

Imagineers at work - creative audio and visual technology

Look and listen

Imagine you're standing on the battlements of Stirling Castle, looking east towards Abbey Craig. How else can you bring to vivid life in your imagination the momentous battle there 800 years before when William Wallace led his countrymen to victory over the English? Not by that boring old panel at your knees! Or, if you wish a different mood – perhaps birdsong, the snipping of shears and the clicking of bowls in the royal garden – that's no problem either. Audio guides add that magical ingredient - atmosphere.

The new digital audio guides enable you to control what you listen to, and when. If you press no. 14, you'll be offered a sound-bite on how the Queen's Presence Chamber was used. If you wish to hear more about the room or its elite occupants, press the green button; if you don't, simply move on. This technology puts the visitor in control.

But, audio guides will only work if they are first and foremost a visual experience. The visitor has come to see your site or exhibit; audio is the supporting cast. So always ensure that the visitor knows where they are and what they are looking at. Encourage them to engage visually before adding the magical audio ingredient.

Audio tour pros

- Engages the visitor with what they've come to see.
- Uses two senses (hearing and sight) at the same time.
- Can help with visitor flow and direction.
- Infinitely more captivating than panels.
- Virtually unobtrusive – unlike panels.
- Facilitates foreign language provision – unlike panels.
- Can address intellectual access.
- Can provide access for some physical disabilities (e.g. visually impaired).
- Can provide separate provision for children.
- Generates income – possibly/eventually.

Audio tour cons

- Does not provide supporting visual aids (e.g. portraits/reconstruction drawings).
- Not easy for the visitor to interact with others in their party.
- Not cheap by any means.
- Not easy – or cheap – to update.
- Mostly available only at sites with large visitor numbers.

Chris Tabraham, Historic Scotland.

Tel 0131 668 8600

Weaving Digital Magic

How can you tell the complex story of Scotland's forests to a family audience? How can you cram 10,000 years of woodland history into 5 minutes? How can you add humour without losing a serious message? Film and animation are providing Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Garden with the solution.

We first used animation in 1997 for a short film on the story of the Himalayan Weeping Cypress, and again in 2000 for the Flora Celtica exhibition. When the Millennium Forest for Scotland commissioned the Return of the Natives exhibition, the result was a superb short animated film that gave a fresh perspective on Scotland's woodland story.

This experience convinced us of the almost limitless potential of animation for interpretation. There are no boundaries, so it is possible to let your imagination run free. You can fly up in the sky or tunnel underground, go back in time or into the future, make animals talk and trees walk...

Many traditional storytellers admit that they see stories visually rather than learn them as narrative, a secret that enables them to hear a story only once and incorporate it into their memory. Children learn to understand and appreciate the world through stories, and we all love a good tale or cartoon.

Plantweave, the RBGE's major exhibition for 2002, was about basket making, and one challenge was to give craftspeople their own voice. Research revealed a range of views on issues from the importance of keeping old skills alive to the need to manage raw materials sustainably. We decided to adopt a video diary approach, and commissioned short films about some of Scotland's superb basket weavers.

The resulting video diaries formed a significant part of the exhibition, with longer versions available as a DVD catalogue¹. The beauty of the DVD is its versatility. As well as giving the makers a voice, it allows us to explore the baskets in a novel way. You can see both outside and inside, close-up and distant, even turn them upside down. The downside, of course, is that not everybody has a DVD player. However, judging from the number on sale at Christmas, this won't last for long!

Ian Darwin Edwards, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.
Tel 0131 248 2979

¹ Copies available from Alison Torrie, Tel 0131 248 2819; £10 including p&p.

"I do not fear computers. I fear lack of them."
Issac Asimov, science fiction writer, (1920 – 1992)