The Potential of Interactive Negotiated Narratives in Rebuilding and Reimagining Northern Irish Society

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the role of the writer in interactive transmedia production through a research project that has been primarily designed to take place within contemporary Northern Ireland. Red Branch Heroes was created, in association with Bellyfeel Productions[1], as a prototype for a more extensive fictional interactive web series that will be known as The Eleven. The author developed a game like scenario where, through their play, the audience influenced and developed character and story elements. The research asks if interactive forms such as transmedia offer any new storytelling potentials to the people of Northern Ireland and how such projects can contribute to debates about e-politics and e-democracy in post conflict societies. Evidence is presented in this article to suggest that the 'negotiated narratives' formulated in this prototype offer further creative community-building possibilities, in neutral spaces that can facilitate discourses about the future.

KEYWORDS

Interactive Transmedia, Narratives, Participation, Storytelling, Webseries

INTRODUCTION

Through the application of participatory action research (PAR) the *Red Branch Heroes* (RBH) prototype creates an environment through which the audience, acting as judges, elects a new hero for Northern Ireland, someone who in the larger research project, *The Eleven,* will build a utopian community somewhere in the region. Through a feedback loop that challenged the conventions of reality TV, judges had to examine and interrogate the artefacts of fictional applicants to understand who these people could be. This interrogation through a feedback loop helped build the character for the story. An example would help to elucidate the approach used. As part of his application Leo, a fictional applicant, provided a photostory of his life taken from the pictures on his mobile phone. The judges used these to make assessments of what he was like and the author (the writer of this article) fed these back into the character of Leo through visual images, character quotes and psychological profiles that reflected the judge's comments. The feedback loop help build a complex character for Leo and other applicants. The judges then were asked to vote for three of these applicants so they could explore them in more detail before making their final choice of 'hero/heroine'. To facilitate

closer engagement the judges were able to 'meet' these applicants when the production team cast actors to play them. The judges interviewed the 'applicants' via Skype and once they had decided on their favourite, promoted them to the outside world as a suitable 'hero/ine' for Northern Ireland via social media. The character Leo was eventually chosen as the 'hero' and would be one character who would feature in the proposed webseries. Figure 1 depicts the Red Branch Heroes, and Figure 2 shows Alice, Leo and Mary (played by actors) the three Heroes selected by the Judges.

Figure 1. Red Branch Heroes

Figure 2. Alice, Leo and Mary (played by actors) the three heroes selected by the judges
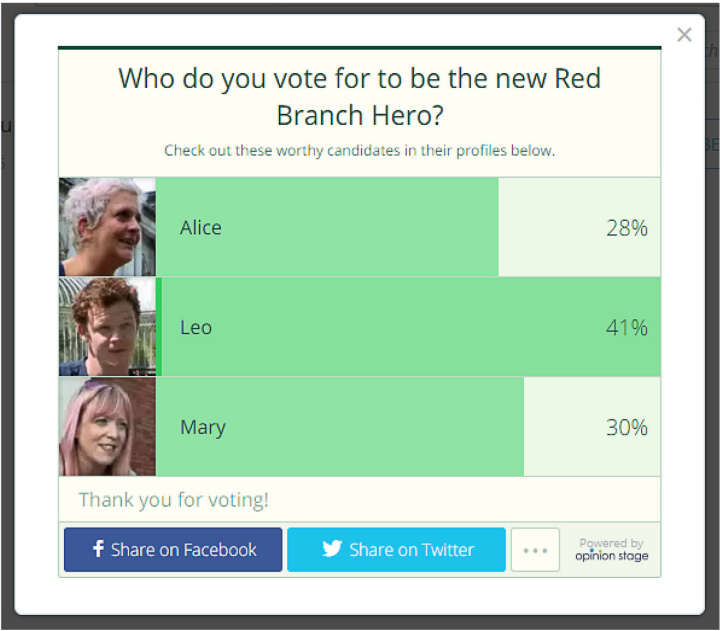
The project was part performance and part game and it used websites, social media, game play and fictional video production to tell its story, along with songs, comic books, photostories and a host of other media. In this sense, it could be considered to be a transmedia project. Transmedia production with its emphasis on world building (see Jenkins (2006, p. 57) who points out that screenwriters/artists build worlds that cannot be explored or exhausted within a single work) and with its ability to present drama from multiple perspectives (see polymorphic narratives Giavagnoli (2011, p. 98) for examples) appears to offer new and untested opportunities in this context. Indeed, many transmedia makers and theorists suggest that participation is essential to its success (Gomez, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Phillips, 2012). However, the interactivity promised by such work has yet to find its realisation (Rose, 2012; Manovich, 2001; Ryan, 2001) and has disappointed audiences. Figure 3 shows that Leo (played by an actor) is the eventual winner - a surprising result as initially he was the least favoured candidate:

Figure 3. Leo (played by an actor) is the eventual winner - a surprising result as initially he was the least favoured candidate
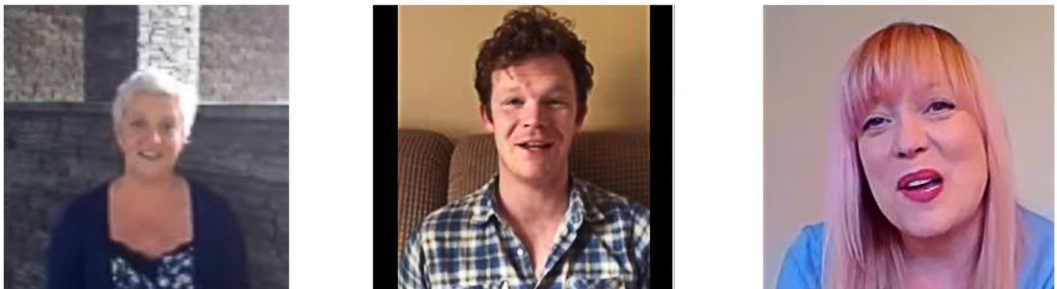
Transmedia storytelling refers to a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence – one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities'. (Jenkins 2009)

Northern Ireland is a society at an interesting phase of social change – moving from a society in conflict from 1968-1998 to one of post-conflict after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.[2] The 2011 census indicates the growing use of a Northern Irish self-identified category of identity:

Two-fifths (40 per cent) of usual residents had a British Only national identity, a quarter (25 per cent) had Irish Only and just over a fifth (21 per cent) had Northern Irish Only. (Census Publication, 2011)

However, I acknowledge, as Mary Hickman suggests, that:

How people 'really' see themselves is much more complex, changeable and nuanced, rooted in national origins, family and community life, changing social contexts and political exigencies. Ethnic identity in this latter sense is not amenable to analysis through censuses. (Hickman, 2010, p. 22)

Taking into account such reservations, the census still suggests that a growing number of people are now comfortable in identifying themselves as primarily Northern Irish. Brexit has, of course, raised the issue of national identity once again. A recent survey commissioned by researchers at Queen's University has found that support for 'Remain' has risen:

In 2016, the region voted 56% to remain and 44% to leave, but support for leaving the bloc has fallen 13 points to 31%, undermining the Democratic Unionist party's continued staunch backing for Brexit. (O'Carroll, 2018)

Could this mean a hardening of political positions, or result in an opportunism where each group is trying to grab a share of resources? Such occurrences illustrate the fragility of peace and progress in Northern Ireland, demonstrating that it is a good time to think about what it means to be Northern Irish and to investigate an approach to writing that will be appropriate to this endeavour. There has also been limited media production in Northern Ireland although Tim Loane, a Northern Irish series writer, suggests 'There seems to be more activity in BBC Northern Ireland Drama than there has been in quite some time' (Barter 2012). He is referring to such programmes as *6 Degrees* (2012-2015), Irish language series such as *Scup* (2013) and more recently *Derry Girls* (2018), but what Northern Ireland has always lacked is a continuing drama series that reflects life across the region.

The interactive nature of the internet often suggests its democratic potential offering a sense of community and solidarity (Kapsa 2018). Much has been made of its application by activists and the ways in which it has changed their activities and impacted on democracies (Dorenda, 2010). At the same time the utopian promise of the Internet and its attendant practices has been somewhat tarnished in recent times. Douglas Rushcoff suggests that this is our own fault – the fault of those who create for the Internet. 'Back in the 1990s, we cyberpunks saw the law as the enemy' and 'what we didn't realise was that pushing government off the net made it entirely safe for corporations, and a new form of digital capitalism was born' (2017, p. 20). The author of this project and this article is therefore interested in examining how projects can be used for community empowerment, democratic practices and development rather than profit. This article therefore not only asks if power dynamics can be challenged in transmedia work but also considers the context within which such projects are developed. As an online project, *RBH* is functioning in a global context that could be argued to be operating in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* as Shoshana Zuboff (2018) has suggested. Indeed, RBH used a type of surveillance practice to create its stories, but this practice was recognised and supported by its users and uses a negotiation designed to find a mutually-agreed approach to the construction of a web-based drama that is democratic rather than a method of extracting profit. In this way the author argues that its falls outside such concerns.

Online web-series and *RBH* prototypes can be seen to build and extend on Hugh O'Donnell's idea of 'soaps' or continuing drama series as 'sites of a complex on-going process of negotiation between producers and consumers itself taking place within a much larger framework' (1990, p. 10). It is similar to the proponents of entertainment-education (EE) or educational soap operas that have adopted a social action approach, as soap operas have long been seen as a useful vehicle to promote social change. In the early 1970s, Miguel Sabido created a new genre for Mexican television that was an entertainment-education soap opera, an educational programme promoting social development. His efforts have influenced many similar projects in other countries for both radio and television and now for the web. The results were seen to be considerable in commercial and behavioural terms with many viewers positively altering their behaviour (Singhal 2006). Since the 1980s, many programme makers have used this strategy as one part of their communication campaign in Latin America, Africa and Asia (Singhal, 2006) to promote peace and conflict resolution. Singhal suggests that such entertainment-education could be heading towards socially engaged transmedia production. But I argue that a narrative that is composed and designed by all parties - a negotiated narrative - offers a greater opportunity for discourse than an educational soap opera that offers only the message of its makers or its authors.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a useful methodology to adopt in this context. As with all research, participatory research starts with a problem to be solved, but the goal here is not to produce an objective body of knowledge that can then be generalised to large populations in societies that have faced conflict. Rather, the aim is to build 'collaboratively constructed descriptions and interpretations

of events that enable people to formulate acceptable solutions' (Stringer, 2007, p.189) to an agreed problem. This research is oriented towards finding a mutually-agreed approach to the construction of a web-based drama that is democratic, equitable, engaging, participatory and life enhancing in a society which is still characterised as 'divided'.

The research followed a cyclical form where each cycle of study had four steps: planning, acting, observing and reflecting; or, more specifically, as Gerald Susman (1983) suggests, a more elaborate process which begins with the identification of a problem. My starting point was to ask how to write effectively for transmedia and then I began the process of collecting more detailed information in order to identify potential avenues of action. Several ideas were considered before opting for a particular course of action. In this research there have been three cycles or iterations of the project that have resulted in the findings that the author details here. The project site has been studied for audience activity and engagement through qualitative and quantitative methods. It has been evaluated by a range of players, including this author as the main writer/designer, the production crew that the author worked with from Bellyfeel productions, the actors, community, theatre and media agencies from Northern Ireland, members of the general public and players of the prototype.

The research contributes to existing debates about storytelling in the context of Northern Ireland, and the role that storytelling can have in the rebuilding and reimagining of that society. *RBH* has studied film and TV projects (*The Beat Generation* (2010) by Crosstown Media), drama projects (Abbie Spallen's *Pumpgirl* (2006) and Daragh Carville's *This Other City (*2010), database projects (*Prisons Memory Archive* (2006 - present) in Northern Ireland that aim to make a contribution to a future Northern Ireland. From my research I understand that it is important that any web series should incorporate the transgressive aims of Northern Irish theatre along with the available versions of the past that database forms can feature. It can further develop the visual elements of film and television and house these within a transmedia world. More importantly however, an interactive web series offers a system of decision making that allows for a very public negotiation and promotion of a new and publicly-engaged media form.

AUDIENCES AND PARTICIPATION

Central to the intent of the project was to give audiences real agency. 'Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices' (Murray, 1998, p. 126). As Gomez suggests in an interview with Giovagnoli, 'A truly interactive transmedia experience is signified by the participant's ability not simply to choose between two threads of narrative but to impact the narrative itself' (Giavagnoli, 2011, p. 134). This was the process adopted by the *RBH* prototype and an element that was at the core of its design. Often the only participation or interactivity that is available in a transmedia production is the very basic opportunity to comment on, or react to, a set of variables that have been presented by the writer/author/producer. So, for example, while the *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* offered the opportunity to comment on the material. Even when the direction that the drama can take is encouraged, such as in the *Try Life* (2014*)* online educational project, in which the young audience is actively urged to take on the role of director, all the variables are predetermined, limiting the audience's ability to influence the world of the drama. In addition, interactivity is not an easy term to define and remains a much debated one (Jensen, 1999; Manovich, 2001; Ryan, 2001). It can often be attributed ideological potency as Aarseth suggests: 'to declare a system interactive is to endorse it with magic power' (1997, p 48). As Lister et al. (2009) maintain, it can include the creative management of information, user engagement in media texts, the visual and sensual pleasures of spatial exploration, the ability to input to a text and person to person connection to a 'mutually reciprocal communication process' (Lister et.al 2009, p. 21-25). It is not my intention to contribute further to this debate here so much as to be aware of the term's different and often contradictory histories and to be clear about the ways in which I adopt this concept in the creative production context.

Interactivity and immersion were encouraged through the use of the Ulster Cycle of myths, providing a potent mix of real-life stories from Northern Ireland (ones that have featured in the media) along with fictional pre-texts or provocations to become a judge in a Reality television setting. The call to action, to decide on a new hero, was housed in 'an imagined community' for people to investigate. In this way, players were asked to enter into the world of the production and take part in a gamified experience, one in which they had to take action. The resulting action had a real influence on the development of the characters and the direction the underlying story took.

Central to that concept of agency is the provision for audiences to undertake performance activities. There were many performance opportunities in *RBH* so that audiences could talk about themselves and their experiences. Media scholars Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) suggest that central to the idea of audience is the concept of performance, 'the capacity of the audience to give attention, and to become involved, will vary over time, by the type of performance, and by the medium by which the performance is transmitted' (1998, p. 55). The arrival of mass communication has obviously had an impact on what it means to be a member of an audience. They suggest modern audiences are more diffuse, more used to performing, so much so that the boundaries between art and life are broken down.

Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences* (1997) emphasises the creative involvement that spectators bring to theatrical productions. Both she and Jacques Ranciere (2009) talk of 'the emancipated spectator' an audience member who is an active participant in the creation of an artwork. While Bennett talks about 'a common determination to increase the spectator's activity to their mutual benefit' (1997, p. 212), Ranciere dismisses the myths of audience transformation:

'…to know that words are merely words and spectacles are merely spectacles, can help us arrive at a better understanding of how words and images, stories and performances, can change something of the world we live in.' (2011, p. 125)

But his views do not reject the idea that theatre and maybe in this case transmedia production, has some agency. He suggests that we do not come to any work of art without complex patterns of interaction.

Each judge in RBH experienced such performance attributes and the thoughts and feelings encountered by these audiences were made known through a discussion forum. As each judge had a different take on each hero so variation was central to the research project. These different takes and views were used to build complex characters. Finding ones ideas reflected in the emerging characters and stories that resulted, helped promote a greater sense of collectivity within the online group. Once the research project was over the players reported 'missing' their fellow players even though they did not know them personally. The judges came to own the site as much as the producers and protested when it ended. Audiences were also challenged or tested by the introduction of controversial storylines. In this way real 'interaction' was created that not only impacted on the drama but impacted on the community of the project. Laurel (2013, p. 33) argues that human–computer interfaces and activities are about 'creating imaginary worlds that have a special relationship to reality – worlds in which we can extend, amplify and enrich our capacities to think, feel and act'. This was at the heart of the research. The *RBH* prototype does show some engagement with the issues of Northern Ireland but a more active participation would be better placed in the larger research project *The Eleven,* which could pursue these issues further as it builds an idealised community for the heroes to inhabit. Figure 4 shows a discussion forum relating to Leo.

This form of writing and participation acknowledges, as Helen Freshwater suggests in *Theatre & Audiences* (2009), that 'participation can be profoundly disturbing; that it may involve making ourselves vulnerable as we open ourselves to unexpected experiences and outcomes.' (2008, p. 76) This places great ethical responsibilities in the hands of the producers. However, in *RBH* the writers and actors were as vulnerable as the audiences who participated as they were just as subject to those

Figure 4. Discussion forum relating to Leo
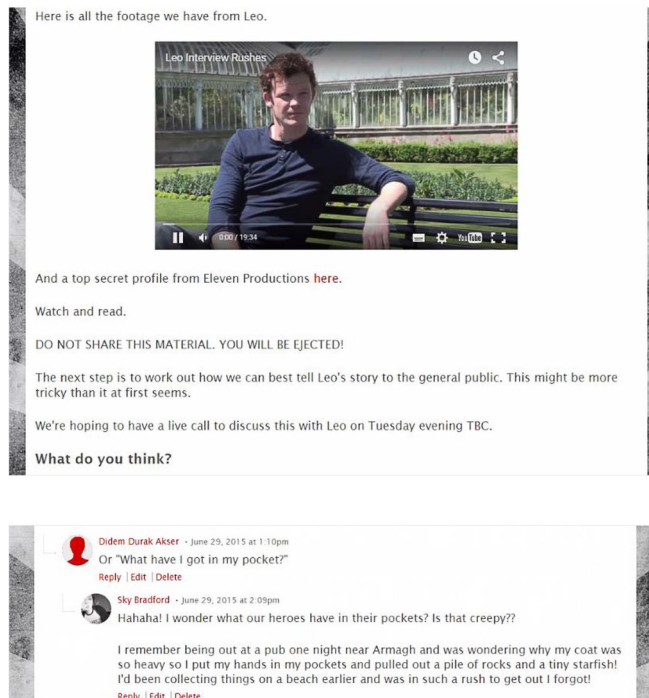
unexpected and experiences and outcomes. In *RBH,* while the production personnel are in possession of a greater control and understanding of the processes at play, they are in a similar position to the audience members in that they were:

Accepting that genuine participation has risks as well as potentials: that it involves vulnerability on the part of the performers and participants, as both parties open themselves up to unexpected experiences and outcomes. (2011, p. 409)

For these reasons, it is more accurate to term this research project a 'negotiated narrative', in recognition of the fact that the process is a consultative one where neither party is in full control of the proceedings. To be interactive on this research project meant to be able make a direct link from audience to creator, a communication that has the potential to inform or impact the process of creative development.

A Negotiated Narrative and the Potential of Transmedia

The RBH prototype demonstrates the need for the writer to be a leader, designer, collaborator and orchestrator. Immersion is promoted through encouraging real-audience agency by the use of greater improvisation, process theatre methods, the use of gamification techniques, and by creating a world that blends elements of fact and fiction.

Tony Watson (2001) used the term 'negotiated narrative' in relation to critical management education and learning (a term in in turn borrowed from narrative studies) – more specifically, ways to teach and build management practice. He uses the term to synthesise a range of 'stories' in the management process (the practitioner story, the academic research story and the theory story) to discover 'the story behind the story' (2001, p. 388). I have adapted and used his concept to imply

a synthesis of stories (stories proposed by people from Northern Ireland, my own stories, myths and re-workings of other writers) but, in my application, this synthesis results in the creation of a new and negotiated narrative rather than an analysis. The narrative is constantly changing due to these negotiations, so my use of negotiated narrative implies an evolving concept rather than a fixed position. I use a negotiation process similar to that found in process theatre as O'Neill describes (1995) to create the new and transformed narrative. This narrative is the result of stories that have been offered by the audiences, the author/writer, and the production personnel involved in making the project. I use the term narrative in a fluid way, not only to refer to the action that takes place in the project and the transformation that results from this action, but also to involve the interventions and interruptions that are caused in the negotiation stages of the project. This necessarily involves discursive and experimental elements that would not usually find themselves part of any narrative text, but which are commonly used in installation art and digital arts projects. The aesthetic rules for such a production are more akin to those found in television documentary, games and world building games such as *The Sims* rather than in literature and film, as a wide range of views and actions can be built together to form the resultant narrative.

Transmedia offers creators undeniable creative and artistic possibilities (Rosenthal, 2011). The many avenues of storytelling that can be developed across a range of ever-increasing digital platforms demands ever more co-ordination and the understanding of how nuances can be explored. As a result, stories need to be rich and complex: as Miller suggests, transmedia storytelling has a 'unique ability… to import a rich dimensionality to a property and to tell a story in a deeper and more lifelike, immersive way than could be possible via a single medium' (2008, p. 153). However, at times, the various tensions can be problematic for the author, as all participants need to be considered and decisions weighed up before authorial decisions are made. As Sousa et al. warn:

The author's personal creative effort might be over-shadowed and restrained by the public participation… Questions of authorship in this new age are very pungent and there is still very little conversation on the matter, mostly, possibly, because the answers are extremely complex and hard to devise with any certainty. (2016, p. 15)

They suggest that these new relationships between organisations, creatives and the public need to better understand how the form works so that:

The shared participation and the convergence of efforts between all the partakers in the process may be a way to create a better, more informed, skilled, participative, equalitarian and creative society. (2016, p. 27)

Rather than suggest this is a means to change society, I would suggest that shared participation and study offered to all users is also a way to create a more informed, participative and creative project. In this way a negotiated narrative is useful in the transmedia context. A full-annotated treatment [3] describes the story of the research project and might usefully be read in association with this article.

EVALUATING THE PROTOTYPE

From the analysis of website using Google analytics, 2,242 people came to the *RBH* website with the intention of viewing the project. A questionnaire at the threshold of the project was used to collect data on participants. This significantly deterred large numbers of players; 82.73% of those people moved swiftly on to something else and did not sign up, despite the incentives we offered to take part (win £100). In other words, only those dedicated to the project enlisted, thus making them suitable prototype testers. Figure 5 shows the introduction to the project.

Figure 5. Introduction to the project
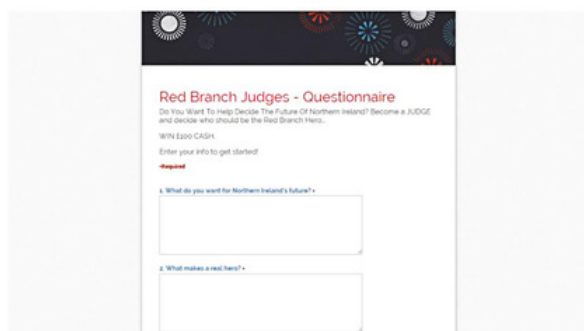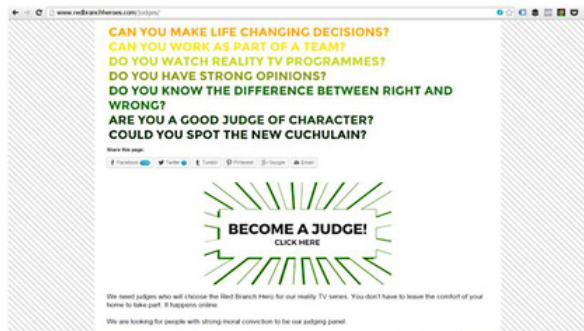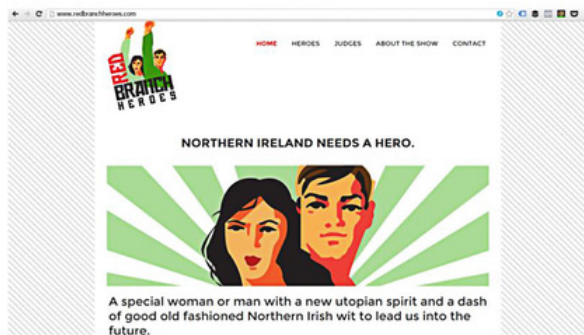
Forty people joined the project over the space of a month. Of those forty twenty-seven were over thirty years of age and thirteen were under thirty years of age. Twenty-two were female and eighteen were male. The majority of these were from large cities, such as Belfast or Derry, but a surprising number were from small towns and country areas. Very few identified themselves as religious but, of those that did, five were from a Catholic background and three were from a Protestant background. In online projects that are not connected to large and popular franchises this number can be considered to be a healthy sample. Lance Weiler has used groups of twelve participants to test his *Sherlock* prototype (2015) and asserts that small groups of five to six people are ideal for granting agency. More importantly for me, it was a sample that represented a wide range of people: male and female; from different age groups; from migrant communities (a small number were of Asian, Turkish and Polish origin); employed and unemployed; and people who related to Northern Ireland in various ways (nationalist, loyalist, or preferred not to comment, politically involved). 25% of the test group were prepared to become the builders of the project by contributing regularly, of those people the majority were over forty years of age. A further important discovery was that those builders were more likely to promote and enliven the project for those who were viewing. Young people did participate but they tended to engage with activities such as voting rather than by making comments on the chat threads of the project. From interviews conducted I would guess that confidence and experience played a large part in those who were prepared to comment.

Further analysis shows that 2,008 visits were made to the site, although many of these were repeat visits. The bounce rate was 66.27%, suggesting that over 34% were engaging on a regular basis. These users were accessing a greater number of pages - 3.66 per session - and spending an average of 3.47 minutes at the site. For an online project this represents a very good engagement rate. FanBridge Blog (2015) suggests that Facebook engagement rates are in the realm of 0.5 -1% while Instagram rates are closer to 3 – 6%, with email still offering the highest with an engagement rate of 20%. *RBH* offered a 34% engagement rate which at some points peaked at a 100% participation rate. Of those 34% who made up the regular contributors, 60% of those were able to make in-depth responses to follow up questionnaires and telephone conversations or Skype interviews about the project. It is from these responses, and others gained from the personnel who worked on the project, that the following evaluations have been made.

It is true that many of my participants found the form confusing and not easy to access from their telephones at all times but the gamified content helped participants to understand what was required of the form and the use of the reality television format made the project accessible. The story complicated the narrative but did not distract from it although at times the judges chose to ignore the story and engage with one of their own. Kathryn Millard (2014) suggests that there is a need to acquire multiple literacies for the digital age and urges us to use the innovative writing practices of writer/ directors who mix fact and fiction in their work. She suggests these are the practices of recording, re-enactment and remixing. For some of our judges this didn't really work:

I think that the on-line forum can really work but it takes a lot more time for people like me to feel comfortable with it and engage. I think the goals, timescales and purpose of the project would need to be clearer for me. (a player interview)

While performance and enactment were crucial to the project such activities were not for everyone. Some people were fairly happy to watch and vote and this was enough:

Not very [involved], I only tend to get involved in forums if I have something invested or knowledge to bring. Arguing with others etc. Someone had a little go at me on the forum, prompting a reply. (a player interview)

If *RBH* were to be further developed into *The Eleven* then greater use of re-enactment would be useful while also paying attention to the design to ensure those less active members have something to gain.

The role of orchestrators mediates against any slide into abuse that Internet and social media chains can fall into. The production team used interventions to help participants navigate through difficult issues such as infidelity, abortion and child abduction and we were surprised by their humanity and understanding. When a difficult backstory was released about Leo, rather than criticise, the judges attempted to empathise with him. They also 'voiced' their concerns about character actions but wanted these portrayed in a sympathetic light. At times we intervened to show how bad practice would not be acceptable, but this action was derided by the judges who felt they could do this better themselves, but also had the effect of making the judges feel safe about expressing their views. Providing a safe environment for people to imagine, reflect and explore their world can lead to change and can create circumstances in which people can search together collaboratively for more comprehensible, true, authentic, and morally right and appropriate ways of understanding and acting in the world (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 578). Figure 6 shows that judges decide their own rules.

Figure 6. Judges decide their own rules
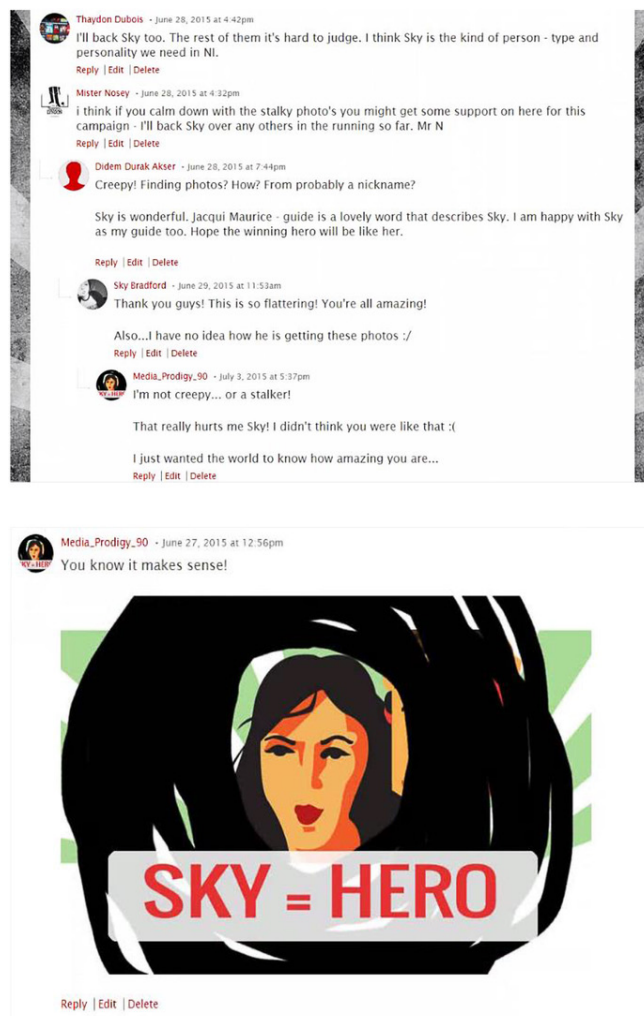
However, the form of the project and its associated structure assists, is not the aspect that necessarily promotes discourse and democratic participation. Instead, it is the intention of the author and the context within which the author and reader find themselves that is key to the success of the project. The liminality of both the form and the political situation in Northern Ireland and the centrality given to the author's intentions to provoke and unearth some of the instrumental rationalities associated with media practice in Northern Ireland, were all central to creating a productive discourse on power and ownership:

We can have (wonderful irony) extreme-right-wing discussion forums […] But at the same time, these forums are highly exclusionary at the level of rhetoric and access, which pushes them outside the realm of the democratic. (Carpentier, 2014, p. 1139)

For us, it was important for our audiences to be able to see or sense their contributions to what was being created, and, while our judges were not always aware that their contributions were being fed back to them, both we, and they, could trace that recognition through the choices being made. Social movement was orchestrated through small moments of activity online where people had to work together to make something happen:

Engagement levels and most importantly the FUN factor greatly increased as we relinquished control and let those formerly known as the "audience" become collaborators with us. (Weiler, 2015)

Talking about Weiler's work, Bronwin Patrickson suggests that 'the best practice principles imply this sort of event is not simply storytelling – but a social, playful, skilful drama with its own developing distinct poetics' (2016, n.pag.). Likewise, *RBH* created an immersive context that was discursive and where personal contribution was valued within multi-perspectival views. This participation was easy to access, encouraged people to challenge their views, and required minimal performance skills. The challenge for writers of transmedia is to find ways to engage and offer audiences agency, but - more importantly - if we are to transpose this into the world of post conflict societies, this challenge becomes even more pertinent. How can the fantasy created not only survive and thrive, but also play a role in reality?

When writing about entertainment-education programmes, Singhal suggests that the production-centred design approach should now be moving to a more audience-centred design approach so that such productions have less of a top down relationship to their audiences. I argue that if audiences are the co-writers and designers of such programmes this will more readily promote an audience-centred approach. Singhal argues that:

The future of the entertainment-education strategy is very bright […] Social change practitioners are increasingly grasping that entertainment-education is one of those rare social change approaches that can be both commercially viable and socially responsible. (2006, p. 268)

Entertainment-education in Northern Ireland has taken many forms and is possibly more evident in theatre productions than in broadcasting. But it has never resulted in a soap-opera type programme aimed at both communities that has tried to promote empathy and understanding between communities. Such projects have been tried elsewhere for example a radio show in Rwanda has been broadcasting *Musekeweya* (2004) twice weekly which has been listened to by 90% of the population:

No ordinary radio drama, it contains carefully embedded psychological and communication messages intended to support healing in a population traumatized by the 1994 genocide'. (Zeigler, 2010, p.16)

This programme – the title of which means *New Dawn* – is a fictional soap opera that aims to empower and strengthen the population to resist incitement to violence. Its central messages are based on the research of Ervin Staub (1989), an academic who has worked extensively in peace and conflict studies. The main goal of the programme is to explain the escalating stages in group violence and how to take measures to prevent them.

In Northern Ireland, funding for television drama and film productions has been directed to both loyalist and nationalist communities. The writing/productions produced have sought to offer illumination of those differing positions. There has been considerable investment in community and arts projects such as *Draw Down the Walls,* a north Belfast cross-interface community relations initiative that has the explicit vision of 'creating the conditions to imagine a city without barriers' (Golden Thread, 2011). Such approaches are useful but what is most evident within this work is the lack of broadcasting space given to imagine what a different and less-divided Northern Ireland could look like. It is also difficult to make a direct comparison to Rwanda in that Northern Ireland is not a country in its own right but an area under British governance that has developed a level of self-government but is also heavily influenced by the Republic of Ireland. Initiatives to address such a complex situation would necessarily be more complex to negotiate.

RBH encourages the people of Northern Ireland to think and act differently about an imagined future community. However, Sanglang, Johnson and Ciano suggest that there are problems with the analysis of gamified stories due to their complexity and audience requirements that makes them difficult to quantify but that:

As EE [entertainment-education] scholars seek to explore the influence of integrating transmedia storytelling techniques into their campaigns, it is essential to consider the strengths and weaknesses of various digital storytelling formats. (2013, p. 143)

The author has considered some of these in this article. As such, a programme of this nature could be useful in an education-entertainment capacity in Northern Ireland so that people could work together to build a mutually useful space to discuss the future of the country.

It is easy to show that participation in terms of interactivity is possible and that participation, which is democratic and negotiated, is useful. But as Carpenter points out, the real issue is that of control:

Struggles about the distribution of power in society in fields such as media, the arts, and development, and the attempts to make that distribution more equal, are what participation is about. (2014, p. 1132)

A recent discussion by Moya Bailey in the *International Journal of Communication* suggests that gender marginalized people of colour use digital media to create representations of themselves that challenge mainstream media depictions offering more diverse narratives; and Ramesh Srinivasan suggests that working in the Arab world it is clear that 'networks of communication are circumscribed by your social status' (2014, p. 1131). Mikro Tobias Schafer suggests a difference between different modes of participation - between those we are aware we are contributing to and those we are not aware of: 'examples of explicit participation shape the narrative of new media as enabling, implicit participation constitutes its commodification' (2014, p. 1132). In *RBH* we play with both implicit and explicit participation methods encouraging our audiences to investigate these forms rather than to just accept them. Such a public declaration and acknowledgement of our methods seems to have gone a long way to promote trust and additional participation. If such an idea were to be developed and to be used for democratic purposes it would essential to be clear about who was intending to use this information and for what purposes. Without such declared interests, it is difficult for audiences to know why they should engage in such work and what the effect of their participation will be. There would be no point in engaging in the construction of a participative online negotiated web-series if the purpose behind it is to:

Breed a different kind of 'conflict', one that is certainly less violent but gestures towards new forms of violence exerted by the Agreement's rhetorical negation of the sectarian past and its aggressive neoliberal campaign. (Heidemann, 2016, p. 4)

Such a process would be participation without control, participation for participation's sake. This is not what this research is recommending.

And how does such work relate to the demands of e-politics and e-democracy? Izabela Kapsa suggests that new media techniques and formats can make it possible for citizens to respond to a crisis of democracy in a way that is up-to-date because it 'It expands the sphere of public debate, because the content of new media increasingly penetrates the mainstream discourse (the political blogosphere, Twitter diplomacy) (2018, p.152). I would argue that creative projects such as RBH can go further than offering access to political issues. By using negotiated new media narratives debates can be explored more fully. What has been demonstrated is that the negotiated aspects of the writing elements used on the project have promoted a sense of community, have promoted a strong sense of engagement and have contributed to a new and interesting narrative about the sort of stories people in Northern Ireland would like to tell. However, the form itself is just the beginning of the journey. As Klopp, Marcello, Kirui and Mwangi point out when studying their website work in Kenya 'Once it became clear that a need existed to go beyond an initial participatory design process and embed the website construction in a broader set of negotiations around information, decision-making, and power, the question became which actors, strategies and tools would work best in helping to effectively re-arrange the "bricks and mortar of government" [2013, p. 35].

In *RBH* such a discussion can be carried out without recourse to hierarchical political structures and can link to a range of instances of cyberactivism on social media. As Sandoval-Almazan and J. Ramon Gil-Garcia suggest 'Technology will support the actions, but people will decide what those actions should be' (2014, p. 376). Further studies would need to be completed into audience behaviour to ascertain if *RBH* could be used in its larger manifestation *The Eleven* to promote such e-political or e-democratic objectives in Northern Ireland.

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ENDNOTES

[1]   Bellyfeel Productions are a Manchester based transmedia production company http://www.bellyfeel.co.uk

[2]   While 'post conflict' implies the end of conflict I feel the term is misleading in the current context of Northern Ireland, where we find that various conflicts continue to play out. However, what it does imply is that the worst aspects of the conflict are past and agreements are in place to help try and build a pluralistic society.

[3]   The full annotated treatment that contains much of the visual material that relates to the research project can be found at http://www.redbranchheroes.com/phd/

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