Creativity and project management: a comic

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Abstract

It's a comic book, the clue's in the title. The idea is to tell a story about how a research project took place focusing not on the data that was generated, or even so much on how we generated the data, but on the way we actually tried to manage the project. Generally the academy likes to draw a veil over the messy bits which make scholars look like idiots and allows outsiders to question whether or not projects should have been funded in the first place. But if you're willing to sail your academic reputation out to sea on a long boat and set it on fire then you might illuminate the dark corners of the black box in which these processes normally reside. Project management can be a crucial, highly creative, part of the process of generating new academic knowledge. We argue that acknowledging these processes is every bit as important as acknowledging the research 'position' from which the field data were collected and analysed. Plus there's a sex scene.

Foreword

So, this may seem like a bit of an odd way to put an article together which is supposed to be for a serious academic audience, doing serious research, seriously.

As academics, we often worry about making ourselves look foolish, about giving critics of the academy more excuses to attack universities as a waste of taxpayers' money in an age of austerity. So even where we fess up to the organic and serendipitous nature of the research process, there is a temptation to pull our punches, to make us look more professional (and less half arsed) than perhaps we really are.

Social scientists are increasingly becoming project managers, setting the framework for other people to carry out the research and trying to make sure the findings create 'impact'. Project management can, however, be highly creative and just as likely to be organic and serendipitous (and occasionally half-arsed) as the research process itself. This paper considers the practice of project management by two people running their first large grant, taking an often unflattering look about how we did things. Here we tell the story of the grant, and the impact of management decisions we made on the kind of project we ended up delivering. So this is a form of autoethnography, but we're not so interested in the research, rather in the things that happened around that research (Butz & Besio, 2009).

Both because this paper is both attempting to 'draw back the curtain' on the academic process and doing so through a particular kind of media, this paper fits broadly within the philosophy of public geographies (Fuller & Askins 2007; Ward 2006). Indeed, as members of the Birmingham Public Geographies Working Group at the time, we wrote these principles into the grant application. Partly because we believed in them and partly, more cynically, because we thought they might sound 'cutting edge' enough to help us get the cash.
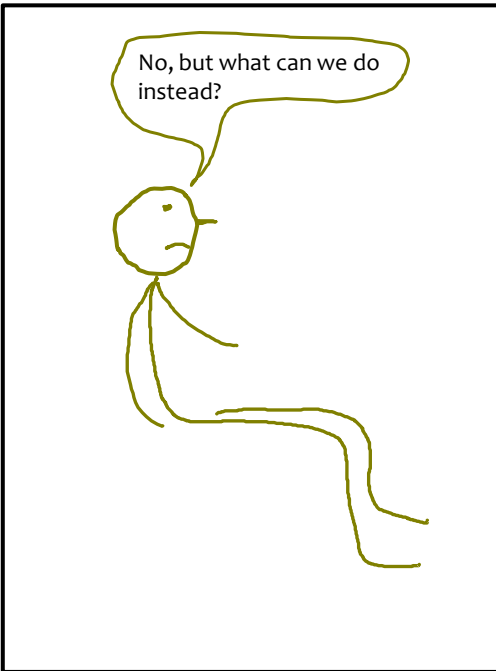
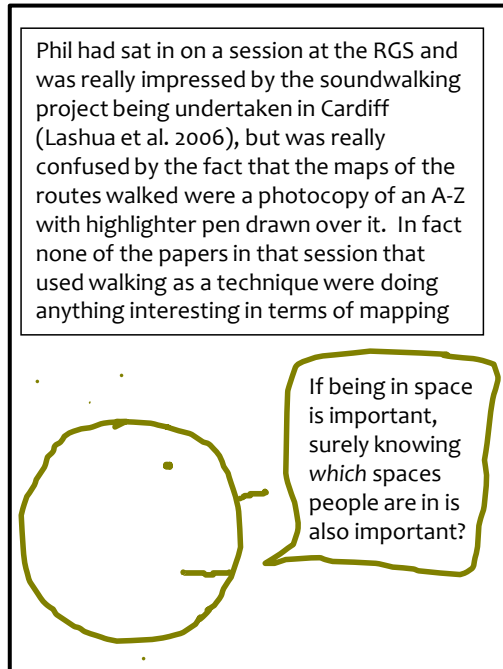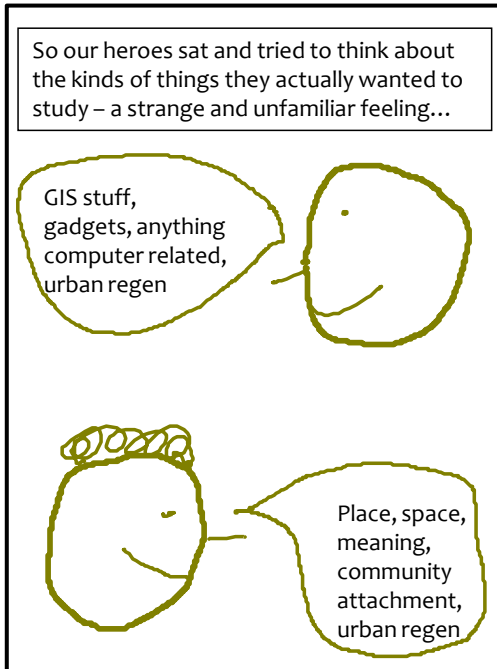They did. But we'll get back to that later.

A note on style

This piece is inspired by the graphic novel idiom – particularly the text intercutting of Watchmen, the narrative form of Questionable Content and the visual style of xkcd – but should be thought of primarily as an academic narrative. We have made no attempt to create a cod 'comicbook' style with clichéd fonts and standard effects from PhotoShop. Though lacking aesthetic polish, there is an originality to the style here, working within the parameters of the graphic novel mode to create something which is more than mere dabbling in an artistic form (Percer, 2002). You can get sniffy and say this isn't academic enough, but remember, using visually-driven presentations such as photo essays are pretty common within highly respectable medical literature as a means of getting across the story of the case study (see, for example, Peoples et al. 2004). Plus, of course, there's acres of academic print that's been taken up examining the merits of graphic novels (see Weiner 2004 for an overview). So just take it all in good humour. Okay?
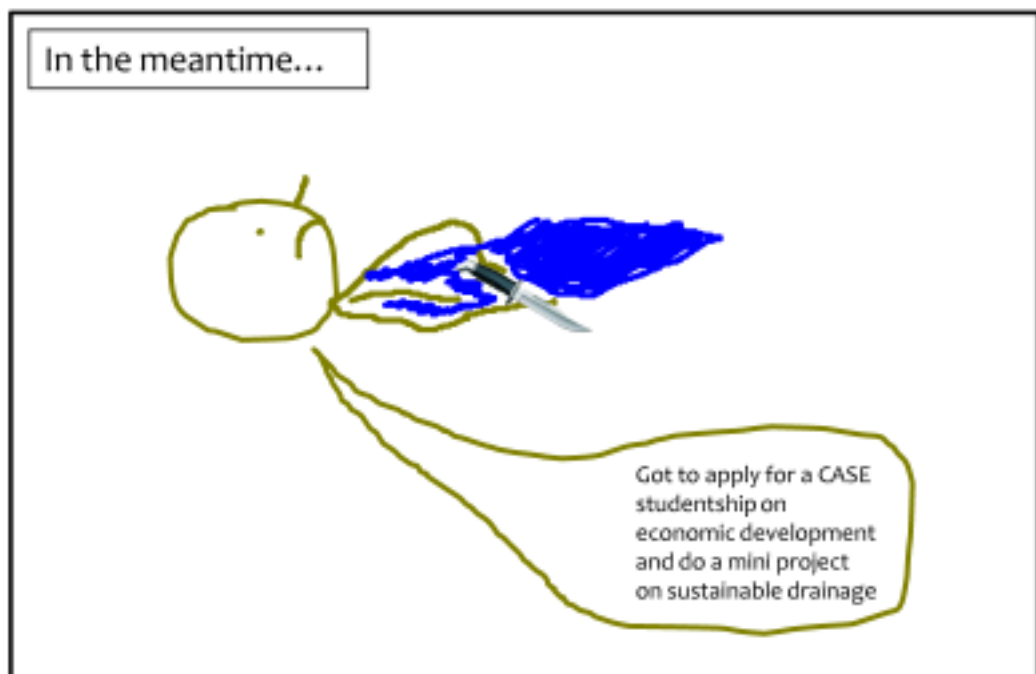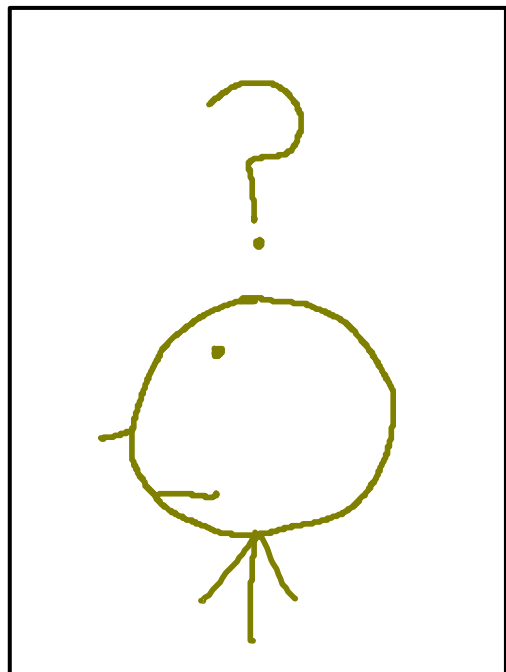
Part One:
The superhero origin story

So our heroes sat and tried to think about the kinds of things they actually wanted to study – a strange and unfamiliar feeling...

GIS stuff, gadgets, anything computer related, urban regen

Place, space, meaning, community attachment, urban regen

Phil had sat in on a session at the RGS and was really impressed by the soundwalking project being undertaken in Cardiff (Lashua et al. 2006), but was really confused by the fact that the maps of the routes walked were a photocopy of an A-Z with highlighter pen drawn over it. In fact none of the papers in that session that used walking as a technique were doing anything interesting in terms of mapping

If being in space is important, surely knowing *which* spaces people are in is also important?

There's lots of interesting things here...

...but how does it all fit together?

And how the hell do we sell it to the ESRC?

And so it came to pass that our heroes started writing their first proper grant application about something they actually wanted to research. The basic notion was simple: everyone seems to be interested in walking interviews, but what difference does walking with a participant actually make?

By attaching GPS devices to participants while they walk and talk, words and spaces could be (fairly) precisely mapped. Three groups of people would be used: those who only undertook walking interviews, those who only undertook traditional sit-down interviews, and those who did both. Then they'd be able to analyse the different ways the different groups talked about a particular space.

But which space?

This was the height of the pre-credit crunch boom. Phil & James were already producing a book on urban regeneration (Jones & Evans 2008) and were getting a little exercised by the ways that, for all the talk of community engagement, in the final analysis people seemed very much squeezed out of the process. They were both particularly miffed about the Digbeth area of Birmingham where a big project branded 'Eastside' was taking place which seemed hell bent on erasing the histories, both physical and social that existed there.
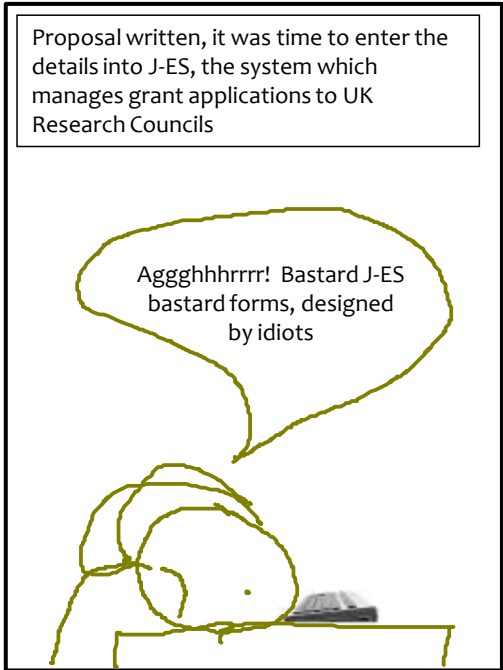
Rescue archaeologists go into an area prior to redevelopment and try to record traces of past settlements. Why couldn't geographers do the same with people's spatial memories of spaces about to be radically changed. Why not create a Rescue *Geography*?
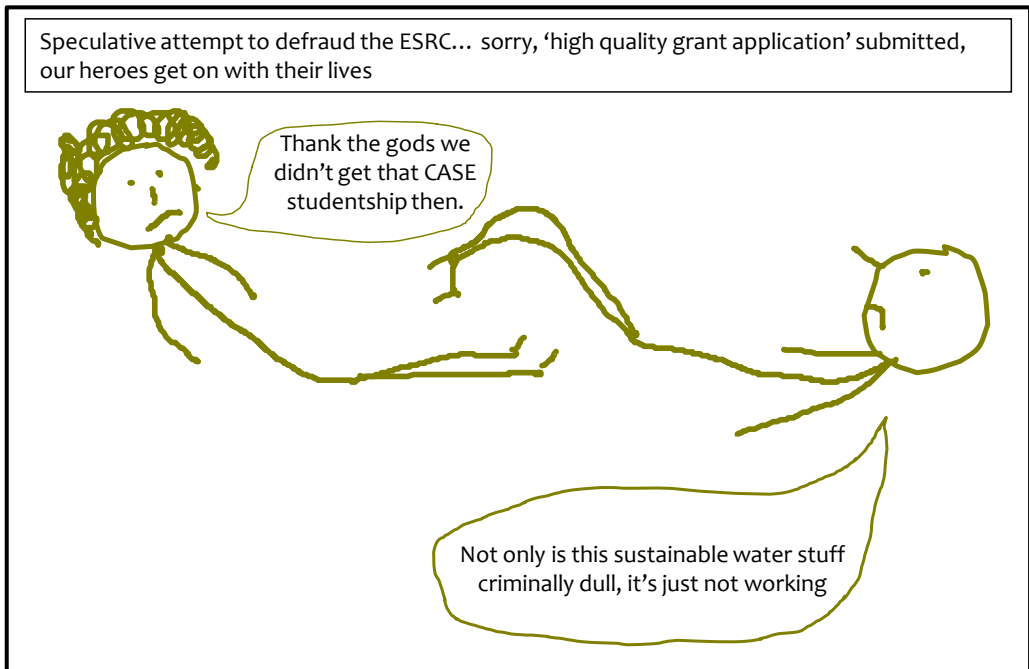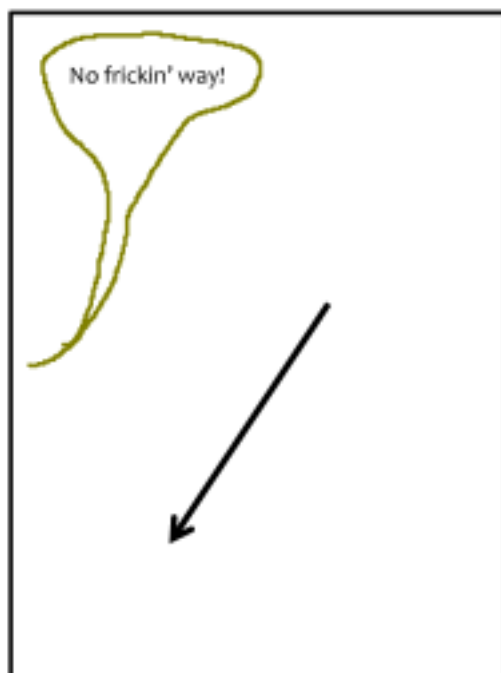
Welcome to Digbeth
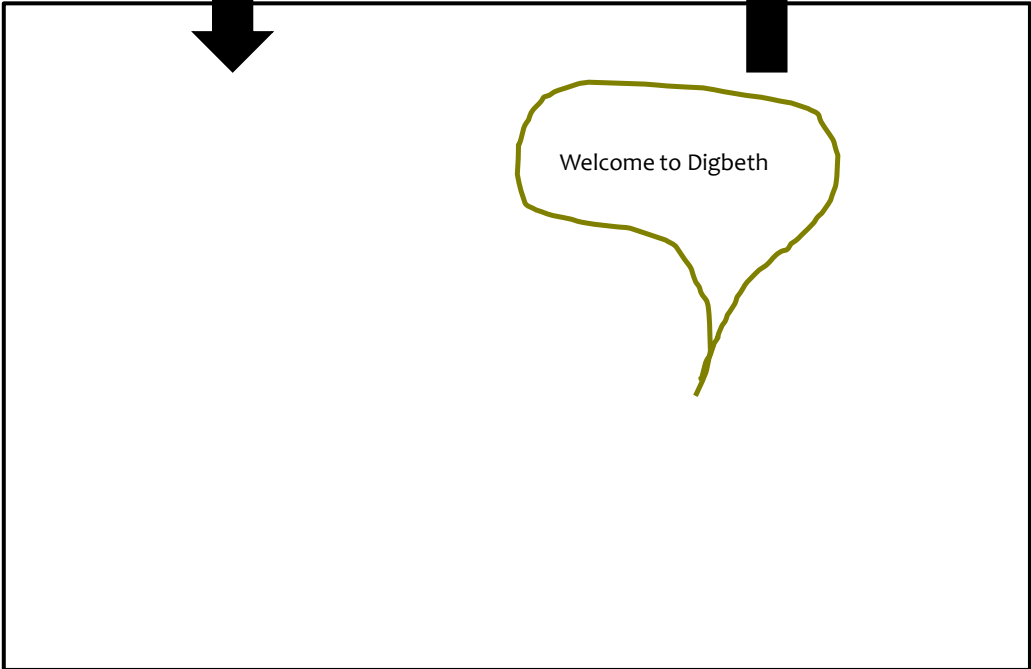
Little did our heroes know that they were starting on a journey that would take them some distance from the original idea.

So this grant application had a number of things going on at once. There was the methodology element. But there was also the investigation of Digbeth's history. And there was a public geography commitment to do something to help 'resist' the actions of the local authority, regional development agency and private developers who had their own vision of what the area should be. Even if that 'resistance' was only to record what was there before it was gone.

In short, it was a bit half-arsed right from the start

Proposal written, it was time to enter the details into J-ES, the system which manages grant applications to UK Research Councils

Aggghhhrrrr! Bastard J-ES bastard forms, designed by idiots

Several weeks and many, many spreadsheets later

I've finished costing the grant at long last!

I've got a job at Manchester

You git, do you have any idea what this does to the spreadsheet?

Months pass then, one morning, checking the post in the staff pigeonholes…

Hmm, what's this?

No frickin' way!

Dr James' shopping trip is suddenly interrupted by an excited phone call…
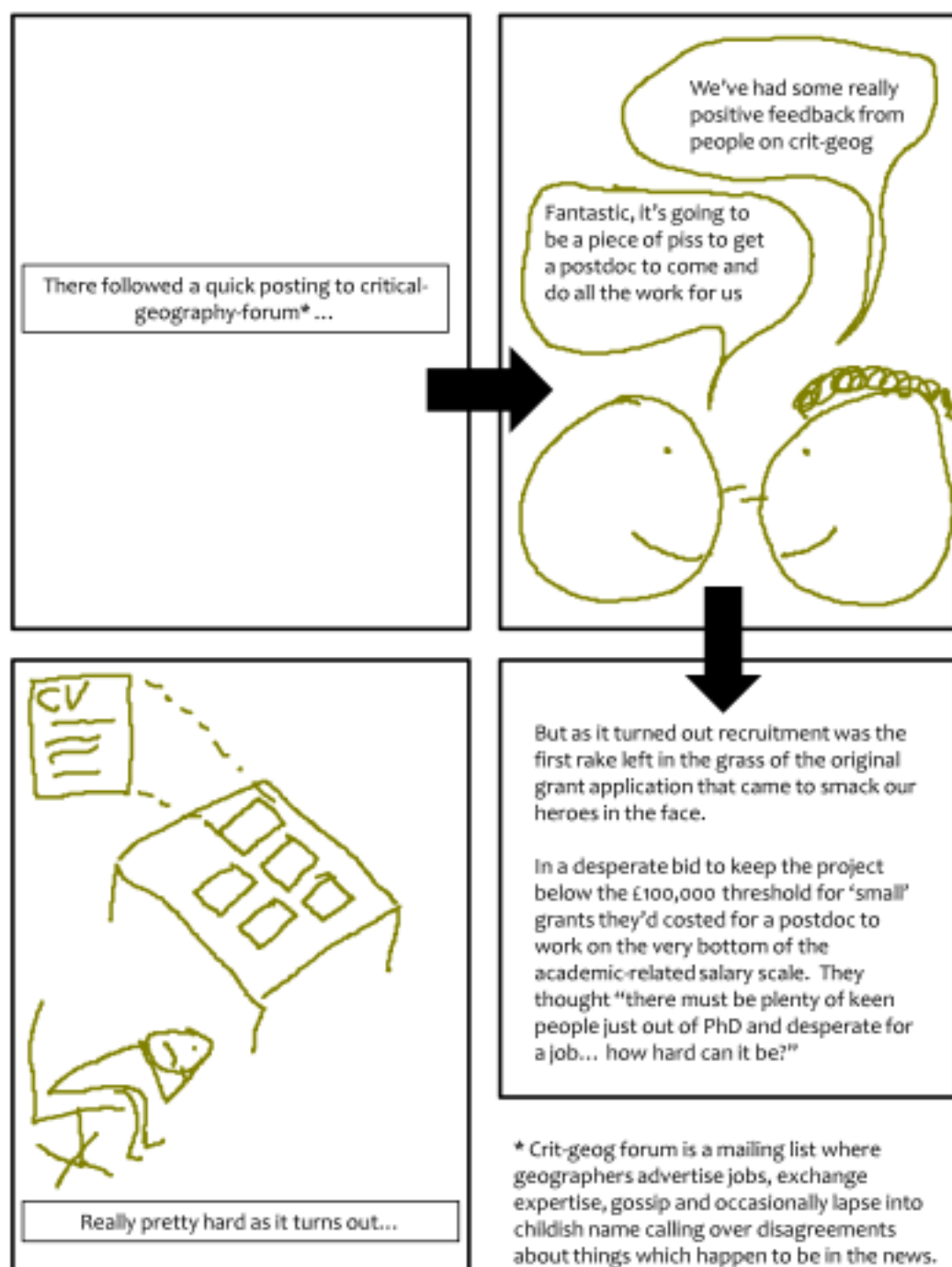
No frickin' way!

And so our heroes were all set,. They had £100,000 of public money and 12 months to devise and test a new research method.

What swayed the ESRC in their favour? Was it the public geography element? Was it the urban regeneration element? Was it the historical geography element? Who knows? But they didn't care because they'd got the cash. Now all they had to do was deliver the project.

Part Two:
The project they were paid to work on

There followed a quick posting to critical-geography-forum* ...

We've had some really positive feedback from people on crit-geog

Fantastic, it's going to be a piece of piss to get a postdoc to come and do all the work for us

But as it turned out recruitment was the first rake left in the grass of the original grant application that came to smack our heroes in the face.

In a desperate bid to keep the project below the £100,000 threshold for 'small' grants they'd costed for a postdoc to work on the very bottom of the academic-related salary scale. They thought "there must be plenty of keen people just out of PhD and desperate for a job... how hard can it be?"

Really pretty hard as it turns out...

* Crit-geog forum is a mailing list where geographers advertise jobs, exchange expertise, gossip and occasionally lapse into childish name calling over disagreements about things which happen to be in the news.

First the obviously bullshit applications were weeded out

Then the ones from otherwise okay-ish people who just weren't really in a position to do the job (i.e. nowhere near finishing PhD)

Finally there were only two left and so they were invited to interview.

Hmm...

CV

CV

Not exactly the situation our heroes wanted to be in, but after taxes they were offering not much more than PhD money, so they were never going to be inundated with applicants in the middle of an economic boom.
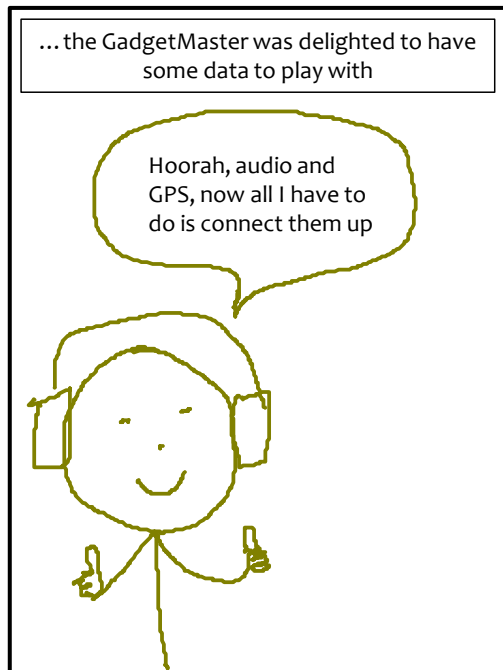
The other thing was they thought they'd be able to get the postdoc to do some of the analysis and writing up and so were looking for someone capable of this, rather than realising that this was woefully ambitious for a 12 month project and that they needed to focus on someone who could actually deliver the data collection for them. In truth, you didn't need a PhD to do that and someone without a PhD would have been happy with the relatively low salary being offered. But they weren't clear from the start that this is what they needed from their employee.
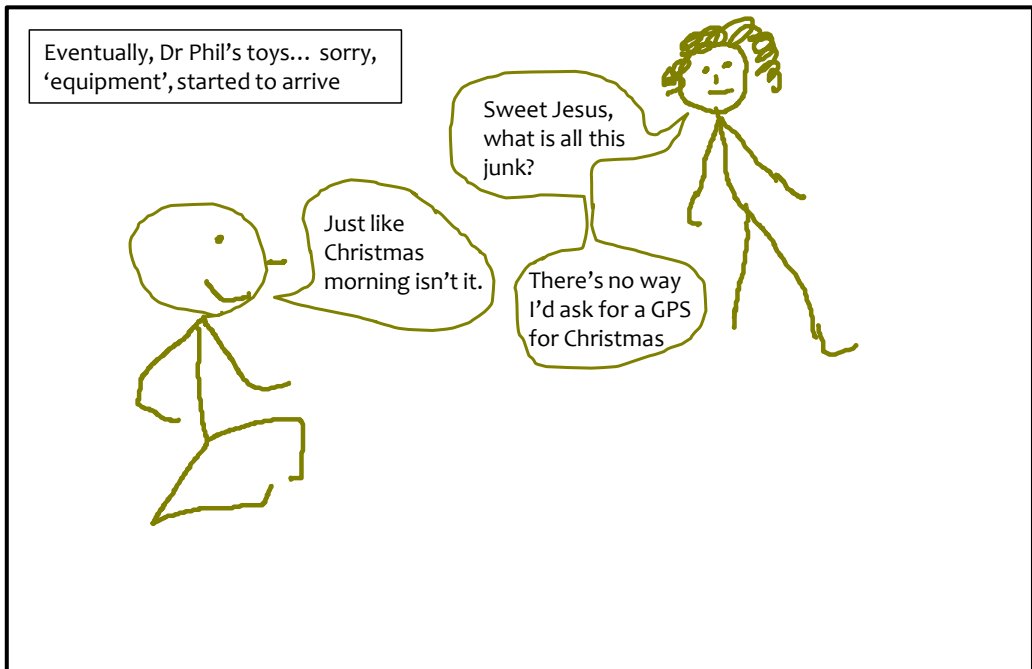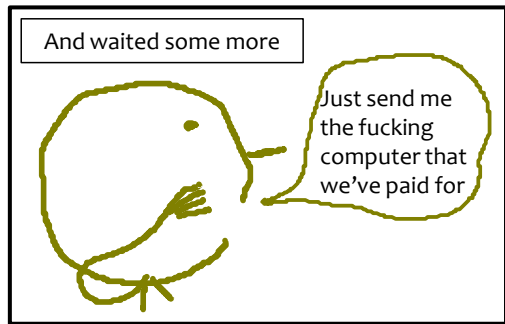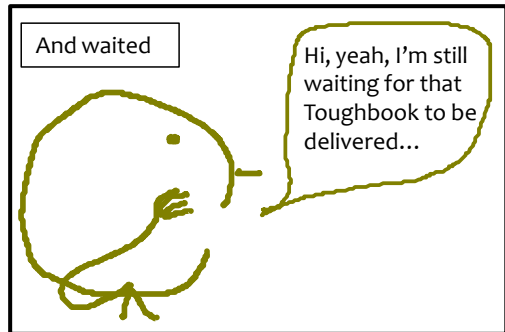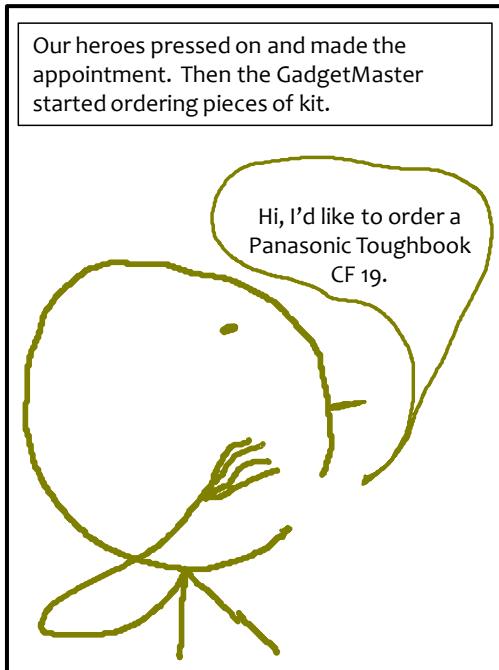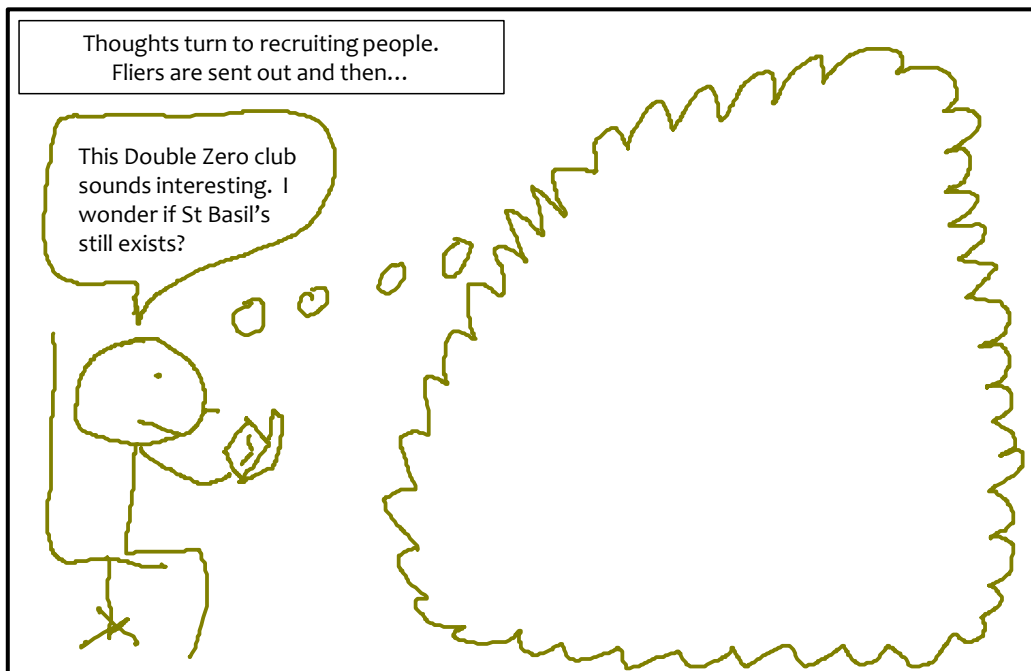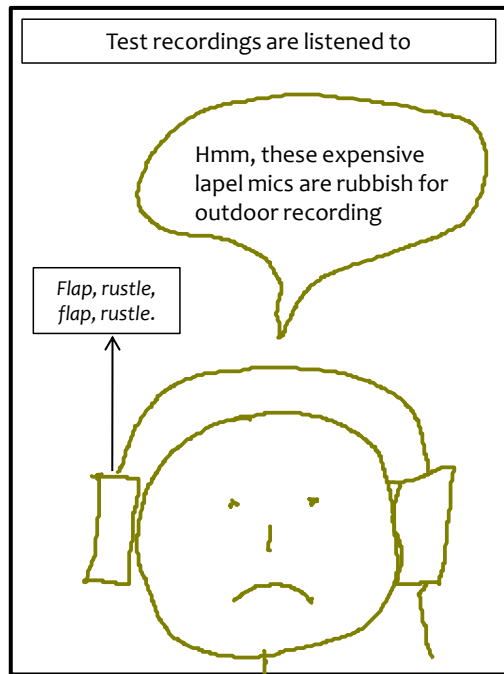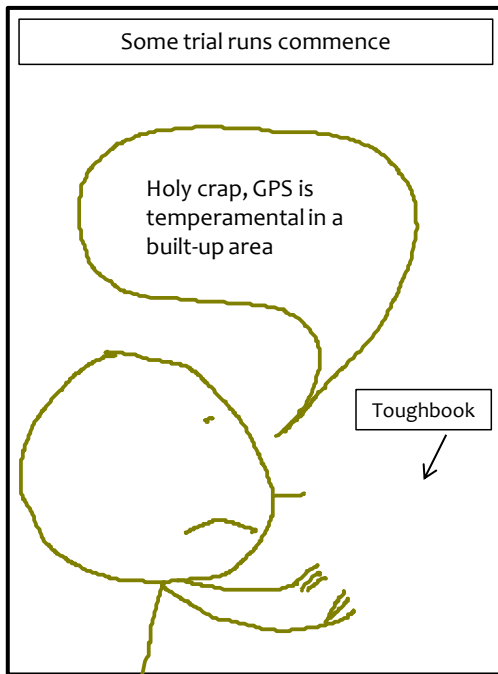
St Basil's does indeed still exist, slap bang in the heart of Digbeth. In the 1960s this deconsecrated church was given over to a radical vicar who ran support services for dispossessed young people out of it. Back then it was nicknamed the Double Zero club, and was a popular hang out for bikers (Collyer, 1973). More recently St Basil's has become the centre for a local homelessness charity and an interview was arranged with Blair, who runs St Basil's and knows the area well. An ideal person to be the first interviewee.

With the equipment all checked and working, the postdoc went out to do the interview. Afterwards...

… the GadgetMaster was delighted to have some data to play with

Hoorah, audio and GPS, now all I have to do is connect them up

From Blair the research snowball quickly rolled toward Mus, who ran the local chippy. Another successful interview followed.

Excellent, this is going to be easy!

… famous last words.

Two big problems started to emerge, both of which were due to our heroes' incompetence. First was the fact that they'd picked Digbeth. Remember, it only has a tiny residential population and they were not particularly straightforward to access (see Pain & Francis, 2003 for approaches to help overcome this). It was, therefore, always going to be difficult getting 'resident' interviewees.

The second issue was the fact that our heroes had absolutely no experience in managing anyone and so were not prepared for working with a postdoc for whom the project was a job, not a passion.

It rapidly became apparent that our heroes had no idea how 'do' management...

Well, I guess it's difficult to get into resident networks.

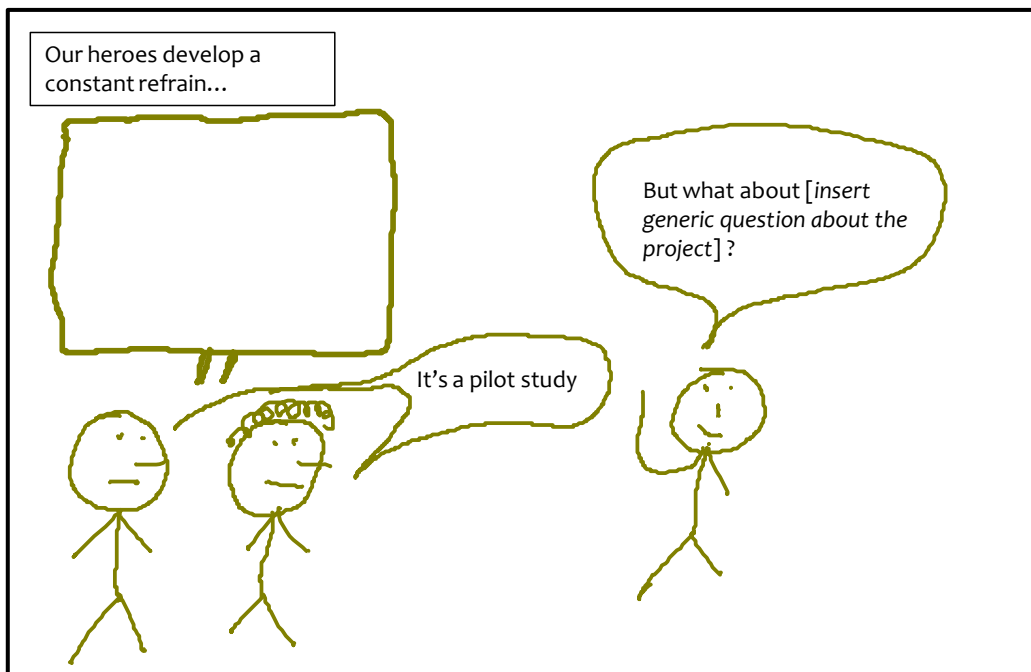...and started making excuses for things not keeping things on track.

We don't seem to have got that many interviews with residents so far.

There's only so many ways I can say "please recruit more people"
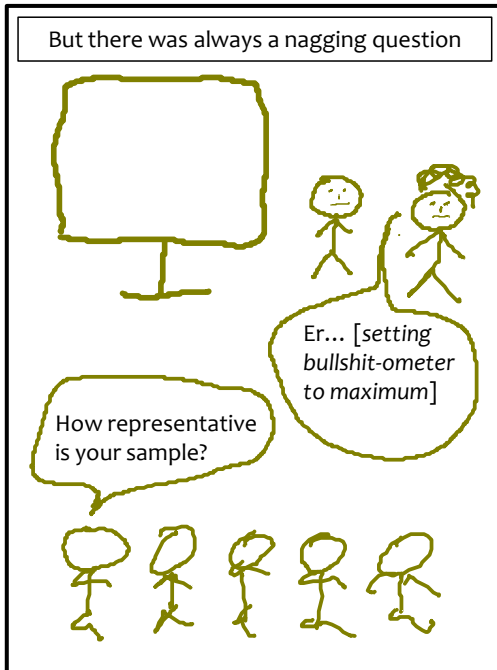
~~Lunch~~ Project management meeting

Later, back in the ~~batcave~~ office...

We're just going to have to interview **anyone** who's interested in the area

Okay, that basically translates as 'stakeholders'.

Then things started going wrong with the equipment, messing up the few interviews that had been arranged.

Balls, the audio didn't record...

[Silence]

...and what the hell's happened to the GPS log? The frickin' battery must have been dying mid interview.

The risks of undertaking a very techno-centric project started to become perilously clear.

Our heroes develop a constant refrain...

But what about [*insert generic question about the project*] ?

It's a pilot study

Because these kinds of questions came up a lot. Our heroes kept going to talk about the project at different gatherings of academics. One of the most significant of these was the Peripatetic Practices workshop, organised by Jennie Middleton and Hannah Macpherson, at UCL (31 March 2008). Silly name, great workshop.

It became clear that walking was *achingly* fashionable. Well, no, let's put that another way, it was *achingly* fashionable among a little clique of academics. There was also a divide between those interested in walking because of its potential to contribute to understandings of cultural theory, and those more interested in its potential as a participatory technique for getting people to talk more openly about a set of issues.

But neither group was particularly techie...

Blah, KML, blah, GPS, blah, API, blah ArcGIS etc.

But there was always a nagging question

Er... [*setting bullshit-ometer to maximum*]

How representative is your sample?

The honest answer... not very. But none of this invalidated the development of the techniques of data collection and analysis and it was this , after all, that our heroes had been given the money to develop. Which meant they were able to sleep at nights.

Any findings about Digbeth itself were, essentially, an incidental byproduct. So in posts to the project blog our heroes found themselves focusing on methodological issues (using a blog as a research diary is increasingly common among scientists. See Todoroki et al., 2006).

Research diary = public 'blographies'...

[First we'll look at postitivist things with the GPS logs, then place discourse then match the two up]

Summer flew by and time was running out. Soon the postdoc would be out of contract

I think we're just going to have to accept that this is all the data we're going to get.

Then we should finish transcribing and do the main analysis
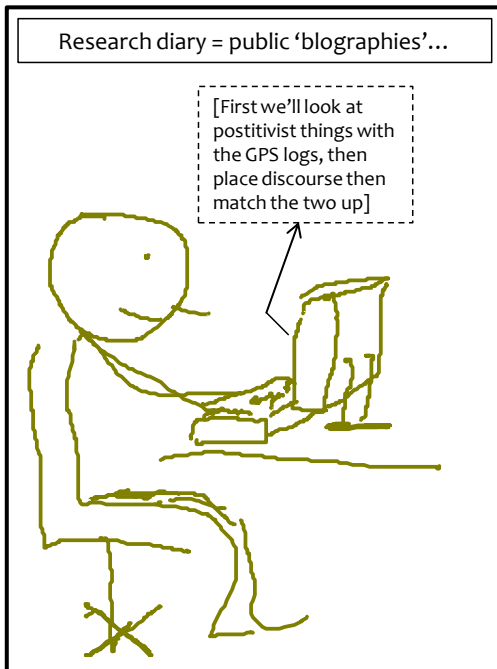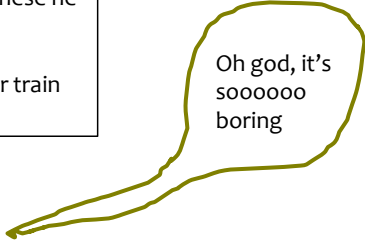
The GadgetMaster took all the GPS data and started making graphs of various things. This made him feel like a scientist (i.e. overly positivist, masculinist and god-trick-tastic).

And it felt great, in a guilty-pleasures sort-of way.

Meanwhile Dr James began the massively tedious job of hand coding all of the interview transcripts, looking for spatial descriptors, story telling and other markers of place. These he entered into Dr Phil's transcript spreadsheets.

(i.e. the kind of soul destroying task that dull commuter train journeys were made for)

Oh god, it's sooooooo boring

Then the two halves were connected up, using the GPS tracks to map Dr James' qualitative analysis. This allowed our heroes to do spatial analysis of the content analysis.

This excited them a lot and they wrote serious papers about this for serious academic journals where serious people discuss serious things, seriously (e.g. Evans & Jones, 2011).

The method they'd been paid to develop had been developed and rigorously tested. ESRC, tick.

But what else had gone on?

Intermezzo: Something the referees questioned when they reviewed the first draft of this cartoon
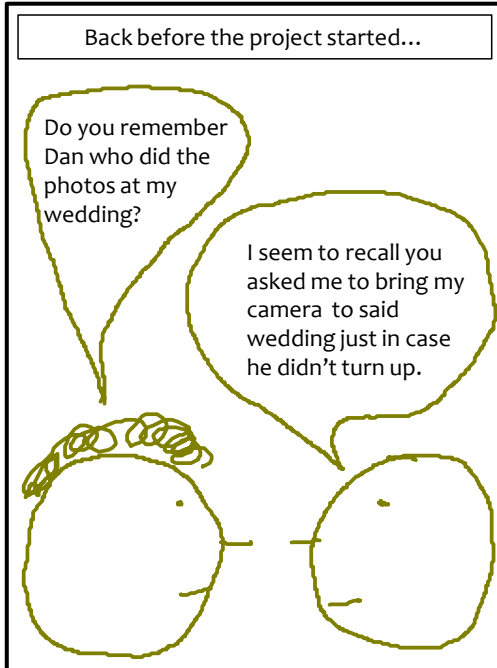
But hang on, don't we know all this already? I mean, look at stuff like Ian Cook's ruminations on the research he undertook for his PhD (1998) and that great edited volume by Pamela Moss (2000). Haven't the feminist scholars already reflected on the 'messiness' of research and the role of the researcher within it?
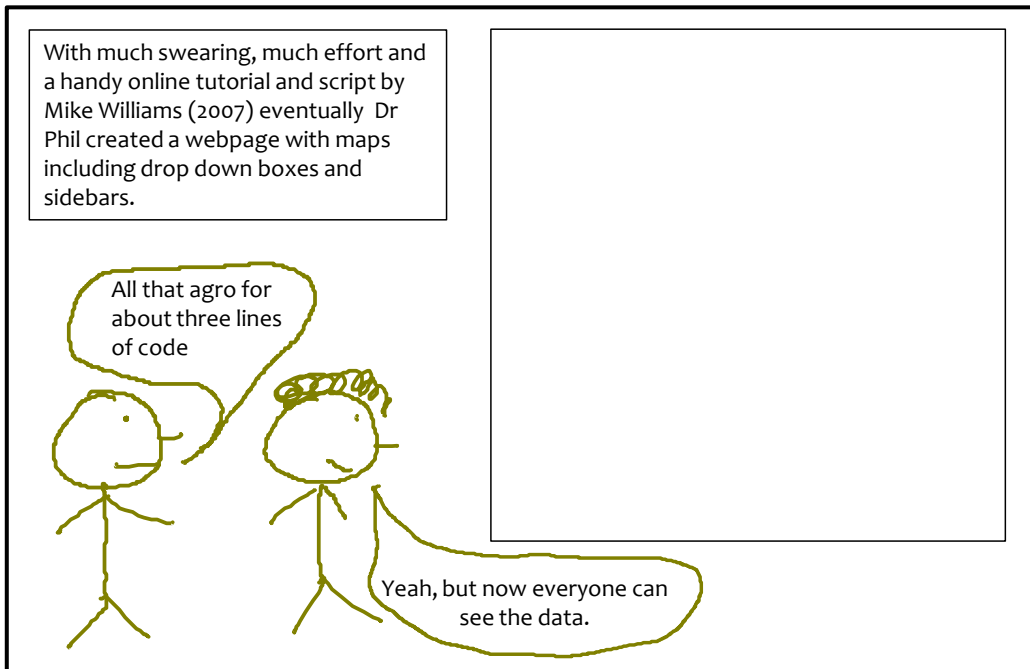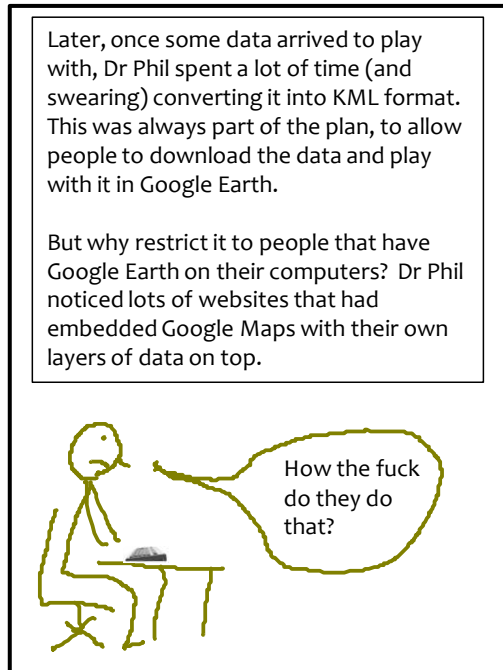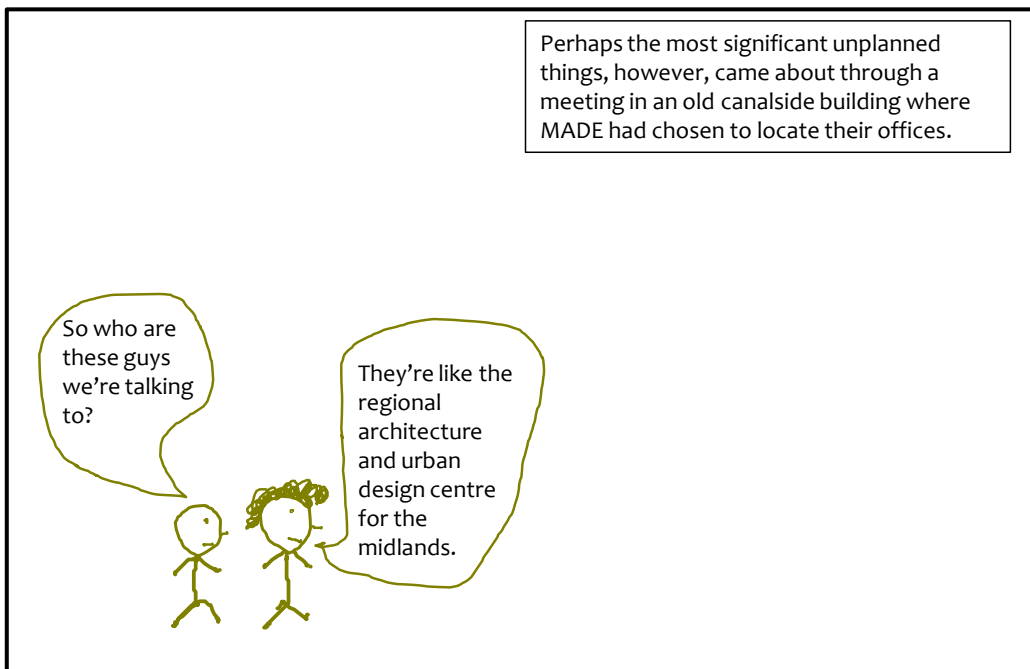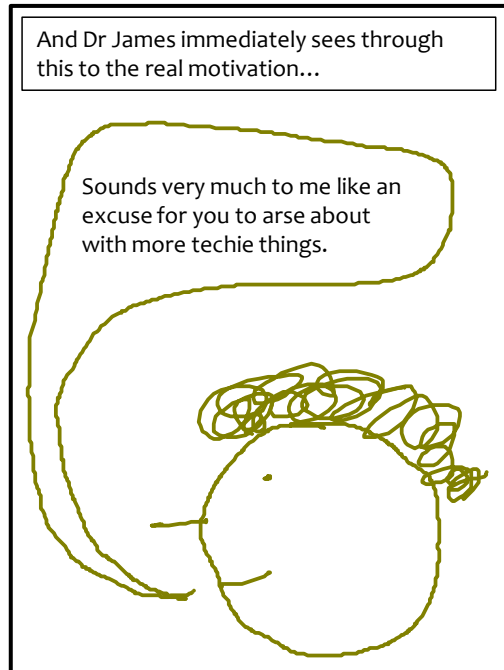
(Mmmm, papaya)

Absolutely, and we want to extend that to think reflectively about what it's like to **manage** a project.

The things that went wrong...

Oh, wait, I see. Establish clear roles at the start...

MANAGING HUMAN RESOURCE

Maybe we could ask the Arts Council to fund some more work

...and the things that ended up taking the research to unexpected places.
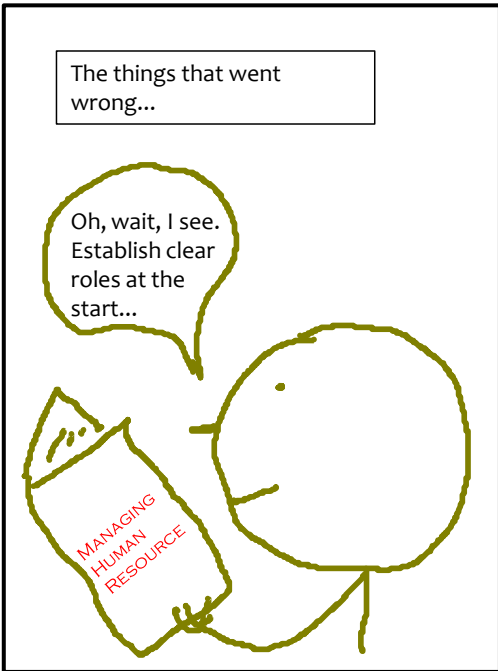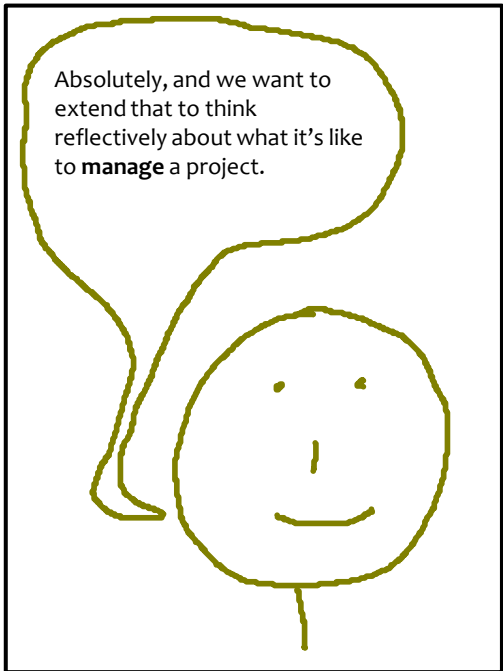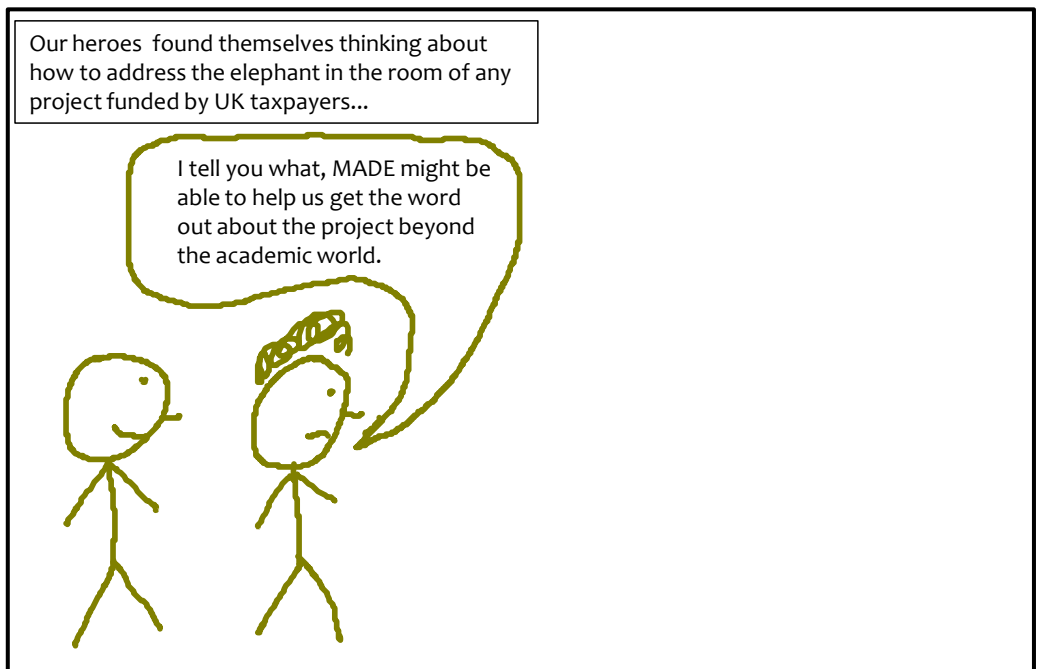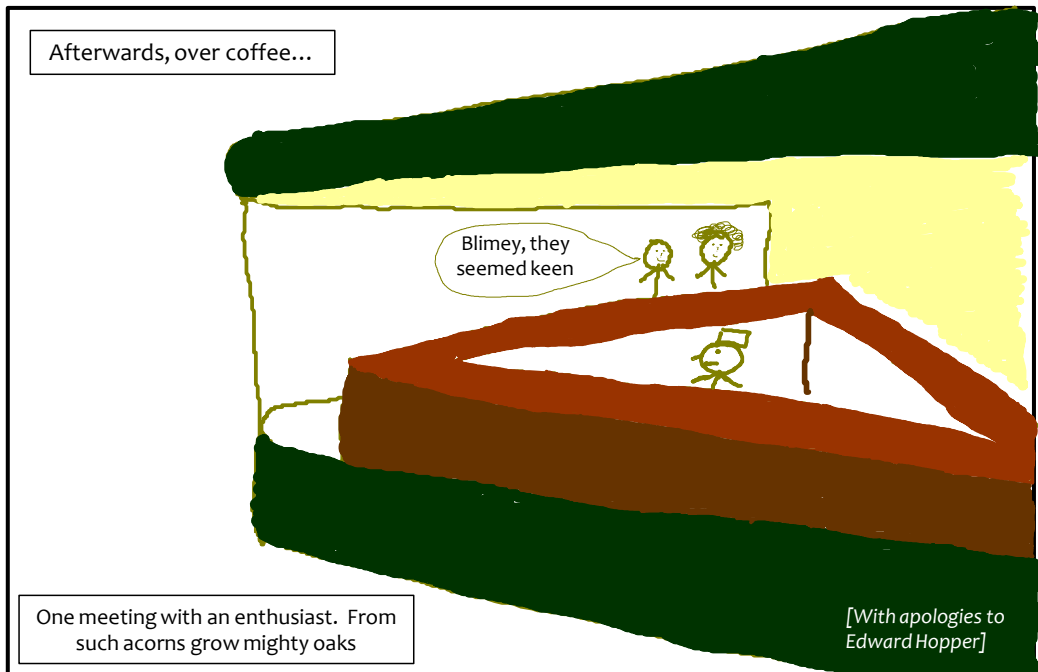
Back to the story...

Part Three: Interesting places the project management took our heroes (mostly by accident)

Afterwards, over coffee…

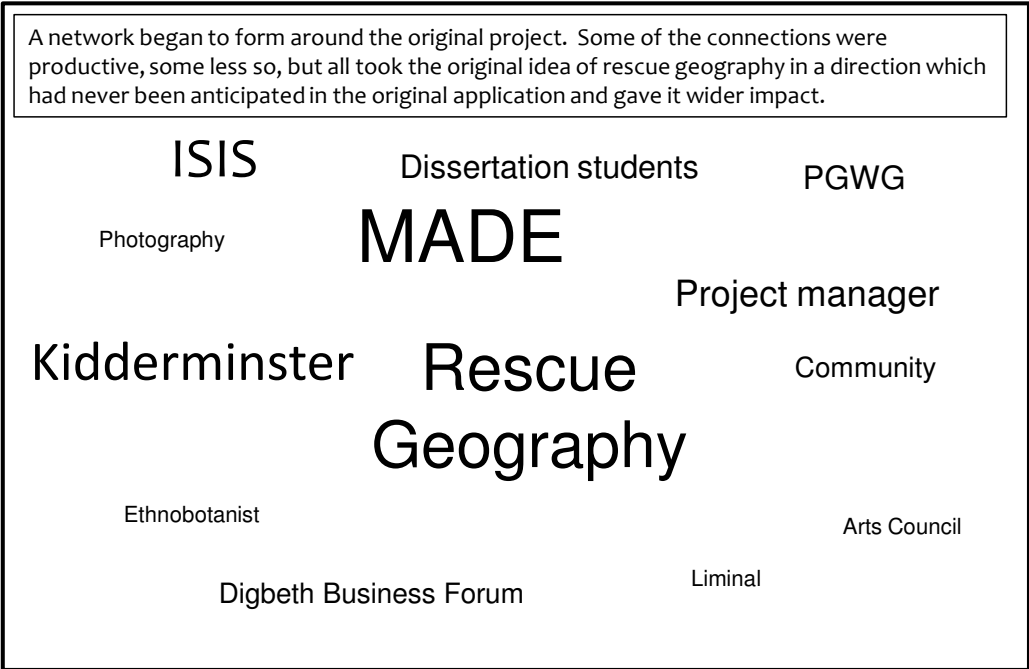Blimey, they seemed keen

One meeting with an enthusiast. From such acorns grow mighty oaks

[With apologies to Edward Hopper]

Our heroes found themselves thinking about how to address the elephant in the room of any project funded by UK taxpayers…

I tell you what, MADE might be able to help us get the word out about the project beyond the academic world.
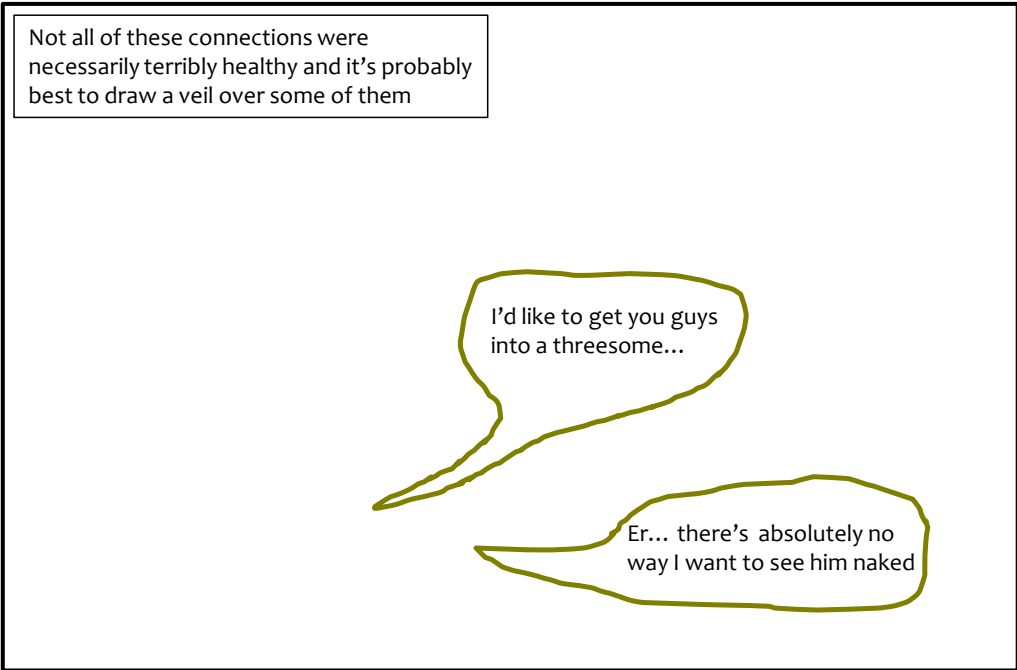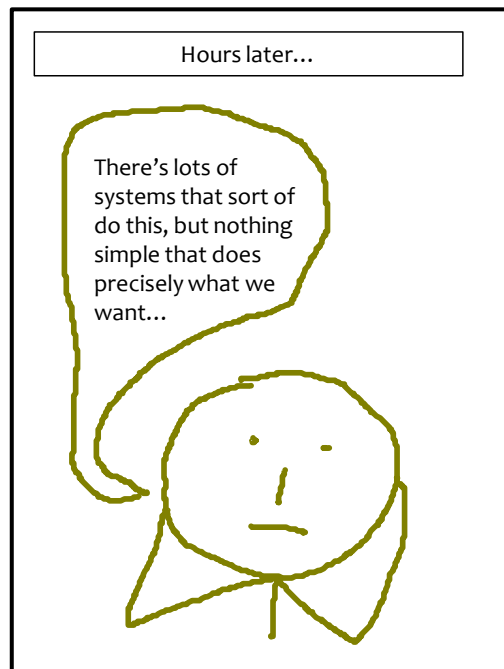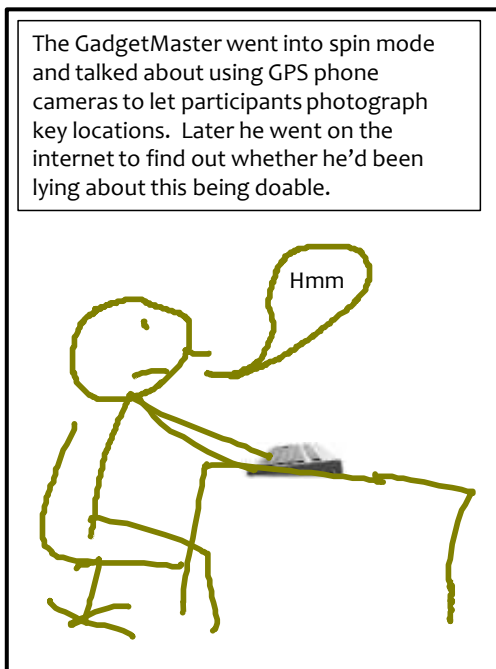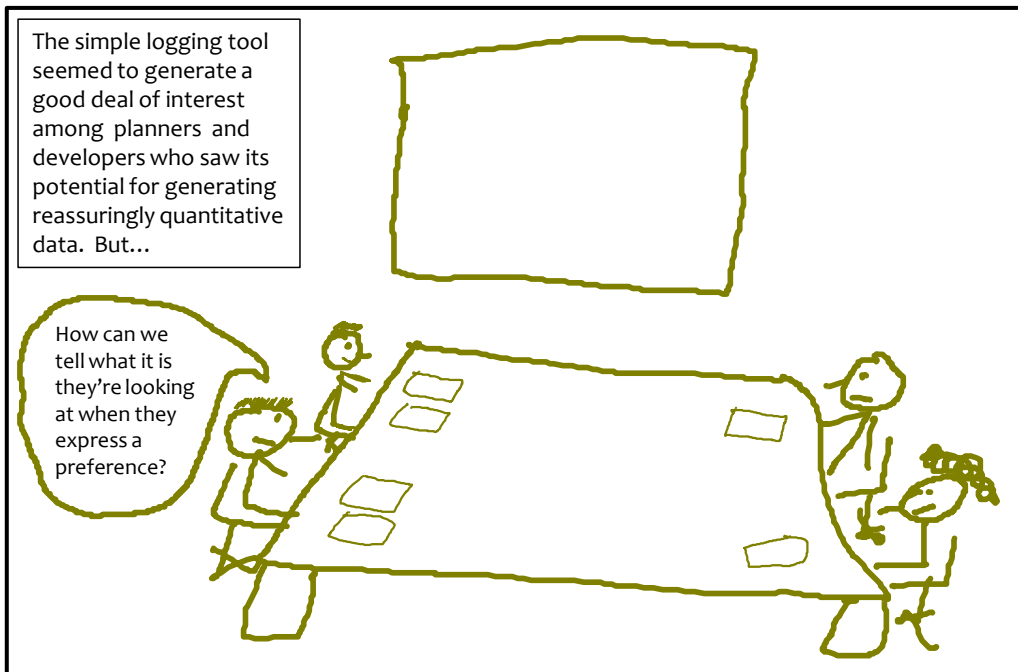
Researchers in the UK are now routinely asked to identify how their work will have 'impact', creating benefits for wider society.
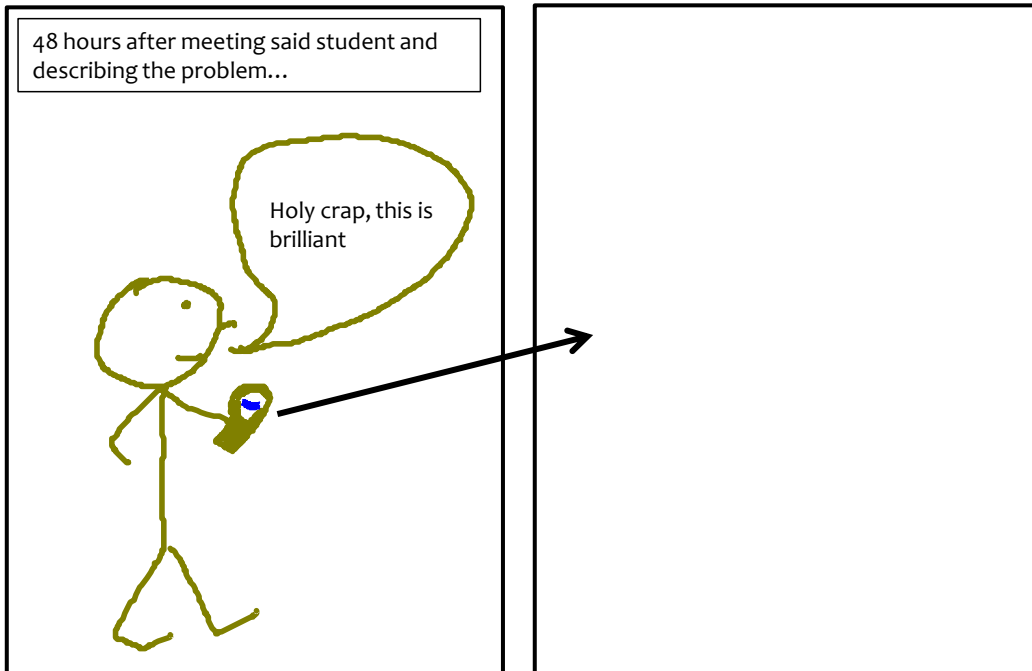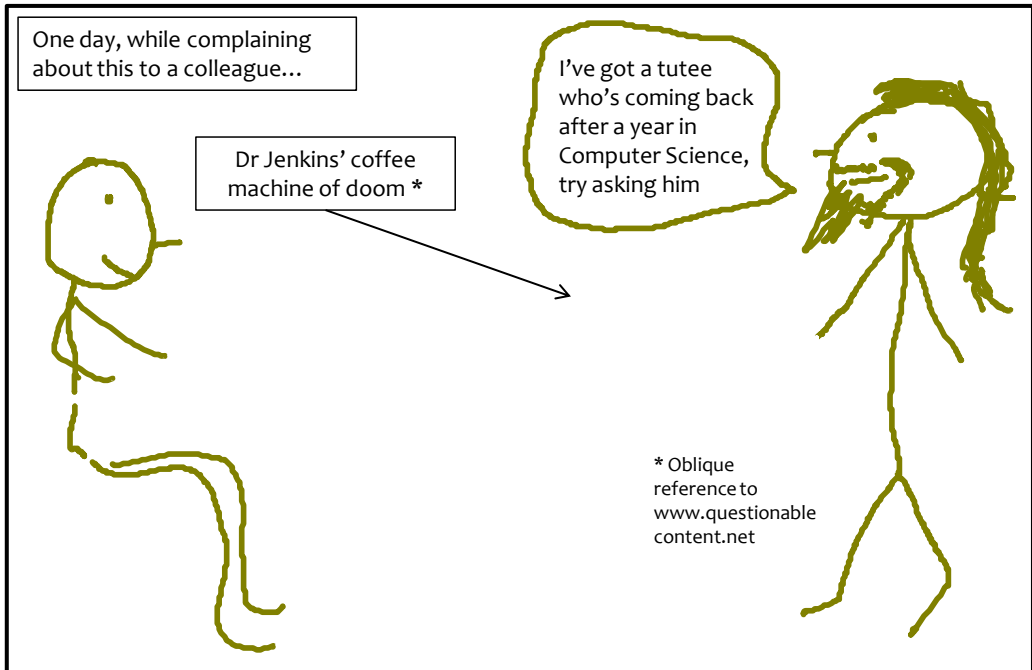
MADE, the organisation our heroes found themselves entangled with, have as a core function bringing together lots of different people interested in design and redevelopment, from artists and architects through to politicians and policymakers. A series of meetings were set up with members of MADE's network, allowing our heroes to show their work to a range of professionals in the sector and explore possibilities for interesting collaborations.
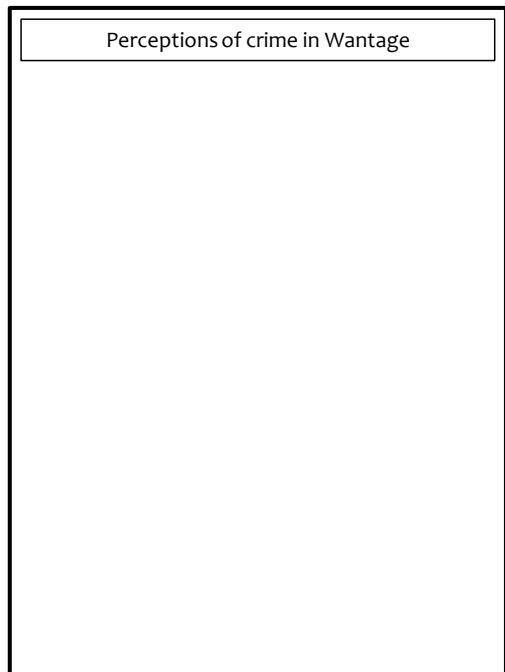
The Flange-ifier was in his element, schmoozing like a Hollywood player. [Note the 'upper arm press' and the apparent interest in the other person's life.]

Wow, that sounds really interesting, how did you get into that?

A network began to form around the original project. Some of the connections were productive, some less so, but all took the original idea of rescue geography in a direction which had never been anticipated in the original application and gave it wider impact.

ISIS

Dissertation students

PGWG

Photography

MADE

Project manager

Kidderminster

Rescue Geography

Community

Ethnobotanist

Arts Council

Digbeth Business Forum

Liminal

Not all of these connections were necessarily terribly healthy and it's probably best to draw a veil over some of them

I'd like to get you guys into a threesome...

Er... there's absolutely no way I want to see him naked

Other connections were more (academically) productive

Well, I could write a logging tool for people to express preferences in particular locations.

If only we could get a broader brush picture

The logging tool could be used record any kind of self-reported feeling. Thus the first test run mapped a participant's sense of horniness [for rationale see above]

[for the sake of discretion no key or scale is included here]

Based on the interesting places our heroes had stumbled into while managing the project they sat down to think about new grant applications.

The ESRC had paid them to deliver a new research technique. But beyond this, the project management had allowed them to develop additional tools and also build a network of friendly people who were interested in the research and were willing to help them generate more.
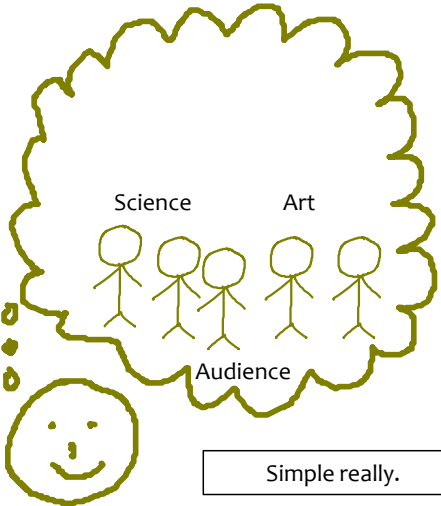
So our heroes felt pretty happy that they'd seen off the 'impact' question. The last thing to do was create a nice public geography output. It was time to put on a show...

Part Four:
The exhibition

Remember, our heroes went into this project with a commitment to taking a 'public geographies' approach. Dissemination wasn't just going to be academic conferences and journal articles, but more accessible materials.

The idea of doing an exhibition of some kind had been written into the original grant proposal, although our heroes were a bit sketchy on the details. Nonetheless, this wasn't conceived as some kind of two-for-one *academic* research-driven exhibition with associated career/RAE value (Rust & Robertson, 2003; Niedderer et al., 2006), but instead merely something that participants and locals could genuinely engage with. The oral history side of things seemed the most obvious angle. And surely in Digbeth, with its cluster of 'creative' businesses, there would be some kind of suitable space for hire cheaply.

Fortunately having Dan, a bona fide artist, on board helped some of these ideas to coalesce...
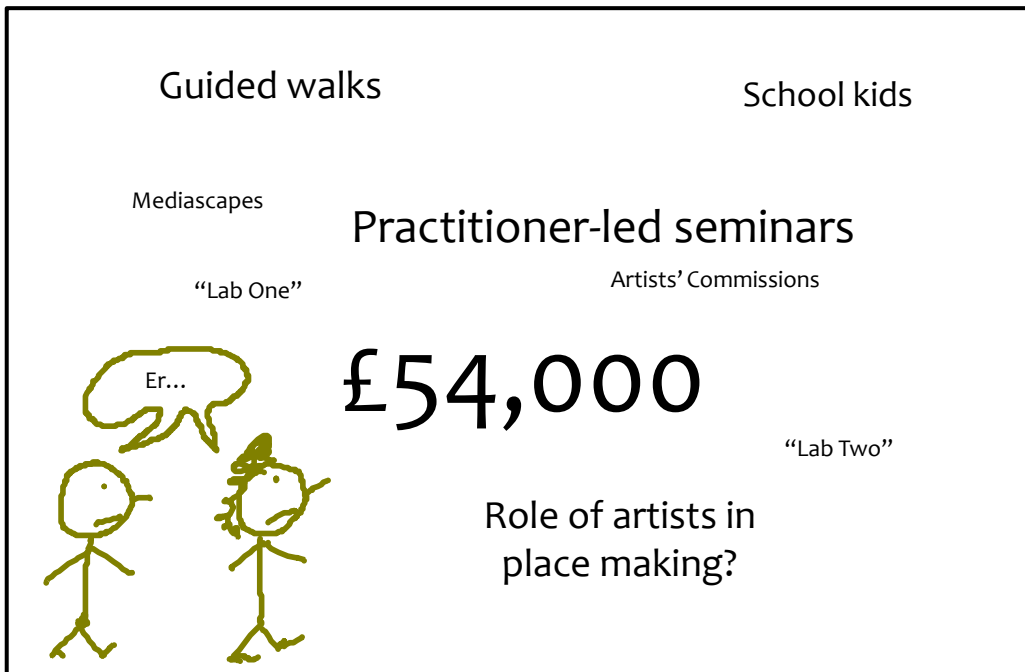
Science   Art

Audience

Simple really.

But then our heroes got involved with MADE who get VERY excited about the possibilities of an exhibition...

What about if we do a bid to the Arts Council to fund a whole programme of events?

Er... okay, cool.

The plan, as it emerged from increasingly enthusiastic meetings, was to make a bid to the Arts Council for a large sum (£54,000 as it turned out) to support an ambitious, integrated programme of events. MADE, Rescue Geography and Dan were nominally equal partners in this , although in practice the bid was mostly written by MADE.

Some of the details seemed, to our heroes, a bit vague, but they told themselves that their partners knew the world of arts funding better than they did and that they should therefore be more relaxed about it.

So the exhibition plan became bigger, more complex and just the start of a whole series of events, including commissions to artists to explore the whole idea of 'place'.

This seemed kinda cool and exciting. And a bit vague…

This said, the management of a (not yet funded) project was considerably more organised than the slightly shambolic academic world our heroes were used to.

And they started to wonder how the hell they were going to deliver it all.

Two months later

The Arts Council have said no

I'm not the only one thinking 'thank fuck' right?

And so the plan went back to being a small-scale exhibition showcasing ethnographic photos by Dan along with interview and multimedia material produced by our heroes. But let's not kid ourselves, without having become involved with MADE and having done a lot of the project planning for the Arts Council bid, our heroes probably wouldn't have found the time to organise this.

How often do you say "well it would have been nice to do [insert unrealised plan] but we never got round to it because it wasn't core to the project"? The exhibition, and stakeholder workshops held in the run up to it, suddenly became the centrepiece of the project's dissemination and impact outputs without this ever having been the intention. In essence our heroes got a two-for-one academic and public geography output after all.

Leftover cash from unspent transcription allocation paid for Dan to expand his ethnographic documentary work to participants from our heroes' project.
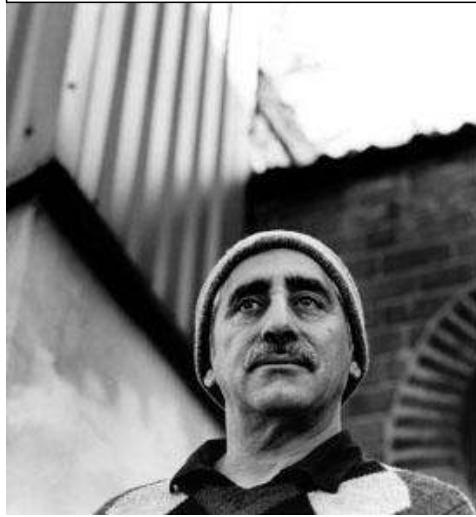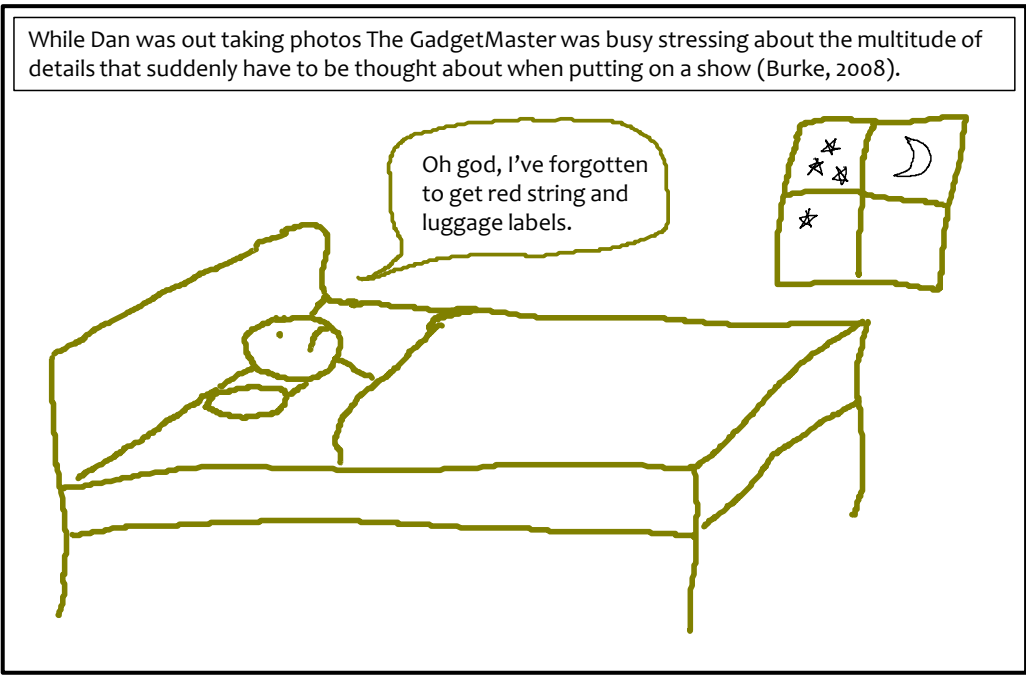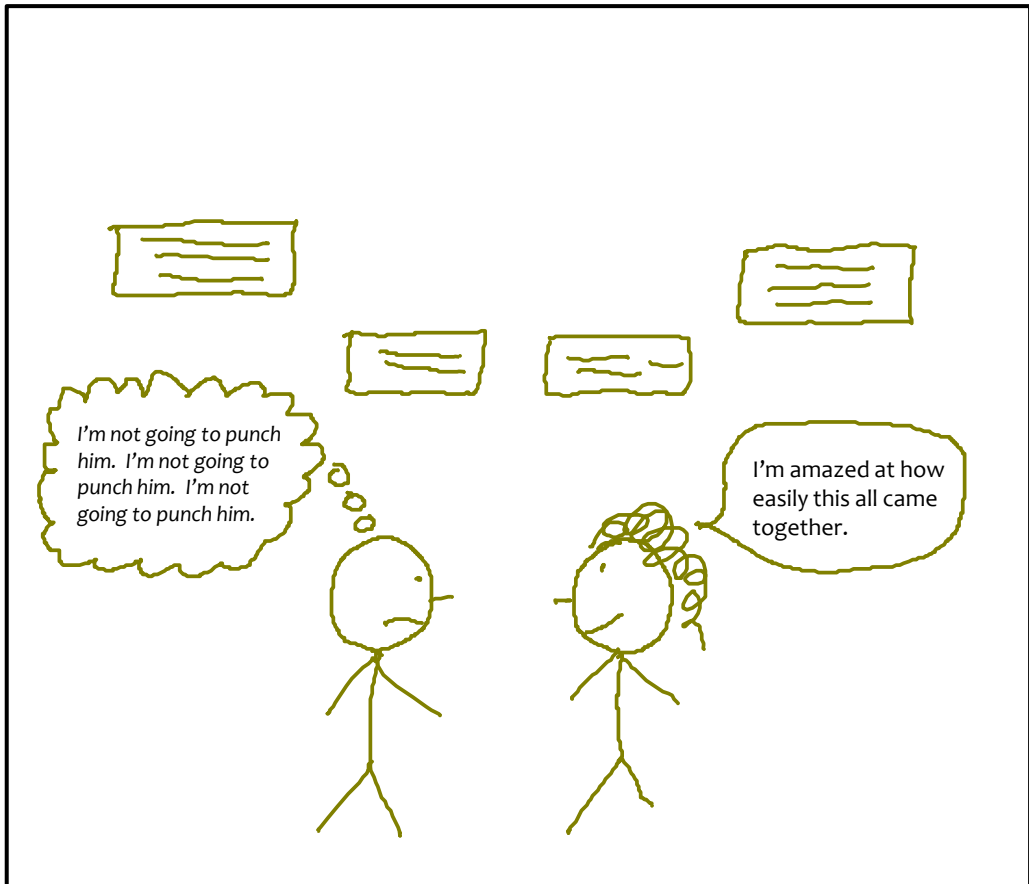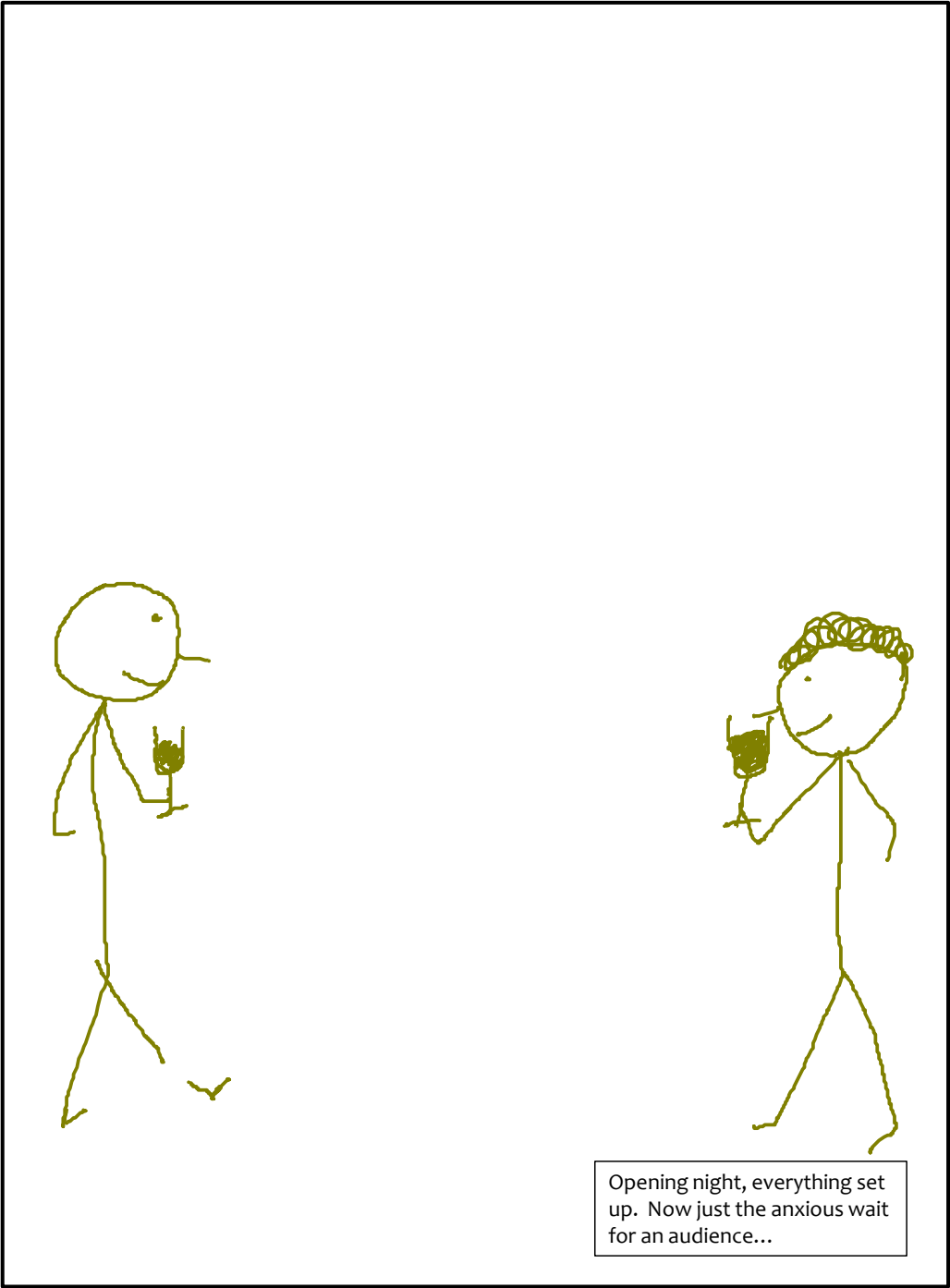
And so it came to pass that our heroes had an exhibition showcasing elements of their work and that of Dan. The two most obviously came together in the exhibition catalogue where each of Dan's portraits was accompanied by a quote from the participant's walking interview.
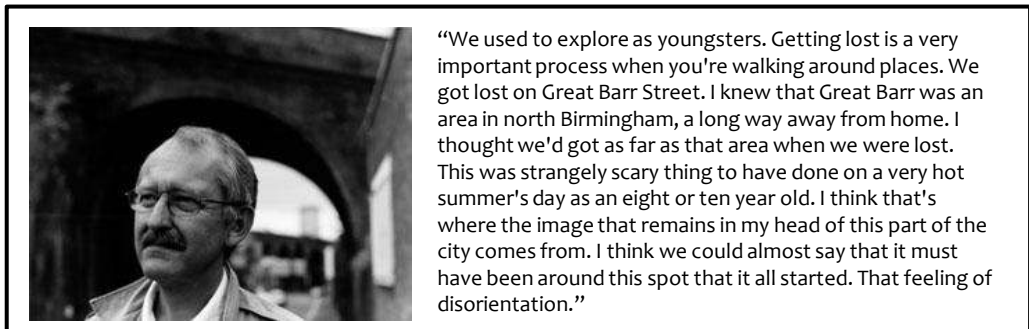

"We used to explore as youngsters. Getting lost is a very important process when you're walking around places. We got lost on Great Barr Street. I knew that Great Barr was an area in north Birmingham, a long way away from home. I thought we'd got as far as that area when we were lost. This was strangely scary thing to have done on a very hot summer's day as an eight or ten year old. I think that's where the image that remains in my head of this part of the city comes from. I think we could almost say that it must have been around this spot that it all started. That feeling of disorientation."

Opening night, everything set up. Now just the anxious wait for an audience…

It's so good that we've poached people from another exhibition opening in Digbeth tonight.
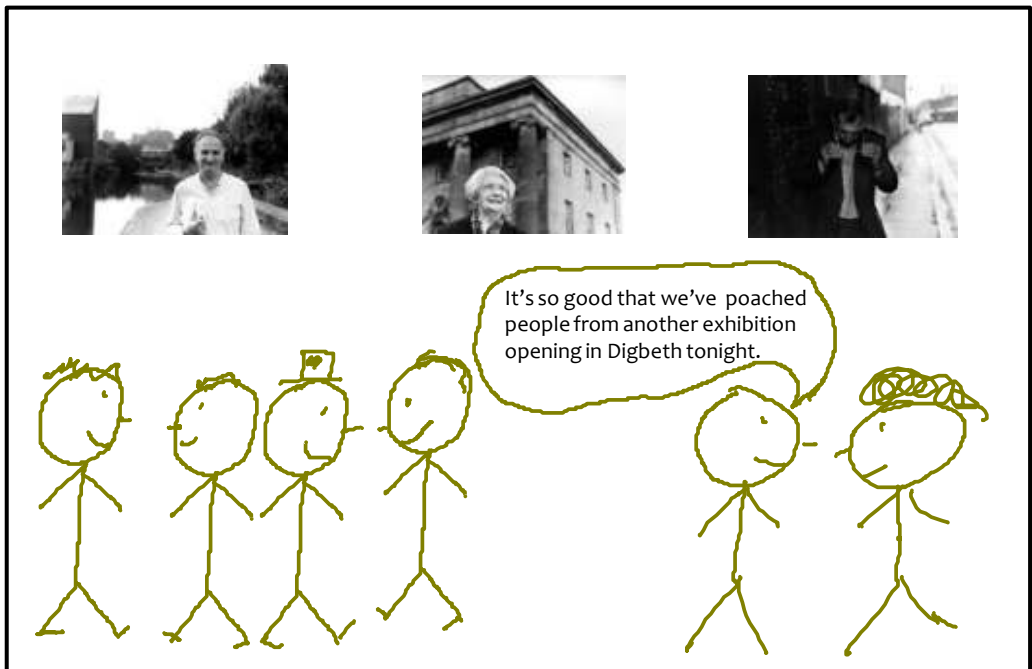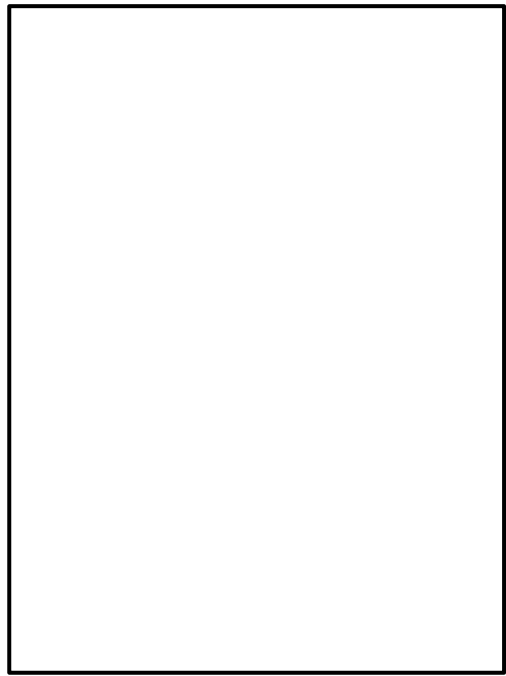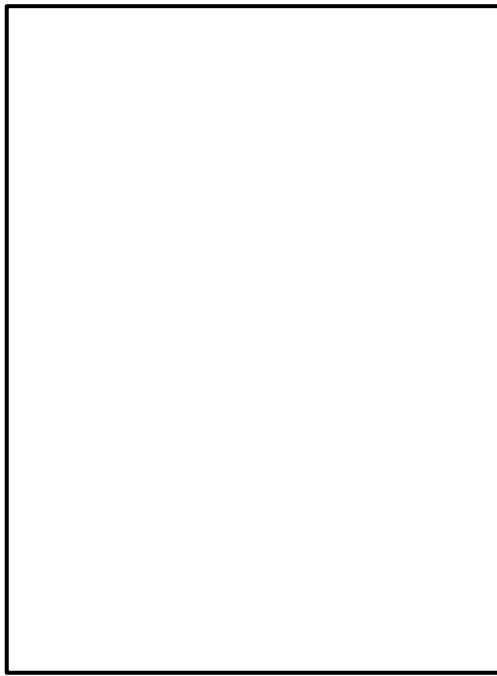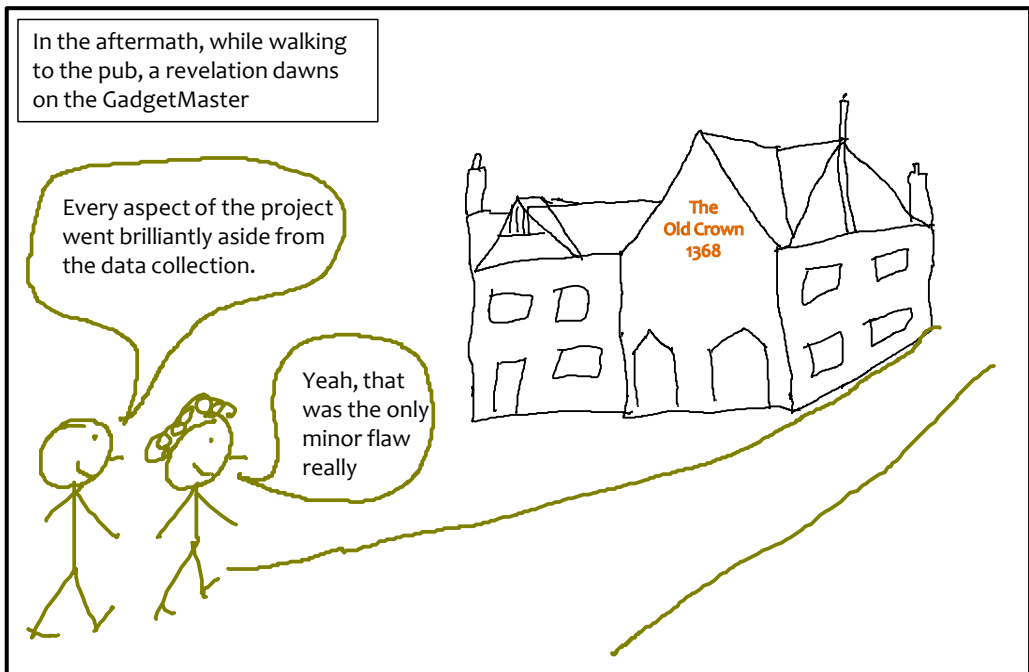
Afterword

So what have we learned here?   Well, this isn't a paper about the serendipitous things that happen as part of field work. There's plenty of work out there that can tell you about the way that meeting a key informant / gatekeeper totally transformed the data collection process. Instead what we've tried to outline is the messiness (and opportunities) not of field work *practice* but of research project *management*.

We ensured that the key project output – the development and rigorous testing of a new form of qualitative GIS – was delivered.   But we got things wrong. We should have been specific and realistic about what we wanted our employee to deliver for us. We also allowed a relationship with a collaborator to become unprofessionally close.   Nonetheless, our somewhat relaxed approach to project management allowed us to stumble into interesting places that we might not have done had we had a clearer plan for delivering the research.

In terms of data collection MADE were just another local stakeholder. But for the project management, MADE became a critical actor, both in the dissemination strategy and in how follow up grant applications were written. In large part this was driven by personal relationships: MADE's role is to facilitate knowledge exchange in the field of urban design, but if we hadn't got along with the people who worked there, we wouldn't have bothered. To be brutal, at the outset we didn't know how useful they would be to the project, but they seemed like nice folk and were enthusiastic about what we were doing so we were happy to 'waste' some of our limited project management time collaborating with them.

Working with Dan was serendipitous, although, again, was built on personal relationships and the trust that this brings.   We have not, as yet, really unpicked that relationship. For sure, without Dan the exhibition would have been much less interesting (if it happened at all) and his portraits gave us a way to pay back people for their time walking around Digbeth with our postdoc. A cynic might ask, however, whether working with Dan really affected our practice as researchers, or his as a photographer. We don't yet have an answer for that, but there is an interface between research and artistic practice to investigate (Leavy 2009). This is partly why Phil chose to continue the collaboration with Dan through another project which investigated commuter cycling, a subject of mutual interest (Jones and Burwood 2011). Again, the project management in and of itself has stimulated new directions and new research.

Project management is not always as chaotic as we've described, nor does everyone running a project swear quite as much as the authors. The portrait painted here is not particularly flattering: we made mistakes and behaved pretty dubiously at times. But to gloss over these details is to leave project management

within a black box, which is every bit as problematic as writing up the data without acknowledging that the researcher actively co-creates any material that is collected in the field. Being more prepared and more professional would have helped us to manage the research, but overall we would advocate a little bit of chaos to allow projects to move in creative and interesting directions.

Acknowledgements

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