

Interactive Media and Non-Linear Participatory Narratives of Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

This research project explores the application of non-linear narratives afforded by new forms of interactive storytelling, such as responsive media, to the production of participatory films created by non-professionals with lived experiences of mental health problems. The aim of the research is to bridge the gap between the emerging practice of interactive filmmaking and community storytelling in mental health, with a view at how complex and non-linear narrative forms could suit polyvocal and diverse film productions. The research is practice-based and involves the design, implementation, and evaluation of an interactive film prototype produced in Cutting Room, an object-based media tool developed at Digital Creativity Labs, University of York.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing • Empirical studies in interaction design

KEYWORDS

Interactive film, iDocs, mental health, participatory filmmaking, participatory design

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1 Introduction

While mental health appears to finally be at the centre of much debate in the media [1], it is still a complex area to discuss, often susceptible of misrepresentation and stereotyping [8]. Stigma around mental health still significantly impacts the quality of life of people experiencing mental health problems in a variety of ways, ranging from professional opportunities to self-acceptance [2, 4, 5, 6, 20, 21, 23]. Mainstream media has been accused of reinforcing stigma by often representing stereotyped views on mental health and people experiencing mental health problems [12, 13, 19, 24].

Participatory filmmaking is an inclusive practice that allows non-professionals to shape personal narratives around issues close to their experiences [22] and, as such, it could constitute the antidote to the stigmatised views of mental health often proposed by the media. Literature [22, 25] and direct experience as a facilitator by the author shows how participatory filmmaking can be a source of authentic and unfiltered narratives on the nature of complex issues, including mental health, illness, and recovery. However, this practice still presents challenges, especially around the creation of polyvocal films by community groups. Producing linear films revolving around one main storyline poses the risk of both minimising dissonant views in a group and over-simplifying the representation of mental health experiences for some participants, falling into some of the same pitfalls that mainstream media production is accused of [12, 19, 24].

This research project explores how the non-linear narrative forms afforded by interactive media [10] could offer opportunities to expand participatory filmmaking on mental health by allowing the creation of complex, polyvocal, “living” films [9], shaped by participants with lived experience of mental health problems.

2 Related Work

The emerging practice of interactive documentary (iDocs) has been described as a field that could potentially open dialogic and transformative ways of communication between authors and audiences [3, 9, 10]. Interactivity can amplify the intentions and directions of film narratives [18], allowing audiences to explore content according to their personal preferences and to add their own viewpoints to the film text [11, 17, 18].

During the initial stages of this research, we have identified a number of narrative qualities afforded by interactive media that could support the production of participatory films on mental health, such as coexistence of multiple storylines, insertion of non-filmic materials, immersion, empathy, responsiveness, and audiences' input in the film [16]. These qualities, currently embedded in a number of existing interactive documentaries, have informed our investigation at later stages of the research, towards identifying an interactive film form that can fulfill the potentials of participatory filmmaking in mental health.

3 Aims and Objectives

This research project explores how narrative non-linearity afforded by new forms of interactive media could support the production of participatory films created by people with lived experience of mental health problems. In particular, we are looking at exploiting non-linearity to design new polyvocal film forms, in which participants can represent their experiences of mental health problems by expressing both communal and personal views. A successful participatory interactive film could allow participants to express themselves authentically and inspire empathy in audiences through personalised routes through the film content and the establishment of a dialogue that is central to the practice of participatory filmmaking [25].

Overall, the research seeks answers to the following overarching research question: how can interactive media support the production of participatory films on mental health where participants can represent their experiences as authentically as possible while engaging audiences in interactive forms of dialogic reflection? In order to explore the area of investigation defined, we have designed a practice-based research project grounded on a specific case study.

4 Methodology

The exploration is centered around an existing participatory linear film produced in 2016 by five men with direct experience of mental health problems to express their views on the role of community and isolation in recovery. The film, called *Stepping Through*, has been chosen as an example of a linear film which attempts to accommodate the views of different participants who have all acted as creators of the film, designing both its content and its narratives shape, and taking direct part in its making.

The research has been structured around three main phases. First of all, a study has been dedicated to investigating whether *Stepping Through* as a linear film hindered some of the expressive potential of the group in a way that non-linearity could have facilitated. This preliminary study, conducted by working directly with the participants who created the original film, was necessary in order to verify our assumptions on the limits of linear narratives in participatory production. The second phase of the research has been dedicated to the design and creation of a non-linear interactive version of *Stepping Through* which could incorporate the expressive needs left unfulfilled by the original film. A final study will be dedicated to evaluating the new version of *Stepping Through* with its creators and external audiences in order to verify whether it can be considered more successful than its linear counterpart in expressing the viewpoints of the authors and in engaging audiences with different levels of familiarity with mental health.

The three studies comprising this research project have been designed taking into account principles of participatory action research [7, 15] in order to keep the needs and outlooks of participants at the centre of the research, valuing their involvement in the design and evolution of the film prototype. We have also engaged with creative methods [14] to design workshops activities that could generate discussion and reflection while being inclusive of participants that have different levels of familiarity with academic research.

5 Progress

The first study in the project has been completed and has shown that some of the complexities the participants intended to represent in the original version of *Stepping Through* had to be sacrificed to streamline viewpoints into a linear film. A number of workshops with participants uncovered a higher level of complexity in their accounts and resulted into the identification of eight additional storylines, which have a different degree of relevance to each participant, and a number of other ways in which non-linearity could have been useful to participants' expressive needs [16]. The inclusion of these narrative devices within the existing storyline of *Stepping Through* would paint a more thorough picture of the dynamics at play in the relationship between isolation and illness (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Increased complexity of the *Stepping Through* main theme induced by narrative non-linearity

The second study, currently almost completed, has been dedicated to designing a new non-linear narrative form for *Stepping Through* which could incorporate and fulfill the expressive needs identified in the first study. Participants, who had no previous experience in interactive filmmaking, have designed a map of content using physical objects which established relationships between the original narrative materials and the new storylines. The map of content was then translated into a number of possible narrative structures, which culminated into the final choice of presenting film clips according to which feelings within each watched segment resonates the most with the viewer. At the end of the journey, the viewer is presented with a personalised clip reflecting the feelings she or he has been through while watching the film and an interview of the participant whose feelings have resonated the most with the viewer's. The possibility of navigating content through feelings was chosen by the participants in order to establish empathic communication with viewers and encourage them to reflect on their own experiences of mental and emotional wellbeing. The narrative structure created has then been implemented in Cutting Room through the support of a software developer, resulting in the first film prototype.

6 Future Work

Future work in this research project will consist in designing and carrying out an evaluation of the film prototype to check whether *Stepping Through Interactive* meets its objectives against its linear counterpart. The film will be first evaluated by its creators, through a combination of questionnaires

and peer-led interviews. The aim of this part of the evaluation is to reflect on whether the non-linear version of the film managed to fill the gaps identified in the first study. We will also record and correct possible inconsistencies or barriers in the interaction with the film's UI.

Once an evaluation with the direct film's participants is completed, the prototype will be presented to three different audiences: mental health professionals and service users who are familiar with the original *Stepping Through*, people with experiences of mental health problems and mental health professionals that are not familiar with the community we worked with, and finally, a sample of general audience who is not necessarily well-versed in mental health awareness. Working within these different contexts should allow us to gather a variety of views and reactions to the film, which will become the foundation for a second iteration of the prototype and for future research on the use and applications of the film and its related workflow.

7 Contribution

The completed project will present a refined interactive film prototype designed by a group of non-professional filmmakers with direct experience of mental health problems and a related workflow which will allow other practitioners in community settings to replicate or adjust the same model for future research and practice.

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