

Behind the Research: Shelby Navone



Communications
Departmental Account

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Postgraduate Researcher Shelby Navone talks through her PhD research on how to make digital culture experiences accessible for autistic and neurodivergent adults.

"It is estimated that around 1 in 7 people (more than 15% of people in the UK) are neurodivergent, meaning that the brain functions, learns and processes information differently," - [\(source\)](#).

Thank you for speaking with us today. What is your role?

I'm a Postgraduate Researcher in Museum Studies and Fellow of the Institute for Digital Culture at the University. I'm in the third year of my PhD at Leicester.

How did you get into what you do?

I have a mixed background between museums, archaeology, education, and the technology



Shelby Navone, Postgraduate Researcher

sector. While working through my Bachelors in archaeology part-time at Portland State University, I worked for Apple as a mobile technician and Creative. My role at Apple had me teaching both digital art and accessibility classes to the public. Afterwards I completed a Masters at Durham University in Museum and Artefact Studies, but the COVID-19 pandemic was in full swing upon my graduation and museums had shut their doors and stopped hiring. So I moved to Seoul, South Korea to work as a professional Arts and Humanities Teacher in an international academy, integrating art and archaeological practice into my curriculum. My current PhD project was advertised towards the end of my contract in Korea and perfectly combined my experience and interests in museums/heritage, technology and accessibility, and was an avenue for me to return to academia and museum work in the UK after the pandemic.

Tell us about the inspiring work you do in layperson's terms.

I'm doing PhD research on how to make digital culture experiences accessible for autistic and neurodivergent adults. I work with autistic adults to test existing digital culture experiences in virtual reality (VR) environments, augmented reality experiences, and museums where technology is used alongside real artefacts. I've worked with a focus group of autistic adults to develop and refine my entire research process, methods, and fieldwork materials to tailor them to autistic and neurodivergent needs. Participants are treated as co-collaborators, paid more than is typical for a research study, and provided multiple methods for delivering feedback.

I've worked with the Natural History Museum in London, the Jewry Wall Museum, and MBD as providers of the digital culture experiences. This work has had access and inclusion at its core at all stages and is working to develop a new framework for designing neuroinclusive digital culture experiences.

Why was this a chosen area of focus for you?

It's always been important to me that my work benefits humanity in some way and this PhD project very much feels like I'm doing that. The focus on improving the accessibility of digital culture experiences for autistic people allows me to both continue engaging with the museums and heritage sector while also working directly for and with a marginalised group of people to make these places and experiences that I love more neuroinclusive. When I taught accessibility workshops at Apple I directly saw how technology could benefit disabled and neurodivergent people and so I wanted to continue with this thread of technology as an experience enhancer and accessibility facilitator for museum and heritage settings.

What impact on society does your work have now?

The immediate impact of my work can be seen in the influence it has had on the autistic participants of the study and the steps forward that have been made towards repairing the larger relationship between researchers and disabled participants. There is a power imbalance between researchers and participants, as well as a 'legacy of harm' that exists in the history of research involving

disabled people, who have often suffered from the proliferation of harmful biases. Therefore, anti-ableism principles guided my actions, and I considered it crucial that I conduct myself with high levels of care, patience and understanding towards participants. I strove for open, deliberate and clear communication throughout all stages of participation, which for many, helped them feel more relaxed during the study experience and able to enjoy it.

The range and quantity of positive feedback I've received on my research conduct has highlighted the importance and value that tailoring care, showing consideration, and acting with kindness as a researcher has to the quality of a participant's experience and their sense of being valued. Centring these tenants of conduct also shaped the quality of data gathered and potentially the willingness of a person to participate in future research studies.

How can it help in the future?

The results of this research will form new frameworks for designing neuroinclusive digital culture experiences and for conducting inclusive user/visor research in the museum and digital experience sectors. Due to testing across multiple digital technologies and formats including VR, augmented reality (AR) and mixed reality (MR), and with a large pool of participants, the design tenants and principles aim to be widely applicable and strive towards universal design.

Were there any challenges with the research?

Working collaboratively was a challenge whenever I finished putting something together and thought I'd made it really accessible, but

then the focus group would send it back saying it essentially needed to be completely overhauled. That was hard to hear at times when I wanted to move forward with things or thought it would be accessible enough, but ultimately, it's about making something the best it can be for the intended audience. I had to let go of my own ego and timeline at times, and allow for things to change based on feedback from focus group participants.

Also, the volume of work in developing fieldwork materials and the coordination of so many participants was definitely a challenge. I had to push myself sometimes to work very early or very late in the day to accommodate for different schedules and provide more access to participation.

Why is this such an important area to improve things?

Current digital culture programming and autism research often overlooks the experience and enjoyment of autistic adults, and are made without autistic people's input. When programming is designed with neurodiversity or autism in mind, it typically predominantly offers a reduced experience, centres learning or behavioural modification goals, and is geared towards children. This research identifies and challenges prevailing neurotypical assumptions made when designing digital for the culture sector and focuses on the autistic adult's experience. It aims to impact and reposition digital culture programming to centre neurodivergent enjoyment and neuroinclusivity by developing frameworks to do so.

Any next steps for you?

The first thing is finishing writing up the PhD! But afterwards I want to continue building and expanding on this work and have what I've learned and developed to be used by the museums and heritage sector and/or digital experience design companies. That might be through a post-doc position somewhere, a KTP or collaboration with a digital culture design company or developer who would be interested in developing a digital experience based on the neuroinclusive frameworks I'm creating, and likely freelance consulting work. If anyone is interested in my work, please do get in touch.

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