



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

### Touching the untouchable

**Duration:** 0:03:48

START AUDIO

(Music)

**Respondent:** We came up with this project because it met a research need.

Touching the untouchable is exactly what it says. There are lots of objects in museums that it is impossible for people to touch and to engage with in that way because they would damage them, and that's particularly true of all of the soft stuff; the perishable material culture, and although it's rare, it's amongst the most challenging to present, but it's also humanly engaging.

If you're talking about textiles, what is more natural than to touch a textile and to understand it as a fabric?

And so we decided to focus on that as an example of how to engage the sense of touch in the presentation of objects from the past using what is out there at the moment, of IT possibilities and some exciting developments in tactile arrays at the end of a computer.

**Interviewer:** You talked about the exciting possibilities but you also said there were scary implications for this. Could you just tell us a little bit more about the scary, why, what's scary about it, and...?

**Respondent:** Well one of the things that I thought came across most strongly when we did the workshops, was that some of the technology that exists, could mean that people have on their home computers, in the not too distant future, haptic devices, or mice/mouse that lends itself to that sort of ability and that could mean that you could reach people in their own homes, but I am aware of the fact that with everybody needing to justify their funding sources, people also want to get the credit for having put that information out and for doing the research, and to be able to say "Look, we've got these visitors to a website." or "These

visitors to a museum.” It’s an important part of people being able to justify the use of public funds.

Interviewer: You talked about the collaborations, AHRC and EPSRC, how did that work, was it always a happy collaboration? Tell us about how discipline’s going to mesh.

Respondent: It was a happy collaboration, but we really did have to learn new language terms, and I found some of it was a real surprise to me. I had not realised just how far advanced some of the tactile sensation devices were.

I also didn’t understand the language that went with them and I did gain an appreciation of just how much software development, as well as hardware development, would be needed to play a role in putting out what I wanted to do from an end user point of view.

AHRC and EPSRC together funded the science and heritage programme of which our cluster is just one part, and I have to say without that, we couldn’t have brought that particular group together.

They’re probably a network initially of people who thought that there might be something interesting in collaboration, but that expanded enormously by having the website; by drawing people in from many different spheres that we have no connection with before the project started, and so it was a snowballing effect, and that is what the two workshops and the website that the AHRC, EPSRC funding allowed us to do, has really made a big difference in terms of what we can achieve and also it’s only a year, but in a year I feel like we’ve made a big stride forward.

That’s a good use of those funds.

(Music)

END AUDIO