

# ART OF DECISION: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO RAISING AWARENESS OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

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*Art of Decision* explores the possibilities that creative applications of multimedia and technology, in combination with an artistic approach, offer for the development of innovative ways to raise awareness of Active Citizenship. The exhibition consists of 9 interactive multimedia rooms that present opinions from research participants in an engaging way alongside statistical information, using sound, film, and interactive installations.

Since the 1990s, there has been a renewed interest in the concept of citizenship as an important idea that has relevance to today's social and political problems. [1] In the Irish context, citizenship has become more relevant in the context of recent social, economic and demographic changes in Irish society. Ireland continues to experience significant levels of voter apathy, increasing immigration and increasing diversity around moral, religious and ethical perspectives. [2] These developments in Irish society have made it clear that the health and stability of Irish democracy depends not only on its basic structures (political structure, representation and accountability) but, on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens; for example, how citizens respond to these social, economic and demographic changes; how they participate in government in order to represent the public good and hold politicians accountable. [3] Since the early 1990s, there has been a growing concern, at both the international and Irish level, for a definition of citizenship that focuses on "the identity and conduct of individual citizens, including their responsibilities, loyalties and roles." (ibid) A review of the health of Irish democracy based on standard indicators such as voter participation and representation does not give it a 'clean bill of health'. These inequalities in representation stem from inequalities in political participation and are a cause of great concern for the health of Irish democracy. The matter is of such concern that the Democracy Commission was established in 2003 to address the issue of poor participation, unequal representation of groups and general civic and political disengagement in the country. [4]

## 2 The individual at the heart of Active Citizenship

Following on from the Democracy Commission report, increasing attention has been given to addressing citizen engagement. The importance of the community and voluntary sector has been seen as playing a considerable part in establishing a strong civic culture and society. In April 2006, the Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern established a Taskforce on Active Citizenship "to recommend measures which could be taken as part of public policy to facilitate a greater degree of engagement by citizens in all aspects of life and the growth and development of voluntary organisations as part of a strong civic culture." [5] The Taskforce on Active Citizenship conducted a *Survey of Civic Engagement* in order to begin to measure social capital and found that overall the levels were very healthy, with no apparent decline in recent years in levels of volunteering, active membership of community and voluntary organisations. [6] The Taskforce have also looked to the civic republican tradition as a means to actively encourage citizens to participate. The distinguishing feature of civic republicans, that separates them from other participations is the exhibition, therefore, explore "emphasis on the intrinsic value of political participation for

the participants themselves.” [3] The Taskforce definition of ‘active citizenship’ has now established a definition of the ‘active citizen’ as one who plays a role in the family, their neighbourhood, their community, voluntary organizations, the workplace, as well as in political structures.

In their final report to government, the Taskforce presented a set of recommendations to enhance the work already being done to develop a strong, independent, and inclusive civil society. [5] Among others, the recommendations relate to institutional and procedural mechanisms as well as citizen engagement measures aimed at increasing participation in the democratic process. [5] Of specific interest to this research is the Taskforce recommendation that innovative projects to raise awareness of Active Citizenship should be supported. The Taskforce suggests that projects in which community development and Active Citizenship are presented as something “attractive, real and personal could spark public debate and interest.” [5]

In this spirit of pursuing innovation, the remainder of this paper presents an overview of the *Art of Decision* mixed-method approach and interactive multimedia exhibition that explores new ways to raise awareness of Active Citizenship, in a manner that makes it attractive, personal, and engaging. [7] Multimedia and new artistic modes of information presentation, in combination with qualitative social research methods are used to provide a platform for the presentation of information on Active Citizenship and content drawn from personal views, insights and opinions of people and their communities. The *Art of Decision* research and resulting exhibition therefore explore the possibilities that creative applications of multimedia and technology, in combination with an artistic approach and aesthetic sensibilities, offer for the development of new innovative approaches and responses to the Taskforce recommendation.

### 3 Art of Decision: an interdisciplinary approach to design

In the last decade of the twentieth century, computer technologies have played a dynamic and increasingly important role in altering how we make art in all disciplines. [8] The characteristics of multimedia as defined by Packer and Jordan present defining emergent characteristics of the diverse array of multimedia presentations that set them apart from other media presentations including the integration of all art forms; interactivity that offers the user new ways to manipulate media and communicate with others; the use of hypertext and hypermedia; immersion in different experiences through entry into the simulation or suggestion of a 3D environment; alternative narrative structures. [9] Artist-researchers continue to address the use of computers to advance the presentation and organisation of large volumes of complex information and are looking at new ways to visualise and allow interaction with information by creating visualisation methods that incorporate experimental two-dimensional, three-dimensional, time-based, meaningful and metaphoric visualisation, and interactive environments. This way of doing things is significant in that it not only exploits new technologies to facilitate the expression of artistic ideas but has also brought about new stylistic and aesthetic modes of thinking arising out of the conceptual implications of the use of technology in an art context. These characteristics and approaches define a way of doing things, both artistically and technologically, and an approach to artistic creation that was adopted for the research and design of the *Art of Decision* exhibition.

At the heart of this research is the use of art to raise awareness of an issue of social concern and the creation of artwork that can be used for that purpose. The application-oriented approach requires that the artist considers the context for the work, the variety of artistic and technological methods available to realize the work, and importantly that the artist has a concern for the human dimension in addressing

the creation of such a work. There is a need for multiple disciplines, methods and perspectives to illuminate the human context [10] and input is needed from a variety of disciplines relevant to the study, in this case including art, technology, design, politics, and social science. Social research offers useful methods for an enquiry into what people think about issues, which can give the artist a unique perspective and offer opportunities for reflexivity. Interview and media-elicitation methods are a particular part of this approach to enquiry and the generation of participant-authored content that is presented in this research. Social research also offers methods to organise and present the resulting data. In particular, content analysis and thematic networks analysis offer ways for the artist to structure and present the information in themes that can be presented using multimedia and technology in an artistic manner. *Art of Decision* draws from these methods but is primarily situated in the art and technology field.

It is worth mentioning here that this research and the resulting art exhibition are not an examination of how the artwork can bring about social change. This type of evaluation presents other challenges and perhaps is best examined from another research area. The work presented here is about the exploration of artistic practice, informed by political theory and social research methods, with the aim of creating art that raises awareness of social issues, with a particular focus on Active Citizenship. The next section will provide a brief overview of the *Art of Decision* exhibits.

#### 4 *Art of Decision*: themes and exhibits

The *Art of Decision* exhibition is a series of 9 interactive multimedia exhibits that present opinions and ideas about power and decision-making from a variety of research participants in an engaging, theatrical way. Contributors' ideas are presented alongside statistical information in a meaningful and innovative fashion using sound, film, and interactive installations. The technology also facilitates visitors to contribute their ideas to the exhibition as it evolves in the space and in future research. For the purposes of this paper, these exhibits will be presented briefly under the three broad themes:

- a) information presentation: *DATAm*
- b) insights and opinions on Active Citizenship: *Decisions*<sup>3</sup>, *Finding Your Voice: Siobhán's story* and *Mamo's story*, *VIP room*, *Images of Power/Powerhouse*
- c) react, take part and debate: *Art of Decision Daily Post*, *Rantroom* and *Rite of Passage*

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#### THEME 1: INFORMATION PRESENTATION

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Art and technology offer new and alternative possibilities for presentation and audience engagement. The artist working with multimedia and technology can exploit these possibilities to present a complex view of many layers of information in an accessible and meaningful way. While this approach permeates throughout the entire exhibition, and all the rooms in the exhibition present information of some form or another, *DATAm* is solely dedicated to enriching the presentation of factual information, specifically the levels of representation in Irish State bodies, with a focus on gender balance.

*DATAm* is a large-scale interactive map of Ireland (housed in a room that is 48ft long, 24ft wide and 12ft high) designed to present statistical information on the gender makeup of Irish decision-making bodies in a novel way, presented on 6 surrounding projector screens. As visitors enter the installation, they are presented with lights illuminating sensors that correspond with information points. As they walk across the map, visitors trigger animations that present data on the gender balance on Irish State bodies in over 70 locations around the country.

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## THEME 2: INSIGHTS AND OPINIONS ON ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

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Media research methods, and the generation of text, audio, video and image authored by participants or created through interview, are appealing to the artist as they can be used in multimedia presentation. The exploration of content can be facilitated with the aid of social research techniques such as content analysis and thematic networks analysis that allow the researcher to sift through data and organise it. The artist is interested in using the themes that emerge from the enquiry as a way of presenting Active Citizenship and is particularly interested in participant-authored content as it can be used to present Active Citizenship in a more personal and meaningful way. The analytical process is very much an exploration to find out the general themes that describe what people think on the topic. Media research methods were used extensively in the research and design phase of *Art of Decision* and resulted in five of the nine exhibits presenting participant-authored and participant-generated media.

**Decisions<sup>3</sup>** is a short documentary video where 9 contributors present their perspectives on decision-making. The filmed interviews were an attempt to get people to reflect on the similarities and disparities between their own decision-making and political decision-making such as happens at national government level. The documentary video is presented in a darkened room and is projected on a screen that is split into three panels so that three people speak simultaneously. Each division of the screen (panel) has a dedicated speaker that allows for sound to be directed to a particular spot in the screening room.

The ***Finding Your Voice – Mamo’s Story And Siobhán’s Story*** exhibits encourage visitors to find their political voice through the experience of listening to the personal stories of 2 women, Mamo and Siobhán. The two stories presented here are drawn from recorded interviews made by Melissa Thompson, an American documentary filmmaker, and are special and illuminating because they tell of external forces and circumstances that affected these women and how, as a result, they turned their lives around. Both women tell personal stories of their life experience, overcoming the odds and being drawn into political action. The concept relies on the motivating power of the interviews and their impact as role models. Both stories are recordings of the women’s own voices, presented in two small, intimate spaces as audio installations with lighting that changes and responds to the stories as they unfold.

The **VIP room** exhibit presents 8 contributors’ perspectives on the different types of players in the Irish political power game, the nature and direction of their influence and maps the interrelationships between them. Visitors navigate through this power map using a control that allows manipulation of a 3D model of the VIPs on screen. The *VIP room* sets out to make visible the political power game, its players and the way they interact. The project was administered as an interview wherein 8 participants from a wide demographic were asked to identify, in their opinion, the sites of political power in Ireland and plot and draw a map of these sites of power, their interrelationships and the degree of influence exerted by each site. As visitors enter the room, they are presented with an interface that shows a participant’s hand-drawn map on a small screen and control dials for manipulating a 3D model representation of the map, which is presented on a large projection screen.

The content-generation phase, ***Images of Power/Powerhouse***, uses a photo-novella technique (uses photographs to encourage participants to talk about their day-to-day lives to generate participant-authored content giving perspectives on power. In the project, 72 participants from around Ireland were sent disposable cameras by post and asked to take photographs to describe what power meant to them. As the project was seen as a story-telling opportunity for participants, it was important that the image

and comments created what could be considered a 'picture story'. Using content analysis, the large volume of 'picture-stories' were organised into themes that provide an interesting and insightful view of how people perceive sites of power as dealing with the individual's power, the power of the family, the power of connections between people and how they influence each other. It deals quite prominently with these sites of power as being very positive as they provide support and comfort to the individual within the family, home, and the larger community. The presentation phase of this work is two-fold: a) on the website *imagesofpower.net* and b) as *Powerhouse* an immersive interactive multimedia exhibit that presents a physical space where visitors can experience the complex collection of 'picture stories'. *Powerhouse* presents a mixed-reality environment comprising of the website, a presentation of the card-mounted 'picture stories', a video presentation of the 'picture stories' and an audio recording of a selection of quotes from the reflections data. The exhibit is a custom-built large room that suggests the feel and familiarity of a home interior and outside space (garden, street).

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### THEME 3: REACT, TAKE PART AND DEBATE

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In a world where it is becoming increasingly difficult to engage people politically, communication systems such as the Internet and mobile phone communication can offer novel and exciting possibilities for interaction and communication. The three exhibits presented under this theme offer visitors different ways to communicate their thoughts and leave their mark on the exhibition.

***Art of Decision Daily Post*** immerses visitors in a giant newspaper where they can comment on the current affairs headline of the day. The 'front page' projection screen of the newspaper is updated daily and can also be seen on the dedicated website, [www.artofdecisiondailypost.net](http://www.artofdecisiondailypost.net), during the exhibition. People outside the exhibition can gain access to the exhibit by sending an email to [post@artofdecisiondailypost.net](mailto:post@artofdecisiondailypost.net) or using Internet-based comment board at [www.artofdecisiondailypost.net](http://www.artofdecisiondailypost.net). A camera is positioned to film the *Art of Decision Daily Post* projection screen. All of these modes of interaction allow a larger audience of those inside and outside the room to participate in debating the news topic of the day.

***Rantroom*** is the last exhibit in the *Art of Decision* journey and is intended as a resting space. It encourages visitors to reaction and leave comments on any aspect of the exhibition. Visitors are encouraged here to contribute their ideas and comments on specific issues raised throughout the exhibition, such as power and decision-making. Visitors can contribute to the *Rantroom* projection screen via mobile phone text messaging, email and an Internet-based comments board on the dedicated website, [www.rantroom.net](http://www.rantroom.net).

***Rite of Passage*** gathers images of contributors' faces and superimposes them on members of the Irish government. In doing this, it challenges visitors to think of themselves in positions of power while also gathering contributions in a creative and alternative way and offers visitors an opportunity to 'play' with their contributions to the space and the idea of themselves in positions of power. The exhibit consists of 2 spaces: a corridor-like space that masks off and leads into a larger viewing room. Positioned at the end of the corridor is an opening in the wall that contains a cartoon of the faces of members of the government. As visitors place their head inside the opening 'for a closer look', a sensor triggers a camera hidden in the box to take a photograph of their face. Visitors are unaware that a photograph of their face has been captured. These images are transferred into the large viewing room and superimposed on the heads of members of the government. As visitors continue into the larger viewing area, they see a large projection of the members of the government.

## 5 Conclusions

If citizens are to become more engaged, they are required to take part in an active exploration and study of citizenship at all levels – personal, local, national and global. The mixed-method approach presented here is a rich palette of tools from which to draw on, tools that offer new ways to create content for presentation and the design of engaging multimedia presentations that are brought into the community. This research has presented a fresh approach to engaging the citizen and a new tool that can be added to the repertoire of ways to understand and examine how people view their role as individuals in society, within the family and community structures. The exploration offers new ways for multimedia artists to look at the process of creation and presentation and create engaging and unique perspectives on a topic. Social research methods offer many interesting ways for the creative work of the artist to be informed and made unique and the combination of methods, and changing role of the artist in the project, is a novel approach that informs the design of exhibits to address and engage a public audience.

## **References and Notes:**

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2. Michael O'Connell, *Right-Wing Ireland? The Rise of Populism in Ireland and Europe* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2003).
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6. Taskforce on Active Citizenship, "Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship," March, 2007, Available at [www.activecitizenship.ie](http://www.activecitizenship.ie) (accessed: January 20th, 2008).
7. The scope of this paper does not allow for detailed accounts of each exhibit. More information available at [www.artofdecision.net](http://www.artofdecision.net). A feature-length documentary, containing footage of the exhibition, is available for viewing at [www.vimeo.com/2771258](http://www.vimeo.com/2771258).
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