

Engagement "Beyond Our Walls"

Libraries as hubs for civic media and stronger communities

Democracy depends on engagement at the community level, including as a basis for group identity and collective efficacy. Yet our local institutions -- including libraries and community museums -- lack the tools for interactive storytelling. Public space is increasingly mediated by mobile phones, with apps controlled by global companies. This research investigates a new path that centers on local history and voices, and scaffolds the design process around "low-tech" tools and principles borrowed from game design.



My first book established the foundation for this inquiry by showing the impact of local games, and revealing how the design process remains too technically and conceptually intimidating for most civic groups (2020 / MIT Press).

1. Who we are



The most advanced models for engagement come from games. The Game Center at American University is a national leader in translating the science of game design into public purpose.



Our lab is led by Dr. Benjamin Stokes, an associate professor at American University.
<https://playfulcity.net/>

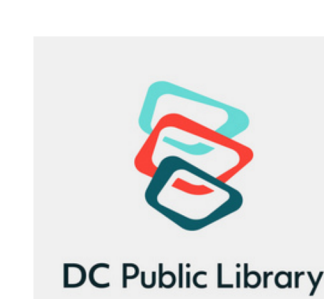


According to Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT), strong places can mobilize when they have the ability to circulate key stories, tied to shared concerns and the group identity.

Funding and partners include:



- \$250,000 grant from the federal IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2020-2023)
- The Knight Foundation with Niantic, Inc., in support of our research on cities appropriating Pokémon GO
- The Smithsonian Institution for their support of our storytelling system as part of the "Right to the City" exhibition at the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum
- The DC Office of Planning, in support of a pilot to use our system in Ward 7



What kind of thing?

Think of mural hunts, audio tours tied to local history, and texting-with-a-sculpture...

2. Regional pilots, 2018-2020



4 DC libraries and the Smithsonian

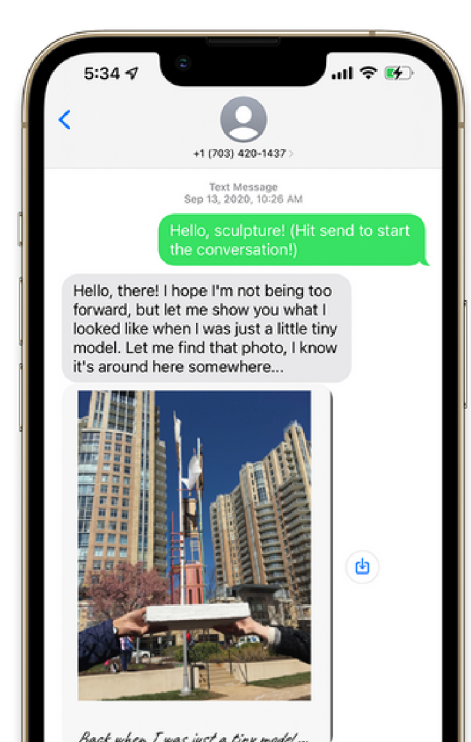
A participatory audio system on the history of DC neighborhood organizing, with listening stations in four libraries tied to a Smithsonian exhibition. Residents contributed stories, and explored content tied to specific neighborhoods. Branching audio, text messaging, and an interactive scavenger hunt.



VA Pilot: a sculpture that texts back

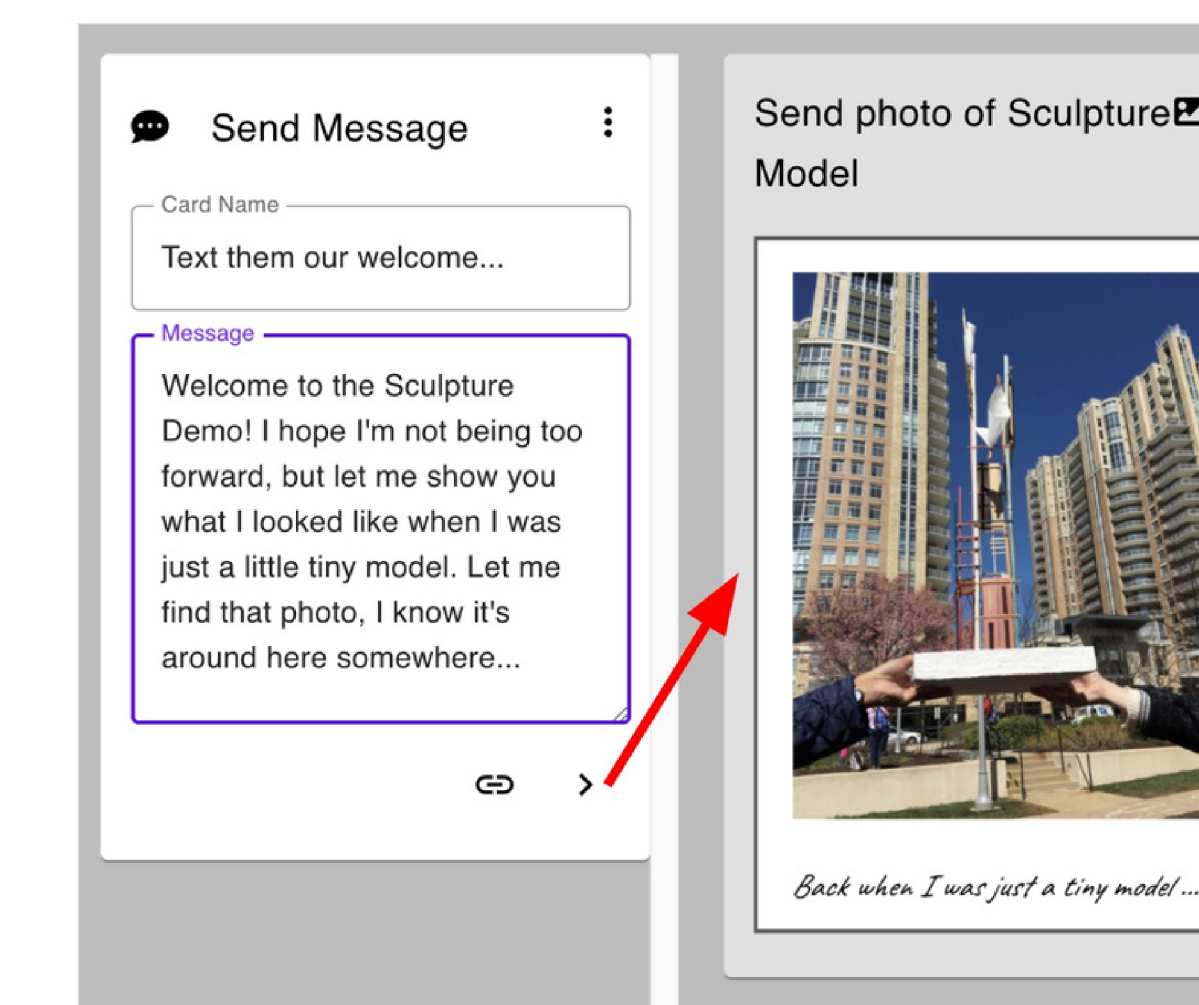
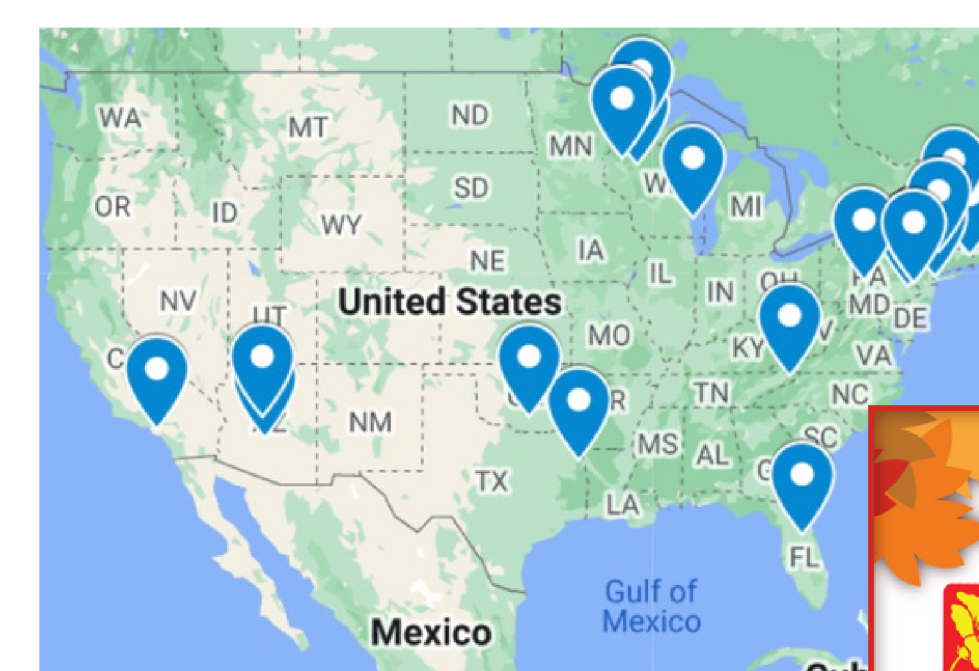
To accompany this 50-foot surrealist sculpture, we designed an "oracle" to engage with visitors by text message. The oracle sends annotated photographs (similar to polaroids), revealing the hidden history and philosophy of the artwork. More playfully, the oracle picks different "readings" of paired poetry and remixed images of the sculpture for each visitor. Featuring mounted signs with QR codes that start the text message conversation.

Five year installation for the Tephra Arts Center. Created in collaboration with artist Sue Wrbcian; located in Reston, VA.



3. Scalable models

National study in 20+ cities, anchored at public libraries. The first cohort of cities was in the fall of 2022; the second is spring 2023.



Screenshot of our authoring system for libraries. It that requires no background in computer programming.

4. Field data (ongoing)

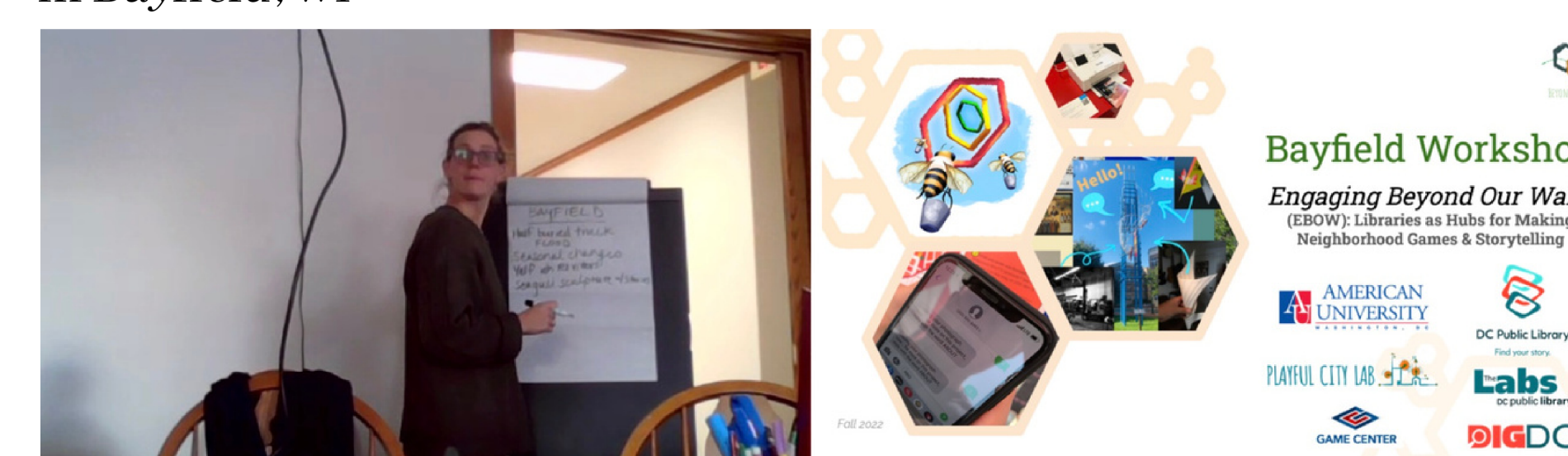
A few of the library creations...

"Explore a Haunted Caboose" in Umatilla, FL



The narrative complexity is considerable (left); recruiting in public space remains important, such as through the display table used on Halloween (right).

Resident Workshop in Bayfield, WI



A group of 6-10 residents met weekly in person, with remote coaching by MFA students in Game Design from American University. The generalizability of this three-workshop model will be tested in the spring of 2023.

Research questions...

- 1) How can we democratize the design of neighborhood games and interactive stories, especially for civic use and with low-tech accessibility?
- 2) What interactive forms can be most effectively appropriated by neighborhoods for local content? Can these be articulated as "recipes" that can generalize and scale?
- 3) What tools and curricular scaffolds can significantly help to close the gap between the capabilities of industry and those of ordinary communities with critical stories to tell?

Methods include: participatory design, action research, semi-structured interviews, participant surveys

5. Research outputs



In draft: Open-access [book](#) for [museum and library leaders](#), co-authored with the Chief Curator of the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, Dr. Samir Meghelli.

Working title: "New Strategies for Cultural Institutions: Storytelling for Stronger Places with Unexpected Technology: Phones, Trucks and Hybrid Media."



Released: We are publishing all the code for our authoring tool to GitHub. In the spirit of open source, any institution can then use our tool to create their own neighborhood games and interactive stories.