

Animation Filmmaking in the Community: Exploring young people's lived experiences using mobile technologies and fantasy narratives

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss two complementary filmmaking projects carried out with groups of young people that enabled the participants to deal with challenging material and empowered them through the effects of intense involvement with creative experience and expression. The projects were carried out by Gritty Realism Productions, a UK-based production company with an extensive track record of producing films with a variety of vulnerable groups, and these particular projects were chosen because they make use of handheld video and GoPro footage in an original way to stimulate the imaginations of the participants involved.

One project involved a group of young male offenders in an inner city environment, with the aim of producing an animated film that would tackle the issue of joyriding and encourage them to confront the implications of this activity in a nonthreatening way. The other project involved working with a group of teenage girls from a rural area with the brief of making a film that would promote the area in an innovative way. Both of these films attempted to subvert conventional documentary filmmaking by combining video footage and green-screen techniques with the intention of juxtaposing their own lived environment and their imaginary worlds. With both projects, the young people were introduced to a range of animation techniques as part of the production process with which they created the imaginary sequences for the films.

The paper will discuss how the absorption process and levels of concentration required in these techniques have potential benefits that demonstrate the concept of "flow" and will explore the idea of using animation as both therapy and creative expression with young people in challenging environments. The paper will analyse these contrasting projects in order to compare the differences in approach when using filmmaking to raise awareness and encourage young people to express themselves.

Keywords: Animation, creative documentary, teenagers, fantasy, GoPro filmmaking

Introduction

This paper describes two animation filmmaking projects that were carried out with teenagers by Gritty Realism Productions with two different communities in the UK. The projects demonstrate how animation can be used to engage and empower young people and provide a platform for their participation in community projects. A key aspect of working with young people in these projects was the process of combining the use of mobile technologies, specifically GoPro, to capture video imagery in real-time with a pre-thought-out fantasy narrative that reflected themes that were relevant to these young people's lives.

Background to the projects

Gritty Realism Productions is a creative digital organisation based in South Wales in the UK with a successful track record in the UK animation industry. Its filmmakers have an established reputation for producing high quality films made with groups of often disadvantaged young people, in particular young Gypsies and Travellers, young carers, young people with learning difficulties, and young people from different ethnic backgrounds. Many of these films have won widespread recognition and awards, including an Inspire Mark from the 2012 Olympic Committee, an Artworks Award at the Tate Modern and two Film Nation awards.

The organisation has also established a reputation for its commercial films through its subsidiary company, with films produced for broadcast in the UK and music videos for MTV. These films have won a BAFTA for best animation and been nominated on four other occasions. The company has also undertaken residencies in Washington DC and at the Children's Creativity Museum, San Francisco, as part of their Innovators Programme.

Both of the projects that are the focus of this paper were carried out with groups of teenagers. A group of boys who were young offenders from a deprived area of Cardiff, the capital city of Wales, and a group of girls also from an area that suffers many socio-economic deprivations located in a postindustrial region, the South Wales Valleys. The aim of the boys' project was to explore the topic of joyriding, which was a favoured subject for all of the boys. The idea behind the project was to allow the participants to explore and confront their views with the objective that this might bring about a greater awareness and potentially a change in their attitudes and behaviour. In particular, there was a perceived need to encourage the young people to understand the implications of indulging in this activity, using creative animation and filmmaking techniques.

The aim of the second project was to use GoPro footage combined with animation to make a film that promoted the area where they lived, using participants' own imaginative narrative. The funding for this film came from a community arts organisation that is concerned with developing practical filmmaking and cinema literacy in this particular area of the South Wales Valleys.

In developing these projects, the filmmakers were aware of the importance of combining the spontaneity that can be achieved using mobile filmmaking technologies with participants' imaginative ideas. From our own experience, as filmmakers working

with community groups for many years, we have found that this combination is a powerful way of exploring personal concerns and life experiences. GoPro footage is typically used in a way that simply captures experience as it is happening in the here and now. This immerses the viewer in minute by minute life experience, but it does not allow for any processing of life experience or narrative re-construction. Animation is an ideal medium to convey the imaginary world, but is lacking in the immediacy available when using mobile filmmaking methods. As filmmakers we have found that by combining mobile technologies with participants' animated artwork, imaginative stories and fantasy creations, it is possible to achieve a greater depth of thought in relation to lived experience and working through of personal issues and concerns as well as creating films that cross conventional genres.

Animation as therapy

In their paper, "Animation in therapy: The innovative uses of haptic animation in clinical and community therapeutic practice", Ashworth and Mason argue that animation can be used to therapeutic effect with individuals, as a form of expression and visualisation of difficult feelings. They write:

Animation can be harnessed to explore difficult themes, events and ideas and the animation process can enable the visual externalisation of thoughts and feelings that may be difficult or impossible to verbalise through talking based therapy approaches alone. (Ashworth & Mason, 2010, page 3)

As filmmakers working with vulnerable young people we have found that using animation combined with live-action enables the young people to place themselves in imaginary situations in a nonthreatening way that can help them deal with challenging subject matter without the need for verbalisation. Animation also allows young people to participate in a film anonymously and this is often attractive for a number of the more marginalised groups that the company has worked with, including young Gypsies and Travellers or, as in this case, young offenders. This approach also allows the filmmakers early on to assess those in the group who would rather not be seen on camera, but would still like to see their work presented on screen.

For many of these filmmaking projects, the filmmakers have also witnessed the potentially therapeutic effects of "flow" i.e. a focused state of concentration that amounts to complete absorption in an activity. In his book *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csikszentmihalyi describes a state of happiness achieved through intense involvement with creative experience and expression. From our experiences of working with young people through community filmmaking, we have found that even hard to reach populations can be stimulated and engaged in creative activity, showing optimal motivation, attention and investment that is in stark contrast to other areas of their lives. Csikszentmihalyi argues that the demands of creative effort, though initially experienced as challenging by the individual, will eventually be experienced as intrinsically rewarding once the interaction starts to generate positive feedback to the person's skills. He writes:

Most enjoyable activities are not natural; they demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make. But once the interaction starts to provide feedback to the

person's skills, it usually begins to be intrinsically rewarding. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, page 5)

As filmmakers we have found this to be particularly the case with the animation process when working with young people directly under the camera on an animation rostrum. This technique involves a great deal of concentration by the participants, but as the frames of film accumulate, they see their animated sequence emerge over time that in turn encourages them to become more absorbed in the process. These young people, who often have low expectations of what they can achieve, are frequently delighted by the resulting moving imagery possible using these apparently simple techniques (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Animating with sand on an animation rostrum, Bike Afan (2015)

A further influence on these projects was an interesting new strand of filmmaking, the animated documentary. This allows for the use of “animated reality”, an emerging form that opens up new possibilities for dealing with challenging subject matter with young people. In his book *Documentary – The Margins of Reality*, Ward makes the point that, although animation appears to be inherently an artificial medium and therefore disassociated from documentary as a true record of reality, documentary is in itself an artifice. He writes:

Animation has long been associated with subjectivity, interiority and an inherent ‘manipulation’ or ‘constructedness’ that documentary appears to eschew. And yet ... documentaries are also constructed. (Ward, 2009, page 3)

As filmmakers we have found that a very powerful aspect of working with young people is the generation of fantasy narratives around a particular theme, one that is relevant to their lives. Creating semifictional characters, using a documentary style that takes an unusual slant on their own lived experience and reimagining their communities in humorous and surreal ways are all creative modes that we have found to be highly

motivating to this population. For these projects, we were interested in giving these young people control over media production, giving them the opportunity to create both real and imagined experience as a more compelling and accurate construction of their ideas and feelings. In this way they can imaginatively place themselves within their own surroundings and give themselves a sense of empowerment over their own environment.

The Rush

The joyriding film, produced by the group of boys, was entitled *The Rush* at their request. This was a reference by them to the adrenaline rush engendered in stealing cars and driving them at speed. This also gave us an indication of how we might need to tackle this addictive behaviour through the narrative of the film.



Figure 2. Composited video and toy car, *The Rush* (2010)

The project originated from a belief by the Youth Offending Team working with the young people that a self-created film might be more persuasive and effective than a film produced by a figure in authority, such as the police. This project was part of a programme of activities that included go-carting sessions which we felt would not necessarily encourage them to confront their offending behaviour. In the first meeting with the group, the filmmakers proposed that they could participate in the making of an animated film, to which the boys' response was that they wanted to make a "proper film". This led to a discussion about what constituted a "proper film", with the filmmakers taking as an example the *Fast and Furious* franchise, a series of action films with which they were already very familiar and that concerns a group of elite street racers who drive fast cars.

The filmmakers demonstrated to the group how a good deal of what was depicted on screen actually involved digital manipulation and computer graphics. We came to the realisation that an important approach to use with this group was to find a way of putting the boys into the film itself. They identified strongly with the characters in the feature

films that they enjoyed watching and we felt that they would be more responsive to the production process if it involved them taking on acting roles themselves. Since it was impossible to film them in real driving situations, the filmmakers decided to digitally composite them into a toy car and use a green screen technique to place them in outdoor locations (Figure 2).

The storyline for the film came about as the result of a recent news story about a joyriding incident in which the cousin of a young driver had died in a crash when travelling as the passenger in a stolen car. The boys were interested in this as the basis for a fantasy story in which a boy who had been killed in a fatal collision returns from the dead to warn his friend, whilst the friend is driving a speeding car and being chased by the police. Another important influence on these boys' ideas was the film *An American Werewolf in London* (Landis, 1981) in which one young man is killed and returns from the dead in an ever more decayed bodily state. The idea of wisdom coming from a peer appealed to these boys as did the idea that someone returning from the dead would have knowledge of the future of which the living protagonist would be unaware.

The scene was set up with two of the boys sitting on chairs taking on these roles and improvising dialogue about the fatal consequences of speeding, in front of a green screen. The filmmakers decided to encourage the boys to use improvisation as it was felt that the constrained and "fixed" quality of a conventional script would not be practical with this particular group of teenagers. It was also decided that a more immediate approach was needed for them to respond spontaneously to this imaginary situation in a more realistic way, and to encourage them to see this as a game rather than compelling them to analyse their feelings too publicly. The improvised dialogue between the two protagonists, with one warning of the implications of dangerous driving and the other professing scepticism about this, formed the core of the film's narrative structure and also cemented these two boys' commitment to the filmmaking process.

The young offenders involved in this project were unwilling to express their attitudes on this subject directly, but putting them in an imaginary situation and role playing made it easier for them to verbalise their feelings, whilst also putting them at one remove from their own lived experience. As a result it became a less threatening way of exploring something that was a difficult experience in their young lives and the reason why they found themselves in the situation of "being punished" as young offenders.

The second stage was to create animated graphics to accompany this story. Working on a rostrum, the boys animated a toy car against a green screen that enabled them to digitally combine this with video footage shot outdoors from a moving car in the area of the city where they lived. This footage was shot using conventional hand held video cameras as this particular film was made in a period before mobile technology had adopted HD quality video. Now these sequences could ideally have been shot using iPad or other mobile-based cameras that would help to give the young people greater ownership of every aspect of the filmmaking process. Using this footage allowed the filmmakers to convey a sense of driving at speed in a safe manner. The soundtrack for these sequences was a rap poem written by one of the young offenders about his experience of being arrested (Figure 3).

Following the completion of the film one boy told the filmmakers that this was the first time in his life that he had ever participated in anything without dropping out halfway through. Another of the participants, who had been asked to leave the filmmaking workshops, later brought a number of family members to the premiere screening of the film, indicating the important role that the filmmaking experience had for him. These responses contributed to the qualitative outcomes of the project, providing clues that the young people had benefited from the project and demonstrating their uncharacteristic commitment and enthusiasm for the filmmaking process.



Figure 3. Stop Motion animation with 3D model, *The Rush* (2010)

Bike Afan

The second film project was called *Bike Afan* and was the culmination of a two year involvement with a lottery funded project called Film in Afan, with the intention of bringing cinema and filmmaking to a disadvantaged area of South Wales in the UK. Gritty Realism had previously made two films working with young people dealing with the history of the valley, and another concerning older residents' reminiscences of cinema-going in the valley. Both of these took the form of animated documentaries.

This was an opportunity to open up the experience of making a film to young people and communities in a neglected part of the South Wales Valleys. In practical terms it meant taking the latest digital equipment into different locations in the Afan Valley to make films with a broad cross section of people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds including young people, young adults, unemployed people and people with learning difficulties.

Gritty Realism had worked previously in the valley on an intergenerational film project that involved two schools. As filmmakers we find that working across the age range in this way on a single project can help to bridge the gap between these diverse communities and makes the best use of the strengths of these two groups.

Using new technology to create their own films has also helped to give the young people involved a new perspective of the valley. As filmmakers we have been able to tackle subject matter that is relevant to their lives and create a legacy of films that can be used to promote the valley in future years. Subjects for these films were elicited from interviews with a cross section of people to ascertain the issues that were most important to the people living there.

One of our previous films, *Haiku Cwm Afan* had dealt with environmental issues in the area, particularly around forestry, which plays a major role in the valley. The film referenced the cultural and commercial links that the valley has with Japan, as there is a Sony factory situated in the locality and a Japanese forest has also been established in the valley. This film employed the use of Haiku poetry written by local children and the finished film was used in the visitors' centre of the Afan Forest Park with the soundtrack of the film used on a listening post within the forest itself.

With our background of filmmaking work in the valley, it was decided to work in conjunction with the other partner organisations involved in the Film in Afan project by linking their film literacy work to the filmmaking process, enabling the young people to put into practice the cinematic techniques they had studied in professionally made films. The filmmakers also wanted to involve professional scriptwriters and storyboard artists as the bridge between the literacy work and the filmmaking, giving the participants an insight into the process by which a film is planned and structured. As part of the project, the young people also visited the film set of a major transatlantic production to introduce them to the potential career paths available locally within the film industry.

The Afan Valley is one of a number of regions in South Wales devastated by the closure of the coalmines. They were once thriving mining communities which have attempted to reinvent themselves to attract new employment. The valley has become particularly well known for its mountain biking and people travel from all over the UK and further afield to experience the bike trails. It was decided to take this as a theme for the film and to employ GoPro technology, which is often used by cyclists, in an innovative way to explore this further. The filmmakers chose GoPro specifically as it is intended to be a hyper real representation of life giving the viewer the impression of experiencing the events as they occur, directly through the eyes of the participants. Many examples of this can be seen online for example *GoPro: Backflip Over 72ft Canyon* (McGarry, 2013). With its own distinctive wide angle perspective, GoPro places the viewer at the centre of the protagonist's point of view, giving an intense immediacy that is lacking in the painstakingly constructed world of animation.

The valley also has an interesting theatrical history as the birthplace of actor Richard Burton, and more recently Anthony Hopkins, and a local community organisation requested a film that would promote the attractions of the valley to visitors as well as provide filmmaking training for a group of girls during a holiday period. The filmmakers decided to work with the young people to take an imaginative approach to this, as well as to create an entertaining video combining animation and GoPro footage to take a whistle stop promotional tour of the area via a protagonist on a mountain bike.

The filmmakers scripted and storyboarded the film with the young people, identifying sites in the valley that could be visited by bike. The girls were then introduced to a range of animation techniques including sand animation and three dimensional models with which they created the imaginary sequences for the film. This gave them access to a range of different methods of expression to realise their ideas. Some of these techniques also encourage a depth of involvement that has observable benefits for the participants. We have noticed that sand animation in particular can engender a sense of satisfaction when young people bring to life their own drawings that in turn encourages them to persevere with the work to bring a greater degree of satisfaction, an observed example of the potentially therapeutic benefits of “flow” as described by Csikszentmihalyi.

We created a number of two dimensional animated sequences for this film where that approach seemed most appropriate. This form of animation, called “cut-out”, has particular advantages when working in this environment as it produces fairly rapid results and does not require the filmmakers to continually redraw their artwork, which can be challenging for young people. It is a method notably used by Terry Gilliam to create the animated sequences in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, where the disjointed collages characteristic of the cut-out technique contributed to the surreal humour of the animation.

In a similar way to ‘The Rush’, the primary technique used to link these sequences was a process that involved filming one of the participants on a fixed bike set up in front of a green screen. This is a technique called pixilation in which the subject is treated as if they were a model with small changes made to their position between frames. Norman McLaren, of the National Film Board of Canada, used this technique very effectively in his Academy Award winning film ‘Neighbours’ (1952) that demonstrates the potential for animation to employ a concise metaphor to convey a powerful anti-war message by combining animated props alongside pixilated performers.

We used this technique to enable us to animate three dimensional animal models that the young people had made to create imaginary bike riding scenes through the local environment. Like the creation of the toy car sequences in the young offenders film, the animation of these models, as well as the manipulation of cut-outs and sand, demonstrates the uniquely haptic nature of animated filmmaking with young people. That is the potential benefits of working directly with models and other malleable materials in contrast to the sometimes rather disengaged nature of much of digital filmmaking.

We filmed footage taken from a helmet camera visiting the actual locations for the film and then digitally placed this behind the girl on the bike as she takes a fantastical journey around the valley, stopping off at key sights. Along the way she gathers a collection of animals that accompany her on her ride. The story involved a journey from one end of the valley to the other over the course of a day and took the protagonist into a variety of unlikely settings including down a coal mine, under the water of a lake and up into the sky. In this way the filmmakers wanted to subvert the conventions of GoPro filmmaking where extreme locations and vertiginous views are the norm, whereas in this case we were safely situated inside a community centre and the participants were able to place themselves amongst their own animated artwork in

order to immerse the audience in their imagined cycle ride around their own environment in an attempt to reimagine their lived environment afresh (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Compositing animation with pixilated video footage, Bike Afan (2015)

Impact of the projects

There were a number of outcomes of these two projects. *The Rush* was produced as part of a funding scheme for films made with young people in the UK, called First Light. The film was nominated for their national awards ceremony that took place in the centre of the UK cinema industry in Soho, London. The two boys who appeared in the film attended this event, walking up a red carpet to experience their film on a big screen in front of an enthusiastic audience of other young people. This would have been a memorable occasion for these boys, coming from an inner city estate in Wales, who hadn't previously visited London. The finished film was also used by the police as a grassroots comment produced by offenders themselves on the perils of joyriding. It would be of interest to know if any of the participants desisted from their offending behaviour as a result of the filmmaking process and, although no data was available to assess if this was the case, there were a number of observable clues that this had been a significant experience for a number of the participants.

The teenage girls involved in *Bike Afan* received accreditation for carrying out a programme of filmmaking activities during the course of the project and gained a recognised certification when the finished film was premiered in the community. It will hopefully encourage them to develop their skills further and possibly study film at a higher level. The film will be entered into international film festivals alongside other films by young people, where previous films screened at film festivals, including San Francisco Film Festival and Chicago International Children's Film Festival, have demonstrated the universality of the issues that affect young people.

Based on our previous experience, when young people see their work presented in a wider context in this way it can have beneficial results, particularly when working with marginalised groups of this kind. These two films show the transformative potential when using a combination of animation and mobile filmmaking techniques with hard to reach young people. By using digital processes that immerse the young people in their own artwork and imaginings, and by tackling subject matter that is relevant to them and the communities where they live, it is possible to raise their depictions of lived experience to a level that brings these experiences to an international audience. There is a need to undertake further research in this area to establish the benefits of this kind of filmmaking work with young people in order to qualify the positive changes in behaviour observed by the filmmakers.

The progression in the filmmaking process involved in these two projects reflects the rapid changes taking place in video and mobile technology and gives an indication of how these changes might affect this area of community filmmaking. As mobile technology becomes more portable and ubiquitous and the video quality of the cameras they contain improves so the lines between professional and amateur filmmaking are becoming blurred. In the future it will potentially be easier to build a filmmaking legacy within these communities and encourage the young people involved to continue with their own filmmaking using the tools available in their hand held devices.

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About the Author

Born 1960, with a degree in Fine Art, Gerald Conn is a producer and director whose films have been broadcast on UK television and shown at numerous international festivals. He specialises in sand-on-glass animation and won a BAFTA for best animation for his film 'The Comet's Tale' (1998) and has been nominated on four other occasions. Gerald has taught animation for a number of years to young people and was visiting lecturer for two years at the University of South Wales. He has travelled to France, India, Japan and Ethiopia to run workshops and to talk about his work.

Gerald has also made music videos that have been screened on MTV. His work has often dealt with different cultural perceptions including 'Just Not Cricket' (2000) and 'Romance in the Air' (2002) both commissioned for Channel 4 in the UK. In 2009 he presented his work at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington DC. In 2010 he established Gritty Realism Productions and in 2013 was Innovator of the Month at the Children's Creativity Museum, San Francisco. Gerald is currently developing a feature length adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novel 'Heart of Darkness'.

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Supporting Material

The Rush – <http://vimeo.com/37306576>

Bike Afan – <http://vimeo.com/115027189>

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