

**Multisensory
Storytelling**

Bottlenecks

Reports from a sequence of Multisensory Storytelling Development Debrief sessions, exploring the challenges associated with developing multisensory work across Immersive Arts UK.

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Introducing the reports

01

The following short reports and reflections are drawn from a sequence of conversations with Immersive Arts UK funded artists.

These artists responded to an open call to join in what were described as Multisensory Storytelling Development Debriefs, part of a wider project looking at the impact of technical bottlenecks in the evolving cultural space of multisensory storytelling.

An Important Note on Quotation and Attribution:

To reflect and preserve the breadth and candour of the conversations, all quotations, whilst offered verbatim, have been anonymised in line with the wishes of the group.

To provide a little background on the project, it’s worth unpacking a few of these terms.

Multisensory – This research stems from an investigation into the impact of multimodal and multisensory technologies on cultural production and experience.

Storytelling – The use of new technologies in storytelling is unlocking new forms of narrative and new ways of making sense of our changing technological environments.

Development – These formats don’t arrive fully formed, they are the product of intense development processes and creative R&D.

Debriefs – The pressures of production and delivery are intense. By contrast, a debrief is a loosely defined space where insights and reflection aren’t attached to project deliverables.

Bottlenecks – These are the points in any creative process where constraints determine the choices available to an artist. Understanding what bottlenecks are prevalent across multisensory storytelling development is key to understanding how technologies inform creative practice and what opportunities there might be to:

- Support artists across the programme encountering similar constraints
- Analyse how dominant technologies are shaping multisensory culture
- Identify obstacles to the narrative application of emerging technology

More than just an exercise in data collection, the debriefs were also designed to support the Immersive Arts programme by creating a space for artists which focussed specifically on high-friction, high-frustration areas of the creative process.

Whilst a focus on technical bottlenecks framed the invitation to the Debriefs, that was only ever intended to be the starting point for wider discussions. Lightly moderated, the 90 minute online lunchtime sessions were at their most generative when the discussion flowed freely, with insights arising spontaneously from the identification of shared experience, recognition of creative achievement and the trading of hard-won knowledge.

Writing in 1995 philosopher Andrew Pickering described a “dialectic of resistance and accommodation” between technologies and their users. For Pickering human-machine assemblages were involved in a “dance of agency” in which the technology served as the “surface of emergence for the intentional structure of human agency.” What Pickering called a process of “reciprocal tuning” between technology and intention is at work across multiple scales today: within individual projects in Immersive Arts UK, across the programme as a whole, the cultural sphere of multisensory storytelling, and as an aspect of lived experience within contemporary technological environments. But three decades after Pickering’s analysis the dynamics of this dialectic have evolved, and creeping asymmetries (e.g. platformisation and other symptoms of the political economy of Big Tech) call into question opportunities for reciprocity between users and their technologies. Agentic AI is poised to join Pickering’s dance.

Where is resistance possible? Where is accommodation not a choice but a requirement? In this context questions about bottlenecks – what are they? where are they? how do you navigate them? – can surface rich insight, even – and perhaps especially – when the conversation strays away from the logistics of software, hardware, and workflow.

The aim of the following reports from the debrief sessions is to reflect the ongoing work taking place in Immersive Arts, to index the priorities of the participants as they navigate the implications of working with new technologies and operating under an Immersive Arts award, and to aggregate, with a light touch, some shared areas of investment across a wide range of projects.

In doing so, they contribute to the ongoing process of “reciprocal tuning” between artists and technologies in a non-proscriptive manner, offering, by turns, wider perspectives and glimpses of particular problem areas.

The debrief sessions themselves were, as one participant put it, “valuable precisely because they held that tension between development, sharing and uncertainty.” In the same vein, these reports move past being inconclusive to being anti-conclusive.

They are snapshots of the developmental processes taking place project-to-project.

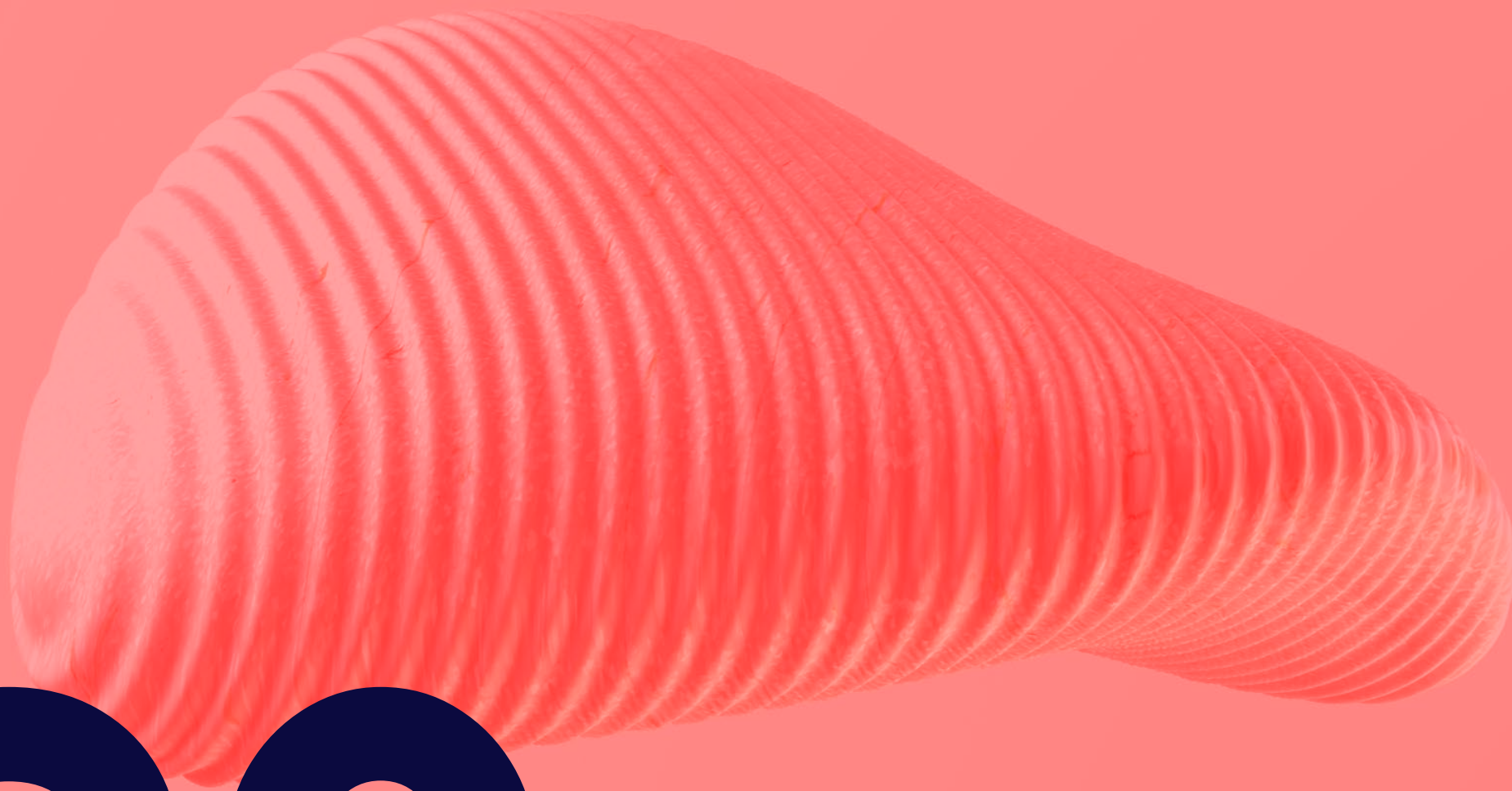
Where they invite conversation and response, it is in the spirit of open reflection, and with an eye on process over diagnosis.

How might these reflections support work across the Immersive Arts programme? Do they resonate with wider dynamics in the creative sector? What are the indications for the future of multisensory storytelling as a form, a practice and a widening facet of cultural experience?

Reference:

Pickering, Andrew. (1995). The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Bottlenecks & Worldbuilding



02

Worldbuilding

The first debrief sessions were convened under the heading of “worldbuilding” with an invitation to think about the bottlenecks encountered in taking projects from ideation to development.

The conversations took place on the 23rd and 24th of March 2026 and featured 10 artists across 2 sessions.

The rationale behind convening a debrief under the thematic heading of “Worldbuilding” was a chance to begin by talking about beginnings. In my conceptualisation of bottlenecks, the beginning of a process is where a number of bottlenecks might occur (which software to use? which recording hardware to adopt? which XR format to design for?) and therefore where a range of project-critical decisions might cluster.

Whilst this suspicion was borne out to a degree, the conversations quickly revealed the limits of my framing for both worldbuilding and bottlenecks.

For example, was taking a project into development a matter of expanding or contracting the scope of the piece and what was possible within the project? Likewise, were bottlenecks exclusively, or even primarily, technical? After all, the biggest influence over whether a technology or pipeline can deliver is not the individual artist, or the technology in isolation, but the collaborative dynamic between them.

Worldbuilding: I asked the participants in these projects how they took their projects from the ideational phase into tech development and how did the available technologies inform that process.

When learning to operate within new technologies, the learning curves were occasionally steeper than expected:

“I’m a visual artist, and my background is in photography, and I’m really familiar with photographic technology and software, and I really thought that I wouldn’t particularly struggle with VR. I figured I’d get this VR lens, I’d put it on my existing camera, I’d be using very similar software, and it would all be fine, and it wasn’t at all. It was really difficult, it was very different. And I was able to, kind of, muddle through, but it was really intensive, every step of that, getting to the next step and to the next point and solving that problem.”

As a result, for some artists this process was a matter of re-scaling and re-scoping in response to the technical constraints and freedoms uncovered through worldbuilding:

“But I knew I had ideas of what I wanted to do, and then it turned out, as I went through the process, that my ideas were a lot more expensive than I’d realised, and so I had to scale down massively.”

“So we had to figure out, ‘Well, which of these 5,000 different directions do we go in?’ And the first session we had, which was online, was very much that: a lot of very explosive or iterative developmental discussion. And it was, at least from my point of view, it was very advantageous.”

“The proof of concept is actually just to connect, and figure out, what are the processes, what do we need to do to make this actually work? Because what I envisaged was something much more, you know, huge, and 3D, and colourful, but the actual R&D will be very small... I’ve had to learn how can I scale down, so what I’m learning, what I’m developing, is still a part of the larger idea I have?”

In some processes of worldbuilding, however, this opportunity to either scale up or scale down the nature of the work was inhibited by the interaction with the technology itself.

On marker-less motion capture:

“When I was looking at it, when I was writing the bid, it looked like you needed iPhones, which can be quite cheap, like, there were specific models, and you’re like, ‘*Okay, brilliant, this’ll be great.*’ The moment it started, all of a sudden, it was like, ‘*No, no, you need GoPros,*’ which are so much more expensive. So we needed six GoPros.”

On combining real-time captioning, BSL interpretation and AI translation tools in a mixed reality context:

And I thought all I was trying to do—the tech existed, I was trying to bring it together. And I was very naïve. So I made many, many mistakes during my R&D, all genuinely generative now, because I know exactly what I couldn’t make, and the kinds of people I don’t want to work with.”

A common experience, when engaging with a new technology was encountering unexpected demands on time and resources, either through steeper than anticipated learning curves, additional expenditures, additional labour or just the time required to make the output from a capture session useable within the specific context of a project.

“There’s a lot of overpromise, there’s a lot of hidden costs.”

But why?
The commercial context for the technologies in question was often a sticking point.
On spatial audio set-ups:

“It’s one of the immense struggles I feel in spatial audio... the leading voice for the spatial audio field, is a commercial brand. So at the beginning, I felt really against spatial audio, because it’s like, who is selling you spatial audio? They just want to sell you speakers.”

Offers of help from commercial partners come with risks:

“They’d be interested to offer us one of their suits on loan for us to experiment with. But they wanted to know the timeline and they wanted to know if they could use some of the work in their marketing.... So there’s a definite, I think maybe a slight mistrust between myself as a creative and the commercialisation of something or the instrumentalisation of artists in that process.”

However, it was underlined throughout that collaboration was not always a given.
Several artists struggled to build relationships with technical partners. For some, emails went unanswered and the process of getting a project into development devolved into the process of re-pitching it again and again to potential collaborators.
The networks available to the creatives produced some really positive interactions but weren’t always well timed. It was widely acknowledged that Immersive Arts was just finding its feet when these projects were green-lit, but that in any event the scheduling of the Big Thing early in the development cycle may have been highly beneficial.
“And then at the Big Thing, which was brilliant, we had a meet-the-technologist afternoon, which I went to, which was really good, but by this time, I’d kind of done the bulk of my project... And I didn’t want to wait until then, to meet people who may or may not be able to help me with my project, that seemed like cutting it a bit fine.”
Finding the right collaborator emerged as key to the process of translating a project out of its ideational phase and into development.
Whilst some participants came to this conclusion through negative experiences, there was ample evidence that effective and timely collaboration was able to transform potentially inhibiting technical challenges into developmental progress.

*“It was really, really wonderful to be able to work with these people. And it sounds cliché, but it changes absolutely everything.... And then when you come up to those bottlenecks and whatnot or decide how you’re going to move forward, it’s like, ‘Ah, okay. Well, we’ve created this kind of *modus operandi* or working method, we’re all so comfortable with one another that it’s just open, so open.’ And that was really the springboard to make things move forward, in that respect.”*

In fact, on the topic of relationship and collaborators, this is where some of the chief bottlenecks for development were found.

Key issues involved how to best manage collaborative relationships: when money was involved, when access to facilities was involved, where the lines were blurred between who was the creative and who was the producer, where technical roles needed to be clarified across the team.

The challenge of building productive collaborations across the creative industries is greater for artists with marginalized identities. Talking about structural barriers based on prejudice encountered not only during the initial phase of development but before, one artists said:

“I know that a lot of artists from my background have learnt how in the application [to] overemphasise how much support, how many people of expertise are involved in the project, just so the funders can’t say, ‘Are you sure you can do it?’. It’s about understanding the terrain. It’s like, what equipment do I need to avigate this particular structural, systemic, discriminatory issue which exists in the society we live in?”

In the context of cutting-edge production technologies – the access to facilities and the skillsets needed to operate within them – one of the main bottlenecks is not technical but structural: structural inequities determine who has access to expensive and complex production environments and who has is given the freedom to fail.

The pressure to pre-empt the question “are you sure you can do it?” is indicative of the degree to which prejudices inflect the distribution of resources at all stages and for whom the bottlenecks present in the early stages of development are even tighter.

Many of these insights will be picked up in the following discussion on Accessibility. But, what emerged from this conversation about the beginning of the development process is that it is never a matter of a truly blank slate, or fresh start.

How an artist is situated, what networks and resources they have access to before undertaking the worldbuilding process will directly impact how they navigate bottlenecks at this crucial stage.

This might be a question of understanding the mundanity of productivity tools – the software before the software – that shape a project before it enters technical development. Or it might be a question of the relationships that are in place across the bidding team and their extended networks, whether or not new working relationships need to be incorporated into the process.

In any case, the structural conditions that precede and determine the technological ones will be impactful and need to be recognised.

“We didn’t know what we didn’t know.”

In a creative landscape where technologies overpromise, and a funding landscape where artists overemphasise those aspects of a project amenable to funding, being given the “freedom to fail” in an artistic and R&D context comes with a range of unwritten conditions, only some of which are to do with the technologies.

A phrase that occurred across the conversation was “**we didn’t know what we didn’t know,**” applied to tools, technologies, workflows and relationships.

The range of responses to – pivoting, reframing, rescaling – and the variety of experiences – positive, negative, generative, frustrating – arising from this working through of unknown unknowns prompts two final questions. They are pertinent to the experiences shared in these conversations but might be useful discussion starters for artists across the programme as a whole.

1. What preparatory work can be done to mitigate the impact of unexpected technical constraints?
2. Conversely, what can be done to ensure that encountering the unknown in development is fruitful for the overall project?

Bottlenecks & Accessibility



03

Accessibility

The second debrief sessions were convened under the heading of “accessibility” with an invitation to think about the bottlenecks encountered whilst developing accessible experiences.

The conversations took place on the 13th and 14th of April 2026 and featured 6 artists across 2 sessions.

The second session in this sequence of Multisensory Storytelling Development Debriefs, was convened around the theme of access and accessibility, recognising that multisensory storytelling, in creating narratives available to multiple sensory modalities presents a lot of interesting opportunities for accessibility.

A common intention with the projects discussed was that experiences could be approached through more than one sense – audiences could look, listen, or touch the artworks – with each interaction being equally valid and meaningful.

“How could we create an experience that could have, like, multilayered access points? So, you could access it through touch, through sight, through sound, through smell or temperature change or whatever it was and however people felt most comfortable to access it.”

Additionally, the conversations were convened with the understanding that the technical assemblages being used to deliver multisensory experiences would present several challenges – and that these bottlenecks would impact not just what the experience would look/sound/smell/feel like, but how accessibility was centred within the development process.

One participant reflected early on:

“My creative practice is very much this: for accessibility not to be an ‘*add-on*’ at all. On the contrary. And it’s much easier to say than to do, especially as access is always seen as for ‘*others*’, and it’s a ‘*nice thing*’, but ‘*it costs*’. And ‘*it’s for a minority*, so *really we’ll add it at the end as it’s nice to be nice*’, but, for a lot of mainstream organisations, it’s not the very core architecture of how things are made.”

Across the two debrief sessions there was a wide variety of experience shared: from professional experience as an access consultant, to work stemming from engagements with disabled communities, to lived experience of disability.

Artists were consistently conscious and attentive to their own embodied experience both independent of and in relation to immersive technology and universally developed their projects according to their own considered experiences of the accessibility or otherwise of the available tools and technologies.

“I’m hyperaware of how I meet the world and how the world meets me internally.

As underlined in the previous report, structural hurdles stemming from ableist and racist attitudes also informed how artists understood, encountered and dealt with bottlenecks in their creative practice. This is particularly acute when considering the bottlenecks around accessibility as the structural prejudices faced by marginalized creatives converge with prejudices faced by marginalized audiences, re-doubling the challenges along the development pipeline.

It was consistently acknowledged that the available means for delivering “off the shelf” accessibility were rarely adequate.

“The technology needs to be as invisible as possible and non-disruptive and not become the point... It needs to be the facilitator to allow for the encounter to happen, that presence to happen.”

“Disruption is often the result of hardware ‘*becoming the point*’ of the experience, a framing which often leads certain audiences to assume that experiences – involving headsets, or being ambulatory, or comfortable in crowds – is not for them.”

Technologies were found, then, to be unhelpfully visible.

But also, oftentimes, the technology involved rendered the significant details that the artists and projects were interested in foregrounding and focussing on, invisible.

For example, in relation to AI translation:

“If you can’t hear where I’m from, I become the same or, like, my accent is neutral enough, do you stop having preconceived ideas about me sat around the table with you? But then what does it lose of me? You’re not meeting me, you’re meeting a version of me that’s acceptable to you.”

Likewise in trying to capture culturally specific dances:

“So, with the Move AI, if I remember right, yes, they had finger tracking enabled because, with the kathak style, which was one of the specific ones, finger tracking would have been amazing because a lot of the stories are through movement, but also with the fingers as well. I remember the creative technologies showing the fingers looking like balloons, like literally just like sausage fingers, basically. They just weren’t tracking properly!”

For some artists this is as much an opportunity as a problem. Given the rise of AI assisted workflows, there is an imperative to make sure that their databases don’t deselect certain types of body, certain types of movement and certain culturally specific gestures from their tool-box.

“If you look at a lot of the various LLMs out there, they deal with text. They deal with sound. They deal with your face. They deal with voice, all kinds of other mediums. But movement, and the capture of movement, is really, really, really complex, very, very deliciously, beautifully complex. Not just because you’re dealing with these very codified techniques like kathak or ballet, etc., but because the person doing that is... not a machine. Even the repetition of the same movement will have the subtlest of differences, which is, I would argue, the beauty of it, right?

This is exactly what we want to promote and explore. Not that we don’t want to use these forms of technology and motion capture, etc., but we want to make sure that we are leading and making the decisions about how they are then evolved.”

However, this focus on which tools enabled or inhibited the development of the projects proved to be a narrow conceptualisation of how technical bottlenecks intersect with projects directly concerned with access.

Instead, a number of projects under discussion were developed not as stories/experiences/performances that would be widely accessible by design, but rather as interventions within contexts and spaces that produced narrowed conditions for participation and inaccessibility by default.

For example, one project intended to engage participants in a multi-lingual and BSL interpreted dining experience using AR:

“The intention was to bring people together that may not necessarily feel comfortable and get past the uncomfortableness, hopefully through the use of some technology that would start bridging those gaps.”

This sense that multisensory experiences – vastly more than legacy media experiences or even experimental forms of monosensory media like writing or audio – could engage audiences at the thresholds of their habitual experience was consistently held up as an advantage, a means to shine a light on everyday contexts and their inclusive or exclusive valences.

Multisensory and immersive experiences were widely celebrated for their potential to do away with some frames of expectation that dominate in a gallery environment, and invite behaviours and engagements – touching, smelling, interacting – that some exhibition contexts exclude.

But not always!

“But I think it could have been a lot of the, kind of, sensibility of the audience as well and it could have been the fact that they were feeling a bit awkward in being invited to a, kind of, artistic experience on a Friday when they were all scientists from the lab.”

Invitations to engage with artworks that fall

outside of the embedded traditions of exhibition and spectatorship can cause their own issues:

“If you go into an experience and they go, ‘*Oh, okay, this is a dancing experience. Now go dance.*’ I’m not going to dance. I’m just going to stand there like an idiot while everyone else dances. Even if I look stupid, I’m not going to be able to dance.

So, I was trying to explain that and they just– Because they’re a dancer, (Laughter) it turns out they couldn’t understand that feeling. They didn’t understand the discomfort of being demanded to do something for entertainment for yourself, in a sense.”

Multisensory Storytelling’s ability to intervene in sedimented social structures to disrupt or reflect structures that perpetuate marginalisation and inaccessibility can just as easily cause other forms of discomfort!

But of course, they should. That’s sort of the point.

Again the relational aspect of the development and production process was incredibly central to participants experience and, as with bottlenecks encountered in the process of worldbuilding relational tensions are

exacerbated by a technical context, with technical bottlenecks becoming more consequential to the project when coupled with an interpersonal barrier and vice versa.

However, again the degree to which technical challenges could be mitigated by positive collaborations was significant. One artist reported that, despite all the challenges developing the piece the thing that went smoothly was the adaptation of established working practices – with a group of autistic adults – within the new production context.

As another artist summarised:

“All it needs is for both parties not to feel that they’re going to fail each other.”

One of the chief challenges facing the development of accessible experiences in immersive and multisensory contexts: the dominance of a paradigm that, by considering access retrospectively, only mitigates against failure and doesn’t reconceive of what a successful intervention might look like.

As these discussion made clear there are many ways in which an artwork, a toolkit, a development process or a technology can be accessible. But rather than categorise them according to their success or failure, the challenge is

“To keep the question open as stubbornly as possible.”

One of the chief challenges facing the development of accessible experiences in immersive and multisensory contexts isn’t necessarily an individual technology, set of institutions or even the misperceived lack of appetite for stories and experiences that explicitly foreground their intention to be accessible.

A common complaint across the conversations was that even when access was baked into the original creative proposal, the development process still needed to wade through off-the-shelf access solutions (for creatives as well as audiences) to argue a case for engaging creatively with the technologies beyond the surface level affordances they offered. This process was a drain on time and resources.

This is an interesting example of the potential asymmetry of the “**dance of agency**” taking place between immersive artists and the technologies they use.

Here, a persistent technological solutionism inhibits and diverts the creative intention of artists endeavouring to work outside of the affordances of a given toolkit. This solutionism also speaks to the dominance of a paradigm that, by considering access retrospectively and according to pre-existing norms, generates a bottleneck of its own.

As these conversations and work across Immersive Arts suggests, the accessibility of a given experience can depend – not on broad accommodation – but on the degree to which it intervenes in and interrupts standardisation.

By principally mitigating against failure, technologies that posit access only as a form of translation or transposition, struggle to imagine what successful intervention might look like.

Bottlenecks & Finalisation



04

Finalisation

The third and final set of Multisensory Storytelling Development Debriefs were convened – fittingly – around the issue of finalisation or pushing the work into a shareable/exhibitatable/testable format.

The conversations took place on the 20th and 21st of April 2026 and featured 7 artists across 2 sessions.

The rationalisation behind this framing was that the final stage of creative development is one where a convergence of technical bottlenecks such as the inter-operability of hardware or the optimisation and shipping of executables might converge.

Immediately, there was a range of views on what finalisation meant in the context of the development of immersive work, where what is delivered varies so widely:

“I do feel a bit frustrated that I don’t have a physical or a tangible product, to the point where I almost decide to focus on creating a product just for the sake of having something that I can say, *‘Hey, this is what I can do, this is what I’ve been doing.’*”

“You need to try something out, figure out what works and then iterate and iterate and iterate, being cautious that you don’t spend endless time trying to make the perfect product.”

There was a general consensus that the final sprint towards a shareable iteration of immersive work was an extremely crucial one, fraught with technical challenges, but the experiences shared were far from homogenous, the approaches and strategies for managing this phase of the work.

Several artists were generous enough to share how the process of “finalising” a piece of work in order to share it (even as a test or a prototype) was emotionally taxing. Bringing the work into new spaces, was often a challenge.

“I was probably a bit overly ambitious in the application with what I thought I could achieve, and that was something that was quite sobering to go through.”

Venues consistently represented a point where the working methodologies of the project were subject to intense pressure and change:

“We, sort of, thought that it was going to only take maybe a couple of days to assemble. What we should’ve done, going back, was to have assembled it beforehand, checked that everything was working. It was left too much to the last minute because we had to work round other people as well in the exhibition.”

Across the group there was a lot of solidarity offered and insights shared on the issue of bringing new work to a venue, especially if that venue was not strictly intended to host immersive art:

“But the venue was a challenge. I mean, it was a totally soulless, corporate, heinous environment. The challenge was, how do you make this thing immersive?”

“And there was a lot of navigating and figuring stuff out and being quite on-the-fly. So, you know, light was paramount, taping down exit signs and all that kind of thing, which sounds small, but it really changes everything. We really needed to figure out how do we make this space dark? How are we going to lead people in? There was a sense of choreography around that. How are we going to have them at the end?”

However, even dedicated venues presented challenges. A large institution cancelled a booking for a testing event with only two days notice. Even when the scheduling was straightforward, several other obstacles were discussed.

“Because it’s a nightmare sometimes to work in traditional venues with technicians who have been trained with specific ways of doing things, and only work with tech that they know.”

Across the course of the debrief sessions the range of potential venues for immersive work was discussed, with the modular format of spaces like Undershed and Bocs at the Wales Millenium Centre discussed. But as above, the bottleneck that was repeatedly noted was the one that occurred when the creative momentum of a project in development came up against the standards and processes of an institution and its team:

“Modularity is a smart way of looking at things. But if you don’t have the human capacity or human willingness, that system around it that is already coming forward, you might as well forget about it. To be totally blunt.”

Likewise, when it comes to work as diverse as that contained within the Immersive Arts programme, even a hyper-modular space would have its limits, and the black box model of immersive art exhibition has its own set of internal tropes:

“I question the modularity of something. I think that we have such bespoke, unique projects that a modular approach sounds to me almost like an approach to something that, you know, it may or may not completely work for our project, but it would squeeze it into something very much more homogenised and similar to something else, potentially... I don’t like the idea of a future of black boxes, especially as a low-tech living-systems person.”

Amidst this discussion around venues a distinct disciplinary divide emerged that was interesting to reflect on. Artists with performance backgrounds consistently identified the process of putting the work in front of the audience not as a moment of delivery but as a further opportunity for discovery.

Three projects articulated the potential contained in this moment:

“We don’t know what the work is like until there are people joining the work.”

“You literally are starting to have a live dialogue that is completely unpredictable, and you have to accept that you’ve got far less control than you imagined.”

That said, even with the most radically open practice, there was an acknowledgement that bottlenecks – especially around the dependable performance of networked technologies in new spaces – threatened to curtail the processes of discovery sparked by introducing an audience to the work.

“Some tech takes so much management that it becomes a monster that shapes everything we make and the experience of us as the creators and the users, the participants, the audience that we invite in, and we forget the other bits that are about dialogue and meeting and fragility.”

Significantly, some artists start their creative process by thinking about the challenges that will be inherent to touring it:

“When we start to make work, the starting point is about touring. It’s not, *‘I’ll think about this afterwards.’* From the very beginning, it needs to be touring in order to make sense. So, thinking about for touring, so it’s like, how can we be cutting-edge and at the same time find enough venues or a festival which can take us?”

But within the context of immersive technologies, the question of how to finalise can lead to constraints on how to develop the work in the first place.

Of course, bottlenecks associated with distribution fold back onto bottlenecks that occur in development, but with the model of sustainability for this work so vulnerable to shocks and pivots from the leading platforms in the sector the technical challenges of distribution can impact creative decision making at every stage in the pipeline.

One artist shared the provocative prospect of Netflix in 3D, adding that immersive exhibition was often shackled to the business models of other formats.

“The choices are reducing what is being made, basically, and they are driven by commercial imperatives that have been directly borrowed from all the other industries that have narrowed down things again and again.”

Lastly, even where immersive work was shared in the spirit of experimentation and in contexts that galvanised conversation and engagement, an under addressed challenge remained – the dominance of English.

“It’s only reserved for people who have enough mastery of English to be able to get something out of it, if it’s through words. But even the navigation, the invitation, who onboards you, everything is done in English. And tech is intimidating, it can be intimidating.”

Whilst there was a catharsis to be found in sharing frustrations, the discussions were generative and practical as well. A range of strategies emerged for dealing with bottlenecks associated with delivering experimental work into a venue, and finding the right person to help with that delivery process:

“Basically, there are a lot of skills a producer needs to have. ‘Oh, there are line producers, there are technical producers.’ They’ve been dissecting these roles. And in my head I’m like, ‘Yeah, if I had all the money in the world, I think I could dissect that role, but we have to be realistic.’ That’s a lot of money, to start dissecting roles like that.”

With so many skillsets in play and with limited resource to work with a diverse team, clarifying the brief around delivery was understood as crucial.

“In the future I wouldn’t work in the same way. We would hire someone and specifically explain to them what the brief is, ‘This is what you need to do, this is what you need to not do,’ and be quite precise about that kind of stuff, to time-box it a bit more.”

Others however, found the process of finalisation an opportunity to absorb multiple roles and skillsets into their practice, and re-scale their projects appropriately:

“It took me from thinking that what I needed to do is to figure out what to tell the stage technicians, how to direct the lighting and how to follow the cues, the theatrical cues within my script to make the show happen the way I want it to happen, and what tech I needed to have these relationships with the audience.

But I then found that I can direct all that from the stage myself. You know, with an Apple, with the right programme, with the right peddles, I can trigger these things to happen. So that was a really useful thing, so it means I can rely more on myself and without having to worry about another person who, if it’s a sound engineer I might’ve just met that day, will I have to rely on them having to follow a script which they’re not familiar with?”

But this stacking of roles onto one person represents a bottleneck in itself. And burnout and exhaustion were a commonly reported outcome. Moving away from the lead producer model to a community model was met with enthusiasm:

“A community of people like ourselves, we’ve all developed all these different skills, but what if it was a question of like... This is actually a solution that sometimes ADHD people use, where, ‘Okay, I can’t clean my house but I can clean, so I’d rather go and clean your house and you come and clean my house,’ you know?”

This encapsulates a feeling that was pervasive across the debriefs, specifically that no matter how challenging the bottlenecks encountered through the process of multisensory storytelling development, the first and most available avenue of support was the creative community. Whilst the Immersive Arts programme is doing a lot to build community spaces for discussion, skill-sharing and knowledge exchange, these spaces sometimes fail to offer a degree of permission and/or security commensurate to the vulnerability entailed in discussing creative challenges.

I’ll expand more on the value of debriefing and providing a space for candour and reflection in the Closing Remarks.

Closing remarks:

Bottlenecks & An Ecology of Practices

05

In 2003 philosopher Isabelle Stenger formulated the notion of an “ecology of practices,” in which no practice be “treated ‘like any other,’ just as no living species is like any other.”

Stengers was researching the work of scientists engaged in questioning the legitimacy of ‘reality claims’ (they were physicists) whilst simultaneously defending the legitimacy of their own experimental practices against external forces.

Stengers described a delicate balance where “approaching a practice... means approaching it as it diverges... experimenting with the questions which practitioners may accept as relevant, even if they are not their own questions, rather than posing insulting questions that would lead them to mobilise and transform the border into a defence against their outside.”

I resonate with this approach for several reasons. Firstly, because my initial enquiry into bottlenecks risked insulting the artists with its irrelevance and provoking a defensiveness that might have left me on the outside.

But secondly, and more importantly, because the question of bottlenecks became a means by which to conceive of multisensory storytelling as an ecology of practices. It is clear that bottlenecks are never exclusively technical and the impact that they have on a project is rarely bounded by the operation of a given technology. Bottlenecks are moments in creative development when pre-conditions of all sorts, social, cultural, technical, even epistemological and ontological, exert pressure on the emergent possibilities of a project. They are layered and compounding, unevenly distributed across time and space and amongst individuals. One person’s bottleneck is another person’s opportunity, and vice versa: the success of one way of doing things, especially in a practice as nascent as multisensory storytelling, can immediately impose the bottleneck of precedent on successive projects. No bottleneck can be treated like any other, just as no practice can.

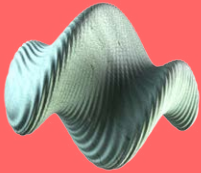
For Stengers, the concept of an ‘ecology of practices’ enables a form of research that, if not belonging to that ecology, can nevertheless affirm and sustain it. “If there is to be an ecology of practices, practices must not be defended as if they are weak. The problem for each practice is how to foster its own force, make present what causes practitioners to think and feel and act. But it is a problem which may also produce an experimental togetherness among practices, a dynamics of pragmatic learning of what works and how. This is the kind of active, fostering ‘milieu’ that practices need in order to be able to answer challenges and experiment changes, that is, to unfold their own force.”

The reports included here are conversation starters – prompts to reflect on the experience of grappling with a creative problem, particularly as it pertains to using creative technologies to produce multisensory experiences.

But they are also evidence of the value of debriefing to the individuals participating as well as to wider research invested in a cultural space as internally variable and heterogenous as multisensory storytelling. Therefore, not to betray the anti-conclusive spirit summoned in the introduction, it is worth noting, by way of closing, that this research into bottlenecks in multisensory development is a means of fostering the ‘milieu’ of multisensory storytelling, and helping the individual practices irreducibly contained within that ecology to “unfold their own force.” Thinking about the challenges posed by bottlenecks in multisensory storytelling development, be they material, technical or more abstract, is a means of producing an “experimental togetherness among practices,” and generating a “dynamics of pragmatic learning of what works and how.”

Reference:

Isabelle Stengers. 2005. “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices.” *Cultural Studies Review* 11 (1). Carlton South, Vic: University of Technology Sydney: 183–96.



Multisensory Storytelling

Multisensory Storytelling is a research initiative led by Prof Mandy Rose and Dr Tom Livingstone (DCRC, UWE Bristol) engaging with evolving forms and formats for storytelling in an increasingly multisensory media environment.

More info: multisensorystorytelling.org

IMMERSIVE ARTS

Immersive Arts is an ambitious UK-wide sector development and artists funding programme, taking an artist-led approach to working with immersive technologies. The programme encourages artists of all backgrounds and expertise to explore, experiment or expand how they work with immersive technologies.

More info: immersivarts.uk

MyWorld

Building on the existing strength of the West of England region, MyWorld is exploring the future of creative technology innovation by pioneering new ideas, products and processes.

More info: myworld-creates.com

Digital ———
——— Cultures
— Research —
——— Centre

The Digital Cultures Research Centre interrogates articulates and creates practical approaches to responsible technological futures.

More info: dcrc.org.uk