

One Hut Full

Woolly yarns in a contemporary context

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Abstract

OneHutFull highlights the heritage of the Dartmoor Whiteface Sheep breed through a unique immersive sound and visual experience that examines the use of wool by artisan makers, the life and culture of this farming community and the celebration of localism in a global industry.

This project seeks to subvert the traditional orthodoxies of the bucolic shepherd's hut through creation of a highly contemporary digital artistic space, which aims to educate and inform visitors about the story of wool production and use in a specific Dartmoor community.

The artist, commissioned by OneHutFull, through Heritage Lottery Funding, has gathered the stories of Whiteface Sheep breeders as well as artisan makers using the wool, and appropriated these unique experiences through the innovative use of film and sound. Three eight-minute visual narratives are back-projected on to bespoke screens in the hut surrounded by a multi-speaker aural soundscape.

A primary aim of OneHutFull is to fully engage and educate the visitor about every stage in the wool production process from the birth of the Whiteface lamb in the spring, through sheep shearing in summer and to market in autumn. As counterbalance to the lifecycle of the sheep the artist also collaborates with a series of artisan makers including a felter creating shrouds and ornaments, furniture designers manufacturing sustainable chairs and a contemporary twine and wool producer.

Further, this project uses the considerable expertise of a Dorset-based shepherd's hut maker enabling this audio-visual space to be created. The bespoke nature of the design by the commissioned artist has potential to be applied to other areas of industry and production.

Following its launch at Exeter Cathedral in February, OneHutFull is now touring locally and nationally with the aim of raising the profile of makers and sheep breeders in both rural and urban spaces. A series of educational workshops will complete the research project.

Introduction

OneHutFull (www.onehutfull.org) is a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) project initially commissioned to celebrate the rich traditions of farming on Dartmoor through an innovative technological process of story-telling within an immersive mobile environment.

Using as a starting point the Whiteface Dartmoor sheep, an endangered breed which epitomises the moor and its heritage, this project aimed to involve, inspire, enthuse and educate a diverse rural and urban audience.

This paper outlines the artistic vision and process underpinning the capture and interpretation of the lives of several generations of traditional Whiteface Dartmoor sheep farmers. It also focuses on the evolution of the project itself and examines its ultimate aim to highlight a new generation of artisan makers and craftspeople working with the wool from these rare sheep.

We will first analyse the heritage surrounding Dartmoor and its historic relationship with farming. We will outline the context and aims of this heritage-lottery supported project. We will then discuss the decisions made around capture of the audiovisual content and presentation of this rich history through digital story-telling.

One of the key elements of this project was the concept of subverting the traditional orthodoxies of the bucolic shepherd's hut by implementing a technically innovative, immersive and captivating experience for a potential audience within it.

This was achieved through a year-long process based on Dartmoor during which we followed the seasonal sheep farming calendar by interviewing, filming and capturing sound. We also researched and featured contemporary crafters and makers working with the by-product of this annual cycle. This enabled us to edit and present a fully authentic account of the lives of the wool producers and makers on Dartmoor.

The culmination of OneHutFull has involved taking the hut to market. Following the launch at Exeter Cathedral in February 2015 OneHutFull has toured a series of summer fairs. The next stage of the project will involve undertaking quantitative research to gauge impact and success.

Heritage

Dartmoor has been farmed in some form for over 5000 years and over 90 per cent of the land within the National Park is still used for this purpose.

Much of this area is both open and enclosed moorland where livestock is grazed, and the remainder is made up of fringe enclosed farmland which mainly comprises improved grassland. In addition, woods, shelterbelts, wetlands, rough pasture, traditional buildings and archaeological features all contribute to the character of the farmed land.

Dartmoor National Park Authority, 2005

Tenement farms became established within the Forest of Dartmoor approximately 800 years ago and animals grazing rights were established there. At the edge of these tenement farms, common lands or commons provided grazing for farms from nearby parishes. Sheep made up the majority of livestock during mediaeval times and were associated with monasteries such as Buckfast and Buckland.

One of the oldest breeds of sheep in Britain, the Whiteface Dartmoor has evolved to withstand the winds and rain of the moors, while providing excellent meat and high quality wool. By the eleventh century, wool was Devon's primary export and as the trade blossomed across England, so too did the region.

Today the population of Whiteface Dartmoor sheep has shrunk from 72,000 at its peak to less than 1,000 ewes. Hill farmers are struggling and knowledge passed from parent to child for centuries is being lost as young people look for more secure occupations. Without the sheep to graze the moors, the landscape of Dartmoor is changing. Wool is often shipped to China to be washed, then onto India to be made into clothing before being exported back to Britain. In her role as member of the Whiteface Dartmoor Sheep Breeders Association, Paula Wolton says:

If we don't want to see hill farming on Dartmoor lost forever, we need to inspire a new generation of farmers, artisans, producers and consumers. To do that, we need to celebrate the innovators of today and demonstrate what could be achieved in the future. And we have to reach new audiences. (Wolton 2014)

Context

The starter-funding bid for the OneHutFull project required a focus on heritage in relation to the Whiteface Sheep breed on Dartmoor but, once underway, the project initiator Paula Wolton and the commissioned artist Andy Visser both realised that a wider scope was imperative. Initially, Wolton had focused on the Whiteface Sheep Breed, which she had been involved with for many years. Their gradual decline exposed a wider issue, amongst farmers on moorland hill farms, in terms of the struggle to maintain numbers of both sheep and other livestock on Dartmoor. Wolton applied for and won an HLF bid to allow her to investigate the issue through the commissioning of a physical artwork.

The wider debate concerned the future fate of Dartmoor moorland itself. On the one hand, commentators such as George Monbiot (2013) were confident that 'rewilding' of areas like Dartmoor would have a lasting and beneficial effect on the future of the space and its associated ecologies. On the other, working farmers on Dartmoor proffered bleak prognoses on the future of sheep farming and the future of the area itself.

The project scope broadened as it evolved in order to examine not just the plight of declining sheep numbers on Dartmoor but also the burgeoning pressure from Government and new-wave environmentalists to abandon the moorland to a combination of tourists and nature.

Conservation sites must be maintained in what is called "favourable condition": which means the condition in which they were found when they were designated. More often than not this is a state of extreme depletion: the merest scraping of what was once a vibrant and dynamic ecosystem. (Monboit 2013)

At primary level, within the OneHutFull brief, there was a requirement to document the lives of some of the generations of farmers living and working with sheep (Whiteface breed and others) on Dartmoor and focus on the secondary product of wool production. However beyond this, as the project took shape, there was an ever-growing stimulus to encapsulate this situation in a contemporary context, to persuade a potentially media-savvy audience that this was a story worth listening to and to provide a new narrative around the contemporary makers and users of wool and its by-products.

We identified the "consumer citizen" (Featherstone 2007) who is interested and engaged with his or her purchasing decisions in terms of both sustainability and support for the local community as a possible core audience.

Over the last decade a clearer notion of the consumer-citizen has emerged with the citizen defined as having rights to be a consumer, and the consumer defined as having responsibilities to ask questions about the consequences, risks and planetary costs of consumption. (Featherstone 2007:xvii)

Ultimately we wanted to examine ways in which people might be making new futures through the re-imagining of a very traditional way of life. By highlighting the localism of this production process we could emphasise the sustainability of the lifestyle and end materials, for both contemporary maker and citizen consumer as well as celebrating the "making is connecting" movement (Gauntlett 2011).

Materials play an emphatic role in our current understanding of the ways in which fashion and textiles can contribute towards sustainability. They are, more often than not, our starting point for change and also a valuable commodity for farmer, designer, manufacturing industry, consumer and recyclers which works to reinforce their central role. (Fletcher 2014: 7)

Subversion of traditional orthodoxies Artistic Vision

The artistic vision around this project centred on creation of a physical and mobile space that could immerse a potential audience. Further, this immersion had to include audible and visual sensory inputs.

Our aim was to evoke a sense of place by using digital means, identified by Giaccardi and Palen as an effective medium for heritage practice.

ICT can support this process by allowing new ways to engage with the people, interpretations and values that pertain to a specific setting. Bringing or strengthening a sense of place – and therefore, a living and sustainable relationship with heritage – meaning creating communication and interaction spaces capable of sustaining a community's engagement with the physical and social settings of the heritage. (Giaccardi and Palen 2008:283)

We decided early on that we would use subversion techniques to lure audiences into a space and context that was not quite what it appeared on first inspection. The traditional shepherd's hut has already been re-appropriated in many ways. Used primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as refuge from weather or incubator for young or sickly lambs, it was rarely functional in this form after the 1940s.

It has since become a prime candidate for restoration and revival, in various forms, and is now almost exclusively sold or rented as a recreational retreat.

Our immersive space needed to serve two distinct roles. First, as historic signifier, where we hoped it would draw in people who were searching perhaps for a nostalgic whiff of rural tradition. Second, as a subversive but immersive space, where narratives and themes might unfold, unfettered by the nostalgia that might have originally lured the audience.

By combining the traditional with the technological we hoped to communicate a meaningful and lasting story to our audience. As Giaccardi & Palen comment, technical infrastructure cannot account alone for heritage practice.

Combining technical infrastructure with diverse media and actively promoting social interaction are vital steps to support the tensional relationships between past, present and future, so that people can remember, perceive and imagine encounters with the heritage.

(Giaccardi and Palen 2008: 284)

Multiple Narratives

Central to the artistic vision of this immersive project was the tenet of multiple narrative story telling. The split-screen delivery of visual narrative is a recurring theme amongst experimental and mainstream filmmakers with notable examples in Norman Jewison's The Thomas Crown Affair (1968), Peter Greenaway's The Pillow Book (1996) and Mike Figgis' Timecode (2000).

Malte Hagener (2008) suggests the split screen functions as remediator within cinema, perhaps implying that audiences are ready to be pushed to a more complex and rewarding form of visual consumption. Lambert (2013) too argues that story-telling needs to be increasingly innovative to cut through the noise of human daily experience or "infoglut".

Our brain unconsciously processes some 10 billion sensory inputs a day, 40,000 separate conscious thoughts. We are biologically incapable of holding what comes in, but we are superbly capable of focusing our attention to hold onto certain parts of our experience. (Lambert 2013: 16)

The physical dimensions of the immersive space, aligned with some empirical research and an eye on the academic discourse around split screen narrative delivery led to a solution, involving three streams of visual narrative, broadcast through back-projected video sources and a parallel, multi-channel audio narrative.

To realise an immersive space of this nature, we considered the possibilities of what could be achieved in an area measuring 6 x 6 x 16 metres. An initial concept to project video imagery onto one of the longitudinal internal faces of the hut was abandoned when it became clear that we could not achieve any significant 'immersive viewing depth' with this orientation. Further, we wanted the possibility of multiple, visual narratives so needed greater length to stagger viewing screens throughout the interior of the hut.

Borrowing from concepts around multiple narrative structures in comic books including work discussed by Cohn (2014), the commissioned artist Andy Visser experimented with three perspex back-projection screens mounted across the short width of the hut and displaced in 3-dimensions so that no overlap occurred whilst maintaining maximum use of height, width and depth within the hut interior. Projectors were mounted at the back of the hut, facing forward so that unbroken beams would play onto the screens at all times.

Additionally, a '5.1' surround sound speaker system was implemented in the area just in front of the screening space. Choice of this type of immersive audio system had been influenced by substantial prior use of similar systems and was also informed through existing research around this style of audio reproduction by Kerins (2011: 239-245)).

The creative notion of cycles of seasonal change served as the backbone underpinning the artistic vision for this project, allowing a natural set of progressions to drive the OneHutFull meta-narrative forward. Planned within each of the four seasonal events were self-contained stories, allusions and sonic and visual signifiers, bound up with the rawness of life on Dartmoor. It was decided, at the outset, that the complete story would itself loop with a duration that had been derived empirically through prior experience with similar exhibitions.

Audiences within this area of the hut would, therefore, be fully immersed, visually and aurally.

Technical Innovation - reconnection and remediation

The technological innovation within [OneHutFull](#) was based on a requirement that the complete audiovisual experience could be started and stopped with one switch. To enable this, three small media servers were networked together and programmed to start and stop on power up or down. Films were stored on flash drives and synchronised within the media servers which also provided a '5.1' audio stream to the six active speakers within the installation.

At a meta level however, technical innovation was also realised through use of existing technologies in innovative and unique configurations. An example of this was in the use and interconnection of media servers that provided audiovisual playback in the hut.

The servers were not designed to be used in conjunction but, through a combination of open-source software and unconventional connections, they became part of a 'new' network that had not existed before. When they were also required to serve up video and multi-channel audio, they formed part of a novel system that has not existed anywhere else.

The use of these media servers was also intrinsically part of a remediation process that we found ourselves examining, at different levels, throughout the process of this work. These devices were 'old' technology but were re-employed because they contained features not available on newer devices.

In [Multidisciplinarity](#), Machado (2014) discusses the concept of 'self-knowledge' in terms of a Sufi metaphor involving warp and weft, stating that: "the weft is the visible design and the warp is the invisible web that sustains it."

This structural process, one of engaging, re-appropriating or re-connecting existent techniques or technologies in innovative ways, is one that has consistently re-appeared as a 'warp' to the 'weft' of the makers and crafters stories we have followed. Indeed, the structural use of seasonal change, discussed above, may also be viewed as a 'warp' laying down the holistic path of the whole project.

Process

At the outset it was agreed that [OneHutFull](#), whilst documenting the lifecycle of Dartmoor and the sheep farmers who worked it, should not actually be a documentary. Griffon defined documentary as, in his much analysed term, "the creative treatment of actuality" (cited in Winston 2008: 14).

Instead the ultimate aim of the project was to create a reflective, story-like narrative which could encompass documentary 'fact' but which would result in a less didactic outcome.

In marrying these "real-life" farming narratives with state-of-the-art technology it was essential to retain the humanity of the producers and makers.

The story is a personal, intimate, analog thing. Therefore cyberspace is a world apart, at its worse a cold domain of data...Data are cold, while stories are warm. Data lack intrinsic meaning, while stories are all about meaning. (Alexander 2011: 4)

Gathering

A significant component of the year long work on the [OneHutFull](#) project was to identify, contact and interview potential participants. Two main categories of potential interviewees were identified. First, those actually farming Whiteface (or other) sheep on Dartmoor. Second, those working innovatively with wool or wool-derived products.

As the project evolved, the scope of the first category was widened to include family of those who were farming. Either families were so deeply involved in this farming way of life that it would have been impossible to separate them out, or the farmers were multigenerational, with women and men working alongside their parents and, sometimes, their own children.

Additionally, as the project progressed, ancillary players and occasions in the sheep farming lifecycle began to emerge and were included in the storylines. Examples included sheep shearing, swaling (the annual process of burning of excess vegetation on Dartmoor), a working livestock market and various country shows vital to the integrity of the farming year. The views of an ecologist were also incorporated into the narrative fabric for contextual completeness.

As defined by Scott (1990: 3) most of the social documentary research undertaken within this project, although qualitative by nature, was considered 'proximate' and primary source.

Beyond the 'factual' gathering of oral histories and family anecdotes, some considerable time was also taken capturing the visual and sonic nuances that make up Dartmoor throughout four seasons.

Using a hand-held, digital single lens reflex camera (DSLR), tuned to produce a film-like video output (the film 'look' was part of a subjective plan to reinforce a visual feel of drama rather than documentary) and a high quality sound recording rig, footage was accumulated over the span over a complete seasonal weather cycle, beginning in winter 2014 and finishing in winter 2015. Filming took place all over Dartmoor and in all weathers.

Editing

Gigabytes of sonic and visual data were accumulated on various disc drives as stories were captured. Initially, some video and audio extracts were picked to produce short (ten minute) aural histories which will run, virtually, alongside the physical OneHutFull exhibition. These extracts were not selected for use in the main exhibition story loop.

Editing the remaining material, collected over a year, was a bifurcated process. A deliberate decision had been made to capture visual and sonic media separately as it was not known how the material would eventually be incorporated into the exhibition. This resulted in a complex set of editing possibilities, decisions and processes because the final media produced would need to include three video streams and a multichannel audio stream, all perfectly synchronised and loopable.

Counter-intuitively, an audio narrative was built first from word-based storyboards. These storyboards were created from a combination of field notes (taken at the time of recording) and more abstract ideas of how certain events might be perceived sonically.

The decision was made to create this audio story in surround sound format from the outset. Layering techniques were used in proprietary sound manipulation software and a combination of found and abstract sounds were blended to produce an eight-minute, loopable soundscape.

Interplay between sonic and visual content was crucial and decisions were made, often, to let the films run against a backdrop of ambient sound, rather than constant human dialogue. The ambient sound was sometimes so subliminal it was almost absent.

The ultimate metaphoric sound is silence. If you can get the film to a place with no sound where there should be sound, the audience will crowd that silence with sounds and feelings of their own making. (Murch 1998: 100)

The surround soundscape was then imported into video editing software and used as the temporal framework on which to hang visual elements.

Initially, the visual editing comprised a single time-line which evolved steadily over a four week period of intensive editing, in order to produce a three screen narrative, as discussed.

This timeline was then triplicated and varying visual elements, fragments and complete sub-stories were added to the second two timelines until three interlocking but varying visual narratives were completed.

Ultimately the success, or otherwise, of the OHF immersive audiovisual experience relies on a good, authentic story. The results of all the editing processes and technologies within the production of OneHutFull have to lead to this.

The need for stories that shed light on the fears and value of the age is as vital - perhaps more vital - now as it ever was. (Thurlow 2008: 64)

Production

The line between editing and production blurred in this project at the beginning of the editing process. The audio track was fairly quickly transformed from component parts, through editing to a finished audio track within a short time frame. This meant that the audio track was effectively 'produced' as soon as it had been edited. The visual components were more complex. As they had been edited in synchronisation with the audio, each could be 'printed' separately. These three separate prints then had to be compressed using various bespoke software and finally installed onto three separate flash usb drives for each of the media servers discussed previously. Finally, audio was printed onto one of the drives for full installation into the hut.

Installation was bespoke and all the physical wiring and electrical connections were completed and hidden within the hut infrastructure. Three projectors were installed, projecting onto three bespoke perspex panels in the hut's internal space, surrounded by six active speakers. The hut interior was painted black, lined with a combination of wood and sheep wool (also back) and the entire floor was covered in black astroturf.

The astroturf furnished the dual benefit of reducing light and sound spill inside the hut while also reflecting and gently subverting the concept of the 'great green grass outdoors', so much a signifier for farming, Dartmoor and the project itself.

Presentation

Ultimately, the test for this project was to take it 'to market'. The hut was tested extensively on small audiences prior to public release however most of this audience had been involved in the initial planning or execution of the project so the resulting feedback was often subjective and probably biased.

At an earlier concept stage, Exeter Phoenix staff had also offered useful advice on populating the hut space with audience. The consensus, while qualitative, was useful in planning for an optimum of six adults at any showing of the audiovisual loop. The space provided a fairly tight area within which an immersive experience could be attained and more than six adults began to produce counter-productive results.

Conclusion

The OneHutFull project is still on-going. From the point of inception to launch there has been underlying philosophy inculcated between the project founder (Wolton) and the commissioned artist (Visser) to allow initial ideas, investigations and findings to drive the direction of the final piece of made work.

From raw anecdotes, through aesthetics and ergonomics, to the final presentation of the work and collection of audience data, there has always been a requirement and a desire to 'incorporate' along the way.

As a result, the final arc of this work (although not fully completed yet) has seen an expansion from the stories of Dartmoor sheep farmers and their livelihoods to include and reveal new narratives around the pioneering makers and craftspeople who are just beginning to bring wool and wool products towards a new future.

Interviews with innovators making such things as bio-sustainable chairs from wool or burial garments from felt, reveal the same strength, tenacity and adaptability that characterised the farmers and families who were the first subjects of our investigations.

As Lambert suggests..

Story becomes a teaching tool for survival. And one could argue that the human race still uses story for this reason, to put the stakes of survival and the emotions that come with it, as the basis for attentive consideration of a remembered event. (Lambert 2013: 7)

The OneHutFull project was not originally designed as a quantitative research project. However, as some significant data will be collected from polled audiences throughout the project lifecycle, this may become subject to separate research and analysis.

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