

IATL Fellowship Project Interim Report

The Mediasmith Project

Summary of intentions

- To bring together a group of inter-disciplinary colleagues to explore transmedia documentary as an alternative research and assessment method.
- To host three intensive workshops facilitated by producers, documentary makers and creative technologists to empower participants to produce their own transmedia projects with minimal access to expensive technology and technical expertise
- To recruit a student researcher who would also participate in the workshops and contribute to the organisation and dissemination of the project.
- To disseminate project learning via an active project blog and Twitter feed.
- To host a final symposium (June 2014) to present projects and debate the value of a transmedia approach in research and teaching
- To produce a transmedia project about the Mediasmith Project
- To co- produce a pilot transmedia documentary about a street dance project in the Favelas in Rio, Brazil with Mags Gavan, as a case study for Art as Social Practice (a new option module being developed in the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies

Project Update

Set up

Preparation for the project took place between August and November 2013. My first step was to secure funding from IAS for a speculative lunch to bring together an ‘advisory board’ of researchers interested in alternative research methods. This took place on Tuesday 26th November and an extended version of our discussion is available as an article in the Warwick Exchanges research journal.

<http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/exchanges/index.php/exchanges/article/view/33>

A key task was to publicise and recruit colleagues to the project so information was widely disseminated via the University website, emails cascaded by Faculty and postcards distributed across campus. The workshops were initially oversubscribed but in reality fewer participants attended than anticipated – this has been a disappointment as I turned people away without having factored attrition and competing commitments into the picture. Nevertheless, workshops have been attended by a committed group of colleagues representing Engineering, WMG, English, Politics and International Studies, Statistics, Sociology, and Warwick Business School.

Two student researchers were also recruited:

Terezie Simova, a current student on the MA in Creative and Media Enterprises, with practical experience of documentary making and an interest in a transmedia approach and Athina Baloupoulou, an MA Creative and Media Enterprises graduate who had conducted extensive research into transmedia for her MA dissertation.

The three project workshops took place on the following dates:

Wednesday 29th January

Workshop 1: Transmedia Documentary R&D

Wednesday 5th March

Workshop 2: Digital Storytelling

Friday 2nd May

Workshop 3: Remix & Representation

A full write up of each of the workshops in the form of a live blog and Storify summary from the Mediasmith Project Twitter feed is available on the blog.

<http://www.mediasmithproject.com>

Pilot Documentary: Dancing out of Danger

The ambition to co-produce a pilot transmedia documentary was always tangential to the core aims of The Mediasmith Project and it has proved difficult to realise in practice. Initial discussions with Mags Gavan of Red Rebel Films were promising however on a return visit to Rio de Janeiro at the end of 2013 to complete a related documentary she found the political situation had worsened and the project we planned to film had been thrown out of the favelas by traffickers. In addition to the risks Rio de Janeiro is one of the most expensive cities in the world and the prohibitive costs and ‘hybrid’ nature of the research made it difficult to secure the necessary match funding. We have now identified a project in Colombia and are hopeful of resourcing and producing a documentary in the longer term as a complement rather than an inclusive element of The Mediasmith Project.

Mediasmith Project Workshops

All three workshops have now taken place as planned and have included contributions from practitioners and colleagues from the academic technology team. Contributors to date include:

Rachel Carter (Film Producer): on the pragmatics of producing a film/digital media project, resourcing a project and workflow

Rob Batterbee (Designer/Creative Technologist): introduction to editing, workflow and the creative process

Chris Atkins (Documentary Maker): narrative building, audience engagement and editing techniques

Mags Gavan (Documentary Marker): resourcing projects, relationship building, narrative techniques and audience engagement

Tim Wright (Cross Platform Producer): digital media and narrative creation, narrative devices, online/offline interplay, gamification, creating and manipulating data assets

Steve Ranford (Academic Technologist): digital presentation tools and techniques, infographics and data visualisation methods

My role has been as convenor and ‘continuity announcer’ introducing the concept and practice of transmedia documentary, reflecting on the connections between the practical examples and facilitating participants in developing their individual projects. The workshops were discursive and playful with opportunity for participants to engage with many different tools and methods. By the end of the first workshop everyone had edited their first 30 second film, in the second they found themselves playing ‘golf on the moon’ and creating new digital assets through play, and in the final workshop much of the discussion centred around the acquisition of visual (and digital literacy), ethics and the challenges to embedding and resourcing these practices in an academic context. By the final workshop some participants were in a position to present work in progress ranging from a data set of forty motion capture videos to student films piloted within a module taught in the English department.

Each of the workshops was filmed and recorded in several different ways. The intention to disseminate the learning as the project progressed was met by live blogging and tweeting at each workshop so that our process was transparent and we could invite contributions from external audiences.

Mediasmith Project Symposium

The intention to host a symposium in which project participants could present their individual transmedia projects in June 2014 was perhaps overambitious. One of the early realisations was that the combination of a steep learning curve in terms of acquiring the necessary technical skills and the collaborative nature of the production process is time and resource intensive; so much so that one participant has mobilised a five person strong production team! Participants are committed to developing their ideas but were/are not at a stage where they have a finished piece of work to present. In addition, several people requested deferring the symposium until the autumn as June falls within the exam period. Consequently I have not gone ahead and organised this and have therefore underspent the budget set aside for this aspect of the project.

What have we learnt?

This is just a short summary of some of the key learning and questions that have emerged during the project so far (it is not exhaustive)

- **Filmmaking is inherently collaborative:** this has raised some interesting questions about the nature of collaborative work, authorial control and how this compares with an academic research process; at what stage does the collaboration take place? Who are the collaborators? What is the nature of their contribution? What is my role; author, director, producer, facilitator, technician, database manager, editor, developer, curator or all of the above?

- **Technical/technological proficiency:** learning new skills, developing expertise in software and new digital tools is time-consuming (and genuinely fear provoking for some) leading to questions; should I learn to do it myself or outsource? What is the best use of my time? Do I need to learn how to code or become proficient at all aspects of filmmaking practice in order to produce a high quality digital object/film (that the terminology to describe outputs is problematic is also a key learning point)
- **Creating and managing digital and audio visual data:** how do we collect, store and retrieve digital and audio-visual data? What are the implications for archiving digital data collected in multiple formats? Who owns what? Where are the boundaries? Does a transmedia project that sparks an ongoing conversation have a finite end?
- **Visual incompetence and new forms of literacy:** whilst we are relatively accomplished in the production of literary texts within academia we lack visual literacy and need to cultivate a new aesthetic approach to the production of knowledge i.e. it's a steep learning curve and, as in the production of texts it's about the combination of craft and content – it requires mastery. This also raises questions about how to offer appropriate support for students in the production of these hybrid 'digital texts' (even if they demonstrate seemingly well developed visual literacy skills). Who is qualified to judge and assess this kind of digital work?
- **Accessing resources:** if research process and outcomes deviate from the conventional norms how do we access funding and other resources to produce this kind of work? The AHRC funding contribution to Joshua Oppenheimer's feature documentary *The Act of Killing* is a timely and encouraging example but it may well be a case of piloting projects in the hope that funding will follow changes in practice. Funding remains a challenge when designing research project in this way.
- **Copyright versus cultural practice (participatory culture):** the legal and moral obligations that we are required to respect when using existing and found digital content are increasingly challenged by the cultural practices of remixing and redistribution without the copyright owner's permission. What is our position within the academy in relation to this debate? How do we enforce the legal and ethical use of content without constraining creativity and intellectual freedom? These conversations segue into discussions about open access etc...
- **Public Engagement/dissemination:** a transmedia approach lends itself very well to engaging audiences beyond the academy in a number of ways. Firstly through 'crowdsourcing' participant contribution from the outset of a transmedia project so that the public are involved in the co-creation of knowledge and meaning throughout the process. Secondly through the presentation of research/knowledge in an alternative form (short film, art installation, performance) which provokes and invites an ongoing discussion/interaction following the 'house party' transmedia model (Henry Jenkins, 2006)

- **Transmedia production as a curatorial practice:** the methodological approach that we have explored throughout the project generates a richer set of materials/digital assets/documents to synthesise into a meaningful whole. This 'whole' also has many possible shapes and forms and may not be entirely within the researcher's control. How do we develop this kind of curatorial expertise?
- **Links to an emergent set of practices/discipline:** during the project there has been a growing realisation that these practices fit within the emerging disciplines of digital humanities and digital sociology in particular. The Mediasmith Project has a significant contribution to offer this debate (hence why deferring the symposium may provide an opportunity to explore these connections in a more explicit way)

All of these points present an agenda for further discussion - it was always the hope that the project symposium would offer a forum for this.

What next?

The project was deliberately designed to be open-ended and experimental and it has felt very much like the start of a conversation. Despite the natural shrinkage in the group I think it is fair to say that it has built a lot of momentum and excitement and I am keen to sustain this. With plans to defer the symposium there is now an opportunity to keep the conversation alive on the project blog and expand and enrich it with more content including:

- Interviews with project participants
- Interviews with transmedia project authors
- Revisiting and elaborating on issues that have emerged during the workshops
- Inviting guest posts from contributors
- Using the blog as a platform to build visibility and create and audience for the symposium

If possible I would like to explore the opportunity that deferring the symposium can offer to connect the Mediasmith Project into discussions about the digital humanities more explicitly. I would also like to extend the ambition for the symposium to include some external speakers (this is a deviation from the original plan).

Therefore I would like to request permission to carry the remainder of the project funding forward in order to host the symposium in November 2014 and retain the student researchers to this end.