Digital Champion *Good ideas*

Introduction

Hello and welcome to the Digital Champion's Good Ideas Guide.

I'm Hannah Nicklin, and as the Digital Champion my job is to nudge the Fun Palaces to be more inventive and engaged with digital technology than they might otherwise have the capacity or the experience to be. I'm here to try and make your job – producing that great big transformative community experience – a little easier, with some *good ideas*, some prompts and contexts.

If you ever have any questions or ideas that you want to talk through between now and October, just let me know. Drop me an email hn@funpalaces.co.uk

What is 'digital'?

Well obviously it's a wide definition – but I'm going to suggest that we forget some of the more conventional uses of 'digital' (not least because the lovely people at Fun Palaces HQ have done some great advice on social media etc. so you don't need that repeated)

I'm not here to help you think about digital as a **tool** as '**marketing**', '**youth engagement**, **'a screen'**. Instead I want to encourage you to think about it as **a medium – one where you can tell all manner of stories** appealing to all manner of people, and one that can be *made* by everyone.

I'd like to encourage you to think of the digital medium as a mix of the following things, I'll explain a tiny bit under each one and then will present a series of **quick case studies** of easy/inventive/cheap/great things other people have done with Digital that you could learn from.
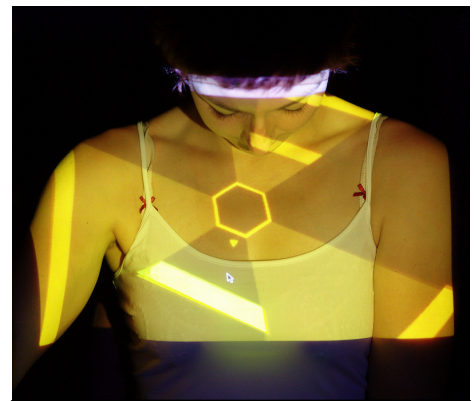

A performance where you listened on headphones to a story about the death of a friend-from-the-internet, whilst the projected internet wanderings of the left-archives of social media were projected onto the silent storyteller.

Digital as…
- **An ethos**
- **An aesthetic**
- **Accessibility**
- **A mechanic**
- **A material**

An ethos
Internet culture is a big influence on digital culture - Early internet culture was **radical, free and all about sharing and learning** – Tim Berners Lee set up an early version of the world wide web to share lab results in the world-wide collaborative research work of CERN. He gave it away royalty-free and patent-free. There is a new (or renewed) collectivism that is emerging in digital culture influence by the web's connectivity, as well as a do-it-yourself way of working, because it was made up by just some people, and just some more people continue to remake it.

In many ways it allows us to be more human that we ever have been – more connected, telling our folk tales to people all over the world, drawn together by common interests, or jokes, or pasttimes. It is testing the 200 year-old invention of copyright with a return to a much older notion of creative commons – take it, adapt it, pass it on. Media (the stories we tell ourselves about the world) are less centralised. **This is a *very* Fun Palaces idea**: **don't just give people a chance to fit into what you want to make – make it *with*, make something that is different because others were making it with you.**

An aesthetic

I don't mean all blue lights and bleepy bloopy noises that computers haven't made for years – I mean that some of the most exciting work today understands the shifting, built, rebuilt, rebuilt iterative nature of the digital.
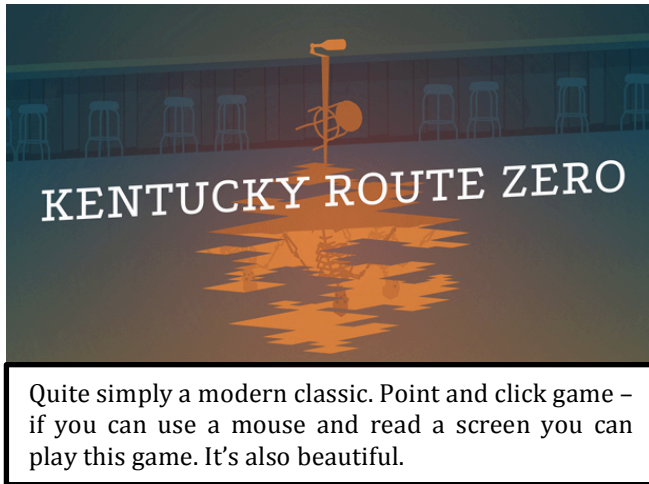
Quite simply a modern classic. Point and click game – if you can use a mouse and read a screen you can play this game. It's also beautiful.

It's also good to thinking about it as (at its best) returning to a participative, iterative form. What that means is designing with the people you make for, testing, and trying again – that means paper prototyping (building things out of paper to test them!), that means making a simple game idea and playing it in real life and then asking 'how do we make this better'.

And finally there is something to understand in 'aesthetic' about the visuals of games and digital culture – things like Proteus, Kentucky Route Zero, Sword and Sworcery, Fez, Gone Home. Increasingly the best art in digital culture isn't trying to make itself look like reality. It's looking for its own way to look and be – pixelated, blocky, something else entirely.

Accessibility

Quite simply, some careful but easy choices made in dealing with digital technology in the your curation of an event can make the output much more accessible. For example, adding captions to your video (easy in Youtube) or posting a text *as well as* a soundcloud recording of the text. There are also ways of being **radically accessible,** that is, making work that is designed directly for people who usually receive a second class 'adapted' accessibility – for example the sound-based game Papa Sangre (both digital and parlour game versions) from Coney privilege those living with visual impairment. The best way to make work that is radically accessible is to make work with people whom it is aimed at

A mechanic

Video games are a huge part of digital culture – they *are* digital culture – but they build on a history of play from which theatre and storytelling themselves originated. I.e., it's not new, it's old, human. Johan Huizinga calls us *Homo Ludens* – playing humans – and explains how we understand our world through play as children, and learn to play the game of 'adult' 'culture' or 'society', almost seamlessly. Games and play are not the opposite of 'serious' and 'real' though – they are aside from it, a place of transgression, new rules, testing, and a rare *unproductive* space in our lives. This can be an incendiary pastime in a world of surplus and productivity. So, what does all this mean?

Games are a way of telling stories about our world – a way of taking simple rules or systems and spinning a wheel – setting them in play. They demand that people make them together, and that they make them up – the rules are always a jumping off point for *whatever you want to do*. **This is Fun Palaces**. Right there.

To understand games is to understand how to make a space where anyone can contribute. Don't just think digitally – they influence digital culture and are influenced by it but games are also: Bridge, make believe, Buckaroo, Grandmother's Footsteps, Consequences, Risk, that thing you used to fold up into a little fortune teller in the playground, football, table tennis, crazy golf. There are lots of games, for example, that you can play, re-make, and share on the Ludocity wiki for all ages, capabilities and number of participants – digital culture pervades offline and in non-technology spaces. **Part of working with digital well is understanding when not to use it.** So think about that, too.

A material.

Digital technology is finally, also a material – it's a thing that art is made with, it is a thing we test and understand and sculpt experience and encounters with. A highly influential technologist Tom Armitage wrote the following for a newspaper of interesting miscellany around performance and technology for me, you can read the full article here, and the following is the key thread of the article, reproduced extensively because this is such an important point, put so eloquently by Armitage:

> "To make art with technology, one does not use it as a tool; one must understand it as a material. Technology is not always a tool, an engineering substrate; it can be something to mould, to shape, to sculpt with.
>
> Materials have desires, affordances, and textures; they have grains. We can work with that grain, understanding what the material wishes to be, wishes to do – or we can deliberately choose to work against it. We must understand that grain and make a deliberate choice. […]"
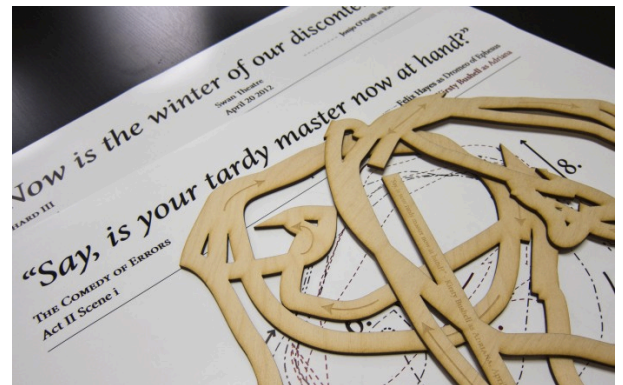
A laser cut shape of the movements made by performers in Act II Scene I of the Comedy Of Errors – Tom Armitage and the RSC

Case studies!

Day of the Figurines
web link

A table top adventure played remotely over a long period of time using text messages to inform players of where their figure is, and to instruct the movers on what actions you want your figurine to take. Figurines talked to one another through text messages, moved about their business, went about their days.

CASTLE, FOREST, ISLAND, SEA
"A philosophy-based adventure story for the Open University"
link to more info
Play it here

Castle, Forest, Island, Sea is a game made for the Open University Philosophy department by Hide&Seek. The game is made with a writer, an illustrator and put together in the popular and incredibly easy to use text-adventure engine Twine. Twine allows you to drag and drop elements of a story-journey you write to fit together into an interactive choice-based story. This is a great example of one of them. You can read an easy how-to-make-a-twine-game guide over here.

The Smell of Rain Reminds Me Of You – Hannah Nicklin

This is one of the earliest works that I made – and I offer it here as an example of something anyone can do on no budget. The Green Room in Manchester gave me 100 umbrellas as a starting point to make a piece of outdoor performance but the brief was totally open. I made a piece called 'The Smell of Rain Reminds Me of You' – I used a simple Tumblr blog with a 'submit' function to collect anonymous stories of people of kissing in the rain from my twitter

followers (http://rainonmy.tumblr.com/). I used these stories to inspire a piece of writing, which came in and out of the stories (recorded on mobile phones by friends and emailed to me), I edited it together using a free audio editing programme called Audacity and used

creative commons (a kind of copyright made for the internet that allows for sharing and remixing) marked music from a search of Soundcloud's 'ambient' taged music to back it. The text included simple invitations to move around the intended space that were involved with the feeling of the dramatic moments. Listeners were asked questions, invited to move in certain ways to certain places; to open their umbrellas, and to act alone and together.

I then hosted the audio file in a public dropbox folder for download, alongside instructions to go to a certain place in Manchester and collect an umbrella before heading to Picadilly Gardens to begin the soundwalk. I signalled the start of the soundwalk by ringing a bell in Picadilly Gardens. The event is recorded here: http://rainreminds.tumblr.com/

Third Angel – What I Heard About The World #storymap
See the last version of the show, as it played out, here
"Story Map is a durational research performance that gathers and exchanges stories. Originally conceived as a research-engine for the theatre piece, What I Heard About The World, Story Map grew to become a 12 hour durational performance in its own right. The stories gathered are of fakes and replicas, facsimiles and substitutes; not deceptions - the inauthentic used knowingly in the everyday."

Story Map is a 12 hour durational performance that collects true stories of fake things. The company start with a huge blank map and as each country is called the transitory audience are invited to tell true stories of fake things they know about that country. Stories are fact checked using academic online research standards to confirm, (and additional facts and stories offered of interest from the hashtag #storymap on twitter). Each story has a picture drawn for it, places on a post it note placed on the map with the name of

the country on it. A 2 word title for the story is written on a back wall. These stories and countries are all also live blogged and highlights are tweeted. Any visitor (online or off) can request a story retold.

Story Map exists online and off – it pushes out but also feeds back in, the internet and the people who populate it are present in the performance, and the premise of the show itself tackles the deeper question of what it means to exist in a so-called global village. The stories we tell ourselves about the world in order to fit it into our heads. It deals deeply with the implications of a digital culture, and it also flits naturally between online and off.

Tom Armitage and the RSC
Spirits Melted Into Air
Project page link

Tom Armitage is a technologist who worked on a small fast-protoyped project with the RSC – almost every major city in the UK has a hacklab in it full of the kind of people who you can team up with to produce things like this – a beautiful wooden laser cut representation of the movements a performer makes in a play. Using the physical data of performance to make a physical and permanent art
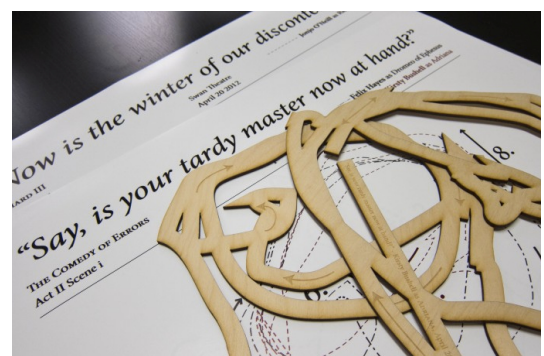
object in response to it.

"Spirits Melted Into Air is a project exploring actors' movement on stage, created by Tom Armitage as a series of three commissions programmed by Caper and produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. It takes individual scenes or speeches – in this case, two individual scenes from the 2012 Royal Shakespeare Company productions of Richard III and The Comedy of Errors – and produces data-visualisations of actors' motion during them.

[…] Custom-built, open-source software is used to analyse performance video and generate plots of actors' positions on stage from a perspective viewpoint. These plots are then used to generate new, secondary artworks: posters, and laser-cut wooden shapes. The posters illustrate only the traces of the actor upon stage; "footnotes" indicate salient lines in the text of the scene, anchoring the movement to Shakespeare's original words. The wooden shapes represent the shape of the actors' footsteps for the whole scene, and are engraved with arrows indicating directions of motion, as well as recording the scene, actor, and date of performance."

Nikki Pugh – The Bloop
[Read all of Pugh's blog updates on The Bloop here](#)

Nikki Pugh is a Birmingham based hacker/game designer/technologist and sculptor working in the spaces between technology and play. Her game The Bloop uses her handmade 'sonar goggles' which block all vision, but make sonar noises to indicate when someone else is nearby. She handbuilds the technology and designed a game which involves wearing a giant inflatable whale on your head. Nikki carefully blogs the [making processes](#) for all of her work – including the [prototyping stages](#) – of both technology and game design – testing silly ideas and making them funner/sillier, working out what is just the right kind of difficulty for reward pleasure. Nikki describes the game as "A game that offers an alternative way of navigating space through the use of sonar goggles. Also colourful ribbons and grown-ups jumping as far as they can." And you can read lots on all of her projects – all homemade, all DIY, at http://npugh.co.uk/projects/

What next?

Here are some really useful first steps you can make

1) **Find your local hacklab!** Check the [Wikipedia entry on UK Hacklab](#)s and reach out to one local to you to see if anyone there would like to be involved in your Fun Palace.

2) **Find your Fun Palace digital champion**! Is anyone on your team confident about technology? This task could feel daunting amongst everything else so try and delegate – find someone whose job it will be to support and find great digital and playful things for the day.

3) **Ask around!** Do you know anyone who works in game design, in play, in electronics? Check with local schools or children and teenagers you know to find out if anyone builds anything exciting online or off, and invite them into the Fun Palace – can they run a workshop on building things in Minecraft? Could someone run an interactive storytelling workshop that results in Twine games being made?

4) **Look out for resources I'm going to send your way.** I'm going to be making a callout to people in games tech and play to raise awareness with them about Fun Palaces and hopefully connecting them to local Fun Palaces so you can work together. I'm also going to be making regular blog posts with more case studies and

Good Ideas, and highlighting great work being done by other Fun Palaces. You can also always contact me if you want to talk something through or have any questions.

5) **Familiarise yourself with simple tools.** There are great free tools out there for captioning video (Youtube), uploading audio (soundcloud) building simple blogs (Tumblr, Wordpress, Blogger), editing audio (audacity), sharing photos (instagram, flickr), if in doubt – ask around, or ask me. Someone will know a way to do something.

6) **Think practically as well as creatively** – there is always a way to do it yourself. There are always free tools online if you google for them. Think creatively and imagine hard – technology can often seem daunting but it's usually just a case of familiarising yourself with it. And – think practically – about plug sockets and wifi connections - if you want to live stream something important, make sure you have a wired, dedicated internet connection for the computer running it. If you want people to be able to live-tweet or text you, make sure there's good signal and lots of signs about the wifi password, and clear hashtag info on lots of signs around the area.

7) **If in doubt, google**. That's it. Someone somewhere has already asked the question you have, and someone somewhere has answered it. Try googling everything first.

8) **DON'T BE AFRAID** – everyone is learning, always learning in this space, it's so new and fast changing that everyone working in this space is constantly learning new skills. So don't be afraid or think that this is beyond you, it definitely isn't. I promise.