

PORTAGE: Locative Media at the Intersection of Art, Design and Social Practice

Geoffrey Shea

Ontario College of Art & Design
100 McCaul Street
Toronto ON M5V 1W1
+1 519 369 3025
gshea [at] faculty.ocad.ca

Paula Gardner, Ph.D.

Ontario College of Art & Design
100 McCaul Street
Toronto ON M5V 1W1
+1 416 977 6000 ext 314
pgardner [at] ocad.on.ca

ABSTRACT

The ongoing research of academics, artists, designers, students and engineers at the Mobile Experience Lab at the Ontario College of Art & Design has created a broad and inclusive methodology that seeks to address the impact of emerging media technologies, current theoretical discourses, and the value of user participation in the resulting creations.[1]

In this current artist/designer driven research project, PORTAGE, a short street in downtown Toronto will be converted into a virtual theatre. Users with a broad range of 'mobile devices' will be able to interact with participatory content experiences: spraying virtual graffiti on wall, turning surveillance cameras back on themselves, collaboratively remixing music tracks through choreography, or exploring the history of the specific locale. Users equipped with highly capable devices (e.g. with Bluetooth and GPS) will have one level of engagement, but others with simple voice or text capable phones will be able to access the experiences on another level. Even visitors with no device will be able to participate: by banging a steel drum for example, and creating a digital signal in collaboration with other online users.

This project emerges out of other successful locative media creation at the lab and extends a methodology that includes:

- active brainstorming with artists, designers and engineers;
- breaking down projects into their component concepts, technologies and techniques and recombining them in new and unexpected ways;
- blending established context paradigms (narrative, documentary, gaming) with real-time interactions (co-creation, iterative development, content uploading)

As an example, one user experience included in this streetscape theatre will be *Spy*, a video surveillance experience. In the first iteration users will be able to review the content of a dozen cameras which inhabit the environment, seeing and revealing themselves as they are seen and revealed by the private and public interests that typically invest in surveillance. Signal strength will determine which vantage is displayed on the user's device, so simply walking the street will result in a game of 'find the spy-cam.'

A subsequent iteration, however, will blend the current images with historical images from different significant periods in the city's past, placing the user in the middle of another event. Beyond that we will introduce scripted narratives, sound, and nighttime versions of the experience.

The goal of PORTAGE is to combine the diverse skills of all the collaborators to address pressing social issues, investigate innovative social interactions (i.e. a digital commons) facilitated by mobile media, create unique technological platforms that can support the content creation, and deliver to the user a meaningful and new experiences that speak to the unique time and space possibilities of mobile media .

REFERENCES

[1] Previous research by the authors in this field can be found at:
www.mobilenation.ca/mdcn/alteraudio/

BIOGRAPHIES

Geoffrey Shea is an Assistant Professor at the Ontario College of Art & Design, where he has taught new and emerging media for artists and designers since 1986. Currently he is co-leading a research team developing PORTAGE, a Broad Locative Environment, a streetscape virtual theatre triggered by mobile users. Shea's artwork has been exhibited and collected widely and he recently released a DVD/CD of his musical work with Gigi Minor. More at: www.unscrambled.com.

Paula Gardner is Assistant Dean in the Faculty of Liberal Studies at the Ontario College of Art & Design, writing and research in the areas of Communication/Media Studies research, video documentary and mobile design. Her work broadly addresses the relationship between new media technologies and democratic practices of culture. She is the co-leading the project, PORTAGE: A Canadian Mobile Experience, which is creating a virtual, interactive street theatre on John St, Toronto, and currently completing a manuscript entitled *Recovery, Inc.: Depression, Power, Democracy*.