

Collaborative and Creative Documentary Production in Video and Online

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Introduction

The collaborative production of screen-based narratives, how they are shaped by their respective technologies and production contexts, will be discussed in this paper by drawing on research data gained through a PhD Practitioner-led research project. Using a framework provided by the System's Model of creativity, an examination of the interactions and the collaborations a practitioner has with 'field' experts (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999) will be investigated. Field experts have been identified for this research as all collaborators who contributed to either the video or website production process, or documentary subject area including 'on-camera' participants. Thus, this research will reveal the collaborative significance of the field through the video and online production contexts of the Fort Scratchley Research Project.

Fort Scratchley, a historic site in Newcastle, provided more than 200 years of Australian community history that was packaged into a low-budget fifty-five minute documentary DVD, "*Using Fort Scratchley*" and an online interactive documentary/website "*Fort Scratchley a Living History*" (www.fortscratchley.org). Broadly speaking, the two narratives tell stories about the five Australian communities that have used the Fort Scratchley site. The video begins dramatically with an animation of a Japanese Submarine firing on Newcastle in 1942 and then the historical and restoration stories of the Fort unfold. The website is a glorified time line containing over 300 media files. Its interactive structure allows users to view material by date or by a chronologically prescribed tour. The tour options are Maritime, Military, Coal Mining, Theatrical and Awabakal — the local indigenous community. The website was created after the video which allowed for the footage to be re-edited into short segments for online delivery. Each entry provides access to still images, documents and articles or video footage that relates to a particular date or time period.

My role for both productions was that of content creator and producer. Previously I have been professionally employed at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as a Television Producer/Director. On the video production I was the producer/director but due to crew restrictions I also undertook other crew roles. On the website production I was the content producer, preparing media for the website programmer.

Methodology and theory

The PhD research employed an auto-ethnographic research methodology known as Practitioner Based Enquiry (PBE) (Murray & Lawrence, 2000), that ran in parallel with the production of the two screen-based media products. PBE is a methodology that provides a way of exposing a practitioner's creative process that can be both overtly collaborative as well as drawing on knowledge that is tacitly stored through their own skills and practice. At the heart of this research is an understanding that creativity, while being an individual or mental process, is also a social and cultural process (Becker, 1982, Csikszentmihalyi 1999, Paulus et al, 2003, Wolff 1981). More importantly, in order to be creative, an individual draws on a larger body of knowledge which is accessed through a social system. The System's Model of Creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; 315) is used to explain how it is possible for an individual to draw on a set of antecedent conditions. This model exposes the collaborative process of creativity, whereby creativity can begin at any point in the model and each of the three components are equal.

For creativity to occur, a set of rules and practices must be transmitted from the domain to the individual. The individual must then produce a novel variation in the content of the domain, the variation then must be selected by the field for inclusion in the domain (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999: 315)

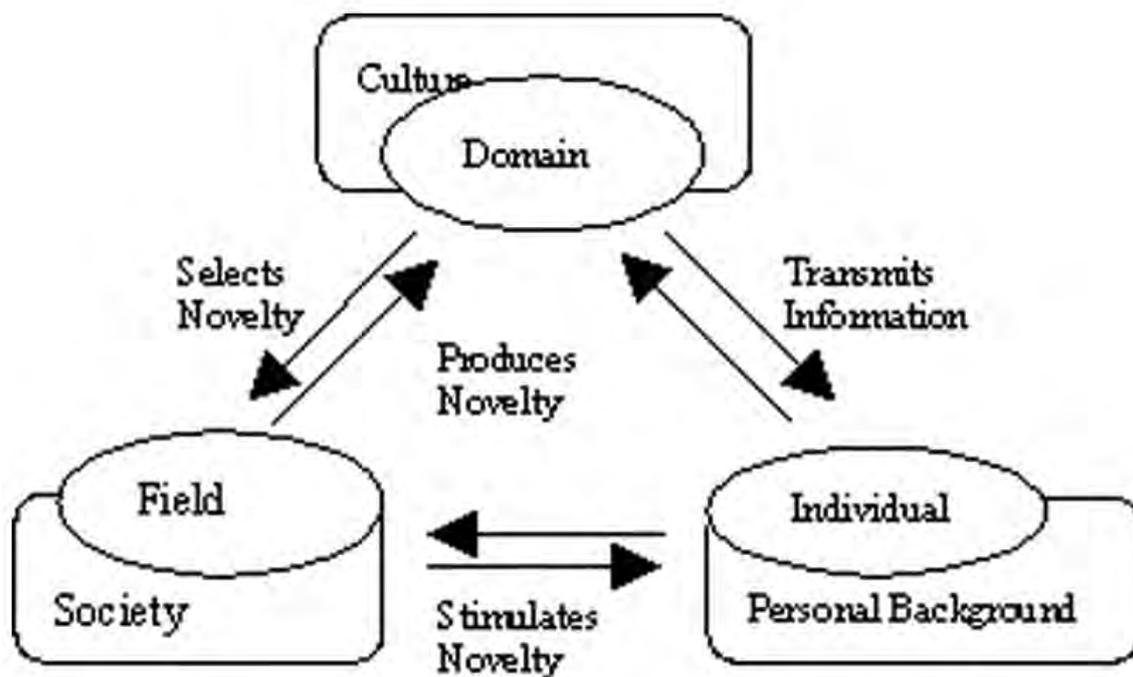


Figure 1: The Systems Model of Creativity

The framework provided by the System's Model is used in this discussion to explain the process. As the 'individual' I am required to deal with feedback and collaborative 'field' input during production. Thus, the 'field' of experts are identified as all collaborators, either individuals or institutional bodies who contributed to the project. The domain is identified as the body of knowledge which exists on the history of Fort Scratchley and video and website production technology. Thus I will be drawing on my background in television production practice, and my understanding, interpretation and internalisations of the rules of the domain and opinions from the field. My creative collaborative process is how I assess and mediate the information and knowledge that exists within this Fort Scratchley Production context. What follows is a brief discussion about some key interactions with members of the 'Field'. I have identified their contributions and collaborative input into shaping the narrative as it occurred through the production process.

Collaborative production practice

The 'field' members, who contributed to the video documentary production over a four-year period, can be crudely broken down into three groups. These are nineteen technical crew, twenty interviewees, and twelve institutions. Institutions in this case are Museums and Cultural bodies that house archival material as well as the Local Council who commissioned the work. Each contributor brought different sets of skills and knowledge to the project resulting in various forms of collaborative practice. Since 'the (social) context affects group functioning' (Paulus, 2003: online) an explanation of the production context, budget and skill base is necessary in order to define the contextual parameters of the production.

The video was a low-budget production — under \$20,000 (AUS). As a University Research Project it used a core of five undergraduates who worked along side three professionally skilled practitioners. The consequences

of this were that dramatic variations in skill levels meant there were times when production progress was slow, while undergraduates worked out how to negotiate specific tasks or technologies. Conversely, the undergraduates contribution to the project was essential, particularly in relation to the development of the 3-D animation sequences and preliminary editing tasks. The collaborative input from the technical crew was fundamental to the project as the scope of the project was too large for me to undertake by myself.

The website budget of \$10,000 (AUS) was secured through a University research grant, which allowed me to employ two professionals. These funds enabled the development of an efficient collaborative environment. Consequently, there were collaborative discussions to ensure that the website design would effectively show off the multi-media and provide an enjoyable user experience. For example, the final Flash interface-design was suggested by the Website Programmer and allowed for a time line specific data-base that offered a selection of multi-media options relating to each date.

The Fort Scratchley Historical Society (FSHS) also gave me access to their archive which contained information on the 130 year military history of the site. While it could have been possible to make a documentary exclusively about the site's military history, I realised as my research portfolio expanded, that there were also other communities who had used the site. This became evident as the archival newspaper articles from the 1870's revealed different names for the site.

The site has been known as Signal Hill, Flagstaff Hill, Captain Allan's Hill, Fort Fiddlesticks, Fort Scratchley, Collier Point, and Tahlbina. These different names represented each community which at some point in the Fort's history *used* the site. Explaining which communities had used the site and the nature of their activities became one of the main drivers of the narrative. Therefore the story evolved into one about the site's geographical location and how site use and community dominance on the site changed with defence and maritime technologies. The eventual withdrawal of the military in 1972 saw the site return to community hands. These themes also provided inspiration for the documentary title.

The title for the website was inspired by the 'Living History' methodology that was used by the University of Newcastle historians who were collaborating on the research project. Their task was to write a 7000 word booklet on the Fort and through their methodology, bring a real life perspective to past historical events through re-enactments and oral history interviews. The interviewees contributed their stories to the project, including the video and website, agreeing that any profits from these would go directly to the Fort's upkeep. Thus factual historic events were brought to life through the inter-cutting of interviews, 3-D animations and the use of archival photographs and film footage.

Conclusion

This selective examination of the contributions from some of the 'field' experts spotlights the diverse range of collaborative input on the Fort Scratchley project. On reflection, in order to incorporate all of these inputs, I developed a working process by which I could assess all collaborators' project input in order to filter out inappropriate or biased contributions and keep the project moving forward.

In summary, the evidence presented above confirms that the 'field's collaborative contributions and feedback were significant and helped shape these processes and, ultimately, the final narratives presented on the Fort.

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