ERA statement
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FOR 1902, Film, Television and Digital Media.

The Alchemist’s Guide to the City

Research background

The AHRC Ambient Literature research project investigates the aesthetic and location based potentials of literary content delivered by mobile apps, such as Duncan Speakman’s *It Must Have Been Dark By Then* and Tom Abba’s *These Pages Fall Like Ash*. Megan Humphries’ *Six Stories of Southampton* convey the multiple histories of the Solent river through a mobile locative app tying historical narrative to place.

The Getty Research Institute’s 2017 exhibition ‘The Art of Alchemy’ situates medieval alchemy as a protoscientific practice, emphasising its ongoing impact across scientific and philosophical thought. *The Alchemist’s Guide to the City* is a digital media app for mobile phones in which the philosophical notions of the medieval alchemists are used as a filter for the contemporary world.

The work asks: How might historical and philosophical contents be delivered to audiences in ways which draw upon location specificity and reframe contents within a contemporary app context?

Research contribution

The project identified several techniques for reframing historical contents within a mobile app context: the use of common app affordances and responsivity while disrupting user interface norms by integrating atypical design approaches such as serif fonts and hand drawn illustration; the utilisation of location specificity via guided instructions and navigation path to maximize the experiential affordances of location; and the selective integration of historical and creative contents to infer connections between past and present.

Research significance

The work was exhibited at the internationally peer-reviewed Electronic Literature Organisation’s conference and exhibition in Porto, Portugal in July 2017.
1&2. ELO 2017 The Alchemists’s Guide to the City, inclusion in program

3. Promotional postcard with download instructions developed for ELO 2017

4. Postcard at Mosteiro da Sao bento da Vitoria, Porto for ELO2017
5 - 9. Project being used in-situ (inside and outside) at the Mosteiro de Sao Bento da Vitoria, with image, text and guidance referencing location.
10 & 11. Further images demonstrating close engagement to location in conveying historical contents.

IMAGES OF WORK

Read the quotes from the alchemists, discover some of their history, & follow the brief instructions that are paired with each quote.

1. FICINO
2. TRITHEMIUS
3. AGrippa
4. PARACELSUS
5. DEE
6. GABELLA
7. BRUNO
8. BRUNO #2
9. LE FÈVRE

This project includes audio.

1. FICINO

“Walk in a circular sense for as long as you can, trying to avoid giddiness, and cast your eyes upon heavenly things, contemplating them also with your mind.”

*Marsilio Ficino, c. 1489*

1a. It begins with walking

**Commence** by making your way inside, old spaces and older stories, present and past losing their sharp edges. It begins with walking, and the sound of footsteps on stone, wood and dirt. Though the city swirls at the edges of the door, it is time to step inside.

Marsilio Ficino was court philosopher to Lorenzo de’ Medici, and his keen observations of the natural world and the movement of the planets led to his writings on natural philosophy. His *Three Books on Life* linked the *spiritus mundi* - the spirit of the world - with the quintessence, an ethereal, transformative substance that permeated the heavens and could be isolated through alchemical means.

14, 15, 16. Ficino quote, instruction and contextual overlay for Ch1 demonstrating historical contents reframed by location specificity.
5. AGRIPPA

“There are four Elements, and original grounds of all corporeal things, Fire, Earth, Water, Aire, of which all inferior bodies are compounded...there is none of the Elements that is pure, but they are more or less mixed, and apt to be changed one into the other. For Fire is hot and dry, the Earth dry and cold, the Water cold and moist, the Aire moist and hot.”

* Cornelius Agrippa, c. 1509

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3á. Walls made of fire

**Circle** these rooms, and notice the elements – the light, the air, the earthy coolness of the granite walls. As cool as they seem, **these walls are made of fire**, of lava boiled up from within the earth. Everything is a concoction, of atoms, elements, forces, their secrets hidden from view.

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**Cornelius Agrippa** was a physician, writer, theologian, and alchemist. His 5 part *Of Occult Philosophy* linked alchemical processes with the four elements, the composition of the world and cosmos, and “natural magic”.

While his esoteric writings brought notoriety, he also controversially wrote that women were equal - if not superior - to men, in *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex (1529)*. Agrippa managed to avoid persecution for heresy, perhaps through denouncing alchemy and magic in his later years.

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17, 18, 19, 20. Agrippa quote, instruction, contextual overlay and in-situ photo for Ch3 demonstrating historical contents reframed by location specificity.
5. DEE

“And thus you may understand the difference between the true Sulphur and Mercury, for when it appeareth simple it is flowing and is called Mercury, and is volatile... But when the aforesaid decoction doth show the nature of Sulphur, then it is called Sulphur... which doth coagulate, reduce and fix to his proper nature, which is to be made Gold”.

John Dee, c. 1564

5a. The truth shimmers

➤ Step outside the confines of these four walls, to the road, & the world that envelops us. If we open our eyes, the truth shimmers everywhere, even the houses on this very street. Yellow & red, Sulphur & Mercury, an eternal dance and rare marriage, as your feet clatter by on stone.

21,22,23. Dee quote, instruction and in-situ photo for Ch5 demonstrating close integration of historical contents with guided instruction & location specificity.
24. In-situ photo for Ch9 demonstrating close integration of historical with creative contents via guided instruction & location specificity.