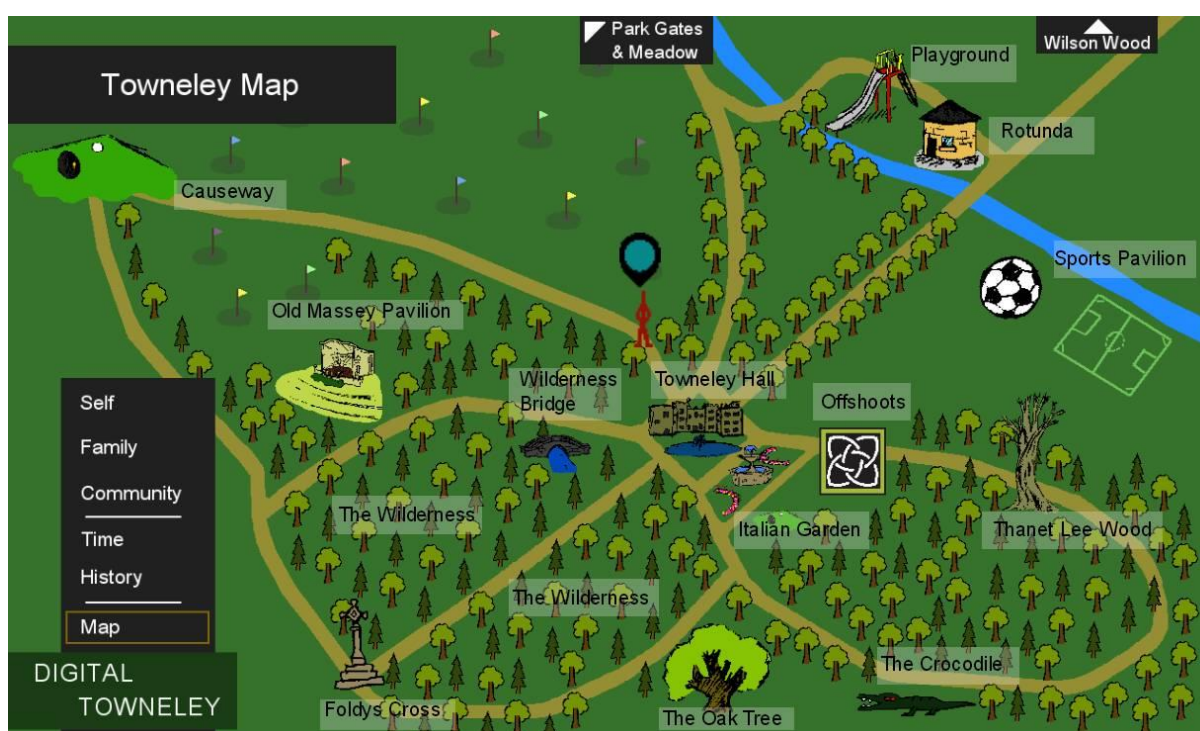


Figure 7: Digital Towneley map screen

The map also displayed names for the places in the park. Participant 7 discovered that one woodland she had visited many times had a name (Thanet Lee), while Participant 4 was interested to see a bridge on the map that he had used for decades and seemed pleased to have it named 'The Wilderness Bridge'. Participant 1 was happy that the 'proper' names for each place appeared on the map because they felt that it was important for people to be able to discuss the places in the park using the same terms. Names play a role in making features of landscapes relatable to us; they must become part of our language for us to include them in our culture (Tilley 1994). Crucially, names are required for places to take part in our stories and it is in this sense that the map in Digital Towneley facilitates the participants' continued telling of stories about Towneley Park.

Of course there were also park features which were missing from Digital Towneley, because not everything could be included on the map or in the website. On a different part of the website, Participant 19 noticed that the cenotaph was missing narrative comments and this absence seemed to almost distress them. In an early response to the website they raised the importance of the cenotaph, describing some of the viewpoints in the park from which they know it is visible, its significance to Burnley and its artistic beauty. The participant went into much more detail and displayed much more passion about the cenotaph than they had during the initial interviews.

If the absence of park features is felt, we may argue that Digital Towneley is generating a sense of place; a sense of somewhere in which something belongs. For Participant 19 the cenotaph should have been in the space created by the website.

With the exception of Participant 11, who explicitly stated that they had no type of ‘virtual’ experience while using Digital Towneley, the feedback interviews demonstrated evidence that participants felt a sense of virtual park space. Some participants described feeling a sense of visiting Towneley and Participant 4 described the website as being a good substitute for visiting the park. In many cases the participants engaged in spatial gestures to describe aspects of the park or concepts; hand movements describing shapes, movements or spaces opening up (Participants 1, 4, 5, 12, 14, 16).

Others described their sensation of being in what we might call a virtual space:

I think it absorbed me, it probably drew me into it... 'cause I did spend quite a bit of time going round, you know [Feedback interview: Participant 7]

[I felt I went to Towneley] because you make that connection with certain images and experiences, sensations which you've had there [Feedback interview: Participant 8]

Yeah, obviously we looked at this and we explored the different things didn't we? [Feedback interview: Participants 16 & 17]

Participant 8 makes a clear link to feeling as though he ‘went to Towneley’, while the other participants express senses of place by using the words ‘drew me into it’ and ‘explored’. I was also able to observe how gestures express the different modes that people use to engage with park phenomena or concepts (Jewitt 2013). The hand gestures used by the participants indicate their comfort with spatial modality in the context of using Digital Towneley³. When using the physical park, the participants engaged with a spatial modality through the use of their bodies in the space of the park. During the use of Digital Towneley their bodies are limited to words and gestures. These modal signs may tell us that Digital Towneley has been able to communicate aspects of the spatiality of the physical park for the participants.

³ The website was present at the feedback interviews and used either by myself or the participants.

Conclusion

There are indications that Digital Towneley is able to represent subjective aspects of a park space. In particular the multiple associations with park locations and their narratives may mimic the freedom associated with the physical park. The visual elements of the map offer the user a sense of travel (Kenderdine 2007; Riessman 2008; Massey 2012) and the cross-referenced links within the website allow the user to generate their own narratives (de Certeau 1988; Tilley 1994). These narratives run through a series of excerpts that cover different times and places within the park and within the lives of the participants. Since they are not limited to linear narrative expressions of space or time (Ryman 2015), they necessarily offer a non-traditional heritage discourse (Smith 2006). Consequently Digital Towneley offers the potential to blur the line between official and unofficial heritage (Giaccardi 2012). Here the website works towards representing the rhizomatic and *habitus*-like qualities of human relationships with park spaces, acknowledging both the complexity of these relationships and their continued development (Deleuze & Guattari 2005; Bourdieu 1977).

However, there were also drawbacks to Digital Towneley. General digital anxieties played their part, but the nature of the website itself identified issues of technological bias and resonated with barriers of academic jargon and digital exclusion (Samuel 1994; Shanks 2007; Schradie 2011; Brabham 2012; Bidwell & Winschiers-Theophilus 2012). Ultimately, the content decisions for Digital Towneley were my own because participants were not involved directly with website development.

Nonetheless, what this project has shown is that a model of digital heritage is possible that involves a local community on their own terms and facilitates the co-creation of everyday heritage with participants. This approach pushes the limits of scholarship in the discipline of heritage, moving away from the privileging of an authorised heritage discourse (Smith 2006) as well as addressing concerns about community agency in heritage research (Waterton 2005; Waterton and Watson 2010). The project has identified, through practice-based research, the potential effects on the participants of digital media development by highlighting the ways in which they may be excluded from the process.

Future research into digital heritage may build on this model in order to work towards a more democratised process of digital heritage creation. The approach can be applied to other heritage contexts including galleries, museums and monuments to identify the variety of meanings that these places have for the public. Although initial interviews and field visits are time consuming, the result is a digital heritage object like Digital Towneley which offers considerable scope for enhancement and development. Once such a digital framework has been established, the object may grow organically with input from the community or from further afield. In this way, the approach outlined in this project can help represent bottom-up perceptions of space and place as well as develop new creative spaces of development in an open access online environment.

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