

URBAN ENCOUNTER: Location-Based Collective Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe the workshop activity; Urban Encounter, which creates opportunities to discuss common narratives of places through a street game experience. The workshop is based on the concept of place-based storytelling where participants assume both the role of Guest and Host of the story. Participants of the workshop create personalized adventure routes through a space defined by the organizer and publish them to a digital map. Each collected story is merged into a main adventure route. The participants then have the opportunity to re-explore the known space through an unraveling of a series of clues left by the other host, which lead them through a particular spatial experience. The treasure at the end of the game is not a material reward but rather the construction of a shared social experience; the exploration and revealing of each individual story developing as a valuable artifact in the memory of all game participants. The workshop measures its outcome with an open discussion on sharing common stories of a place, and in particular those that support the construction of a social framework.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.2 [User Interfaces], H.5.3 [Group and Organization Interfaces]

General Terms

Design, Experimentation, Human Factors.

Keywords

Street game, social networking, experiential mapping, narratives, land marking

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture takes place when the traveler is able to link found information to encountered space during a journey. From the block to the borough to the entire network of the city; diversified stories all call out at once, shouting for the attention of the dominant narrative. While each alternative narrative has its own richness and complexity, there is a need to be able to combine and discuss these immobile connections between a group of people. A number of art projects have been developed which draw on the

idea of an urban game to enable exploration of place-based narratives; such as RIDER SPOKE [6], 34 North, 118 West [1], NOKIA VINE [6] and Proboscis's Urban Tapestries [4]. Yet most of these projects recount stories developed and presented through digital media such that they cannot be changed or influenced once they have been created. In this way they tend to represent a one-way narrative, which does not enable participation of a whole range of actors in creating a common shared narrative.

These humanistic geography projects are very much a place of rootedness and authenticity to become a symbol of reactionary exclusivity. "As long as place signifies a tight and relatively rather immobile connection between a group of people and a site then it will constantly be implicated in the construction of 'us' (people who belong to that place) and 'them' (people who do not)." In Urban Encounter, views of the city are fluid entities highlighted through the participation of a wide range of actors, to mimic its dynamic nature in the sharing of stories. The proposed workshop approaches the challenge of cultural knowledge exchange and networking with the creation of a cultural street game. Through providing a place for both *publication* and *re-interpretation* of cultural common knowledge, the proposed workshop explores the use of locative storytelling to locate and enable discussion within existing social settings.



Figure 1: Host projecting story over the space

The key question the workshop seeks to address is; which strategies can stimulate dialogue among a group by tapping into existing individual knowledge in public space, and how can each unique view be unveiled and communicated?

2. THE STREET GAME EXPERIENCE

2.1 Place, openness and change

Viewed by architects and planners, abandoned spaces are often seen negatively as a problem or eyesore. They are labeled as derelict, outdated, and foreign to the city fabric. However, artists and photographers view the same spaces in an entirely different light. They understand these forgotten spaces to bear the most potential within the urban context. Within the rough and gritty nature of the overlooked, artists communities value an underlying framework laden with history and mystique. Upon encountering such spaces one seems to have left the urban fabric behind, breaking away from the expected, the order, and the rationality imposed by the city. Once thriving, the space is now underappreciated. Yet, in this zone, there exists an indescribable quality of intrigue. Hidden beneath layers of time, these overlooked spaces of the city are alive with untold stories. For its experiment, urban encounter will take on one specific area of overlooked spaces within Bonn City as its site. The area will then become the subject of the Guest/Host narratives and interaction.

These stories are an individual's weaving of memories, images traditionally shared through oral narration that enables the transfer of personalized knowledge from one individual to another or others. It is vital to be able to give a voice to allow such local narratives of place to be discussed and continued. The urban encounter workshop creates a framework for extracting and sharing these personal experiences of place as a narrative game.

2.2 Sharing and Discussing Knowledge

Urban Encounter is a game played between 'Hosts' and 'Guests'. Hosts invite and challenge Guests to follow their story through a sequence of question nodes linked to an adventure route indicated on a map. All game participants will assume once the role of Guest and once the role of Host of a story during the experiment. By accepting the challenge, the Guest places trust in the Host's adventure. This confidence may help allow them to spot and act upon opportunities to further discover interesting people and situations along their route. These discoveries are where different stories intersect and open for discussion of the same located media.

Urban encounter will identify 5 participants to communicate their unique relationship with the chosen site. Each Host will have a unique background to ensure the telling of four different stories. Hopefully, there will be represent of each of the following categories: Architect/Planner, Artist/Photographer, Resident, Student and Historian/Academic. The best would be to find an already existing community such as a "Junge Gemeinde" in the city. Ultimately, they should come from diverse social group but share a common typology.

2.3 Weaving Spatial Memories

Urban encounter organizer will begin by identifying a specific area of overlooked spaces in Bonn City as its site and selecting five people of diverse backgrounds to participate as Hosts. Each Host will create an exploration path through the chosen site, weaving their own personal narrative of the place. The same participants will then participate as Guests by accessing and following the narratives created by other Hosts through the same site. Guests, however, will not just be passively following a prescribed path, but through the use of a mobile device equipped

multimedia technology will also actively contribute to the story. On their device the Guest will be able to record their point of interest in contrast with the one defined by their Host. The collection of Guest experiences will then be overlaid and compiled to create a final exploration path through the same site. In this way the role of the Guest/host is inverted as they now, collectively, host a new collective story describing their experiences of overlooked Bonn.

2.4 Place, openness and change

In order to empower visitors and residents to relive, visualize, and listen actively to these hidden cultural stories, the workshop solicits Hosts to take photograph, annotate items along their way, and record their thoughts with a voice recorder. All these digital collectibles are mapped as an adventure route, and submit to the Guests device. The interface can load onto a user's personal device through any normal Wi-Fi connection. For people without access to mobile web devices, the service is also available in paper format, where Guests can print out the adventure in advance.

The suspense of following each route looking for clues to answer the Host's site-specific questions, allows for a new heightened awareness of this space that they might have otherwise completely overlooked. These autonomous initiatives of mapping stories use a language of persuasion to follow events that allow both Host and Guest to organize cultural knowledge, interpreting their meanings, while experiencing them in the street. [see Fig 2]. This dynamic process of exchanging experiences directly between members of the society often provides a far richer understanding of the constantly changing human and urban condition than traditional organization can keep up with.

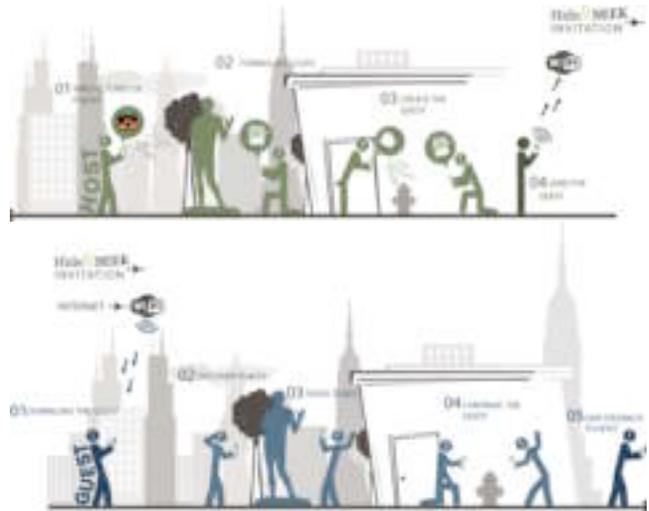


Figure 2: Illustration of how Host and Guest formulate stories of a place, transform it into a game adventure and share it with a guest.

2.4.1 The Game Scenario

The game consists of series of elements which the Host uses to build up a personalized game. The game is structured around a series of clues, derived from the physical environment. These are displayed on an adventure map with a trail linking the various clues in a sequence of game 'chapters'. In the interface each clue is represented as graphic 'landmark' node in the Urban Encounter

interface, which the Host introduces by placing them onto the adventure map [see Fig 3]. These landmark nodes are where Host's virtual clue and the corresponding physical place in the environment interconnect to create the Host's game narrative.

2.4.1 Mapping the storyline

The game scenario is developed by linking these clues into a trail, which is visualized as a grey route on the adventure map. Once the game is complete and published to the Guest, they download the adventure route onto their mobile device. The adventure then starts when the Guest answers the Host's starting point question by entering the answer into the mobile interface. If the answer matches the physical landmark where they are located then the first chapter of the adventure is activated.



Figure 3: Example of superposed traced stories

The adventure sequence is executed at a low scale,; focusing on building the Guest's suspense for the next chapter in the story. A chapter is successfully achieved when the correct answer to a clue is entered into the game interface at the corresponding correct landmark node. A game scenario is successfully accomplished when all clues at landmark nodes have been found and answered.

The Guest's objective is not simply to find their way from A to B along the Host's adventure route, instead the next chapter is only revealed when the previous chapter is successfully completed. As the Guest proceeds through the game, updates on the completed route are displayed on the map. In this way, the Guest can always look back at the progress made, but still has to solve the entire sequence of clues to reveal the entire adventure route.

3. WORKSHOP EXECUTION

3.1 Host create stories

The game is initiated in the morning of the workshop day as the Hosts create their exploration path. Each of the five Hosts will be given the same area of overlooked spaces for the site of their path. The area will be large enough to ensure a diversity of experiences, but yet compact enough to be easily walkable and ensure an overlapping of each host stories. Hosts will have a period of time to explore the site themselves and determine the specific spaces,

or elements of interest, they would like to include in their exploration path narrative. The Hosts will then enlist the help of the project authors to create the digital sequence of clues that will guide guests from node to node. Using images, video, audio and text, clues will call on the Guest to look for something specific in the physical space, something they might not have discovered otherwise. It should be remembered that these are clues, and should not disclose the full experience. A photograph, for example, should avoid showing the entire space, but rather portray a detail. The workshop authors will assist Hosts in crafting their clues forming a 10 to 20 nodes storyline. Once each sequence of clues has been completed, the project authors will upload the full exploration paths onto urban encounter workshop devices (anything from a Nokia n95, Nokia n810 to Itouch) and distribute them to the guest in the beginning of the afternoon.

3.2 Guest rediscover the space

Guests will be brief on the game mechanism onto the device and access the exploration paths with a digital map, headphones and set of photographs / videos as clues. If desired, a Guest will be able to follow each of the four other paths. Upon uploading the sequence of clues, they are ready to begin. At the starting point of the path, the Guest will activate their mobile. The device will sequentially display clues that comprise the exploration path they are to follow. The Guest will look at the first clue on the screen of their device. The image and/or text they see will describe a particular pocket of space in the physical world. Prompted by the clue, they will scan their surroundings to locate the space and go it, successfully encountering their first overlooked space. When they are ready the Guest will return to their mobile device and advance to the next clue, repeating the process of taking in information from the screen and using it to find specific spaces while navigating through the real world. The Host's exploration path is successfully accomplished when all clues have been answered and overlooked spaces have been found.

Through the use of mobile GPS technology, the Guest will contribute in two ways. The first method of contribution occurs as each Guest records the path they actually travel while moving through the area of overlooked spaces, in contrast with path defined by their Host. Upon logging in, the device will record where the Guest goes, and how long they remain in a particular location. While the path created by the Host indicates a prescribed adventure route, this GPS recorded data represents the actual path followed by the Guest. It is of value for two reasons. Firstly, the preferred nodes along the route can be determined based on the duration that the Guest spends in one particular location along the path. Additionally, it takes into consideration the spontaneous encounters that the Guest makes along the exploration path, not foreseen by the Host.

The second method of contribution made by Guests occurs as they mark their thoughts and reactions along the exploration path. Prior to beginning the route, Guests will be informed of a tag it button on their mobile device. They will be instructed to depress this tag it button along the course of the hunt at moments when they strongly identify with something they encounter. In this sense, where the GPS tracking assigns value based on duration of stay, the tag it button assigns value through direct user feedback. Guests will be instructed to use the tag it button two or three times along the exploration path, but will not be limited so that if they

encounter something toward the end of their path they will not have to worry about having used up their tags.

3.3 Guest and Host combine stories

The project authors will receive the collection of Guest experiences and overlay them digitally, compiling them into a final story map, new adventure route based entirely on real-world user experience. The GPS tracking data will be imported as a series of lines overlaying the chosen area of overlooked space. Much like a map of flight patterns, the Guest paths will cross the site area and converge upon certain nodes identified as significant by multiple participants. The tag it data will be imported as a series of points overlying the site. The project authors will seek a critical density of tag points as nodes, identified collectively by Guests as they moved through the overlooked spaces. The nodes from each method of Guest contribution, GPS paths and tag points, will then be combined to identify a shared set of Guest nodes. These nodes will define the final, Guest-created exploration path. The author will then export the final map onto a projected wall and engage a discussion with the 5 participants. The workshop duration will be of maximum 3 hours for the host story creation, 3 hours for the space exploration and maximum 2 hours discussion for a total of 8 hours workshop.

3.4 Technology Narrative

Although the proposed workshop use particular technologies, we do not 'live or die' based on these technological frameworks. Moreover, for the proposed workshop, Urban Encounter may call for the use of already existing technology and open source software. In all the cases the used technology aren't prescribing the outcome but rather offering a base where each individuals weave their own practice of the use of these technology. In the end, the product is the stories and the experiment is about the overlapping of these place-based narratives.

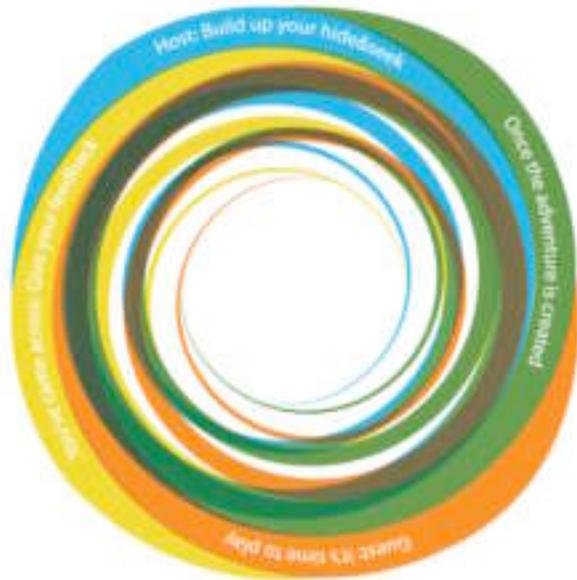


Figure 4: Graphic illustrating the virtuous cycle of host and guest knowledge transfer

4. THE TREASURE AT THE END

The use of mobile multimedia technology can sometime be frustrating in the following of a place-specific story and limiting the host creativity. As for example, photos and videos are nearly not visible on most mobile screens under sunny weather while audio offer to possibility to the host to be more prosaic in developing Guest's experience but confusing to orient them. The presented workshop proposes a low-fi experiment at the end of the space exploration that demand each of the 5 host to draw their interpretation of the presented space by using a glass mounted canvas and a set of thick markers [see Fig 5]. Using a language of persuasion, the 5 hosts are one after the other one invited to create a fictional projection of what the framed space "could be". A camera installed over their shoulder film in real time the progression of their drawing over the physical space. Once the 5 host stories are recorded, the workshop author will combine the collected media in a final document that, once more, will serve as material to open the discussion between the workshop participants and generate the "prognosis exchange".



Figure 5: Photo of a portable in space drawing glass.

5. SECTIONS

In this paper we introduced a street game whose aim is to support the sharing of cultural knowledge. We described the motivation for creating an experience, where participants actively create a personalized platform for authoring and publishing a narrative based game. The game is played between Guest's and Host's, where the Host creates a challenge which is published on a web based network. The Guest must then solve a series of clues in the environment, which are ordered into sequential game chapters. We explained how the game enables Host and Guest to take a role in developing their own narratives and thus creates a platform for stimulating an individual's awareness and cultural knowledge of a common place.

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