

“LANDED (Freeman’s Wood)
a contemporary art exploration of landownership”

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“I descended a little on the Side of that delicious Vale , surveying it with a secret Kind of Pleasure, (tho’ mixt with my other afflicting Thoughts) to think that this was all my own, that I was King and Lord of all this Country indefeasibly, and had a Right of Possession; and if I could convey it, I might have it in Inheritance, as compleatly as any Lord of a Manor in England.”

Robinson Crusoe. Daniel Defoe. 1719

Introduction and Summary

StoreyG2 is a small contemporary art organisation based in Lancaster, England. We are currently running a project researching land ownership and its effects on people’s lives, and the money, power, and influence associated with it.

Landed (Freeman’s Wood) is centred on the plot of land on the edge of Lancaster, known as Freeman’s Wood, where the interests of the local community have collided with those of global capital.

Freeman’s Wood has been used by local people for decades, and they have regarded it as common land, but fencing was installed around it in 2012, resulting in public unrest and reports in the local press. This plot of land belongs to a company which is registered in Bermuda, and the director of the development company acting for them plays polo with Prince Charles.

StoreyG2 commissioned artists to explore the issue of landownership and to produce artworks to stimulate thought and discussion about it, through a focus on this site. I requested that these artworks would be in formats suitable for distribution via the internet, rather than gallery exhibition, so that they would have potential to reach a wide audience.

The commissioned artists Layla Curtis, Goldin+Senneby, and Sans Facon all have international reputations, and are experienced in working with themes of mapping, economic structures, and place-making. Layla Curtis developed an i-Phone app featuring conversations about the site; Goldin+Senneby bought a plot of land and produced a play script; and Sans Facon created a game which requires participants to role play relevant stakeholders.

Before describing this project in more detail, I will outline the reasons for addressing the issue of landownership, and why artists may be appropriate to provide new approaches to such important social and political issues.

Landownership

Ownership of land is fundamental to all social and economic structures. The unequal ownership of land provides owners with social and economic power. In the UK about 69% of the land is owned by 0.6% of the population.

However, landownership is a hidden political topic. A 2009 academic paper by Robert Home, Professor of Land Management at Anglia Law School, writes that, in the 1970s there was political discussion and academic research about it, but since then, landownership and the redistribution of land has largely disappeared from political debate. He states that :

“....the Conservative government of 1979–97 drove land ownership off political and academic agendas in the UK, and the subsequent Labour governments after 1997 did not restore it.”

More recently, in his introduction to a lengthy review of a new book about landownership, Ferdinand Mount, a former conservative MP wrote :

"In this case, the elephant is the room. There can be few enormous subjects more often dodged than land ownership. It is the great ignored in politics today."

Writer and political activist, George Monbiot wrote in The Guardian in 2013 :

"The issues politicians do not discuss are as telling and decisive as those they do.

...the loudest silence surrounds the issue of property taxes. It is altogether remarkable, in these straitened and inequitable times, that land value tax is not at the heart of the current political debate."

Land Value Taxation is a proposed annual charge based on the rental value of land, which was promoted in the 19th century by Henry George. Lloyd George and Winston Churchill tried to institute such a tax in the early 20th century, but it was defeated by the members of the House of Lords, many of whom are landowners themselves. It has been claimed that a land value tax would allow for all other taxes to be abolished. The campaign continues.

Scotland has been undertaking a review of land reform for the past several years. It became a key issue for pro-independence activists during the recent referendum campaign and is now central to the Scottish government's legislative programme.

Meanwhile Dr Jason Beedell, Head of Research at Smiths Gore, Property Consultants, reports that :

"2014 continued farmland's strong rise in values that started before the recession and has continued since 2009, which has made land one of the best performing assets of the last five years.bare land values rising by 58%..."

Art and social engagement

For several decades, many contemporary artists have been working outside galleries and museums in search of a more interactive context and a clearer social role. These artists are not primarily interested in exhibiting in galleries. They do not wish to produce objects for consumption in an art market which is focussed on creating luxury goods for rich people. They are more interested in conducting extended 'research' projects in which they engage community participants to address a range of current social, political, environmental, and economic issues.

This type of art practice has been given various labels including 'new genre public art', 'socially engaged practice', and 'durational public art'. It is a combination of community art, public art, political activism, ethnography, etc. It has been practiced by many artists since the 1970s, but has recently become more fashionable and highly regarded. Some feel that it represents a shift in perspective whose time has come.

A famous early example of this area of art practice was by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, a New York City artist. One of her most well-known projects *Touch Sanitation* (1970–1980), involved shaking hands with more than 8,500 workers in the New York City Department of Sanitation while saying "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." It is an example of her commitment to combining art with everyday life in order to bring together seemingly unconnected pieces of a community.

In the current situation of economic crisis and resultant public funding cuts across Europe, many cultural institutions are reconsidering their role in society. A notable project on art and public benefit is *L'Internationale*, a new consortium of six major European museums, which has been awarded a grant of 2.5million Euros by the European Union for a five year project "*The Uses of Art - The Legacy of 1848 and 1989*". Some visual art organisations have moved away from a gallery-based model to an approach that is about being

embedded in communities and becoming active in shaping the wider world around them.

There is increasing debate about the role and 'usefulness' of art. In a rich society with full employment it was acceptable to create artworks as useless luxury objects which could be bought by the super-wealthy and admired by the rest, but in a society of 'austerity' this may no longer be appropriate. It has been acceptable for art to be slightly removed from mainstream society, and to deliver primarily to the financially better off sections of society, while simultaneously being supported by public funds. This position may now be questionable, and is increasingly being debated

There is much discussion on what art is to be, with many people regarding 'contemporary art' as having reached a dead end. Many artists and curators are seeking a redefinition of the space of art beyond what was both a product of, and propaganda for, neoliberal capitalism. The current seismic shifts in society, and the economic crisis, may require a new form of art.

Artists and Land

Land has been a subject for artists for centuries. Landscape painting, the depiction or representation of natural scenery such as mountains, valleys, trees, rivers, and forests, has been widely practised. One of the earliest functions of the pure landscape picture seems to have been to provide evidence of ownership, like an entry in a land register. Much later, Gainsborough's painting of Mr&Mrs Andrews shows two landowners in the land which they own. In the later 20th century artists started to produce works by working directly in, and with land. Movements included Land Art, Site-specific art, and Environmental art.

More recently, a few artists have engaged with political and economic issues about land such as Amy Belkin's *This the Public Realm* project in California; Maria Eichhorn's *Acquisition of a plot of land* in Munster; and Patrick Keiller's series of films made over the past two decades about landscape, place, politics, and economic history in England.

The plot of land - Freeman's Wood

This project about landownership is centred on a plot of land known as Freeman's Wood, a 28 acre plot located on the south west edge of the city of Lancaster, in the north of the county of Lancashire in North West England.

The site is bounded by an industrial estate, a cycle path, a public footpath, and a public recreation ground. It is close to both residential housing, and to open farmland, and it is near the tidal estuary and salt marshes of the river Lune.



Lancaster is an appropriate place to explore the issue of landownership as it stands at the interchange between industrialisation and the countryside, at the meeting place between the urbanised powerhouses of the North West of England, and the iconic and idealized rural landscapes of Morecambe Bay and the Lake District.

This plot is next to the site of the now defunct factory of the major employer in Lancaster in the late 19th and early 20th century, Williamsons, which made linoleum. The owner, James Williamson, later Lord Ashton, became one of the richest men in the world through this production.

The land is part of an area which was known as Lancaster Marsh. In the 18th century this was common pasture on which the 80 oldest freemen of Lancaster had grazing rights. It was enclosed by Lancaster Corporation in 1796 and divided into fields which were then rented out. Legislative Acts of 1864 and 1892 gave the Corporation power to sell parts of the Marsh.

Williamson's lino factory was created on land nearby in the mid 19th century and, as it gradually expanded, Williamson bought additional plots of land on the Marsh, including Freeman's Wood. Part of this plot was used as a factory tip, one area included a gravel pit, and part of it was a recreation ground for the factory workers.

In its heyday, Williamson's was a huge factory, but it declined in the 1950s and 60s. The whole factory site, then known as Lune Mills, was sold in 1969, and part of it became Lune Industrial Estate in about 1972. The factory continued to operate under new names and owners, but ceased in 2001.

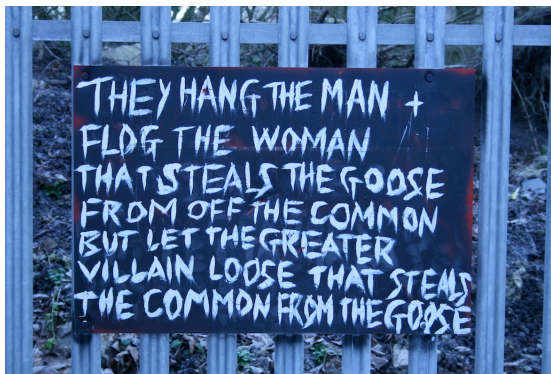
The land is now apparently owned by a property development company, The Property Trust plc, which is registered in Bermuda, and its directors are thought to be based in Hong Kong.

The planning consultancy company acting for them, Satnam Ltd, based in Gloucestershire, deals with business and management consultancy, investment, and town planning. Its director was born in the Punjab, moved to the UK in his youth, and is now a multi-millionaire. He has also been very socially successful, and is chairman of the polo club at which members of the royal family play. He is a friend of Prince Charles and Camilla. His son plays polo with Prince Harry.

So this scrubby patch of land on the edge of town has direct links to national and global power structures, and economic, social, and political networks.

Industrial use of Freeman's Wood diminished as the factory declined, but recreational use continued. Local people regard it as common land, and have apparently been using it since the 1950s for dog walking, biking, den building, tree-climbing, bird-watching, picnicking, playing football, etc. It is home to a wide diversity of wildlife, including deer.

Spiked metal fencing was installed around it between November 2011 and January 2012, together with "Warning - Keep Out" signs. Various tree houses, and a complex system of bike ramps which had been constructed by local people, were destroyed. There was a public outcry and several reports in the local press. The signs were rapidly and creatively defaced (see pictures). Local people submitted applications for Town Green status and for three designated public footpaths. Lancaster City Council imposed a Tree Protection Order on the site.



An art project ?

This situation at Freeman's Wood offered an ideal illustrative example for an exploration of the issue of landownership.

StoreyG2 is a tiny art organisation. It is the new version of Storey Gallery. I was one of a group of Lancaster artists which started Storey Gallery in 1991, a contemporary gallery based in a grand but unused Victorian gallery in Lancaster. We ran a programme of over 100 exhibitions featuring many artists with international reputations including Andy Goldsworthy, Albert Irvin, Richard Wilson, and Linder Sterling. Over a 20 year period the structure of the organisation gradually developed from being an informal group of artists to a company limited by guarantee and registered charity. I became director.

In 2012 our funding was hit in the first Arts Council England cull, and this was exacerbated by the financial collapse and insolvency of our landlord and partner, the Storey Creative Industries Centre.

At that point we could have folded, as many other small arts organisations in the same situation up and down the country have done. However, in addition to running gallery exhibitions, we had been delivering a variety of projects in public places. I decided to try a shift of our focus to concentrate on that aspect. Two of our funders indicated potential support.

I had been aware of Freeman's Wood for many years, and knew that it was thought of and used by local people as common land. In the late 70s and early 80s, I had lived on that side of the city. More recently I had moved a few miles out of town, and often commuted by bike, along a cycle track which went by this site. One day I found a group of men installing a high spiked metal fence along its edge by the cycle path. Their responses to my questions were not helpful. The public outcry soon followed, with reports in the local press.

I was thinking about potential art projects for our revised organisation, and realised this could be it. I had been interested in landownership, and had read Kevin Cahill's book, *"Who Owns Britain"* a decade before. I began to formulate a plan and proposed it to our trustees, who rapidly gave their approval and support.

I considered artists who might be interested, and who had a suitable track record.

I approached Layla Curtis, Goldin+Senneby, and Sans Façon, all artists with international reputations who we had some contact with previously. All responded and were keen to be involved.

I made funding applications to Arts Council England, Lancaster City Council, and Lancashire County Council, and succeeded in obtaining their financial support.

Landed (Freeman's Wood)

This funding application process had taken about 9 months. The artists were all still keen, but as successful practitioners they were in demand, and were all working on other projects. They would not be able to start for a while.

During the application period I had been conducting research about landownership, and I continued to gather information. I learnt about Henry George and the Land Value Tax campaign. I discovered that Scotland was considering a land reform programme. I found numerous newspaper reports about the subject. During development of the project, further books on the topic were published including: *Hedge Britannia: A Curious History of a British Obsession* by Hugh Barker; *The Land Grabbers: The New Fight Over Who owns The Earth* by Fred Pearce; and *Owning the Earth: The Transforming History of Land Ownership* by Andro Linklater. It was clear that although landownership had become a hidden topic, there was widespread interest in it.

I also searched out information about the history of this particular plot of land, and was given support and guidance by a recently retired member of the history department at Lancaster University, Michael Winstanley.

I appointed two Lancaster-based artists, Helen Hicks and Rachel-Ann Powers, as 'engagement artists' to assist with the project, particularly in contacting and interviewing local people about their memories of this plot of land known as Freeman's Wood. We contacted the people who had made and supported the applications for designated footpaths and town green, and followed up a variety

of other contacts, including three academics at the Law School at Lancaster University. We talked to local people who have used this land – the dog walkers, footballers, cyclists, den-builders, nature watchers, etc. - and collected their memories of Freeman's Wood, and their wishes for its future.

We recorded interviews with over 30 individuals. Here are a few short quotes:

With a space like Freeman's Wood you can just make it up as you go along. It's a creative space for kids to do whatever their imagination tells them they can do.

We used it as our playground. We used to swing in the trees and bike-ride along the paths. We would act out the film we had seen that week. We would be Tarzan in the trees one week, sword fencing the next.

Local BMX fans had modified the footpaths in the wood to make a bike course. They had made artificial hillocks and ramps. They were wonderful, made out of pallets and tree stumps.

The fence felt like an insult.

The fence obviously deters access to Freeman's Wood, so the use of this land by members of the public diminished initially. But the fence is not continuous, including a section beside the cycle path of a few hundred metres where there is no fencing. Also, gaps were created at various points, so the fence is permeable and it is still fairly easy for people to access the land. During the development of this project to date, it has become well used by local people once more, and there are well-trodden footpaths, and clear cycle paths. Lancashire County Council has given approval in principle to the designation of the three requested footpaths across it.

Commissioned artists and the resulting artworks

StoreyG2 commissioned three sets of artists to lead an investigation of the Freeman's Wood site, to research and explore land-ownership and its social effects, and to produce new art works, which would aim to raise awareness of, and stimulate thought about, these issues.

The artists Layla Curtis, Goldin+Senneby, and Sans Façon, who each have an international profile, were selected because they produce high quality work, and their practice and approaches are appropriate for the topic.

I wanted the project to reach a large audience, so I asked the artists to produce artworks in forms suitable for distribution on the internet, rather than objects for display in a gallery.

As each artist became available, I sent them all the research information I had collected, as background to the project, and a curatorial context for the kind of artwork I hoped they would produce.

Layla Curtis was the first to begin. She is a British artist who makes artworks about maps and mapping. Extensive travel has informed her work, which explores boundaries, both physical and metaphorical. She has undertaken projects in the Antarctic and the Borneo jungle. Her early cartographic work, developed during a residency in Japan, is in the Tate collection. Layla's investigations into our sense of place utilise digital technologies and extreme sports.

Layla Curtis is based in London, but visited Freeman's Wood several times. She found herself being drawn back to it, saying it would have been a wonderful place to play as a child. We talked a lot about the fence and its symbolic significance, and its effect on the experience of being in this place. It's obvious, but a fence asserts ownership, it creates an inside and an outside, although otherwise the land on both sides looks the same. The fence is an apparently randomly located linear barrier amongst the trees.

Layla Curtis decided to produce an app for i-Phone, which would highlight the role of the fence. She engaged another artist, Ron Herrema, to assist her with its technical development. First, they GPS mapped the fence.

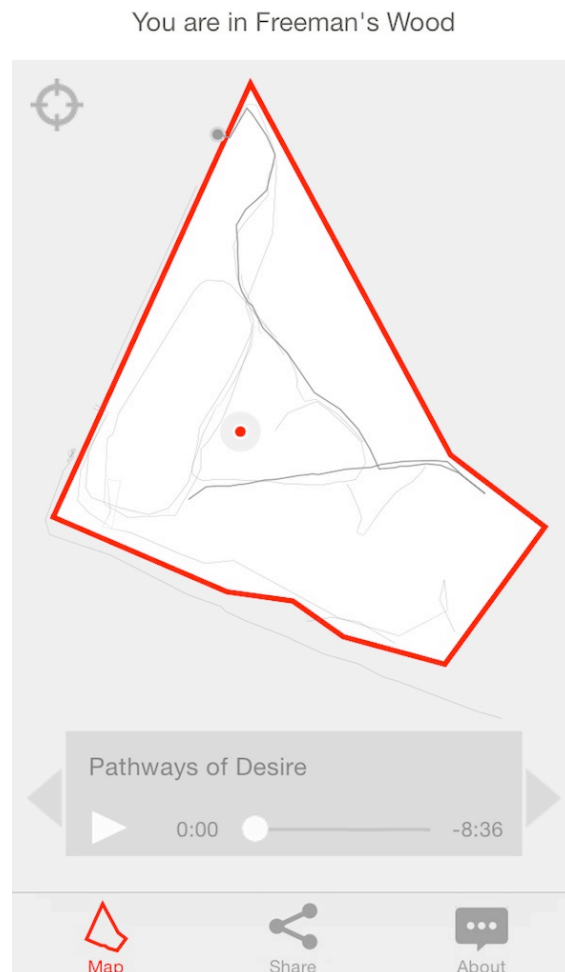
Following our preparatory work, the artist then recorded conversations with local people about their personal memories of this site and their speculations on its future. She also included two academics from the Law School at Lancaster University. In these interviews, the members of the local community gave their responses to the landowner's recent erection of the metal fence, along with accounts of how this, and the accompanying 'Keep Out, No Trespassing' signs, have affected the way the space is now used and accessed.

The resulting audio tracks are compilations of these conversations. Memories and accounts of how this land been used as a recreational space over recent decades are intertwined with discussions of wider issues of land ownership, trespass, territory, common land, and activism.

The conversations were conducted on site, and the recorded sound tracks are GPS mapped, so users of the app can listen to the recordings while walking in the place where they were recorded and to which they refer, and can follow their own movements on a map.

Conversations were recorded both outside and inside the area enclosed by the fence. The conversations on three of the thirteen audio tracks were recorded

outside the boundary and are available to listeners anywhere in the world. However, to access those tracks which were recorded inside the boundary fence, the listener must cross into Freeman's Wood itself.



The app is entitled 'TRESPASS'. It tells the story of Freeman's Wood from the perspective of people who have used it. This app forms a lasting document of the local community's long relationship with this piece of land. Even if the land is developed in the future, and is changed beyond all current recognition, this app will continue to map these stories onto it indefinitely.

Apple were initially reluctant to approve the app. They suggested that we were encouraging criminal activity, but we pointed out that trespass is not criminal in

the UK. They then said that we were inciting reckless behavior in encouraging people to go onto private land, but we told them that the County Council had given approval in principle for three designated public footpaths across the site. After further negotiation and explanation, we were pleased that Apple approved the app for distribution via their store.

Goldin+Senneby are a pair of artists based in Stockholm. Their work addresses bureaucratic and financial systems. Their projects create a complex structure in which multiple voices of actors and agents are presented, but the artists are absent, reflecting the public absence of the wielders, manipulators, and systems of social and economic power. I felt there was an appropriate similarity in their mode of operation to that of absentee landlords.

I first came across them through a small book documenting part of their ongoing project 'Headless'. They had commissioned a novelist to go to the Bahamas to investigate an offshore company called Headless, and to write about it. They commissioned the writer by email, without ever meeting. I'm not sure if this company exists. In their work it is not always clear what is real and what is not.

Initially I did not know their first names, emails were signed simply and mysteriously, G+S. I was surprised, but pleased, when they proposed a visit.

On their visit to the site we discussed the "For Sale" signs on a plot of adjoining land, between Freeman's Wood and the river Lune. I had enquired about these plots earlier, and discovered that the going rate for farmland in the area was about £8-10,000 per acre. So unfortunately they were well beyond our budget.

Undeterred, G+S decided that buying a plot of land was to be a core component of their project. They said “We need to become complicit in what we are investigating.”

G+S investigated websites such as “PerfectPlot” and “EnglishLandAgency”. My preference was for a plot of land near Lancaster, but the ones we found were too expensive, so we gradually spread the search more widely.

We soon found that there are numerous tiny plots of land for sale, where one large plot has been divided up into many small ones. It is not clear what these could be used for, as they are so small and fairly inaccessible. It appears to be a way of making more money for the seller. For example, I became interested in a set of small plots in West Yorkshire. It’s not close, but at least it is in our region, and it had plots within our budget. I found that it was a piece of fairly remote moorland, which was divided up into tiny rectangular plots for sale. A very strange site to sell off in such small plots.

Eventually, for pragmatic reasons of their own, they decided on a plot in Kent, whose previous owner was living (or at least registered) in Bahrain, and made a downpayment.



Goldin+Senneby have used this plot of land as a stage from which to present ideas about landownership. Their piece, entitled “A3 - A PLOT”, presents an estate agent’s ‘For Sale’ details for this small plot of land in Kent, in the south of England. These sale particulars feature a photograph of the plot, and directions to it from London, plus a conversation between two people on the site. This conversation is a prologue for a play script, to which there is an on-line link as a PDF document. G+S commissioned this script from playwright, Pamela Carter. The script, about the imagined history of the plot of land, explores various aspects of landownership and its history in England. This play script forms the apparent estate agent’s sale description of the plot of land.

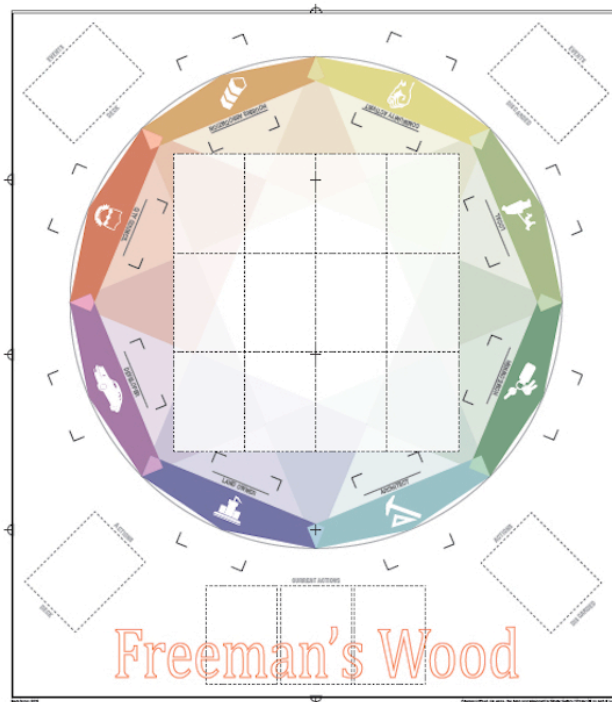
Sans Façon is a collaborative art practice between French architect Charles Blanc and British artist Tristan Surtees. They are based in the UK, and undertake a wide variety of projects internationally, both short and long term, working on a large number simultaneously. Their work predominantly explores

the complex relationship between people and place. They state that “We like to see the role of the artist and art as a catalyst in a process of raising questions and inviting one to look and think differently about a place, hoping to create an opportunity rather than an inanimate object.” I had met them several years ago, and engaged them to give a talk about their work, as one in a series of talks which we organised about the variety of roles which artists currently take on.

Sans Façon have been working on a longterm project entitled WATERSHED+, a public art program in the city of Calgary, in Canada. It is hosted by the Utilities and Environment Protections department, similar perhaps to a utilities company in the UK. The guiding motive is to embed artists and their creative process within the department’s core activities, in order to build an emotional connection between local people and the Calgary watershed. A rather innovative and remarkable project.

Tristan first visited Freeman’s Wood alone, and later Charles and Tristan visited together. They were smartly dressed, and I noticed that they were both wearing city shoes, so were slithering around a bit on the muddy paths. A passing dog-walker asked if they were estate agents, much to their dismay, but also amusement.

A few weeks later they proposed to create a board game about landownership. Over the next few months their ideas gradually evolved and they sent a series of developmental stages.



“FREEMAN'S WOOD – THE GAME” involves verbal negotiation between the players. It is intended to encourage the players to consider the points of view of the various stakeholders with an interest in a plot of land. Individual players take on the role of a designated stakeholder, such as 'Developer', 'City Council', or 'Community Activist', and they have to inhabit the point of view and interests of this stakeholder, even if they do not personally share those views. ‘Event’ and ‘Action’ cards are presented which feature a wide variety of potential events and actions which might occur, from discovery of archaeological remains, to changes in the composition of the local council. Players are required to react to these events, and to discuss their potential effects. Each player role-plays their allocated stakeholder and tries to influence other players, and gain their support for their favored response. A player may seek influence through discussion, by bartering influence chips, and by buying votes. It is a game of strategy, influence, and compromise.

This game for 3-8 players is available for download from the StoreyG2 website. The board, all the cards, and full instructions can be printed out on A4 sheets

with a standard domestic colour printer. The board is easily assembled and the cards cut out.

The game is still in a testing or Beta phase, and the artists are keen to receive feedback from players. We know it will take a few iterations before it works satisfactorily. I have played it several times, and found that all players have had difficulty in understanding some of the rules, and some of the action cards. However, it is always successful and effective in achieving its primary aim - to get people thinking and talking about landownership and related issues. Players are particularly amused by having to speak from political positions different to their own.

Further Development

The Media Innovation Studio in the School of Journalism and Media at University of Central Lancashire are currently developing a civic drone centre. Academic staff there have enabled us to obtain aerial photography of Freeman's Wood. Video clips will be on line, and incorporated in a short film, to provide an understanding of the site, particularly for people in another part of the world who have not visited and might never do so.

Although the Trespass app is currently only for i-Phone, we hope to also produce an Android version. So far, the "A3 - A Plot" playscript is intended simply to be read, but we will consider potential for its live presentation. We will investigate the possibility of developing the Freeman's Wood game into an on-line format.

Conclusion

The aim of StoreyG2 is to stimulate thought. Our aim for this project, and the artworks produced, is to raise awareness and discussion of land-ownership and its effect on people's lives, both locally and around the world. We believe that a key role of art is to imagine how things could be different, and to communicate with a wide audience. The art works produced in this project are apparently effective in achieving that aim. They provide an example of how artists can contribute to the understanding and dissemination of ideas around complex social and political issues, and that art may be able to shift perceptions and discourses.

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