THE PLAYABLE CITY:
"HELLO LAMP POST!"

The streets of Bristol are full of sleeping objects.
Will you wake them and answer their questions?

PAN

THE SMART CITY AND THE PLAYABLE CITY

"The Playable City is a new term, imagined as a counterpoint to 'A Smart City'."

We interpret the 'Smart City' as an idea that represents values such as clarity, accuracy, integration, efficiency and refinement. It is a top-down ideology, most desirable from the perspective of civic authorities and service providers.

The sensory extremities/ appendages of a smart city are its utilities and street furniture – objects so ubiquitous that they have become invisible to us. They include (but aren't exclusive to) street lights, post boxes, bus stops and fire hydrants.

If these human 'touchpoints' are going to be smart, can they also be open, hospitable and played with at the same time? How can they be open to interpretation, surprising and personable?

This has been our area of interest, and what has informed our proposition for a core playable mechanic.

APPROACH:
CODES
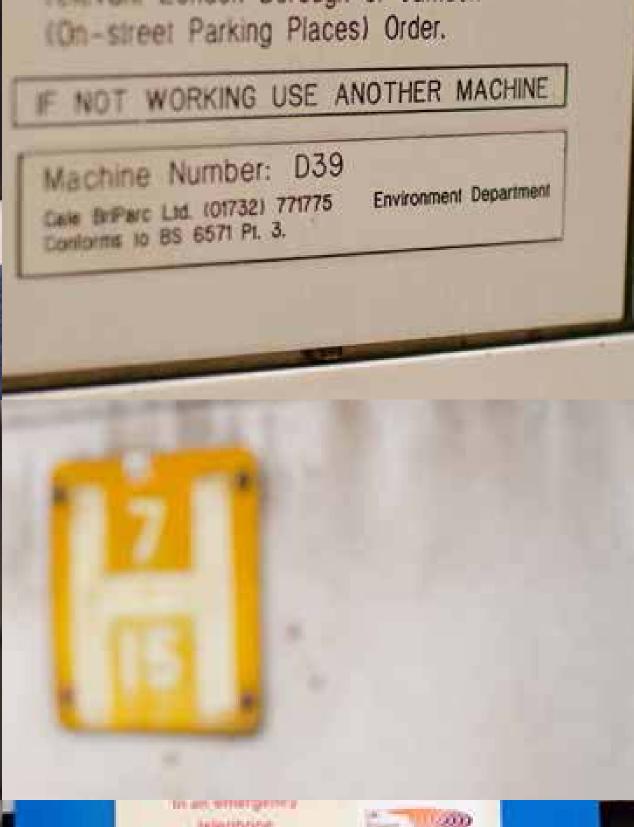
The city is full of codes.

Almost every utility has an identifying label of one kind or another – a combination of alphanumeric characters that functions as a name, as well as indicating patterns and relationships with their 'sibling' objects.

Can these codes, initially deployed for management and maintenance, be repurposed as reference points and context providers for city-wide play?

The city is coming to its senses. The fabric of its streets has been sleeping, and is now waking up.

Lampposts, pillar boxes, manhole covers, bus stops, and more; all are rising from their slumber.

Startled into life by Bristol's citizens, they are suddenly awake, alert and inquisitve.

They have questions, and they need answers.

Objects are "woken" by texting the "Playable City" phone number with the object's reference number, "Hello" and the object's form/ description (it doesn't have to be accurate)

EC1107 Hello post box!

As soon as a player texts the object, it immediately responds with a question about itself...

...Once it wakes up it will want to know about its location and current situation.

These exchanges will be a maximum of three questions long: one about the object itself, one about where it is, and one about the person talking to the object.

EC1107 Hello post box!

Whoa! You startled me. Hi. Can I ask you something... what do I look like?

You're big and red with two slots. People use you to send letters.
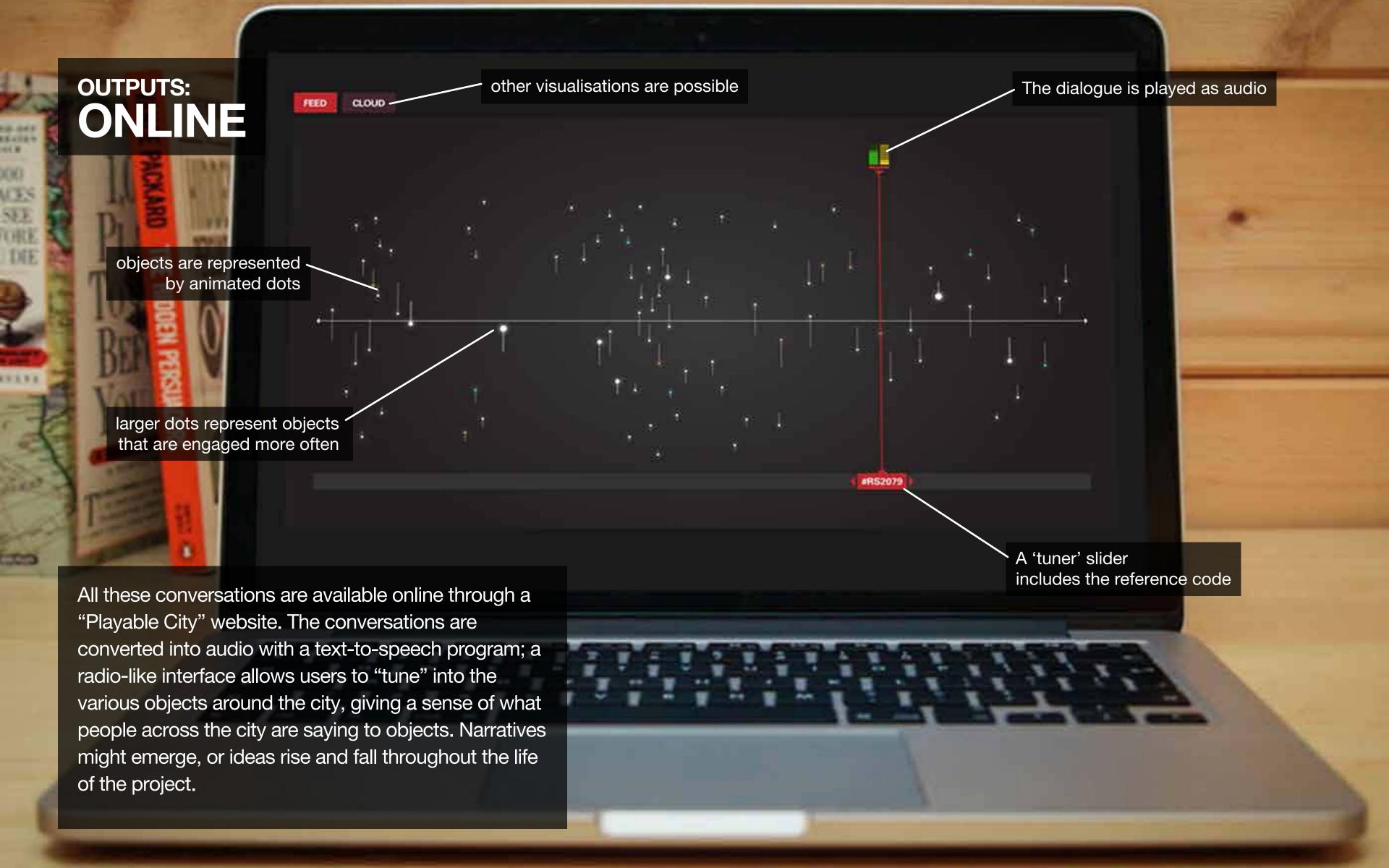
Thanks. Someone once said "You are a monster with two mouths"... Where is this place?

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Players responses are stored on an online database, so they can be collated, aggregated, and presented back to other players later.

Because codes do not necessarily have to be unique, many objects in the city - even different types of object - might share the occasional code. This can lead to confusing, jarring - but playful, and accidentally charming conversations.

This is Union St. Behind you there is a Greggs.

Good to know. Can I please ask one more thing? Where are you off to right now?

I'm going to the park. To read my book.

Thanks for the info, I'll need to think it all through. Maybe come by for a chat again, some time soon.

Players are identified through their phone number (or email address, account, twitter handle…). This means that we can acknowledge players who call again - offering new options to experienced players, for instance. It also means we can recognise players calling to the same object again, and the object can converse a little differently with a "frequent caller", or perhaps even start to reject their advances.

other visualisations are possible

The dialogue is played as audio

objects are represented by animated dots

larger dots represent objects that are engaged more often

FEED   CLOUD

#RS2079

A 'tuner' slider includes the reference code

All these conversations are available online through a "Playable City" website. The conversations are converted into audio with a text-to-speech program; a radio-like interface allows users to "tune" into the various objects around the city, giving a sense of what people across the city are saying to objects. Narratives might emerge, or ideas rise and fall throughout the life of the project.

OUTPUTS:
INSTALLATION

There is also a physical installation in a central exhibition space, where the city's conversations can be heard.

Visitors enter the space wearing special headphones. They "tune" into conversations based on their position in the room, allowing them to physically walk through the ideas and games being played in the city. Again, new context is created, as visitors group around interesting or bemusing exchanges, leading to yet more conversation.

The physical experience is very personal, individual: every visitor is wearing headphones. But, by looking at the actions of other visitors, it becomes possible to see where interesting narratives are developing: information from across the city - but without any location data - starts to be relocated, into positions throughout the exhibitions space, into new clusters and groupings.

KEEPING PLAY FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE

We see a lot of further potential in the core mechanic. A good design process should be both discursive and iterative; ideas should be refined with the benefit of a contextual point of view. As a design studio, PAN is interested in the potential for the Playable City to continually evolve, through the development phase as well as after launch.

During the development period we plan to continue refining the project, exploring the affordances of Bristol itself, adding new playful seams, building strong reward loops for committed players, and exploring ways the rules of the playable city can be bent by its citizens.

Development could also continue after the project has launched through specific events - working with local schools or community groups, for instance, to "tag" their area and tell specific stories about it; the possibilities are all there to be explored.

EXPLOITING AN OPEN FRAMEWORK

Players may start to play on a micro scale within the system - creating riddles or exploration games through the answers the leave. For instance, the above image may have the code [DolphinMDCCLXII]; other players might end up leaving clues to its locations in their responses to its questions. Then, if someone else came to wake up the window having heard those hints elsewhere - say, on the "radio" - they might leave clues to another object and location.

PLAYER SUBVERSION

Players can begin to subvert the game by creating their own codes - writing them either directly onto objects (not that we could condone it) or on official Playable City stickers. This might lead to them writing their own narratives - chaining objects together, each with clues to the next in some responses, and spreading an adventure or story across Bristol for other players to discover.

WHY SMS?

We chose text messaging for the core mechanic for two reasons: because in the past we have found it to be highly accessible (anyone with a mobile phone can take part, a smart 'device' is not necessary) and because the medium is simple, immediate and seemingly "low"-tech.

OTHER POTENTIAL MECHANICS

However, other mechanics could be explored for in addition, each with their own quirks and advantages. We could consider the use of a social media platform like Twitter, which would open the project to a wider audience and enable geo-tagging; email, if we wanted to explore longer responses and rich media (like pictures); or a bespoke mobile site or app, which could allow more flexibility in question and response forms.

People that have played with the city will have explored their environment and found a new relationship with it. Inhabitants will forever know a particular post box, or bench, as the one they spoke to; the one they woke up, made self-aware, left a joke at. Players may have travelled to new locations, found new parts of the city they otherwise would not have seen, thanks to clues in objects.

Players will have connected more strongly with their homes and neighbourhoods thanks to their exploration of the connections therein. The legacy of the project is one where relationships between people, objects and location has been reshaped, creating a new language for community in the city.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS:
MODERATION

Though the play mechanic is not specifically designed for children, it would be ideal if all ages could take part. Because textual responses allow people to potentially submit offensive content, we take the issue of moderation very seriously.

Fortunately, in this case the task is straight-forward and low risk. We can apply automatic language filters that block any content containing chosen words and implement a community-moderated "flag content" function online.

There isn't any requirement for submitted content to be seen in real time, so if it were considered necessary to do so, we could also implement a human-level approval system, that all conversations would need to pass.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS:
WILL IT TOUR?

The project is, of course, entirely tourable in it's current state: it just requires a suitable location for the installation.

However, in each city it's toured to, the project will ideally benefit from some reshaping and reconfiguration - for instance, making use of suitable objects in each particular city, and perhaps emphasising unique elements of each city.

THANK YOU