Research Statement

Title: People’s Garden (Digital Creative Work)
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Research Background
The People’s Garden is an interactive digital artwork aimed at inspiring greater activity in caring for the environment. The artwork was produced in a joint project between the Engage Research Lab and the Sunshine Coast Council. It shows a digital projection of a vine that only grows when someone sends a comment to its webpage or via SMS message sharing what they did for the environment that day. The comments make flowers appear and animals move across the artwork. Comments then rain down around the vine, so the public can read what their community is doing for the environment. The interactive artwork has been installed as a public exhibit at Noosa Junction, Queensland, and in galleries at Gympie and the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Research Contribution
People’s Garden was a first, using an innovative and exciting public artwork to engage and explore public opinion of environment. Environmental data was displayed as an animation rather than numbers and letters, to engage people to think about the environment, and to enable public participation and contribution to the artwork. Public contributed their own comments while they were standing in front of the artwork, and then saw their words rain down in the animation. The artwork aimed to engage participants with environmental issues with a view to encouraging pro-environmental behaviour and a pride in the local environment. The research investigated the effectiveness of environmental art in envisioning ecological concerns and compared responses from a general audience who ‘incidentally’ encountered the visualisations at the transit centre. The interactive artwork ran as a public projection for 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Research questions included the effectiveness of public art in delivering environmental messages? The audiences feelings about using public art to deliver messages? Were the renewable energies agenda acceptable? Did the format engage, educate or motivate the audience? Did the audience already have an environmental awareness? Did People’s Garden persuade towards environmental awareness? What was the audience’s response to visualising live data? Did it encourage greater interaction and receptivity than non-live data and did it encourage a greater response than data delivered in didactic ways?

Research Significance
The People’s Garden project investigated the efficacy of data visualisation for communicating environmental messages and promoting behaviour change. People’s Garden offers a playful and fun platform to investigate, through mobile technologies, audience responses to public art projections based around local environmental data. The design of the interactive artwork, its impact on eco-visualisation pedagogy and public experience and behaviour changes have been published in peer-reviewed articles.