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Articles

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How we role: The collaborative role-playing poetics of the Secret Story Network

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Abstract

In 2018, a group of ten academics and industry professionals created 'The Secret Story Network'. This practice-research initiative produced ten 60–90-minute role-playing games conducted on the social media platform WhatsApp. In the process, we worked to identify and refine design strategies that incentivize engagement with the type of narrative collaboration that media scholars commonly call 'collective storytelling.' Via the participatory action research methodology, this study evolved through cycles of prototyping, testing, feedback, reflection and

modification. This article analyses our study in relation to the 'Threefold Word Model' for RPGs proposed by Kim. Based on the affordances of the WhatsApp interface, we suggest a modification of this conceptual frame, in line with scholars such as Edwards, Bøckman and Bowman that extends investigations into four theoretical lenses that we use to examine the stories in our study. These modes are (1) drama, (2) game, (3) simulation and (4) immersion. The observations made also suggest new avenues for 'writing' and creating interactive digital narratives.

Keywords: interactive narratives, role-playing games, collaboration, digital storytelling, WhatsApp, participatory action research

Introduction

Throughout 2018, ten academic and media professionals and a handful of student volunteers met regularly online via the platform WhatsApp to create interactive storytelling collaborations between 60 and 90 minutes in length. The project was led by an interdisciplinary team of experienced scriptwriters from film and TV, theatre and comedy in the United Kingdom, many of whom had previously specialized in immersive and transmedia storytelling. The authors worked in conjunction with the UK interactive storytelling company, Bellyfeel, who originated the idea. Together, we called ourselves the Secret Story Network (SSN). Each collaboration was designed and led by a different writer, and the project aim was to study different forms of collaborative storytelling through testing and pushing online story formats. Arts Council (United Kingdom) funding was used to create these new story formats, to train writers in online story curation and to test the narrative possibilities of the WhatsApp interface. We later analysed our findings, and some of those insights are featured in this article. It should also be noted that throughout our collaborations, we deliberately avoided imposing strict rules about story construction. This helped inspire creators to experiment with a wide variety of forms, exploring many different aspects of digital collaboration that allowed us to take our practice into new areas of writing, such as game play, role play, improvisation and invention, so as to better understand these dimensions of interactive digital narratives.

Our research aims were to:

1. identify and study the different modes of collaboration related to SSN WhatsApp stories;
2. identify and study design strategies that promote different modes of real-time, digital, narrative collaboration;
3. identify and study design flaws that inhibit different modes of real-time, digital, narrative collaboration.

New narrative forms give rise to new analytical challenges. As Likavec et al. argue, 'the traditional narratology model was thought to describe analogical narrative as a linear sequence of the author's work. [...] It is now obvious that this does not fit the narratives in digital media' (2010: 94). The project was undertaken to experiment with forms and find new ways to 'write' or create digital narratives, including those created in a role-playing context, and to answer the concerns of media scholars such as Jenkins (2008), Riggs (2019) and Millard, who call for new

approaches to storytelling for the digital medium. When examining our study of stories created on WhatsApp, we drew on the framework of John Kim, whose 'Threefold World Model' (1997) effectively identifies three key modes of game play: drama, game and simulation. In 2001, Edwards proposed his 'three way model', invoking adjectives that echo Kim's nouns. For instance, Edwards's word 'Gamism' correlates to Kim's term 'game'; Edwards's 'Narrativism' correlates to Kim's 'drama'; and Edwards's 'Simulationism' correlates to Kim's 'simulation'. In 2003, Bøckman modified Kim's Threefold Word Model by arguing that Live Action Role Playing games or 'LARPs' feature a different sort of role playing where simulation is not really a significant factor because people are actually performing their narratives in real-world settings. In place of simulation, therefore, Bøckman proposes using the word 'immersion' to define the more performative aspects of LARPing.

This study suggests a similar revision of Kim's Threefold World Model to further explore the concepts of simulation and immersion in a 'live' storytelling context. While we retain his original modes of game play, we further investigate the concept of 'immersion' as part of our experiments on the WhatsApp platform. Here we talk about how immersion is created in SSN, which is akin to that of LARPs but which happens in fictional environments. This article, therefore, examines our findings through the lenses of:

1. games
2. drama
3. simulation
4. immersion.

In addition to clustering our findings according to these categories, we suggest how they often blur the lines between them. This, in fact, was one of the first things that inspired us to create stories on WhatsApp, the idea that it was simultaneously a communications tool, a broadcasting method and a means of collaboration. This allowed us to experiment with collaborative writing techniques and dramatic forms that challenge author/audience expectations and marry these with filmmaking approaches that emphasize scripted forms to create stories in which people are able to take an active part. What resulted was a form that closely resembled many Role Playing Games (RPGs) or LARPs that are intrinsically multimodal and polysemic.

Methodology

Because this project and study were designed in association with other producers, writers and active participants, action research seemed an appropriate methodology to apply. Reason and Bradbury suggest that action research is 'an orientation to inquiry that seeks to create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues' (2008: 1). We were also interested in the participatory nature of the study and wanted to include significant feedback and response from our audiences; therefore, we used participatory action research (PAR) as our methodology.

PAR is considered a subset of action research, which is the 'systematic collection and analysis of data for the purpose of taking action and making change by generating practical knowledge'

(Gillis and Jackson 2002: 264). 'A distinguishing feature of PAR – as opposed to action research more generally – is that the participants are also involved in its evaluation [...] [This] is based upon the concept of communal reflection and self-evaluation' (MacKenzie et al. 2012: 13). Such methods of research have a long history of cooperative inquiry, involving what Greenwood and Levin have suggested as 'broad cadres of participants' (2007: 34). When defining the collaborative nature of PAR methodologies, Smith et al. explain:

This processing entails an openness and an interpersonal vulnerability to which university researchers may be unaccustomed vis-à-vis other research participants; moreover, this is an ongoing part of the work, and researchers should not let idealized conceptualizations of mutuality and trust tempt them to become complacent. (2010: 422)

While PAR starts with a problem to be solved, the final goal is to build 'collaboratively constructed descriptions and interpretations of events that enable people to formulate acceptable solutions' (Stringer 1999: 189). Therefore, our study was oriented towards finding an approach to support the construction of stories that was equitable, engaging and life enhancing for all participants.

This approach presents some methodological challenges for this study. For instance, 'How do we articulate the multiple positionalities, contradictions, and ambiguities across a group of very different people?' (Cahill 2007: 337). Based on such concerns, our researchers worked to coordinate communication in a manner that was as transparent and egalitarian as possible. Following the lead of Grant et al., we addressed these challenges by 'building relationships, acknowledging and sharing power, encouraging participation, making change, and establishing credible accounts' (2011: 3), hence the value of our frequent think tanks and debrief sessions.

Throughout this study, our researchers often worked in isolation. However, we also met in person and online, communicated asynchronously via e-mail and engaged in iterations of prototyping and user testing to ensure that the work would be engaging for audiences. Over eighteen months, our research evolved through cycles of prototyping, testing, feedback, reflection and modification. Starting in 2017, we began to design and play stories and game prototypes with writers and storytellers on WhatsApp. Because collaboration is an inherently complicated and messy process, we designed our study to allow for a great deal of informal peer-to-peer learning, and gradually, by fits and starts, our first RPGs began to emerge.

Figure 1: Secret Story Network logo.

The study

Throughout 2018, ten story scenarios were developed online as part of the SSN. These were all hosted and enacted on WhatsApp and identified as creations of the SSN; see www.secretstorynetwork.com. The stories ranged from those with prescribed elements or what might be defined as railroading (Bowman 2013: 17–18), to those that were more open and allowed participants to invent with fewer constraints. In all models, participants were empowered to design and orchestrate character development, control the direction and

content of a story and make active contributions to the theme and style without having to demonstrate sophisticated storytelling skills.

The word 'Secret' in the title of the project drew attention to both a strength and a weakness of the research design. As Boyce explains, '[c]ollective sense-making occurs differently in structurally closed systems than it does in open systems' (1995: 132). Because our stories were only accessible to select participants who had to be invited and then added to the chat, opportunities for spontaneous grassroots engagement were foreclosed. In other words, our stories operated in a bit of a vacuum. They were more controlled and contained than more organic social media discourses. What is more, their creative evolutions were not entirely spontaneous. Instead, the collaborative design of each of the ten collaborative projects was carefully constructed beforehand by a single writer-designer.

Boyce explains how this approach influences outcomes: 'In a closed system, co-creating (the field approach to collective sense-making) is not expected. Collaboratively constructing a new sense of shared meaning is not only unexpected but undesirable' (1995: 132). However, the closed structure of SSN helped promote our ability to study outcomes. By containing and at least partly controlling the collective storytelling environment, the story designers were able to test various means of promoting and inhibiting different modes of collaboration.

SSN was, in the parlance of software design, a 'skunkworks' (Gwynne 1997: 18): an innovation incubator consisting of a small group of stakeholders freed from the usual organizational constraints. This allowed us to create and iterate a number of highly diverse approaches to collective storytelling. From the outset, we were primarily focused on creating stories that were as engaging as possible.

The role of the author and their relationship to filmmaking are indeed complex, and as Gerstner suggests, 'it can be perplexing, particularly to those who have labored with poststructuralist theory and issues of agency' (2003: 21). Such concerns are equally complex when it comes to discussions of interactive narratives and why some decry the distortion of classical dramatic forms (Konetiz 2015; Riggs 2019). This classical view of narrative composition casts the writer in the role of both prime mover and final judge. An author, in this sense, is both the font of creative inspiration, producing a work of striking originality, and, somewhat tautologically, the ultimate arbiter of the value of that work.

In SSN, we engaged in the process of collective storytelling. When working this way, the role of the author is necessarily transformed and must, therefore, be reconceptualized. The collective storytellers are not authors in the traditional sense. Far from operating as omniscient voices attempting to make a fixed and final sense of the text, they are individual contributors vying to inflect the narrative with idiosyncratic meanings that do not always smoothly cohere with the contributions of their fellows. This constitutes a new mode of expression in which co-creators assume character roles and interact with one another in the manner of actors improvising a scene. Likavec et al. call this mode of digital creation 'emergent storytelling' (2010: 94). They define it as 'a style of participated narration in which the structure of the narrative emerges from the interaction between the characters instead of being defined by a predefined plot' (2010: 94).

According to Patrickson, 'best practice principles imply this sort of event is not simply storytelling – but a social, playful, skilful drama with its own developing distinct poetics' (2016: n.pag.). She proposes a form of digital process theatre. Our article focuses on authorship in this sense, as a kind of cultural, collaborative act. It describes a series of collective storytelling projects where the contributions of individual participants were valued equally. As these projects centred on interfaces that were familiar and intuitive, participants were able to easily articulate diverse perspectives with minimal performance or technical skills. In a similar sense, we were able to collaboratively generate stories negotiated ad hoc through the process of production. This form of storytelling also correlates closely to role-playing games and indeed, we used many of the techniques and processes found in RPGs and LARPs to inform our work.

Contextual review

'Interactivity' is a term often associated with new media narratives, role-playing games and various forms of immersive entertainment. Much has been promised in terms of interactivity, but often, as with Build Your Own Adventure books, all variables are predetermined, which tends to limit the audience's ability to influence the world of the drama. Although, in a game's context (and particularly RPG), we find more open frameworks from which the story can emerge. Players can be permitted the freedom of character creation and can decide how to engage their character. This is always within the writer's overarching plot. At times, as Ryan suggests, the interactive elements are in conflict with the immersive elements of such stories. Her solution has been to propose the combination of immersion and interactivity so that readers become performers, acting out the roles of their characters in much the same way as Patrickson suggests. In this way, interactive programmes need to have the ability to modify themselves in response to the user's decisions (Ryan 2012). Therefore, SSN offers a complex layer of interactivities by linking to other media, texts and pretexts, producing an 'inner level' (Ryan 2012) of story generation where ideas are generated on the fly through improvised storytelling. Following on from his experimental collaborative project 'Sherlock Holmes & the Internet of Things,' Lance Weiler identifies four emergent design principles for collaborative storytelling projects: trace, agency, theme and social movement. These do not easily, neatly map onto the four modes of game play mentioned above. They are, however, related, as they identify qualities that inform each mode. Like Weiler, the SSN team also work in small groups of five to six people to facilitate collaborative experiences.

Engagement levels and most importantly the FUN factor greatly increased as we relinquished control and let those formerly known as the 'audience' become collaborators with us. Together we are all storytellers wrestling with an emergent creative space one in which our collective actions give rise to a new narrative that embraces the collaboration itself.

(Weiler 2015: n.pag.)

Likewise, in SSN, we intended to create an immersive context that would promote a discourse, where personal contribution was valued within multi-perspective views. This participation was easy to access, encouraged people to challenge their views and required minimal performance skills. In this way, we were able to work together to create a meaningful story that was negotiated through the process of production.

A key affordance of digital media is its capacity to create nonlinear connections, hyperlinks that suggest intriguing digressions and cut between parallel stories, unsettling the notion of any fixed central narrative. As Likavec et al. state:

In digital media, text is not a sequential monolithic block anymore; it changes to hypertext through massive use of links that give the user the possibility to choose many routes to surf the content, thus becoming an author who establishes the order, the presence, the rhythm and consequently the meaning of the text. These innovative characteristics of digital narration permit an interbreeding among genres, producing new narrative forms, such as the branching narrative and the hyper-textual one, that can be classified as interactive storytelling.

(Likavec et al. 2010: 94)

Rather than obliterate the give and take of sequential composition, such complexities enrich it, offering opportunities for dramatists to co-create in all sorts of new ways. Like fellow mountain climbers, these collaborators both challenge and support one another in pursuit of a shared goal and along the way, and this requires careful and constant negotiation.

Tony Watson uses the term 'negotiated narrative' in relation to his practice-based research (2001: 388). He defines this as a process whereby a range of 'stories' are synthesized to form a single narrative discourse. A negotiated narrative is, in effect, 'the story behind the story' (2001: 388). The narrative is constantly changing due to these negotiations, so the use of negotiated narrative implies an evolving concept rather than a fixed position. For example, in our stories, characters were often killed or rendered inactive in a game, and players took issue with their position by re-engaging as ghosts. The negotiation of stories in this manner results in a narrative fusion that affords, and indeed depends on, real agency on the part of the contributors. This is significantly different to the playbooks and rules that commonly accompany some role-playing games and is more akin to the aesthetics at work in LARPs. As a result, SSN involves discursive and experimental elements of play that would not usually find themselves part of a narrative text, but which are commonly used in installation art and digital arts projects, so the definition of 'Story' this project uses more readily corresponds to Ryan's (1991) more open conception of narrativity. This is guided by three principles: the setting up of a world and those inhabiting it and the changes that occur in a temporal sequence, along with the possibility of the identification of aims, motivations and causal relations that ensure coherence in the plot.

Brenda Laurel (2013) was one of the first to suggest a direct link between digital environments and theatrical representations. She argued for 'computers as theatre', basing much of her work on performance studies and, in particular, the theories of Aristotle. More recently, Koenitz challenges adaptations of such theories, saying the 'Aristotelian notion of what constitutes a well-formed plot [...] is in conflict with the concept of interaction' (2015: 96). He proposes we change the artistic focus from product to process. When describing this mode of narrative composition, Riggs identifies something she calls 'the Storyplex'. 'The Storyplex is a dynamic network that balances the traditions of storytelling, human psychology and the affordances of computational systems to create an immersive narrative' (Riggs 2019: 151). She suggests that her toolbox has three sections: technology, creators and participants. In this way, her thinking is similar to the ideas of Koenitz, who uses terms such as 'protostory', 'narrative design' and

'narrative vectors' to capture the specifics of interactive digital narratives. SSN has all the hallmarks that these theories suggest are crucial to successful interactive narratives but perhaps concentrates more fully on the participative elements of such designs and, as such, owes a further debt to role-playing games of various types.

Figure 2: Devising day.

Immersion is a key ingredient to most forms of digital production, but having participants lose themselves in a fictional world is not the same as compelling them to actively co-create it. This type of deep engagement occurs when participants are inspired to openly articulate imaginative ideas. Brian Boyd (2010) suggests that this compositional impulse is hard wired into the human psyche, and our immersion in stories is an adaptive process that helps to productively alter attitudes and beliefs. According to this view, we all have an innate desire, perhaps even a need, to tell stories, but how can RPGs effectively harness this impulse?

As Rose suggests, '[s]torytelling is key but, as with any key, it only gets you in the door. What people really want is to merge their identity with something larger. They want to enter the world the story lives in' (2015: n.pag.), hence engagement becomes a much more useful term in this context. Engagement happens when the audience is asked to take some form of action. Fan cultures, for example, show an increasing desire to step inside artificial worlds and deepen and broaden them. Such activities mean the writer/creator not only needs to build immersion into the production but also needs to provide performance opportunities for their audiences. Sarah Bowman similarly suggests:

Through a better understanding of the ways in which various players find enjoyment through immersion, designers and organizers can create experiences that are more fulfilling for their player base at large. [...] through understanding immersion, scholars can better comprehend the reasons why role-playing games are so appealing and, in some cases, transformative for players.

(Bowman 2018: 394)

SSN sought to promote such immersion by incorporating familiar genre conventions and thus welcoming participants to explore a relatively familiar terrain in a manner that was not entirely alien. Each story featured a writer who acted as what is often called a 'Story Master' in RPGs. This individual was required to start the story, guide its progress and help it to reach a satisfactory conclusion. However, there was no rule book in SSN stories; the rules were very few, and their delivery was constantly evolving.

As our stories were all created online, participants were encouraged to incorporate digital images, sounds and texts as we contributed to the process of composition. These contributions took many forms and ranged from prose, to poetry, to music, to visual art, to short films.

Figure 3: Planning for story.

Although the ten RPGs we eventually created featured a wide variety of narrative structures and character types, they all promoted and rewarded participation via four primary types of role

playing. The following section elaborates each of these modes, tying them to the composition of a specific story developed on WhatsApp as part of the SSN initiative.

Games

John Kim defines the 'gamist' approach to role playing as

the style which values setting up a fair challenge for the players. [...] The challenges may be tactical combat, intellectual mysteries, politics, or anything else. The players will try to solve the problems they are presented with, and in turn, the GM [Game Master] will make these challenges solvable if they act intelligently with the contract.

(1997: Section 3, para 2)

This view of role playing applies to many of the WhatsApp collaborations conducted as part of SSN. The early iterations, in particular, contained many game-like features and less free-form invention. Another characteristic that informed some of our projects was competition. This aspect of role playing is something Edwards (2001: n.pag) emphasizes when explicating his notion of 'Gamism'. According to him, '[it] is expressed by competition among participants. [...] It includes victory and loss conditions for characters, both short-term and long-term, that reflect on the people's actual play strategies. The listed elements provide an arena for the competition' (Edwards 2001: n.pag).

Participants in our SSN projects were often incentivized to win some kind of competition. This compelled us to be strategic, while experiencing the ludic pleasure of manoeuvring around prefabricated obstacles in pursuit of a predetermined goal. In other words, the RPGs conceived for the SSN project frequently incorporated design techniques found in video and analogue games. In some cases, this meant establishing a voting system that allowed participants to select plot options or to evaluate the relative merits of individual contributions. Our RPGs also featured puzzle mechanics, battle scenarios, mazes, gated content and many other common gaming tropes. What is more, many of them were constructed via 'bread crumbing' (Bateman 2021 108), a technique familiar to game designers, where clues are left to lead participants through the story spine. These clues were arranged in a linear fashion, guiding players towards a particular outcome or set of potential outcomes. Due to budgetary and timing constraints, our stories could only allow for limited branching; thus, another gaming technique known as 'funnelling' was employed (Bateman 2007: 109). At specific choke points, narrative options were limited, and multiple pathways were forced to intersect, forming a single linear channel.

In some SSN stories, the writer tended to exert more control over the various modes of participation, impelling collaborators to stay on particular paths and to complete specific tasks within allotted time frames. *Space Is a Bitch* featured many gaming tropes and thus obliged participants to deploy the gamist tactics throughout.

Figure 4: *Space Is a Bitch*.

There were some opportunities for narrative invention, but these were embedded within a fairly linear structure. As a result, story details could change from iteration to iteration, but the basic

plot progression was somewhat fixed and predictable. There were, however, two possible endings to be determined by choices made by the participants.

The story involved a female astronaut trapped in a remote space station. The participants were on a rescue mission to reach her before she ran out of oxygen. In some versions, she was saved. In others, she infected everyone with a deadly disease, which was then brought back to earth.

The inclusion of gaming techniques in RPGs affords a sense of 'railroading' (Bowman 2018), that is, limiting agency to selecting from a set of predetermined outcomes. This is beneficial in terms of improving production values, as story elements can be produced in advance of the RPG session. As *Space Is a Bitch* had many gaming elements, it was also one of the more well-produced RPGs featured in the SNN project.

Drama

Another key aspect of role playing is drama, which Kim defines as 'the style which values how well the in-game action creates a satisfying storyline. Different kinds of stories may be viewed as satisfying depending on individual taste, varying from fanciful pulp action to believable character drama' (1997: n. pag). Edwards's notion of 'Narrativism' builds on Kim's conception of drama by stressing the significance of player collaboration. He states,

Narrativism is expressed by the creation, via role-playing, of a story with a recognizable theme. The characters are formal protagonists and the players are often considered co-authors. The listed elements provide the material for narrative conflict (again, in the specialized sense of literary analysis).

(Chapter 2, n. page)

The SNN collaborations allowed ample opportunities for individual narrative invention but always at the service of a co-authored story world. Therefore, the players were empowered to go off on surprising tangents, yet ultimately, those embellishments had to be brought together in an emotionally satisfying way.

When describing this type of co-creation, Jason Cox writes,

No single method will ever completely contain what it meant to be a person co-creating the experience of a particular game, but through the creation of media that are co-created experiences themselves, we can shift our perspectives and gain new insight on what it might have been like to 'be there'.

(Cox 2018: 28)

Stenros et al. likewise emphasize that

role-play is co-creative. Each participant not only witnesses (some of) the play of their fellow players, but also contributes through their own actions. The amount of participant output varies from one LARP to another, but in all of them, the player is a co-creator. She is not just choosing from pre-existing paths, but bringing in her own contributions and making her own choices – cutting her own path.

(Stenros et al. 2011: 4)

In the context of an RPG, dramatism becomes a collective feat that enlists the involvement of multiple participants in acts of both improvisation and premeditation. This links it to what O'Neill calls 'process drama' (1995: 2). That is, a method of performance whereby students and teacher (or writer and participant) work in and out of adopted roles. The act of creating an RPG incorporates many aspects of process drama as the story conductor and participants are both co-creators and co-performers within the storytelling experience. Both of these roles involve performative gestures, some subtle and unconscious and some more overt. O'Neill suggests that the main lure of process drama is the desire to create a dramatic 'elsewhere', 'a fictional world which will be inhabited for the insights, interpretations, and understandings it may yield' (1995: 12–13). In line with this, the RPGs that our team created did not originate as written texts. Instead, they were first formulated as what O'Neill calls a 'pretext' (1995: 22). A pretext is a dramatic world that can be activated into action: a gesture, an idea, an object, an image or a location. A pretext frames the participants in a firm relationship to the potential action. 'It provides the arc from which it is possible to begin to infer the full circle of action' (O'Neill 1995: 22).

As with process theatre, RPGs involve a mix of pretextual elements and spontaneous improvisations. When the participants are compelled to extemporaneously invent, they influence plot and characterization in real time via the creation of dialogue and dramatic action. O'Neill suggests that the best forms of pretext are those that have generated action throughout history such as myths, legends and folktales. In SSN, we often developed stories that echoed such pre-existing structures. We then experimented with running the same RPG multiple times and found that although the emergent plotlines differed significantly, familiar patterns of dramatic performance tended to emerge with each iteration.

But what happens when narrative negotiations breakdown? As collaborative storytelling requires some baseline of shared goals and cooperative action, an excess of consensus or dissensus can stymie the development of a narrative sequence. As Sousa et al. warn, 'the author's personal creative effort might be over-shadowed and restrained by the public participation' (2016: 15).

Throughout the SNN project, our negotiated narratives were comprised of interwoven narrative sequences created by dramatists enacting character roles that expressed both competing and complimentary views. These complex relations formed the warp and weft of the narrative fabric that emerged. One of our key findings was that neither discord nor harmony is inherently productive and that an excess of either can, in fact, prove counterproductive. As Black points out:

Adversarial stories could be used to divide group members into factions that hinder the group's ability to work together. [Whereas,] unitary argument stories or transformational stories could potentially create a sense of false consensus by overemphasizing inclusive collective identities and covering over real differences among group members.

(2009: 27)

When designing our stories, therefore, we sought to strike a productive balance between agonism and accord in order to ensure a lively and productive collaborative process. An example of this type of negotiated narrative was the Divided Kingdom.

Figure 5: Divided Kingdom.

This SSN project was based on a simple dystopian premise:

It's 2024, five years after the Brexit disaster, and those crazy Brits are at it again. Only this time, it's in Yorkshire. Leeds wants to be its own country, 'The Independent Republic of Leeds'. They need policy makers now, or they'll never get the motion through. Can you help set the policies they need?

(Gyori 2018: 1)

As with many of the RPGs we created, Divided Kingdom offered opportunities to reflect upon real-world circumstances via virtual performances. Such experiences cultivate what Boal calls 'a politics of the imagination' (1979:12), that is, a sense of reflection and distance from which we can consider our lives anew. Our intention in creating this RPG was not to explicitly advance any particular political agenda. However, we did want participants to reflect on the contemporary social world and their place in it. As Woo explains, 'collective storytelling can serve as a pedagogical tool for creating dialogue in an ideologically polarized media environment' (2010: 132). He adds that '[It] is one way to build rapport and resonance with each other. Hopefully, it will lead to the kind of critical thinking we know is important for democracy' (2010: 136).

The design mechanic of the Divided Kingdom centred on a series of policy negotiations. Participants representing polarized political perspectives were required to reach consensus around various controversial topics within tight time constraints. We were warned about the dire consequences that would ensue if we failed to do so, and this incentive generated a much lively debate, though little compromise. As a series of policy negotiations, Divided Kingdom was an abject failure, but in terms of narrative engagement, it was far more effective. It is unlikely that a traditional reader would find its emergent storyline particularly riveting, but participants remained engrossed throughout the 90-minute composition process, so in that respect, it was an apparent success.

Because dramatism is an inherently dialectic process, it is an effective tool for considering multiple points of view and for harnessing collective action. These qualities made it one of the fundamental ways in which stories emerged in our RPGs.

Simulation

Kim defines 'Simulation' as 'the style which values resolving in-game events based solely on game-world considerations, without allowing any meta-game concerns to affect the decision' (1997: n.pag). In other words, simulation involves adhering to the internal logic of the game irrespective of any external goals. Rather than playing to win, as with Gamism, or playing to invent, as with dramatism, simulationism is playing to honour the fundamental rules of engagement. Edwards puts it this way, '[s]imulationism heightens and focuses exploration as

the priority of play. The players may be greatly concerned with the internal logic and experiential consistency of that exploration' (2001: n.pag.).

Becoming an effective simulationist also means embodying a collective ethos. Therefore, whenever our RPG creators engaged in simulation, we found ourselves negotiating a system of shared beliefs. This allowed us to operate as a community of practice (Wenger 1998), that is, a group linked by shared interests and concerns and working towards a common goal. In role-playing theory, this is referred to as the 'social contract':

Nothing exists beyond the social contract to prevent the players from seeking information from sources that are not within the illusory reality. Yet the social pressure to preserve the illusion intact is very high, leading to potential conflict between participants favoring different types of information behaviour.

(Harviainen 2007: n.pag.)

In SSN, preserving illusions was often a key component of role playing. An example of this was Agony Aunts.

Figure 6: Agony Aunts.

In art, as in life, one of the most effective modes of spontaneous world building is the act of gossiping. Evolutionary biologist Robin Dunbar (2004) defines gossip as an important means of social bonding in large groups. The mechanic of Agony Aunts exploited this innate impulse by allowing participants to adopt character roles and then separating them into separate camps. Characters in one group were then compelled to gossip about characters in the other group and vice versa.

As Prins et al. point out, 'identities are constructed and negotiated in interaction' (2013: 95). Thus, as the characters in the Agony Aunts exchanged gossip, describing specific actions and, in particular, perceived misdeeds, communal values were instantiated, social roles were redefined and social standings were re-evaluated. At stake were nothing less than the reputations and social status of particular characters, though of course, this was all a simulation.

Participants in this story were primarily focused on the role of simulationist, shining the light of collective awareness into the darkest corners of the story world and bringing shocking revelations to light. When the simulating impulse predominates, the narrative ecosystem takes on an evaluative function, discerning who belongs in what way and to what degree. Individuals are compared and levels of relative legitimacy are discerned. In Agony Aunts, the role of the simulationist became the realm of thought leaders and influencers, those arbiters of distinction and auditors of social cachet. Players were afforded an opportunity to accuse one another of outrageous transgressions, though all in a spirit of play. The aim of exposing hidden truths tended to thwart linear plot development, as participants were constrained by the Simulationist mode. In an actual social situation, the impulse to expose transgressors might culminate in socially disruptive phenomena such as scapegoating, banishment or revolt, but in our fictive context, no one was lynched, exiled or even burned in effigy. Participants feigned outrage, but any social stigma tied to the imagined offences of our peers was of fairly low valence.

The interface did, however, generate some lasting resonance in terms of defining shared values. This was consciously reinforced via the construction of key 'boundary objects' (Kimble et al. 2010), ideological touchstones plastic enough to adapt to local needs and unique individual interpretations yet robust enough to maintain a sense of common meaning in multiple contexts. In the case of Agony Aunts, postcards were mailed to individual participants after the RPG was conducted. These served to extend the story world in both time and space, expanding its narrative frame and sustaining its simulated ideological resonance.

Figure 7: Boundary object: Agony Aunts postcard.

Immersion

Bockman (2003) suggests emphasizing immersion as a key goal in LARP engagement. When describing the kind of performances that emerge during live-action role playing, Stenros states, 'you are both a player and a character, which creates interesting frictions since you inhabit the same body' (2013a: n.pag.). He goes on to explain that such tensions also influence notions of spectatorship. 'There is no external audience inLARPs. However, there is an audience, the audience of the participators. The performer and the spectator are also brought together in one body' (Stenros, 2013b: Section 3, para 3).

Like LARPs, our SSN stories featured this double-edged sense of participation/spectatorship. Any performances were showcased for the benefit all co-creators simultaneously, including the participants who were performing them. However, unlike LARPs, the more performative aspects of our WhatsApp-based RPGs were online and some could, therefore, also be witnessed in a context where some participants were expected to assume the role of more traditional and relatively passive audience members, viewing, rating, critiquing and even applauding the performances of their co-authors.

Figure 8: Dance around the Fire.

One of our RPGs, Dance around the Fire, solicited a mix of performative, simulationist and immersive performances under the pretext of a talent show. At key points during the collaboration, participants were tasked with demonstrating different skills, performing the role of a singer, a musician and a visual artist. Their creative contributions were then displayed and critiqued in real time, with participants complimenting unique qualities and/or playfully mocking defects. As with LARPs, Dance around the Fire featured no clear distinction between performer and audience, thus the creative work generated was more akin to ritual than theatre and more akin to LARPing than role playing. Players were often performing, creating and spectating simultaneously. In RPG circles, this is known as 'first person audience':

LARPs are embodied of course also in the way that LARPing is not something that is seen or described or even just witnessed, but something that is bodily inhabited. The internal play, that play that is only available to the first person audience, shouldn't be forgotten either.

(Stenros 2013: n.pag.)

Therefore, in an RPG context, we tended to enter what the anthropologist Victor Turner calls a state of 'liminality' (1982: 22), a time and space 'betwixt and between' one meaning and another. This allowed us to embrace multiple modes of identification. We were, at once, performers, creators, the audience and collaborators, and each of these personae was operating in the service of the evolving project.

Conclusion

In this article, the role-playing modes of a Threefold World Model and its fourfold elaboration have been discussed as isolated phenomena. This is somewhat misleading. During the creation of our Story Network RPGs, these four modes of role play often operated in conjunction with, or counterpoint to, one another. In conclusion, we wish to elaborate upon these interrelationships.

An example of conflicting role-playing modes occurred during an early workshop session. The team member running the session had assigned a group task. The motive was altruism, the goal, helping a fellow participant romance a particular love interest. This led to a brainstorming session where most of the participants offered productive suggestions, assuming the role of simulationists in an effort to advance the nascent love story. One participant, however, took on a more performative role, a non-cooperative stance, offering suggestions that were clearly counterproductive. This highlights a key challenge related to role-playing behaviours; when participants are empowered to contribute, they are also empowered to challenge and even openly reject the guidance they have been given. The degree to which an RPG structure mandates particular role-playing modes or allows alternate behaviours to emerge determines the degree of anarchic invention it will forment.

Deploying multiple role-playing modes in the course of a single RPG does not necessarily result in conflict and chaos. For instance, Mr Catty compelled participants to shift between different styles of game play with relative ease.

Figure 9: Mr Catty.

The story structure was relatively simple. The participants were cat sitters tasked with wrangling a particularly unruly feline. At specific junctures, we adopted different role-playing techniques. Occasionally, we acted as dramatists advancing the plot in a step-by-step fashion. For instance, when the title character decided to take a nap in the middle of the game, we were able to take over the narrative and plot an insurrection. We also became immersed when tasked with sketching drawings and composing captions. We used simulations, as well, enacting behaviours appropriate to our surroundings and the cat we were caring for. And finally, we were gamers, selecting from an array of rule-oriented options (i.e. throwing dice) that helped to determine our progress through the story. In this way, the different role-playing modes operated in conjunction to help construct different aspects of the evolving narrative.

We have attempted to marry the affordances of RPGs with those of interactive narratives, theatre processes and collaborative storytelling to illuminate the many processes that are at work in the types of participatory collaborations we created. It is our contention that such works benefit from the theoretical interplay described above. Ultimately, our SSN stories afforded opportunities for co-authors to role play in terms of navigation (games), narrative invention

(drama), world building (simulation) and performing/creating in real environments (immersion). SSN not only upholds and develops Kim's Threefold Model but also throws further light on the contribution that games, drama and immersion make in the interactive storytelling world. However, we also need to better understand what motivates our players in SSN and how they interact with these modes. An approach that focuses on a phenomenological investigation of player behaviour and their subsequent immersion could highlight what is fulfilling and enjoyable in this kind of play. This necessitates placing greater emphasis on narrative collaboration in the digital realm while considering how participants use their senses to navigate and contribute to collectively created fictional worlds.

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