

Institution: University of the West of England, Bristol		
Unit of Assessment: 28		
Title of case study: Digital heritage from below: crafting better experience design for public history audiences		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012 – 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Steve Poole	Professor of History and Heritage	1994 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2013-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Social history research conducted at the University of the West of England has contributed to the development of creative, technology-assisted experiences that have enhanced visitor engagement with heritage sites, influenced practice within the heritage sector and led to commercial benefits for small businesses. The underpinning research combined Professor Steve Poole's 'from below' approach to storytelling with digital technologies co-created with SMEs, to evoke sympathy in audiences as well as impart historical knowledge. This research led to a GBP100,000 investment from the National Trust and a shift in the organisation's approach to storytelling. It also influenced interpretation projects developed by Historic Royal Palaces and the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology. Collaborating with Poole helped establish the SMEs' reputations within the sector, leading to new contracts and helping them become commercially stable in a competitive marketplace.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
Traditional heritage practice		
<p>Poole researches social history 'from below', reflecting subaltern experience in a society divided by inequality, focusing particularly on social protest and criminality in Georgian England (R1, R2, R3). Although such perspectives are not uncommon, in 2012, heritage sites (predominantly castles and stately homes) were using a discourse chiefly focused on the experience of the propertied elite in their interpretation strategies (R4). Heritage interpretation had begun to embrace creative digital applications and innovative methods of communication, but the modeling of knowledge remained conservative – top-down and didactic. Excessive screen use and isolating earphones risked dissociation between visitor and place.</p>		
A new approach to digital heritage led by history from below		
<p>Instead of emphasising 'factual' knowledge transfer, Poole sought to complement the way in which historians make editorial choices from fragmentary evidence (R4). His research tests the potential of digital platforms for making engaging plebeian histories that are situated, co-created and playful, delivered with minimal screen use. As well as introducing traditionally overlooked historical perspectives to the heritage experience, his 'from below' approach to storytelling aims to help the audience identify with the characters and situations, evoking both sympathy and understanding. In 2012, in an R&D collaboration, Poole and Bristol SME Splash & Ripple devised a methodology to challenge conservative orthodoxies (G1). <i>Ghosts in the Garden (GITG)</i> (R4, R5), an interactive and digital 'choose your own adventure' (CYOA) installation, ran for two months, showcasing freshly researched plebeian histories in an elite Georgian-era social space (Sydney Gardens, Bath). CYOA immerses visitors in a</p>		

game environment; prioritising agency in the user. Scholarly 'from below' approaches to heritage (R4) and to garden history (R6) were paired with Splash & Ripple's expertise in digital innovation to trial this new form of heritage interpretation. Archival research revealed previously hidden histories of working class experience. Gameplay, informed by Poole's emphasis on multiple perspectives and methodology being central to an understanding of history (R4), prompted audience interaction and influenced narrative outcomes. This took the form of a GPS-driven 'Time Radio', a listening device providing scraps of imagined conversations from the past, which allowed audiences to piece the story together and influence its trajectory. This R&D project became the basis for the experimental research forming the backbone of this case study.

Research in practice

From 2013-2019, new research building on *GITG* was conducted through further collaboration (R5; G2, G3, G4) with Splash & Ripple. Innovative outputs (including new technological hardware and programming) were underpinned by Poole's original archival work and continued to generate new research questions: how far can emotional audience engagement be taken using immersive technologies? Can we apply the methodology to more distant historical periods? Can/should we move audiences towards historical empathy?

A GBP100,000 commission from the National Trust (G2) enabled an expanded, more complex model of the *GITG* prototype at Bodiam Castle, Sussex. *A Knight's Peril (AKP)* (R5) replaced *GITG*'s 'Time Radio' with an 'Echo Horn' concealing radio frequency identification technology and a Raspberry Pi processor for the Castle's signal-free environment. The Echo Horn released situated interactive audio files revealing the everyday struggles of Bodiam's 14th Century residents, framed within a CYOA format. In contrast to the top-down narratives championed in the Trust's existing guide book, Poole and the team built freshly researched narratives of medieval life 'from below' to the Castle, focussing on social changes affected by the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.



Ghosts in the Garden with 'Time Radio'



A Knight's Peril with 'Echo Horn'

Building on the success of *GITG* and *AKP* (R5), the team was keen to explore whether the approach could be adapted to inspire a more powerful emotional association with the past – moving audiences from sympathy to empathy. AHRC funding (G3, G4) enabled the development of a follow-on project called *Heritage Empath* (R5). Through digitally enabled audio theatre, visitors to a Bristol shopping mall experienced life of a single historically researched character, a second-generation African migrant to Bristol. Visitors explored the environment while immersed in the mind of another person, subtly blurring distinctions between self and historicized other.

3. References to the research

- R1** Poole, S., and Rogers, N. (2017) *Bristol From Below: Law, Authority and Protest in a Georgian City*. London: Boydell. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787440678>
- R2** Poole, S. (2018), 'The Politics of Protest Heritage, 1790-1850', in C. Griffin, B. McDonagh & I. Robertson (eds.), *Remembering Protest: Memory, Materiality and Landscape in Britain since 1500*. Palgrave. Available on request.
- R3** Poole, S. (2015) 'For the benefit of example: crime scene executions in England, 1720-1830', in Ward, R. (ed.), *A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse*. Palgrave pp. 71-102. Available on request.
- R4** Poole, S. (2018) Ghosts in the Garden: Locative Gameplay and Historical Interpretation from Below. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. 24 (3), pp. 300-314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1347887>
- R5** Poole, S., with Splash & Ripple: *Innovation through practice-based research using a digital 'heritage from below' approach* <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/7083718>
- R6** Poole, S. (2019) 'Pleasure and Shame: Reputation and Respectability in Sydney Gardens, Bath, 1820-30.' *Bath History*. 15, pp. 134-147. <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/3653402/>

Evidence of the quality of the underpinning research

- G1** Poole, S. with Splash & Ripple, *Ghosts in the Garden*; REACT (AHRC), 2012, £33,264.
- G2** Poole, S. with Splash & Ripple, *Bodiam Castle Interpretation Design Brief*, National Trust, 2013, £100,000.
- G3** Poole, S. with Splash & Ripple, *Heritage Empath*, AHRC follow-on funding for impact and engagement, 2017, £158,963.
- G4** Poole, S and Buser M. with Splash & Ripple, *Empath R&D*, REACT alumni award (AHRC), 2015, £36,000.
- G5** Poole, S. *Romancing the Gibbet*, AHRC Being Human Festival Awards 2014, £2,000.
- G6** Poole, S. *Romancing the Gibbet*, AHRC Being Human Festival Awards 2019, £1,280.

Poole's work with Splash & Ripple was commended as an example of best practice in the EU-funded RICHES report on Best Practice in the Digital Economy (2015):

'a successful example of collaboration of grounded academic research into CH [cultural heritage] history with DT [digital technology] and the transformation of ideas into the creation of an innovative prototype product applied to a CH location to create new experiences in CH' (p99).

(<https://resources.riches-project.eu/d5-4-ch-best-practice-in-the-digital-economy/> pp.87-99)

4. Details of the impact

Influencing practice in the heritage sector

The National Trust commissioned *AKP (R5)* as a direct result of the research showcased in *GITG (R5)*. The commission – which was Bodiam Castle's principal new attraction for 2014 – was a change in practice for the Trust, who had never offered an interactive experience of this type before. It was, the Trust's Visitor Experience Director affirms, an opportunity to experiment with innovative approaches to interpretation they would not otherwise have had, and

'a brilliant example of a switch to a programmatic way of thinking about stories that has contributed to our ongoing thinking about how to [tell stories]' (S1).

GITG was a 'lasting and important influence' on the former Director of Projects at Historic Royal Palaces (HRP) and, through him, directly shaped a number of major HRP projects, most notably its award-winning Lost Palace attraction of 2016-17. The ideas behind *GITG* – its combining of physical location, interactive audio, and historic stories to give agency to visitors, and its pairing of academic research with imaginative digital work – 'still impact on [his] work today' and continue to influence his projects for other heritage organisations (S2).

GITG's methodology has also influenced work at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology in Oxford. The Director confirms:

'[GITG] changed how I think about digital tools in museums practice, and in particular how one can use technology to encourage an imaginative, open and interactive visitor experience. This long-lasting influence has in turn had an impact on the direction of interpretation at the Ashmolean Museum.'

Its forthcoming new multi-media guide, a significant investment and important step forward in the museum's engagement activity for families, has been directly shaped by the interpretive principles pioneered in *GITG* (S3).

Poole's research has also started to influence the heritage sector internationally. In 2018, he was invited by the NGO Cultural Heritage Without Borders to demonstrate an adapted version of *A Knight's Peril* in Albania to early career heritage professionals from across the Balkan states. His work was

'instrumental in enabling participants to think in new ways about how they could present historical narratives' (S4).

Creative and commercial impacts on SME partners

Collaboration with Poole has been essential to Splash & Ripple's commercial development. It 'strongly influenced Splash & Ripple's successful decision to innovate specifically in digital heritage', raising the company's profile, consolidating its commercial stability and allowing it to employ over 30 people at different times (having started with the founder working alone and part-time). *A Knight's Peril*:

'consolidated our reputation in the heritage sphere and gave us valuable exposure that we would not otherwise have had,'

contributing to the company winning a subsequent commission with English Heritage.

Poole's 'history from below' approach also influenced the interactive structure which is a distinctive element of all Splash & Ripple's projects. The company

'would not be in a position to make the work we are making today if it had not been for the three formative collaborations' with Poole (S5).

This successful partnership facilitated collaboration with a second SME, Satsymph, on a project inspired by Poole's research into histories of Georgian public punishment (R1, R3). *Romancing the Gibbet* was a series of live-art performances at execution sites, each linked by phone app to a situated digital tour, with poet Ralph Hoyte and sound artist Michael Fairfax, for the Being Human Festivals 2014 and 2019 (G5, G6). Through partnership with Poole, Satsymph have strengthened their profile as designers of located immersive audio for the heritage sector and generated an important source of income in a competitive marketplace. Poole has become an essential part of the creative team; as the Director states, his

'input as a social historian... enabled Satsymph to produce critical new work, of an unusual historical complexion, melding poetry, music and situated performance. We

could not have made this work without Steve's research and willingness to co-create with us' (S6).

Audience experience and understanding of history enhanced through research

The 'from below' perspective of *A Knight's Peril* helped audiences develop a new understanding of medieval life outside traditional 'knights and battles' perspectives (S7, p10), while its innovative technology created emotional resonance and personal engagement, especially among younger visitors (S7, pp11-12). Visitor numbers are estimated to have been very high: Bodiam Castle has up to 100,000 visitors a year and the experience was in place for 18 months (S5).

Heritage Empath (R5) further developed the model pioneered in *GITG* and *AKP (R5)* to investigate audience responses to more empathetic forms of immersion. *Heritage Empath* ran in Cabot Circus Shopping Centre in Bristol, over 10 days in December 2018. Audiences reported '*a heightened awareness, and a deeper understanding of someone else's perspective due to the effectiveness of the narrative, and the ways in which it was delivered and engaged with.*' (S8, p23).

Romancing the Gibbet also had an extremely positive impact on local public audiences. It was staged in small village halls to encourage local audience interaction away from familiar centres of cultural privilege. Capacity was deliberately limited to create an intimate environment and enable technical assistance when audiences trialed new digital technologies. Feedback surveys were carried out at a sample of these events; of 23 respondents, 91% said it had increased their understanding of the subject's relevance to everyday life, 100% were inspired to find out more and many expressed an intention to produce their own work, do further research, or seek out similar events (S9).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1 Testimonial from Visitor Experience Director, National Trust, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S2 Testimonial from former Director of Projects, Historic Royal Palaces, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S3 Testimonial from Director, Ashmolean Museum, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S4 Testimonial from Programme Officer, Cultural Heritage without Borders

S5 Testimonial from Creative Director, Splash & Ripple, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S6 Testimonial from Director, Satsymph, contact details provided with source submitted to the REF Team

S7 Buser, M. (2017). 'The time is out of joint: Atmosphere and Hauntology at Bodiam Castle', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 25, 5-13 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2017.09.006>

S8 Evaluation Report, *Of Home and Each Other*

S9 Participant feedback from Being Human Festivals (2019: summary and scanned feedback forms; 2014 link to video interviews and transcript)