Cultural Byways on the Information Highway: Contextualizing Spaces and Places with History and Folklore

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Abstract

This article is a report on a project in which a group of faculty and students at the University of Central Florida placed high resolution audio-visual equipment on the downtown bus system in Orlando to be used as virtual museum sites exploring the potentially lost heritage of Orlando. This project exemplifies the potential convergence of new technologies and content for teaching, playing, and living, changing a bus ride into an educational activity.

Downtown Orlando, Florida, has an historic neighborhood that is fast being revitalized. While most people think of Orlando as the place to go for theme parks, before the city had that identity, it was associated with ranching and the citrus and turpentine industries. As Florida continues to bring in new residents from countries around the world, Orlando is increasingly in a state of change.

Recognizing that Orlando's residents and its visitors are unaware of much of the city's folklore and history, an interdisciplinary group of faculty and students at the University of Central Florida (UCF) has been working together for several years to address this issue. Our goal with the Cultural Byways project is to place local folklore and history on the new, high-resolution video and audio equipment on the downtown bus system that has been mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This equipment was installed in order to automatically and clearly communicate the identity of stops for riders who may be visually or hearing impaired. Using this ADA equipment, riders on the free Lymmo bus are able to enjoy the places they pass as if they were virtual museum sites. At certain fixed locations the bus computer is loaded via a wireless Internet connection with history and folklore segments. Segments include information about architecture, events such as the county fair, sculpture, restaurants, churches, new roads, and numerous "stories from the streets." These segments are "called up" to be played as the bus travels by a GPS (Global Positioning System) attached to the computer. Between stops, the video screens, linked to wireless Internet and satellite links (GPS), are filled with stories, facts, and information related to the places the busses pass. In this project, the architecture, city spaces, businesses, and neighborhoods are seen as artifacts on display, and the bus technology acts as an interpretive device, like a text panel or a docent, only more

entertaining, innovative, and hopefully, engaging. At this writing, several of the segments have already been placed on the system.

The idea for this and other related projects originally came to Mike Moshell, Chair of the Digital Media Department, in the Fall of 1999, as he and his UCF students talked to a group of Elderhostel students about the potential of new technologies that included GPS. The audience became excited about the possibility that GPS could be used to trigger the reading of stories that they could record for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. With the help of a creative theme park producer, Chris Stapleton, Digital Media faculty developed the concept of Earth Echoes, a project that would present information relevant to a location. For example, a couple could leave a message for future generations in the place where they were married or vacationed. Generations later, it could be retrieved, connecting families across time and space. Cultural Byways on the Information Highway was a natural outgrowth of Earth Echoes.

Media Convergence

Cultural Byways on the Information Highway is a project that is centered in UCF's Digital Media Department, although it partners with faculty in Film, Art, Text and Technology, Music, Computer Science, and English. "Convergence" is a theme that is a focus of the Digital Media Department's curriculum. Convergence happens when technologies and content come together in a creative way to build a new modality for teaching, playing, and living. In this project, media convergence provides the tools for satisfying the Americans with Disabilities Act in a way that permits additional information to be presented. An interdisciplinary class of students makes segments, called "Moments in History" or "Moments of Folklore." These segments include historical and contemporary photographs, animation, text, and sound. They present facts about people and architectural spaces, stories about ghosts, information on ethnic music, stained glass windows in churches, Asian restaurants, tattoo parlors, hip-hop nightclubs, the historical progression of certain buildings, naming of downtown Orlando streets, local musicians, crafters of foreign instruments, and popular places to visit.

This paper describes the motivations, methods, and partnerships that have changed a bus ride into an educational activity. It looks at the theoretical foundations for the project, and it addresses questions, concerns, and potentials.

Theoretical Foundations

The Cultural Byways project focuses on many themes art educators have been concerned about for a long time: inclusion and a multicultural

focus, viewing art in context, a use of newer media, relating art to everyday life, and a shift in focus from art to visual culture. Folklorists, for centuries, have recognized the power of art in everyday life. Art critics are just coming back to this way of understanding culture, one that is perhaps more acceptable to children and many adults. Dave Hickey (1997) remembers that when he was growing up, "the whole cultural enterprise. . .took place at home, in other people's homes, and in little stores" (p. 11). By returning our focus to community, and the more intimate spaces where we live and work, Cultural Byways functions to make art more meaningful by teaching us to expand on the ways that we understand our community and relate to each other.

Any good art program raises intriguing questions. Erica Doss, in her book *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs* (1995), claims that controversy over contemporary public art has been a positive thing for the United States because it has created a forum for debate at a time when there has been too much apathy in democratic life. Increasingly, art is recognized as being political. If the content doesn't strike someone as political, then the context of its placement or the way in which it was funded might. Cultural Byways, as an interdisciplinary project involving people from various disciplines, engages in questions and problem solving from various perspectives. And it seeks to broaden its dialogue and participation as it expands into the community.

Irwin, Rogers, and Wan (1999) recognize that it is impossible for us to become fully immersed in all the cultures that exist around us. Just as the Byways project needs digital media specialists, it also needs folklorists, historians, educators, and artists. Additionally, because it represents Orlando's diverse cultural make-up, the project requires expertise from numerous people including people with disabilities and varying ethnic backgrounds and economic classes. Because no small group of people can know everything needed for such an immense project, we must expand our focus from only knowing information, or learning about a discipline "to the pedagogy of cultural performance through the act(s) of cultural translation" (Irwin et al, 1999, p. 209). In other words, we need to learn to work together to understand the needs of various individuals and cultural groups who are working toward the same goal, but are raising different questions or coming from a perspective that may be foreign. In the case of Cultural Byways, the goal is to teach about Orlando's history and folklore by developing a dialogue about who we are and who we want to become. The process of melding disciplines to accomplish this goal involves communication where differing interests and expertise can successfully come together. The Byways project encourages dialogue for community-building through what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) calls "landmarking" (p. 157). In this process heritage information connects us to the present, while keeping alive the past. As Lippard (1997)

calls for more art and education that is about local place, Cultural Byways responds. It is much needed in a time when we have neglected our many heritages, our neighbors, our commitment to community, and a thriving dialogue about what it is we value.

The thesis for Putnam's popular book *Bowling Alone* (2000) is that the United States has been shedding its social capital since the 1970s. We no longer bowl in leagues with others; instead we bowl alone. This occurrence has become a metaphor for our citizenry's increased isolation and distance from group activities and purpose. Putman explains that the founding dates of U. S. organizations such as the Masons or Boy Scouts peaked in the 1930s, leveled off through the 1970s, and dropped sharply after that. Putnam noted that at the turn of the last century, the older strands of social connection were being broken -- even destroyed -- by technological and economic social change. "Serious observers understood that the path from the past could not be retraced, but few saw clearly the path to a better future" (p. 382). He also noted that progressives were too practical to lament and hope for a return to a simpler time such as the years before globalism. He explains that Progressives did not believe that the future would take care of itself, and, in his opinion, neither should we.

Many scholars, journalists, and community people mourn the loss of community in their lives. A sense of community, in large part, depends upon an engagement with one's physical surroundings. According to Vidler (2000) we rarely look at our surroundings. "Streets and buildings, even those considered major monuments, are in everyday life little more than backgrounds for introverted thought, passages through which our bodies pass 'on the way to work.' In this way cities are 'invisible' to us, felt rather than seen, moved through rather than visually taken in" (p. 81). We believe that this condition of "not seeing" must be reversed in order to re-engage the public with their neighborhoods, towns, and city spaces.

There now seems to be a strong desire among many to work hard to rebuild our sense of community. Putnam (2000) claims that "our challenge is to restore American community for the twenty-first century through both collective and individual initiative" (p. 403). We believe that one of the major goals of the Cultural Byways project is to help rebuild a sense of community in downtown Orlando. We believe that this can be accomplished, in large part, by connecting people to history and folklore.

The Cultural Byways "Moments in History and Folklore" segments inform riders about what is going on in the city. They may discover the meaning of a statue of an alligator wrestler, or the ingredients of an Asian delicacy. A new kind of musical instrument from Puerto Rico may intrigue them, or they might be introduced to new tattooing trends they had never known about before. Cultural Byways has become possible because of

improved GPS accuracy over the last few years. We believe that this is just one example of a project where technology can be used to re-build social capital.

But there are concerns among many that technology basically supports an elite agenda as it is "owned" by the powerful, and it is their agendas and their histories that are told and promoted. It may also change the way we relate to each other, making for less dynamic interchange that is necessary for community building. For example, Jerry Mander, in his book *In the Absence of the Sacred* (1991), clearly points out how technology has been detrimental to Native American communities. He uses the example of how the presence of television in rural tribal areas took the place of interactive storytelling evenings. The result was that elders had less influence on youth as they looked more toward mainstream popular culture for inspiration and entertainment. In a similar cautionary manner, Constanzo (2000), looking to the future, points out some dangers as our communities become increasingly technological:

> Today the computer is the universal machine that is driving the Information Age. This technology, currently being propelled by an increasing range of interactive global networks, has had a profound impact on the social, political, and cultural landscape. But in the rush to digitize and encode all aspects of our lives, we are pushed forward without fully analyzing the consequences. At the heart of the matter is the fact that in the digital environment, information becomes a commodity. Those who reap the benefits of this environment are those who control this commodity. (p. 32)

Constanzo's response to this concern is REPOhistory ("repossessing "history"), a New York-based collaboration of artists, writers, and performers founded in 1989. Perhaps more overtly than participants in the Cultural Byways project, they deal with issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality in an effort to make diverse histories and perspectives more visible.

Gans (2003) would agree with Constanzo's critical position, only his focus is more specifically placed on journalism. He claims that, unwittingly, journalists tell stories about top officials, and that it results in top-down news. He reports, "Telling people what their top elected and appointed officials are doing and saying is important, but it is hardly the only information people need to participate in politics. Top-down news may even discourage participation because the news constantly demonstrates the clout of top officials and the relative powerlessness of individual citizens" (p. B16). Gans goes on to say that top-down stories treat the citizens as "passive spectators" and that news needs to be balanced with "bottom-up stories that assume citizens are actual or prospective participants in the democratic process" (p. B16).

Participants involved in the Cultural Byways project recognize these problems. Craig Friend, our Byways historian, warned us early on that working only from archival information would produce information about the elite white male, and that women and people of color would be largely excluded. Other sources of information would have to be found. Like Gans and Constanzo, we are also working toward diverse participatory goals, with an emphasis on folklore and future goals of finding more interactive ways to communicate with the bus riders, allowing them to and expand on and respond to information placed on the bus. Digital Media is about *Interactive Education or Entertainment* and we recognize that, thus far, Byways is passive or a one-way system of presenting information. In response to this concern, one student in a summer session of the Byways class asked, "Why don't we use cell phones as a console on the bus?" Her idea was brilliant and is currently being explored. Cell phones, acting as an interactive Byways device, could be used to conduct polls and translate audio text into different languages. A high proportion of the general U.S. population now has cell phones, and this is likely to be true for Lymmo riders. Using cell phones to create more of a dialogue would make the project more powerful by allowing for varying kinds of participation and response.

Just as we want to avoid a passive system of delivering folklore and historical information, we also recognize that we do not want to build a community of sameness. Rather, using Ott's (1994) definition, we seek to work toward a community that has an ability to accommodate difference (p. 33). In other words, as Orlando has changed from a small town built on citrus, turpentine, and ranching, to a multi-ethnic space influenced by a wide variety of occupations including entertainment and tourism, we hope to acknowledge the all aspects of our identity. Some stories may be shameful, violent, or racist. Still, they are part of the identity of who we are and who we have become. In making all aspects of Orlando visible, we seek to evoke dialogue, participation in the city's folklore and history, and more informed and active citizenry. One aspect of this project that already has the makings of a re-built community is the digital media class that makes Cultural Byways a reality.

The Cultural Byways Class

The Digital Media Program at the UCF educates students in the art of segment production as well as the technologies. Emphasis is on the use of teamwork to produce large projects. One reason for this approach is that most jobs after college are based on teamwork and the faculty has observed that teamwork training is, in fact, lacking in most programs. The Cultural Byways class is valued for this aspect of community building as well as its goal reaching so many people with its product. We recognize that we are, in

a way, doing museum work, but we are working outside a museum setting where the population is more diverse and extensive.

What makes the Byways class unique is that with the exception of a few key staff advisors (especially Steve Teicher who oversees the class and Phil Peterson who supervises art direction) the project is almost entirely managed and produced by UCF students. Adrienne Engell, who leads the class as her paid senior project, sets the pace, establishing tasks and making sure work gets done in a timely manner. Students receive class credit for participating in writing and editing scripts or producing the actual video segments in a program called Adobe After Effects.

The production cycle started at the base level with a collection of research gathered by history graduate students and Bob Stone, a professional folklorist. The Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, generously granted funding for this aspect of the work. While the student producers learn about the production software, scriptwriters familiarize themselves with the material on which the scripts are based. Because the Lymmo bus route has so many stops, short in distance, scripts are mostly written to last 30 seconds, with a few being one minute. The scripts are then passed to a script editor who checks to see that both content and audience have been adequately addressed. They are then passed to a faculty member who finalizes the script (Craig Friend for history; Kristin Congdon for folklore). The scripts are then placed into production.

Each script is completed with audio, visual, and textual information for the producers to follow. Along with each script are historical images selected by the scriptwriters. Any current images that are needed are assigned to the Photography Asset Manager in the class, whose job it is to travel to the local historical sites, gather current images, and archive them in a manner that is easily accessible to the student producers. There is also an equivalent job of gathering sounds for the segments, which are maintained by the Audio Asset Manager. Once the producers have all their resources to create the video segments, they begin to piece them together in Adobe After Effects. Engell explains that this process is similar to building a house in that the materials and tools are all there, but a nice house requires someone who is both creative with the way the materials are used, and skilled at working with the tools. To ensure that the project has a certain degree of uniformity, the students are provided with a style guide that they must follow for the introductions and closing credits of each segment. Included in this style guide are rules about type and color of fonts, which effects can be used, and when to use them. All of these guidelines are overseen by a student art director, who is also responsible for editing the final segments once they are turned in by the students. Every effort is made to make all segments accessible to as many people as possible. After the art director's finishing touch-

es are added, the segments are submitted to the industrial and grants partners for final approval and the completion of the project.

Once the segments are completed, they are placed in a special directory that is annotated with the GPS coordinates of the location of the building or space described in the segment. The GPS location, based on latitude and longitude, is used by the bus computer to call up the segment for playing. We are working on having a variety of segments to choose from for each location, so the "calling up of the segments" becomes complex. This variety prevents the bus trip from becoming repetitive to the frequent rider.

Partnerships

Besides the many UCF partners who are participating in the Cultural Byways project, we have established numerous community partnerships that are also involved. These include the Orange County Regional History Center, The Department of State, Florida Folklife Programs, and Transit Television Networks, which is a spin-off of Itec Networks. This company specializes in outfitting public bus and rail systems with the equipment that is used to display the Byways segments among other types of materials including advertisements that may also be location based. Partnerships are increasing as new bus routes are being planned. The second route will be twenty-seven miles long and will pass through several cities with local museums and historical societies. Each of our two routes will eventually include public health messages related to diverse cultural perspectives. This direction will call for partnerships with various health organizations.

The Future

The display of health information is another opportunity to make use of cellular telephones. For instance, we could offer health information in different languages by having the bus patrons dial a number on their cellular telephones. We could also allow the rider to alter the course of the presentation by telephone key-strokes. Another option is to present more private information on cell phone screens as the devices allow for more capabilities. At this writing the over one hundred segments are being placed on the Lymmo bus system.

As the Cultural Byways project grows, questions about technology, re-building community, and ways to enhance participation will also grow. We believe that this dialogue is critical. As we begin to employ new technological advances, we are hopeful that the Byways project will engage us in a new and better way to understand and build our communal lives.

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