

“Kaleidoscope Eyes”: The Exploration of a Sense of Place Through Art Strolling in Mozilla Hubs

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Abstract—Based on my workshop in Cambridge, the UK, I discuss Mozilla Hubs as an intervention to enact in-person strolling experiences through an online photovoice exhibition. I explore this virtual space with stakeholders from relevant backgrounds to open dynamic understandings of a sense of place in a virtual world. I argue that this online space intervenes in the power-centered system of curation. Additionally, I find that there is a nonlinear narration of the past and present in the Hubs, since it unfolds the understanding of time, art and memory. And I notice that not only optimistic possibilities happen in this online space but also there are several challenges, like ethical problems, waiting to be explored.

Keywords—Mozilla Hubs, a sense of place, virtual space, memories, art

1 Introduction

According to the National Geographic Society [1], there are many definitions of place, ranging from the simple “a meaningful space or place” to the more complex “an area with unique physical and human characteristics and inter-connectedness with other places”. And they argue that a sense of place is the emotion a person feels towards an area based on their experiences. Many community art researches always focus on people’s a sense of place in the reality, for example, some stakeholders (Caiman and Jakobson, 2021; Lee, 2013) [2] [3] conclude that in-person community art projects can act as a ‘bridge’ that contributes to migrant children’s sense of integration/place and promotes their wellbeing. Nowadays, not only the places in our daily life, but also the places created in the online virtual space, provide a wider platform for people to discuss deeply and think more critically. For me, I would like to explore people’s a sense of place in Mozilla Hubs, an online platform offering ‘rooms’ where people are encouraged to meet, share and collaborate together in private 3D virtual spaces. I would like to explore a sense of place on a virtual account.

I organised ‘The art in the stroll, the stroll in the art’, an Mozilla Hubs workshop with international students in the University of Cambridge, the United Kingdom, in the spring of 2022. My participants and I co-curated and co-created an online photovoice exhibition in the Hubs, where we will display photos and podcasts created during our strolling in Cambridge to revitalise a sense of place in the virtual space. Firstly, I invited

my participants to stroll with me around Cambridge. I suggested to my participants that it would be interesting to take photos while we were strolling, and also they were welcome to just enjoy strolling without taking any photos. Additionally, with the consent of my participants, I invited them to develop our workshop as a podcast. I used my mobile phone to record human voices, birdsong, car engines and other ambient sounds and it could be reposted as a podcast channel. Then, I co-created Mozilla Hubs (Figure 1)¹ with my participants and I discussed the Hubs with them and other stakeholders through casual conversation. It is very interesting for me to appreciate different stakeholders' exploration in the Hubs, and my exploration is no exception, as if we are using the kaleidoscope to see through this virtual space.



Fig. 1. Co-creations of Mozilla Hubs (author's own photographs)

¹Links for the Mozilla Hubs in my workshop: Giri and Sun: <https://hub.link/rJeN69k>; Xizhi and Yiran: <https://hub.link/m2EvLkn>; Ruoqi: <https://hub.link/pCuJGXT> (please use Chrome as your browser while 'strolling' in the Hubs.)

2 Intervene in the power-centered system of curation

In the Hubs, I found that every stakeholder took part in the curation of this online photovoice exhibition, instead of following instructions from a curator or curator teams, which intervenes in the power system in the creation of the exhibition, especially the power of the curator. There were numerous initial models for stakeholders to choose as their environment for the Hubs and it is stakeholders, participants and I, who discussed the placement of photos, podcasts, animated maps and other various materials (Figure 2). In some photos, stakeholders were participants who were photographed and gazed down at, in a lower position than the photographer. However, during the co-curation, the power system of curation was regenerating, and it is a lasting and ongoing process, since stakeholders can enter and edit by themselves in this Hubs room at any time. And thus I argue that the centre of power in this photovoice exhibition is no longer the curator's, every stakeholders can use their creativity to intervene in the power system, and can develop a co-creating and ongoing virtual space. The Hubs changes the way of curating an online photo exhibition and adds more materials to it, like podcasts and animated maps. Therefore, I argue that this is a co-created photovoice exhibition in the virtual space, which produces a dynamic power system of curation.

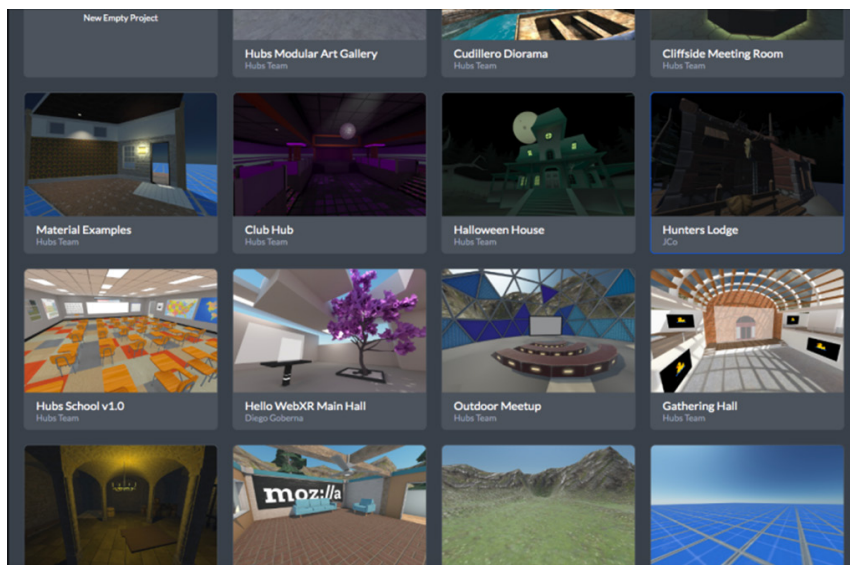


Fig. 2. Different initial models for co-creators (author's own photograph)

Dare [4] is applying a co-creation approach to production in the Hubs, where participants can change the installation and contribute their own smart ideas, exploring ways of co-working and framing intelligence. This practice interests me with a template, which references Le Guin's [5] redefinition of technology and knowledge as a cultural carrier bag rather than a weapon of domination or manipulation. From my perspective, in the Hubs, technologies, knowledge, photos, podcasts, and various elements are collected in a digital carrier bag by participants' preferences, as a dynamic and relatively

equal environment. I think in the Hubs there is no fixed higher authority or the centered power system controlled by the organizer or the curator, like me, since the whole space is co-creating by all stakeholders.

3 Time travel throughout all time

I find that there is no longer a linear narration of the past and present in the Hubs, since it develops a dynamic and unfolding understanding of time. It is available for every stakeholder throughout their whole life. Stakeholders can enter this online space as avatars again and again, but not in a same way. They are producing a dynamic a sense of place spirally in this virtual space. They can re-appreciate, re-join, and re-curate and re-call, re-enjoy and re-create the memories of their in-person strolling, and the stories mentioned while they were strolling, whenever and wherever they like. Re-creations, memories and experiences produce, change, and vibrate in the Hubs, continuously and vividly, which will be explained in the following paragraphs.

I think the Hubs explores the way of enacting a dynamic understanding of the past. In the Hubs, it seems that photos and the podcast enact the past linearly. Firstly, they enact the past of participants' in-person strolling experiences in Cambridge, and then the stories and memories mentioned in the photos and podcast during the in-person strolling, enact the past of participants' personal experiences. However, I argue that the Hubs enacts the understanding of 'the past' in a non-linear and multi-directional way, since when avatars enter this virtual space they can enjoy photos (Figure 3) or the podcast separately, or the photos and the podcast together. They can have their preference to unfold the past by mixing various feelings and materials. For example, one of the participants, Yiran Xu, an MPhil student in the University of Cambridge, recalled her childhood memory while strolling in Cambridge since the shape and the colour of a cloud were so familiar. And when she entered the Hubs built by the materials collected during the strolling, she was stroked by a insight and started narrating her childhood memory again, but linked with the understanding of a movie she had seen recently. I use Yiran's example to explain that the past in the Hubs can enact in non-linear and multiple ways. She had just seen the movie recently, but somehow she talked about her childhood memory first. Although the past is narrated verbally, it is enacted by storytelling, movie appreciating and other ways waiting to be explored.

In addition, the Hubs provides a new narration of the presence. When avatars enter this space, they can produce different strolling routes, different perspectives from which to appreciate photos, different clips of the podcast, and different interactions with other avatars. It enacts live art each time; as Sofaer [6] explains, live art comes into being at the actual moment of encounter between artist and spectator and the notion of 'presence' is key to the effect of the work. In this virtual space, 'presence' encounters every material, including every avatar. Not only can artists and participants make live art 'lived', but photos, podcasts, avatars and other materials continue to produce their vivid life in this space, through revitalising memories and producing new ones.

Therefore, I argue that in this virtual space, the understanding of time is no longer enacted as a line of past and present, and it shifts into a flow, as a co-happening and a twisting together. The enacting of the past is dynamic and the appreciation of

the presense is vivid. It is a time journey of art, places, memories, and materials are blurring and unfolding continuously, but also problematically sometimes, which I will explain more in the following part.



Fig. 3. An avatar appreciating the photo in the Hubs (author's own photograph)

4 Opportunities and challenges all at once

From my observation, I notice that not only Hubs can bring more fresh inspirations to people's life, but also there are several challenges, like ethical problems, in this virtual space. Our online photovoice exhibition can be an individual or private form of art when stakeholders choose not to share the link of Hubs with the public, retaining it as an exclusive place with personal memories. Also, when stakeholders consent, the Hubs link can be shared and made widely available through social media, and it can become a work of public art to demonstrate more social concerns as collective memories. When the photovoice Hubs room is open to the public, it unfolds the virtual space to incorporate more people, combining another audience of visitors, creators, and curators, and their roles are dynamic and changing in relation to each other. This can bring a number of ethical concerns and disorders: who will maintain this Hubs room? Can stakeholders who joined later change the Hubs room? Do they need consent from the original team? Is there a tendency for the initial team to be more powerful in this virtual agency?... Although the photovoice Hubs room unfolds and blurs art, memories, and places to contribute to a dynamic understanding of a sense of place, ethical problems emerge and need more discussion in relation to the virtual space. In addition, my participant Masmi Sun, an MPhil student in the University of Cambridge observes that he does not believe that this Hubs space can ever be a private or individual work of art, as network security cannot be trusted. There is advanced encryption, but it can easily be attacked by hackers. He prefers to save his personal artwork on a hard drive, rather connected to the network, and thus Hubs is not the priority for him to create online artwork.

Interestingly, Sun also shares his inspirations from this virtual photovoice exhibition. He suggests that this kind of photo-podcast virtual exhibition can be combined

with Google Earth, to explore the world from above with satellite imagery, 3D global terrain, and 3D buildings. Similarly, another participant Xizhi Zhang, an MPhil student in the University of Cambridge, loves retracing her travels through the auto-created Apple photo map (Figure 4). She says that it would be appreciated if Hubs could create a photovoice virtual exhibition automatically for her to expand her sense of the places where she has travelled.

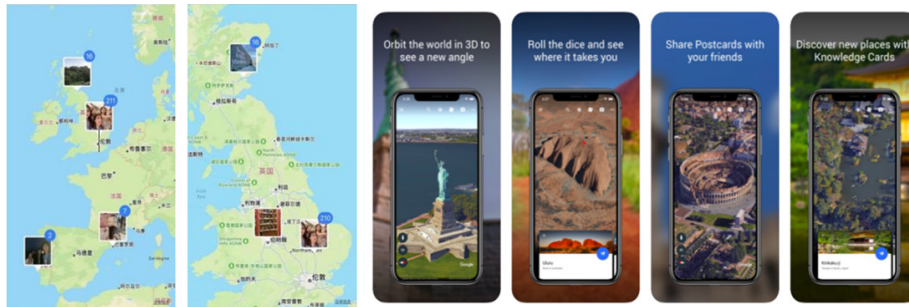


Fig. 4. Xizhi's Apple photo map and Google Earth from Apple store

Tianyi, a Master's student in Design Futures at the Royal College of Art, argues that photovoice Hubs can be considered as a future data centre for saving pictures, voices and memories. She compares the photovoice Hubs with the Apple photo map which saves photographs with their locations automatically, while for the former, the algorithm used to auto-curate photos and voices should be discussed further. In my view, the way of saving information, like memories, photos and voices, is entangling with the development of the times, as Foucault suggests:

The idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. [7]

I argue that Hubs offers a modern way to save private information in today's life, and it can explore more new ways in the future, but not necessarily an entirely unproblematic way. For example, Sun has mentioned the concerns of security of personal information. Also, I think attention should be focused on wider questions, such as accessibility, language, wi-fi and equipment access, since some people do not have broadband or computers to enable access to Hubs.

5 Conclusion

In this article, I am discussing Mozilla Hubs as an intervention to enact the in-person strolling through online photovoice exhibition and explore a dynamic understanding of a sense of place in the virtual world. I co-created Hubs with my participants based on their in-person strolling experiences and discussed this virtual space with stakeholders

from related backgrounds. I argue that the co-creation of the Hubs intervene in the power system of curation by deconstructing instructions that come from one central curator. Most participants showed the strong sense of participation in co-creation that accounts for the strong exploration of a sense of place. In addition, this virtual space develops a dynamic understanding of a sense of place through unfolding time, innovating a narration from a line of past and present into a co-happening and co-twisting flow. Moreover, the photovoice Hubs enacts a journey of unfolding art, places and memories recursively. It provides a new way to save and revitalise past information in the future, while it is also ethically problematic. This article ends here, but it will continue. I am continuing to explore this virtual space: community art always focuses on the human and assumes that it is the human who finds or constructs the community. However, the Hubs unlocks a new way to explore community art with non-human materials and when all the humans leave this Hubs room, it will become a non-human community. And then, what will happen to the time, arts, places, and memories?

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