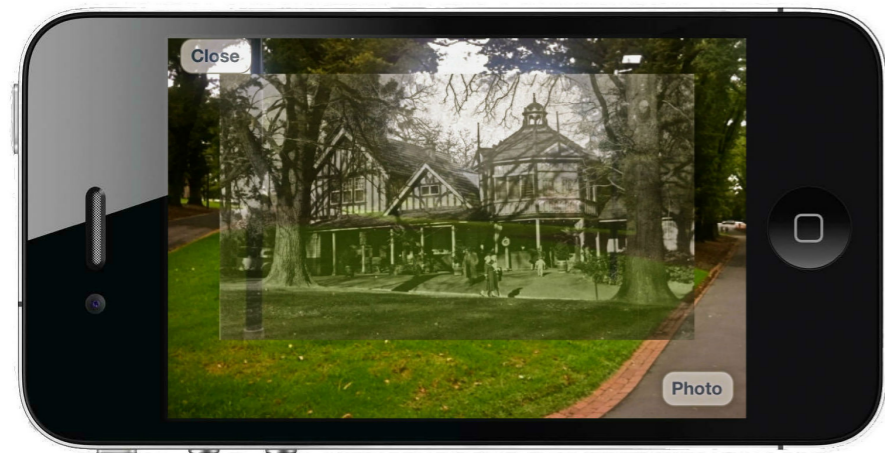


Seeking New Roles for Collection Data: experiments in augmented reality

MEGAN SHEEHY, YARRA RANGES REGIONAL MUSEUM



Underneath the hype of 'x-ray vision' and 'superpowers', what is augmented reality, and what does it mean for our industry? Megan Sheehy caught up with Eleanor Whitworth, Content Curator, Culture Victoria and Alexandra Hill, Heritage Programs Advocate, National Trust of Australia (Victoria) to ask what they learned from their experiments with augmented reality.

What is augmented reality?

Augmented reality refers to the ability for computer generated content to be superimposed over a live camera view of the real world. Users currently experience augmented reality through apps via devices such as smartphones, tablets and goggles.

Culture Victoria

Since 2010 Culture Victoria has tested basic forms of augmented reality for three projects. The first was created to navigate the 2010 Museums Australia Conference at the University of Melbourne, Parkville Campus. The second mapped their database of 715 collecting organisations across Victoria, and the third mapped contemporary craft organisations.

Each of these experiments was a test of the technology and a marketing exercise, particularly to raise awareness of the collecting organisations database. Instead of creating a new app, Culture Victoria utilised the existing *Layar* app, developed in the Netherlands. Free to use, this app had an existing user base (with over 28 million downloads) and works on a 'points of interest' model (eg. art, food & drink, health). In real time, it can be used to identify places and things around you in the designated 'layer'.

Although the apps only received views in the hundreds, the team learnt a lot from the experiments.

• It all comes back to data

"You're better off investing in your data" Eleanor explained, "then putting a small investment into the portal. It gives you flexibility and choice. If you don't have the data there, you don't have the options."

Experimenting with augmented reality was low-cost for Culture Victoria, because the data already existed and was in a format that could be easily utilised.

• It must add to the visceral experience

"In the design there must be a strong understanding of the reality experience. We do have bodies, so sensory perception is enjoyable and should not be undervalued. It is about augmenting and making that experience more enjoyable or more useful. There has to be a good understanding of the reality experience before you can get a successful augmented experience."

"The moment when I realised that it was not particularly successful as a way of augmenting reality was when a colleague was very enthusiastically using it, holding it up trying to find where the next venue was. He was walking forward looking at the screen...trying to line up the dot exactly with where he wanted to go. He stumbled into the garden and onto

a rock while the rest of us stood there waiting, having read the sign in front of us."

• Know your vision: practical or beautiful

Augmented reality can be used in at least two distinct ways: the practical or the beautiful. Too many apps get stuck somewhere in the middle. Eleanor emphasises that designers need to have a clear vision for their app. "Am I trying to create a beautiful experience where people are transcending reality in order to immerse themselves in an experience, or am I trying to create a practical experience? ... Know when you're investing in making one what you want to happen at the end of the day, and make sure it meets those purposes."

• Invest long-term, share your failures

Perhaps the most refreshing thing learned from Culture Victoria's experiments is that museums should be widening their view from current technology fashion trends to a twenty year timeframe. Particularly for smaller institutions, it is essential to "do a bit of future planning, sort your data out, don't jump into gimmicks if you can't afford to".

However, "there is value in investing in playing and failing. But you have to evaluate and share that failure. There has to be broader value to the project." Eleanor is interested to see future



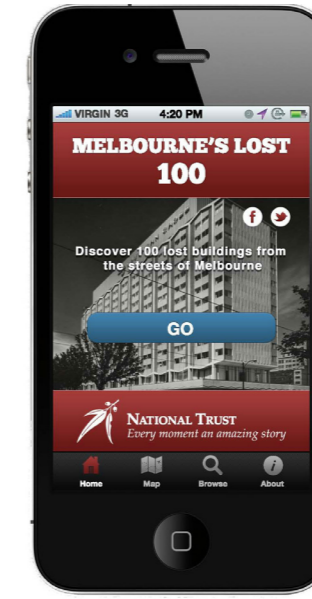
experiments in the industry, as she believes that "where augmented reality may be really effective for cultural applications is linking rich media to place...I think it will be used on an everyday basis, it's just how it ends up happening."

National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

In July 2012 the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) officially launched *Lost! 100 Lost Buildings of Melbourne* iPhone app. Free to download from the iTunes store, *Lost!* is designed to superimpose images of demolished buildings over what is at the location now, by augmenting the iPhone's existing camera function.

Developed from concept to completion in around six months, it has been a resounding success for the organisation with 2,216 downloads in one week after it appeared in *The Age* and a total 3,672 downloads by February 2013. Alexandra explains that the organisation "see this as an advocacy tool...in a lot of ways just having an app is fulfilling a lot for the National Trust. It's part of breaking the mindset of what the National Trust is."

The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) was formed as a grass roots, activist based organisation in 1956. It has a huge number of classification files, predominantly on buildings that are



threatened by demolition, but also on trees, landscapes, pipe organs & gardens. It is from these files and a previous panel exhibition that the information for the *Lost!* app was drawn.

• Know how to curate an app

With the Trust Trees app under their belt, Alexandra stresses how important it was for the organisation to have a strong working relationship with a developer and honed skills in curating an app. "It's a skillset, it's like writing interpretive exhibition information. It's a really concise way of writing."

The information was curated for the app by a team of three. Every entry had to be written and Google co-ordinates added. "Once we got used to it, it was fine. But it was really challenging. The three of us had quite different writing styles."

Content outside the normal curatorial scope also had to be considered, including instructions. "We assumed there was a high level knowledge of how to use apps, but there isn't necessarily. It's important to focus on what icons mean and provide clear instructions."

• Stick with your vision

Echoing the advice from Culture Victoria, Alexandra emphasises that "purity of an idea is important; don't try to make it do everything at once!"

Opposite: Former Fitzroy Gardens Kiosk 'ghosted' onto the current site. Photo courtesy of National Trust of Australia (Victoria).

Below left: *NGV International* listing in *Layar* augmented reality view. Photo courtesy of Culture Victoria.

Right: *Lost!* homescreen. Photo courtesy of National Trust of Australia (Victoria).

While lining up an historic image over the phone's camera view never works quite as well as it does in the promotional images, the concept is exciting when thinking about how we experience heritage places and objects. This idea, and getting people physically into the city to experience heritage, was at the heart of the Trust's vision and is a major reason that the finished product 'works' for users.

• Valuable two-way conversation is possible

Augmented reality is "part of a broader two-way conversation between the organisation and the user. We chose to allow people to upload images on their own social media pages, so we don't know how popular this has been. We can only track how many downloads the app has had, or how many stories have been contributed through the app."

Interestingly, the Trust has been surprised by the number of new stories flowing in, mainly about the social side of properties including people working at sites, taking cooking classes or being on honeymoon. "We will feed contributed stories back into the Heritage Record Management Electronic System (HERMES) so they go into common understanding of those sites."

• iPhone vs Android

The Trust made the decision to develop only for iPhone for a number of reasons. They felt the need to honour the loyalty of users of their previous app and they found that for older people there was a significant uptake in iPhone use. But the main reason, Alexandra explains, was that "if you want to develop for both iPhone and Android operating systems, the cost doubles."

Megan Sheehy is Curator Public Programs at Yarra Ranges Regional Museum and a member of the INSITE committee.

For more about Culture Victoria visit: <http://cv.vic.gov.au/>

To download *Lost! 100 Buildings of Melbourne* iPhone app visit: http://www.natrust.com.au/trust_register__1/lost_app