

# A mediated portrait of the Dublin Liberties

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**Abstract.** "The Media Portrait of the Liberties" consists of a collection of multiple short historically informed narratives about the liberties community. These media segments reveal "a sense of place" and were designed with the intention that they be delivered to the audience as the audience wanders through the neighborhood. The conceptual development of the project began with getting to know the neighbourhood and its people using observation and ethnographic interviews, and evolved as the director of the project entered into collaboration with Maireen Johnston, a writer whose book "Around the banks of Pimlico" serves as the basis for the scripted media segments. Drawn from Johnston's personal memories of growing up in the neighbourhood, the book describes the life, lore and colour of the Liberties. The Liberties script made use of Johnston's anecdotal accounts of the lives of real individuals and the way in which she interweaves these with historical descriptions of the social condition of the people living in the area in past times.

The Liberties portrait uses a range of audio-visual styles to bring these accounts to life. The content segments are distributed to the interested audience via an ad hoc wireless infrastructure. In this paper a description of the technical infrastructure is followed by a description of the research process, the scripting and the production of the visual stories for the narrative application.

## Introduction

People enjoy telling and empathizing with stories. The aim of the digital "Media Portrait of the Liberties" is to offer "a sense of place" to the contemporary community – which is a mix of residents from the immediate vicinity, a broader base of Dubliners, the student populations, and a broad mix of international tourists. The project also provides an evolving repository for stories community members wish to add. The format of the project involves the production methods for creating short media stories, each of which references and is linked to particular setting in the neighborhood and, a mobile system that can receive the story in the appropriate location. The stories are arranged in a branching structure that enables different sequencing depending on the path of the receiver. Plots are developed around multiple characters through a series of narrative fragments that eventually intersect with other

characters who appear in different stories but who are also connected through the common social network or shared adventures. The stories, in form of downloadable video clips, are made available to the audience at the appropriate geographical location and so contribute to a community-related story map of the area.

A multidisciplinary team of researchers worked on the project developing hardware, software, researching social issues of earlier times, scripting and producing the video segments. The aim of the project team was to seed the portrait with sample content and to encourage other members of the community to evolve the collection over time. The project highlights a method for the collection, production and processing of stories relating to a community of people, in multimedia format.

## The infrastructure

The hardware and software for deployment of Media Portrait of the Liberties is being developed as part of the Wireless Ad hoc Network for Dublin (WAND) and Context-AwaRe Multimedia Environment for Narrative (CARMEN) projects, both of which are collaborative efforts between Media Lab Europe (MLE) and the Distributed Systems Group (DSG) in the Department of Computer Science at Trinity College, Dublin (TCD). Both projects are funded by the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA).

The WAND collaboration was formulated in 2002 to explore ad hoc wireless communication system based on the IEEE 802.11b Standard [1]. The innovative aspect of the research is not the technology itself but rather in the investigation into how socio-cultural dynamics can be coupled with emerging technologies and application research. In the process of being implemented, the network will cover part of the city centre of Dublin, from Thomas Street, where MediaLabEurope and the Liberties are located, to Trinity College Dublin.. The technology used provides a network infrastructure for handhelds, laptops, PC's and other wireless-enabled devices that are outfitted with the required protocol.

Shortly after the WAND initiative was begun, the researchers proposed another initiative, the Carmen project [2]. This collaboration was initiated with the aim of providing simple authoring tools to shape the delivery of context aware multimedia content to people roaming public space. Carmen's multimedia application development framework is used for the Media Portrait of the Liberties.

## Motivation

Inspiration for the Media portrait of the Liberties comes from different projects and experiments. Ongoing research at the Interactive Cinema group at the MIT Media Lab in Boston focuses on the development of tools to facilitate the creation of multi-threaded narratives, the browsing of large collections of media segments [3] and the construction and delivery of spatially distributed cinema [4]. The online work of Abbe Don [5] provides some insight into the process of collecting reflective stories drawn from memory of members of a community and organizing them as a digital collection.

In this case the process happens online with submission of text and images to the website.

While developing the initial phase of the Liberties Portrait, Nature Trailer, another spacially distributed project, was being developed project as collaboration between the Alison Wood in the Story Networks and Brendan Donovan in the Everyday Learning group at MediaLabEurope. Wood and Donovan developed [6] distributed fictional content and platform, inspired by Irish folklore, which uses contextual weather variables as well as location to shape the path through narrative content for an audience walking through remote places. The interdisciplinary Urban Tapestries action research project investigates wireless mobile devices and annotated urban space from the point of view of community authoring their own virtual annotation of the city [7]. In Annotate Space Dumbo of Andrea Moed, local information is tagged to specific locations and browsable by walking the area [8].

The Liberties portrait draws lessons from these projects. By paying special attention to people living in the neighbourhood, the project aims to stimulate and encourage the start of a spontaneous storytelling activity by members of the community as well as the use of new technologies for viewing and production.

## The importance of being local.

### History of The liberties of Dublin .

After the fall of Dublin during the Norman invasion, the city became the centre of English rule in Ireland. In 1520 King Henry the VIII abolished all religious orders in Ireland and gave Thomas Abbey, and the land around it, the actual Liberties, to his treasurer at the time William Brabazon. In 1627 his grandson William, was made Earl of Meath. From there after the area was known as earl of Meath Liberties [9].

The Liberties or Franchises of Dublin were twenty-five, each one taking its name from the principal individual residing in the locality. The Earl of Meath's Liberty included Kevin Street and Booter's Lane, Bride Street, Bull Alley, Meath Street and Mellefont Lane.

For the past 400 years this area has cycled through high and low periods. Following the thriving period of the early 1600 with its Huguenots and woollen workers, the neighborhood survived some very poor times with the coming of the famine in the eighteenth century. With the arrival of Guinness and other industries the neighborhood started to flourish again. "During the 1800 1900 it was fairly wealthy around the Coombe. [...] Guinness and Jacobs biscuit factory were employing around 8000 people" says John Gallagher, local community member and social worker in the liberties. Again, the neighborhood saw bad times in the late 1900, which lasted until a few years ago when Guinness became open to selling off some of its property and the city of Dublin decided to create a digital hub right in the heart of the Liberties, starting from our research lab, Media Lab Europe.

## Making contact with the local community

As the project was taking shape in our minds, we started to explore the Liberties in different ways trying to make contacts with the local people and institutions.

The first occasion arose when a group of Trinity students who were videoing in the area invited me to participate. One of the characters I had become interested in was Jack Roche, owner of the homonymous vegetable shop in Meath street. He permitted us to film in his shop during a busy Saturday morning. People were flowing in and out of the shop, looking around, chatting to each other while choosing the vegetables and queuing to the cash point, where Jack would always have the last say on their conversations, a joke, an anecdote or just asking about their lives or relatives, definitely making the trip to the vegetable shop something more than just doing some shopping. The atmosphere of this shop illustrates the atmosphere of the old community of the liberties. Those who nowadays would be in their fifties or older, people whose parents were living in the neighbourhood, working for Guinness, Jacobs biscuit factory or some local factory long before they were born.

The following year I had the opportunity to participate in a social research project that took most of the summer [1]. A colleague sociologist, Irene Quinn, and myself under the direction of Christina Quinlann and Paolo Dini conducted twenty ethnographic interviews with community members from social workers of the area to random people met in the street.

The analysis of these interviews suggested that many different types of people intersect in the Liberties, making it a surprisingly complex and diverse neighborhood. Through this research we discovered that there are four distinct communities within the Liberties area. The old community made up of people who have been living in the Liberties for all their lives and who's ancestors have lived in the area as well. They are very proud of their neighbourhood and continue to remember the good old days as a sort of golden age "When I was young we used to leave the door open all day. The keys of the house were kept in the letterbox attached with a string. That was a feature of the area", says John Gallagher. "To me this area is dead today" adds Maireen Johnston writer and member of the local community, "It used to be teaming with people [...] the shops opened early and closed late [...]". They often feel lonely now as they notice that their old neighbours are all gone and they feel that the new people in the area do not care about each other as the old timers used to.

A second community is made up of the new comers. Attracted by the promise of the digital hub and the attendant idea of a flourishing new neighbourhood, many of these people dream of buying an old, renovated cottage in this neighbourhood that is so close to the city centre. These are generally young, computer literate people that like the area even if they do not have a strong emotional attachment to it. They are interested in its history and costumes but in a more detached way compared to the old community.

Then there is a large community of people who live in the huge council flat buildings that were built largely in the 1970/ 80 around the core Liberties neighborhood. These people share common problems of low income, drug availability and difficulties in getting through the education system. Uprooted from elsewhere and grouped together in the large, unfriendly council flat buildings, it is not surprising that this community

never develops any cultural attachment to the area or to the other communities but rather associate the place with their own problems and can become quite violent and destructive at times. "It is not very secure to walk around. [...] not only drug addicts but also alcoholics[...] A lot of children that are in trouble now, their parent wouldn't have had a chance to have a good education. It's a circle." clarifies John Gallagher in the interview.

Finally, there is a growing concentration of immigrants in the area from yet other communities. They are not blending in with any of the local population but rather hanging around among themselves and starting to set up their own shops. John explains to us that since the economical situation in the Liberties has been good in the past two years, there is no imminent problem. But if the situation gets worse there is going to be a housing issue. The immigrants have more kids and go up the lists for social benefits, which causes the local people to think these newcomers are using resources that should belong to them. The problem is not to relocate the immigrants but to allocate more resources to the area to avoid rows.

In the initial phase of this project, as we made contact with the various community members, we had the great fortune to meet Maireen Johnston, writer and member of the liberties community whom I mentioned earlier. Thanks to an invitation from Johnston, I participated to a class of creative writing she was attending and co directing in Whitefriars social centre on the fringe of the Liberties.

Ten to fifteen women from the Liberties area attended this workshop each week, and would tell each other stories and anecdotes about their private lives or stories around the theme of the day suggested by the teacher. At the end of each session each participant would put his or her own story into writing. Attending these classes made clear to me that collecting stories from the community members would take a very long time and might lack the context that a project about the Liberties would need. By working together with Maireen and using stories she had included in her book about the Liberties area [9], I already had at my disposal a beautiful set of warm, informative, and at times dramatic stories that revealed aspects of specific places, history and characters of this community that fascinated me.

## Real stories as content for an interactive narrative

Stories based on the everyday life of a community can provide powerful content for a narrative experience. Everyday stories appeal to us as audience because they are directly connected with what we perceive to be real events and history; such stories can provide us with inspiration for our own lives, prompting us to recollection anecdotes, memories and similar stories. Like a spider web, real stories lead into each other, connect characters and themes providing a natural hyperlinked structure that can be used as the basis for an interactive modular narrative project.

### Collecting and reconstructing the stories

#### Finding the content.

The idea for the Media Portrait of the Liberties has been to realize a set of stories that would allow the audience to discover this place. Initially we extracted around one

hundred and fifty short stories/anecdotes from the Johnston book, which we then scripted and storyboarded for multimedia production. As we began production we reduced the number of short anecdotes to 40 as a result of time, budget and technical constraints.

In creating visuals for the stories we used a mix of video, animation or photographic media; once the visuals were selected we would add audio narration to complete them. As we were considering what images to use for these stories, Leo Monhogan, former tourist guide, now security guard of the MLE, generously made available to me his collection of old photographs of the liberties, soon to be published in a book. This historical material has proven very valuable in the process of reconstructing the visuals of some of the stories. In addition, to these contributions, many community members, like Charlie Hammond for example, member of the local Marylands Residents Association, had offered papers and booklets and anecdotes on the history of the Liberties during the earlier ethnographic interviews phase of the project. He told us stories about the river Poddle "A river that runs under the Liberties ground and was the main water supply for the city after the Liffey. That is why breweries and distilleries, laundries and weavers of silk and poplin flourished in the area. The river produced an industry that was very labour intensive". These gifts touched me as they communicated the desire of the community itself to share their sense of history through this project. "Social history is rich in this area. I believe is important for this community to understand its area. ", adds Charlie later on. As a result of these gestures, I decided on the following approach: I would first make a collection of exemplar stories using the Johnston book. Later I would run workshops and provide support to community members who wished to contribute so that this project could become an "evolving" portrait of the community [10].

### **The production phase.**

Once the stories had been scripted, we decided to use different methods of production due to the different characteristics of the stories, ranging from ghost stories to description of architectural changes of the area and portrait of local characters. Harnessing the friendly and open atmosphere of the neighborhood and the availability and enthusiasm of a lot of the MLE staff, film sets were staged in the lab and around the Liberties area where locals and colleagues would reenact some of the stories following as closely as possible the costumes and settings described in Mairens book. One of the biggest successes was a long session of traditional Irish music that animated the Pimlico cottages for a whole evening.

The traditional musician Cormac Cannon, former colleague, and fiddle player Finbarra played in the courtyard of the Pimlico cottages reenacting what was a typical Sunday afternoon of the liberties in the 1940. Local people came along to engage with the action and participated as local characters in the filming. The session itself had also been an occasion of informally chatting to locals about the project and verifying their enthusiasm in providing new content to the story collection, reviving memories and anecdotes and a certain pride of being from the area.

Different, but equally friendly and participative was the young lady of one of the cottages; she had recently purchased the house and told us from her outsider perspective about how tight the old Liberties community is and how fascinated she is

by the history of the Liberties. These very characteristics of the neighbourhood had prompted her to stop renting the cottage and move in herself.

The reenactments of the stories would have never happened without the help of all the staff at MediaLabEurope and I credit the creativity of the results to the different skills and ideas of this interdisciplinary community. A different kind of story, referencing buildings that do not exist anymore or particular events too complex to reenact, were produced using some of the material collected during the research such as the old photos and some watercolors painted by myself during the storyboarding process. The varied methodology added in expressivity and freshness to the stories, but mainly pointed out some ideas for on how to develop a framework under which to guide the community members in the feedback collection phase: when they will provide and produce their own stories to add to the collection.

### Designing the story structure

The stories have been crafted as units in a modular structure where the story fragments are interchangeable. The classical arched structure of a plot-based narrative artefact such as a movie or book with its introduction, complication, climax and resolution, has been exchanged for a more fragmented collection-based structure where each scene is a self contained story; this approach places fewer requirements on adjacency of story material and insures that the scenes be experienced in any order. The resultant hyperlinked structure consists of the collection of story fragments and the different types of links that connect them. The reader can end the experience at any time, without needing the closure that is typically expected in stories that have a strong story arc. This kind of structure is designed to remain open and evolve, making possible for new stories to be added any time. As we mentioned earlier, our intent is to enrich the story collection with new stories contributed by the community as soon as the project starts to be available for the public.

The Liberties story fragments are organized in a structure following a content model developed in conjunction with the Carmen software: the social network and the geographical area, themes and the user profile are all variables that determine the story experience of each audience member.

Three are the main mental operations that allow involvement with a narrative: temporal immersion, or the response to the plot; emotional immersion or response to characters and spatial immersion or response to the setting.

Traditional narrative has demonstrated its ability to create a strong sense of the spatial settings and clear visions of its typography [11]. In the Media Portrait of the Liberties, we are grounded in a real place. The audience can merge the story settings (where the story takes place) and the surrounding space in forming his/her mental image of the story and augment the surrounding space with the stories content and impression. In addition to that effect, relationships between places can be used to trigger memories and recollections of an audience who is very familiar with the place. This is one of our aims.

The spatial distribution of the stories is used as one of the navigation criteria for the narrative, providing the readers with a map of the story space that illustrates the relation of the content to specific locations, as well as a spatio-temporal immersion

strategy to transport the audience into the scene. Spatial temporal immersion takes place when the distance between the position of the narrator and addressee, the time and place of the narrated events, are reduced to near zero. By placing the story fragments in the location where they happened and allowing the audience to experience them there we reduce that distance and increase the spatial temporal immersion [11].

## Reflections on the Process

Our hypothesis for this research is that interactive non-linear narrative is well suited to collections of real stories collected from a community and that such a collection of stories could play an important role in capturing and fostering a sense of community and belonging to place. Such a collection will have the effect of stimulating a sense of awareness that emerges from the community itself, empowered by the reappropriation of the local, social, and personal stories and furthered through the narrative process and its distribution.

When we talk about real stories about a community of people, artistic manipulation of the stories can raise interesting discussion points, which open possibilities for further research.

In the sixties, structuralism's critics conceived the study of literature as a subpart of the social sciences and tried to develop a model that would similarly serve theories of anthropology, sociology, psychology and linguistics. Critics soon realized that all these disciplines are concerned with narrative, but differences in purpose and materials make it very difficult to see how they are interrelated. Theories are dependent on the material selected for the study and the different objectives of the theorists is evident in their different approaches to narrative

The question the anthropologist is almost opposite to the one of the critic: "Why is this story unique?" Not what this identifiable author means, but what function does this collective myth serves. Features like point of view, characterization, description and style, so important to the literary critic, scarcely exist in the oral tale. The anthropologist, as a social scientist, is committed to a conception of methodology which is certainly more constraining than the literary critic. [12].

Aware of the difference between the object of the anthropologies and the narrative critic we kept in mind that a story is an act of interpretation of the world, rooted in the particular perception of the author. There is no mechanical or digital way to substitute this and no reason for wanting to do so [12].

We envisage then that the author must be able to have control over the many levels of artistic choice. As the community gets more involved in the project and their stories contributions start to fill the database, their different styles and interpretations takes over the project. The collection starts to belong to the community and becomes a repository of their memories and anecdotes.



## Conclusions

Interactive narrative is an ambitious art form, combining traditional narrative, visual art and interactivity [13]. In the Liberties project we have thought of using stories to convey the atmosphere and local history of an old Dublin area and community such as the Liberties; stories have been scripted and produced as a collection of short, visual, self-contained multimedia segments. To fulfil the interactive narrative properties we have linked each story to the specific location where it happened. The area of the liberties become a geographical map of stories where the audience can physically navigate the story collection.

“Our path through the structure of the work reflects our choices back to us making us more aware and responsible of our experience. “[14]. We’d like to think that the liberties portrait experience could act as a mirror towards its audience in different ways. First to the general public or tourists by letting them explore the liberties community story set and choose their path through it. This way they are free to follow what interest them, leaving with a very personal idea of the community and of the work itself. Second the audience that belongs to the liberties community can experience the work literally as a mirror of themselves, against which they could compare discuss and redesign their past, present and future.

The initial steps of the Liberties portrait rely on the author’s or artist’s interpretation, we think this choice does this facilitate the integration of community’s feedback or reaction to the stories. Remembering also the Weir View experience [15] it seemed that the community needed an inspirational starting point to get their own stories flowing.

## Evaluation strategy and Future Investigations

As the community gains access to the current collection of media segments, we are curious to explore what stories they will wish to tell. In order to help them achieve a full media version, we intend organize an ongoing workshop which can promote methods that enhance production of these stories. By making the process more accessible, we’d like to encourage people to provide and produce their own stories and add them to the initial collection. As this process begins, we will return to our ethnographic method to better understand how the process of story telling for this project affects awareness of both the individual and the community.

We think this kind of site-specific project will prove particularly invigorating for the Liberties community as it continues to transition. The disadvantaged settings, the multiplicity of coexisting communities in the neighborhood, and recent and ongoing architectural changes form provide themes that can challenge an expression of individual and collective point of view. When viewed spatially, we hope that this collection will help residents and tourists alike better understand how place is co-grounded in historical socio-cultural events and augment the place with its past

history and traditions that can be experienced in a totally different and more engaging way than reading it in history books or tourist guides.

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