



Watershed's Pervasive Media Studio: Collaborative Creative Practice

Dr Laura Kemp
Senior Manager, NCACE

Clare Reddington
CEO, Watershed

Keywords

*visual arts,
innovative design,
co-creation,
collaboration,
community
engagement*

The Pervasive Media Studio, launched by Watershed Bristol in 2008, is a space that has become an international hub for interdisciplinary collaboration in arts and technology. It challenges conventional approaches to innovation and prioritises process over output, open collaboration, and long-term exploration rather than short-term, project-based thinking. The Studio provides an ecosystem where artists, technologists, and academics can co-create and experiment in ways that are more inclusive, iterative, and open-ended.

The Studio's creation is deeply rooted in Watershed's long-standing commitment to bridging the divide between the arts, creative industries and academic research. This has led to pioneering collaborations with the University of Bristol, University of the West of England (UWE), and other partners such as Hewlett Packard and Aardman Animations, and has fostered cutting-edge projects in mobile technology, cloud computing, and the ethical implications of emerging technologies.

Watershed and the Pervasive Media Studio

Founded in 1982 as Britain's first media centre, Watershed's mission has evolved alongside the technological landscape. In the 1990s, the organisation began exploring the internet's impact on creative practice, partnering with HP Labs on projects like Mobile Bristol (2002–2005), which explored the creative potential of mobile technologies. Clare Reddington joined Watershed in 2004 and worked on establishing creative technology programmes including Pervasive Media Studio and Playable City, before taking up the position of CEO in 2018. These early experiments demonstrated the importance of providing artists with access to cutting-edge tools, long before they were mainstream, allowing them to shape and question new technologies from the ground up.

In 2008, leveraging these insights, Watershed and HP Labs opened the Pervasive Media Studio. The aim was to create a space where cross-sector and cross-disciplinary creative and academic groups could explore and develop ideas over time, without the constraints of traditional funding cycles or project deadlines. Initially considered by the University of Bristol and UWE as too risky an investment, this allowed the Studio to develop with a 'rogue' co-working business model driven by a desire to ensure inclusivity, where they gifted desk space to residents. It was designed as an open, collaborative environment where ideas could evolve organically and where the practice itself - rather than just the final product - was valued. Jon Dovey, Professor of Screen Media at UWE, recognised the value in that and made it his workspace. Soon afterwards, UWE and the University of Bristol became formal partners.



The Pervasive Media Studio
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Key Ideas and Approaches

The Pervasive Media Studio is built on several foundational principles, including the concept of "open innovation," where knowledge is shared freely and innovation happens by drawing on external perspectives. This openness is reflected in the Studio's commitment to connecting people with

diverse skills, backgrounds, and interests. It is not just a space for technology but for culture, commerce, and creativity. Inspired by John Hagel and John Seely Brown's theory of Creation Nets, the Studio recognises that innovation accelerates when diverse individuals work together. Difference is seen as an asset; as Seely Brown said, to innovate in challenging times, you have to work with people who are not like you. The studio is also inspired by the Jelly co-working model, which encourages informality and collaboration in open, casual settings. During Open Studio Fridays, the public are invited into the space, allowing them to meet the resident artists, see their work, and participate in the creative process. These interactions are critical in growing the community and introducing fresh ideas and talent into the Studio. The Studio also works closely with local youth organisations and schools to offer digital literacy programs that encourage young people to use technology to express themselves creatively and critically. This includes supporting initiatives like Rife, which works with young people in Bristol to create digital content, helping them build skills in filmmaking, journalism, and digital media.

The university partners have desks in the studio with researchers who occupy them full-time as part of the Watershed community, which means that when a research call is announced, the collaborative team already have a very clear idea of what might be mutually beneficial. The Pervasive Media studio engages in intentional conversations about equity, authorship and intellectual property with their academic partners. There is an informal understanding which recognises the different value systems at play, but encourages ethical co-working with due recognition for all contributors to published outputs. The universities and Watershed jointly pay all creatives who participate in projects, and Watershed doesn't allow the universities to take the intellectual property of projects that they are supporting. Clare Reddington notes that it is the informality of the collaboration, sitting together every day and chatting about shared interests, which makes for such a long-running and fertile collaboration. From the studio's perspective, there is a long range temporality and rigour within academia which has proven very useful for a creative community that moves quite quickly and iteratively. Also, the co-working model has allowed the team to codify new forms of knowledge, especially around AI, and to reflect back where the creative practice is breaking new ground and thinking about practice in different ways.

More formally, Watershed has a collaboration with the University of West of England (UWE) around architecture and regenerative futures, in addition to a rich collaboration with the film department who teach in the building. Watershed provides screenings for students and benefits greatly from undergraduates coming into the city of Bristol to become new audiences. Watershed also hosts students from the practice-based MA in Curating at UWE, with many graduates staying on afterwards as employees of the media centre.

Using Technology for Social Good

The Pervasive Media Studio has long been committed to using creative technologies for social good, leveraging its unique interdisciplinary environment to address pressing social issues, promote inclusivity, and ensure ethical engagement with technology. One of the core values of the Pervasive Media Studio is its commitment to diversity and inclusion. The Studio recognises that for technological innovation to be truly meaningful, it must be accessible and inclusive, welcoming voices and perspectives that have traditionally been marginalized in the tech sector. Historically, the creative tech industry has been dominated by certain demographics - particularly white, male technologists. To counter this, the Studio has worked actively to attract women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Not only does the Studio promote diversity through its residency programs, but it also partners with organizations such as Unlimited (which supports disabled artists) to create more accessible spaces. In 2017, for example, 53% of the Studio's residents were women, a reflection of the Studio's commitment to gender parity in an otherwise male-dominated space. The team has also employed a producer to specifically reach out to people from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, ensuring that diversity isn't just an aspiration but an active, ongoing initiative.

The Pervasive Media Studio actively uses technology to engage with and benefit the broader community. By fostering collaborative projects with local organisations and initiatives, the Studio contributes to improving public life, particularly in marginalised or underserved areas. Many of the projects developed at the Studio have direct social applications, from improving healthcare and education to enhancing public services. These projects have used locative media, augmented reality (AR), and interactive technologies

to create meaningful, community-driven experiences. Projects like "Play Sandbox" (a co-created model for commissioning creative work with children) illustrate the Studio's focus on community involvement and co-design. By involving young people in the commissioning process, this initiative not only helps shape the creative landscape but also provides children with tools for critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital literacy.

*Woman with headset,
Aardman
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The Studio also embraces technologies that can foster empathy, understanding, and social change. One of the Studio's guiding principles is the belief that technology should be used not just to innovate for profit or efficiency but to create positive social impact. Many of the projects developed at the Studio focus on digital storytelling and narrative-based media, where technology is used to amplify the voices of marginalised groups. Through interactive experiences, VR storytelling, and documentary-style films, these projects give people a platform to share their stories and raise awareness around critical social issues like migration, identity, and climate change. "Playground", a project by Studio resident Kate Spence, used augmented reality to create an interactive storytelling experience for children, allowing them to engage with both the physical environment and virtual characters. By creating an immersive, cross-generational experience, these

projects help build connections between people of different ages, backgrounds, and communities.

As technology increasingly shapes our everyday lives, the Pervasive Media Studio emphasises the importance of ethical design. The Studio recognises that new technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and machine learning are shaping everything from healthcare to policing, and that their development must be grounded in ethical principles. The Studio actively fosters dialogue around the ethics of technology, ensuring that its residents work not just to develop innovative solutions but to consider the social and moral implications of their work. The Studio has hosted a range of talks, workshops, and research programs on topics like surveillance, data privacy, and algorithmic bias. These conversations ensure that the ethical considerations surrounding the use of emerging technologies are integrated into the practice of artists, technologists, and entrepreneurs working within the Studio. Tim Kindberg, a Studio resident, led a "Skeptics" talk series that focused on technologies "for skeptics"—encouraging critical thinking about the social implications of technology.

Another key aspect of the Studio's approach is its focus on sustainable innovation. The Studio actively supports projects that use technology to combat climate change, promote sustainability, and address environmental challenges. By creating technology that is both innovative and mindful of environmental impact, the Studio encourages a balance between progress and sustainability. In collaboration with UWE Bristol and other research partners, the Studio has hosted events and programs aimed at designing eco-friendly technologies and green innovation. These include projects exploring the use of IoT (Internet of Things) for environmental monitoring, as well as artistic explorations of how technology can raise awareness of environmental issues.

The Future: Navigating Uncertainty with Hope

The collaborative relationships Watershed has fostered with UWE and the University of Bristol has enabled access to large research council funding revenues, in addition to the more traditional Arts funding streams. Immersive Art is an Arts in in the Four Nations initiative, which launched in October 2024 and is led by the University the West of England with Watershed as the the executive producer. It is both an opportunity for artists and

creatives to play, and for Watershed to work across the four nations of the UK. Undershed, Watershed's new immersive gallery, was launched at the same time and offers a sustainable and resilient exhibition infrastructure for immersive content. It is the first immersive gallery in a cultural organisation that will curate work from across the world, and the aim is to exhibit work for long periods of time in order to build audiences and conversations about access and inclusion. The Pervasive Media Studio will work closely with their academic collaborators to think about the embodied experience and to best design them within galleries and exhibition spaces. Clare describes this as 'giving the sector what it needs', and whether that's through providing exhibition opportunities, ensuring the inclusivity of underrepresented groups in tech, fostering creative responses to social issues, engaging communities through participatory design, or leading ethical conversations about the future of technology, the Pervasive Media Studio has positioned itself as a key player in shaping the future of creative tech.

Looking forward, the Studio remains focused on nurturing creative innovation, but with a commitment to ethics and social responsibility. As new technologies, such as AI, continue to evolve, the Studio aims to provide a platform where creative responses to these technologies can be explored critically and ethically. This is particularly relevant in a time when the power structures of culture, technology, and media are under increasing scrutiny. The Studio aims not just to participate in the technological future but to actively shape it, ensuring that cultural and ethical considerations are front and centre in the development of new tools and systems.

Further information:

Home | Pervasive Media Studio - <https://www.watershed.co.uk/studio>

Watershed - City Campus | UWE Bristol - <https://www.uwe.ac.uk/life/campus-and-facilities/city-campus/watershed>

Pervasive Media Studios | Education works - <https://educationworks.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/2015/11/pervasive-media-studios>