

Community heritage interpretation games: a case study from Angaston, South Australia

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Abstract

The residents of Angaston in South Australia, have worked on interpreting their town's history since the early 1990s. Heritage walks brochures and interpretive plaques attracted, and continue to attract, steady interest from adults interested in history. An attempt to broaden the audience base to include children and 'younger people' in general, led to the development of an interpretive game designed as a choose-your-own adventure and intended for conversion to CD as a computer game. Although the town had an interpretation plan and keen local historians, the project ultimately shed its historical base and became a cartoon-like 'choose your own adventure' game which did not attract its intended market. This case study demonstrates the difficulty of achieving heritage interpretation with integrity when working within the complex dynamics of a small community. Some strategies to assist community-based interpretation projects are suggested.

Keywords: heritage trail, interpretation, community, heritage tourism

Angaston

Angaston is a small town (population around 2,000) in South Australia's Barossa Valley, one of the best-known of Australia's wine regions. Only 80 km from the state capital city, Adelaide, the Barossa is a major day trip destination. Regional tourism promotion is built around its heritage and historic character as well as its food and wine.

Angaston is less visibly affected by tourism than some other towns in the Barossa, and its rural village character and heritage are regarded as being its major appeal to visitors. The main street, Murray Street, and adjacent areas are designated as a Town Centre Historic (Conservation) Zone under *The Barossa Council Development Plan*. Other buildings in the town centre are listed on the State and National heritage registers and many are listed separately as protected as local heritage places.¹

In the late 1980s, Angaston was designated as a historic town by Tourism South Australia, and included on signposted regional tourist drives.

¹ *The Barossa Council Development Plan*, consolidated January 2004.



Figure 1 The Doddridge family's smithy operated in Angaston's main street until the 1980s. Heritage listed, it is open to visitors. Photo: L. Leader-Elliott

Representing Angaston's heritage

The first European settlers in the Barossa Valley in the 1840s were mostly immigrants from north-Eastern Germany. Most of the land in the Barossa Ranges east of the Valley was bought by wealthier English families who established large pastoral holdings. The Angas family, one of South Australia's most influential founding families, held much of the land around Angaston.

Angaston grew steadily throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a centre of fruit growing, viticulture, winemaking and pastoralism. Since the early 1990s, community groups have produced a range of materials and activities to interpret the town's heritage for visitors.

Angaston's first heritage trail was developed by a community committee for the heritage program of the 1993 Barossa Vintage Festival. The trail linked twenty two places around the central part of the town. Community members with an interest in history assembled the material for it. The places selected for inclusion were generally agreed to be representative of important themes in Angaston's history as a community, including its close connection with the Angas family, members of which played important roles in the foundation of South Australia. Most of these places were listed on the State Heritage Register and all are in the designated historic (conservation) zone. The heritage survey report together with other sources used in compiling the information for the brochure were acknowledged and further sources of information were suggested for those interested. Funding for the brochure was obtained through the South Australian Cultural Tourism Committee, funded at that time through the State government tourism and arts agencies. Local businesses Yalumba Winery and AQ Printworks assisted with sponsorship.

The outcome was a glossy brochure that met with an enthusiastic reception from both townspeople and visitors. Architectural description and social history dominated the content. The first print run of 5,000 was used up within a year. Guided walks following the trail route were held at weekends, conducted by volunteer guides from the community.

Heritage, business and tourism – the ideal

Towards the end of 1993, Angaston moved towards setting up a Main Street program². The objectives of this program, run initially through the SA Tourism Commission, were to ‘maximis[e] the opportunities of a community so it can revitalise its main street and increase the potential of business and tourism activities’³. Public meetings were held, an Angaston Main Street committee was formed, funding was obtained from the State government for the 1994/95 financial year, and a part time Coordinator was appointed. From the outset, the Angaston Main Street Program was seen as a means to ‘link heritage, business and tourism’ along the length of the main street, Murray Street.

A 1995 Tourism, Heritage and Interpretation report commissioned by the Committee recommended the development of opportunities for visitors to appreciate Angaston’s history and heritage, including identifying and interpreting places of interest in and near Murray Street.

Implementing the heritage interpretation program was the responsibility of a working group that reported back to the Main Street committee. Over the next two years, themes for interpretation were agreed upon; plaques were planned for a number of buildings in the main street; interpretive signs at six key locations were designed; the existing heritage walk brochure was reprinted, then ‘livened up’ and reprinted again. An innovative interpretive tool, the Angaston Game, was planned.

Community process – the reality

Nothing quite worked out the way the way it was intended. The heritage working group met a number of times to consider what should be included in the various activities. Their suggestions were then put to the Main Street committee, and to several public meetings. Other interested individuals made suggestions and contributions and changes were made as a consequence. For instance, interpretive plaques were initially planned for eighteen buildings identified by the consultant and the heritage working group. These buildings were all included in the existing heritage walk brochure. A later decision by the Main Street committee that the plaques would have to be paid for by sponsorship changed the basis for determining which buildings would have plaques. The Angaston Main Street Newsletter of October 1995 opened the door:

Families and shop owners, anyone with an interest or story to tell, can sponsor a plaque....This project is a beauty. It’s a way that for a little money, your family

² Sources used for Angaston include notes of public meetings; minutes of Angaston Main Street committee and subcommittee meetings; and personal papers. The author was a resident of Angaston from 1985 to 2003. She was on the town’s Main Street Committee from its beginnings in the early 1990s until 1999 and was closely involved with all of the projects described in this paper, either as a community volunteer or as a professional consultant.

³ *Main Street Newsletter* 1(1), Angaston: Angaston Main Street Committee, c.1993.

and your family history can be remembered. It's another way in which our town can enhance its special character.'⁴

This change in interpretation process had both positive and negative outcomes. Several local businesses responded to this, wrote their own texts and put the plaques on their front walls. This broadened the base of ownership of the plaques program, drew attention to buildings that were not included in the heritage walk and added some details of building use to the common pool of information. But control of content was lost and some of the buildings recommended for plaques did not get them because sponsorship was not forthcoming.

The walk brochure was 'livened up' by a public relations professional who re-did the graphics and rewrote the text. The 1844 George Fife Angas print of early Angaston on the front cover of the original was moved to the inside and a new picture of Angaston's early twentieth century lamplighter was chosen to replace it – pictures with people in them were thought more likely to appeal to a wider range of visitors. The historical introduction was shortened, subheadings were put in to break up blocks of text and building names were highlighted. Some of the original information on architectural details was replaced by social history, reflecting the incorporation of information from more local sources. The entry on the Old Police Station and Gaolhouse underwent most transformation. The original was:

Old Police Station and Gaolhouse

Angaston's old police station was built of rubble, marble and limestone in 1855 on land donated by George Fife Angas. In 1866 Angaston's first telegraph line was set up to the station. Stables, a gaol house, courtroom, magistrates' room and cells were added in 1865. Since 1961 the building has been used as a private residence.⁵

The 'livened up' text for the second version reads:

Police Station and Courthouse

George Fife Angas deplored drunken and unruly behaviour. He wrote in 1851: 'there were persons prowling amongst sheep stations and shepherds' huts in the neighbourhood, who did untold injury in making the shepherds drunk with spirits slyly introduced but no one had authority to apprehend them'.

Angas lobbied the Government for the area's first police station. He then donated the land and building materials. The complex eventually included stables, courtroom, magistrates room and cells for wrongdoers. The Old Police Station now houses Bethany Art Gallery. Nine inch baltic pine and slab slate floors are worth a look.⁶

The map was made easier to read by marking the trail route with a dotted line in addition to numbered sites and including the creek that runs through the middle of the town. Some information about modern businesses was included, together with new sections on Schulz Butcher and Angaston Cottage Industries – both important elements in the recent social history of the town as well as businesses selling local produce.

⁴ *Angaston News*, Angaston: Angaston Main Street Committee, October 1995.

⁵ Angaston Heritage Walks Committee, *A Heritage Walk of Angaston*, c.1993.

⁶ Angaston Main Street, *A Heritage Walk of Angaston Barossa Valley*, c.1995.

Visitors were encouraged to enter the buildings that were open to the public such as businesses and churches.

The outcome was a walk brochure that retained most (but not all) of the historical information of the original and linked it more strongly to the town's contemporary life. The Angaston Main Street agenda of promoting the town's businesses and its market position as a historic village was moved forward.

Neither version includes any reference to the Peramangk people who occupied the land before European settlement. Throughout the Barossa region, in fact, there is such a heavy emphasis on its colonial settlement history that Indigenous culture and heritage are rarely or barely mentioned in histories and interpretive materials.



Figure 2 Angaston's National Australia Bank building has featured in all editions of the town walk brochure and is a stopping point in the Angaston game. Photo: L. Leader-Elliott

The Angaston Game – the plan

In 1996, planning began on a game that would build on the existing heritage walking trail as a new and different type of interpretive tool that would interest families as well as the age 35 plus adults who are the main users of the heritage walk. The game was to link heritage places and businesses in and near the main street, and encourage visitors to enter main street shops. It aimed to encourage visitors and residents to look more closely at the town

The game was originally planned to have a map with two routes marked on it; two sets of cards, each with an image relating to a building or site on the town walk and a question or 'clue' that would help game players to match the picture with the place. Matching the cards with the places was the game 'quest'. A booklet with interesting stories about Angaston was to accompany the cards and map.

The heritage subcommittee spent about a year identifying places to be included on two routes for the game walk and thinking about what sorts of images might be used on the cards and what the clues might be. Site selection was based on buildings already identified as having significance for the town. Most of them were heritage listed. The committee felt that the final writing and art work needed to be done by somebody creative – they had historical interests and research skills rather than graphics, design and game writing⁷. A search was made for potential sources of funding, and it was decided that funds would be sought from the South Australian Country Arts Trust for a community cultural development grant. This was a fateful decision for the future of the interpretation game.

The Angaston Game – the reality

The Main Street application for an artist to work with members of the local community to ‘liven up’ the game was successful. Part of the requirements of this funding program was that the artist selected work with artists from the community and develop their skills in the chosen art form. The artist appointed had a particular interest in developing virtual reality games and in cartooning. The original intention was that he work with the material already gathered and develop a new game on the model the committee had worked on. He rejected this model almost immediately and began to work on a new format. This was based on the sort of framework used for developing ‘choose your own adventure’ or virtual reality games such as popular ‘quest’ computer games, where players choose a role and play out a set of scenarios that vary with the choices made by the player. There was excitement about the potential to develop something both engaging and original. It was also risky – nobody really understood what the artist had in mind or what he would want them to do. Nevertheless, there was general agreement that his recommendations be followed.

A new working group was set up and more public meetings were held. The new aims were more ambitious but less specific about target markets – they were to ‘draw tourists in and get them to stay for longer’ and ‘educate visitors in a user-friendly way about the town’. The new working group grappled with new concepts and game-speak - protagonists, heroes, villains, quests. It became very clear that fiction would dominate and that the only place for history was as fragments of story ideas around which a character or scenario could develop. There was debate in the working group over lack of concern about appropriate themes, the distortion of the town’s history and the incorporation of real historical figures within the created world of the game. Educational purpose dissolved. The historians fell away from the working group leaving the creative writers and artists to work on game development as directed by the consultant artist.

In April 1999, the emerging new game was described in a Report to Main Street Committee:

We designed the Angaston Town game as an interactive role playing game. Assuming the identity of a fictitious character from Angaston’s past, the player

⁷ The author was a member of this group, but work commitments called her away from voluntary activities for about six months, during which time the contract was let to engage the artist. She attended two meetings of the new working group, raised concerns about the new directions being taken and withdrew from the project.

involves themselves in a 'virtual reality; mystery adventure, one incorporating some interesting and sometimes spicy tales of old Angaston. Played on the 'game board' of the Main Street, the game leads the player through the town from the sites of historical interest to shops and establishments. Local products and services are clues or other crucial elements to the game play, thus advertising them to the player while further promoting the town. [It aims to] attract the eye of international tourism at the highest level.



Figure 3 The game board – Angaston's main street. Photo: L. Leader-Elliott

This sounds compatible with the original objectives. But looking at the actual product, it is apparent that there has been a significant change. The game (now called *Villagers and Villains*) is based around eight imaginary characters (protagonists), each of whom has a 'quest' or adventure. Players choose a character and a quest and then follow complex instructions. '8 Adventures 25 Options 16 Outcomes You Pick the Path!' calls the game book cover. And somewhere in the process, the adult audience for heritage was replaced by a focus on the sector of the youth market in which the cartoonist/game designer spent his working life. The format of the game itself and all the accompanying print material reflect this shift.

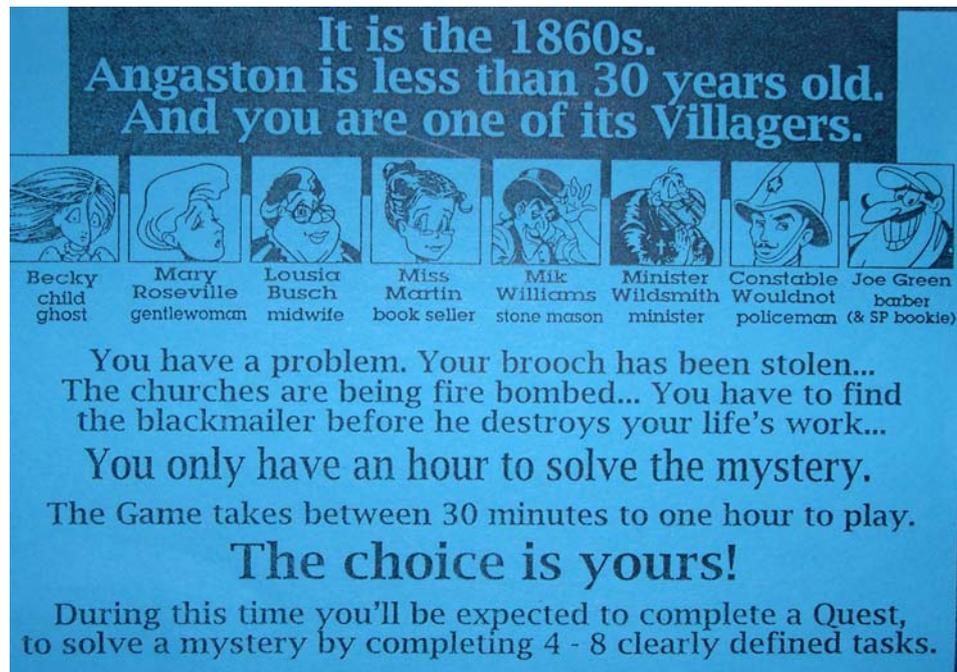


Figure 4 Extract from *Villagers and Villains* promotional flier.

The promotional flier (Figure 4) that accompanied the game's launch in October 2000 warns: 'The Game is challenging, with wrong turns at every choice, presenting players with obstacles and lies'. The style of writing, presentation and graphics appear to be designed to attract the sort of audience that might be interested in *Choose your own Adventure* books or 'quest' computer games. Characters include Mik Williams, the [fictional] stone mason, whose introduction in the game handbook includes this description 'You are the no-good Mik Williams, rogue, liar and cheat. Are you as sinister as people think, or is that all an act?... A law unto yourself you hate petty bureaucrats and rules and the Law. The damned thing was written by the rich to protect their interest after all. Well to hell with them.' Mik's quest is to rid his house of the ghost of 'the silly cow' who drowned herself 'to prove her love for you' [i.e. the character Mik].

Amongst the fictional characters in *Villagers and Villains* are real people from Angaston's history – the very respectable founding father George Fife Angas and lamplighter John Bott among them. Their character descriptions in the game book give no indication that they are different from the wholly fictional characters. The 'Johnny Bott' character illustration is decidedly sleazy. Genuine historical issues, such as the connection between poor water quality and infant mortality in the nineteenth century, are bundled up with ghost stories created for the game.

The presentation of history and heritage in this way raises serious and troubling issues.

The stories are invented. False images of Angaston's past have been created. The characters, claiming to be based on 'fair dinkum people'⁸ have at best a tenuous relationship with Angaston's history. The expressed hope that 'visitors will discover the

⁸ Angaston Main Street and Lumsden de Vries, *Villagers and Villains, the Angaston Game*, Angaston: 2000, p.2.

unique history and qualities of Angaston'⁹ by playing the game is seriously misplaced. The language is inappropriate, and does nothing to enhance sense of place or convey what is significant or valued in Angaston.

In 2000, a group of second year Flinders University Cultural Tourism students trialed the game before its formal launch. Among them were parents of young children who said it was so confusing and frustrating that they would not consider playing it with their children. One group reported that they realised that they were so focused on sorting out the game rules that they had not actually taken much notice of Angaston itself. They reported frustration at the lack of 'real' information about the town.

The game booklet and answer sheets come in a Showbag which costs \$10 to buy. The game book promotes it as 'an environmentally friendly "you beaut" stylish cloth bag ... yours to keep as a souvenir! As well as the Game Components, it's filled with vouchers and gifts and other useful bits of information¹⁰.' Discount vouchers range from 5% discount for a haircut, books or paintings to a free cup of coffee or tea with any bakery purchase or restaurant meal. The vouchers were aimed primarily at an adult audience and indicate the sub-theme of the game as it emerged – to draw visitors into the main street shops to buy. Incentives to attract the young males thought likely to be attracted to the style of the game, were not developed.

The game was launched with fanfares in the local press and was promoted as an activity for families during the 2001 and 2003 Vintage Festivals. Consumers demonstrated a marked lack of interest. By mid 2003, over three years after its appearance in the marketplace, the Angaston Game had sold about eighty units in all. No data have been kept on who bought these games, though anecdotal evidence suggests that it was mostly mothers with children about 10 and under. By mid 2004, only a couple of tattered posters remained in the windows of two little-used buildings, and the game had no other visible presence in the town.

The game as a product designed to attract a wider audience than the more traditional heritage walk, did not find a market. The usual history/heritage audience are likely to have been alienated by the style and approach and disappointed by the lack of substantial content. The young, male audience expected to respond to this sort of approach did not materialise.

Conclusion

Despite the existence of interpretive guidelines, extensive community involvement and input from local historians, the *Villagers and Villains* end product is a sorry illustration of a community heritage interpretation project gone awry.

The initial aims of interpreting aspects of Angaston's built heritage were to widen understanding of their significance within the local community and for visitors. The walks brochures and interpretive plaques did this quite successfully using limited resources in a traditional format, and retained accuracy despite shifts in content due to 'livening up' and to building owners writing their own plaques.

⁹ *Villagers and Villains* flier, 2000

¹⁰ Angaston Main Street and Lumsden de Vries op. cit.

These aims were weakened progressively by decisions to incorporate business promotion into the product development and to seek a new market with no indication that it actually existed. The major shifts took place with the appointment of an artistic consultant from outside the community who was not interested in applying the existing strategic interpretive framework or in building on the history-based work already undertaken for the Angaston Game. The dominant focus moved to developing a way of attracting a wider audience for a 'historical experience'. The artist's own interests in virtual reality games directed the progress of the project from the time of his appointment, and concerns for accurate representation of historical events and places of significance disappeared.

This Angaston case study shows the collapse of concern for representation of history or heritage in the bid for entertainment and market expansion. A genuine concern for history and cultural heritage were left behind in the eagerness to attract new audiences. *Villagers and Villains* was reconstructed as a marketing exercise by people with no understanding either of history or the sectors of the tourism marketplace interested in exploring cultural heritage. The end product has been adopted neither by the traditional market nor the anticipated new one. Fortunately, the *Heritage Walk of Angaston* brochures remain in print (they are regularly reprinted); visitors continue to use them and to read the interpretation boards and plaques.

Some general lessons from the story of *Villagers and Villains* can be drawn.

1. Volunteer committees play an important role in the commercial and cultural lives of small communities, but are not an ideal vehicle for running an interpretation project, especially one entering territory where nobody has appropriate knowledge or skills. The Angaston community volunteer groups managed capably with a straight forward trail brochure, but were not able to manage the shift into an interactive interpretive activity.
2. Clear briefs for interpretation projects are essential. The basic questions of why are we doing this, what do we want to achieve, who is it for, and how can we get where we want to go are as critical in community-based projects as they are in businesses. In Angaston, some of the basic thinking had been done, but not enough. Information on the actual and projected audiences was intuited, rather than researched.
3. Drawing up contracts and setting project standards is essential for community organisations. The decentralised committee structure and generally informal approach to doing business that prevailed in the Angaston Main Street Committee were not strong enough to take action when it became clear that the originally anticipated project outcomes were veering away from the intended path.
4. Great care is needed in choosing funding programs to ensure that their criteria are consistent with the goals and intentions of the project itself. The conditions attending the community cultural development grant meant that the original purpose of the game was put aside and replaced by an inappropriate approach.
5. Interpretation projects need people with expertise in interpretation. In a community project, there are distinct advantages in such expertise being drawn in from outside the community. In this instance, there was no obvious place to go for help. Specialists in interpreting urban environments are rare in Australia – most interpreters work in museums or in national parks. Education for

interpretation of cultural heritage places is being discussed at a number of levels, and Flinders University is planning a graduate program which will integrate interpretation of built, cultural and natural environments.

The end result for Angaston is mixed. The game designed to bring in new audiences to share the town's history failed miserably. But the Historical Society was stimulated by its research to put up displays in empty shop windows in the main street and it has staged historical plays on Angaston Town Day in the last two Vintage Festivals. A small history of Angaston has been published. And visitors can often be seen walking the heritage trail, brochure in hand.

Author Note

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