

# The Experience of Using Digital Walking Tours to Explore Urban Histories

Authors: Wally Smith, Dirk vom Lehn, Hannah Lewi, Dora Constantinidis<sup>†</sup> and Katie Best

Keywords: history walking tours, digital apps, flâneur, the *dérive*

## Introduction

Over the past decade, the app-based urban history tour has quietly emerged as a familiar feature of our new digital world. Entering ‘history walking tour’ into any app store produces a seemingly endless list of search results. Although reflecting the usual bias towards the Western world’s urban epicentres of both GLAM and digital content production, the list nevertheless contains a motley mixture of institutionally branded and privately developed offerings of both ‘official’ history and more offbeat historical themes.

In this chapter, we report a study of people's experiences of following digital history tours in Melbourne and London, and examine whether and how they might bring new kinds of engagement with places and the past. Underlying this enquiry is an inevitable comparison between the digital tour and what are arguably its parents: the human-guided tour and the tourist guidebook (Lewi & Smith, 2011). In many cases, the app version can seem like an inferior child of the human-guided tour, a digital prince unable to displace a very popular monarch. But in other cases, it opens new and interesting possibilities, partly inherited from the guide book, including self-paced freedom to explore and innovative juxtapositions of engaging historic text, images, audio and film against present-day realities.

Since the 19th century there have been various characterisations of walking in the city, both as a habitual practice and as a touristic activity. We will first briefly review some of these ideas as a context to frame questions about how the design and use of digital touring apps responds to a larger history of urban exploration on foot. The central theme in this review, and the chapter as a whole, is an enduring tension between a romantic yearning for free wandering and a competing desire to follow planned routes and itineraries that promise educational and culturally significant encounters with the city.

---

<sup>†</sup> Dora sadly passed away during the writing of this chapter. She will be remembered as an insightful, kind and generous colleague and will be much missed by all who knew her.

The first of these desires might be traced back to the well-known figure of the *flanêur*, an aimless urban wanderer identified by Charles Baudelaire and other writers and artists to characterise a particular time and place in 19th-century Paris (Benjamin, 1973). Later, John Urry (2002, p. 127) and others saw the *flanêur* as a forerunner of the modern tourist who walks to experience new places, often to photograph them. Susan Sontag (1977) also made this link with photography, describing an ‘armed version’ of the middle-class *flanêur*: ‘reconnoitring, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes’ (p. 55).

Guy Debord (1956; npn) and the Situationists in the 1950s and 1960s described a related idea of the *dérive*, meaning a playful engagement with the city, quite different to the journey or the stroll:

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.

Debord (1956) described the *dérive* as letting go of conventional plans, yet still being guided by something more than random chance: perhaps a sensory itinerary, or the writings of a poet, or the moves from a game.

Running parallel to these celebrations of free urban exploration, numerous scholars have also pointed to the rise of tourist walks that are more planned and guided. In an illuminating account, historian Alan Gordon (2014) describes how an innovative guidebook walking tour of 19th-century Quebec City, appearing in 1882, was both a tool for an emerging tourism business and a formative influence on the way that city’s past came to be understood and consumed. Within this broader analysis, Gordon (2014) perfectly captures the very planned nature of the tour, yet curiously within this, the orchestration of a sense of agency and even discovery among the tourers:

[The walking tour] ... did more than simply identify major public buildings worthy of note: it laid out a route through town that led past selected sites deemed historically worthy. ... Following this typical route, a tourist happened upon the city’s key religious and civic institutions. And, at each of those sites, the guidebook text explained what should command the stranger’s attention. (p. 87)

Guided walks subsequently became an accepted practice of tourism and education. Henry Bischoff (1987) noted, in the context of learning about the immigration history of Paterson in the US: ‘a walking tour presents material expressions of wealth and power, it is one of the best ways to alert students to the more common, human aspects of immigration history’ (p. 202). However, within this wide positivity, there are sometimes historiographical criticisms of biases and limitations, some of which express a discomfort of being caught in an orchestrated event. In reviewing a guided tour of ‘Baltimore’s Historic West Side’, one professional historian expressed some common misgivings.

One was the incompleteness of the narrative: ‘The Committee for Downtown cleared the mostly African American and low-income neighborhoods that occupied the space ... Pousson did not tell us where the residents went.’ (p. 121). The other was in becoming a tourist who was marked out as separate from the ongoing lived reality of the surrounding people and place: ‘We were tourists consuming their difficult narratives as a form of educational entertainment’ and ‘the script relegated us to stories safely in the past’ (p. 123).

In our study we set out to examine the how digital tours might respond to these historical patterns of urban exploration on foot. Our focus was the experience of the ‘tourist at home’, meaning people exploring the history of their own city rather than travellers and holiday-makers doing so. We wanted to compare the app-based experience with that of the traditional human-guided tour. Without the sure navigation and narratives of the human guide, how does the digital tour experience take shape? Does the digital tour provide a new kind of balance between the freedom of the *flanêur* to explore alone, and the instructive guidance of a planned itinerary?

### **A Study of Three Digital History Walking Tours**

We chose three digital tours to study—two in Melbourne and one in London—and evaluated their use by 29 people in all. To keep a clear focus on the tour experience, we piloted many apps and chose carefully to include those that, in our view, contained valuable content and were readily usable. Our participants, adults of various ages, were recruited from the local city and invited to take the tour using their own mobile device. Each participant was given an initial briefing and left to take the tour at a convenient time in the following days. Later, an in-depth semi-structured interview was held with each participant about their activities and experience of the tour.

A central aim was to compare different approaches to the design of digital tours. As for any digital technology, inscribed into these tour apps were implicit notions of a certain kind of user and prescribed patterns of use. We now briefly describe our three chosen apps and consider the images of the urban tourer and touring activities that were inscribed into them by their makers.

#### **Tour 1: Golden Mile Walking Tour—A Click-Stop Tour**

The first app-based tour was created and published as part of Museums Victoria’s ‘Walking Through History’ series, and developed by MyTours, a New Zealand-based software company (see Figure 1). Seven participants took this tour. It is based on an existing successful human-guided tour of the centre of Melbourne called the ‘Golden Mile’, which visits 45 stops over approximately two hours, mostly

notable buildings fuelled by the 19th-century gold boom that gave impetus to Melbourne's rapid development.

We chose the Golden Mile as a good example of what we will call a 'click-stop' tour. This style of app mimics some of the aspects of a human-guided tour, by presenting a prescribed route of designated stops, each with a scripted delivery of manually triggered ('clicked') content in the form of text and images. It presumes an ideal user who obediently follows the prescribed path, consuming didactic, if lively, packets of information, sometimes in a small group of co-tourers. Figure 1 shows the main screen of the app, with information about the currently selected stop shown as text with the option to hear the same text narrated through audio. At the top of the page is a horizontally scrollable set of three to five images, related to the current stop.

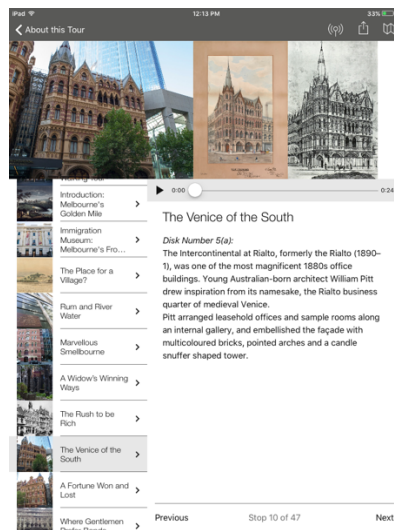


Figure 1. Golden Mile tour: screenshot from Museums Victoria's 'Walking Through History' app series, showing text and audio information for the stop 'Venice of the South).

## Tour 2: War Remembrance Trail—A Click-Stop Tour

Our second choice, evaluated with 11 new local participants, was also in the click-stop format. Here, we gave participants two apps to use in tandem, allowing scope to explore how multiple devices are managed and how this affects the experience of the event. The main app was published as part of the Victorian War Heritage Trails: Melbourne City '100 places for 100 years' (see Figure 2). Like the Golden Mile, it is also based in the centre of Melbourne but takes a different route that passes along the edge of a major urban park, the Domain, encompassing the Shrine of Remembrance—a large memorial built to commemorate the First World War dead and subsequently all conflicts in which

Australia has been involved. The walk takes in seven stops of mainly memorials, one stop having several separate pages for separate but adjacent monuments (see Figure 2), with the full route containing many other memorials and objects of interest. The app interface was identical in format to the that for the Golden Mile tour, also built by MyTours. The second app, ‘Shrine of Remembrance School Walk’ created by the Shrine, presents a simple schematic map of an outdoors area called the forecourt, showing icons that click open to historic videos related to specific monuments with voice-over commentaries: oral history recordings of war veterans.

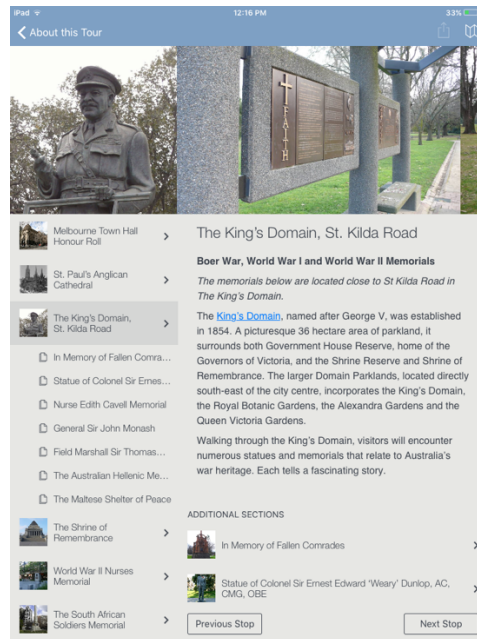


Figure 2. War Remembrance tour: screenshot from Victorian War Heritage Trails: Melbourne City ('100 places for 100 years'), showing text and audio for the stop ‘The King’s Domain, St Kilda Road’.

### Tour 3: Soho Stories—A Location-Triggered Exploration

Our third choice of app, ‘Soho Stories’, is set in London’s West End and was created by the United Kingdom’s (UK) National Trust. Unlike the click-stop tours with their predefined walking routes, Soho Stories invites users to roam freely in the small area of Soho and provides global positioning system (GPS) location-triggered audio content (see Figure 3). Pilot testing showed that like the other tours, it was highly usable and well designed, with well-crafted and potentially engaging content. We studied 11 users to examine how they experienced its novel approach to exploring an urban area. The audios focus on post-Second World War street life, with stories of local personalities and events, many from the music and sex industries that characterise Soho’s recent history. These stories are told

by celebrities whose voices are recognisable to a (slightly older) British audience, such as Barry Cryer, Janet Street-Porter, Christopher Foyle and Molly Parkin.

By inviting people to wander freely with their smart devices tucked out of sight, Soho Stories defies the tradition of the prescribed walking route. A map of hotspots is provided but is often not needed; by simply wandering, the user will soon happen upon the next audio delivery. Therefore, the inscribed user of Soho Stories is a kind of modern *flanêur*, with echoes of the playful *dérive* through its variety of devices, including stories and poems that frame the experience of place. Further, in the manner of the Situationists, the narratives are often cut into fragments as the user moves in and out of range of a hotspot. Softening this intention somewhat, the app presents the reassuring voice of a human guide, cleverly designed to provide linking commentary as the user shifts between stories.



Figure 3. Map view of Soho Stories, showing the hotspot locations that trigger audio narratives.

### Findings for the Two Click-Stop Tours: Golden Mile and War Remembrance

The goal of our study was not to attempt a summative evaluation of the effectiveness of these digital tours, if indeed such an evaluation is possible, but rather to provide more formative insights into the nature of the activities and experiences they afford. However, to provide some context, we begin by describing the overall reception of the two click-stop tours, before tracing the patterns of activities and experiences that were observed.

Overall, most participants were positive about their digital tour experience, although within this there were notable and recurring disappointments. Sometimes these were expressed through unmet expectations that the app would be more like a human guide: 'I assumed it was going to be a proper

tour app, and I was waiting for it to tell me where to go next, and it didn't do that!' (R8).<sup>1</sup> Some felt the absence of the banter of a human guide: 'I like fun facts, interesting things and I personally would be more interested in that than who designed a building' (R7). One participant recounted how at one stop they met 'a concierge type guy downstairs who was passionate about the building and its history ... I was kind of hoping for more from the app' (G5). Nevertheless, most participants did not express this disappointment and considered the app and human guide as different options, each with its advantages, and some outright preferred the digital: 'Sometimes those guided tours are frustrating, depends on the country ... I like using headphones, you hear everything, and you don't miss things' (R11).

Overall, the apps were found to be sufficiently usable, and supported some degree of social interaction within the small parties of two or three people that many of the participants assembled to take the tour. All participants trusted the information in the app and were surprised that it was queried in an interview question. There was a mixture of reactions to the various formats of content. Some preferred audio because it frees the eyes, but audio was not easily co-consumed in a group, despite incidences of sharing headphones or leaning in to the speaker. Many others strongly preferred images, with testimonies of their benefits for more attentive, directed observation of the physical world. Pure text was also found usable and preferable by some, and was more easily reported to children. One participant much preferred watching and listening to videos.

More significantly, there was evidence that our participants had genuinely learned things on the tour that might later change their knowledge and appreciation of the city:

I got history on some people I didn't really know ... that means when I go past, I actually know what it is about. (R10)

When I do bring people around, I will be able to talk about the architecture a little bit better. (G3)

I think it has kind of changed my perspective and if I was to walk through the city again and go past those places it might kind of prompt me to take a second look. (G6)

## **Adapting the Tour**

Turning now to the nature of the digital tour activities and experiences, the first striking observation was the considerable extent to which all participants modified and adapted the prescribed tour.

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview testimonies are referenced to participants from the three tours: G—Golden Mile tour; R—War Remembrance tour; and S—Soho Stories.

Typically, its timing and the exact route taken was improvised around ongoing life, scheduled around work activities or meeting with friends. In the days before, decisions were made about when and whom to tour with, about which and how many devices to use, sometimes reviewed in response to charging and compatibility issues once the app(s) were downloaded. Interestingly, given these elaborate preparations, no participants took the opportunity to view the stop-based content in advance to any great extent, all suspending the consumption of content until they had embarked on the journey.

During the tour itself, modifications continued as the actual route taken was often reordered and sometimes truncated for various reasons including transport convenience, and avoiding excessive walking and obstacles like road works:

So, I skipped the nurses stop and the reason was that I was short on time. I was meeting a friend for lunch and it was a long way to go up and double back. I cheated a little bit. I took the tram in the morning and just got off at an earlier stop, just because there is such a big gap between St Pauls and King's Domain. (R1)

At the same time, another kind of adaptation often occurred, as many participants keenly deployed other smartphone apps and tools to make sense of place and history. As described above, we had contrived the War Remembrance tour to involve two apps to explore this issue, but in practice for both the Golden Mile and War Remembrance tours, many participants drew on a range of digital activities. Most common was the act of taking photographs. Some uploaded images to the app and enjoyed the sense of improving the tour for others. Quite often, information in the app was checked and supplemented on Wikipedia and other websites. One participant preferred to use Google maps to obtain estimates of walking time, and another participant uploaded images to Instagram and received online feedback during the tour.

## **Minding the Gaps**

This urge to modify the tour can be viewed as a kind of early resistance to being fully drawn into a highly orchestrated event. However, once into the tour, most participants consulted the app to furnish a coherent experience; this quickly became a point of consternation and critique of perceived gaps and disconnects. Sometimes this unease took the form of ongoing questioning and sense-making of the tour design: 'The other thing I thought was that it was an odd choice of buildings ... I wondered why some of them were chosen and why not others nearby' (G2). In other situations, it was manifest in attempts to understand what the authors of the tour wanted to convey and whether they themselves were the right kind of audience:



If the app was designed to make me get a better understanding of Australia's military history, it failed. If it was an opportunity to experience a little bit about history, whilst exploring the city and what the city offers, then yes, that's where it succeeded. (R1)

At a more practical level, especially in the Golden Mile tour, there was an ongoing labour to match content in the app to reality. Part of this was the challenge of navigation using a map at smartphone scale:

Constantly checking map and orientation was complicated-and the iPhone screen is too small and that was tricky, a bit confusing because map was wobbly, and it would jump around. (G2)

Sometimes the physical feature of the landscape and its interpretation in the app needed effort to connect: 'some of the statues were small even though photos looked big, so we missed them, but the kids liked it, the challenge of finding the next stop' (R3). When reaching the stop, confusion persisted: 'here I am comparing a photo with the building and trying to figure out which one it is because some buildings from the same period look alike' (G4). Sometimes, the final matching was never achieved:

This WWII nurse memorial I was kind of determined to go to it, even though it was hot, but that was just a waste of time, this ship here I think it was a picture that was taken but it wasn't anywhere there. (R9)

For some, the interstitial spaces between stops were felt as an absence within the tour narrative:

You pass like three different parks before you get there ... it would have been handy to have some words about that, because it would make it a bit more like a guided tour; it would have been nice if they told you what you could see on the journey along the way. (R8)

Some participants had suggestions for this problem: 'perhaps it needs poetry or Australian stories in between stops to fill it out?' (G7). However, for others, the open-endedness of these interstitial spaces created freedoms to reflect and explore:

We talked a little bit about what we had seen, but there were also some other monuments that weren't on the tour that we were then interested in looking at. (R5)

### **Exploratory Walking and Heightened Observing**

Competing with the quest for narrative coherence, what might be viewed as a desire to stay 'inside' the tour, there was a recurring and competing desire to break out, to freely explore the spaces being passed through. This contradictory impulse was at least partly a product of the tour process itself. A heightened sense of information-seeking often spilled over to greater than usual attention to non-tour objects, such as plaques and signs:

The biggest point of reflection was looking at the inscription on the floor in the centre ... I'd already listened outside about the mathematics of the light coming through on the 11th day of the 11th hour, so I spent quite a bit of time looking at that and looking up at the ceiling. (R4)

In a way, that is perhaps not possible on the human-guided tour, the act of walking and touring was, for many of our digital tourists, felt to be surprisingly more akin to exploration:

I was just like I'm walking here ... I stopped thinking about the tour itself, and like yeah, I'm walking to the cathedral, or I'm walking across the bridge ... I didn't explain to my son that we were going on an historical walking tour ... because we were out and out about and having fun, looking at the world ever so slightly differently. (R6)

Such exploration had to be carefully managed within the tour structure, by regularly checking the plan:

I didn't need the map for every step of the way, and it meant I could look around and see a lovely fountain. (R1)

We were just chatting as we walked, then when we got to something and looked it up to see if was on the tour. If it wasn't on the tour, we were looking at it anyway. (R11)

## **Defamiliarisation of the Tourist at Home**

In choosing locals to the city as participants, we wanted to examine how the tour might bring a new perspective to an already-familiar place. There was a strongly positive response to this experience of being a tourist at home, with frequent expressions of defamiliarisation. This was sometimes expressed as surprise at discovering new things to be learned:

I have played there since I was little. I've gone to Carols by Candlelight, I've seen concerts, I've gone to the Shrine and I've walked past them a lot, and I'm usually pretty good at being nerdy and looking at what a plaque says, but a lot of them I had no idea about. (R6)

For others, it was a deeper sense that elements in the urban landscape that had receded into a familiar backdrop were brought back into focal attention as something new to be investigated:

Most of the King's Domain I had no idea about ... growing up. I knew the Shrine was always there, but I never knew the building was for the first war, and the forecourt was for the second war. (R6)

The Madam Brussels was interesting for me, because I had heard the name before, but I hadn't realised the story or the fact that it was a brothel. (G6)

Sometimes the very novelty of a new route across otherwise familiar terrain brought a new perspective: ‘I run around the Tan [Track] but I’d never taken this route, so I kind of know what it looks like from top, but I never walked in the middle’ (R4). In some cases, the tours revealed previously unvisited spaces within the familiar landscape:

I sort of know all the places but then you see the building, but you never go inside to see the magnificent ceilings or domes. (G4)

We looked up, which is what you normally don’t do in your own town, and you see a gargoye you’ve never seen before, or some mosaic. (G2)

### **Wanting Both Less and More Information**

We turn now to how participants experienced the information provided in the app in textual, image and auditory forms. Here, we observed an almost paradoxical sense of people wanting only very lean servings of information, yet constantly wanting more. As explorers, they did not want to be talked to exhaustively by the app, nor did they want to be buried in its screen: ‘I didn’t want to sit there reading text when I was in amongst it all’ (R4). Equally, there were high expectations about what the app should speak to and the gaps in its delivery were felt as an absence.

As an illustration of this paradox, one participant stated:

I guess it was good that there wasn’t too much to read, because you are kind of on your way ... since I was riding, I couldn’t read while walking.

Later, the same participant mentioned an African memorial

Maybe a bit more structure would have been nice, a section on who actually paid for it, and who decided to build it ... more of the actual monument history, and another section for things around it. (R10)

Similarly, another felt the content overall was ‘sometimes information was deep, too much’, but later suggested ‘maybe a little bit more about Collins Street or why not include Flinders Street?’ (G2). There was often an expectation that, as a digital device, the app should, when required, behave more like an encyclopaedic database: ‘it’s much nicer than just looking up information, but you’ve invested in the app then to be complete and inclusive of everything’ (G2).

The potential for disappointment around absent information and the desire for highly personally relevant information, lays down a significant challenge for the would-be digital tour designer:

There wasn't information about when the Shrine was built, which my friend actually asked, and we were trying to find out ... the other information section has a lot of detail about 'Oh you know this was funded by committee and a completion for the designer' but I don't care about that at all. (R5)

With this, as tourists at home, there was sometimes a desire to have their own memories confirmed in the app:

They didn't mention the Indigenous exhibition nor that there was a tributary under Elizabeth Street that is now covered but there were floods ... I remember the cars being carried down the street only about 25 years ago after a massive downpour. (G5)

This irreducible sense of incompleteness of what the app delivers seemed to be a consequence of the freedom of exploration afforded by the digital tour experience, especially its effect of heightened observation, which led to the acknowledgement of many non-tour things. In this way, the disappointment of incompleteness is not a negative outcome and participants came away with new curiosity and new questions about the sights observed. Many expressed the desire to return later to the places visited to explore more fully. Nevertheless, this finding draws a sharp contrast with a human-guided tour in which participants more readily accept, perhaps, that the account of the guide is inevitably highly personalised and bounded in its scope.

### **Findings for Soho Stories: A Location-Triggered Exploration**

Compared to the fully prescribed walking routes of the two click-stop tours, our third app—Soho Stories—attempts to offer something firmly in a different tradition. By inviting its user to roam freely and explore the area of Soho in London, this app provides an experience that is, at least on the surface, closer to that of the *flanêur* and the *dérive*. Before exploring how this took shape in practice, we first note that Soho Stories was found to be highly usable on the street. Apart from a few crashes, participants generally trusted its content because it was produced by the National Trust, the largest heritage organisations in the UK. As a more innovative app that presents location-triggered and highly immersive content, the reception of Soho Stories was more polarised among our participants, as we now describe.

### **The Effects of Rich and Immersive Narratives**

We begin by considering the effects of having rich audio narratives of place in a tour app. Many respondents were impressed with the quality of these stories, the speakers and atmospheres created. Participants enjoyed the fact, if recognised, that speakers were famous and associated with the area

(e.g. George Melly and Janet Street-Porter) or perceived to be ‘in the know’ (e.g. those associating with gangsters) and able to ‘go behind the scenes’ (e.g. the Groucho Club):

We all know who Janet Street-Porter is ... but actually to hear her speaking about what she did when she was going through uni making the silver coats and things like that and then ... yes, that was a very personal thing. (S8)

The experience was found to be immersive in the manner of drama: ‘It was quite theatrical ... it reminded me of watching Sherlock ... the background noise and the accent, and the way it was executed’ (S1). Street sounds incorporated into the audios were particularly effective and created a sense of time travel back to the past, including background music, talking and live recordings of a jazz concert in Ronnie Scott’s:

It produced this noise as if you’re walking the streets, there were horses tapping the streets ... they were trying to grab you back to the history ... there were noises of people talking ... there was jazz, when I walked passed Ronnie Scott. (S9)

However, these narratives of social history conflicted with the expectations of some participants. Sometimes, this was a negative reaction to particular content. For example, two users found the portrayal of gay culture to be clichéd. In other cases, it was associated with the discomfort of being locked into highly immersive and dramatic narratives and a perceived lack of engagement with the present place. Two of the most popular stops (The French House and the sign ‘This is not a brothel’) overcame this problem and required participants to observe carefully and find particular objects or features in the landscape. However, almost half the users commented that elsewhere there was not enough engagement with the things around them:

I had this preconception that it might tell me more about, I suppose, certain buildings. I know it did to an extent, but it was like more about the history of ... I don’t know what I thought, really. (S5)

Another commented that it was strange for items that obviously attract the tourist gaze to not be discussed:

What I was surprised about was that it wouldn’t point out information about buildings where there are blue plaques for example. Like where Karl Marx lived or where Mozart used to live. I was surprised that that app would not pick up on that and give you more information about something that the environment would stimulate you to look at anyway. (S2)

## The Mixed Blessing of Wandering

Many participants liked the sense of freedom that Soho Stories brought with it; they could go where they pleased ‘at their own pace’, listen when they wanted and tune out when they did not: ‘I like it better, because I could actually hear the tour guide, and it’s also self-directed ... I could just leave when I had enough information’ (S7). However, this freedom was not universally enjoyed. Some users found it frustrating that everything emerged as a result of where they walked, rather than having more direct control over what they listened to:

At some point like when I was on Greek Street, I can’t remember what information it was, but I would have liked to listen to the information on while I was walking but it wouldn’t allow me that. (S2)

These issues were sometimes compounded by failures of the technology, mainly the GPS not working and locating people in a different place on the map with the incorrect audio content. There were often frustrating mismatches between participants’ locations, intended locations, focus of attention and audio content:

I would like an app to detect that I’ve actually moved on from Ronnie Scott, which means that I’m no longer interested in the history of that place ... so it would and detect the current location and start with the new voice. (S9)

Even without these technological glitches, many users were simply uncomfortable with the uncertainty of free roaming. One participant felt the app was missing images to indicate what you should be observing, and that you were properly located. Another commented that it would be useful for places already visited to be marked to avoid accidental revisits. Another wanted more specific audio directions:

I thought, as it changed, so if you go down and you arrive at Wardour Street and it starts talking about Wardour Street, it might be nice to say ‘Wardour Street’. (S5)

The negative reaction of some participants to free roaming and rich narratives that were not strongly tied to features in the physical reality, can be viewed as unfavourable comparisons with a human-guided tour. One expressed this explicitly:

It pointed me towards a green plaque on Old Compton Street that I’d never noticed before and it pointed out where the Groucho Club door was, but I didn’t feel like they were saying, ‘Look at this bit of architecture’. (S6)

Some expressed a deeper antagonism to the playful spirit of Soho Stories and with this, anything resembling the *dérive*:

I know my dad, for example, would be really annoyed to discover he'd walked all the way to the other end of Soho for someone to read him a poem. (S6)

### **Defamiliarisation and Heightened Observation**

As with the click-stop tours, a particularly powerful experience for participants lay in a sense of defamiliarisation and the renewal of interest in familiar things and places. One of the most popular stops was the alleyway with the sign, 'This is not a brothel' because there was a feeling of confronting something known about the area in an unusual way. One user described how walking slowly between stops had allowed them to view the area in a new way:

When they're telling the story I walk slowly, but I realised, for example, some shops or places I hadn't paid attention to before and so I stopped and looked around ... so I wasn't directly influenced by the story but sometimes I was influenced by the environment and the shops ... sometimes we just walk by and we don't really pay attention to the buildings or neighbourhood, so I think that's very good ... but you need to have some time to wander in the area. (S11)

### **Wanting More but Less Information**

Also repeating a pattern of the click-stop tours, participants presented paradoxical feelings; they wanted less information, while simultaneously expecting more things to be reflected in the app's content. Wanting less was often expressed as the narrative being excessively long:

At the beginning we stopped in this pub and we listened for probably 70 per cent of the story. But I must say it was a long story, probably more than five minutes, so we only listened probably four minutes ... and just kept walking. (S4)

We were just listening to quite an interesting story about a pub and its history ... then after a while it just got, 'Okay, too much information' ... so we just started walking towards the next stop. (S7)

One expression of wanting more information was the desire to have visual and video content alongside the audio narratives:

They talked about how it changed over the years, but I couldn't visualise it ... so I thought it might be nice to be able to take your phone out and look at a photograph. (S10)

For other participants, the desire reached further and reflected the belief observed with the click-stops tours that the app should be more encyclopaedic and provide links to support a deeper digital exploration of topics presented:

If they mentioned there was an incident that happened in this place, I would expect at least it was in the news or some report ... so if there's a link to BBC, I could just click on it and see what happened. (S9)

Wanting more in a different way, one participant lamented that despite being called Soho Stories, it stopped so abruptly at Soho's borders:

I walked out past the 'Coach & Horses' onto Charing Cross Road ... I stopped outside the Palace Theatre ... hoping it would tell me about the history, but it didn't say anything. It stopped. (S5)

## Conclusion

We began by tracing two contrasting historical precedents of urban exploration on foot: the free roaming *flanêur* along with the later more playful *dérive*, versus the rise of highly orchestrated and guided history tours. Digital history tour apps, we suggest, offer the modern visitor a way to combine, if not reconcile, these two traditions. They promise the opportunity of being able to tour without visibly becoming a tourist; visitors can be directed to sites and items of significance in an efficient manner, while remaining somewhat anonymous and always free to wander at any moment. The attraction of this covert tourism is in avoiding the kind of discomfort described by one participant: 'I felt a bit self-conscious because we had it on loudspeaker ... "Oh, I'm a tourist, looking at you", so I felt a bit weird' (S3). Another imagined the reactions of people around her: 'look at that idiot, she's confronted with beauty and she's looking at her phone'(R6). However, both were able to tuck their smartphones away and resume a normal appearance while remaining on the tour. In this way, the experience created is one of straddling an imaginary frame boundary; of being 'inside' the tour and yet able to step 'outside' it. This stepping in and out happens in both the overt sense of following or not following the designated path, and the covert sense of dutifully accepting tour instructions versus critically evaluating the wisdom of the tour design.

The first demonstration of our participants' desire to stand outside the tour was their readiness to modify the prescribed itineraries of the click-stop apps. Routes were evaluated, truncated and otherwise manipulated, and various other digital devices and apps were marshalled to extend and alter the tour app's offerings. Although these click-stop tours are inscribed with the ghost of a human guide peddling a fixed itinerary of designated stops, in practice they provided more flexible resources for tourers to become co-designers of the activity. Following from this, many reported a sense that they were exploring freely, and some enjoyed the opportunity to mix in spontaneous activities like browsing shops and cafés. In embracing these freedoms, some participants resembled an updated version of Sontag's (1977) figure of the armed *flanêur*, their smart devices now subsuming and



extending the tourist's camera, providing an upgraded touristic weapon that is both more readily camouflaged into the ordinariness of urban life, yet more versatile in its sense-making functionality.

A different situation was observed for Soho Stories, in which the app comes already inscribed with a notion of free roaming and of the playful *dérive*. Curiously then, in practice, its highly immersive audio content was more resistant to improvisation and adaptation. Although participants could roam anywhere and anonymously, they were less able to negotiate the boundary of being inside or outside the tour. Once embarked, they were definitely inside the activity, and many were happy to be there, finding the deeply immersive and carefully crafted content absorbing and enjoyable. However, unlike the click-stop tours, in which participants could survey content in advance and pick and choose to an extent, participants in Soho Stories had less strategic control over the material consumed and had to accept what came next without much forewarning.

However, not everyone always wants or has time to become the *flanêur* it seems. The sense of freedom afforded by the click-stop tours, of being outside any organised event often came with a degree of disappointment and discomfort. Many of the click-stop tourers found the lean servings of factual content left yawning gaps and disconnects in any overall narrative. This was especially true in the interstitial spaces between the stops, where some felt the painful absence of a human guide to make sense of things and places and hold them inside a tour experience. Exacerbating this, many tourers felt it a burden to be constantly making and maintaining correspondences between information in the app and features of the physical landscape, with ongoing uncertainty about the correctness of connections made.

Despite the differences between the reception of the click-stop tours and Soho Stories, there were some common reactions across all three apps, which point perhaps to the deeper nature of the digital tour experience. Most striking was a paradoxical response among nearly all participants of an overall desire for less information in the apps coexisting with demands to be told more, about more things, and to be provided with related images or other materials felt to be missing. This paradox perfectly captures the conflicting desire to be inside a tour (wanting more information) while also being outside it (wanting less). It also points to the fact that a digital tour is not able to explain itself and defend its choices of inclusions, and perhaps more importantly, exclusions. Nevertheless, the clear evidence of our studies shows that many users of a digital history app will constantly feel the gaps and uncomfortable edges of the tour as absences. This, of course, contrasts with the experience created by a human guide, whose patter may reassuringly fill the gaps while nevertheless often being as scripted and machinic as the content of an app.

Yet curiously, the discomforts of the digital history tour may ultimately make for a productive experience, as we observed in two other common reactions. One is a kind of heightened power of observation, possibly to fill the sense of incompleteness, in which participants reported being switched into a mode of discovery and delighted to notice and consume various plaques, signposts and other sources of non-tour information that they felt would normally pass them by. Taking this further, another very strong reaction was one of defamiliarisation. Things that had receded into the familiar backdrops of their home cities were dragged back into focal attention and illuminated through new perspectives or simply through previously unknown facts.

In Dean MacCannell's (1976) classic book *The Tourist*, he described an emerging generation of tourists in the 1960s and 1970s who seek out authentic experiences but are often presented with various forms of 'staged authenticity' in tourism sites. Roughly half a century after MacCannell's portrait, the participants in our study were perhaps more aware of such stagings, and more skilfully able to discern forms of historic and cultural significance through and around them. However, this study shows that the notion of staging is still apt. The history walking tour is one such stage, and the tourer must manage their conflicting desires to be fully immersed inside the orchestrated tour narrative, while at the same time being a bystander of history who moves freely and anonymously through the city. The two forms of digital tours apps examined here provide new modes of negotiating these conflicting traditions of urban history exploration.

## **Acknowledgements**

This research was funded by the Australian Research Council through a Discovery Grant (DP140101188).

## **References**

- Benjamin, W (1973). *Charles Baudelaire: a lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*; translated from the German by Harry Zohn. London, NLB.
- Bischoff, H. (1987). A Walking Tour of an Ethnic Neighborhood: Communities as outdoor classrooms for teaching immigration history. *The Social Studies*, Sept-Oct 1987, 202-205.
- Debord, G. (1956). Theory of the dérive. *Les Lèvres Nues* 9, November. Reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste*, 2 (December 1958).

- Gordon, A. (2014). What to see and how to see it: Tourists, residents, and the beginnings of the walking tour in nineteenth-century Quebec City. *Journal of Tourism History*, 6(1), 74–90.
- Lewi, H. & Smith, W. (2011). Hand-held histories: Using digital archival documents on architectural tours. *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 15(1), 69–77.
- MacCannell, D. (1976). *The tourist: A New theory of the leisure class*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sontag, S. (1977). *On photography*. London, UK: Penguin Books.
- Urry, J. (2002). *The tourist gaze*. London, UK: Sage Publications.