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MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION VIA NEGOTIATED NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the project “Red Branch Heroes”, an interactive, transmedia prototype that was set in Northern Ireland. This piece of practice based research investigates the writing techniques that can be used to promote useful participation. The article suggests a form of participation that acknowledges the power balances that exist between author and audiences in digital narratives. It advocates a range of techniques that promote a greater sharing of that power so that those power positions are challenged. But it also advocates for the role of author as one of conductor or orchestrator, a role that is defined by a process of negotiation. Such a process results in a “negotiated narrative”.

KEYWORDS

interactive transmedia; narratives; participation; storytelling; web series

PARTICIPAÇÃO EFETIVA COM RECURSO A NARRATIVAS NEGOCIADAS

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa o projeto “Red Branch Heroes”, um protótipo interativo e transmídia, lançado na Irlanda do Norte. Este projeto de investigação ação analisa as técnicas de escrita que podem ser utilizadas para promover uma participação eficaz. O artigo sugere uma forma de participação que reconhece os equilíbrios de poder que existem entre o autor e as audiências em narrativas digitais. Defende uma série de técnicas que promovem uma maior partilha desse poder, para que essas posições de poder sejam desafiadas. Mas também defende o papel do autor como o de um condutor ou orquestrador, papel este que é definido por um processo de negociação. Tal processo resulta numa “narrativa negociada”.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

narrativas; participação; *storytelling*; transmídia interativos; websérie

INTRODUCTION

“Red Branch Heroes” (RBH), a prototype project set in Northern Ireland and developed by a core team of three, including the author of this article, was part performance and part game, using 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 an interactive transmedia project. This term has been applied to large-scale Hollywood productions and small-scale self-funded arts projects (Dena, 2009, p. 4) and the RBH project falls into the latter category.



Figure 1: Project website
Source: <http://www.redbranchheroes.com/> and <http://www.theeleven.org/>

Many transmedia makers suggest that forms of participation are crucial to its success (Gomez, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Phillips, 2012) but currently available programmes

often only offer predetermined storylines which are author-led and have disappointed audiences (Manovich, 2001; Rose, 2012; Ryan, 2001). The RBH prototype and the associated practice based, action research methodology investigated both the writing processes used and the role that such storytelling practices could play in post conflict societies such as Northern Ireland.

The project was set in Northern Ireland as it is a place rich in social capital and has a vibrant civil society that values participation. This is evidenced through the many cultural, voluntary and sporting organisations that are currently found there. Family and community continue to be of considerable importance. However, the relationship between this society and political institutions is fraught with tensions (Coulter & Shirlow, 2019; Dawson, 2019; McQuaid, 2012).

The RBH project aimed to contribute to existing debates about storytelling in the context of Northern Ireland, and the role that storytelling/participation can have in the rebuilding and reimagining of that society, or in any other post-conflict society. There are many who suggest storytelling is a way for people to understand their world and to represent it; to take it apart, and to reconstruct it (Berger, 1979; Zipes, 2011). Other scholars have gone further to suggest that stories have a broader effect and can transform societies (Arendt, 1958; Gomez, 2011; McGonigal, 2011). Le Hunte and Golembiewski suggest in their abstract that

humans place themselves in stories, as both observer and participant, to create a 'neural balance' or sweet spot that allows them to be immersed in a story without being entirely threatened by it – and this involvement in story leads to the formation of empathy – an empathy that is integral to forging a future humanity. It is through empathy, we argue, that stories have the power to save us. (Le Hunte & Golembiewski, 2014, p. 1)

Many storytelling projects in Northern Ireland are keen to utilise such empathetic traits but I do not maintain that storytelling in Northern Ireland (or in any transmedia or interactive context) has the power to radically change the society we live in. Rather, it is my contention that such practices offer us a way to reimagine our world together through old and new tales, and to engage in jointly telling these tales in new immersive ways that help us learn and understand our hopes and aspirations for the future. These practices also allow us to rethink and reconfigure participation, moving into more balanced power relations.

This article analyses RBH, paying special attention to its participatory dynamics, and how the design techniques promote a greater sharing of creative power. RBH is seen to challenge the traditional positions of author and reader, who are instead in collaboration to create a negotiated narrative. Their creative work is characterized by a liminality that not only supports conflict transformation, but also allows for a multivocality that is intrinsically democratic. In addition, RBH is not only produced by imagined

communities, but also produces these communities, again demonstrating the socially beneficial capacities of participation. Moreover, the protective positioning of the authors – the project team – is seen to mediate against the negative aspects of online participation known as “dark participation”.

"RED BRANCH HEROES"

RBH¹ was a project that encouraged participants to become judges in a fictional reality TV project (one that challenged the conventions of reality TV) to elect a new “hero” for Northern Ireland. Judges were presented with artefacts that belonged to fictional characters and were asked to interrogate these submissions to understand who these people could be. This interrogation was used by the authors/production company (which, as mentioned before, included the author of this article) as a feedback loop to help build characters and story for a web series. The main participants in the production were as shown in Figure 2, but there has been a much broader consultation on the project throughout Northern Ireland.



Figure 2: Project participants

To give an example of the character development: The character Mary Doherty submitted the contents of her handbag for scrutiny. From this the judges began to think about who she was and what she was like. As they made their observations through a chat application, the authors watched and fed this information into the character profile of Mary releasing further information on her in the form of visual images, psychological profiles and character quotes, that reflected the judges' views. The feedback loop helped create, deepen and strengthen the characters. The judges were then asked to vote for

¹ More information on RBH can be found on the website <http://www.redbranchheroes.com/phd/practice/>

their favourite character and three were chosen to be further developed. This time the judges were able to meet their creations face to face as we cast actors to play them. The judges interviewed these “candidates” and eventually used this information to decide who they were going to promote to the outside world as a suitable “hero” character for Northern Ireland. Friends, relatives and the public then voted for their favourite candidate. The character Leo was eventually chosen as the “hero” and would be the first character to feature in the proposed web series.



Figure 3: Candidate application Mary Doherty
Source: Bellyfeel/Author



Figure 4: Mary as played by actor
Source: Bellyfeel/Author

The RBH websites were designed to work primarily on mobile phones and tablets². However, not everyone has access to a smart phone and so participation was already

² Although the major reason to set the project in Northern Ireland was related to the legacy of the Troubles, the levels of tablet ownership and smartphone usage suggested that Northern Ireland was a useful place to carry out an online experiment. A recent *Communications Market Report: Northern Ireland* by OFCOM (2013) shows that Northern Ireland has one of the highest take-ups of tablet ownership in the UK. This report also shows that social media continues to be popular, with 53% of Northern Ireland’s population accessing Facebook, Twitter and other similar online services (Base: Adults aged 16+ who use the internet at home or elsewhere, n=376, Northern Ireland 2013).

curtailed to those that did. Broadband availability was also an issue with many complaining about limited access to the project. The project team also realised that people were needed to participate in the project to study the form, which made external incentives important, to motivate participation and had to be properly applied. We offered a financial reward (£100 for the best participant) for participation, and made it clear that the project was “not for profit” and was in common ownership.

As an online project, RBH is functioning in a global context that Shoshana Zuboff (2018) has labelled *The age of surveillance capitalism*. Admittedly, RBH did use a type of surveillance practice to create its stories, however it is one that is recognised and supported by its users and relies on a process of recognition and negotiation designed to find a mutually-agreed approach to the construction of a web-based drama that is democratic. Instead of declaring “our private experience to be theirs for the taking, for translation into data for their private ownership” (Zuboff, 2019, p. 19), the team alerted our players to the power imbalances at play so that all could engage in a dialogue, through a gamified project. This article therefore necessarily is an attempt to contribute in part to what Quandt (2018, p. 44) calls “a future agenda” for participation research, where both the positive and negative perspectives in participation are considered. He suggests research “must accept and include both perspectives, light and dark, and it needs to offer clearer benchmarks on the societal relevance of both phenomena and everything in between”.

Zuboff and Quandt are not the only one to suggest that online participation can have negative consequences. For instance, Lutz and Hoffman write that “online content creation, however, can be associated with significant individual and collective disadvantages. Users may become associated with causes they do not support. Participation might engender online confrontation, strife, incivility, defamation, bullying, persecution, and stalking” (Lutz & Hoffman, 2017, p. 877).

In a post-conflict environment such as Northern Ireland I was nervous of what the “dark side” of participation would produce and aware that participation can have unforeseen consequences. I was keen to find a writing context that could deal with such occurrences and minimise conflict. In this sense I fell into the trap that Quandt (2018), and before him Cooke and Kothari (2001) and Miessen (2010), identified: My participation research focused on observable acts of content creation, and somewhat ignored the broader setting, the limits it imposed on the participatory practices under scrutiny, and the lack of participation in this broader setting itself. However, subsequently I questioned this position and investigated user motivation and the quality of that participation when large numbers of participants did not materialise to test the work. As such I take into account the participation that did occur but also the participation that did not. Many of the results from this project were positive but, in this article, I consider the lack of broader participation in the project and how negative or disruptive participation is mediated in the design processes used.

RBH, as a prototype, can be seen as a low-fi technological test that developed simple tools to explore the idea of a future and idealised Northern Ireland. In this way it can

be seen as a probe. Madden, Cadet-James, Atkinson and Watkin Lui (2014) write about probes and prototypes that aim to obtain culturally appropriate design for individual wellbeing. Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti (1999) developed the idea of using cultural probes to explore design for the elderly. Probes are simple, flexible tools that allow designers to learn about potential users. Since then, probes have been used to inspire design, to increase participation and to build and facilitate dialogue. Technology probes have also been used in this context (Mattelmaki, 2005) and are low-fi applications that are used to garner information relating to ITC use and the environment of the participants in order to inspire further design. Problems have been identified:

increasingly, we see technology probes used not in an inspirational sense, but as a way of generating functionality requirements to determine the one best way forward. Indeed, we see this as one of the ways that technology probes veer away from the standard cultural probe design. (Madden et al., 2014, p. 42)

In general, the participants were not particularly interested in the mechanics of writing but expressed an interest in taking part in something that contributes to a better Northern Ireland. Such ambitions were identified by the participants themselves in pre- and post-project questionnaires, but it was not the aim of the project that all these aspirations were met. This implied that it was important that expectations were managed from the very start. For this reason our website featured a section explaining the project and all questionnaires sent out included a personal history of our work which demonstrated our approach. Some people will have been put off by this information. However, we were able to make clear that the aim has not been to use community participation for business development or economic gain but to test and react to local circumstances in a continued loop of exploration and improvisation. In this way, the research avoids the identified dangers of functionality by using a combination of participative design and participatory action research to create a negotiated narrative (see below). Such concerns do, however, limit the numbers of people who participate and the type of participation that can be achieved. The need to make clear our intentions destroyed many of the immersive techniques commonly used to engage people in fictional works and as a result the number of participants was low. Our feedback also shows that our need to collect data acted as a major barrier to participation when people had to fill out forms and give personal details. Such factors would be minimised if further work was carried out.

A NEGOTIATED NARRATIVE

The RBH prototype suggests that writing for interactive transmedia is a writing process that needs to have the interests of the reader/audience at the forefront and that the role of the author could be akin to that of the conductor or orchestrator. This is similar to Barthes' idea of an author as "scriptor", a person who produces the work. However, in

RBH, readers make an active contribution to the scripting and production process of the text through their own participation so they also produce the work. I suggest that both readers and authors are scriptors and readers in this context, although the author bears more responsibility for the quality of the final text. The work here is drawn, as Barthes suggests, from “innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes, 2001, p. 210), rather than from one individual experience. Although immersion is common to all forms of text, a different experience of immersion is achieved in this interactive transmedia context by adopting a “gamification” approach of fictional narratives (Alderman, 2015). Through what Jenkins terms “convergence culture” (2006), and now more commonly through convergent technology such as smart phones, people are able to enter the actual world of the story and take action. Improvisation plays a central role in this type of writing process (Millard, 2014), although forms of collaborative practice have yet to be fully developed to facilitate such effective participation.

It is the “liminality” of form and situation that makes participation so crucial in this context. The transmedia/interactive form necessitates “liminality”, an ambiguity where the reader/user is in a process of change or disorientation where the usual hierarchy of author and reader are reversed. A certain liminality across many different forms is also afforded by the mix of platforms and methods used in which the usual order of writing is disrupted. Northern Ireland is a society undergoing a particular, though not a unique, process of transition and stasis – often termed “post-conflict” – and I argue that such liminality requires the adoption of a narrative that is constructed from the many voices involved in its making and that actively includes discursive elements: in other words, a discourse³.

To build this argument, we can return to the Frankfurt School critique, which expressed dissatisfaction with the cultural and political implications of mass media during the twentieth century. Jürgen Habermas (1991) suggested that twentieth century industries had sophisticated methods of persuasion that had displaced dialogue among equals. However, he also proposed a critique of the public as a mass audience, one manipulated by mass communication methods. I recognise that many of the theorists working within this critique were writing in the shadow of the *Third Reich* and were thus concerned about the powerful deployment of propaganda in print, radio and cinema. Indeed, in contemporary culture I understand how transmedia methods could be used effectively for similar propaganda purposes, but I question the idea of audiences as un-informed or passive participants. Indeed, much of such passive behaviour is now contested in fan culture and audience studies (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Jenkins, 2012). While some audiences are content to watch and consume, there is an increasing number who aim to perform.

³ I use discourse here in the postmodern sense of the term, specifically that of Foucault (1977, 1980) who argues that power is always present in communication, producing ‘truths’ but also producing their limits and constraints.

This observation has been upheld by my research, not only in the way people were willing to perform on the project but also in the way people were keen to volunteer information that aided the project's construction. Nonetheless, the prototype could be perceived as useful in developing a neo-liberal consensus in relation to civic life in Northern Ireland. For this reason, I argue that the author role is as important as the role of the reader in this transmedia form. One role does not dominate the other. The author has the responsibility for setting up a pretext, a process drama term for a dramatic 'elsewhere', "a fictional world which will be inhabited for the insights, interpretations, and understandings it may yield" (O'Neill, 1995, pp. 12-13). Within this dramatic world, online debate and story construction occurs. It is incumbent upon the author to be cognisant of the implications of this dynamic and for readers to be aware of the views and intentions of that author if the element of discourse is to be fully maintained throughout the project.

Barthes concludes that "we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (2001, p. 213). While understanding that this reversal is more complex than it first appears, and that Barthes is as sceptical of the reader as he is of the author, his work is useful here as it suggests that both reader and author have equal roles to play in relation to the text. However, in RBH, the author is continually being reborn only to die again. The reader in this transmedia context is in a similar position, sharing as they do part of the scriptor role. In this way greater parity or power was achieved between author and reader. The relationship between author and reader is critical in such a context given the collaborative nature of the project, and the trust and empathy that this kind of production requires.

The readers/participants were constantly trying to evaluate what the purpose and meaning of pre-text and information presented implied and so Barthes' assertion that the Author is dead is slightly problematic in this case. At the outset it was important that the audience was aware who the author was and what was motivating their practice. Without this knowledge (that I was brought up in Northern Ireland within a particular community) the negotiation would be based on suspicion and could result in conflict. In Northern Ireland, where notions of territory are often disputed, the idea of a negotiated project – one that is constructed by a range of people, both professional and non-professional – opens up possibilities for the transgression of established boundaries.

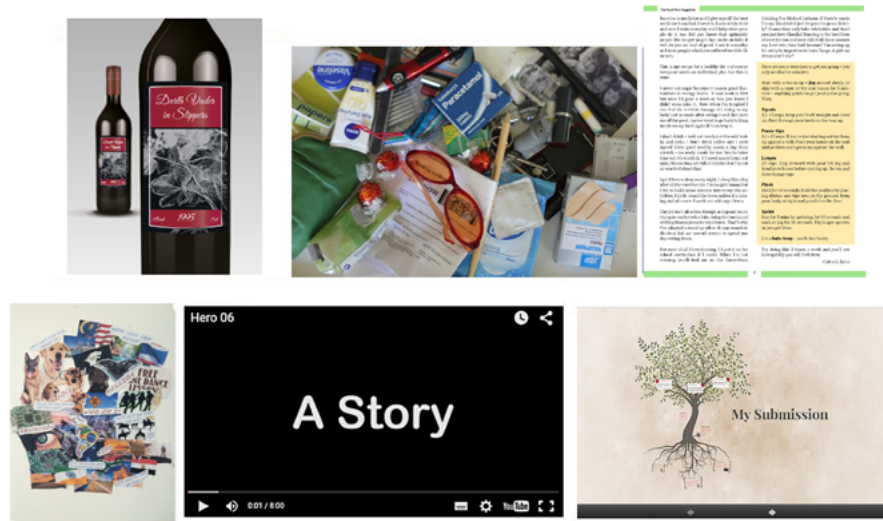


Figure 5: Applicant submissions
Source: Bellyfeel/Author

Tony Watson (2001) used the term “negotiated narrative” in relation to critical management education and learning – more specifically, ways to teach and build management practice. He uses the term (which he, in turn, borrowed from literature studies) 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” (Watson, 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, theories of writing, and re-workings of other writers) but, in RBH, this synthesis results in the creation of a new and negotiated narrative, reflecting the “story behind the story”.

In a negotiated narrative, the narrative is constantly changing due to the negotiations, so my use of the term implies an evolving, liminal concept rather than a fixed position. Moreover, 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 negotiated narrative in RBH acknowledges that the process of creation and its emotional impact is as important to the creation of the online performance as are the fused stories that will contribute to the final product. The aesthetic rules of such a narrative are more akin to world building games like *The Sims* rather than literature of film and television. To be interactive or to participate in this project has meant the need to build a direct link between audience and creator; a communication that has the potential to inform or impact the process of creative development.

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

The interactive nature of the project provided the opportunity to engage (participate) with audiences from different communities by building safe fictional environments that audiences could populate to create “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983) which house opportunities for comment and collaboration, opening up possibilities for the future in the real world. While Anderson’s phrase was coined to refer specifically to nationalism, where he attributed the spread of nationalism to the development and rise of print media, I am using the term more broadly (by referring to a community of interest, or see also Said’s (1978) concept of “imagined geographies”) to emphasise elements that can be created from an investigation of presumed agreed characteristics. These presumed characteristics were defined by those who answered our questionnaires and then took part in our drama.

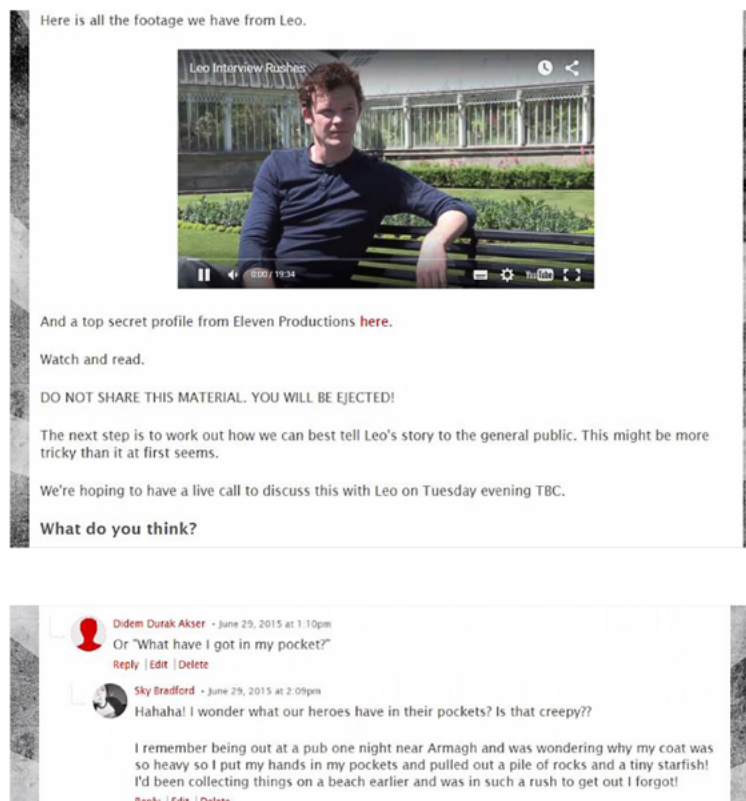


Figure 6: Leo and the discussion forum
Source: RBH Forum (no longer online); Bellyfeel/Author

However, the term also usefully refers to those “imagined” or “perceived” attributes that are afforded by the internet and could equally refer to both utopian and nationalistic elements that are represented there. The project provided the following example where the creation of an online character through a feedback loop could be seen as being problematic in the context of Northern Ireland. Leo offered a photostory of his local area

as his application artefact (see Figure 6) and in doing so suggested he may belong to a particular community. The judges had to interrogate this story to find out who he really was. As people discussed his likely identity there was a strong possibility that some polarisation could occur. To some extent this was avoided as I began to build participant's comments into Leo's character regardless of their contradictory nature. People (although informed) were not really aware that I was using a "surveillance technique" for character creation, but they were delighted to see a complex character emerge from their views. In this way Leo, initially an unpopular choice of hero who received few votes, became an engaging character who reflected people's concerns and to whom people could relate, as one of participants indicated in the feedback:

I thought it was a game ... but I had no idea what to expect. I thought it was quite interesting when Leo revealed his dubious past. I found the thing about the way people present themselves interesting – I was surprised I chose Leo, but he seemed more real. (Player 1, player feedback)

I was also surprised by this outcome, especially as the majority of participants were women over thirty years of age and Leo became an unemployed, absent father. However, it is also the case that a number of participants were nervous of making their views public in this way. The project contained a number of judges who lurked on the sidelines, who wanted their views to have effect as was evidenced by their voting behaviour but who did not want to contribute to character creation. To do so could open one up to conflict and in the context of Northern Ireland such conflict could have consequences. So, story conductors in such projects need to be as aware of the needs of inactive participants as much as those of active players. Using an imagined community as the building block for the prototype proved to be extremely immersive for participants and so a strong community of players was born.

A fiction built on imagined communities – communities built by the imagery, texts and discourses of a range of people – therefore builds and extends on Hugh O'Donnell's (1999, p. 10) 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". It is also 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 (Singhal, Cody, Rogers & Sabido, 2008). His efforts have influenced many similar projects in other countries for both radio and television and now for the web. Since the 1980s, 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 and perhaps interactive production. The RBH project therefore owes a debt to such popular forms of entertainment and education, but a negotiated narrative does not necessarily aim to promote social development above all else; although such development is at the core of the narrative structure. Indeed, such a practice could be manipulated by a range of authors to promote very different messages. In this way I agree with Zuboff's (2019, p. 19) statement that "surveillance capitalism is not technology (...) Surveillance capitalism relies on algorithms and sensors, machine intelligence and platforms, but it is not the same as any of these". The form of the project and its associated structure is not the aspect that necessarily promotes discourse and democratic participation, although it does in part contribute to it and make available new ways to engage in that discourse. 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.

ANALYSING THE PROTOTYPE

Despite a growing body of evidence which details the negative aspects of online participation and the anti-democratic views of some highly motivated and organised actors in the online realm, I believe that this is often to be found in online forums that are not moderated to any significant extent. A negotiated narrative is by its very essence a moderated narrative and one where every contribution can be challenged so Quandt's assertion, that "positive forms of participation now seem awfully outdated" (Quandt, 2018, p. 44), is overcome by using a negotiated approach to content creation, what Kligler-Vilenchik has termed "good participation":

there is a continued need to understand good participation, but instead of an abstraction derived from idealistic notions, we should do so in a way that is empirically informed by the actual participation practices of real people (even if a select few). (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2018, p. 13)

In this way, my study (which is based on 40 participants) acknowledges that those participating were in the main from community and arts groups within Northern Ireland who were concerned with the ways in which stories are told and supported there. This limits the study, to some extent, and it is important to acknowledge that storytelling which involved a wider range of participants from different backgrounds would no doubt have been a more difficult and challenging proposition given that prejudices and positions could have surfaced more readily. That does not invalidate the experience of the prototype however. The participation, and the conflicts that did occur, were analysed in the prototype and the knowledge gained has been used to inform further work.

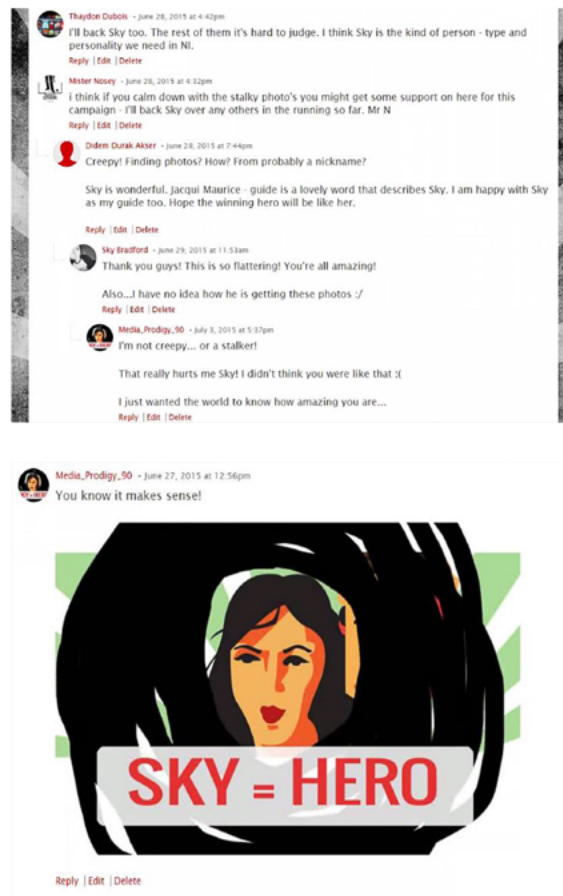


Figure 7: Discussion forum
Source: RBH Forum (no longer online); Bellyfeel/Author

It was crucial that different communities were present in this project. Of the 40 who signed up 27 were over 30 years of age and 13 were under 30 years of age. Twenty two were female and 18 were male. The majority of these were from large cities, such as Belfast or Derry/Londonderry, 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. Twenty were born and bred or have lived in Northern Ireland most of their lives while six had no connection to the place and fourteen had tangential connections, such as being married to someone from there. In online projects that are not connected to large and popular franchises this number can be considered to be a healthy sample. Small numbers did not necessarily undervalue the usefulness of the information obtained. Lance Weiler (2015a, 2015b) has used groups of 12 participants to test his Sherlock prototype and asserts that small groups of five to six people are ideal for granting agency and understanding the work. More importantly for me, it was a sample that represented a wide range of people. Of those 40 people, ten people contributed regular posts although there was a core group of about six who were constantly engaged. This means that the majority of participants took a less active role. Again this could be seen in a negative light, that a self-selected

group of people have taken ownership of the project. However, given that the core group was a very varied and diverse group of people not all known to each other I suggest that this was not the case.

Perhaps it is important to detail here what is often referred to as the 1:9:90 Rule, where out of every 100 users of the internet, only 10% will interact with it, while the other 90% will simply view the material (McConnell & Huba, 2006). Of those 10%, only 1% is likely to be a content creator. Charles Arthur (2006, s.p.) argues that “you shouldn’t expect too much online. Certainly, to echo *Field of dreams*, if you build it, they will come. The trouble, as in real life, is finding the builders”. While some suggest that this dynamic is changing, this project found the builders in these 10 people, meaning 25% of the test group and the majority of those people were over 40 years of age; a real surprise as this age group are not often seen to be builders for online projects. A further important discovery was that those builders were more likely to promote and enliven the project for those who were viewing. So the builders encouraged and prompted those watching to comment and vote and that probably resulted in further participation. This suggests that having an element of control could be a more central concern than participation. Alison Jeffers (2017, p. 209) maintains when writing about participation in Northern Ireland:

despite the success of the GFA in setting up a power-sharing government based on an understanding of the legitimacy of both unionist and nationalist views, many issues remain unresolved. These include “[t]he question of how to deal with the legacy of the past” and the fact that “division remain[s] an unfortunate fact of life”. (McKittrick & McVea, 2012, p. 305)

The work of writers for film, television and new media products since that time, is, in part, defined by the fact that such writers grew up during the Troubles⁴ and that their work is therefore influenced by that period. It could be argued, as Heidemann does when talking about post-Agreement literature, that their work “concerns itself with subject identities suspended between a ‘repressive’ past and a ‘progressive’ future’ and that the resultant work ‘neither attempts to ‘heal’ nor ‘resolve’ the political conundrum of Northern Ireland” (Heidemann, 2016, p. 251).

Instead, she suggests that post-Agreement literature (novels, poetry and drama) concerns itself with, “restructuring, recasting and, more importantly, diagnosing the passive absorption of the country’s violent past into an ‘agreed upon future’, and that the ‘violent past does not necessarily configure as a dominant trope of their writings’” (Heidemann, 2016, p. 251).

⁴ ‘The troubles’ is a frequently used term to refer to a conflict that happened in Northern Ireland from 1960s to 1990s. The conflict although often seen as a religious conflict (between Catholics and Protestants) was primarily a political struggle fuelled by historical events. Unionists/Loyalists wanted Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom and Irish Nationalists/Republicans wanted to establish a united Ireland.

The design and writing of RBH shows similar traits. Maybe such passive absorption of not only the Troubles but also the practices of digital media were a worry to many of the participants in RBH?

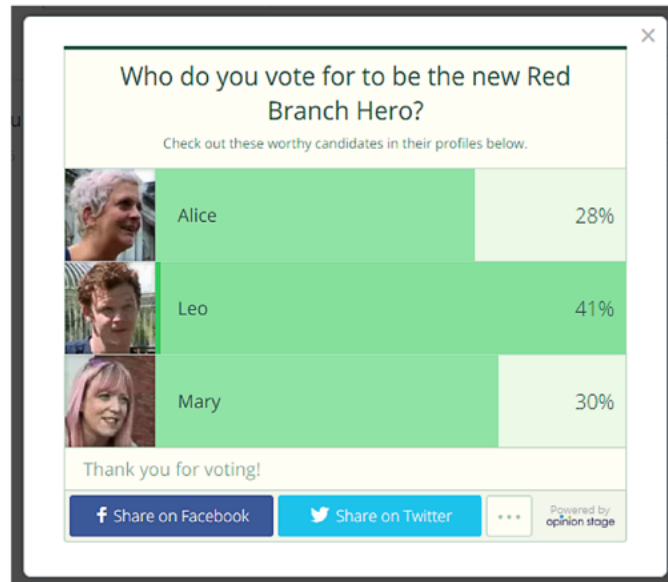


Figure 8: Voting for candidates
Source: RBH Survey (no longer online); Bellyfeel/Author

Heidemann talks of theorists (Nordin & Holmsten, 2009) who read Ireland as a postcolonial society and apply the concept of liminality as “a site of negotiation and re-identification” (Heidemann, 2016, p. 8) and as an enabling state. She takes issue with such a position, suggesting that what characterises Northern Ireland is a state of “negative liminality” (Heidemann, 2016, p. 10), a disabling condition which resists closure and resolution. However, she does not see this as a negative concern or one that is a pathological condition of post-Agreement Northern Ireland. Rather, she suggests that “‘post-Agreement’ writers are predominantly concerned with the private predicaments of their literary characters as opposed to discursive reading of the political structures themselves” (Heidemann, 2016, p. 51).

My concerns have also been driven by trying to gain an understanding of how people have been influenced by these experiences. Finding a form that has been able to accommodate a range of views has been instrumental in facilitating such a project. Therefore, the project design became a mix of popular forms that are able to bring difficult ideas to larger audiences alongside the development of complex characters, which better exemplify the current concerns of people living in Northern Ireland. Playing in this space has meant that we have all been able not only to critique and investigate characters but also to look anew at some of what it means to be Northern Irish. However, in this context I am mindful of Jeffers’ comment that “participation alone is no guarantor of the necessary

redistribution of authority that may lead to positive social change” (Jeffers, 2017, p. 210). As a result, participation, defined as meaning the providing of access, per se was not the central aim of the project. Instead, the project aimed to create a type of participation that promoted and challenged the authority of the authors. When writing about participation in community plays in Belfast she further asserts “the value of thinking about authority is that it allows us to identify and examine different types of power and the role of knowledge and relationships in developing these” (Jeffers, 2017, p. 218). Such a practice was central to the RBH project and its participants frequently contested the actions of the authors and the storylines suggested, inventing their own to replace these.

Heidemann (2016, p.192) suggests that it was not until the 1970’s that the “aesthetic collusion between art and politics has emerged as the defining feature of contemporary Northern Irish drama”. She suggests that more recent productions such as Abbie Spallen’s *Pumpgirl* (2006) and Daragh Carville’s *This other city* (2010) adopt Stewart Parker’s “working model of wholeness” (Heidemann, 2016, p. 192) and apply it to a new political situation: the pitfalls of neoliberal politics in Northern Ireland. As such, the plays she examines “provide a provocative commentary on the ‘progressive’ neoliberal nation-state building” (Heidemann, 2016, p. 193). RBH mirrors this practice. My aims therefore go beyond the idea of “widening participation” for audiences and are related to ideas of “cultural democracy” (Kelly, Locke & Merkel, 1986, n.p.) that emphasise a shift in power between artist/author and participant (Webster & Buglass, 2005, p. 21). Jack Linchuan Qui (quoted in Allen et al., 2014, p. 1133), who has extensively researched Chinese internet usership, sees no correlation between bottom-up inclusive frameworks and the flattening of political structures of control and suggests that “instead, the structures of control seem to have gained from the new wealth of user-generated content, which benefits the powers that be more than anyone else”. There would be no point in engaging in the construction of a participative online negotiated webseries 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 agency and control, and mere participation as access and interaction. This is not what this research is recommending. The participants of RBH had real ownership over what was created in the project using a critical approach to story creation, even if they were few in number.

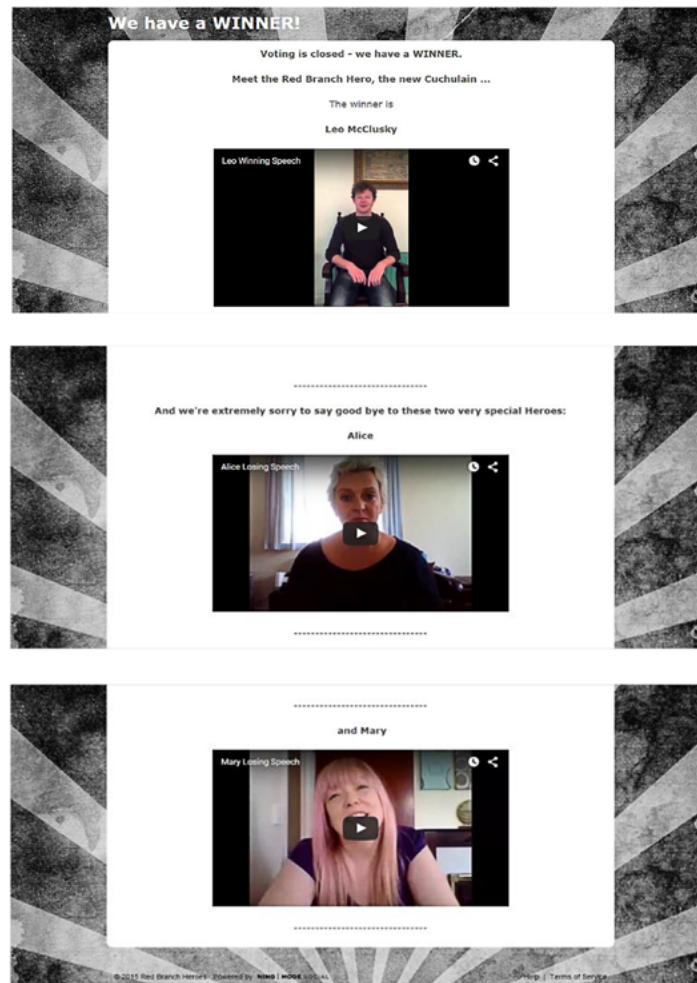


Figure 9: The winner
Source: Bellyfeel/Author

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” (Freshwater, 2011, p. 409).

Setting that task in a polarized society further complicates that process and a discourse was necessary in order to establish how this task was to be undertaken. Some judges wanted more direction in this task:

I think the constituency has to be properly engaged with the story/context/issues. (...) the phase where we were supposed to ‘help our chosen hero to develop their story’ was confusing. I didn’t really know what we were supposed to do. (Players 2 and 3, player feedback)

We were not clear enough with our participants about what time span and with how much negotiation our characters would be created. We created a process and we assumed that this process would be evident to the participants and reach the required result. The process did indeed create rounded characters through investigations and promotion by the judges but we should have made clear when that process was complete. We mistakenly brought the process to an abrupt ending which had the effect of ensuring that people wanted more but also left them a little bereft as they missed the close community created. A lack of involvement on the part of the orchestrators often provoked the judges to fill the gaps and move the story along and make it their own and we possibly should have involved the participants in the ending of the work. While the discussion about Northern Ireland on the site was low-level and very tentative, the eventual successful characters seem to embody the negotiated characteristics of that discussion. This is perhaps the biggest lesson learnt from the writing point of view – control and story cohesion was less of a concern for our participants than the media gurus (Gomez, 2011) of transmedia would have us think and participants are able to understand more fully what a story needs even if they don't necessarily know how to create that themselves.

I received very little feedback on how this type of project could be “useful” in the context of Northern Ireland. On the whole, all participants avoided answering it and some even deleted it from their forms. It is difficult to speculate why this would be. Again this lack of participation is worth considering. Perhaps it is due to the ways in which film and television have been used in relation to the Troubles. Lance Pettitt's (2000) research into the drama documentary suggests, that although such films are based on journalistic research they use the conventions of fiction films to tell their stories and mediate the real world. Maybe if we had asked this question within the drama rather than afterwards we would have gained a better response. People have felt more able to speak in the fictional environment.

Jimmy McGovern's film, *Sunday* (2003), makes no attempt to mimic the style of documentary and is clearly presented as a fictionalised version. Nonetheless, it is based on the stories and talks that he had with many people and in some respects is the culmination of such activity. He mediates the truth of what has happened through a story he creates himself. This is not dissimilar to the process that RBH used, except that this approach goes one step further and asks that the victims and families not only provide the stories, but respond and contribute to the mediated truth produced, in a public forum. Although more drama than documentary, the programme asks the audience to play with these concepts. As Sarah Edge (2009, p. 185) suggests “the docudrama is an especially powerful genre in which the signs of realism and fiction have become conflated”. The work of RBH not only conflates the real and the fictional world to represent the current climate of Northern Ireland, but also utilises the more contested forms of semi-real or semi-fake worlds in reality television, a genre usually associated with attributing derogatory characteristics to ordinary working people. In this instance, the intention was to use

the genre conventions for more positive ends. The voyeuristic elements associated with reality television and social networks were used to motivate investigative approaches to story design. In short, I was asking people what was important to their lives as we played a story game that embodied these ideas.

The dynamic relationship between author and audience did create a strong sense of belonging in this project and ensured that people from both communities were able to take an active part. There was a surprising consensus about what kind of hero was needed for the modern world and what attributes such a hero should have, as the conversation thread in the project shows.

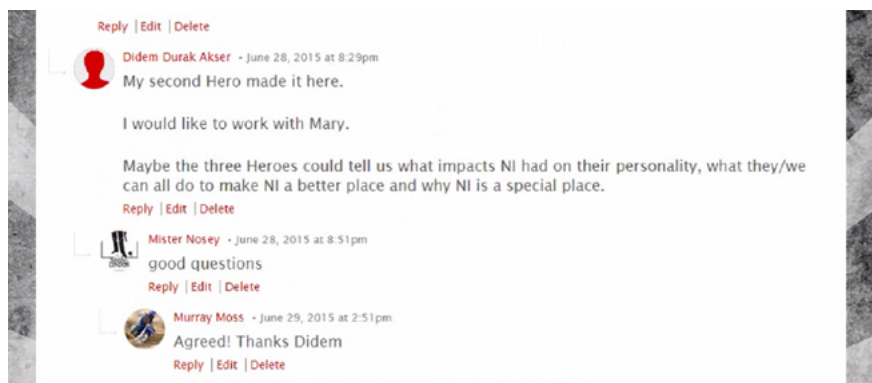


Figure 10: Conversation thread in NING network
Source: RBH Forum (no longer online); Bellyfeel/Author

There was a desire to understand the complexity of human behaviour rather than to take sides. When faced with difficult information the judges tried to find positives and move past stereotypical character portrayals and into a process where deep character is revealed. Such a successful outcome would suggest that the performative and game-playing elements were crucial to building a convincing narrative and that the narrative created was not negatively impacted by such participative elements. If we were to develop this project further, however, we would include live events in our transmedia and interactive practices so that people can meet and share experiences together in neutral spaces where elements of the story can be extended and developed so that that the on-line experience can be extended in their own lives.

CONCLUSION

It is necessary to therefore acknowledge that participation per se does not automatically result in democratic practice or meaningful creative production. Neither can we overlook the skill and experience that the author brings to the creation process. It is my contention that we need to recalibrate and rethink how and why we offer opportunities to participate so that we can ensure these opportunities result in meaningful

creation. In this context it is not about how many people contribute, how much and how often they contribute but about the participatory quality of their contribution and the terms under which this contribution is included, rewarded and acknowledged. For these reasons, I have found the term “negotiated narrative” useful in this context as it recognises that the interactive and participative process is a consultative one, one that results in a synthesis of stories produced by all parties in the project. As Carpentier points out, the real issue is that of control and power: “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” (Carpentier quoted in Allen et al., 2014, p. 1132).

In this way, interactive transmedia and the technology that delivers it does not offer a revolution in storytelling as such. However, its liminality as a form contributes to opportunities that can be used for immersive possibilities. More importantly, this liminality and multivocality, which are generated through the participatory process that offers the reader/user/player greater power and control, also support a more democratic, decentralized society. Participation here is seen to matter, because it moves us away from the hard dichotomies that sustain (violent) conflict, by showing that the many grey zones and the pluralities that characterize contemporary societies can coexist with senses of belonging.

As always, it depends very much on who is controlling such opportunities. A negotiated narrative recognises the ways in which narratives can be hijacked to promote a particular point of view and suggests that discursive decision-making as a central element of participative story making mediates the likelihood of this happening. It also recognises the problems created by “surveillance capitalism” and although using similar but not machined techniques, suggests that such methods can be used for more positive outcomes if the inherent power relations are laid bare, made clear and can be dynamic. Offering opportunities where real life and fiction overlap helps develop online communities where strong links can be made between diverse groups of people. As a result, this research and this article raise the possibility that all is not lost in terms of the beneficial aspects of participation. Let us analyse further the potential of interactive production to better understand its benefits and difficulties. ✍

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