

The Adventures of ‘Mad Jack’: An Experiment in Documentary Game Design

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a new project that takes advantage of the emerging trend in developing a convergent game-documentary experience using the world and experiences of ‘Mad Jack’ Churchill, an eccentric English WWII Commando. This project will be supported by a case study analysis of related works to understand the possible limitations of the production of such a hybrid practice and the opportunities to be applied.

Keywords

Interactive documentary, hybrid documentary, serious games, docugame, design innovation, game design, digital media, design strategy, collaboration design, design-based research, practice-led research, design-based research.

INTRODUCTION

‘Mad Jack’ Churchill was an eccentric English WWII commando who passed away in 1996 leaving with us many stories of his wild and wonderful exploits such as fighting the European front with bows and arrows, escaping two notorious concentration camps and even a stint at being a Hollywood star. By 2009, the Mad Jack story had spread throughout the Internet via Reddit, StumbleUpon, Flickr, DeviantArt as well as numerous forums, and inspired memes, fanart and fanfics. Such instances have contributed to the growing mythology surrounding both Mad Jack and his family.

The collisions and convergence between mediums, particularly within the ludic and stereotypical ‘fun’ nature of video games (Huzinga, 1949) with the historically politically-charged field of documentary film (Rabinowitz 1993; Renov 1993) can lead to a conflict of academic debate. Similar to the function and tradition in documentary film, these ‘serious games’ are seeking to promote social change. Flynn (2005), notably of the

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School of Film, Media and Cultural Studies at Griffith University, questions whether participatory gameplay can move beyond these notions of authenticity or representations of factuality to explore and model a more complex and responsive analogy of lived experience.

These highly interactive documentary based forms can present historical representations that promise to be both innovative and challenging to traditional historiography. As an emergent form, the games-based interactive documentary represents new and expanded creative opportunities for identifying suitable historical content, construction of interactive narratives and a potential re-definition of interactivity in the face of historical knowledges and experience.

There is little in the realm of socially conscious gaming and games that genuinely challenge or confront social taboos or real cultural issues. This explains the lack of successful, or mainstream, examples in this emergent area. To date, this convergence between gameplay and cinematic mediums has been met with controversy, as in the case of *JFK: Reloaded* (2004), *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (2005) and *9-11 Survivor* (2003). This is partly due to the sensitive subject matter inherent in these works, but also points to a larger issue of a lack of understanding in what is required, creatively, ethically and theoretically from hybrid works, especially in the realm of historical memoir and documentary.

Games cannot lay claim to the type of ontological relationship with their subjects in the manner of photography or film, which occurs almost naturally in documentary (Fullerton, 2008). Many games, particularly in the war genre, claim to be historically accurate representations of combat, such as *The Operational Art of War* (1998), *Brothers in Arms* (2005) and *Empire: Total War* (2009), and could be interpreted as being documentary-like. However, the struggle between entertainment and authenticity occurs when games position themselves as being 'serious games' as they lend themselves to being analyzed as performing documentary functions.

This suggests that the current paradigm of merging historical documentary functions within gameplay is fundamentally flawed. Video game hybrid works that encompass and embody documentary-like functions are increasingly being positioned as historically accurate representations. If these works can be framed and interpreted as performing the functions of a documentary film, then they must take on the responsibilities of the genre as well. It is vital to have historical accuracy in these kinds of video games due to the fact these works become cultural artefacts as outlined by Greenfield (1996), Bogost (2007) and Squire (2002).

In the increasingly hybridized landscape that is a response to convergence and innovation in narrative factual and fictional form, it is important that creative practitioners adapt and possess new language, tools and methods of both navigating and creating new works. Not all content and/or narrative are suited to hybrid mediums as the more 'traditional' documentary concerns of authorship, representation and point-of-view are granted to the control of the audience/player via the nature and construction of the chosen medium.

There are significant gaps in both game studies and interactive documentary theory, particularly in regards to transdisciplinary communication between the two schools of thought in hybrid practice. Areas of interaction strategy in games theory can answer pressing questions of authorship in interactive documentary theory, just as the

documentary preoccupation with point-of-view can compliment and illuminate knowledge gaps in player engagement concerns in game studies. Immersive environments in game studies can also solve issues of orientation and spatial limitations in documentary. Both fields of enquiry are fixed on narrative, the implications of narrative and the role of hypertext/cybertexts in both mediums across areas of immersion and experience.

Many of the game-documentary hybrid works and literature has been created in the past three-five years. It is the assumption that the issues lie in not an immaturity of tools, but an immaturity of practice. Through the development a WWII based project on cult historical figure Mad Jack Churchill, a practice-led research thesis will pursue new methodological approaches and tools to assist in historical documentary-based game-hybrid production.

BIOGRAPHY

Rebecca Wolgast is a PhD candidate at the Queensland University of Technology, her research interests lie in hybrid works, convergence, digital democracy, online fan communities and their assistance in research, social issues, documentary, narrative, videogames as an education tool and history. With a background in multiplatform production, documentary and freelance film production, Rebecca began collaborating with the Churchill family in 2011 on this interactive documentary project and is proud to be given the opportunity to bring this amazing story to the screen for the first time.

Deb Polson has enjoyed a career in the arena of game and simulation design, experimenting and innovating in the vibrant intersections of design, research and industry in Australia, China, the US and UK. Most significantly, Deb has led major CRC projects into commercialization phase, completed a PhD and senior research fellowship, designed and delivered over 30 new design theory and practice courses, and supervised numerous coursework masters and RHD students. Deb continues to lead large-scale, trans-discipline projects in her current position at the Queensland University of technology driven by a passion for sharing complex scenarios in accessible and playful ways.

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