

# Stories of place. Presenting the local in an online world.

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## Abstract

This paper presents a series of digital mapping projects initiated by a community oral history archive, the Cork Folklore Project. The maps are digital representations of Cork city with associated audio stories and anecdotes taken from oral history interviews. The audio excerpts are pinned to places or points on the map. They are narratives that relate personal and embodied experiences of place (and of the things that happen there). The overall effect is a textured and multi-dimensional narrative of Cork city that highlights local experience.

Theoretical interpretations of digital projects like these often examine memory and interpretations of place identity and place attachment. The final part of this paper will explore some preliminary ideas about the roles of digital technologies in the articulation and construction of experiences of belonging and locality in a globalized world.

## Introduction

The Cork Folklore Project (CFP) is a folklore/oral history organization that has been collecting stories of everyday life in Cork city and county since 1996. Oral history practice at CFP is reflexive and critical, always striving to question 'who our communities of contributors and resource users might be, and how they might be meaningfully represented, served and/or challenged' (O'Carroll 2013, 23). The CFP interviews are maintained as a public oral history archive, currently including more than 570 recordings. Collecting and archiving oral histories forms the core of CFP's activities, but researchers also actively engage in dissemination and the organization has produced and collaborated in the production of books, radio programmes, short films and websites. The CFP also produces an annual journal, *The Archive*, which is distributed freely across Cork city.

In recent years the CFP has been involved in a number of digital initiatives, including an oral history map of Cork. This is a digital map representing the city, with associated audio stories and anecdotes pinned to places or points on the map. All of the embedded audio pieces are excerpts taken from oral history interviews in the CFP archive.

Technical problems with the early iterations of this map mean that the CFP has recently embarked on the creation of a new map, using new software. This paper presents the old and the new iterations of the map, and discusses plans for the future.

These maps are community representations in the sense that the CFP is a community organization, hosted by a community education and training initiative (Northside Community Enterprises). The CFP also has strong links to the Department of Folklore and Ethnology in University College Cork and to the Department of Social Protection (research staff are hired as part of a Community Employment Scheme). All of the stories presented in the oral history maps are the words and the voices of community members, who have given freely of their time, memories and creative self-expression in order to contribute to the CFP archive, as well as to the associated research and dissemination projects. The oral history maps present narratives of personal and embodied experiences of place (and of the things that happen there).

## Background information – digital mapping projects by the Cork Folklore Project

There are 3 different digital oral history maps to discuss:

- 1 The original *Cork Memory Map*
- 2 *Cork's Main Streets* – a pilot project that presents oral history excerpts about North and South Main Streets in Cork
- 3 *Stories of Place* – the replacement *Cork Memory Map*, under construction, using the software platform piloted in *Cork's Main Streets*

## The original Cork Memory Map

The first *Cork Memory Map* (Figure 1) was created by Cheryl Donoghue, in association with the CFP, as part of her MSc in Interactive Media in 2010.<sup>i</sup> It was subsequently supported by the Heritage Council and Cork City Council through grant aid for technical support. It was developed using Google Maps as the background. Embedded audio (excerpts from oral histories), transcripts and images are used to explore the narratives and stories associated with Cork city. This project was inspired by a digital project called the *City of*

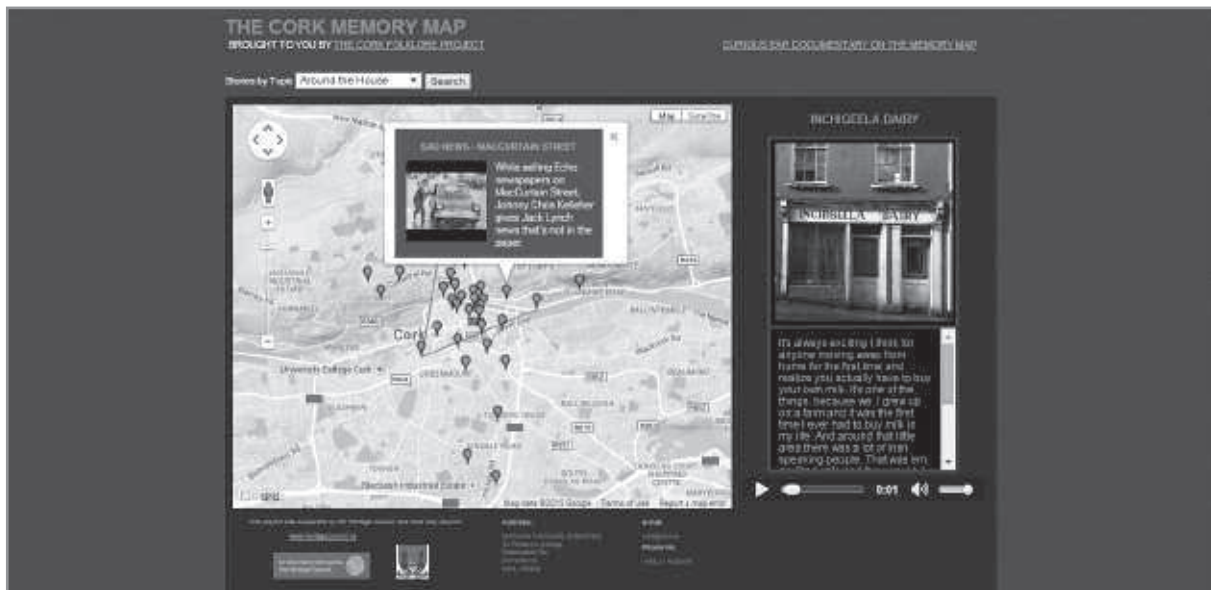


Fig. 1. Screenshot: Cork Memory Map [www.ucc.ie/research/memorymap](http://www.ucc.ie/research/memorymap); accessed 20 February 2016).

*Memory*, a New York video and audio stories project.<sup>ii</sup> The *City of Memory* includes specially curated stories as well as those that have been uploaded by site users (these are moderated). This was considered one of the most sophisticated online story mapping projects available at the time when the *Cork Memory Map* was being created (O'Carroll 2011, 184-5).

The *Cork Memory Map* generated a lot of positive publicity for the CFP, including an RTE radio documentary.<sup>iii</sup> However, as is frequently the case with digital projects that have been supported by one-off grant funding (as opposed to ongoing, regular funding), the rate of change and development in digital technologies can often mean that resources are subject to technical difficulties after a relatively short life-span.<sup>iv</sup> This has been the case for the original *Cork Memory Map* and it is now necessary to look at ways to replace the original *Cork Memory Map*. My work with the CFP (part of my research for my PhD in Digital Arts and Humanities) is to create this replacement, particularly focusing on creating a project that is sustainable and easy to use in the long-term. To this end, I have built a pilot project, using open source software (*Cork's Main Streets*, described below) and tested this extensively with staff and stakeholders at CFP

### Cork's Main Streets

*Cork's Main Streets* (Figure 2) is a pilot project that I built during my doctoral research. It uses open source softwares developed by the scholarly digital humanities community (Omeka and Neatline). I built this digital oral history map to focus on a small collection of oral history

interviews (taken from the CFP archive) about life on North and South Main Streets in Cork city. The aim of this project was to test the new softwares in terms of usability and sustainability, and to gauge the response to the projects from amongst the CFP's stakeholders (staff, former staff and contributors). The ultimate aim was to use this pilot as a first step along the way to building a replacement for the original *Cork Memory Map* (which is now in need of an upgrade).

*Cork's Main Streets* uses Open Street Maps as a backdrop.<sup>v</sup> Like with the *Cork Memory Map*, this is populated with a series of audio excerpts from the CFP archive, photographs and text (most of the text being taken from transcripts of the audio recording). Users are able to browse through a collection of audio stories of (past and present) everyday life in North and South Main Streets.

Responses to the *Cork's Main Streets* map (measured from user interviews and a focus group with CFP staff and stakeholders) has been positive. The next step is to use my experience, gathered and documented while building this pilot project, as a stepping stone towards building a completely new memory map. This new site is currently named *Stories of Place*, and it is still in development.

### Stories of Place

The third oral history map is *Stories of Place*, a new Cork Memory Map (Figure 3). This map is currently under construction. Because of the success of *Cork's Main Streets* CFP decided to extend the use of the digital humanities platforms (Omeka and Neatline) in order to build a new and more extensive digital oral history map that will

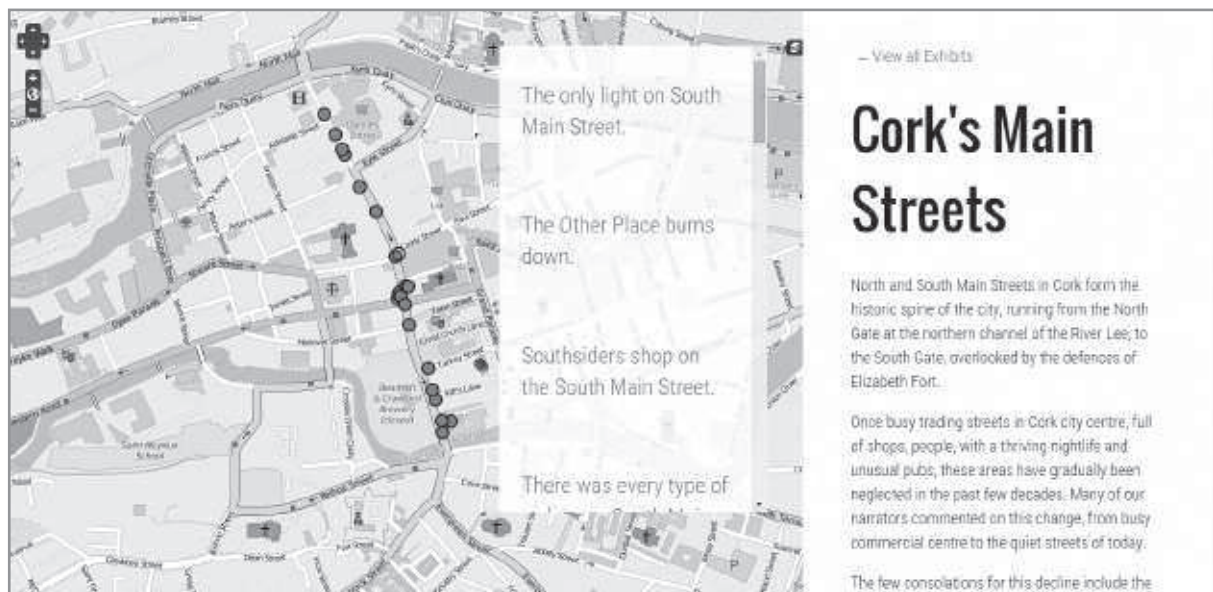


Fig. 2 Screenshot of the digital oral history map of North & South Main Streets (<http://pennyjohnston.org/exhibits/neatline/show/north-and-south-main-streets>. Accessed 25 November 2015)

replicate and, eventually, replace the original *Cork Memory Map* (with the URL <http://www.corkmemorymap.org> eventually being forwarded to the new *Stories of Place* website).

The aim of *Stories of Place* is that the CFP staff will continue to add stories and contributions to the map on an ongoing basis. For this to remain a realistic possibility, the amount of technical knowledge needed to design and contribute to the map needs to be kept to a minimum. This is because CFP staff are employed as part of Community Employment schemes, where technical expertise is not a hiring requirement (so technical expertise cannot be guaranteed in the long-term). In addition, personnel turnover can be high as staff members are on limited-term schemes and regularly leave to take up full-time employment. Because of this, the design and look of the *Stories of Place* site does not exactly mirror that of *Cork's Main Streets*, (the installation process for the latter project was more complicated and required additional technical know-how). Instead, *Stories of Place* uses an iteration of the Neatline platform that is easier to install, and the software for the site has been successfully installed by CFP staff (with minimal guidance). A set of step-by-step instructions has been specially written to ensure that it is quick and easy to maintain, sustain and, if necessary, re-build this digital resource in the long term. The stories presented on this map replicate the stories of the original *Cork Memory Map* and these will be gradually added to in the coming months.

#### Aims and use in oral history digital mapping projects

The outcomes from oral history projects are primarily audio and they represent a primarily aural experience, focused on listening rather than seeing. Oral history practitioners working to gather memory narratives understand the recording of audio testimony as having distinct advantages over more visual recording and presentation methods (see O'Carroll 2015, 34-52). However, putting this material online in a visual format such as the web can sometimes look unappealing because it does not adhere to the presentation conventions for current websites, which tend to be highly visual. This can make it difficult to attract an online audience. One way of tackling this is to present visuals alongside the audio and oral history projects associated with locality or place are increasingly using digital maps as their primary visualization: 'maps situate our stories, tie them to specific places, and are among the most useful tools to aid in our ability to understand the world around us.'<sup>vi</sup>

Maps can exclude and constrain representations of space and place and critical cartography aims to expose these limitations, focusing on 'hidden, and sometimes hideous, narratives embedded in maps' (Caquard 2011, 136). Nevertheless, one of the attractions of digital maps for oral historians is that they help to create and re-create place through the representations of everyday worlds of past and present (in the maps, in the oral histories and in their accompanying images and text). They are a way for users to 'access the rich tapestry of memory and informal histories that overlay the city' (O'Carroll 2011, 184). It



allows them to explore spatial stories and to imagine and evoke the city as it is to them, or as it has the potential to be. Most importantly, it exposes the city as it is to others, many of whom have a very different view/experience of the city when juxtaposed with official and historical narratives. This is an important aspect of the CFP's archival holdings. As well as traditional oral histories recording the voices of residents and their stories of everyday life, the CFP archive includes several special oral history projects. These include, for example, recordings documenting the experiences of migrants to Cork. Another example is an ongoing project collecting oral histories of LGBT experiences of the city.

In the CFP's latest digital oral history maps the intention is that stories can be continually added, so that the narrative of the space is changing and developing as more stories are added. The emerging narratives created around digital oral history maps go beyond the representations in the maps themselves, since the addition of memories and stories from oral history adds another dimension: sounds, particularly human voices 'evoke place in visceral and profound ways' (Tébeau 2013, 28). Using this extra evocation, in voice, stories and memories can be seen as a process of creating meaning in space, transforming it to meaningful place. The changing and cumulative process of creating the digital oral history maps could be interpreted as an appropriate evocation of place since, as Massey suggests, the meaning(s) of place is/are not stable, instead places are configurations of space that have a temporary meaning and purpose, can mean different things to different people, and at different times, and are in a constant state of negotiation and re-negotiation

(Massey 2005, 140-1).

The CFP's core activity is the collection and archiving of oral histories of everyday life from Cork. As with other oral history projects, the gathering together of many different individuals' memories can form a kind of memory bank, transformed into collective memories that are sometimes used by groups and individuals as a way of finding a place in the world, a sense of belonging (Said 2000, 179). This is even more the case when combined with representations of place, such as a map: 'Together, social memory and social space conjoin to produce much of the context for modern identities' (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004, 384). If we accept these theories about the (temporary and negotiated) configuration of meaning and place and the powerful combination of collective memory and social space in the construction of a sense of belonging, then digital oral history maps could be said to present narratives associated with spaces, where meanings can be configured and re-configured over time as stories of places accumulate, overlap, compete and interweave to reveal a multi-layered cityscape of narrative and stories.

### Conclusion

This paper has described three different iterations of a digital oral history map of Cork city, created as part of the everyday work of the Cork Folklore Project. In each iteration, the aim is to use memory (personal and collective) to present individual interpretations of place identity and place attachment. When the individual interpretations of many different narrators are juxtaposed on the same background, the aim is to create a textured



Fig. 3: Screenshot: New Memory Map under construction [www.storiesofplace.org/neatline/fullscreen/stories-ofplace#records/2](http://www.storiesofplace.org/neatline/fullscreen/stories-ofplace#records/2); accessed 25 November 2015)

and multi-dimensional narrative of Cork city, highlighting local experience. This is one way of exploring how digital technologies can play a role in the articulation and construction of experiences of belonging and locality in a globalized world.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.ucc.ie/research/memorymap/>. Accessed 20 February 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.cityofmemory.org>. Accessed 20 February 2016

<sup>iii</sup> [www.rte.ie/radio1/doconone/2011/0816/646858-curious-ear-doconone-cork-city-memory-map/](http://www.rte.ie/radio1/doconone/2011/0816/646858-curious-ear-doconone-cork-city-memory-map/) Accessed 17 February 2016.

<sup>iv</sup> N.L. Maron and S. Pickle 'Sustaining the Digital Humanities Host Institution Support beyond the Start-

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<sup>v</sup> Open Street Maps is © Open Street Map contributors <https://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright>. Accessed 21 February 2016.

<sup>vi</sup> See P. McCoy at <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/storymapper/>. Accessed 21 February 2016.