



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Digital R&D Fund for the Arts: Research Supporting Innovation

Podcast Transcript

VO: As well as encouraging collaboration between arts organisations, technology providers and researchers, the Digital R & D Fund for the Arts is supporting experiments from which the wider arts sector can learn. Projects that have already received funding include DanceTag, a location based dance video app, and Qualia, a cultural evaluation app being used by Cheltenham Festivals, and both have involved researchers from the University of the West of England and Plymouth University. DanceTag encourages users to upload their dance films to the web, allowing others to view, share and rate each contribution. The app was commissioned by the regional dance agency Pavillion Dance Southwest. Dr Seth Giddings, programme leader for Media and Cultural Studies at the University of the West of England has been working alongside Richard Wilson from Mobile Pie - the Bristol based games development studio who created the app. Dr Giddings explains how his research set about understanding the overall design process, including user involvement and collaboration.

SG: I guess my research questions, from the academic side, were to see how the collaboration between cultural partners and technological partners generated, not just the app itself, but moments of play, and dance, and how technical considerations, cultural considerations all shaped the future. My wider research looks at the relationship between technologies and people and their environments in playful circumstances, so on that level it is very similar. What's different about this one is being involved in the design and production process as an observer, as a contributor to a small extent, so that's been absolutely fascinating. It's having that access to the design and production of the project, understanding how that workflow works, the discussions, the software that is used, the decisions that have to be made. So a deeper understanding behind the factors behind any particular moment at which people are playing the technology.

VO: For Mobile Pie, as Richard Wilson explains, the company was keen to include ideas and collaborations from everybody involved.

RW: We've always, from day one, been very open. We wanted everyone to be involved in the design process but we try to explain where those decisions affect the design, that's part of the reason we are so keen to get it in front of the users from an early stage is to get that feedback.

SG: Personally, as a researcher, I sort of felt a little parasitical on the real work of making the app and for the cultural partner, Pavilion Dance Southwest, you know, increasing their audience. Now the user testing has started, that has been great fun, so our trip to Brighton last week, where all the roles got mixed up really because we were going out and encouraging people to test out the app and to get them involved. At all the way through Mobile Pie have been very accepting and open and felt very much part of it and I think we've had regular and frequent meetings with open agendas so we get a sense of where everybody is coming from and I'd certainly recommend setting up some kind of online space just to keep in touch, store files, so things don't just get lost in email inboxes.

RW: We feel that Seth's knowledge helps us validate the sort of feedback we are getting. It helps provide a framework in which we can evaluate the information we are getting in and sort the raw data from users that we are seeing. It helps us put it in context.

VO: And what would be their advice to anyone pursuing this kind of working relationship?

SG: I think it would be getting the collaboration sorted so that you understand what the partners involved want out of it and so you can see where the overlaps are, and make that clear in the application and that will be the foundation of a successful working relationship.

RW: I'd say "fail fast", which is always a good thing to do. Especially in this project where you have space to do that.

VO: Helping the development of the Qualia app is Cheltenham Festivals, which has teamed up with leading researchers to

find more effective ways of tapping into the audience experience. Professor Mike Phillips is Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts at Plymouth University. He's also Director of Research at i-DAT, a laboratory based around creative research. Together with Kate Danielson from Cheltenham Festivals, they've been discussing how methodologies introduced by Dr Eric Jensen from the University of Warwick has helped challenge traditional evaluation thinking. As Kate Danielson recalls, working with such academics has also allowed them to test the effectiveness of using new digital methods.

KD: I haven't got that research academic knowledge that Eric has, so I say "can't you compare that and that" and he says "No, no, they're not comparative data". It's about challenging the new technology that is being developed to see whether it can...

MW: ... validate it.

KD: Yes exactly.

MW: And it to challenge his traditional ways, the traditional ways, the way things are done, the norm. I'm an academic as well, and a researcher, but in digital arts, we work in a very cross-disciplinary way with psychologists, not so much sociologists, so the methodology that Eric is using is ethnographic, anthropological and psychological methodologies as well, which have not been traditionally technologically based, so this testing of the methods he uses has been an eye opener for us as well, just because of assumptions that we've made from our practice, and I know it has for him too, because this idea of comparison has been problematic within the project because comparing the data that we're getting from the sliders in the app from his half hour questionnaires – they are just two different things, so it's how they extend or complement each other and validated using a methodology that has validated the traditional methods, how those things become comparable in that way, comparable in the fact that they're useful or not. We are talking about using these techniques in further projects, so it has been really productive for us to work with Eric on that. So, in terms of writing this grant it has come out of a dialogue about participating with the audience, about collecting real time data, and ... then extending that into what we're got now.

KD: and I suppose that's also from a festival's point of view, as you've been having other discussions with them, is that they are keen to do a bit more; I mean I used to run the Jazz festival and I've been involved with the Festivals for a long time and there has been this sort of growing need to be more sophisticated about how they evaluation, and for I to have more of an impact on the next year's programming, so this isn't just a commissioned piece of work, so I think from the Festival's point of view it was not only an opportunity to work with iDat and develop and continue that relationship, but also to add in the really robust evaluation research.

VO: One significant aspect of the Qualia project is its ability to reveal real time subjective responses to live cultural and arts events as they occur, which, as Professor Phillips points out, may prove to be extremely useful for organisations - even if the responses are negative.

MW: In the case of measuring audience impact, if this is really successful, it gives us really detailed data, and if that data is somehow more negative than what we were getting through these traditional methods... how does that work... what do you do with that? In future, these kinds of technologies will definitely be in play in the sector, and Cheltenham has advanced warning of how you deal with that as an organisation.

VO: The potential of Qualia is clear, but at Professor Phillips emphasises, the real value of such a system lies in the way the information that's gathered is interpreted.

MW: it's borne out of revealing things, you know, it may be sensitive, maybe commercially sensitive who knows? The trouble is we haven't yet compared it with other organisations, so until we do that there's a whole set of other research to be done there. So the model we've got, we're releasing the stuff as open source software, but as with most open source stuff it will be there, you can download it but it requires a bit of tinkering for it to function properly ... but the missing ingredient is actually the knowledge of interpretation that Eric's research brings, so there's a lot of collaboration that can come out of this.

VO: The Qualia project has already proved to be a rewarding

collaboration between academia and the arts and cultural sector, in this case with both researchers and Cheltenham Festivals benefitting from the experience.

KD: I suppose the message to researchers is that there is potential. Yes, they might be a bit thorny, some of the issues they are dealing with, new partnerships and working with an organisation, like Cheltenham, where you've got real problems, real deadlines, real people...

MP: It's been a very real kind of experience for all of us, having the lab – these events – they are scary and I don't think that any of the technologies we have been working with would have been as critically reflected on as they have been without that kind of input... as a research process, that is really positive.

VO: The Digital R&D Fund for the Arts is a collaboration between the innovation charity Nesta, Arts Council England and the AHRC. For more information about how your research ideas could benefit from the Fund visit the AHRC website or see:

<http://www.artsdigitalrnd.org.uk>

The deadline for submissions is January 7th 2014.