

# New Technologies, New Interpretations: the visitor experience at the Shrine of Remembrance, Melbourne

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## Abstract

This paper explores the intersections between historical interpretation, mobile technology and museology at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne. It presents two perspectives — curatorial and academic — on the introduction of a hand-held mobile device to provide site interpretation and enhance visitor experiences at the Shrine.

Built in 1934 to honour the dead of the First World War, the Shrine is a major commemorative and ceremonial site. Its scope has expanded to include remembrance of all wars and peacekeeping operations in which Victorians have served. A recent building extension has added significant exhibition galleries. The renewal of the histories of Australia's military participation, and the communication of these to younger generations, are central to the Shrine's mission. But the Shrine has also been the focus of contestation and anti-war protest, and site's history is complex and multi-layered.

How then, might the introduction of a mobile interpretative device add to the experience of visitors who range from veterans and their families, to school children and Australian and overseas tourists? How might use of such technology shape visitor interactions with the volunteer guides at the Shrine, and with the social experience of visiting an historical site? And how do visitors respond to the various elements of history-telling on the mobile device, from changing voices and narratives, to the different kinds of visual and aural content presented (photographs, film, oral histories), and the use of the technology within the very different spaces (crypt, forecourt, balcony) of the Shrine?

## Mobile Interpretation: a Research Framework

The use of hand-held mobile interpretative technologies for the enhancement of visitor experiences, and the provision of new capacities for illustrating the social and spatial histories of particular museological and heritage sites, has increased rapidly over the past five years. In tandem with this, the increased accessibility of mobile devices with video and image functions has had an impact on thinking about how such devices might enrich visitor interpretation at historic and heritage sites, providing a mobile 'exhibition' where various types of materials — photographs, film footage, aural materials — have been selected and curated to facilitate (in ways that are more or less directive) particular visitor experiences. Linked to such developments has been a further consideration about the ways that such mobile interpretative technologies might 'isolate' visitors in a self-contained 'bubble', thus removing their interactions with co-visitors and limiting the 'socialibility' or exchanges (with friends and strangers) that are seen to be an important aspect of gallery and museum experiences.<sup>8</sup>

With such general questions in mind, in late 2008 a multi-disciplinary research team at the University of Melbourne, comprising scholars with expertise in architectural heritage and digital representation, social history and museum studies, and the design and evaluation of interactive digital technology was formed.<sup>9</sup> Our overarching research aimed to explore how a holistic practice and understanding of the application of mobile technologies in the interpretation of public heritage could be developed and evaluated. We began by surveying examples of mobile interpretative devices then in operation globally, including in Australia a hand-held interpretation

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<sup>8</sup> More detailed discussion of the project research aims and its findings can be found in Smith, Lewi, Darian-Smith & Pearce 2010 and Darian-Smith, Lewi & Smith 2009.

<sup>9</sup> The research was supported through the University of Melbourne's Strategic Research Initiative Fund, and the team comprised: Hannah Lewi and Bharat Dave (Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning); Kate Darian-Smith (School of Historical Studies, Faculty of Arts); Wally Smith and Jon Pearce (Department of Information Systems, Faculty of Science).

wand device (developed by Acoustiguide) at the Australian War Memorial, and an historical walking trail where material was downloaded via mobile phones implemented by the National Trust (WA) and the City of Perth.

But the project was always intended to have a practical side, to design a prototype device that would test various narrative and non-narrative approaches to the provision of archival historical media, and would work in association with an external partner interested in the same issues — albeit from a different perspective. The Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne was in many ways the ideal partner for the project. As the largest war memorial in the state of Victoria, the Shrine and its surrounds are of architectural and cultural significance. Moreover, since it opened in 1934, the Shrine has had a complex and multi-layered history, and has at times been the focus of contestation and anti-war protest. It is also a ‘living place’, used actively by the wider community for a range of commemorative and ceremonial events — including during being the pivotal site of official Anzac Day events. The Shrine’s built form and design, the meanings attached to its interior spaces, and the substantial archive of historical documentation relating to the histories of the Shrine itself and of Australia’s provided considerable research opportunities.

The Shrine of Remembrance is a large grey stone monument, on the southern end of the main axis through Melbourne’s central business district. Stylistically, the Shrine belongs to the architectural neo-classicism of the 1920s in Australia, and is a highly symbolic built structure: its Greek style colonnaded porticoes on the north and south facades, for instance, visually symbolise the spirit of democracy and the freedom for which the Australian armed forces believed they were fighting for. The Shrine embodies the grief of the community that built it, and the honour accorded to those Victorians who served in the First World War (1914-18), of whom approximately one-fifth of those who served abroad were killed. The scope of the Shrine’s commemorative reach has expanded since then to include all Victorians, and also all Australians, who have served and died as part of a national force in war and peacekeeping. Yet although it has an imposing presence, the

Shrine is often seen as dated and perplexing by younger generations, and may appear to those passing-by as an unapproachable monumental structure where (in sometime critique of war memorials in general) war and victory are celebrates and glorified.

To interpret this history and the depth of Australian experiences of wartime represented by the Shrine, the curatorial emphasis is on the individual stories of all members of communities at war, not just those who faced the most awful experiences on the military front line. The myriad stories about war provide the content for exhibitions, public lectures and school educational programs at the Shrine. They are the means by which the Shrine’s curatorial and education team aims to reach the wider community and the array of visitors, and to promote understanding of the impact of armed conflict in a way that might help to influence how Australians understand the costs of war on all members of a society. The annual figures show that 34% of the Shrine’s 550,000 visitors are international, 20% are from elsewhere in Australia and the remainder are from Victoria. There are challenges in representing the Shrine and its purposes to each of these groups, in addressing the diverse origins of Australian’s as well as overseas visitors.

## Development and Evaluation

This paper thus discusses the intersections between historical interpretation and mobile technology at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, and how mobile interpretative technologies can provide site interpretation and enhance visitor experiences at the Shrine. In the project between the University of Melbourne researchers and the Shrine’s curatorial staff, four distinct experiments or case studies were selected for the prototype mobile guide using the Apple iPod Touch, focussing on three distinct sites within the Shrine— the Balcony, the Crypt and the Forecourt — and oral histories or Voices of Victorians at war. These case studies offered distinctive spatial ‘zones’ of different scale, and in each a different approach to the ways that the historical content was told through a range of media (photographs, oral histories, historical film and so on). The device had to be highly usable for

visitors, but the aim was to have distinct features in each experiment relating to differing forms of user control and a range of ways that the visitor was connected with the deeper historical content of the Shrine:

**The Balcony:** This comprised an external viewing platform that runs from the external lower edge of the Shrine's roof, giving the visitor views looking towards the city of Melbourne as well as a view of the Shrine's Forecourt and garden surrounds. The historical content presented here through the prototype guide was a chronological survey of the building and construction of the Shrine, with historical images and accompanying text for four key dates. There was no audio for this experimental segment, and the link between the content and the Balcony site was intentionally oblique — allowing for unguided exploration and unblocked social interaction between co-visitors.

**The Crypt:** Located deep inside the Shrine, the Crypt houses some important artefacts of centrality to the Australian experience of conflict. These objects include *45 Colours*, a large array of regimental flags hung too high for viewers to see in detail; a sculpture entitled *Father and Son* showing two men from World War I and World War II; and the *Changi Flag*, an iconic object from the World War II POW camp. The historical interpretation chosen here directly linked content to the site through a material history enrichment of the objects on display, and allowed for a range of visitor social interaction. It included a sequence of images of the regimental flags, explaining the meanings associated with their colours; images of absent but related objects (military uniforms) and further detail of the *Father and Son* sculpture; and slide show with audio to accompany viewing of the *Changi Flag*.

**The Forecourt:** The World War II Forecourt is a large external area located at the front of the Shrine, and contains important memorials such as The Eternal Flame and the Cenotaph. The prototype guide used 6 film sequences (most with audio), each of 1 minute in duration, to highlight the range of social experience on the site itself, thus forging a highly direct experience for the visitor with site. Such events spanned the opening of the Shrine in 1934; a 'women against war'

demonstration in 1983; and the ANZAC day service in 2009. The intention here was to examine how users of the prototype guide made connections between the present moment and past experiences at the Shrine, with the film footage edited to emphasise immersive crowd scenes.

**Voices:** The final experiment did not link the content on the mobile guide to a particular space, but provided six oral histories (of 3-13 minutes) of experience in key conflicts with no visual accompaniments. This sequence could be listened to as the visitor wandered through the Shrine and the memorial grounds that are around it. The aim here was to examine how visitors responded to content delivered in a context where the link to the site was highly indirect.

What, then, was the evaluative response to these four experiments in the mobile delivery of a tour of a heritage site? The formal evaluation occurred with a culturally diverse sample, and included feedback on the technical and navigational aspects of the prototype tour, although this will not be discussed in this paper. In terms of the content, the evaluation group were asked to respond to a questionnaire on each zone by using an ascending scale of 1-5 indicating their level of satisfaction. The data collected was detailed and can only be summarised here in a gesture to the complexity of user response.

The least engaging zone was seen to be the Balcony, where there was frustration expressed as the intentionally oblique links provided between the images on the guide and the site — and panoramic outlook — itself. There was approval for some of the direct associations between the content and the objects in the Crypt, but the narrated slide show accompanying *The Changi Flag* was seen to be too long. The responses to the Forecourt zone and the Voices sequence were mixed, and in particular for the reactions to the audio histories there were other user variables (cultural background, ability to feel empathy with the personal story told) that determined their appreciation.

There are some broad conclusions that can be drawn from the development and evaluations of these experiments in the use of mobile

interpretative technologies at the Shrine. Given that one of the initial research aims was to look at the ways that a 'lean' approach to content might facilitate socialisation between visitors, it was disappointing that little social interaction among the evaluation group was observed. This is an area that demands further investigation. Most significantly, the evaluative study revealed that there was a very strong user expectation that there be a direct relation between the content on the mobile interpretation device and the actual spaces where it was used. Such findings, and the associated issues of design, are important when considering the potential, and the limitations, in engaging audiences through mobile technologies. And the findings are also being fed into a further process as the Shrine curatorial team looks to develop its own mobile interpretations— illustrating how the research-led investigations can have applied outcomes in the interpretation of heritage sites.

### Future Possibilities

The Shrine's learning and access policy highlights the use of new technologies in the dissemination of research and provision of interpretation for visitors. The research undertaken with the University of Melbourne's multi-disciplinary research team has provided the first step towards introducing hand held technology for tours of the Shrine. A brief is being prepared for the development of a tour using a mobile interpretative device, combining all the media tested, with the aim to develop layers of interpretation and a range of tours, potentially in multiple languages. Such mobile technology can offer more than a linear narrative. Effectively a hand held exhibition, such an interpretive tour will incorporate still images, moving footage and sound. Portable and able to download content from the internet, the Apple i-Touch can integrate several media and encourage interactivity from its audience and through these means will address the diverse needs of visitors to the Shrine.

The greatest challenge for the Shrine will be to provide the depth and variety of interpretation that mobile devices can offer, while engaging the visitor in relationship with the three dimensional spaces through which they are physically moving:

to blend the real and the virtual and balance the visitor experience of each. To this end the Shrine has engaged its voluntary guides in research about the potential of mobile interpretative technologies, as they are key to promoting group interaction in the use of these devices. This strategy recognizes the role currently played by over 90 volunteers at the Shrine in site interpretation and, we hope, will ensure their ownership of the initiative, and the benefit of their continued contribution to its use.

From the perspective of the Shrine's curatorial staff, one of the most useful outcomes of the evaluation of the experimental self-guided tour was that that highlighted the importance of providing both navigational way-finding and interpretation. For example, visitors standing on the balcony of the Shrine were briefly introduced to the dedication of the Shrine in 1934, the Second World War Forecourt, the situation of the Shrine in St Kilda Road and recent architectural developments at the Shrine. Without orienting the visitor to specific points in the landscape before them this gave them a mix of information that was both related and unrelated to what they could see before them. 50% of those who were surveyed indicated that they sought a 180-degree introduction to the view from the balcony, specifically orientating them to elements within their view, before being introduced to additional historical context. They asked for a narrative that guided them to each component and explained the symbolism of what they were looking at. They wanted to be oriented within the space before being given the choice of seeking additional interpretation.

A further revelation from the testing came from the interpretation provided within the Shrine's Hall of Columns. The Changi Flag was introduced through the mobile interpretative device prototype with the following text: *Here a 4-minute audio follows - press to continue.* The evaluation indicated that those participating were put off by the announcement of a 4-minute audio and many did not wish to proceed. An alternative strategy could be to engage audiences in contemplation of the flag, commencing in, for example, the upper right hand corner with 'Judy Garland's' signature. Inscribed by Alf Garland, this signature introduces the story of the

Australian Concert Party at Changi in which he was a player. It allows the story to be told of the exemplary role the Concert Party played as a survival mechanism, until the last year of World War II when the Japanese ceased such activities. The flag itself provides rich stories of the experience of prisoners of war and of Australian military history. Through this simple narrative the flag can be navigated, with the additional media on the device used to combine the best of this original artefact with the best of technology.

The research undertaken by University of Melbourne research team with the Shrine has given some understanding of how this interaction occurs and may be facilitated. The principle of layering interpretation, as with exhibition text, provides choices for visitors who are empowered to select more or less information as they wish. These, combined with clear navigational cues, will allow visitors to select according to their interest; what they see and read, or listen to, offering flexibility, interactivity and responsiveness to their needs, Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance and its surrounds, intended as spaces for reflection and remembrance, and today for learning, are enigmatic to many who visit. However, the collaborative research and evaluation for this project has shown that mobile interpretative technologies can enrich visitor experiences and provide new insights into Australian experiences of war in the past and today.

**This paper has been independently peer-reviewed.**

## References

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## About the Authors

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