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Jo Briggs

School of Design, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

jo.briggs@northumbria.ac.uk

Investigating situated cultural practices through cross-sectoral digital collaborations:
processes, policies, insights

Abstract

The (Belfast) Good Friday Agreement represents a major milestone in Northern Ireland's recent political history, with complex conditions allowing for formation of a 'cross-community' system of government enabling power sharing between parties representing Protestant/loyalist and Catholic/nationalist constituencies. This article examines the apparent flourishing of community-focused digital practices over the subsequent 'post-conflict' decade, galvanised by Northern Irish and EU policy initiatives armed with consolidating the peace process. Numerous digital heritage and storytelling projects have been catalysed within programmes aiming to foster social processes, community cohesion and cross-community exchange. The article outlines two projects—'digital memory boxes' and 'interactive galleon'—developed during 2007–2008 within practice-led PhD enquiry conducted in collaboration with the Nerve Centre, a third-sector media education organisation. The article goes on to critically examine the processes involved in practically realising, and creatively and theoretically reconciling, community-engaged digital production in a particular socio-political context of academic-community collaboration.

Keywords socially-engaged, cross-sectoral, digital arts, policy, Good Friday Agreement.

1.   Introduction: contexts and motivations

This article draws from the initial phase of my practice-led PhD project, which was financially supported as part of the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council's Collaborative Doctoral Awards (CDA) scheme. Borrowing from the scientific model of research—designed around team rather than individual enquiry and often engaging with expertise beyond the university—the CDA format aims to encourage cross-sectoral knowledge exchange between non-academic and academic partners sharing close but as yet unexplored synergies. The scheme enabled the Nerve Centre in Londonderry/Derry and Interface, Centre for research in art, technologies and design, 70 miles away at the University of Ulster at Belfast, to work together on a collaborative PhD project entitled: *Visual art practices: digital literacies and the construction of identities in Northern Ireland*.

A brief overview of the project partners, below, aims to illustrate their various motivations behind project involvement—while also highlighting particular areas of interest in collaboration and community-engagement—to exemplify the different cultural, creative and disciplinary perspectives that informed the ensuing research processes and outcomes.

1.1. The Nerve Centre (Londonderry/Derry)

Over two decades the Nerve Centre has grown from a grassroots self-help resource for unemployed musicians to a third-sector organisation with interests across Northern Ireland spanning the cultural production, presentation, appreciation and pedagogies of digital media, music and film. It initiates and manages projects in a number of cultural, informal- and formal-educational contexts, including those falling under the remit of 'community relations'. Some of these are manifested by EU Peace programmes particularly concerned with consolidating Northern Ireland's peace process following its emergence from 25 years of political violence—emanating from deep religious, socio-cultural and political divides between constituent Protestant/loyalist and Catholic/nationalist communities. Specific projects developed by the Nerve Centre under this remit include those involving media training and the production of digital didactic resources, such as 'NI's first accredited online cultural diversity training programme,' and educational CD-ROM resources addressing issues around national and cultural identities and sectarianism (Community Relations Council website).

As part of Northern Ireland's Education Policy Working Group (EPWG), the Nerve Centre has been engaged and increasingly influential in mainstream formal education relating to audio-visual production. The implementation of a new educational strategy at secondary school level has fostered specialist qualifications in *Moving Image Arts* at post-14 years: designed by the EPWG and available in schools and education centres across Northern Ireland and in some institutions in England and Scotland. The Nerve Centre also manages two out of three Creative Learning Centres, founded as part of cross-departmental policy introduced after the Good Friday Agreement to support the development of digital media production-related literacies. As such, the Nerve Centre represents a major means through which strategies to enable moving image creative production and develop wider cultural literacies are implemented across Northern Ireland.

1.2. Interface (Belfast)

Broadly concerned with similar social and political contexts of cultural production, Interface critically explores art practices that 'converge the concerns of art ("in here") and social ("out there") processes' (Fleming and Mey 2009, p. 5). These are typically situated beyond the confines of art and academic institutions. One particular focus concerns practice-led methods involving what is variously named—among other things—participatory, interventionist and socially-engaged art, as discussed arguably most prominently by Grant Kester, Claire Bishop and Nicolas Bourriaud.

Bishop's now seminal 2006 essay associates the 'surge' of interest in collaboration and social-engagement—including that of successful fine art practitioners more usually associated with gallery contexts of displaying work—with a contemporary avant-garde (ibid. p. 179) manifesting: 'dematerialized, antimarket, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life' (ibid p. 178). While Bishop's critique primarily focuses on contemporary fine art practices *per se*, an increase in applications of 'engaged' creative

activities more broadly is apparent. Susan Jones (2007), the managing editor of an artists' opportunities newsletter, evaluated longitudinal data from the publication to reveal an increasing trend over time in the value of 'public-service' commissions and activities, by the time of the study representing 65 percent of the monetary value of all advertised grants and earnings available to subscribing artists (ibid. np). The apparent boom in socially-engaged practices and public art towards the latter part of this century's first decade, as discussed by Bishop, is arguably as much to do with increased proportionate funding for art as 'public-service' as it is evidence of a burgeoning avant-garde. In Northern Ireland for example, the Re-imaging Communities initiative (2007–2009) received Arts Council of Northern Ireland financial support to commission artists and other creative practitioners to propose and implement urban environmental projects whereby:

> *Sectarian murals, emblems, flags and graffiti will be replaced by positive images which reflect the community's culture, as well as highlight and promote the social regeneration taking place in communities today.*
>
> (Belfast City Council *Re-imaging communities* website)

Interface, and the fine art area more broadly, encompass interests across this spectrum of the socially-engaged. Prominent individual practitioners developing practice-led PhDs include Loraine Leeson (2009) and Ailbhe Murphy (2010), while other areas of research explore the wider institutional structures and cultural contexts of contemporary, and indeed historical, art practice.

1.3. <u>Researcher-practitioner</u>

My practice explicitly foregrounds the use of digital media tools in co-productions developed in a range of situated cultural and institutional contexts beyond art practice *per se*, with notions of collaboration and community-engagement often at their core. My first 'multimedia' work was developed in 2000 with Valentina Nisi during an MSc programme at Trinity College Dublin, and constitutes a reflective collective narrative developed with the residents, neighbours and friends of a village terrace in County Dublin. Local tales were elicited through social processes and realised through audio-visual tools, with 65 story vignettes filmed in and around the street or developed in post-production. The final piece was presented as a dual monitor installation exhibited in the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin and the local Muintir Na Tíre (a community-focused town hall). *Weird View* aimed to capture and archive, at that juncture at the beginning of the new century, and using 'cutting edge' digital tools of the day (QTVR, 3D, video, Flash animation, Shockwave games etc.) a complexity of social interrelations re-presented as an interactive narrative: recording a snap shot of time and place as urban Ireland underwent rapid social and economic change.

Weird View was loosely informed by methods taken from art practices, ethnography (or, 'quasi-ethnography') and notions, at that time, of social computing—particularly the human-relational possibilities of web-database tools (subsequently labeled 'Web 2.0'). In the ensuing period between *Weird View* and embarking upon the PhD, my own practice continued, albeit concurrent to a demanding academic role leading and teaching on a digital media production and cultural contexts degree course, situated in a media—rather than creative arts—faculty, in England.

1.4. <u>Collaborative methods</u>

Methodologically, dual notions of *collaboration* informed the PhD process. In this particular practice-led context, it functioned at cross-sectoral level, enabling Interface to work with the Nerve Centre, to recruit a PhD researcher and to generate artefacts together. Collaboration is also prominent as an 'engaged' method within constituent digital projects. Together, these processes constituted a platform for research and a vehicle for digital co-production—albeit extremely explorative—but which in turn, generated material outputs for textual analysis and for PhD examination submission as part of practice-led research.

2. <u>Research rationale and implementation</u>

The main PhD rationale examines emerging digital cultural practices, focusing on audio-visual art-related forms of

production. Ultimately, it is informed by a wide range of social and visual cultural theory, particularly relating to communications (e.g. Hall 1997; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006), to examine how newly ubiquitous digital capture devices and digital and telecoms networks are manifesting particular human (signifying) practices and impacting on understanding. The enquiry builds on the substantial body of digital- and media-literacies related discourse concerning everyday activities involving digital and networked communications, exploring issues of democratic access, meaningful participation and critical understanding. For example: Sonia Livingstone's (2009) investigations into the effects of state deregulation and market fragmentation on media consumption and understanding, with particularly focus on children's online practices. Livingstone identifies a range of literacies necessary to deal with online risks and threats—summarised as commercial, aggressive, sexual and to values (ibid. p. 159)—in order to participate as digitally-engaged citizens.

Another expansive body of research concerns autodidactic practices involving *production* and dissemination of digital texts, and the construction and display of digital identities. Daniel Chandler (1998) examines how and what young people's creative personal websites visually communicate about them—comparing the 'under construction' signs prevalent among earlier online projects with their makers' still-developing identities (ibid. np). Even the modest 'talk and text' type of mobile phone facilitates, indeed manifests, creative forms of communication and representation; Manuel Castells *et al.* (2004) plot the device's evolving utilitarian, social and *expressive* uses; as an example of the latter, David Crystal (2008) examines linguistic creativity within text SMS messages, arguing that intra-generational 'textspeak' has evolved among groups of young people through socialisation. danah boyd's ongoing ethnography (2008) is also of note, concerning online social network profile building. This simpler form of web page production has facilitated mass participation in social media, with boyd examining young people's management of online profiles in relation to the generation and maintenance of social capital (ibid.).

This research is concerned with addressing the cultural and aesthetic aspects of digital production in the context of recently increased availability of extremely sophisticated digital capture tools, associated networks of distribution, and institutional use. This is a largely underexplored niche: beyond autodidactic practices as outlined above or the didactic media production activities traditionally delivered in schools (typically focusing on 'meaning-making' and directed forms of production, rather than the aesthetic-expression, cf. Burn 2009).

2.1. Learning from the past

The two digital projects were developed—in what was deemed to be the 'spirit of collaboration'—to practically and culturally align with the Nerve Centre's ongoing activities across the heritage, culture and education sectors. An existing initiative, *Learning from the Past*, constituted a multi-strand project, including development of a *North West Film Archive* (bringing together audio-visual material from or about counties Londonderry/Derry and Donegal—in the Republic of Ireland—from almost seven decades: cf. Border Ireland website) and a complementary programme of didactic digital literacy workshops, enabling individuals to transfer cine film onto DVD and learn about digital editing techniques.

Learning from the Past was financed by the EU Peace II programme, which promotes cross-border exchange and reconciliation. The process of researching and digitising film and video artefacts along with the workshops intended to encourage social and cultural interaction, partly through inter-institutional collaboration in the border region—including through production of 18 contemporary digital stories to complement the historical content of the archive. Initial suggestions from the *Learning from the Past* project manager at the Nerve Centre were for me to develop, perhaps two of the 18 projects, by exploring potential synergies with ongoing programmes at the Regional Cultural Centre in Letterkenny, County Donegal, and the Tower Museum in Londonderry/Derry. While one had to make decisions with limited information, largely as the Nerve Centre projects themselves were quite developmental, the storytelling brief was open to interpretation. I envisioned this as prospectively facilitating the academic research themes more readily than other Nerve Centre projects exploring and generating teaching materials for the creative use of ICT (information and communication technologies) in the history and English school subject areas. However, 'community participation' was institutionally framed within *Learning from the Past* and conditions of funding determined engagement with specific demographic groups. Preliminary meetings with the

partner organisations identified areas of broadly common interest that simultaneously fitted their ongoing programmes, while aligning, somewhat tangentially, to the digital literacies and identities themes of the investigation.

2.2. __Digital memory boxes:__ *__Fergus, Josie, Susan__*

Situated in the far North West of Ireland, the Regional Cultural Centre is an arts venue, which seeks to promote cultural excellence and facilitate wide community access, social inclusion, education and training (Regional Cultural Centre website). A reminiscence-themed programme of workshops had run the previous year, linked to regional outreach work for older residents in this particularly rural part of Ireland. Workshops had enabled individuals to build—around tea chest scale—tangible three-dimensional 'memory boxes' (a term used by the staff) in a variety of materials. Documentation from the workshops showed artefacts resembling stage sets, displaying their makers' personal photographs and mementos; one participant had apparently painstakingly recreated his one-roomed childhood home, finely crafting a curtained bed next to the chimney-breast. Staff recalled how the workshops had concluded with a particularly well-received exhibition, but that due to imminent relocation they could not currently envisage running such space-demanding and otherwise resource-intensive workshops. Thus, the idea was collectively agreed that the reminiscence workshop format should be recreated in digital form, as '*digital* memory boxes', albeit with participants this year engaging as subjects and narrators, while I managed digital production. Participants fitting the 'over 55s' requirement, recruited by the Nerve Centre and Regional Cultural Centre, were invited to their respective venue for preliminary discussions and subsequent workshops.

Ultimately, three digital memory boxes were developed with Fergus, Josie and Susan, combining audio-recordings of memorable life episodes edited down in post-production to form a coherent narrative and sequenced to (mainly) photographic imagery. This was acquired from a range of sources: family albums were an obviously resource but limited in breadth of subject matter; local archives meanwhile, provided imagery with contextual richness and conceptual neatness: facilitating the images' (re)appropriation in the context of a new *North West Film Archive*. Another invaluable visual resource constituted my documentary 'snaps' captured during project development.

2.3. __Artefact descriptions__

Fergus (03:26)

Fergus—a retired nursing officer at what was Donegal Lunatic Asylum—recalls working with men recovering from the effects of extreme poverty and prolonged isolation living in remote parts of County Donegal. Since retirement he has developed a reputation locally as a storyteller. He evocatively describes the living conditions of those coming to the hospital:

> *You could picture it yourself, a fella living on the foot of the mountain and maybe a mile from the nearest neighbours…on a dark November day…and drizzle coming in the thatched roof and the window falling in…he would get depression…and then…and only then…would someone see to him…and he would be admitted to the hospital where he would undergo the correct treatment and make a good recovery…but by the time it was time to go…the wee house was down on him.*

FIGURES 1 and 2

The digital memory boxes combine only audio rather than video recordings of the reminiscences; the associated sequence of still images intends to generate an interesting 'dialogue' between sound and image. Synchronised to Fergus' narration are photographs depicting cottages from across the region (Figures 1 and 2) sourced from the regional County Archives, in turn taken from an unpublished 1940s Master's thesis (1940 O'Neill). The images serve to strikingly illustrate the conditions under which people lived (in sharp contrast to the residents of contemporary cottages—and bungalows—across the region now constituting private holiday homes). The images

were reproduced in an uncropped state—as received in email attachments from the archive—intending to communicate their loose, rather than literal, association to Fergus' story, and making reference to their (re)appropriation in/from another archive.

Fergus goes on to discuss how his involvement in Co. Donegal's dance-band scene prompted the use of music for patient rehabilitation. He assembled his saxophone and played a few improvised tunes at my request (Figure 3): later mentioning that it was the first time he had played in many years.

FIGURE 3

Josie (05:15)

Josie remembers her early marriage, bringing up teenagers on an expansive housing estate, Creggan, and the family's annual holiday in County Donegal:

> They were good days…only 14 miles down the road…but you would have thought…and especially during the troubled years in Derry…you'd have thought you were in another country altogether …'cause there was such peace.

She goes on to discuss balancing domestic responsibilities with the overnight shift at the shirt factory:

> The wages weren't that good, it was like slave labour really in my eyes you know…on that night shift we got five pounds a week…housewives' shift they called it.

The shirt industry in the city was thriving at that time, with several factories providing valuable work. Subsequently, industrial heritage constituted a rich visual resource. Figures 4 and 5 are sourced from a locally published book, _Derry's shirt tale_ (McCarter 1991), which includes documentation from the City Factory, now demolished.

FIGURES 4 and 5

Susan (03:35)

Susan was 96-years-old at the time of project and had been a rural village postmistress up to retirement. She recalls the role's impact on day-to-day life: '_The mailers used to come in…in the morning at ten past seven…and I would have to have been up like…and had my breakfast and faced washed…and cleaned up a bit…._' Figure 6 was taken in Susan's home and depicts the stairs she descends every morning: and used to suggest the daily routine in preparation for the mail delivery. She goes on to remember acquiring the first village telephone—still kept for nostalgic reasons in the hallway (Figure 7)—and how it generated extra work. Villagers left their messages with Susan: '_People used to come you see and they wouldn't want to wait…with some urgent thing and I would have to do that then whenever I would get time._'

Figures 6 and 7

A linear audio-visual narrative was constructed out of discursive recollections in a process similar to what is typically referred to as the California Model of digital storytelling, developed two decades ago and still practiced at the Center for Digital Storytelling (cf. the Center's website). Workshop participants develop time-based digital artefacts by zooming in and out of still images synchronised to voice-over narrations, giving a sense of video without necessitating use of complex digital editing tools. My constructions diverge from this model—arguably owing more in terms of treatment to a long-running '3 Minute Wonder' project on Channel 4 television. Aimed at

identifying new talent, directors pitched for modest commissions to win prime time national exposure. The series thus generated a diversity of films, some quite experimental, broadcast five days a week.

However, the California Model and subsequent flourishing of digital storytelling practices has generated some useful academic texts. Knut Lundby's *Digital storytelling, mediatized stories: self-representations in new media* (2008) brings together critical texts that raise pertinent questions about institutional practices, including those eliciting personal narratives in public contexts—e.g. schools, the heritage sector, public sector broadcasting. Nancy Thumim's chapter (2008) examines such processes from participants' perspectives in relation to institutional motivations, and how representations of 'ordinary people' and 'community' are constructed to serve particular agendas (ibid. p. 85).

In this project, the additional academic institutional framework and artefacts produced were intended to represent some aspect of my creative practice. In this context, the projects described here aimed to aesthetically 'rise above' what I perceived to be some of the apparent digital storytelling 'clutter' being generated regionally and nationally. This involved a time-consuming process of shaping narrative forms out of myriad reflexive recordings and—in order to use the more interesting areas of reminiscence—sourcing suitable visual material from across regional and national archives. From the perspective of socially-engaged art, Claire Bishop (2006) vigorously criticises projects that abdicate authorial voice and aesthetic values in gestures of democratic collaboration in order to 'strengthen() the social bond' saying these practices blur into the long tradition of community arts (ibid. p. 180). However, this is what Peace II projects intend, their primary *raison d'être*, thus raising inherent tensions within the art practice research process.

2.4. Interactive galleon

The Tower Museum in Londonderry/Derry has two permanent exhibitions: a political history of the city and the story of La Trinidad Valencera, a sixteenth century Spanish galleon wrecked off County Donegal and found by a local group of divers in the 1980s (Derry City Council website). A second pilot—an interactive video and animation—was concurrently developed with two primary school classes, the Nerve Centre and the Tower Museum. Methods from socially-engaged art were applied here to populist forms of digital 'edutainment' by producing an artefact with and for children, with the Tower Museum's exhibition informing a Spanish Armada theme.

The first session involved a pupil tour of the museum, with staff recounting the history of the Armada, followed by sessions in each school, separately, to develop the narrative via drama reenactment. This was largely catalysed by availability of copies of artefacts recovered from the shipwreck (e.g armour, cannon balls, shoe, ship's clock) for educational use. Additionally, pupils developed drawings and paintings to help tell the historical aspects of the story, while classmates recorded voiceovers from a script that I devised.

In the final interactive (Flash and video) artefact, the galleon's story—setting sail from France to conquer England, and following a violent storm, shipwreck and later, discovery and recovery by the diving team—unfolds through exploration of interactive interfaces representing the exterior and interior of the ship. Overall, this was a much larger, more educationally focused project involving a crew of sound recordist and camera operator, the *Learning From the Past* project manager, teachers and museum staff. My role was one of co-ordinating, 'directing' and later, compositing the outcomes from across the two schools, in post-production.

Subsequently, there are challenges in identifying ownership and acquiring permissions to use images from the project in publications. Requests to clarify rights and use images for this publication were unresolved, though carefully selected images, which do not identify participating children, are available online (Interactive galleon documentation website). These can be removed if necessary. This issue has surfaced in previous personal projects (e.g. Briggs 2012) and is currently dominant in discussions around 'multi-stakeholder' academically led digital projects (e.g. Cooper 2012).

2.5. Collaborative methods and outcomes

Initially conceptualised as a novel platform and method of academic research, the cross-sectoral collaboration(s)

increasingly blurred into complex project negotiation, facilitation and material artefact production. One had to pragmatically project manage and tailor significant amounts of digital production work to a range of schedules—to meet deadlines across different institutional calendars. Meanwhile, the constituent projects' relative technological simplicity was in sharp contrast to increasing symbolic complexity, as (inter)textually and contextually, the socio-political and institutional situation of production impacted on the artefacts' meanings. This publication presents an opportunity to reflect back and further explore particular areas of policy from which these and myriad other projects emerged.

3. **EU Peace programmes and digital cultural practices**

Learning from the Past was part of a series of EU programmes aiming to foster stability and social cohesion that distributing more than £2b across Northern Ireland through Peace I, II, II extended, and III programmes (1995 to 2013) (SEUPB nd). Thousands of projects have been catalysed including 13,000 funded through the first phase of Peace I (EUONI 2004). A particular decentralised system of community-situated organisations targets grassroots projects with the intention of fostering a sense of 'local ownership' and engaging those perceived as most at risk of becoming involved in violence (SEUPB nd, p. 25). Peace II priorities include social integration and cross-border co-operation, and galvanising projects that help to address 'the legacy of The Troubles' in order to promote reconciliation and social stability (ibid. p. 4). *Learning from the Past* was awarded £194,864.55 from Peace II to:

> *Develop cross border reconciliation and understanding by providing opportunities for young people and adults to creatively engage with the shared history and cultural heritage of the counties of Donegal and Derry while learning skills in ICT and digital media technologies.*
>
> (Border Ireland website)

Elizabeth Crooke's work (2005) on the heritage sector in Northern Ireland contextualises these, as she calls them, 'museum-like' activities (ibid. p. 69), whereby alongside the 'official' museums services, locally-initiated community projects facilitate exploration, articulation and documentation of personal and collective histories. While projects foster cross-community or cross-border exchange, some also concern special interest groups from within one community (ibid.). These include activities involving discussions and documentation of personal accounts of previously 'taboo' subjects, for example relating to the conflict, among wider processes of reflection, acknowledgement, healing and community-building (ibid. p. 77). The understanding is, that by investigating ones' own cultures, values and traditions one is able to develop greater self-understanding and confidence locally, and thus learn to identify, acknowledge and tolerate difference (ibid.).

The projects can be contextualised within wider trans-national processes of community building in post-conflict situations involving reflection and storytelling. Deidre Heddon's survey (2008) of modern and contemporary theatre and performance art describes a 'memory boom' and 'decade of life narration' that links storytelling to geopolitical instability by functioning as a vehicle for healing and reconciliation, and by enabling local contributions to a 'grand narrative' which galvanises feelings of inclusive belonging (ibid. pp. 53 – 56). However, while acknowledging such activities catalyse and reinforce social practices among those whose lives were affected, Heddon cautions on the limitations of amelioration through 'talking cures' in this structural context (ibid. pp. 57 – 58).

Local digital stories produced in a Northern Ireland post-conflict context can, it might be argued, contribute to the 'grand narrative', by articulating other experiences and perspectives, including 'rewriting of well-known political events' (Crooke 2005, p. 80). Crooke makes a comparison with the 'People's Movement' in Australia and establishment of community museums by indigenous groups, which provide opportunities to elicit and present alternative narratives of the past (ibid. p. 70).

4. Ubiquitous practices of audio-visual self-representation

Discourse around audio-visual practice as a vehicle for reflexively exploring situation and as a means of developing alternative narratives extends to the formal schools sector in Northern Ireland, in part, fostered by the ubiquity, and related affordability, of digital audio-visual recording devices and editing tools.

The Nerve Centre is closely involved with more formalised digital media arts qualification development, being part of the EPWG formed in 2000 including representatives from the British Film Institute, the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission (now Northern Ireland Screen) and Northern Ireland's Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessments (CCEA). The group was founded to advocate for, pilot and implement moving image education in Northern Ireland. As set out in its publication, *A wider literacy: the case for moving image media education in Northern Ireland* (NIFTC, 2004)*,* it argues that specifically Northern Irish audio-visual production qualifications should enable acquisition of 'expanded' media literacies (ibid. p. 7). Meanwhile, cross-departmental policy emerging after the Good Friday Agreement, introduced initiatives aiming to harness the transformational potential of creativity (*Unlocking creativity* 2000, 2001, 2004). This lead to a new formal educational curriculum which makes moving image education statutory to age 14 years in secondary schools, paving the way for the introduction of specialist digital media arts qualifications thereafter.

The EPWG argues that developed media literacies are necessary for critical evaluation of audio-visual texts in order to develop an understanding of difference, particularly important, it says, in political regions and situations experiencing divisive socio-cultural conflict (NIFTC 2004, p. 7). Further: expanded literacies must include, as *entitlement*, access to media production resources and opportunities to acquire creative production skills stating: 'It is through moving image education that many young people will find one way to express what they imagine their community to be' (ibid. p. 41). While the EPWG does not explicitly address the issue, it must also be noted that most schools in Northern Ireland operate within a segregated system whereby young people are divided by social and religious background. As such, schools' historic function as sites not only for academic learning but for teaching sociality—what Gunther Kress describes as 'the means, practices and forms of social living' (2008, p. 7)—are exercised within the confines of ones' own community, be it Catholic or Protestant. Nonetheless, the argument for providing individuals with the opportunities and skills to generate and disseminate diverse alternative narratives and identities is a pertinent one; relatively recently, a House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report (CNIAC 2010) accuses the United Kingdom broadcasting industry of continuing to operate within a narrow and impoverished conception of 'Northern Ireland', with its representations—even beyond news and current affairs—largely featuring conflict or unfair and stereotyped portrayals of its people and culture (ibid. p. 3). Thus, specifically Northern Ireland-designed qualifications will, *A Wider Literacy* argues, not only foster positive alternatives to those largely homogenised representations of conflict constructed by news media, but 'achieve social inclusion, understanding between culturally diverse communities, and remotivation of disaffected young people' (NIFTC 2004, p. 8)—an extremely ambitious if not entirely utopian perception of the transformational powers of digital media in the classroom.

5. Discussion: creatively collaborating from outside 'the community'

In her book on situated art and identity, Miwon Kwon (2002) outlines different models for artist-community engagement, from collaborating with existing groups (she cites the residents of an apartment block) to particularly goal-driven or issue-driven endeavours (including fulfilling an exhibition obligation)—to more, sustained, arguably more meaningful projects built on existing ties to a particular community or friendship group (ibid. pp. 123 – 134).

I was an outsider in a city where I had no established contacts negotiating and building partnerships for the research. And, while my particular practical skillset was a valuable resource for accessing institutions and initiating projects, this equally necessitated that I had to avoid being cast as media trainer, in an environment populated by facilitators, community artists and a ready supply of willing interns. Further, this was a relatively complex socio-political situation. The naming of Londonderry/Derry reflects and acknowledges its dual British/Irish identities and use of the term aims to respect citizens with allegiances to either. The cultural, social and political resonances of collaboration in this particular situation were arguably amplified by my own national identity, as 'northern English'.

Sociologists developing a ten-year comparative study of youth transitional identities across the United Kingdom (Henderson *et al.* 2007) found that people living in Northern Ireland routinely ascribe positions, placing people according to their ethnic or religious background, impacting on their qualitative research processes: 'Identity positions were both ascribed and assumed by the young people, and indeed by the researchers' (ibid. p. 7). In this context, explicitly or otherwise, the recording and subsequent editing of the digital memory boxes focuses on the routine of lives at home, at work and at leisure, with conflict, or The Troubles, appearing peripherally in the reminiscence recordings. Josie refers to it in terms of escape during the holidays and as a constant source of anxiety concerning its potential impact on her children.

Claire Bishop (2006) discusses a video installation project by artist Phil Collins—who studied Fine Art as a postgraduate in Northern Ireland—involving the recording and depiction of teenage Palestinians disco dancing. Bishop says that 'by voiding' the work of political commentary, the viewer searches for possible intended meanings via the visual and audio clues—for example in the branded clothing and particular pop music. While the subjects' cultural identities are familiar, she asserts that the 'typical' Western viewer's mind is filled with imagery informed by media images: stereotyped depictions of 'young Arabs either as victims or as medieval fundamentalists' (ibid. p. 182). However, the digital memory boxes did not so much 'void' as possibly 'avoid' certain subject matter. Yet one can only speculate if a local facilitator would have elicited a distinctly different set of stories.

But on the whole, the collaborative ethos took priority over the intellectual and creative needs of the research, particularly concerning the production of 'artworks' for practice-led PhD submission, in that my authorial voice was abdicated to partners' interests and my own aspirations—for developing a youth-focused multi-player mobile computer game—were quickly but pragmatically displaced with more conventional digital storytelling projects. And, this gave rise to fundamental tensions—inherent in a process involving materially constructing and subsequently analysing digitally-mediated representations and identities of others. Critical reflection thus determined a subsequent practical project, with ways sought to enable participant-subjects to generate their own self-representations. To facilitate this: nine months of workshops were implemented in two schools for 16–18 year olds, constituting didactic Flash animation and video production training. Designed around the new 'open brief' digital arts qualification discussed earlier, *Moving Image Arts*, participants were thus able to develop their own subject matter and audio-visual treatment across a range of animation and video media in individual artefacts. This 'community of practice' informed method (cf. Wenger 1998) enabled observation through collaboration and simultaneous documentation (in field diaries and interviews) for research purposes, with the sustained process eliciting greater insights into, and through, social and creative practices, in a specific situated context with participants using particular devices and software tools.

The Nerve Centre-Interface research project was one of 49 collaborative projects selected for funding in 2006 (AHRC 2006) with more than 30 enabling access to special collections for conducting, arguably, relatively conventional forms of academic research. Eight forge academic partnerships with a more unusual range of organisations and businesses: a think-tank, an Aids trust, a law firm, a local authority, a visual arts commissioning agency, an artists' development agency and—including the Nerve Centre—two media arts and education organisations (ibid.). Collaboration through the Nerve Centre enabled short but highly informative periods of engagement with the heritage and cultural sectors, outlined here, and subsequently, the regional qualification authority, CCEA, and two secondary schools. Privileged insights were gleaned into a broad range of institutional practices and processes, subsequently constituting a body of research that acts as a platform from which to explore further lines of enquiry within academia or beyond.

While Elliot Eisner claims that creative arts research necessitates a very open 'anything goes' approach to its design in order to elicit the required knowledge (2001 p. 55), in light of experience I would vigorously contest this. I do agree when he says that knowledge is not 'out there' waiting to be discovered through research, but constructed through the processes of enquiry (2002 p. 211). And crucially that: 'Some things can be known only through the process of action' (ibid. p. 214), necessitating explorative practice-led processes, particularly, I would argue, in areas concerning emerging and rapidly evolving, and in turn transforming, digital cultural practices.

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Digital Media

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Digital memory boxes: *Fergus* (03:26); *Josie* (05:15); *Susan* (03:35).
Produced in association with the Regional Cultural Centre, Letterkenny, County Donegal.
Ireland/UK 2007–2008, colour and sound. Directed and edited by Jo Briggs. Produced by the Nerve Centre Londonderry/Derry.

Interactive Spanish galleon: interactive software developed by Jo Briggs, produced in association with primary schools: Scoil Cholmcille, Greencastle, County Donegal and Saint Oliver Plunkett Primary School Strathfoyle, the Tower Museum and the Nerve Centre, all Londonderry/Derry.
Ireland/UK 2007–2008. Produced by the Nerve Centre Londonderry/Derry.

Biography

Jo's current interests concern the design and use of novel collaborative/participatory methods for knowledge exchange and production in cross-sectoral research into digital cultural practices. She is currently working on a participatory design research project at Northumbria University in association with the Digital Interaction Group at Newcastle University. Previous projects have been displayed in public galleries and community spaces, presented at digital media festivals and academic conferences, distributed on data disc and the internet. After 14 years lecturing in fine art (graphic art and media) and digital design production, Jo returned to full-time study to pursue AHRC collaborative doctoral enquiry, documented online at www.jobriggs.info.