

Hello

Who I am/Unlimited etc.

I'm also a Geek, Early adopter, Mac evangelist.

Share the story of my and Unlimited's digital journey since we formed 12 years ago. In my work with Unlimited this love of tech meant that we as a company were early adopters of many things.

Our first computer, bought with a grant from the Princes Youth Business Trust was a Mac.

The same year we were part of a scheme that I think was an Arts Council initiative to bring Yorkshire companies online. The company that gave us our first modem (Poptel as they were then now The Phone Coop now) are still our ISP and host our website and email accounts.

Not all of the company were quite as tech savvy as my geeky self.

Email back in 1997 was for us still kind of a miracle.

I vividly remember one of Unlimited's founding members Paul coming in one morning and asking
"Has the email postman been yet?"
because he thought that like regular post, email was delivered just once a day.

I vividly recall receiving an email from a friend, the director of another theatre company, sending me a tiny movie file, that took about a day to download of a zookeeper being sat on and disappearing up the wrong end of an elephant.

Equally it very quickly became apparent that this was an incredible new tool for communication and so we started from the outset databasing everyone's email addresses and that formed the basis of what quite quickly became a sizeable mailing list that was vital in our early audience development work.

I was also very lucky at the time to be living with my brother who had moved (escaped) to Leeds. He needed a job so he joined an agency and told them he was a proficient computer user and was experienced in IT support - which was pretty much entirely based on the fact that he 'liked to play on his dad's computer'.

But he got a job with BT as IT Support and used that as an opportunity to go on as many training courses as he could with them.

So it was Brown who built our first website - and he's continued to upgrade and advise us on how to best use the subsequent versions. The first site we had in 1997 had music! And a Flash frontpage! Which looked and sounded beautiful. But also of course meant that it was all but impossible for anyone except him to update.

Usability (for people visiting) became key. Making sure the site was easy to understand and navigate and even more importantly that the content was interesting, personalised, reflected the attitudes and character of the people who were the company - us - and was always up to date.

So that, when we went to the Edin Festival for the first time in 2000, we already had a working website and an established, interested email list that were used to us communicating with them in that way.

That year we took two shows, and we added a Daily Diary to the website. Took it in turns to write how everything was going, reviews of shows we'd seen that sort of thing. We were able to describe the daily events of a working theatre company including the time that Chris's came back from seeing Pupperty of the Penis and demonstrated to us some of what had gone on. The Hairy Hamburger and The Slowly Energising Mollusc being his particular specialities. Fortunately for him (and you) mobile phones with video cameras were still a few years off at this point.

We were blogging without realising and certainly one of the first arts organisations to be doing so - although it's actually taken us until this year to finally succumb to installing an actual blog on our website where we've mostly been recording video rather than writing text.

Also that year in Edinburgh, we'd worked with Matt Locke who was running TEST in Huddersfield at the the time to create an SMS campaign that both worked as a promotional tool for the shows but also more importantly extended the life of the show beyond the theatre space. Anyone subscribing would receive for free a series of text messages from the characters in the show - up to two or three a day for 3 weeks continuing or trailing the story and attitudes of the show.

The daily diary and the sms project were significantly ahead of their time - certainly for arts organisations. But neither of those projects would have been possible without us working in partnership with both Brown and Matt. Really, they were accidents as a result of an inquisitiveness on our part and the vision, the technical know how of the partners we had accidentally ended up working with.

And that's what really turned us on to actively seeking those partnerships - about wanting to work in collaboration with other artists and technicians to make the ideas for material (content) that we were developing..... into real things.

We've subsequently continued to look for or create opportunities to promote or distribute our work online.

We've recorded an audio tour of Leeds written from the perspective of refugees which is free to download from our website and iTunes - along with a rather lovely hand drawn map.

We've used YouTube to post video of us in a shed attempting to describe a complicated quantum physics theory - purely at the time to allow the quantum physicist we were working with at the time to hear and see what we were doing and tell us whether it was accurate or not. That video has been viewed more than 40000 times and has hundreds of comments underneath it.

We've most recently made an online 'game' for our latest show The Moon The Moon, working closely with our old friend Tassos Stevens and his company Coney. We wanted to create a short online experience that people could play and be introduced to the atmosphere, ideas and characters in the show. We also wanted to embed an activity in the 'game' where the participants could create their own simple, personal, private ritual - we had made a version of that ritual which was performed in the show. So if you'd played the game before you saw the show you'd hopefully get a moment of very personal recognition that might otherwise just seem quite abstract.

The other reward for playing the game is an MP3 of one of the songs from the show written by the musician we worked with David Edwards, also known as Minotaur Shock.

And of course in the process of encouraging our audience to engage with us and the work in this way, we're able to gather a certain amount of information about them en route - encourage (but not force) them to join our mailing list - to push them closer towards the pages where they can buy tickets for the performances in the 'real world' in the location that's most convenient for them.

This element of the project came out of a digital and online strategy that Brown produced - because twelve years on from being IT support at BT he's now Project Director for a massive agency where he's responsible for all of Nokia and

Ford's online content in Europe. His recent very commercially driven experience of how to engage with audiences (customers) has been invaluable for us in thinking about how rigorous we are in tracking, analysing the way people are interacting with us - particularly online - and how we develop this strategy for the future.

The ambition we have for the ongoing development of this work is to be able to provide a resource or maybe even a template that we can share with other performing arts organisations.

Because we, and many other companies like us, are increasingly working remotely - the people that are Unlimited currently live and work in Leeds, Manchester, Edinburgh, St Albans, Glasgow and London. We tour and run workshops and residencies throughout the UK and across the world. And so we've recently started using Google sites to set up what's essentially a company intranet that allows us to share information, work and collaborate online. So no matter where we are we can all easily access the most recent versions of scripts, research documents, annual or project budgets, policy documents.

All of which is brilliant, isn't it? Isn't it brilliant? We are just brilliant.

Because this is where despite all of my geekery, early adoption, interest in and engagement with this tech... I continue to hold quite a deeply rooted suspicion of how far we, in the performing arts, can - should - employ it.

I wholeheartedly believe that these online technologies, social networking sites in particular, provide an amazing opportunity for us as artists to reach and to communicate with both an existing and a new audience. But I also wholeheartedly believe that it is and should remain a way of introducing people to the work and encouraging them to come and see it in the real world.

And I'm aware that my use of the 'the real world' is contentious - it's deliberately provocative because this is a conversation I'm interested in. Tassos Stevens who I mentioned earlier once said to me that "the show begins from the first moment that you hear about it". And I love this - it's why we wanted to make our online game for The Moon The Moon.

The moment someone tells you about the show or you pick up a flyer or you visit a website, there is an opportunity for you to start engaging with the work. And the internet is an obvious and a brilliant place to do that. But it should always culminate in a call to action that inspires people to take that massive risk - to get on a bus or a train or their bike or whatever and physically travel to a place and

congregate with other audience members and the artists who are responsible for bringing them there.

Because it's in that moment that the event becomes complete. That there is a live and a present, a creative, imaginative, political act that is the most inspiring and potentially life changing experience you can have.

I say this not because I think that there's an immediate or imminent danger of the live, congregatory event disappearing – but because I worry there is currently an attraction to the idea of the internet as a cost effective way of presenting work amongst some arts funders.

Without an appropriate, additional level of investment that continues to allow (particularly small companies such as ourselves) to keep a focus on what we do. To *take* theatre to an audience who have invested time, energy, money in getting to it. Wherever that is whatever the shifting definition of theatre might be.

The performing arts remain that most inspiring of events, in my opinion, because of the risk we take and the effort we make in getting to it. I've been wondering recently about the danger of encouraging ourselves to spend even more time on our own, at home or wherever, in front of a screen and in total control of the cultural experiences that are being sold to us. Because in a society in which the state has the power by law to

"impose conditions on public assemblies where more than two persons are gathering or expected to gather"

...we as artists have a responsibility to be giving our audiences ever more reasons to come together.

A small piece of anecdotal evidence from a post show discussion we hosted recently for The Moon The Moon - we'd invited Sarah Brennan who's the Chief Executive of YoungMinds to chair the discussion. Young Minds is a national charity committed to improving the mental health and emotional well-being of all children and young people.

The discussion was an inspiring one about representations of mental health in society and art and we got onto a conversation about if younger audiences were coming to the show and how they were responding to it. Sarah was very clear that from her experience the young people they were talking to were saying "Yes, we're on Facebook and Bebo and Myspace and all those other sites, but we're still doing that at home and on our own".

The thing that I'm most excited about having conversations about here is – when do we turn off our phones and our laptops and log out of the networking sites and really I mean really give people no option but to come together. In the real world.

Thank you.