

## **What Do We Call This?** **Dr. Bronwin Patrickson**

### INTRODUCTION

Between 2019 – 2020, The University of South Wales collaborated with a consortium of creative commercial practitioners dubbed Fictioneers in a UKRI funded, Audience of the Future Research and Development (R&D) demonstrator project designed to further develop digital storytelling practice within the UK Creative Industries. Working with the popular *Wallace and Gromit* creative franchise, the consortium drew upon their combined skills in games production, animation, creative marketing and new technology development to create a location-based experience entitled *Wallace & Gromit: Big Fix Up (Big Fix Up)*. This innovative addition to the popular *Wallace & Gromit* franchise is designed to propel new and playful digital storytelling formats.

*Big Fix Up* is delivered via a central, enhanced mobile application. The application presents a pre-determined story, delivered via a rich tapestry of serialised, short multi-platform media elements which include YouTube videos and comics, as well as augmented reality game-play challenges. Unlike traditional transmedia, where networked media might be distributed on separate media platforms, the entire multi-media story is presented via the central mobile application. This offers a rich and variable experience, but also highlights the classification challenges that genre-defying, emerging technologies can pose.

To discuss these challenges, as much as the creative opportunities of limited choice narratives in digital media, I will first review the digital storytelling mechanisms of *Big Fix Up*, and consider potential future developments within this style. Following this, I will explore whether any additional genre insights can be gained by also considering the distributed, and collaborative *Big Fix Up* research and development process.

### ENHANCED, DIGITAL STORYTELLING ACROSS MULTIPLE MEDIA

Choice driven, variable plot structures traditionally enable participants to make a range of variable responses to story prompts, leading to a variety of potential outcomes, or plot developments. By requiring participants to choose between emotionally charged, competing scenarios, for example, variable, branching narratives can prompt dramatic participatory experiences. The participatory capacity, or agency to make meaningful choices in an unfolding experience is traditionally regarded as one of the great pleasures of digital storytelling (Murray).

By contrast, the participatory choices available in *Big Fix Up* revolve around a variable engagement with a pre-set news feed, linked to interactive game-play options. The news feed is made more dynamic because of the variety of media that it presents, as well as the story progression it enables over time. These serialised transmedia storytelling strategies for mobile phone delivery offered a way for Fictioneers to explore alternatives to branching tree narrative structures.

Part of the motivation for this alternative approach was the risk of combinatorial explosion in variable digital storytelling environments. Branching tree narrative plot choice diagrams which track the potential choices involved and their potential outcomes can multiply exponentially, depending upon the number of scenarios available:

“ If you were going to write a story with ten choices, two options at each choice, you would have to write  $2^{10}$  (which is 1024) branches. That’s a lot of writing. Add one more choice to the game, and you have to write double that: 2048.”  
(Nelson)

Aardman Animations limited, who produced the time-consuming animation content, as well as the YouTube videos and digital comic media featured within the mobile application, were keen to avoid this approach.

Established workarounds to help avoid combinatorial explosion include the provision of less consequential choices, and interactions in-between fixed and pre-set plot development points (sometimes called the foldback, or string of pearls approach). In more complex versions, those choices and plot developments are further modified by variables that can be tracked through the course of a playful engagement like player skills, or chosen personality type, morality ratings, status, resources, the world state, and NPC variables.

Whilst not the first digital storytelling innovation propelled by budget considerations, *Wallace & Gromit: Big Fix Up* is one of the first to adapt this approach for augmented mobile delivery. Self-described as an augmented story *Wallace & Gromit: Big Fix Up*, employs a somewhat similar approach to those outlined in the previous paragraph, in that it offers interactive game-play options linked to a pre-determined plot. The plot is developed via short, media elements that are optional to view and mimic social newsfeed posts that update over time and mark the developing story, or event beats. The unfolding variety of media elements include animations, YouTube videos, and digital comics, alongside calls to explore simulated environments and engage in augmented reality game-play options. Only Fictioneers can vary their order and availability of these updates, which are closely networked via the central newsfeed. Narrativized, augmented reality game-play options also become available over time, linked to the developing story, and according to the player’s resource inventory.

Even despite the inability to change the newsfeed beyond updating it, the application is still complex. Participants can pick and choose engagements with sequential media chunks that are posted to the central feed. These sorts of choices have limited influence on the unfolding media, but the option to engage with some and not all posts support a sense of personalisation. The experience of complexity is also emphasised by the use of emerging technologies within the experience, particularly the use of mobile augmented reality play options, which often required extensive user guidance. For many participants, the combination of new and unfamiliar media engagements, partnered with a chunked, distributed story that unfolds across a variety of in-app media was novelty enough.

As audiences become more familiar with augmented mobile media, possible future developments include even more affective interactions. The scrolling twine story “Even Cowgirls Bleed” (Love), for example, illustrates the kinaesthetic appeal of a rhythmic and scrolling story progression (in this case, the hypertext clicks that both reveal and transform the unfolding text). Each click reveals a bit more of the unfolding story, enhanced by the odd surprise, such as a novel and intense affect (the intense, click triggered sound of gunfire, and appearance of bloodied text). This approach supports an engaging participatory experience even despite the lack of meaningful agency.

In a simulated social news feed environment, there is already a lot going on, but more dynamic news feed possibilities include intermittent audio affects, and feed update animations like spinning posts, such as those included in Alan Bigelow's (2017) social media styled narrative [How To Rob A Bank](#). Game elements might also potentially enable further interaction, for example rewards that accumulate as more posts are read, or an optional story recap window that also helps to flag important updates.

In follow on projects Fictioneers are exploring the ways that multi-perspective narratives, told through the overlapping and potentially contradictory narrations of multiple characters could also complement the chunked news feed plot progression. This approach prompts another alternative to the pleasure of agency, which is the pleasure of evaluation.

For example, participants in the interactive, video drama game [Her Story](#) (Barlow) are directly cast as an investigator, required to piece together (through key-word search, for example) a sometimes contradictory interview archive, recorded with the same suspect over seven different occasions in order to evaluate the truth of the events in question. In this example the participatory choices affect the order of replay, as well as the context of the seen media accessed as a result of the participant's search strategy (as opposed to their dramatic action choice).

Reflection and evaluation are linked to the process of learning and transformation. The enactment of multiple perspectives is a hallmark of process dramas (O'Neill and Lambert) for this very reason, since these broader perspectives can prompt further reflection and challenge narrow thinking.

In some game genres, the pleasures of evaluation inform strategy choices – and may also involve ethical dilemmas to prompt deeper reflection. The scrolling AlJazeera documentary game [Pirate Fishing](#) indicates yet another way to introduce evaluative interaction into a single scrolling story. Participants are cast as trainee investigators who can help the pirate fishing investigation team by evaluating and classifying media elements according to the type of information provided (evidence, notes, or background information). Story elements are intermittently presented as a range of investigation points within a virtual representation of a real-world environment, like drawers to be opened, but in the main, the Pirate Fishing investigation unfolds as a single-story progression. In process the participant gains rewards such as badges, whilst the in-game investigate team rises to the challenge at hand. The value of this sort of approach is that it links the participatory interaction directly with the evolving events. There are also numerous ways to evolve these sorts of participatory rewards, for example by rewarding participants with tools and insights that can be used in further game-play challenges, and trigger engaging results when enough are collected.

As these numerous examples indicate, there are captivating alternatives, and adjustments to branching tree plot structures, many of which involve genre hybridity. These alternatives emphasise the importance of a dynamic storytelling experience, as much as a dynamic text. Beyond the need to make that experience engaging, Fictioneers also faced another challenge: How to describe this media rich, playful augmented mobile digital storytelling experience to potential audiences?

## THE CHALLENGE TO DEFINE HYBRID MEDIA

That this analysis of the narrative design considerations for a multimodal augmented mobile storytelling experience is as relevant to the electronic literature conference, as it might be to a number of conferences in other discourse specialisms reflects the hybridity, and complexity of digital convergence.

In many ways we are living in what could be called a fuzzy genre era. For example, optimum writing styles traditionally vary across platforms. Audio-visual media thrives on conversational style scripts, whilst print is ideally suited to more detailed and potentially subjective texts, and digital native texts privilege potentially dynamic networks and data-enhancements. Yet, at the same time, digital storytelling productions like *Big Fix Up* are increasingly convergent, and feature multiple media. In the case of *Big Fix Up* the optimum text was informed by the platform: mobile screens are small and reading is also difficult whilst moving, so text is likely to be condensed and mimic a type of captioning, or navigational function, supplemented by audio-visual media written in a more conversational style.

Convergent texts are being transformed by the media that contextualise them and this sort of transformation can be hard to categorize. As the producers of *Wallace & Gromit: Big Fix Up* explained to me, the lack of categories were hard to promote at times, since there was no established, or definitive way to describe this sort of experience, and few frameworks to evaluate it.

“It's very difficult to describe the project. You can't say it succinctly ... I am learning to say it's an interactive, immersive storytelling experience realized through augmented reality on your phone. That's the fastest way of saying it. But even that doesn't sort of bring in the transmedia, etc...”

(Edward Russell, Fictioneers producer)

In the *Big Fix Up* app, the game-play evolves on linked, but nevertheless separate tabs within the app. These tabs point to upcoming jobs, as well as an inventory of acquired gadgets. These gadgets are visually and textually located within the story that is unfolding in the news stream. Participants are cast as employees of Wallace and Gromit's company, Spic'n'Spanners, which embroils them in all sorts of mischief playing out in the feed. They need to take an AR call from Wallace as part of their induction, for example, and bust their employers out of an evil trap when the drama intensifies.

The mix of story and game-play within the *Wallace & Gromit: Big Fix Up* app confused audiences at times. Susan and Lee Cummings of Tiny Rebel Games, two of Fictioneers' founding partners and co-writers of the application found themselves constantly needing explain to people that the application was not a game.

“(F)or some reason, everyone thinks it's a game. And we have to go through this process with everyone that comes on a project.”

Apple, for example, wasn't sure at first where to place the app in their online store. Fictioneers were keen to ensure it wasn't in the gaming section. The app includes game-play, participants are invited to place augmented contraptions in their real-world environment and interact with them, but these playful challenges are designed to support the primary story..

“Yes, it’s slightly a game right there. (There are) interactive loops, you build things, you collect things, you do things to get rewarded for that. So that’s a game. It passes all the systems of the game, but it’s not supposed to be...this was (intended to be) very light and understandable” (Lee Cummings).

Alternative classifications like *digital story-telling* or *electronic literature* are helpful, since they can delineate interactive and narrativized experiences from other more traditional media encounters, including video game-play.

*Big Fix Up* included both story and game-play. Even though Fictioneers sought to prioritise the story, the hybridity of the results posed as much of a challenge as an opportunity. Describing the experience as a game is problematic, since in the case of *Big Fix Up* that would set up expectations of a very different type of interaction than the story driven experience that this application sought to deliver. The augmented game-play was generally a beloved aspect of the *Big Fix Up* experience, although a few participants who were expecting more classic gameplay challenges, complained that it was a boring game. This is a risk of hybrid productions, which can delight, as well as challenge expectations. With few alternative terms on hand to describe the *Big Fix Up* app, the phrase *augmented story*, has been used on the app store, but the app is also much more than a story. Narrative frameworks such as characterisation, pace and tone are relevant to projects like *Wallace & Gromit: Big Fix Up*, but they may not capture all the elements that audiences encounter in real time, for example, like appeal, curiosity, surprise, challenge, enchantment or affect, which imply a type of unfolding drama. The phrase *digital storytelling experience*, is also an open-ended concept that can be hard to pin-point. Two participants can experience the same event in an entirely different way, for example.

In the past I have argued that we need a new term to define the sorts of hybrid engagements evolving somewhere between storytelling, games, playfulness, and sociality (Patrickson). As yet however, as the *Big Fix Up* experience reflects, the continually reinvented landscape of mobile augmented digital storytelling experiences, is almost, but not quite described by a number of terms including augmented story, digital storytelling experience, electronic literature, interactive fiction, or story-game. In the next section I discuss the value and evolving nature of hybrid, way-marker terms that reference specific media like literature, or games. I also explore whether any further genre insights can be gained through a consideration of the interplay of technology and creativity that shaped the *Big Fix Up* experience.

### **The collaborative process of making a mobile augmented storytelling experience**

One of the strongest takeaways I have from my own involvement in the *Big Fix Up* R&D process as the USW Research Fellow for Impact and Evaluation was just how integral the emerging technology components (augmented reality and mobile delivery, for example) became to the end product. Augmented reality technologies, for example, offer dynamic, enhanced tracking and visualisation opportunities, whilst also demanding strict file-size constraints, comprehensive audience testing and extensive cross-disciplinary collaboration. The *Big Fix Up* story is one aspect of a complex, distributed application. In many ways the story, and application design enact bridges between technologies and their potential audiences.

This observation supports arguments for the importance of platform studies (Bogost and Montfort), yet it is equally essential to keep in mind that these are ultimately experiential, emergent texts (Sicart). Whilst there may be potential theoretical tensions between platform media studies and experiential media interaction paradigms, it may also be worth noting that the team developing *Big Fix Up* embraced both concepts. User experience design and user testing were integral to the R&D process, for example.

Fictioneers' combined commercial identity was the result of a merger of three separate founder businesses, that were each already established and situated in the same south west region of the United Kingdom, linking Cardiff and Bristol: 1) Tiny Rebel Games, an independent games production company 2) Potato, a technical development company and 3) Sugar Creative, a digital design team. The consortium was relatively small, employing under fifty multi-disciplinary, creative digital technology workers. Aardman animations, who licensed the Wallace & Gromit IP were also active, and influential agents within the R&D process. Together with Tiny Rebel Games, members of the Aardman team designed the delivery model and co-wrote the evolving multi-modal story. Aardman also produced the animated shorts, YouTube videos and digital comics for the app. The funder UKRI (UK Research and Innovation), also placed a number of fundamental conditions upon the grant award, such as the requirement that Fictioneers' work with a known IP, and that the initial release be available to the public without charge.

In other words, right from the start this was a distributed creative R&D process that required the co-ordination of a wide range of inter-disciplinary skill-sets, personalities and work cultures. People working on the project included storytellers, animators, game designers, graphic designers, user experience designers, art asset creators, interactive environment creators, back-end engineers, mobile application developers, producers and brand managers.

In order to document and evaluate the research and development (R&D) process I interviewed the team and also joined morning stand-up meetings, progress reviews and team socials over many months. During the *Wallace & Gromit: Big Fix Up* R&D process it was readily apparent that the team understood that their desire to prioritise the story introduced unique considerations. When decisions needed to be made about what aspects could potentially be cut in order to help manage budget and time restraints, for example, those decisions also had to be weighed against the need to tell a coherent story. The need for coherence was a constant consideration and one that was regularly tested, and retested with potential users. This co-ordinated approach also situated participants as additional collaborators within the R&D process by emphasizing regular experimentation through early prototyping and in-depth testing. Yet, emerging technology development opportunities were equally influential.

As Mulligan (2014) points out complex problems just as often require networked solutions, such as whole team collaborations, and extended periods of technology capacity research. For Fictioneers, this co-ordination was enhanced by a key decision early in the R&D project to merge aspects of their separate businesses within this project and consciously work to evolve their own new, and united identity: Fictioneers. This effort required a proactive program of managerial appointments, team building, supported by team coaches, identity envisioning, and extensive collaborative encouragements. With all that in place, Fictioneers emerged to drive a unified digital storytelling vision.

In terms of the challenge to explain distributed and fluid convergent, augmented, digital mobile storytelling experiences, double barrel terms like interactive fiction, interactive narrative,

digital storytelling, and indeed electronic literature are important way-markers, linked to equally defining audience cultures. In a fluid field of possibility, these way-marker signals help to emphasise literary, and storytelling aspects within the infinitely variable, potential unfolding of a text, or application, or experience. Even more definitive, or nuanced sub-genre monikers may yet emerge, but perhaps over time the way-marker terms are themselves also being redefined to the point that they also capture the hybrid spaces beyond the text itself.

In an exploration of the possible applications of scientific complexity paradigms to the field of narratology, literary theorist John Pier (2017) concluded that complexity is a useful lens for narrative studies, since narrative is inherently complex. Nevertheless, he rejects the suggestion that there should be a new field of complex narrative studies, since as he points out, the term complexity merely restates the problem, and doesn't help to clarify the definition:

“Complexity manifests and configures itself in different ways according to the field concerned, and for this reason its theorisation and analysis must be adapted accordingly” (Pier: 560).

Whilst this is true, at the same time in order to better understand the ways that hybrid digital storytelling experiences work it also helps to directly grapple with those complexities, such as the need for way-markers, the importance of sub-genres within the field, and the emergent nature of any engagement with an electronic text, as much as the text itself.

A convergent augmented mobile storytelling experience like *Wallace & Gromit: Big Fix Up*, involves so many emergent hybridities that in the end, Fictioneers came to the conclusion that they would need to be their own defining example within the space.

“(S)uccess will look like being able to talk about it from its name and people knowing exactly what it is.” Edward Russell, Fictioneers producer.

Fictioneers continue to pursue this goal.

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