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Choreographies of collaboration: social engagement in interactive documentaries

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ABSTRACT
This article analyzes new opportunities for using interactive non-linear documentary as social change interventions. Through a series of in-depth conversations with socially engaged Canadian directors, producers and distribution strategists, we discuss how they are reconfiguring their production and outreach in a rapidly shifting and increasingly collaborative media environment. We focus on three recent projects produced or co-produced by the National Film Board of Canada: Here at Home, Highrise and Fort McMoney. The projects address key social issues in Canada including housing, poverty, urbanization, oil production and the environment and are each quite distinct in form as well as strategies of collaboration and engagement. This in-depth analysis of three projects has permitted us to explore interesting tensions and innovations with regard to strategic partnerships and emerging social engagement practices.

The potential for impact in interactive documentary

Increasingly long-form documentary producers and directors are moving into the realm of interactive documentaries (idocs) but with some questions and trepidation about the potential for impact within this emerging form that has its roots in documentary but behaves so differently. Can socially engaged interactive documentaries inspire audiences toward social change as effectively as linear documentaries have? Aspirations for documentary to incite social change have been around as long as the form so what is unique about interactives and their potential for engagement? In his personal manifesto, documentary maker Peter Wintonick advocates that documentaries can change the world as a result of their potential to foster ‘greater digital dialogue, pluralism, tolerance and participation’ (2013, 2). In this same manifesto, Wintonick embraces the potential of the digital revolution and its ability to inspire ‘prod-users’, that is, producer-users, instead of passive receivers. But how exactly does this take place? Who defines the politics, goals, strategies and partnerships that guide effective engagement and how are the terms of participation negotiated in an increasingly collaborative environment? As
creators ourselves, our objective is to contribute to the field by offering the unique perspective of experienced directors and producers piloting new forms of partnerships and reconfiguring both their expectations and methods of engagement within interactive documentaries. What do they feel is lost or gained in the shift from audience to end user, in the move from a collective to a fragmented audience base? Are new forms of interaction getting in the way or drawing in needed newcomers? What is unique about user engagement in an online environment and what strategies are they using to connect to on-ground actions? What kinds of partnerships are emerging?

We spoke to the directors, producers and outreach strategists of three high-profile socially engaged Canadian web documentary projects to better understand how they were adapting their methods to navigate what scholar and practitioner Meg McLagan calls the media complex, where media moves across multiple platforms and is remediated and reframed along the way (2012, 305). Within this complex, impact does not culminate around a single text, but through a series of primary and secondary texts including articles, tweets, radio shows, community call outs, curated conversations, campaigns and more. Within this constantly shifting media complex, users have diverse interpretive frameworks and expectations around their ability to participate with, contribute to, or share with others. Makers and users are also convening in an increasingly crowded and busy media-sphere. As a result, directors must shift their expectations and create media and infrastructures that take into account limited attention spans as well as multiple layers of engagement. A recent StoryCode report on best practices in immersive online media underlines the sober reality whereby users stay on a site for an average for five minutes and only 25% come back for subsequent visits (Epstein and Knowlton 2015, 2). Additionally, creators have to grapple with ongoing digital divides and the need to create across multiple platforms, recognizing that many users may not have the browser or screen to fully experience a project. All of this impacts expectations and strategies for social change.

Here at Home (http://athome.nfb.ca/#/athome), Highrise (http://highrise.nfb.ca) and Fort McMoney (http://www.fortmcmoney.com) are each challenging the form of documentary and drawing on very different strategies of engagement in an attempt to bridge research, cutting edge technology, compelling stories, and diverse degrees of user and community involvement. The three projects were all produced with the support of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) and address some of the most pressing social issues in Canada including housing, urbanization, poverty, oil production and the environment. Our case-study approach has permitted us to explore both tensions and innovations for engagement in an increasing collaborative yet technologically conditioned environment and permitted us to map emerging models of partnership.

**Expectations for a committed interactive documentary**

In his book, Show Us Life, Scholar Waugh (1984) coined the term the committed documentary to describe films that are specifically invested with a goal to engender political action or consciousness. To expand this term, we began to imagine the potential of the committed interactive documentary, an emerging genre offering a process of mediation to link subjects in the world through documentary practice. A documentary form that connects storytelling with engagement strategies to throw light onto darkened areas and provides the viewer/user with an experience that can potentially change their perspective, even their actions. A
committed documentary implies a desire to challenge or rethink existing power structures and to impact the individuals and communities it hopes to reach. Impact is a word in especially high circulation these days and suggests a shift in behavior within a group, system or community or even a legislative or policy change within an organization, government body or institution (Finneran 2014, 4). In formulating our idea of a committed interactive, we began to think about the multiple ways directors and collectives past and present have used documentary to connect individuals to larger concerns and came up with this list:

- By developing aesthetic strategies that challenge the status quo.
- By exposing an issue or set of power relations in both personal and public domains that are not immediately evident and inviting audiences to form opinions and engage in public discourse on those issues.
- By offering an immersive or observational standpoint of people and places in transition, of social movements or political events unfolding, or of places viewers/users would not otherwise have access to.
- By putting stories in conversation or by connecting a local story to a national or global framework to raise awareness or attract media attention.
- By featuring individuals or collectives engaging in dialogue or social action and in many cases using documentary as a prompt or catalyst for new collaborations.
- By integrating documentary into advocacy or educational campaigns.

This selective list is not complete; yet, it is hopefully suggestive of the range of ways that directors have creatively configured storytelling, narrative structure, networks, social movements and outreach. Committed documentary makers utilize the power of the form to shape and circulate stories, to mobilize affect and offer a critical context around a compelling story. It is precisely this merging of stories, circuits and advocacy that interests us. What new forms of engagement are new technologies permitting? What sort of collaborations and partnerships are developing? What kinds of interventions into particular social power relations are at stake? And what is the role of the documentary maker in this set of relations?

Forging collaborative models within an emergent media complex

Engaged documentary makers are developing work in an especially dynamic conjuncture of documentary production, circulation and reception and it is important to rethink how we conceptualize the discursive frameworks of the form in order to assess impact. Rather than thinking of documentaries as singular texts, closed off to interpretation from a close reading, we now understand them as always in a process of mediation. This sense of mediation necessarily involves an understanding of the circulation of texts, contexts and conjunctures and new terms of reception. Meg McLagen suggests that

> It is not about the image, but the image complex, the channels of circulation along which cultural forms travel, the nature of the campaigns that frame them, and the discursive platforms that display and encode them in specific truth modes. (McLagan and McKee 2012, 12)

McLagen further argues ‘documentary is now structurally presumed to have different forms of life, to exist in different modalities, extended across multiple
platforms and networks’ (306). Scholars and practitioners Jon Dovey and Mandy Rose suggest,

This new context for documentary challenges its traditional epistemologies. Where twentieth-century documentary depended for its functionality on an idea of the observer fixing the world with his [sic], camera, this new epistemology is entirely relational. It accepts that all knowledge is situated in particular embodied perspectives, the ‘actualities’ of online are the symbolic expression of this multi-perspectival, relational knowledge. (2013, 367)

Recent creators and scholars have been attempting to theorize and conceptualize the possibilities for social change interventions under these emergent conditions. In particular, do the affordances of interaction on the web necessarily create possibilities for collaboration in relation to broader communities? Scholars De Michiel and Zimmerman suggest that rather than a fixed object with a closed argument, documentary is evolving as an environment, an ‘open space’ where iterations, communities and diverse forms of engagements can emerge (2013, 355). Within this production context, convening and collaboration processes are as important as the final product (De Michiel 2011, 3). De Michiel suggests that open space documentary lives in and evolves through networks, communities and clusters beyond traditional media distribution channels and that it invites media makers and exhibitors to become ‘context providers’ rather than ‘content providers’ (4). Artist and theorist Sharon Daniel concurs that the role of the director has shifted in this context and suggests that interactive directors are no longer simply interpreting reality but curating realities (2012). Theorist Siobhan O’Flynn maps out several models of participation within activist interactive projects including participatory crowd-sourced and platform-based documentaries and draws attention to the evolving role of the director as curator, organizer and designer of a conceptual space that is fluid enough to respond to and document a key issue, power shift or historical moment (2011).

If documentary is increasingly perceived as a relational object rather than as a fixed or closed text, how does the maker negotiate their own intentions with the intentions of the user and other contributing collaborators? Within emergent forms, Kate Nash suggests that the social goals of documentary participants (users, subjects, collaborators) must also be taken into account in attempting to foresee the development of potential political impact (Nash 2014, 385). Nash warns that it is easy to conflate notions of voice and that to better understand different forms of user agency within an emergent environment, she suggests that we distinguish voice as authorship, where a user contributes directly to a project, with social voice, where a user can integrate a media object into a broader social objective. When participation becomes a catch-all or what she refers to as a ‘floating signifier’ then we cannot fully analyze how directors, subjects and users are coming together in unique ways to engage with documentary’s potential to record, foster civic participation and persuade (393). Scholar Sandra Gaudenzi is also interested in moving beyond facile descriptions of user participation and maps out forms of user collaboration that range from navigating and contributing to a finished piece to taking part in an open web documentary whereby the user changes and expands the work through practices such as crowdsourcing (2014, 130). Gaudenzi uses the term co-initiating to describe a circumstance whereby the user has an authentic role from the beginning and is involved in the research and construction of a project (131). How are documentary makers navigating the
diverse nodes of the media complex, and taking into consideration user expectations as well as the ethical and cultural frameworks of emergent collaborators from diverse orientations including advertising, journalism, social media, gaming, architecture and documentary? How are makers working to construct a process, forge partnerships and foster engagement around these multiple nodes? The three projects that we analyze offer diverse models of how directors and teams are negotiating these challenges.

**The NFB, traditions in engagement**

Through a range of interactive productions, the NFB has positioned itself as a leader in the field of interactive documentary and supported directors who are pushing the boundaries of both documentary and social engagement. Willing to invest in innovation over immediate financial return, NFB Interactive (https://www.nfb.ca/interactive/) has gained cultural capital and cultivated what scholar and practitioner Jon Dovey would call a pre-structured ‘network of attention.’ Dovey explains how the ‘always on’, ‘always available’ ‘always present’ nature of the Internet turns attention, not information, into a premium commodity. Essentially, ‘the more information or media, the less attention we have for it’ (2011, 141).

The NFB’s experience in engagement strategies has a tradition. For over seventy years, they have been producing documentaries, initiating partnerships and exploring how to leverage stories and technology to incite audience participation and civic engagement. In the 1940s, the NFB initiated innovative distribution through non-theatrical community-run film circuits to share films with audiences in rural and remote areas. In the 1950s, they had established over 300 film libraries around the country managed by film councils. They also supported mobile libraries and home film clubs. In the same period, they began collaborating with the CBC, the national public broadcaster to establish a privileged exhibition space, demonstrating their ability to work with national circuits of television as well as local and collaborative exhibition practices. The NFB forged partnerships with labor unions, church groups, women’s organizations and schools and made their way to far-reaching regions such as the Yukon and the Northwest Territories (https://www.nfb.ca/history/1950-1959/). From 1967 to 1980, the NFB ran its landmark media project, Challenge for Change, which ushered in video technology and utopic claims for civic participation. The project brought together government bureaucrats, documentary filmmakers, community activists and residents to engender social change through media (Waugh, Winton, and Baker 2010, 4). This significant media intervention resulted in over 200 films and videos, addressing poverty, women’s rights, housing and First Nation’s struggles and explored a range of collaborative methods that have influenced the community media movement ever since (6). For example, filmmakers working in a range of rural and urban communities were accompanied by social workers whose mandate was to foster community involvement and participation.

And while the traditions in engagement are long standing, they are, like any large-scale government project, complex and complicated by institutional structures and visions of change. Challenge for Change is frequently cited as a model for social engagement, but media scholars like Janine Marchessault have also acknowledged the limitations of a top-down social change media project. Pointing out the profound impact that video technology had on the development of the Challenge for Change project and the utopic
technological aspirations that accompanied the technological turn, she suggests that ‘the interactivity and participation that video delivered, instituted access without agency’ (1995, 75). Marchessault also suggests that within a liberal government framework, structures of authority were not fully recognized or challenged (77).

Marchessault’s critical analysis of the terms of access, agency, technological innovation and even a questioning of what is meant by social change are relevant to our own analysis around current interactive work being produced by the NFB. And while there are many factors to consider in forging strategies around social impact, the one that we have foregrounded is the critical role of partnerships in developing social change interventions.

**Models of partnerships in NFB interactive documentaries**

*Partners as co-creators at every stage of production*

To celebrate the 40th Anniversary of Challenge for Change, the NFB launched a series of projects to explore new modes of documentary and strategies of engagement in the digital age. This would also mark the introduction of a new production stream, NFB interactives. *Filmmaker in Residence* ([http://filmmakerinresidence.nfb.ca](http://filmmakerinresidence.nfb.ca)) was the centerpiece of the NFB’s re-imagining of Challenge for Change in a digital age and over a five-year period, director Katerina Cizek developed a wide range of media interventions that ranged from collaborative media workshops to sound installations to an online web documentary (Miller 2010). While in residence at St. Michael’s Hospital, a Research Hospital in Toronto, she skillfully merged documentary and participatory methods with a range of partners including web developers, animators, researchers, doctors, young mothers with experience living in the streets, suicide prevention group facilitators, an HIV community advocate from Malawi and more. To broaden the scope and reach of this initiative, Cizek then initiated *Highrise* ([http://highrise.nfb.ca](http://highrise.nfb.ca)), a long-term project with both a local and a global framework using the iconic highrise infrastructure to explore past and emerging politics of urbanization, democracy and citizenship.

Beyond a series of compelling projects, Cizek, over the last decade, has developed a documentary method that skillfully connects organizations, individuals and researchers and that is both responsive and responsible to the communities involved. Referring to her process as co-creation, she has developed a unique form of creative instigation that involves multiple partners and is less about a final product than about letting co-creators inform the direction of a series of final products. She explained, ‘it’s a small, nimble team at its core that works with many different partners along the way to reinterpret the project as it goes along’ (personal communication, February 4, 2014).

*One Millionth Tower*, one of several *Highrise* iterations, is an excellent example of how for Cizek the creative curation of partnerships is both method and story. The project began with conversations with residents of the Kipling highrise, with whom Cizek has collaborated over several years in her hometown of Toronto. Cizek asked residents to re-imagine their living environment and then invited architects of the ERA architectural firm to respond with plans. Visual animators got involved and rather than developing a linear documentary to document the collaboration as she had first imagined, Cizek and the animators decided to translate the collaborative visioning into a web-based 3D environment, using the open-source program WebGL.
While the final form changed as a result of partnerships with creative technologists and emergent technological opportunities, the intention of creating a space where highrise residents could voice and visualize their needs did not shift. Cizek is attentive to the desired outcomes of all of her partners; besides a dynamic 3D environment, the collaboration also resulted in a new physical playground for the residents, a vital on-ground contribution. Merging online and on-ground impacts and taking into consideration the desired outcomes of a range of partners are central to Cizek’s strategies and vision. This consideration of different needs and platforms is what establishes trust with diverse partners; her long-term investment with residents of the highrise enabled the cultivation of additional partnerships and possibilities for future collaborations.

Cizek’s method is most closely aligned to the open documentary model where, as a cultural animator, she is orchestrating and articulating collaboration and connections at every stage of production. The individuals and communities that form around each initiative often instigate a series of ripple effects or unforeseen engagements. With One Millionth Tower, the residents, architects and visual animators were co-initiators, but new collaborators came in at the distribution phase as well. For example, upon completion of the 3D immersive space, a local group Arts for Commuters got involved and repurposed the original media into a poster and silent video project that played throughout the Toronto subway system. Cizek explained, ‘That’s also part of social engagement, is having a project that’s fluid enough to respond in deep ways to potential collaborations … all these things kind of point in the same direction and help propel the movement towards action.’ Through her skillful practice of curating partnerships, Cizek has been able to bring diverse groups together to shed light on the intersecting concerns of poverty, urban development, the future of Toronto and other rapidly growing cities around the world. Kat explains, ‘We’re seeing unprecedented vertical development in cities around the world, but much of it isn’t intended as decent accommodation for the people who actually need somewhere to live’ (http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/highrise-nation-canada-joins-world-ranks-of-vertical-dwellers/article24697531/).

**Strategic institutional partnerships**

The development of Here at Home, a web documentary about chronic homelessness with those suffering from mental illness, is another example of an NFB production where technological innovation and strategic partnership were key elements in an initiative to bring attention to a housing crisis. Monique Simard, the then director of the French program at the NFB, approached the Canadian Mental Health Commission to collaborate on their high-profile study, At Home, that recruited 2000 homeless people with mental illness to take part in the study. A total of 1265 individuals were offered housing during the period of the study, while a control group of 970 people only had access to previously existing facilities. Until a few years ago, Canada had no comprehensive mental health strategy and homelessness has been a growing concern for individuals with mental illness (personal communication Michelle van Beusekom, February 5, 2014). The innovation behind the At Home research project was to put housing first, to reverse policy trends of the past where secure housing was the last step in a range of interventions. Offering both personal and financial incentives, the housing first approach could prove to be less expensive than the conventional approach.
of leaving people on the streets and having them cycle through shelters, hospitals and in some cases jail.

The mandate of the documentary was to bring the At Home study alive and raise awareness of the initiative through a web of stories of those impacted by illness and homelessness and partaking in the study. Five directors across the five cities of Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Moncton would develop profiles of research participants, landlords, family members, neighbors and social workers over an 18-month period. Creative technologists would cull data from the research and present innovative visualization. Producer Michelle van Beusekom described the challenges of establishing research protocols across two government institutions and her efforts to bridge an understanding of what each institution might contribute, and clarify the difference between a documentary process and a public relations unit.

If we’re going to do this it has to be a documentary look at what’s going on and that means warts and all and we’re not coming in with a particular agenda. But it’s also not about putting a particular type of spin on the work. It’s really to open up what’s going on to the cameras and as honestly as possible to document that process. That’s always delicate because, of course, for the Mental Health Commission they had a lot at stake, it’s very important to them, and it’s a controversial program, there’s a lot of people who chafe at the idea of so-called hand outs and giving housing for free to people.

van Beusekom also explained the negotiation around what form the documentary would take and how the NFB argued for an interactive model based on the potential for increased exposure.

We said if this is a television documentary, it will play once, it will play twice, it will get a few hundred thousand viewers and that’ll be it. Whereas doing it as an interactive web experience is something that’s out there, it’s something that’s always out there, it’s something that we can push, that you can push, that can get out into the community, and we have a much better chance of connecting with people over a longer period of time than we will if this is just done as a traditional documentary.

Beyond exposure, the interactive form lent itself well to the comparative approach of the study and a key challenge was developing an interface that would help the user establish dynamic connections between individuals, research data and the unique characteristics of each city. The NFB invited the interactive design firm, Departement.ca, to participate as a collaborating partner and together they created an elegant rhizomatic interface to connect the web of people involved and to create a dynamic interaction between stories and data visualization. van Beusekom explains

We knew from the start we wanted to use the data to tell the story … like when you go to the Winnipeg page for example, some of the data you see is that Aboriginals represent something like 5% of the Winnipeg population but Aboriginal people represent 80% of the homeless population in Winnipeg and of those, something like 60% of those grew up in foster homes. Those statistics tell a story.

Once the parameters of the project were established, van Beusekom explained how the partnership facilitated the ethical framework necessary to work with such a vulnerable group.

Having this partner with the Mental Health Commission was so incredibly helpful because they’ve got all of these trained social workers who were on the ground there supporting us
and who were able to gauge the fragility of participants so that we didn’t make any unintentional mistakes that were going to have really negative impacts on people’s lives.

Curating an ethical and aesthetic framework between five collaborating filmmakers from five different cities was a creative and ethical challenge for executive producers, Hugues Sweeney and Michelle van Beusekom of Here at Home. The producers initiated this process with a two-day workshop and brought the five directors together to discuss strategies and to meet with a range of experts with experience working with mental health issues. Some of the issues they discussed were how to define professional boundaries and how to be sure not to discount an individual’s experience despite ongoing battles to negotiate reality, voices, or personalities.

While the project did not initially invite research subjects to partake in making the films, Toronto director Manfred Becker, ended up handing his camera over to one of the participants, Barron, a young man from Jamaica with schizophrenia. Manfred was wrestling with the ethics of the research arrangement whereby the participants were not paid. With the consent of the NFB, he paid Barron to shoot his own segment and explained,

I just left him the camera and then I saw him a couple weeks after that and at first it was a little slow because he had to get used to it but then he let it record… he spoke about what it’s like to have your own bathroom and to brush your teeth in privacy… and he also talked about the loneliness… and the fact that he must have done something wrong to be in the situation he is now…. So it wasn’t ‘isn’t it wonderful now I have a home,’ it had all the complexity and it was him, his voice, his images. (personal communication, March 7, 2014)

A more participatory approach with one subject would not necessarily have worked with all participants. Nor did his intervention resolve all of the ethical knots connected to the research. Still, Becker was moved by the possibilities the collaboration had opened up to him.

So the experience of handing a camera to a participant and having him come back with his own voice is just the beginning. And I think that if film is a tool in order to facilitate a social change well then let’s create tools, which allow everybody to use them. In the past you could hide behind the equipment and the 16 mm and the projection and the budgets and the broadcaster requirements and standing values but if you go on the web now anything goes. So I think we need to be really aware and aggressive in terms of occupying part of that space.

The emerging space for collaboration that Becker refers to takes different forms in different projects and is perhaps best understood as what scholar and practitioner Jesikah Maria Ross refers to as a continuum of collaboration (Miller 2009). Assuming that partners or participants want to assume more responsibility is a common misunderstanding. Terms of participation need to be carefully negotiated and discussed in any collaborative project to avoid assumptions or false expectations and this becomes increasingly important when dealing with sensitive issues.

The promise of bringing two institutions together to respond to growing concerns around homelessness and mental illness was to expand public knowledge of the cost of non-attention. The producers in their collaboration with Department.ca found a unique and dynamic approach to make the research available to a non-specialist public and to weave research results together with compelling first-person video profiles. At Home involved an extensive research team, on-ground social workers, the subject/participants,
the lead producers, five filmmaking teams and the web design team. The complexity of discussing and evaluating the social impact of a project with so many partners is that each collaborator brings a different conception of what kind of social intervention can be brought about. Initially, the producers hoped to engage skeptics of the proposed housing solution. However, rather than primarily convincing skeptics, the site became a useful online resource for educators. van Beusekom did not foresee that the project would become a meaningful tool for social workers and would be used in so many social work curricula around the country. Different goals and intentions for this project may have complicated a facile understanding of impact but it also generated unforeseen outcomes.

**Users as collaborating partners**

With *Fort McMoney*, a cinematic video game, director David Dufresne offers a dynamic interface for a user to play their way through the community of Fort McMurray, Alberta, the epicenter of the Tar Sands production that produces more than a million and a half barrels of oil a day. The production involved collaborations with creative technologists, game designers, game masters, and the production team in Alberta. Dufresne was particularly interested to foreground user engagement in the elaboration of the project.

For me, *Fort McMoney* is socially engaged film but not in the sense that was used in the 70’s, but what that will mean in 2015, which is about the engagement of the spectator. Its engaged film because the audience is engaging. Who is the filmmaker? It’s the people who get involved. (personal communication in French, the translation is ours, February 7, 2014)

As the director, Dufresne has directed the parameters of participation as well as the aesthetic and political framework of the project, but he permits viewers to shape their own path through the project. One straightforward way that a user can engage is by determining which questions they want to ask of the range of individuals featured in this Canadian boomtown, including the mayor, a lobbyist, a stripper, a first nations leader, an activist, a bottle collector and more. Viewers are rewarded by their curiosity and can get increasingly involved. Beyond encountering individuals living and working in Fort McMurry, users are asked to form opinions through online polling, voting and debates. Every day, there is an opinion poll and every week, a referendum with questions such as: Should oil resources be nationalized? Should we tax temporary workers? Dufresne’s goal is to instigate dialogue regarding the impact of oil on democracy and to offer a creative space to exercise civic skills. His motivation is to use gaming as an entry point for social engagement.

If one wants to create debate and engagement, a game is an extraordinary way. It’s a perfect tool. We know that with youth, that it’s a perfect learning tool and its also true with adults. From the moment you take a stand or make a moral decision, when you ask yourself, should I go there or there? you get involved and committed.

For Dufresne, the opportunity to engage with the material through a set of complex decisions offers the potential for a user to become politically implicated.

He explained,

I really like the idea of Sim City, even if it is very basic, to be a spectator is to be an agent of what you see. Will you be more aware of your petroleum addiction having played the game over having seen a documentary or a report? I am not sure, I hope so and I think so.
Dufresne’s enthusiasm for social engagement within a hybrid documentary game genre is contagious, but it does not fully resolve several tensions around new forms of collaboration. For one, within this emergent framework, the user is operating in a pre-determined game structure set up by the production, so this power differential amongst ‘collaborators’ must be taken into account. Secondly, how we frame the potential for meaningful political engagement in an online environment is also largely contingent on the interpretive formations a user brings. A user with a background in gaming may arrive with the expectation to be entertained rather than critically engaged and may just as quickly leave the site if their expectations for a challenging gaming experience are not met. Similarly, someone visiting the site to learn about the politics of oil might become frustrated by the structure of the gaming interface and just as easily leave if they have to negotiate too many obstacles to get to the compelling stories. Finally, there is a tendency to conflate simulation with the messy work of on-ground social engagement that involves responding to a range of ever-changing complex circumstances. The opportunity to meet a group of individuals in a small town whose decisions impact a much larger global community is empowering, in that it helps a user to understand a set of dynamics, interrogate a unique power structure and voice their opinion. But how does making a decision in a simulated debate actually prepare a user for on-ground complexities or unforeseen models of resistance, such as forming strategic alliances or taking to the streets? What are strategies to bridge simulation with on-ground actions to maximize a game’s potential?

New collaborators and new tensions
Partnerships in interactives now involve a host of new players. Directors and producers like Cizek, Dufresne and van Beusekom are working closely with gamers, web designers, and open-source coders to push the parameters of the form and explore the potential of documentary interactivity. Pointing out the key role of these new partners, Cizek explained, ‘we’re not just exploring collaborations on the content side, we’re also exploring new forms and new ways of telling stories in terms of the mechanics of it, and the technology.’ These new players introduce their own expectations, cultures, aesthetics, and politics introducing creative and ideological tensions that need to be acknowledged and negotiated. She explained,

I think there’s a lot of translation and interpretation that has to happen to build bridges and find points of relation, and it’s very exploratory. People are coming from very different cultures, in terms of the language that they use to describe their work … a lot of people come out of the ad-agency world which is hyper-entrepreneurial and the language is very capitalist, so it’s talking about content as assets. Just that alone speaks to the ideological divide. It’s about respecting and understanding the cultures that people come from, but also transcending that and finding unique ways to work with partners.

Dufresne describes his own process of working with gamers over a two-year period and coming to terms with the tensions at play in bridging gaming and documentary practices. While enthusiastic about the potential of the form, he is not convinced that any project can or should be translated into a game. In developing Prison Valley, (http://prisonvalley.arte.tv/?lang=en) his first game/documentary hybrid project about the industrial prison system, he ran into some ethical dilemmas about what should be
gamified. He explained, ‘With Prison Valley we utilized the codes of gaming but it wasn’t exactly a game. We were not ready, because how do you play with incarceration, morally it wasn’t possible.’ This tension shifted in the development of *Fort McMoney* where the game revolved around gathering opinions and taking a stand on the petroleum industry and the future of the city. And yet, even within this context, Dufresne confronted complex ethical issues.

There were times when I almost forgot the documentary as I was getting into the game, and the gamers told me you have to stay in the documentary. For example, at first there was the idea that at the end of an interview, there would be a face to face, where you would give your opinion. You could say if you found what they were saying credible or not credible and so on. I loved it and wanted it. And in effect, morally this posed a few questions because who is one to judge after three or four questions? So we took it out but that meant taking away a lot of game design. What became important over the two-year period was to say, when there is a conflict between the interest of the game and the significance of the documentary, the side that should win here is the documentary. Above all the principles of the documentary rule: the rigour, the point of view, and we could not just do anything with this material.

Establishing a framework and offering contextualization becomes critical when working with interactive documentaries and many argue that the voice of the director is largely in the architecture. While interactive documentary has permitted directors to widen the scope of a story by involving others and offering comparative perspectives, a breadth over depth approach can also lead to generalizations. Dovey and Rose suggest that the emergence of polyvocal aesthetics can easily lead to simplified notions of humanity that can result in ‘one world-isms’ that neglect to take into consideration inequalities of wealth, gender and class (e.g. *Global Lives, Life in a Day, One Day on Earth, A Moment in Time*) (2013, 374). They suggest instead that by staging meaningful conversations amongst various players including a user community, research subjects, participants, co-producers and audiences, there is tremendous possibility for critical argument and interventions.

An additional tension directors have mentioned in working within the framework of a non-linear documentary is the need to simplify, condense and compress complex issues into storybits. Manfred Becker, of *Here at Home*, describes the dilemma in trying not to reduce individuals to the sum of their mental illness. ‘There’s a full human being with a biography and challenges and opportunities and dreams behind that, but you have five minutes, you have one shooting day so you reduce the complexity of a human being to one dimension.’ Integrating sufficient context within short-form storytelling represents one of the most significant challenges within the media complex.

### Activating the media complex

A strategy of engagement is in essence a strategy of configuration within the media complex between users, the media, partners and players which gives rise to online and on-ground connections, initiatives and actions. Directors working at the NFB have explored a range of ways to activate the media complex by engaging audiences, leveraging partnerships, and cultivating attention around an issue. Dufresne explained the labor and energy involved, ‘There is an enormous amount of effort in creating a virtual community and one cannot do it alone. It takes partners and it takes energy.’ To facilitate engagement in *Fort McMoney*, Dufresne hired game masters, three outreach staff based in Canada,
Germany, and France, respectively, who dedicated time to directing viewers to content they might not find on their own. Fort McMurray involves eight hours of footage interwoven through four distinct chapters, and the task of the game masters was to assist viewers who may be encountering a play-based approach to documentary for the first time. The role of the game masters has also been to push civic debate both within and beyond the realm of the game. To simulate the sense of a shared collective physical experience, there are features in Fort McMoney that tell you how many other viewers are watching at the same time, but moreover, it is the spaces for dialogue that offer a sense of collectivity.

One of the game masters, Philip Lewis, a seasoned writer and publicist, explained, 

So, my specific role is to encourage debate, nourish it, to draw people’s attention to specific aspects of the game which maybe they’ve not yet seen. I have an inventory of short clips, so when I make a post to the debate I can say ‘Have a look at this clip, an interview with an oil lobbyist, or an interview with a physician or an Aboriginal leader.’ I have a bank of those clips. I feed the newsfeed, so I’m always looking for interesting news, either about the game specifically or related issues. And I feed the Twitter feed. Everything that gets posted on Twitter appears on the dashboard of our game, so that becomes a discussion forum as well. My broad role is to nourish and moderate online debate, and each of us do that for the three different versions of the game. (Personal communication, January 29, 2014)

The role of the game master was to fill in for gaps in experience and to negotiate the wide range of expectations that diverse users brought to the project. Users with less experience in gaming may have experienced moments when the gaming interface was a hurdle to following a particular story arc. Experienced gamers, on the other hand, may have wanted more challenges. For a project placed at the nexus of game design and traditional documentary modes of discourse, a game master can help resolve the tension between technological innovation and narrative.

An additional tension emerging from a project that lets the user direct their experience is the possibility of missing out on key story elements. This is especially relevant when the size and scope of the site are large. How do directors negotiate this tension or even structure a project so that even if a viewer stays for twelve minutes, they walk away impacted or informed. For the interactive development company Campfire, distinguishing users as skimmers (one time visitors), dippers (return visitors) and divers (superfans), helps to point to the reality that there will be always different degrees of engagement (Epstein and Knowlton 2015, 8). A content to viewing ratio was particularly relevant for Dufresne who argues that a few divers easily justify the raison d’etre for a long-form interactive.

Another method that Dufresne developed in his engagement strategy was to cultivate partnerships within the traditional media, what he called super players. He used this term to describe news organizations that wrote about the project and had varying degrees of implication and interest in the game. The Toronto Globe and Mail, for example, used the game as a vehicle to attract attention to the oil sands, an issue they regularly report on. CBC Alberta did a four-minute package on one of the virtual polls, bridging the dialogue within the game and the discourse playing out in the broader public. Dufresne explained,

The Globe and Mail, and the German and Swiss papers have published many articles about the tar sands and the Globe and Mail decided to publish articles on Fort McMoney. Every Monday they wrote an article on the referendum explaining how people had voted and it was a pretext to discuss the nationalization of oil or where our taxes go. As a former journalist
myself that was one way of encouraging them to try something different. And it was great; the 
Globe and Mail played, Le Monde did not play but they announced the project on their 
homepage for two hours.

The Here at Home team reached out to the mass media through an approach they called, 
matching. They selected themes and stories and pitched them to media experts depending 
on their expertise. The project also involved two full-time staff called community man-
agers, whose mandate was to seed interest and debate. Michelle van Beusekom explained,

Their role was to write for a blog that was attached to the site and also to reach out via 
Twitter, social media, to find people who were talking about Housing first. Part of their strat-
egy was also to seed conversations in places where it’s not a fully-converted audience, but to 
seed conversations where people are having active social debates.

van Beusekom explained that the project was initially targeted to potential skeptics of an 
approach that subsidizes housing for those suffering with mental illness, users who might 
wonder ‘Could that work? Is that really a good use of public monies?’ In the months that 
followed, the team discovered that the site was filling a more immediate need and had 
become a critical resource to those engaged around issues of mental health and housing 
by visualizing the web of individuals working with and impacted by mental health. 
With more time, van Beusekom would have wanted to deepen the degree of on-ground 
outreach, but was limited by both time and resources.

Director Katerina Cizek confirms the value and strategy of cultivating meaningful 
relationships with the media.

We do think a lot about how to reach a lot of people and that’s why we’re interested in big 
partners and partners like The New York Times, like Wired.com. The NFB as a whole is really 
interested in engaging with Canadians beyond the industry model, so how does that happen, 
right?

Cizek has expanded her open approach to include partnerships with the media that have 
had tremendous ripple effects. During a CBC interview, a media expert mentioned his 
dream of reporting from a highrise and Cizek helped to make that happen. As a result, 
CBC Radio Toronto launched a three-hour remote broadcast from within the highrise 
as part of their Metro Morning show and this attracted public officials and led to 
another round of collaborations and exposure. Cizek’s The Short History of the Highrise 
was in fact a co-production with the New York Times, where she was given access to 
the institution’s photo archive and created an interactive documentary that explores 
what Cizek refers to as ‘2500-year global history of vertical living.’ As a result of the col-
laboration, the project was featured on the front of the New York Times and has gone on 
to win several awards including a Peabody and an Emmy award. For The Universe Within, 
the final installation of Highrise, Cizek instigated a collaboration with The Atlantic’s City 
Lab Project and they ran a series on the project and on international highrise development. 
By offering City Lab research leads she had culled over several years, Cizek was able to 
bolster additional attention to the political issues raised in the media project.

NFB innovations around engagement have not been happening in a vacuum. Engage-
ment strategies in North America and the UK have flourished with the emergence of 
groups like Working Films, Fledgling Fund, Chicken and Egg Pictures, Active Voice, 
BRITDOC, The Good Pitch, and Just Films who help filmmakers make strategic
connections to non-profits and audiences (McLagan, 310). The increased interest of media players, investors, and non-profits in documentary has led to what McLagan calls an institutionalization of outreach and engagement. McLagan also describes the emergence of ‘filmanthropists’ who after witnessing the success of long-form documentaries such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* and an *Inconvenient Truth* came to see documentary as both a vehicle to promote socially relevant messages and to generate finances. Interested in a ‘double bottom line’ where investors could recover both financial and social return, documentaries are open to the emerging practice of ‘impact investing’ (309). With this trend comes the mandate to measure success, and for example, Participant Media, the activist entertainment company, has been collaborating with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Knight Foundation and the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism to develop a tool to measure impact, in the form of a Participant Index (Cieply 2014). What pressures will such instrumentalized forms of measuring social impact have on the future of innovations in interactive documentary? McLagan warns against a fixation on outreach and trends or funding formulas that corner filmmakers into delivering ‘impacts’ that can undercut possible innovations in technique and viewpoint. She argues: ‘It also pushes the demarcation of what counts as a “political” film away from projects that are more aesthetically challenging and not as easily incorporated into broad outreach campaigns’ (McLagan and McKee 2012, 22). McLagan’s concerns regarding forms are matched by our own concerns regarding forms of advocacy or social change. Do new trends in quantifying impact also lead to a narrowing conception of social agency or political change more generally?

**Stages of infancy**

In an era of media consolidation, many interactive committed documentaries are living up to Wintonick’s expectation and offering a critical space of investigation and dialogue on a widely accessible platform. At the same time, the platforms themselves are not neutral. Political scientist Mathew Hindman is cautious about utopic claims that an emergent media complex will necessarily transform inactive citizens into doers or make the public sphere more inclusive precisely because of pre-existing power structures and elite-dominated media patterns that are mirrored in online venues (2009). Scholar and practitioner Alexandra Juhasz acknowledges the unprecedented levels of access and opportunities for activist documentary producers to scale up both production and dissemination but she also draws attention to the tensions of using platforms owned by corporations who have the tools to appropriate and monitor both movement and materials (2014). The practice of tracking movement is not exclusive to corporations and Dufresne tracked his users to better understand how the game was working but at a particularly high cost.

At the beginning we had anywhere from 1000–12,000 visitors at the same time and we had to rely on Amazon servers. These were very expensive. I think the first month it was $25,000. For this fee we could find out everything a user was doing, who they interviewed, what questions they were asking, how they were voting etc.

The strategies and success of negotiating these circuits to activate audiences is often less about the technology and more about the experience and intention of each producer/director and the strategic partnerships they establish. Different partnerships or approaches
invite unique access to circuits, networks of attention, and visibility. McLagan and McKee rightfully describe how ‘different modes of circulation address distinct publics and make possible varying forms of political action, enabling particular claims to be made while foreclosing others’ (12).

In addition to navigating non-neutral circuits, producers and directors will continue to explore strategies to compete amidst the barrage of information available across platforms like YouTube who claim that users are uploading 100 hours of video every minute. The NFB has had tremendous success in cultivating attention with projects like Pine Point, Bear 71 and now these three projects, but is attention enough? Shortened attention online has put established forms of documentary storytelling under pressure. van Beusekom explained,

It’s hard with interactive projects. As a viewer and consumer of media, for me personally, there are a lot of films that have changed my life, to be honest. And I don’t know if there’s an interactive documentary that has changed my life. I think we’re still in the infancy of this medium and how it works, and if you give the users that opportunity to interact and select their path and choose what order they experience the content that has been made available to them, how do you still give them that sense of narrative or closure and being taken on a story by someone who’s spent a lot of time thinking about something and the issues, and plotting the ideal journey for you.

For Cizek and Dufresne, the story is increasingly collaborative and largely informed by the partners or users. Rather than a fixed narrative or final project, the directors are focused on enabling processes that offer multiple points of entry and re-articulations. In reflecting on Highrise, Cizek explained,

I think that as a whole, in the end, the project ended up being a really interesting equation of the citizen web or the citizen Internet, this idea that we need to defend democracy and participation online. And, we equated that to city building and how the city also needs to be built in a participatory way by its citizens. So we are both citizens of the web, and citizens of the city. And on a grand scale, that’s kind of what the project did. And I think it resonated.

There are no easy templates or solutions to using media to incite change or build awareness and engagement, but directors like Cizek and Dufresne with years of experience in non-linear documentary and journalism are demonstrating the potential of online documentaries to attract new partners and users and in effect broaden reach. Dufresne and his collaborating gaming coders are actively exploring the tensions and affordances of enacting dialogue and citizenship through play, and simulation. Cizek with her emphasis on process and collaboration has shown us how far and wide engagement can travel when a project is open enough to invite meaningful places for collaboration and equally invested in on-ground interventions. Here at Home used the affordances of an online documentary to visualize and activate innovative research and ongoing networks that support individuals suffering from mental illness and who are in need of housing.

As the media complex changes, so do our expectations for the form. If we impose our social change expectations for the committed long-form documentary onto the interactive, are we missing the point? A user is not the same as a collective audience in a well-known exhibition space, one that continues to be a privileged site of activist encounter (Waugh and Miller 2014, 43). But the Internet has demonstrated a whole new landscape for activism that invites new choreographies for collaboration and in effect new possibilities for engagement.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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