Walking for data

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ABSTRACT
We suggest that ‘walking’ in ethnographic work sensitizes researchers to a particular means of making sense of place. Following a brief conceptual exposition, we present our research tool iMaCam that supports capturing and representing activities such as walking.

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Performance, Design, Experimentation, Theory

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Walking, ethnography, methods, probes

1. INTRODUCTION
It would seem, says Hannam et al. [4], that ‘mobilities’ are gradually becoming a new paradigm in social theory. The ‘mobilities’ perspective highlights movement and mobility as key elements for contemporary social analysis. Similarly, Tim Ingold [6] has argued for ‘lines’ over ‘points’ as the basic ontological ground of sociality. Movement and its corresponding vectors are increasingly essential for the understanding of sociality and being in place. In recent years, many new services and applications have emerged that aim to provide people with relevant and local information in the cityscape. But if urban spaces aren’t just experienced through certain ‘points’, is it then possible to capture and make use of the ‘lines’ people are creating?

In this paper we wish to give a short introduction to the ‘walking interview’ as a research method to explore people’s everyday experiences and performances of place. To support and inspire the development of place-based, mobile technologies, we present the iMaCam app and a web-based backend as tools to capture and represent walk-alouds or ‘talking whilst walking’ [1].

2. WALKING METHODS
In ethnography there is a long tradition for following and walking with informants to study their everyday lives. In this context, participant observation is a classical ethnographic method for gathering data in the everyday settings of the informants’ actual experiences. The rationale behind this method is the recognition that people only have a “limited ability to describe what they do and how they do it without immediate access to the social and material aspects of their lives.” ([2]; 966). The relatively recent engagement with mobile methodologies has also contributed to the increased attention paid to walking as a research method for generating and gathering data about people’s mundane experiences [9]. Kusenbach [8] proposes the ‘go-along’ as an ethnographic tool to explore the role of place in everyday lived experience. Combining participant observation and interviewing, during a go-along the researcher accompanies an informant on a walk while asking questions: “What makes the go-along technique unique is that ethnographers are able to observe their informants’ spatial practices in situ while accessing their experiences and interpretations at the same time.” ([ibid.], 463).

In a similar vein, Anderson [1] points out that when using participatory observation and interviews to elicit information about human knowledge construction, researchers rarely pay explicit attention “to the influence of place on knowledge formation, particularly with regard to the method of eliciting that knowledge in practice.” ([ibid., 255, original italics]). According to Anderson, place acts as an “active trigger to prompt knowledge recollection and production” ([ibid., 254]), and he proposes ‘bimbling’, (or aimlessly walking), as a research method to gain access to and harness the relationship between people and place.

Fundamentally we propose that ‘walking’ is an essential enactment of place and sociality, arguably particularly so in urban settings. By capturing or attempting to record and represent walking, researchers may come closer to making sense of people’s performance of places. Seated interviews, however, are still the dominant qualitative method in social research [5], and experiences of place are not easy to express in the traditional interview setting. As Thrift argues, interviews cannot capture or make sense of the affective and sensually diverse engagements as they ‘take place’ [10]. In the following we present a tool that we have developed with the aim of helping researchers capture those crucial aspects of ‘walking along’ with a smartphone. We suggest that the tool can be harnessed to create evocative artefacts about places and that these can be useful for the early stages of the design of digital tools and services.

3. THE IMACAM TOOL
Jones et al. [7] emphasize the importance of connecting what people say with where they say it during walking interviews, “The ability to link locations to particular comments becomes a tool for exploring the way people respond to the views unfolding as they pass through spaces.” ([ibid., 6]). In addition, they highlight some issues regarding recording the walking interview. If interviews don’t unfold along fixed routes, they suggest that the researcher uses GPS to map them. Furthermore, they are a bit reluctant to film the interviews, claiming it to be disruptive, “particularly when the interviewer is trying to film, walk, and talk at the
same time, the output can sometimes be unwatchably disorientating.” (ibid., 4).

For the purpose of studying walking as a way of ‘making sense’ and ‘place-making’, and meanwhile addressing the issues mentioned above, we have developed the smartphone (Android and iOS) application iMaCam (short for ‘I am a Camera’). Drawing on previous experiences from our work on video ethnography, the iMaCam app is an application that allows researchers to assemble different kinds of data. The iMaCam app is intended to run on a smartphone carried on a lanyard hanging from the neck of the informant. It records an image at intervals between 5 and 20 seconds; continuous audio; and GPS information. After a walk, the images, audio, and GPS trail are accessible via a dedicated web-service that allows the researcher to navigate an overlaid Google map constructed from the walk. Clicking on nodes enables the images and sounds recorded at a particular place to be replayed. The entire walk can also be replayed as a slideshow, with the images and the locations synced to the audio.

The iMaCam tool is freely available on various smartphone app stores. The tool does not dictate a particular way of subsequently engaging in an analysis of the data collected. By capturing aspects of the differential modes of a walk, (sound, movement, body orientation), the app creates a rich account of the activity.

The visual data collected through the app is intentionally ‘vague’. It was not the intention to ‘document’. In not using video (i.e. 24-30 frames per second) but rather a slow moving slide show (approx. 5-20 seconds between frames), the app does not visually capture ‘everything’. Buur et al. [3] have argued that the use of video ethnographic methods for design entails that video becomes a ‘design material’ rather than ‘documentation’. Visual methods in design should support processes of abductive reasoning and inspiration rather then merely be used for documenting or representing ‘facts’. While work still needs to be done in analyzing how the iMaCam artefacts work in the context of a design situation, we would claim that the ‘lightness’ and arguably the ambiguities of the visual representations are an advantage rather than a drawback of the tool.

4. CONCLUSION

The knowledge produced in a ‘walking interview’ differs from that produced in a conventional sedentary interview, Anderson writes, “through talking whilst walking, by conversing and traversing pathways through an environment, we are able to create worlds of knowledge (or pathways of knowledge through the world) by talking meanings and understandings into existence” ([1]: 260). We suggest that the data produced with iMaCam can be used to shape the ‘collage of collaborative knowledge’ [1] generated through the walking interview.

Walking together in the context of ethnographically inspired design work is also a reflective process. The ethnographer who walks becomes empathically involved in the process of navigating, indexing, looking and sensing. Walking creates a shared spaces of affective, embodied meaning that traditional research interviews, or ethnographic research where walking is treated merely as a vehicle, cannot easily capture. We suggest that iMaCam produces useful design artefacts that represent how ‘lines’ are enacted and how they are narrative backdrops of place-based sense making. We believe such knowledge to be crucial for the design and innovation of appropriate systems and services in urban ‘experience-scapes’.

5. REFERENCES