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# Let's walk! Worcestershire: how process drama and mobile technologies create pathways for learning disabled, autistic and neurodiverse walkers

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## ABSTRACT

*Let's Walk! Worcestershire* (2023–), creates therapeutic and interactive walks designed by learning disabled and/or autistic individuals. This collaborative project between The Monday Night Group and C&T directly addresses barriers like anxiety, independent travel, health and safety, and sensory challenges. Rather than measuring strict outcomes, the article foregrounds process, drawing on interviews with the key team. It situates *LWW* within participant-led design, exploring how Open Space events and 'light-touch' facilitation shaped these walks. A central analysis point is 'dual positioning,' whereby walkers alternate between guided and autonomous modes, fostering accessibility, confidence, and co-authorship in shared walking.

## Starting a walking group

This article discusses the project *Let's Walk! Worcestershire (LWW)* (2023–), which is part of a three-year collaboration between two UK, Worcester-based charities; The Monday Night Club (MNC) and applied theatre and digital technology company Collar & Tie (C&T). Both authors are members of C&T with one being a key player in the development of *LWW*.

*LWW* consists of a series of app-guided sound walks that have been designed with and for learning disabled and/or autistic young adults and were released in the Summer of 2024. As a new initiative, there is limited evaluative data available, so the focus here is not on impact but on process. Therefore, this research's methodology is informed by interviews with senior members of The MNC, facilitator Gaby Songui who designed the walks with them, and C&T's Artistic Director's own experiences of developing the overall project.

Before getting to the process of developing the walks, we believe it is important to begin with an outline of the background and ethos of the collaborating organisations. This is to evidence the paucity for the *LWW* project as well as recognising how its development centres on a longstanding partnership between both The MNC and C&T. This article then discusses how an Open Space event sparked the creation of the walks for

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*LWW*. Central to this development was the participant-led ethos of The MNC, supported by C&T's 'light-touch' facilitation approach that enabled members to shape the walks according to their own interests and needs without disrupting the existing dynamics of members of The MNC.

In the second half of the article, we explore the concept of 'dual positioning' in relation to sound walks, which concerns the challenge of walkers who move between being wayfinders, who forge their own paths, and passengers, who follow a guided route (Pine, Casserly, and Lane 2020). This framing is particularly relevant when considering how to reduce barriers for learning disabled and/or autistic people to support greater independence and confidence in their walking. By offering varying levels of guidance and flexibility, the project seeks to enable individuals to gradually transition toward greater autonomy, potentially moving from relying on route-marked maps and digital prompts to navigating walks independently. As will be discussed later, this is with a view that as they become more confident and motivated, the walkers will feel they are making routes as much as following them. At the heart of this approach is a commitment to transparency, inclusion, and co-authorship; a recognition that walking together, both literally and figuratively, is central to the process.

From its roots in schools-based Theatre-in-Education (TIE), C&T has developed a broader paradigm of practice that embraces the potential of digital technology. There were multiple motivations behind this shift, but one of them was an increasing interest in the auto-ethnographic potential of participatory drama in line with Norman K. Denzin's (2003) theorisation of Performance Ethnography, thereby leading C&T to explore new ways of deploying performance to digitally encode different communities and people's lives, values and perspectives. This outward looking process, taking us beyond formal education, led C&T into brokering a new partnership with Worcester's The MNC.

The MNC was founded by Laura Gill in 2011 as a means for young adults with learning disabilities and/or autism to socialise in a safe space (pers. comm., August 1 2024). Gill, who has a learning disability and autism herself, began by teaching herself to DJ and created her own night club, which would grow in popularity and ambition to include sports teams, trips, and a community kitchen. It was their annual talent shows and dance competitions, hosted at local arts venues such as the Swan Theatre and Royal Porcelain Works that led to them working with C&T. Their first formal collaboration was with C&T's Assistant Director Max Dean, creating a film of their annual talent show, which was later shown at the Shaw Theatre in London and featured live performance from members of The MNC (pers. comm., August 1 2024).

Such a partnership was not accidental, as C&T's work with children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), dates to its inception as a TIE company. This later evolved into collaborative projects with adults with learning disabilities, working alongside Worcester Arts Workshop and director Richard Hayhow, who later established Open Theatre Company, that specialises in this work to this day. More recently this work was evidenced by the *Time To Be Seen Project* (2022), working with Fort Royal Community School in Worcester, which provides SEND education for 4–11 year olds in the city and beyond. This project involved combining Process Drama activities through bespoke created digital resources designed to animate the school curriculum in new and playful ways, moving learning outside of the confines of the school buildings, out onto local streets and into the community.

## Taking control

In 2023, The MNC and C&T successfully secured National Lottery Community Fund support for a joint project called *Taking Control*. The project's principal aim 'is to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities and autistic people in Worcestershire,' by enabling them to be more independent through digital technology (The Monday Night Club 2023). *LWW* is the first iteration of this project and was born out of The MNC's founding of a walking group during the COVID-19 pandemic. As its CEO Helen Gill (pers. comm., August 1 2024) recounts:

As soon as we were allowed, we started a walking group. First of all, autistic people were allowed to go for a walk with two people. Ooh we made a thing of that: three people can go walking together! We did that a lot. And then you were allowed to walk in groups of six and we often walked along that riverside walk. And we'd meet on a Monday night and then everybody would divide into groups of six outdoors and go along in their groups of six.

In order to further heighten the interest in these group walks, a photo competition was created by The MNC to encourage members to seek out areas of interest to document them for others (Helen Gill, pers. comm., August 1 2024). From these walks, MNC staff observed that members were using them as a stimulus for telling stories about the landscape or for finding more about the history of Worcester (Helen Gill, pers. comm., August 1 2024). These activities generated by the group would later inform the designing of the walks with C&T.

From the outset, The MNC highlighted several barriers that prevent young adults with learning disabilities and/or autism from going out on a walk:

- travelling independently
- lack of support
- understanding health and safety
- sensory challenges
- anxiety about new experiences (The Monday Night Club 2023)

Helen Gill highlights how the inducement to leave the house and take a walk in itself can be very challenging for young adults with learning disabilities (pers. comm., August 1 2024). Additionally, some may struggle with following maps unless it is a route they know well enough already. For example, visually impaired walkers can benefit from using smartphone apps such as *Lazarillo*, which provides increased access for individuals through turn-by-turn spoken audio guidance. However, no equivalent platform exists for neurodivergent people, not least because of the diversity of conditions and needs of potential users. Whereas many accessibility tools strive for standardisation of services, for learning disabled people, more often the approach needs to be based on personalisation of solutions. This is one of the reasons why a number of the *LWW* walks follow routes familiar with members of The MNC to minimise their anxiety. Gill also discusses how the different degrees of support and engagement from care workers can also determine the degree to which members of The MNC would engage with walking (Helen Gill, pers. comm., August 1 2024). *LWW* is therefore designed to act as something of a proxy for care workers who perhaps may struggle or not be inclined to make a walk engaging for their user. Yet crucially, it was also conceived to not just be experienced once as a single event but to

encourage re-walking. Given that part of the remit of *Taking Control* is to encourage healthy living among individuals with learning disabilities and autistic people, having a walk that becomes a routine where exercise occurs almost incidentally was important. This echoes gamified exercise apps such as *Zombies Run!* (2012) or *Fitness RPG* (2018), which emphasises the listener's performance as an actor/audience rather than an athlete.

For *LWW*, the paradigm was to create a series of what C&T describe as 'smartscripts' hosted by the company's online platform Prospero.Digital. A smartscript is a digitally formatted series of automated participatory activities and media content that form an interactive drama experience that is accessible to anyone with an internet-enabled digital device (typically a computer, tablet or smartphone). Prospero.Digital enables users of the platform to create their own smartscripts and share them with audiences at scale. Smartscripts comprise a series of what are called 'scenes,' each flowing into the next, and each containing media content with overlaid tasks and activities. These are triggered through a range of physical and digital interactions by the user. These can take various forms: participatory drama workshops, interactive narratives, video games, or, as in this case, interactive walks. For *LWW* each of these walking smartscripts were sited in a particular location, forming a sequence of interactive tasks, activities and descriptive narratives. These corresponded to the flow of a walk, each having a clear beginning, middle and end. However, each walk would have more than three scenes, each acting as a signpost, either indicating something to observe in the landscape or a practical task to undertake at that location. With the exception of one type of walk, once activated, participants could choose not to look at their devices when walking, as each beat of the performance text is triggered simply by them walking within range of a specific GPS coordinate. These 'signposts' largely took the form of audio recordings, but were also accompanied by associated images or maps to indicate location or the route. Further audio would issue instructions and directions for participants.

The decision to make *LWW* a series of interactive sound walks was born out of a desire to recognise how headphones can modulate and minimise sensory overload among some neurodiverse individuals. In the case of autistic individuals, decreased sound tolerance means that loud, sudden and high-pitched sounds can cause a lot of distress (Scheerer et al. 2022). This is also one of the reasons why the project favoured rural or semi-rural spaces for its walks, in which there was less risk of distressing sounds occurring.

## Open space

The project began with an Open Space event in Spring 2023 at the Royal Porcelain Works in Worcester and had a single question: 'How do we make the Worcestershire Countryside more accessible to people with learning disabilities and autistic people?' (The Monday Night Club 2023). Open Space events are a form of 'unconferencing' that have grown in popularity in the arts sector in the UK, largely since the instigation of Improbable Theatre's 'Devoted and Disgruntled' events for theatre makers which took hold in the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the format involves a range of rules and conventions, Phelim McDermott described the system as largely an act of improvisation between participants (pers. comm., April 7 2010). In this sense, the format was well suited to The MNC, requiring spontaneous dialogue and conversation. Additionally, C&T and The MNC staff and volunteers regularly informally adopted hallmarks of Heathcote's Mantle of The Expert model,

prompting response and exchanges in ways teachers might in a Process Drama. For example, Heathcote's conceptualisation of a Frame ('all events are framed according to the window that you look at them from' Heathcote 1991) was regularly, if loosely deployed to help The MNC members imagine themselves as Guides or Map Makers, informing how they thought about their wider responsibilities to others who might engage with the completed walking routes. To facilitate this mindset, the three-year *Taking Control* project more broadly draws on Heathcote's Commission Model of Process Drama, positively framing participants as gatekeepers with responsibilities to the wider learning disabled community, involving both the design of the project and its goals in the creation of interactive walks.

The Open Space event was widely publicised across the county, looking for input from relatives and carers of neurodiverse people and people experienced in providing support to people with learning disabilities and/or autism (The Monday Night Club 2023). In this event, the above challenges were discussed, the resources required and what would be useful content for the walks themselves. In the next stage, arts facilitator Gaby Songui was brought in to develop the walks with members of The MNC. Songui has experience working both with learning disabled participants but also in creating work that engages with place and utilises locative technologies. They had previously created *Faraway* (2022), as part of a commission from C&T, which is an 'interactive, multimedia fantasy adventure story looking at the topic of intersectionality' located in a fictional land hidden between Worcester and Birmingham (Songui 2024). This approach chimed with the *Taking Control* project's ambition to give visibility and voice to often marginalised members of Worcester's learning disabled community. Songui decided on a 'light-touch consultation,' which involved them attending club gatherings and walking around the space, engaging in conversation with members (pers. comm., August 15 2024). Inevitably this approach embraced the wider MNC community: carers, volunteers and family members. The group attracts fierce loyalty from this wider network and across Worcester, where its inclusive approach and strong public visibility has enabled it to build alliances and partnerships that enhance its work in many areas. For example, a friend of an MNC member who also worked as a mindfulness practitioner offered guidance on the design of the walks, whilst another 'friend' offered to design publicity and marketing materials. For Songui, this approach enabled them to access as many of the club members and supporters as possible in a way that they felt comfortable talking, asking questions about their favourite artforms and the kinds of walks they do or are interested in doing.

The conversations with The MNC led to Songui developing a series of interactive sound walks, featuring her own voice as well as interviews with members of the club. Songui then walked in the locations that The MNC were familiar with and used these to determine the script for the audio. Three locations were determined (The River Severn in Worcester City, Droitwich Spa Lido Park and the Malvern Hills) with each having two walking routes (Short and Long) to appeal to different levels of motivation and time availability. They also all began in places that were easy to get to by public transport and where participants would only need to walk a few metres before finding themselves within a rural environment. The walks were then divided into four types: Mindfulness, Nature, Historical and Adventure.

The 'Mindfulness' walks were driven by one of the aforementioned friends of The MNC who is a mindfulness coach. Songui brought them into the devising process as a

consultant and utilised their voice within these walks. They observe that The MNC 'have a big positive mantra' and 'growth mindset' with a marked emphasis on mindfulness and self-care in all they do (pers. comm., August 15 2024). The subsequent walks were designed to foster relaxation through 'meditations, sensory exercises and cloud spotting' (The Monday Night Club 2023), recognising walking's ability to provide a 'background rhythm against which we are able to clear our minds' (Curry 2000, 6).

The 'Nature' walks were an obvious inclusion for Songui because this became a popular focus for The MNC from the walks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Written and recorded by Songui, they include exercises for walkers to photograph or draw their surroundings, encouraging them to focus on the micro and macro within the landscape. For instance, during the walk in Worcester, attention is directed to the River Severn that flows through the city, emphasising the vast journey this huge body of water traverses, before some moments later changing attention to a single patch of flowers in someone's garden. The 'Historical' walks similarly oscillate between the micro and the macro temporally as well as spatially, in which the lived history of MNC members is heard through recordings of their voices as part of the larger history of the landscape.

Like *Faraway*, the 'Adventure' walks are 'choose your own adventure' stories, in which the participants will hear different audio depending on which option they select on their mobile device. At key points in the walk, rather than the next content being triggered by GPS coordinates, the walker was directly given a degree of agency over the flow of activities and content. This was made possible by simple choice menus, allowing the participant to choose either option 'A' or 'B.' These choices tried to operate productively within needs and circumstances of its neurodiverse and disabled audiences (e.g. not an over reliance on written text) whilst at the same time giving the participant a sense of autonomy and even jeopardy within the narrative flow, which was intentionally more playful than with the other guides. Although a fictional site-generic story, the themes of this type of walk were again informed by Songui's observations of The MNC (pers. comm., August 15 2024):

I was trying to write a story that people any age could access. And relationships are a huge thing. You go to Monday Night Club; you hear every single little bit of drama from the participants; so, I was like I feel like relationships is such a big topic that I wanted to write a story that looked at relationships within the script.

By designing it with the participants, members of The MNC are encouraged to be both guides and guided within the space and to share it with others. The large group discussion in the Open Space Event paired with the lighter touch dialogue with members of The MNC were invaluable in generating material that would hopefully encourage learning disabled, autistic and neurodiverse adults to be able to and to want to go for a walk.

## Dual positioning

For *LWW*, it was crucial to recognise and sidestep the trappings of some audio walks which adopt a tour guide model and provide an overly prescriptive and efficient route to follow. Angharad Saunders and Kate Moles (2016) argue such walks have the risk of flattening a place and feel more like 'modes of transport' (69). In designing *LWW* it was important that the benefits of a routine walk did not just motivate participants to leave

their homes and walk but also that the walks themselves could offer opportunities for them to walk independently within the audio walk itself. In their candid account of their experiences of participating in an outward-bound centre as an autistic woman, Nicolina Newcome acknowledges the importance of improving their 'adaptive abilities and overall wellbeing,' stating that 'I do not want my autistic tendency towards sameness to curtail my freedom' (Newcombe and Good 2025). It is hoped that for *LWW*, that the walks themselves are not curtailing the freedoms of the walkers and that they feel able to step away from the 'beaten track'.

Dana Papachristou's (2022) definition of a sound walk as one that is underpinned by a 'score' speaks to this balance of dependence and independence that needed to be fine-tuned in *LWW* (32). This score may take the form of a map, but could also be a series of signposts within the environment to guide the listener. Along the route the walker will be asked to direct their attention to or interact with specific parts of their environment. What is particularly attractive about this conception of the sound walk is that it presents a compromise between the polished route-following of a tour and the daunting prospect of plotting one's own route to a location some distance away. Consequently, this model was selected for the *LWW* walks, providing assurance in the form of a map for participants to follow on their phones as well as a printable, annotated version. However, in a bid to encourage independence, the map on their phones features a series of stopping points with no line connecting them. This means that the walker has knowledge as to where the next stopping point is but can select for themselves from which direction they choose to reach it. The absence of any time sensitive instructions means that they can take their time in their walk and perhaps feel encouraged to seek out alternative routes to their next checkpoint. The gaps between checkpoints echo Marie Laure-Ryan's 'principle of minimal departure' (Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu 2016, 20), in which the walker can synthesise for themselves the world established within the audio with that of the environment they are walking through. This 'urges readers to build their mental representations of fictional worlds on the basis of their life experience and knowledge of the world,' in which gaps in understanding of a text are bridged without contradicting the original text (Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu 2016, 20). With the ability to connect the checkpoints themselves, the *LWW* walks were designed to encourage participants to minimally depart from their usual routes. Saunders and Moles refer to their own destabilisation of the tour guide walk as one that encourages an assembling of place by the listener (2016, 79). This suggests that although the score remains fixed, participants are as much making a route as following one. Emily Pine, Maeve Casserly and Tom Lane (2020) trouble this binary by instead discussing the merits of 'dual positioning' for the listener who can 'be both outside and inside' (25), or who can flit between being a passenger and a wayfarer. This dual positioning is particularly useful when considering the *LWW* walks because it reflects the challenges of providing something constant and familiar to its users whilst also encouraging independence and autonomy.

Both the above studies reference Misha Myers (2010) 'percipient' as being a relevant term to be applied to such a walker, who 'directs the process as they go along perceiving the encompassing environment from their bodily encounter within it; while doing so they are making place' (67). There is something echoic here of Eric Olund's (2024) recent writing on neurodivergent spatialities, in which the constant act of making that Myers speaks of, relates to neurodivergence as something that 'becomes in and through space'.

The sensory, cognitive and other bodily differences that neurodivergent people experience do not just happen; they take place. In its literal sense, taking place is neurotypical society's problem with neurodivergence to begin with. (Olund 2024)

Essentially, *LWW* was about enabling its participants to engage in an act of taking their own place. Olund's (2024) critique of Jeff Malpas' space-as-container model reveals a need to 'find alternative ways of accommodating the need to move on neurodivergent people's own terms, without relying upon [...] technologies of control'. In *LWW*, there has been a considerable effort given to ensuring that the users of the audio walk were given the opportunity to move on their own terms, with the performance text designed to facilitate this.

In front of you is a weeping willow. You can tell it's a weeping willow by the long, narrow leaves on the long green-yellow stems that dangle down from the tree. They can grow to around 15 m, and the trunk has silver-brown cracked bark. Some weeping willows have spiralling branches and curled leaves [...] Why don't you have a go doing a sketch of the weeping willow? If you would like to sit down and do it, there is a good spot to sit on the wall. Once you're done, keep walking towards the bridge. (C&T and The Monday Night Club 2024)

The above extract is from the Worcester Nature Walk, which starts in the city centre and follows the River Severn out into the countryside. It begins with factual information similar to that found in the tourist walks mentioned earlier but softens the sense of marshalling that Saunders and Moles ascribe to these types of walks (2016, 68). Users can theoretically encounter the trigger points from a variety of different directions, depending on how much they meander between them. This is further emphasised by the occasional unintentional fluctuations in the GPS technology, in which a particular audio section may trigger at different points in the vicinity of what is being described in the audio. Furthermore, the trigger points themselves are not shown on the maps, removing the sense of there being a predetermined route. The stop-and-start structure of the typical tourist walk can also be side-stepped, meaning that the user can establish their own rhythm, without feeling as if they must adhere to a singular way of walking.

This sense of dual positioning also becomes reflected in ensuring that users receive appropriate safety guidance when walking. Each walk has a set of notes explaining what participants need to bring (such as a water bottle) as well as the 'optional' addition of a map to print out which details the route and all the trigger points. In essence the walks in *LWW* provide a plurality of options for walkers to take their place. Additionally, members of The MNC had limited reading skills, so any safety notes need to be fully integrated into the audio content of the walk, rather than solely as map based or on-screen prompts, which might be easily missed. For Songui, this presented practical and aesthetic questions as to how to include this advice without disrupting the immersive narrative flow. Their relaxed, conversational tone in the recordings helped to ensure these moments of guidance felt both fresh and pertinent, without being distracting.

## Taking place

Mark Williams describes the process of practicing inclusive arts as 'an agreement to travel together' (cited in Fox and Macpherson 2015, 82). The development of *Let's Walk! Worcestershire* offers some insights not only into accessible walking practice for learning disabled

and/or autistic participants, but also into how locative media can be shaped by, and with, those whose mobility in public space is often constrained. Several key learnings emerge from this first iteration of the work.

First, the project demonstrates the value of an explicitly participant-led design ethos in locative media, where the structure, content, and pacing of experiences respond directly to the lived realities of their intended users. The combination of the Open Space process and light-touch consultation created a framework in which members of The MNC could act as co-authors, rather than as recipients of a pre-set experience. This not only fostered a sense of ownership but also ensured that the final walks addressed practical and sensory considerations that might otherwise be overlooked in some walking or tourism apps.

Second, *LWW* highlights how the concept of 'dual positioning' can serve as a useful design principle for walking experiences with neurodivergent participants. Allowing walkers to oscillate between passenger and wayfarer roles provides a scaffold for independence; offering the reassurance of structured waypoints without foreclosing opportunities for exploration, improvisation, or alternative route-making. The Heathcotian technique of the Mantle of The Expert was particularly useful in assisting members of The MNC in being able to switch between these roles; encouraging them to develop the confidence to walk more independently.

Third, the use of GPS-triggered smartscrips and multi-modal prompts points to the potential of locative media as an adaptive accessibility tool. Rather than striving for uniform accessibility features, the project embraced personalisation through multiple walk lengths, different thematic framings, and simple choice menus. This recognises that needs vary not only between participants but also for the same individual on different days. It suggests a broader applicability for designers of interactive media seeking to engage audiences with diverse cognitive and sensory profiles.

Finally, the work affirms that designing for and with neurodivergent walkers is not a matter of simply adding accessibility to an existing framework, but of rethinking the assumptions embedded in both the technology and the walking practice itself. In positioning the participants as both guides and guided, *LWW* reframes the walk not as a singular, linear journey, but as a co-created process of *taking* place; a social and spatial negotiation that continues to evolve each time a route is walked.

## Note

1. The format, developed by Harrison Owen, involves a structure where a diverse cohort of participants collectively set an agenda to discuss a common theme or challenge, described as an 'Invitation.'

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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