

Failed yet successful: OurPlace and Digital Civics

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My PhD was undertaken within the umbrella of ‘Digital Civics’: a research agenda which intended to highlight the benefits of relational, rather than transactional, models for institutional services. This document aims to introduce and discuss the ‘OurPlace’ project, how it (and the wider Digital Civics agenda) failed successfully, and how future projects in this space could see greater success.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **HCI theory, concepts and models**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Digital Civics

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1 BACKGROUND: THE DIGITAL CIVICS AGENDA

Much of my HCI research career (2014 onwards) has taken place as a part of the Digital Civics agenda, set against a backdrop of economic austerity enforced by multiple consecutive conservative governments in the UK. This period saw severe cuts made to many of the UK’s public services: affecting everything from parks and recreation, to education and social care. The Digital Civics research agenda was developed as a direct response to these developments [6]: claiming that a civic university should be compelled to reflect on how its HCI research could be of use and value to its local citizens and authorities, extending beyond the confines of its projects to meaningfully engage with a given local context. It framed existing institutional service delivery as something ‘done to’ citizens, and aimed to investigate how technology could support more participatory transactional models, where citizens take active roles. The Digital Civics agenda has since been taken up by numerous HCI researchers around the world [3, 4], and has been used to frame and motivate research in areas including participatory community consultation [8], local democracy [13], knowledge sharing [1], public health [2], formal education [5], and sense-making [7].

2 OURPLACE

My PhD project, *OurPlace*, took place under this Digital Civics umbrella. Initially motivated by the under-funding of local parks and the subsequent diminishing of them as an educational resource for their surrounding schools, OurPlace was a mobile-based platform which aimed to support communities in creating and sharing interactive learning activities about the places they care most about—providing a technology medium for place-making and hyper-local knowledge sharing. These digital activities are produced within the application by combining together bite-size modular tasks, which ask the learner to perform a particular action: such as taking photos, recording audio, or navigating to a specific location. Activities could be associated with a given place through the Google Maps API for nearby users to access, and could also be shared through posters with generated QR codes.

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50 During the project, I held a large number of short-term and longitudinal engagements with local
51 schools, volunteer groups, and non- and for-profit organisations to investigate how existing place
52 and community infrastructures can be better utilised as resources for mobile learning, and how
53 mobile learning technologies can be designed to promote civic learning and the empowerment of
54 place stakeholders.

55 2.1 Successes

56 By many measurements, the project was a success. Not least, I got a doctorate out of it [9]. It also
57 resulted in three academic publications: one highlighting the design space for civic mobile learning
58 within place [10]; one discussing the platform itself [11]; and one which explored how place-based
59 mobile learning could be supported within various formal education contexts [12].

60 More meaningfully to me personally (and in-line with the core motivation of the Digital Civics
61 agenda), the project also had positive impact on multiple communities local to the university. I
62 was able to work alongside disadvantaged groups and schools in low-income areas, introducing
63 many children to the possibility of higher education, computing science, and the valuable resources
64 surrounding their schools. The platform supported volunteer-based interest groups in creating
65 digitally-augmented installations, without needing financial or local government assistance. Finally,
66 one of the partner organisations managed to procure external funding to create a fixed-term staff
67 position, dedicated to producing and delivering OurPlace-based activities. I was—and still am—
68 proud these successes, and I do believe the project to have been worthwhile beyond academic
69 achievement.

70 2.2 Failures

71 While reflecting on the project during my thesis write-up, however, I identified a contradiction:
72 by supporting community resilience and capacity in the face of issues resulting from austerity
73 measures, were Digital Civics projects like OurPlace in danger of facilitating these measures
74 themselves? While not the intention behind the Digital Civics agenda, re-configuring citizens'
75 roles and relationships with the services provided by local authorities could inadvertently work to
76 enable conservative policies which placed increasing emphasis on volunteerism, small government,
77 and individual responsibility. Would a financially stretched local council need to continue to fund
78 a park's educational officer, if school groups could simply use technology to access volunteered
79 community knowledge? Instead of empowering citizens to have more involvement and agency
80 within their government's processes, such technologies could be used as an excuse to simply remove
81 those processes: rather than re-configuring agency and responsibility, shifting it entirely onto the
82 shoulders of individuals. Unfortunately, the possibility for OurPlace to be misused was highlighted
83 in one of my studies, where the participant institutions saw value in the app as it was more
84 economically viable than human tour guides. I don't believe that there were other instances during
85 these studies where the app could be argued to have been used as a tool to support 'down-sizing'
86 (in fact, OurPlace technically created a job), but it was still concerning.

87 Finally, in 2020 the project collapsed: COVID struck, and I finished my PhD and moved abroad.
88 Whilst during the project I had support from supervisors and my community partners had been
89 motivated, OurPlace was still a typical HCI PhD project: a largely one-person show, with me being
90 responsible for the platform's planning, design, development, support, networking, and research
91 output. When I left, capacity plummeted to the occasional technical maintenance update. The
92 volunteer groups I was working with, who had already been balancing multiple commitments,
93 became largely inactive during the pandemic. The grant funding for the staff position came through,
94 but no activities could be run. What had looked to be an active, ongoing impact on the local
95 community suddenly became ephemeral.

3 MOVING FORWARD

In their initial proclamation of the Digital Civics agenda, Olivier and Wright admit that their proposed meaningful, systemic change will take significant amounts of time [6]. Even within the smaller scope of research projects, they posit that the development of long-term relationships between researchers, citizens and local authorities will be necessary if new relational models are to be realised, and the potential roles for technology within them discovered. I believe my project highlights that this goal cannot be fully realised on an individual researcher level: it also requires research institutions to be prepared to forge, maintain and support relationships and initiatives across multiple staff, so that they are not immediately compromised by unforeseen circumstances or individuals transitioning between positions.

Furthermore, rather than designing in preparation for the permanent loss of public services, Digital Civics technologies should work to mitigate hardships inflicted by austerity measures in a way which also implements improvements for when these measures eventually come to an end. I would like to see future Digital Civics projects critically explore how (or if) these new processes and technologies can be designed to mitigate hardships inflicted by austerity measures in a way which can't also be used to legitimise them.

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