The Ashwell Project: Creating an online geospatial community

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As the world becomes increasingly digital, so too must the way in which archaeologists engage with the public (Morgan and Eve, 2012, 521). This was particularly pertinent during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many outreach and engagement efforts began moving online. One such project was The Ashwell Project. This project was similar to that of Layers of London (Cullum, Jarvis, and Unitt, 2020, 5) and Know Your Place West of England (Streich 2017, 3), as it combines aspects of participatory GIS and crowdsourcing of datasets, yet also utilises web application functionality of geolocation and navigation to move from one narrative to the next. The project’s main area of study was how to include anecdotal datasets within local heritage education, and how to engage less technically competent users with inherently complex digital systems.

Subject

The project’s aim was to function as a proof of concept, collating local narratives from the village of Ashwell, North Hertfordshire. The demographic of the village is a combination of the aging and many commuter families. As such, it was vital to ensure the design considered the different needs of these groups. The project was created using the design thinking process of empathising with the users, ideation, development, and testing. The result was a free to access geospatial web application. The project was co-developed by Ashwell Museum and the University of York and aimed to capture previously excluded datasets in one digital resource, educating the public about local narratives, and creating a digital community and so tackling the issue of isolation. The datasets involved within the project included anecdotal and intangible heritage alongside formal tangible heritage datasets, forming a ‘living digital record’. The application has since been taken down, yet there are several lessons that can be learned from this project. Firstly, how to encourage older generations to use these applications. Secondly, how important design is in encouraging wider participation with such technologies. Thirdly, how progressive web applications can encourage further use. From user case study analysis, the project was shown to be effective across a wide range of demographics, particularly those targeted. It also revealed the wide range of narratives and stories individuals consider important, thus providing opportunities to reassess what we consider as significant heritage.

Discussion

This paper provides interesting opportunities and lessons in all aspects concerning digital engagement of diverse communities. It considers how to best encourage wider uptake of participatory GIS and crowdsourcing datasets, alongside how users’ own devices can be utilised to increase engagement with both tangible and intangible heritage. Within this poster, it will argue that such approaches should be considered on a much wider scale, encouraging wider communities to engage with such platforms. The project revealed that the process of design thinking with iterative testing is imperative in designing heritage assets. Crucially for this session, it shows how it is possible to engage the public with archaeology throughout a global pandemic.

References

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