Research Overview

Practice Makes Almost Perfect: A Methodological Reflection

Andrea Zeffiro
Simon Fraser University

Andrea Zeffiro is a SSHRC postdoctoral fellow at the School of Interactive Arts & Technology, Simon Fraser University, Simon Fraser University, 250 -13450 102 Avenue, Surrey, BC V3T 0A3
Email: azeffiro@sfu.ca

In William Gibson’s novel Spook Country (2007), Hollis Henry, former lead singer of early-nineties cult band The Curfew, accepts a freelance journalism assignment from a new, and not yet published journal, called Node. Henry’s assignment focuses on a rather obscure form of art called locative art. Following her introduction to Alberto Corrales and Odile Richard, locative artist and curator, respectively, Henry has her first locative encounter: an installation depicting River Phoenix’s death, situated outside the actual Sunset Boulevard club where the actor died. Though Henry experiences a handful of other projects, she can only vaguely articulate locative art as, "artists doing things with longitude, latitude and the Internet.” In fact, she finds the field rather futile, until she encounters the elusive locative engineer, Bobby Chombo, an odd and reclusive character, whose workspace is chalked into a mysterious grid. As Henry discovers, Chombo’s work extends into the secret realms of military intelligence and piracy, and Henry’s researching of the field, ushers her into a reticent realm of espionage.

From 2005-2010, I was also immersed in the locative realm. My research agenda, while certainly removed from secret agents and pirates, shared characteristics with the fictional project of the fictional Henry. Just as Gibson’s heroine explored locative works and technological infrastructures, and interacted with individuals within the field, my own research was informed by such experiences and encounters. I employ this narrative description on account of an affinity for the subject matter—locative media—was the focus of my doctoral dissertation—but also for what it evokes in regards to conducting research. These characteristics include:

Uncertainty: Research can be like completing a jigsaw puzzle, save for the fact that in research, there is neither a guarantee that all of the pieces are available, or that available pieces fit the mold. Therefore, while it is crucial to devise a research plan, and acquire a sense of one’s research context, it is also necessary to allow for a margin of change and/or uncertainty.

Immersion: The act of doing research is as much about collecting data as it is about nurturing social ties. To be positioned in a particular research space, is to be situated (Haraway, 1997; Harding, 1987; Rose, 1997) within a specific historical, cultural, and social context.

Collaboration: Trustworthiness and reciprocity are the building blocks of collaborative research. One is mindful of ethical considerations, such as issues of enunciation (Braidotti, 1994) and representation. A researcher speaks through their informants, and is cognizant of their own situatedness.

In what follows, I engage these attributes as entry points into Almost Perfect, a locative media co-production residency that was hosted by the Banff New Media Institute and piloted by Hewlett-Packard Labs. This text is a story of sorts—a methodological reflection—that accentuates both my research process and productive output during that residency, and chronicles how the creative modification of my research plan, while in the midst of conducting fieldwork, fundamentally transformed my research experience. In sharing this anecdote, my aim is to contribute to discourses of research-creation, and challenge fixed notions of what is meant by and accepted as an original contribution to knowledge (Haseman, 2006) within communication and media studies.

CONTEXT
In July 2006, the Banff New Media Institute (BNMI) circulated a call for project proposals for Almost Perfect. Having spent the summer engaged in research and participant field trials with the Mobile Digital Commons Network (MDCN), the residency offered an excellent opportunity to extend my research and explore location-based technologies beyond the context of MDCN. In turn, I applied with the intent of conducting qualitative research, as opposed to prototyping a project, and I disclosed my intent of utilizing the occasion to conduct a portion of my dissertation fieldwork. I proposed a multi-method research model that included participant observation, a research journal, participant interviews and interview transcriptions, and a focus group. Finally, I pledged to produce a report, summarizing the residency and reflecting on methodological considerations for locative media research, that I would distribute at the end of Almost Perfect.

UNCERTAINTY

By the end of the first week of the month-long residency, I concluded that my research plan was ill-suited for the research context. Each morning began with a Hewlett Packard workshop that ran until noon, and in the afternoon participants were allotted studio time to work on projects; therefore, there was insufficient time to do the work I had proposed. Further, my plan, which I had designed according to preconceptions of the residency structure and not its actual context, was committed to structured data collecting. To follow through with my proposed schema would have restricted my involvement in the residency, especially my participation in the Hewlett Packard workshops.

In reconfiguring my research plan, I abandoned the focus group all together, retained the interviews with residency participants, and extended my participant observations to include the Hewlett Packard workshops. Indeed, these methods would have generated sufficient research data for both the research report and my dissertation; nevertheless, I was confronted by parallel tensions. First and foremost, I was pensive towards my larger research enterprise (i.e. the dissertation). Although I attended Almost Perfect to conduct fieldwork, I had yet to define the scope of my dissertation—apart from the general and very broad question, "what is locative media?"—and this uncertainty weighed heavily on processes of documentation. That is, I wanted to archive the residency, and as accurately as possible. I was also, therefore, preoccupied with plausible modes of organizing and representing data, and in a manner that best reflected the research context.

IMMERSION

Towards the start of the fourth and final week of the residency, while my fellow residents worked feverishly to produce Mediascape prototypes, I began the daunting task of reviewing data in preparation for the research report. A large part of this process involved revisiting the interviews I had conducted with resident participants during the second week. Immediately, I identified an underlying tension: the disjuncture between the proposed (project) and the actual (project). A significant impediment facing residents concerned project feasibility. Upon applying to the residency, residents submitted project proposals and were granted acceptance based on these proposals; however, at the end of the first week, participants were asked to reconfigure their projects into ones that could be easily executed using the Mediascape platform. Participants were pushed to explore the Hewlett Packard platform—to consume it and produce with it—and the emphasis was on the platform itself, as opposed to individual intent. Surveying the status of projects at the start of the final week, it was evident that many could not be realized. This also signaled that at Open Studios—the exhibition component of the residency—the majority of residents would not have a prototype to demonstrate. Equally problematic was the manner in which their processes of labour—artistic, intellectual, and technological—were subsumed by the toolkit. Despite having completed extensive preparatory work, participants had very little to show without a formalized prototype.

The residency then, was not an occasion for participants to execute proposed projects. Instead, it served as a backdrop for Mediascape testing. Hewlett-Packard’s (HP) partnership with the Banff New Media Institute (BNMI), supplied HP with access to a group of individuals with whom the company could test its Mediascape platform. This was of particular value as the platform was in the midst of transitioning from the Mobile Bristol toolkit to the Mscape model. Comparably, the BNMI was provided with resources —human, capital, technological—by HP to host a large-scale residency. The partnership granted the BNMI sufficient autonomy to supplement programming costs, attract and entice high-caliber advisors, and aggrandize its research portfolio. Given how the political and economic climate determined the extent to which the BNMI was funded, corporate interest and investment nourished the BNMI’s program offerings. Finally, the residents, in exchange for their participation, were granted access to HP professionals and BNMI’s interactive media specialists, and partook in a residency at a world-renowned arts institution.

COLLABORATION

In coming to terms with the tensions I mention above, I had to make a decision concerning my own output. I could follow through with the report I had proposed, or, I could find an alternative mode of output that could summarize my findings, and in a manner that was meaningful for residency participants. I abandoned the report and created an analog locative media walk.
The walk began in a cylinder-like stairwell, tucked at the side of the Jeanne and Peter Lougheed Building (JPL).

A trail of scattered shreds of paper, printed with anonymous quotes pulled from interview excerpts of the residents sharing their musings on locative media, were deposited on the stairs in the stairwell, and along a corridor that lead directly to my studio.
After soliciting project documentation from Almost Perfect participants, which included flow charts, photographs, rough concept designs, maps, lists, and even doodles, I had amassed enough material to cover my studio walls from floor to ceiling, and in turn, transformed my studio into a repository of sorts.

At the centre of the space I placed a television, emitting a snowy screen and its volume turned very low. The screen offered the only source of light within the space.

Finally, a five minute looped audio track, which consisted of interview snippets of the residents discussing their projects, played through speakers. As visitors to the space surveyed the material covering the walls, they could hear—or better yet, listen to—residents speak of their work.
At one level, the walk scrutinized the mechanics of a Mediascape experience. The actions I employed in materializing the walk, such as preselecting sites (stairwell, hallway, studio) and the location of artifacts (shreds of paper and documents on studio walls), were similar to steps taken when creating a Mediascape experience. Using the Mediascape software, a user had to identify four criteria: 1) what digital content is to be encountered; 2) where the content is to be encountered; 3) how the interactions are to be triggered; and, 4) how the interactions are presented (Hull, Clayton & Melamed, 2004). The actions and selections in the desktop authoring environment defined the script that, when downloaded onto an iPAQ, responded to physical criteria and triggered "real world" interactions. Evidently, there was very little spontaneity in a Mediascape experience. In mimicking a Mediascape experience, I therefore sought to alienate participants. Following Brecht, if the aim of alienation is to "purge of everything 'magical'" (2002, p. 94), then in the context of the annotated walk, the "magical" is the technology, and the "purge" constitutes its removal. In this sense, the walk was an effort to demystify the Mediascape experience, and draw attention to the extensive productive output of Almost Perfect participants.

CONCLUSION

Sandra Harding (1987, in Sprague, 2005, p. 5) distinguishes between three elements embedded in the research process: epistemology, methodology, and method. An epistemology is a theory about knowledge, about who can know and under what circumstances knowledge can be produced. A method is a technique for gathering and analyzing information. And a methodology constitutes the manner in which a method is used. "A methodology," as Sprague elaborates, "works out the implications of a specific epistemology for how to implement a method" (2005, p. 5). The author continues,

[w]hen we decouple the elision of epistemology and method, methodology emerges as the terrain where philosophy and action meet, where the implications of what we believe for how we should proceed get worked out. Reflecting on methodology – on how we do what we do – opens up possibilities and exposes choices. It allows us to ask ... [w]hose questions are we asking? And to whom do we owe an answer? (p. 5)

My original research plan—what I had proposed in my application—would have been more than sufficient in gathering data. That said, had I followed through with the predetermined methods, my results would have varied dramatically. In acknowledging a disjuncture between my research toolkit and context, I took pause to reflect on and assess my methodology. This interruption in the research process also demanded that I consider the methods most suitable to confront my own general sense of uncertainty (i.e., "what is locative media?"), and what I had come to identify as a shifting agenda within the research context (i.e., the residency as a backdrop for Mediascape testing). Uninspired by traditional methods, I adopted a research-creation approach. Such a research methodology, as Estelle Barrett (2007) explains, is invested in the "production of knowledge or philosophy in action" (p. 1). Much like Heidegger's notion of "handliability," research-creation is a methodology that demonstrates how "knowledge is derived from doing" (Barrett, 2007, p. 1). As a method of research-creation, the walk resonates with Laurel Richardson's notion of a Creative Analytic Practice (Richardson, 2000, p. 929). In taking a cue from Richardson, I implemented creative means as a process of discovery (Richardson, 2001, p. 35), and as a way of making sense of my particular (research) context. In the manner that writing equipped Richardson to "record little thoughts, to revisit them and fill in the blanks, to piece them together, thought-by-thought", and ultimately to gain a "feeling of control over time and space" (p. 33), the walk— as a site-specific intervention in the research space—was a means to generate and re-present knowledge derived from that particular (research) context. It emerged from my situated perspective (Haraway, 1997; Harding, 1991; Rose, 1997) within a specific research context, and was employed in conjunction with participant observation and interviews. Finally, as an approach, research-creation was a process through which I was able to situate the technical details of Almost Perfect into a larger cultural and political context, and, navigate my competing positions, as a researcher conducting fieldwork, and as a participant in the residency.

NOTES

1. Locative media is a descriptive term to designate the deployment of an assemblage of mobile and location aware technologies in the production of site-specific experiences, or installations, in public spaces. In recent years, however, the term has been used to describe location-based
commercial applications, such as Foursquare or Gowalla.

2. Instituted in 1995 to support and cultivate the exploration of digital technologies and the arts, the Banff New Media Institute (BNMI) became a fundamental and internationally renowned component in the Banff Centre’s artistic offerings. As of 2010, the BNMI has been repackaged and is now offered as a digital media component in the Centre’s Film and Media program.

3. Hewlett Packard Labs co-sponsored the Almost Perfect residency. HP developers were in attendance at the residency and hosted daily Mediascape toolkit workshops and assisted participants to create Mediascape experiences for the HP iPAQ (Personal Digital Assistant). The nucleus of the Mediascape system was the Mobile Bristol toolkit, which emerged from the Mobile Bristol program, a £3.2 million venture between Hewlett-Packard, the University of Bristol, and The Appliance Studio. This research and development initiative pivoted on mobile and pervasive technologies for urban and public spaces. The toolkit consisted of a Windows based editing suite—an authoring environment or a “point and click” graphical user interface (GUI)—through which a user could design a Mediascape experience for a specific location in the real world (Hull, Clayton & Melamed, 2004). That application would then be downloaded onto an iPAQ for exhibition purposes. When the Mobile Bristol program ended in 2005, HP acquired the rights to Mediascapes, and rebranded it as Mscape Suite. In 2009, HP ceased its Mscape research and development program.

4. Funded through Canadian Heritage’s New Media Research Networks Fund, MDCN was an interdisciplinary research network, bringing together designers, artists, computer scientists, engineers, and communication studies scholars from Canadian institutions, including Concordia University, the Banff New Media Institute, the Ontario College of Art and Design, and York University. Research focused on the development of mobile location-based experiences, and user-integration research.

REFERENCES


