

Interactive Media and Non-linear Participatory Narratives of Mental Health

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December 2021

Abstract

This thesis explores the role that non-linear narrative possibilities afforded by interactive media can play in supporting the production of polyvocal participatory accounts of mental health. The research is grounded in my own practice as a participatory filmmaker and uses a pre-existing linear film on mental health and recovery, produced by five men with lived experience of mental health problems, called *Stepping Through*. The film has been used as the starting point for three studies resulting in the production of an interactive version of the film by the same participants.

The thesis starts by setting the context for this study, presenting literature on how mental health stigma is often reinforced and perpetuated by mainstream media while other forms of media production led by people with lived experience of mental health problems offer well-rounded and nuanced representations of mental health. I focus specifically on participatory filmmaking and present my own practice as a participatory filmmaker in the mental health field, reviewing some of the challenges that limit the impact of this practice, looking in particular at how streamlining a polyvocal production in a linear film form can compress some of the complexity of the personal mental health accounts generated. On the other hand, some non-linear narrative qualities afforded by interactive media productions, such as i-Docs, could complement participatory filmmaking on mental health, opening up space for multiple viewpoints to coexist within the same film structure.

The methodology chapter of the thesis presents the overarching research question, which is how can interactive media facilitate the production of personal accounts of mental health by people with lived experience of mental health problems involved in participatory filmmaking? This area of investigation was approached by grounding the research in *Stepping Through* as a case study, working longitudinally with participants to create an interactive version of the film. Given that experiments of participatory interactive filmmaking in mental health are not present in the literature, making a film with participants was essential to explore this area of practice.

The first study, described in chapter 5, was dedicated to exploring the limits of using a linear narrative form in community film productions on mental health by analysing what was left unsaid in the original *Stepping Through* with the participants who made the film. The results of this study indicated that there were several expressive needs that the linear film form did not fulfil.

The second study, described in chapter 6 and 7, consisted in exploring the process of transforming *Stepping Through* in an interactive film by letting participants imagine a new non-linear design for the film. Usual participatory filmmaking processes were modified to include strategies to support the exploration of a new film form participants had no experience of. The process resulted in a film structure which attempts to accommodate the expressive needs identified in the first study and makes space for both personal and communal representations of participants' experiences of mental health problems and recovery.

In the third study, described in chapter 8, *Stepping Through Interactive* was evaluated to explore how it met the objectives set by participants in the first study. The film was evaluated by its creators, who found that it successfully conveyed the complexity of their personal experiences of mental health, with some exceptions which were only partially accommodated by the film due to technical limitations. The film was then evaluated with external audiences, including mental health professionals and service users and a sample of a generic audience. The evaluation showed that the film successfully conveyed the viewpoints of the participants to the majority of audience members.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has been a relational experience which included the support of many incredibly helpful people. First of all, the participants who took part in this research, Paul Gowland, Adam Bell, Wayne Hurton, Nathan Fearon, and Laurie Farnell, sensitive artists who are making a real impact on the way mental health is thought about, talked about, and lived, and who have taught me so much about creativity through many years of collaboration. My supervisors, Dr Jonathan Hook, whom I heard speaking at the Festival of Ideas years ago, whose words have inspired me to pursue this approach to my PhD, and who provided an extraordinary level of support in every aspect of this work, and Prof Marian Ursu, who has infused this research with confidence, ideas, outlooks, collaborations, depth, and often very much needed humour. Dr Debbie Maxwell, for the valuable and insightful advice and guidance around my research provided during TAP meetings. Converge, an organisation I am proud to be part of, which helps many people, including me, flourish and develop, and which has provided invaluable support in this research. Dr Andrew Walter and John Gray who dedicated their skills to translate the often confusing requests of a non-technical filmmaker like me in a great finished product. Migle Markeviciute, who has worked tirelessly in our summer together and has shown great sensitivity in working with participants. Members and staff at DC Labs, colleagues who have helped me think about many aspects of my research and have supported me in anything that was needed in difficult moments, with special thanks to Claire Boardman for involving me in her research and introducing me to great communities in York. Thanks so much to the UKPRN and the Closing the Gap network for their support in the recruitment of evaluation participants, and to the extras who kindly took part in the filming for this work. Thanks to wonderful choreographer and dancer Christie Barnes for making a beautiful piece for the film.

I also would like to thank other indispensable people who have helped me think about my PhD ideas from long before I had the courage to apply, Dr Philip Kerrigan, Dr Sandra Pauletto, Dr Nick Rowe, Prof Steve Purcell, Dr Steve Rawle, Dr Rober Edgar, and of course Prof Marian Ursu is also in this group. All the communities I have worked with over the years also had a key role in shaping the ideas that led to this work. And all of this started thanks to a placement as student researcher with Dr Kay Hepplewhite, whom I thank dearly for introducing me to the world of applied arts and Converge.

A heartfelt thank you to my mentor Dr Sarah Blower who helped me to explore future options and supported me with honest and inspiring conversations and Liz Mellor, for helping me in ways that is impossible to put into a few words. And of course, I thank my friends and family by promising I will finally change the subject and stop bringing up this thesis every few words.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Fragments of the work in this thesis were published and presented at TVX 2019 conference (<https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3317697.3323363>) and IMX 2020 Doctoral Consortium (<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.c.5020919.v3>).

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Mental health stigma and the role of media representations

It is a well-known fact that mental health problems are widespread amongst the general population, with one in four people likely to experience mental health problems within a year time (MacManus *et al* 2009, NICE 2011), especially if they are women, young people, or ethnic minorities (Public Health England 2015). Mental health research shows that the situation is not improving (Mental Health Foundation 2017), and the COVID-19 pandemic has marked a considerable aggravation on the level of people's emotional and mental wellbeing (Cullet *et al* 2020).

Although experiencing mental illness is not an uncommon occurrence, mental health is still heavily stigmatised (Rüsch 2005): negative stereotypes on people with mental health problems include violence, helplessness, and unreliability (Pilgrim 2017). Stigma has tangible effects and makes life for people who are experiencing mental health problems considerably harder, affecting the way they can access help, receive support at work, getting housing and employment (Link 1982, Wahl 1999, Corrigan and Watson 2003). Stigma on mental health is so pervasive that it often gets internalised by people experiencing mental health problems as self-stigma: the tendency to feel shame for one's own condition with consequent additional anxiety and self-defeating behaviours (Corrigan 2012).

Media studies have proved that mental health stigma is strongly reinforced by media depictions of mentally ill people (Wahl 1995, Glasgow Media Group 1996, Rose 1998, Cross 2004, Birch 2012). Mainstream media production, from TV news to documentaries and fiction, has historically leaned towards stigmatised and unbalanced representations of people with mental health problems either through sensationalised news accounts, often pushed by an anti-community care agenda (Cross 2004), or through the depiction of unidimensional characters who are defined by their illness for comical or dramatic purposes (Time to Change 2014). The pervasiveness of these representations is deep as many members of the general population inform themselves through the media and absorb mainstream messages on mental health (Philo *et al* 1994, Birch 2012). This reinforces the phenomena of stigma and self-stigma.

The work of mental health organisations in campaigning for better representations has helped gradually moving away from some mental health stereotypes (Corrigan and Watson 2002). The positive examples in film, documentaries, TV drama, and soaps depicting mental illness analysed in the studies seem to have some traits in common, which do not revolve around an optimistic or romanticised view of mental illness. Rather, what makes them “positive” examples resides in well-rounded representations of characters dealing with their inner and outer lives while experiencing mental illness and negotiating their identities in relation to it.

Despite a growing number of more nuanced representations of mental illness, however, tensions still exist in media industry between producing entertaining media products which respect usual dramatic structures and storytelling conventions and representing experiences which are complex and multidimensional. Even though some productions are making a proactive effort in involving story consultants from mental health organisations, interviews with producers and writers indicate that accuracy and complexity are subordinated to the narrative necessities of the formats (Henderson 2018). Meanwhile, research on mental health campaigns shows that direct contact between people who have experiences of mental health problems and the public through careful and safe disclosure has a healing effect both on stigma and self-stigma (Corrigan 2012).

1.2 Mental health representations in participatory filmmaking

Participatory filmmaking is an inclusive media practice where professional filmmakers act as facilitators, passing on storytelling and technical skills to under-represented communities’ members, so that participants can write, design, film, and edit personal films which explore issues close to their direct experiences (Shaw and Robertson 1997, White 2003, Yang 2012). Emerged to overcome the power imbalances between filmmakers and documentary subjects (Ruby 1991), participatory filmmaking aims to provide empowering opportunities for self-representation to people who are often absent or “spoken about” in mainstream media (Shaw and Robertson 1997).

Practised in community setting and free from commercial constraints, participatory filmmaking offers opportunities for people with lived experience of mental health problems to build personal representations of themselves as well-rounded individuals who are not defined by their illness. In fact, filmmaking has started to be used in mental health settings

as a community art form by many third sector organisations within Arts and Health provisions (Arts Council England 2007). Examples of participatory filmmaking in mental health are still sparse in the literature, but there are documented studies which show that both participants and audiences can benefit from this kind of production in terms of a reduction of stigma and self-stigma (Boyd 2010, Van der Ham *et al* 2013, Whitely *et al* 2020). Films resulting from participatory storytelling provide authentic insight into the lives, hopes, dreams, fears, and overall experiences of people with mental health problems in sharp contrast with the unidimensional or romanticised characters frequent in mainstream media.

In my experience as a participatory filmmaker working with people who have experiences of mental illness, I had the opportunity to witness the empowering effects of producing films authored by a collective of community members who explore and articulate challenging experiences through creativity. The resulting accounts are often highly sensitive and nuanced personal representations of mental illness and recovery, which tend to spark conversations through live screenings and, on some occasions, online sharing.

I have also found that such a sensitive form of practice, where storytelling is deeply intertwined with self-representation, needs to ensure that every voice in the group is valued and accounted for in the filmmaking process and final product, which is the result of the interplay of many voices (polyvocality). This is not always easy, as filmmaking techniques and formats work in a linear fashion which assumes the presence of a strong authorial voice expressing its viewpoint on a certain reality. When we instead have multiple viewpoints on an issue, that can at times overlap and in other occasions divert, and a need to streamline them in a univocal narrative, we face the risk of dismissing some voices in favour of others. Participatory filmmaking assumes that good facilitation allocates equal space for all participants (White 2003) but does not explore in detail how this can be achieved. In my own practice, I have experimented with ways of managing this challenge through assigning single short films to each participant, by trying to fit all viewpoints in one narrative, or by using a voting system to select ideas. In some cases, these methods worked, especially when the group of participants was homogeneous and trust was already established; in other cases, though, some participants felt under-represented and overlooked, defeating the very purpose of taking part in such an experience.

This research explores the possibility of finding a new narrative form which is flexible enough to make space for multiple viewpoints and authorial needs to coexist, rather than trying to force the richness of this collective type of expression to fit a linear film form.

1.3 Polyvocality and participation in interactive documentary

What if such a flexible and open film form could be found in the emerging practice of interactive documentary? This is a recent development of the ever-evolving documentary genre, where the “creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1933) meets the interactive possibilities of digital media (Galloway 2007, Nash 2014). Interactive documentaries, also called i-Docs, expand the traditional linear film form through nodes, links, hotspots, and tags, requiring viewers to step up as active content explorers, making choices regarding the portions, order, speed, or nature of the filmic materials they experience (Watson 2017).

Interactive documentary subverts the relationship between authors and viewers, reducing the amount of authorial control producers can exercise on viewers, and raising the audience’ agency as active participants (Aston and Odorico 2018). Also, the non-linearity of this kind of production makes it possible to present multiple storylines and perspectives and place them in complex and evolving relationships with each other (Nash 2012), making this kind of technology more suitable than linear filmmaking for polyvocal representations and shared authorship (Husak 2018).

The polyvocal potential of this kind of production paired with the possibility of reserving a more active role for the audience has generated much enthusiasm regarding interactive documentary as a participatory practice (Favero 2013). Many interactive documentaries allow and require audiences to input their own footage, images, reflections, or opinions, creating open and ever-growing narrative organisms, which transcend the intentions of their creators (Gaudenzi 2013). As such, interactive documentary could be the ideal avenue to develop participatory filmmaking projects on mental health where participants can articulate their views without having to be constrained by linear filmmaking formalities.

However, some literature has taken a more cautious approach on the celebrated participatory value of interactive documentaries: while many i-Docs require active participation to populate their structure with content produced by non-professional creators, said structure is still designed, implemented, and ultimately controlled by professional producers in the vast majorities of existing examples of practice (Green *et al* 2017, Nash 2021). While structural participation is still so rare in interactive documentary, it is an

essential pre-requisite of participatory filmmaking, where participants are entitled to authorial control over the entire product.

1.4 Research aims and questions

Our research aims to fill the gap between the emerging practice of interactive filmmaking and participatory filmmaking in mental health by exploring the making of a structurally participatory interactive film on mental health which allows space for the viewpoints of a group of people with lived experience of mental health problems. This research aims to contribute to the study and practice of interactive documentary in its intersections with participatory film, reserving particular attention to how complex and non-linear narrative forms could suit polyvocal and diverse film productions. We believe that findings from this research will be beneficial to scholars investigating polyvocality in non-linear representations and inclusive methods for co-designing interactive media with participants who have lived experience of complex issues. It could also be useful to non-academic practitioners working with communities using filming, digital storytelling, and interactive media.

The overarching research question of this project is:

How can the non-linear narrative affordances of interactive media support the production of participatory accounts of mental health by people with lived experience of mental health problems in a way that respects the authenticity and polyvocality typical of participatory filmmaking?

The scope of this research has been furthermore defined by a small number of research sub-questions, which have guided the design of three studies comprised in this project. This research looked at:

- *what are the limits of participatory linear filmmaking in articulating individual and collective viewpoints on the experience of mental illness and recovery by people with lived experience of mental health problems?*
- *how can we merge participatory filmmaking and interactive filmmaking processes to guide people with lived experience of mental health problems in producing polyvocal interactive films on mental health that are structurally participatory?*

- *how can non-linear forms accommodate the expressive needs² of participants to convey personal experiences of mental illness and recovery in participatory filmmaking?*

By assessing the limits of linear film in conveying the multiple perspectives on mental experiences of a group of participants, by exploring and analysing the process of bringing together participatory filmmaking and interactive film design, and by analysing and evaluating the narrative form resulting from said process, the research aimed at identifying some principles and examples of practices which could be re-elaborated for other academic or community projects according to specific expressive needs of the community groups involved.

1.5 Research methodology

This research is a qualitative practice-led enquiry based on my own professional work as a participatory filmmaker in mental health. Given that participatory interactive filming in mental health is an underexplored form of practice, conducting a practice-led research project (Mäkelaa 2007, Nithikul Nimkulrat 2007) was necessary to gain a tangible sense of the challenges and opportunities involved in this kind of production.

We³ started by selecting an existing participatory linear film on mental health, *Stepping Through* (Converge 2016) and by electing it as an overarching case study (Gustafsson 2017). We worked with the same participants who originally produced the film with me in 2016 to deconstruct it and re-design it as an interactive film. This longitudinal approach has granted time and resources to deeply investigate the dynamics at play in managing multiple voices, authorial intentions, and perspectives in the process of transformation of a linear film in its non-linear rendition. It also facilitated experimentation with non-linear editing tools and the possibility of producing iterations of portions of the film

² In this research I use “expressive needs” to indicate the authorial intentions of participants who took part in this project for what concerns the unique combination of poetic associations, memories, symbols, emotions, and affects that each participant intended to convey through their creative work. This definition reserves space to the artistic and creative vision of the participants as authors of films and is related to a feeling-based reception from viewers. I instead speak of “communicative aims” to refer to participants’ authorial intentions concerning more concrete cognitive and informational objectives, in particular with regards to what participants wished the viewers would learn or understand by consuming content produced by them.

³ When not specified otherwise, a generic “we” indicates me as the main researcher in this project with the support of her PhD supervisors (also at times referred to as “research team”). In other contexts, especially when describing and discussing fieldwork, “we” might instead refer to the main researcher and the core participants working together. When this is the case, it will be clearly indicated. The core group of participants working together with support from the main researcher is at times described also as “the group”.

as necessary, in a process of creative negotiation between participants, myself, and software developers who have supported the project.

The research has been conducted through three studies: the first study explores the limits of traditional linear participatory filmmaking in conveying the viewpoints of a group of participants with lived experience of mental health problems by deconstructing a film they made previously to discuss isolation and recovery. This study constitutes a baseline for motivating the rest of our research and uses creative methods (Kara 2015) to unlock participants' views and opinions. The second study revolves around the design and production of an interactive version of the same film by the same participants. Fieldwork involved design workshops, film production, post-production, and assembling of a prototype. The third study consisted of an evaluation of the final film prototype by the participants who produced it and by a range of external audiences. The aim of this study was to discover how the interactive film reached its expressive agenda and how it conveyed the different voices of the participants involved in its production to the audiences involved.

The first two studies revolved around a series of workshops conducted with participants through the support of a gatekeeping organisation, Converge, based at York St John University. All participants were familiar with the process of making participatory films from their experience with *Stepping Through* and other film courses they took at Converge. The research workshops were modelled on the filmmaking sessions participants were already familiar with in terms of settings, activities, pace. This ensured that participants felt comfortable and able to focus on the challenging task of experimenting with an unknown form of storytelling.

Stepping Through was particularly suitable as a case study because its structure shows an attempt to fit different viewpoints within its narrative form, making it an excellent example of "streamlined polyvocality". Also, it was a successful participatory film, appreciated by the participants who made it and their community; this prevented the studies from turning into a remake guided by unfulfilled wishes for improvements.

Some Participatory Action Research principles (Kagan *et al* 2006, Mills *et al* 2009) informed this research: as someone who had already worked with the participants of this research on a regular basis, I was embedded in the social context of the research; findings were presented and checked with participants at regular intervals; workshops were organised according to participants' needs and responding to their interests and feedback. However, unlike Participatory Action Research, the project itself was initiated and led by me as a researcher. Participants had complete creative freedom on the design of the non-linear

film and a certain degree of input on the design of the evaluation study, but the research process and activities were shaped by me according to the research' aims. This approach was necessary to guide participants through a form of storytelling which was new to them. My double role as creative facilitator and researcher required a considerable effort towards self-reflexivity (O'Reilly 2014), in order to check biases and group dynamics, and track my own creative input and direction in the final prototype.

The data collected in this research includes fieldnotes, self-reflective logs, selected transcriptions from workshops, semi-structured interviews with participants, production diaries, qualitative online questionnaires, notes and memos related to the development of the film prototype. These documents have been analysed according to the research agenda of each study, mostly applying thematic analysis (Braun *et al* 2008, Lin 2019), a flexible method which allowed us to track evolving themes and their correlation over different aspects of the research process.

1.6 Thesis outline

This chapter provided a general introduction and overview on the context of the research, its aims, and some of the methodological approaches we applied to the entire research project.

Chapter 2 presents a more detailed picture of the context of this research by exploring the relationship between mental health problems and representations of mental health in mainstream media and in participatory filmmaking. The first part of the chapter introduces theories on mental health stigma, its impact on the daily life of people with mental health problems, and the phenomenon of self-stigma, to then reviewing how mainstream media endorses many stigmatised views on mental health and people experiencing mental health problems. The second part of the chapter presents some strategies that have been used to counteract stigma, both in terms of campaigning and in terms of producing more well-rounded representations in the media. This section shows that sharing personal experiences of mental health can reduce stigma in audiences while having a self-empowering effect on those who articulate their experience to others. The last part of the chapter introduced participatory filmmaking as an inclusive forms of media production which can support personal and authentic representations of mental health.

Chapter 3 starts by reviewing my own practice as a participatory filmmaker working with groups of people who have lived experiences of mental health problems, with a special attention to the challenge of managing the multiple voices and viewpoints at play in this kind of collaborative production. I present some examples of past practice and how I attempted to overcome the limits of the linear film form to accommodate multiple voices, with mixed results. The chapter then moves on to introduce interactive documentary as a form of media production which could be particularly suitable to make space for the multiple voices typically involved in participatory filmmaking thanks to its narrative non-linearity and to the possibility of creating spacious evolving platforms where content can be added at several intervals and navigated through in different ways by audiences. I review the participatory potential of interactive documentary and show that, while many interactive documentaries embed executory forms of participation in their structure by allowing audiences to input content in form of footage or text, experiments where non-professional have full authorial control of an interactive documentary are extremely rare. The chapter concludes by proposing a preliminary exploration of some narrative qualities afforded by interactivity that could be particularly useful for participatory representations of mental health.

Chapter 4 introduces the overarching research question to explore how we could produce polyvocal interactive films that are fully participatory and make space for diverse personal accounts of mental health. This chapter then reviews the research sub-questions and describes how these were tackled by the research studies. It presents the reasoning behind the methodological choice to conduct a qualitative practice-led longitudinal research project and it describes some research details such as context, participants, roles, collaborators, methods of data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 5 presents the first study in this research, consisting of exploring the limits of an existing participatory linear film about recovery, *Stepping Through*, by deconstructing it with the same participants who produced it. Through a series of weekly workshops and the use of creative activities, participants reflected on and discussed how much was left unsaid in the film due to the constraints of having to arrange multiple perspectives within a linear narrative. As a result of this study, a number of expressive needs unfulfilled by linear filming, and which might have been instead accommodated by interactive filmmaking, were identified.

Chapter 6 explores the process involved in creating an interactive version of *Stepping Through* based on the expressive needs identified in the first study. This chapter explores how key stages from participatory filmmaking were adapted to the design of an interactive participatory film on mental health. The chapter dedicates a particular attention to

how participatory principles were applied to interactive film design process, how challenges were managed, and which strategies proved useful in this attempt.

Chapter 7 reviews the film form designed by participants for *Stepping Through Interactive*, with particular attention to how the expressive needs of participants found its formal accommodation in a novel non-linear narrative structure. Here I explore the evolution of models designed by participants, from a rough map on paper to a refined structure which curates content navigation through empathy-based choices for viewers and gradual disclosure of participants' personal stories. I also explore the gap between the ideal design envisioned by participants and the design that was achieved in practice.

Chapter 8 is dedicated to an evaluation study of *Stepping Through Interactive* in which we aimed to assess how the achieved film prototype managed to fulfil the expressive needs of participants and convey multifaceted aspects of their experiences to viewers. The first part of the chapter explores the evaluation of the film by its authors, who watched and reviewed the finished prototype. Through semi-structured interviews, participants expressed their reactions to *Stepping Through Interactive*, commenting on the representations of mental health emerged from the interactive film as a whole and the functioning of the interactive features in supporting their viewpoints. The second part of the chapter presents the evaluation of the film by a number of external audiences, with varying levels of familiarity with the film subjects: a portion of the audience in this study belonged to the same community as the authors and in most cases knew them personally; a portion of the audience included researchers on mental health, mental health professionals and people with lived experiences of mental health who did not know the authors of the film or their community; and a portion of the audience included people without a direct experience of mental health problems. The final section of this chapter brings together the views of the participants who created *Stepping Through Interactive* and external audiences to draw some trends on how the film was received, its strengths, and areas which should be addressed by future designs and research.

Chapter 9 summarises the findings of this research and the answers to its foundational research question. This chapter then reflects on the film's potential to reduce stigma and self-stigma, on its use of interactivity, on the quality of participation for its authors and viewers, and on my role as researcher and facilitator. Finally, I conclude this thesis by providing guidance on how findings from this project can be adapted to other communities experimenting with similar forms of storytelling, by reviewing the limitations of this research, and by proposing directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2 THE ROLE OF MEDIATED MENTAL HEALTH REPRESENTATIONS IN PERPETUATING AND COUNTERACTING STIGMA AND SELF-STIGMA

Despite the pervasiveness of mental health problems on the global population, misconceptions on the subject persist and enduring, yet evolving, stigma affects the way people speak about mental health and how quickly and efficiently they access support when needed. Misconceptions are often mirrored in mainstream media production, which has the power to influence individuals' decisions about their mental health.

In the first part of this chapter, I set the context of this research by presenting an overview on the spread of mental health problems and on the way the public perceives the subject of mental health, with a focus on the Western world, particularly the UK, which is the context within which this research takes place. The phenomena of stigma, self-stigma, and their tangible impact on people experiencing mental health problems are explored, alongside the role of mainstream media in endorsing and perpetuating mental health stereotypes.

The second part of the chapter focuses on growing efforts of anti-stigma campaigns in tackling these issues. I also present existing best practice recommendations on how to produce inclusive accounts of mental health in the media and reflect on how some of these recommendations are tricky to put in practice due to the workflow constraints of mainstream production.

While mainstream media, with its commercial and hierarchical approach to production, might not be the ideal environment to explore a complex subject such as mental health, participatory filmmaking could instead be an avenue for generating expressive media pieces in which mental health is discussed from the genuine viewpoints of people who have experienced mental health problems directly. In the last part of this chapter, I review the foundational values of participatory filmmaking and the way these can support much-needed public conversation on mental health.

2.1 Mental health stigma and its impact

Mental health problems are widely spread: one of the most quoted statistics on the subject

estimates that one in four people will experience mental health problems within a year (MacManus *et al* 2009). Depression and anxiety disorders are the most frequent conditions experienced by the population (MacManus *et al* 2009, NICE 2011), with more than 4 in 10 participants reporting having experienced depression and over a quarter having experienced panic attacks in a survey conducted by the Mental Health Foundation in 2017. In the UK mental health problems are more often reported by women, young people, and ethnic minorities (Public Health England 2015), but men are more likely to die by suicide according to the World Health Organisation, and research shows a clear link between the occurrence of mental health problems and socio-economical gradients (NHS 2017, Mental Health Foundation 2017). The aforementioned survey reported that only 13% of survey participants describe themselves as having optimal levels of mental health (Mental Health Foundation 2017). Young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing also appear to be getting worse, as captured by the Prince Trust's Index, which measures young people's sense of accomplishment and happiness in a variety of areas. Young people's wellbeing levels in 2017 and 2018 have decreased, with 2018 presenting the lowest scores on overall wellbeing and happiness since the index was first published in 2008 (Prince Trust's Index 2017 and 2018). While mental health problems constitute a huge burden on national economies, mental health services are still underfunded and access to services is not straightforward due to long waiting times (Department of Health 2014, Independent Mental Health Taskforce 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a general deterioration of mental health in the general population, due to its dramatic impact in terms of uncertainty, social isolation, and professional and societal precariousness (Cullen *et al* 2020, Pfefferbaum and North 2020, Kumar and Nayar 2021).

Stigma adds to the burden people with mental health problems must deal with by making accessing help and recovering more challenging. It consists of a series of misconceptions implicitly endorsed by society. The most persisting stereotypes against people with mental health problems include *unintelligibility*, where the behaviour of people with mental health problems is considered illogical and incomprehensible as a result of their illness; *social incompetence*, according to which people with mental health problems are considered unable to carry on a functioning social life due to alleged loss in reasoning ability; and *violence and dangerousness*, where mental illness is thought to induce violent behaviour against others (Pilgrim 2017).

Stigma arises as a result of the interplay of several factors. In 2005 Rüsç proposed an integrative model according to which stigmatisation happens through the coexistence of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Firstly, existing mental health stereotypes are turned into prejudice via endorsement. Not all stereotypes are in fact believed in or adopted by groups. To turn into prejudice, stereotypes must be agreed on and able to generate a negative emotional reaction. Once prejudice is adopted by a dominant group, it tends to

dictate discriminatory behaviour against vulnerable people, with tangible and often dramatic effects of their daily lives. Discriminatory behaviour ranges from a personal level (for instance people wanting to avoid someone with mental health problems), to structural levels (for instance lack of financial investment in mental health as opposed to physical health). Public stigma is the widely endorsed and often structural form of stigma which affect the life of people with mental health problems in several ways. The effects of stigma include negative stereotyping in the media (Wahl 1995), reduced financial resources in health system for mental health (Corrigan and Watson 2003), increased difficulty in finding work and housing for people with mental health problems (Link 1982, Wahl 1999), social avoidance (Martin *et al* 2000). The workplace is, in fact, a particularly challenging context where stigmatised views can have immediate negative consequences on people who are experiencing or have experienced mental health problems: a Time to Change report in 2015 found that most people would be less comfortable talking about their mental health to their employer than to friends and family, and the Attitudes to Mental Health and Mental Wellbeing report confirmed that stigma is particularly stringent in the workplace (NatCen Social Research 2015). In 2017 a report on Mental Health at Work showed that 3 on 5 employees experience mental health problems within a year and that just over half would feel comfortable discussing their mental health in the workplace, with numbers dropping for men, young people, and ethnic minorities. Significantly, people who have lived experience of mental health problems also appeared less likely to talk about mental health in the workplace than those who did not experience mental health problems directly. While 61% of CEOs, owners, and board members felt confident that their organisations are efficiently supporting staff's mental health, only 41% of employees agree with the same statement. The report mentions "the culture of silence" as the main barrier against employees' disclosure (Prince's Responsible Business Network 2017 p.23). These various discriminatory behaviours are linked to three main stigmatising attitudes against people with mental health problems, identified by Corrigan as *fear and exclusion*, which is related to social avoidance; *authoritarianism*, the tendency to consider people with mental health problems incapable of taking life decisions and needing an external authority; and *benevolence*, seeing people with mental health problems as childlike and incapable of making their own decision (Corrigan 2003).

Stigma does not just create a hostile external environment for people with mental health problems; it does also foster inner anguish in the form of internalised prejudices, called self-stigma. Self-stigma happens when a person with mental health problems directs societal stereotypes against themselves, inducing low self-esteem and low self-efficacy. The prejudice towards oneself turns into acts of self-imposed discrimination such as failing to

pursue opportunities and not seeking help (Rüsch 2005). This avoidance mechanism has been defined as the “why try” effect (Corrigan and Rao 2012), a vicious cycle where a person with mental health problems does not pursue opportunities that may improve their situation, getting stuck in feelings of helplessness that re-confirm their self-beliefs of incapability. Meanwhile, as public stigma is enduring, the external world seems to validate their own self-prejudice. People who have internalised stigma may act in different ways. Those who feel shame towards their mental health condition usually opt for social avoidance, keeping away from others, or secrecy, where there is still engagement with the outside world, but their mental health conditions are masked (Corrigan 2012).

Overall, stigma and self-stigma are considerable barriers faced by people with mental health problems and their combined effect encourages a culture of silence where honest discussion on mental health is often avoided on both a personal and collective level.

2.2 The role of mainstream media in reinforcing stigma

Having reviewed the pervasiveness of mental health stigma in the previous section it comes as no surprise that most of the literature on media representations of mental health shows that mainstream media have both reflected and reinforced such stigma. In this section, I review the main existing mental health stereotypes in the media, the way they are represented through narrative and visual tropes, and their pervasiveness and impact on society.

2.2.1 Mental health stereotypes in mainstream media

A review conducted in 2006 on a large number of studies on media representations of mental illness summarises a number of negative stereotypes of people with mental health problems in fictional film, mostly citing Hyler and colleagues (1991), as: *the homicidal maniac*, a mentally ill person who commits violent crimes as a result of his illness; *the rebellious free spirit*, characters who display illness-induced eccentric behaviours, often clashing with the community as a whole; *the enlightened member of society*, a mentally ill character capable of accessing higher wisdom, a stereotype which has brighter undertones than others, but still fosters unrealistic expectations on the nature of mental illness; *the*

female patient seductress, a frequent stereotype of female characters displaying uncontrolled and manipulative sexual behaviour; *the narcissistic parasite*, another kind of manipulative character, who exploits mental illness to gain personal benefits; *the zoo specimen*, a portrayal of mentally ill characters as dehumanised and incapable of rational behaviour; *the simpleton*, often found in children media, someone whose illness is portrayed for comical effect; *the failure or victim*, someone who cannot exercise agency on their illness and as a result be a productive member of society (Pirkis *et al* 2006).

The portrayal of mentally ill people as violent is the most persistent stereotype in mainstream media representations of mental health. Two large studies focused on the subject were published in the mid '90s, *Media Madness* by Otto Wahl (1995) and *Media and Mental Distress* by the Glasgow Media Group (1996). The former work focuses on USA media and cultural production, including a wide array of sources ranging from literature, film, TV, news, and comic strips, and reflects the findings introduced above, indicating a prevalence of depictions of mentally ill people as dangerous, with a stigmatising use of language in relation to the idea of madness. Very frequent are also the inaccuracies in the representations of mental health conditions (Wahl 1995). Philo *et al* analysed British media production, reaching similar conclusions: the violent stereotype dominates the media and is often accompanied by stigmatising language ("nutter", "psycho"). In examples where mentally ill people are not depicted as violent, the storylines often tend to oversimplify the illness development and present recovery as a simple and linear phenomenon where characters quickly heal from mental health conditions and are integrated back into society as a result of overcoming a challenge or learning something about themselves (Philo *et al* 1996).

Some studies link pervasive representations of mental illness as violence-inducing to the deinstitutionalisation of mental health care, that is the passage from institutionalised care to the care in the community approach for people with mental health problems (Filinson 1998). A study by Rose in 1998 analysed the representations of mental illness during eight weeks of prime-time TV from channels BBC1 and ITV1 in 1992, including news, soaps, drama, and documentaries. What emerged is that 65% of representations collected linked people with mental illnesses to violent crime. The most common narrative associated to these representations blames the care in the community act as responsible for the violent crimes. While "there is simply no evidence that the progress of community care correlates with violent acts by mentally ill individuals" (*ibid.* p. 227), this kind of narrative states that "mad people are dangerous and there is no longer a system to control them" (*ibid.* p. 226). According to another study (Cross 2004), the collapse of institutional boundaries between

“mad” and “normal” people has led to shifting that differentiation onto a symbolic level, building representations of the mad as “other” through visual clues, and painting them as someone different from the norm, even if not institutionalised.

The representation of mentally ill people as dangerous is not just expressed by how characters are written into the story, but also by visual tropes that underline the separateness between the “insane” and the rest of the community. Rose (1998) identifies a specific visual style which places the mentally ill person as separated from the rest of community through shots that isolate the character and extreme close-ups investigating their appearance. In examples such as ITV’s *Coronation Street*, a character who experienced a breakdown is framed according to these modalities, to then re-appear through a balanced range of medium, wide, and close-up shots once he has recovered from mental illness (Rose 1998). Some of these visual strategies borrow from the horror/gothic imagery. Cross (2004) touches on a long tradition linking madness with dishevelment in art history and literature, culminating in asylums’ photography in the 19th century, where portraits were used to investigate physical clues for madness. Some of these elements have migrated to the contemporary media landscape. Birch (2012) also reviews the concept of “madness” through history, showing the survival of an idea of mental distressed as “othered”. Classic films such as *Psycho* present madness as a deep subjectivity split: the mad character disguises his behaviour presenting himself as an ordinary person, to then reveal an uncanny eruption of chaos which threatens the sense of self of the viewer. This kind of representations can cause people experiencing mental health problems to feel shamed and compelled to manage their self-image (Birch 2012).

Time to Change conducted an analysis in collaboration with the Glasgow Media Group based on three months of soaps, dramas, and sitcoms in British TV in 2014. This more recent report indicates a slight reduction in the frequency of the dangerous maniac stereotyped representations. However, the study identified several problematic areas which persisted, such as the victimised view of mentally ill people as helpless or the persistent storyline of characters behaving dangerously or irresponsibly as a consequence of stopping taking medications, an inaccurate representation of how pharmacological therapy works (Time to Change 2014). A 2021 study analysed a selection of the most commercially successful film productions from the past 30 years which included representations of mental health to verify the persistence of stereotype of mentally ill people as dangerous and to investigate other stereotypes emerged in the same timeframe (Riles *et al* 2021). Authors found that even though the most common mental health conditions in the general Western population are depression and anxiety, most movies focused on personality disorders, which

are more easily associated with dramatic characters. Mentally ill characters in the sample analysed were still largely associated with violent and aggressive behaviour, but also irresponsible or self-damaging behaviour, such as drug use, smoking, and disordered eating (*ibid.*) This study also shows that, even if slightly less frequent, the stereotype of the violent mentally ill character is still very difficult to erode and keeps coming back, even if it is one of the most damaging in terms of stigma. A recent survey on viewers of *Joker* (2019), which depicts its main character as mentally ill and using mental health services, recorded increased levels of mental health and self-stigma (Scart *et al* 2020). In fact, despite the film showing some common problems faced by people experiencing mental illness, such as underfunding of services and past family trauma, it then develops into an explicit depiction of violence and aggression as motivated by mental illness (Durham and Wilkinson 2020).

The presence of stereotyped mentally ill characters is often paired with general inaccuracies on mental health conditions, the most frequent of which appears to be depicting schizophrenia as a split personality disorder (Pirkis *et al* 2006). Inaccuracies and oversimplification of mental health conditions are often a result of using mental illness as a narrative element which needs to fit predetermined narrative arcs and characters' developments:

Depressive episodes on screen have been scarce, relatively recent, and are often contextual—a brief episode after losing a job or relationship, for example. Similarly, anxiety is often contextualized as merely catastrophizing by an individual, typically in response to on-screen events. Trauma related disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which are more directly linked to events and therefore are theoretically easier to include in narratives, are also relatively under-represented on screen until recent years (McMahon-Coleman 2021 p.148-1490).

According to the same author, certain conditions are less frequently portrayed on screen for the very reason that they do not fit in well with building narratives that can be successfully captured on screen: “depression and depressive episode have not traditionally received a lot of airtime in popular television, largely because this type of mental illness leads to people withdrawing from the world. This typically does little to move a narrative forward” (*ibid* p.152).

2.2.2 Pervasiveness and tangible effects of mainstream media stereotypes on mental health

Producing stereotyped views of mental illness is not just a matter of unfairness towards those who are experiencing mental health problems; literature shows that the effects of stereotypes in the media are pervasive and play a key role in reinforcing both stigma and self-stigma.

The pervasiveness of unbalanced representations of mental health has been tested through several studies which established a proved link between media consumption and stigmatised views on mental health. One of these studies took place in Germany and measured the link between social distancing behaviour against people with schizophrenia and media consumption on a sample of over 5000 people, representative of the general population. The results showed that people who watched TV regularly exhibited stronger social distancing tendencies than those who did not (Angermeyer *et al* 2005). Previously a smaller study on college students in the US reported similar results: based on questionnaires testing both mental health attitudes and media consumption, this study found that “individuals who received their information primarily from the electronic media scored on the CAMI subscales of Authoritarianism, Community Mental Health Ideology, and Social Restrictiveness in a direction that indicated they had less tolerance toward people with mental illness than did those who worked with, or had a family member working with people with mental illness” (Granello *et al* 1999).

The picture might be grimmer than some of these studies show: answers to questionnaires in these studies are often based on self-proclaimed behaviour and may be biased by social desirability. In 1994 a study conducted by Philo attempted to obtain information on the pervasiveness of media induced stigma through a more creative approach. The Glasgow Media Group collated a variety of contents on mental health from local and national media (TV and magazines) produced in 1993 and found that the violence stereotype was present in two thirds of the media pieces analysed. The study then involved groups of 70 audience members, representative of the general population, and one group comprising people who had lived experience of mental illness. The group response to media depiction of mental health was analysed through a series of creative exercises, where participants had to create a newspaper article, a scripted dialogue and a journalistic headline based on prompts offered. In all three cases, most participants produced writing which depicted mentally ill people as dangerous. The study demonstrated the permeating and cumulative effect of exposure to media depiction on mental illness, to the point that members of the general population were able to reproduce those messages on a prompt

with uncanny precision. The only group who produced creative pieces which were not aligned with this narrative was not surprisingly the people with lived experience of mental illness (Philo *et al* 1994).

Birch has explored the reception of media messages on different audiences, divided in three main groups: people with lived experience of mental illness, media professionals, and mental health professionals. The groups were encouraged to discuss several pieces of media, from print to TV series episodes. Overall, the group of people with experience of mental illness found most representations to be inaccurate and imprecise, and consistently expressed concern over the stigmatised views presented. Mental health professionals demonstrated concerns over the negative effects media representations can have on patients' behaviours in terms of seeking help and over medical inaccuracies. Alarmingly, the media professionals demonstrated the lower level of awareness on stigma, overall accepting the content proposed at surface level (Birch 2012).

These studies show that stigmatised representations of mental health leave a considerable and lasting impressions on viewers. Not surprisingly, there are practical effects of media depicting mental health in the ways analysed above. Wahl reflected on some of the effects in a review of studies in 2003, including, the endurance of stigma, bias against hiring people who have or had mental health problems, hostility towards community care, and the endorsement of coercion treatments (Wahl 2003). According to a similar study, the perpetuation of stigma through the media produces practical side effects such as: keeping people with mental health problems from disclosing and help seeking; influencing policy making and inducing NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) reactions towards the opening of mental health facilities; affecting employers' decisions; fostering unrealistic expectations on recovery (March 1999).

Overall, the literature indicates the presence of two main problematic areas in the representation of mental illness on screen: portrayals of unidimensional characters dominated by their illnesses which cause them to act dangerously, irresponsibly, or naively; and oversimplified or inaccurate representations of illness and recovery dynamics. Literature also shows that these representations leave a deep and lasting impression in the public, which in turn translates to social distancing behaviours and other forms of stigma against people who experience mental health problems.

2.3 Counteracting stigma

The previous sections exposed the destructive impact of stigma and self-stigma and how the media representations of mental health have reinforced existing stereotypes on the matter.

In this section I review some efforts that have been made both through mental health campaigning and through more sensitive representations of mental health in the media, and briefly consider the limits of these approaches.

2.3.1 Anti-stigma campaigning: strategies, limits, and best practices

In recent years anti-stigma campaigns have made a considerable effort in counteracting stigma (Clement *et al* 2013, Evans-Lacko *et al* 2014). Since 2011, with the publication of the *No Health Without Mental Health* programme, the British government made a commitment to improving the accessibility of mental health services and to equalise the way physical and mental health is treated. This included the key objective of increasing public understanding of mental health, in order to facilitate the way people recognise symptoms and access help, and to reduce the stigma associated with mental health problems (Department of Health 2011). One way of addressing this need has been the investment into a large anti-stigma campaign, Time to Change⁴, coordinated by charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness.

Mental health campaigns generally adhere to three main strategies: education, contact, and protest (Corrigan and Penn 1999), where “education replaces stereotypes with accurate facts and figures; personal contact between members of a stigmatised group and others undermines prevailing stereotypes; protest highlights injustice and rebukes stigmatising attitudes” (Betton *et al* 2015 p.443). Protest is a reactionary strategy aimed at combating negative views, which can help deconstructing negative stereotypes but is less efficient in proposing new positive models and approaches to mental health and it can sometimes backfire (Corrigan and Watson 2002); as explained by Corrigan “instead of decreasing stigma, the public reaction to protest may be “don’t tell me what to think” and negative attitudes may worsen. Thus, while protest attempts to diminish negative attitudes

⁴Time to Change campaign: <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>

about mental illness, it fails to promote more positive attitudes that are supported by facts (Corrigan and Shaughnessy 2007 p.92). Educational campaigns can overcome this issue by spreading accurate information in the public to improve the way mental health is addressed on public and personal levels. The goal is “challenging the myths of mental illness (e.g., people with mental illness are incapable of being productive members of the work world) with facts (most individuals who receive vocational rehabilitation for psychiatric disability will have a successful work world outcome)” (Corrigan and Shaughnessy 2007 p.92). Education does have a positive impact on spreading information and increase a sense of responsibility, but it often has positive effects on those who are already better educated on the subject, with the risk of “preaching to the converted” (Devine 1995). Contact entails providing opportunities for members of the public to meet and get to know people with mental health problems directly, with research showing that prejudiced views are inversely proportional to familiarity (Corrigan 2001, Angermeyer *et al* 2004). Interpersonal contact means “having a neighbor, relative, or friend with a mental illness, working in a setting providing services for persons with a mental illness, or having brief contact in a laboratory setting” (Couture and Penn 2003 p.293). As an anti-stigma strategy, contact can be deployed by having mental health champions in the workplace, organising community forums, presentations in classroom settings, or designing dedicated larger scale programmes. According to Rüschi, interventions based on a combination of contact and education prove to be the most effective (Rüschi *et al* 2005). The educational part of these mixed campaigns replaces inaccurate assumptions on mental health with correct data, while the direct contact with lived experiences expands and complements medical information by showing that mental illness is just one of many aspects of well-rounded individuals with experiences, personalities, hopes, and fears, who speak as equals to their audience (Corrigan 2018).

While stigma is combated on a societal level, self-stigma as an internalised struggle can be counteracted by the individual strategies. In particular, adopting empowering behaviour is key to counterbalancing the shaming effect of self-stigma (Corrigan 2002). The first step in self-empowerment for people with mental health problems is self-disclosure: this eases the stress resulting from having to keep secrecy over their mental health conditions and allows a person with mental health problems to access support more easily (Corrigan 2015). There are different modalities and degrees of self-disclosure: the person may reveal their condition only to other people with mental health problems; to a selected circle of trusted friends and relatives; may disclose indiscriminately, meaning no effort is made to conceal his mental health state; or the person could decide to “broadcast” their status, which means actively informing the public of their personal experience of mental illness in order to educate and raise awareness (Corrigan 2012). The latter strategy appears to bring the most

life changing benefits, as “it fosters their sense of power over the experience of mental illness and stigma” (Corrigan 2012 p.466-467). A study in 2010 used a scale specifically designed to measure the consequences of disclosing mental illness and proved that coming out of the closet generally improves quality of life, as “affirming strategies frame stigma as an unjust, outer force that should be directly dealt with by educating or otherwise addressing public attitudes” (Corrigan 2010 p.270). This means that contact is not only the most effective strategy in counteracting stigma in the public, but it can at the same time have a healing effect on the self-stigma of the person who discloses their experience. These strategies are recommended in the workplace too: the 2017 Mental Health at Work National Report recommends the establishment of support groups, responding appropriately to employees’ disclosure, consulting employees to improve the mental health measures in place. The report also includes a call to action to end the “culture of silence” (*ibid.* p.69) through awareness campaigns within the workplace and the appointment of mental health champions, people who can lead the conversation as experts by experience. Stress is placed on clarifying how mental health affects everyone to different degrees. In this example, openness and dialogue is at the centre of the very possibility of healing stigma within the workplace (The Prince's Responsible Business Network 2017). However, disclosure of mental health conditions can be risky, and modalities need to be assessed case by case, ideally with support from professionals so that people disclosing can reap the benefits without exposing themselves to prejudiced behaviours from others (Corrigan *et al* 2015).

Despite the efforts of mental health campaigns, stigma proves to be difficult to eradicate. The Attitudes to Mental Illness survey published in 2014 captured a general decrease in stigma and improved scores in the ability of participants to identify mental illnesses. However, within the same report people showed reluctance towards considering people who had mental health problems in the past as suitable to act as childminders, an indication that the irresponsibility prejudice is still strong. Attitudes to Mental Health Problems and Mental Wellbeing, published in the same year, proved a lower level of acceptance in the public towards schizophrenia over depression, and towards mental health problems in general when compared to physical conditions such as diabetes (NatCen 2015). A study led by Corrigan in 2015 used a revised combination of scales to measure “difference” through statements that stressed possible points of contact and distinction between survey participants and people with mental health problems. The result showed that people endorsed statements that distanced themselves from people with mental health problems even when other, more explicit, stigmatising statements were rejected.

These results suggest that the knowledge of the public on the medical side of mental health has improved and that the public is understanding that showing stigmatised views is socially undesirable; however, stigma persists, especially within specific areas, for instance particular mental health conditions which are more stigmatised than others (Corrigan 2015). A possible cause of this might reside in the fact that contact campaigns, while most effective in conveying an overall understanding of mental health as universal, are less frequent than protests and educational campaigns: they are more difficult to organise and manage than other forms of campaigns, which are more easily scalable and disseminated. They require “a person with the courage to disclose his or her mental illness” (Corrigan and Shaughnessy 2007 p.92) and safe ways to facilitate disclosure in a public setting. They can only work on an intimate scale and affect small groups of people at a time.

Mediated personal accounts could be used to overcome this limit: some studies have explored the possibility of reproducing the beneficial effects of contact campaigns through mediated contact and sharing stories from people with mental health problems in filmed form proved to have the same level of efficacy in reducing stigmatised views of an audience than the same exchange happen face to face (Reinke *et al* 2004, Corrigan *et al* 2006, Stuart 2006, Clement *et al* 2012, Yamaguchi *et al* 2018). These results open the road for the promising avenue of using filmed accounts of mental health experiences as a way to simulate in-vivo contact and provide safe ways of disclosure that could both empower people with lived experience of mental illness and reduce stigmatised views in audiences. A very recent study has explored how stories of people living with highly stigmatised conditions (schizophrenia and autism) could be used to induced de-stigmatisation in viewers and has recorded high levels of empathy and reflective thoughts in viewers who watched media portraits labelled as true stories, as opposed to those who watched stories labelled as fictionalised (Heckt *et al* 2022). This study also demonstrated the relationship between empathic responses to the media pieces, reflective thoughts, and de-stigmatisation, in that “empathic feelings can stimulate reflective thought processes that encourage individuals to rethink their stereotypical and stigmatizing perceptions of individuals with mental illness” (ibid p.381). For the authors, these results should encourage to carefully reflect on how media can indeed counteract stigma by providing an *eudaimonic* experience to viewers, that is, a type of consumption based on meaning-making, affective responses to content, and self-reflection, as opposed to hedonic consumption characterised by escapism and avoidance of daily worries (Bartsch and Hartmann 2017). The authors also consider these results as a confirmation of the power of deep disclosure, an anti-stigma strategy where people with lived experiences of mental illness talk freely about their circumstances (Uthappa 2017). In this study, deep disclosure prevented the cognitive resistance that

viewers often oppose to persuasive content thanks to the emotional vulnerability offered by people with lived experience talking about their circumstances.

These studies show that the same persuasive power that makes stereotyped media portraits of mental illness so convincing can be used to de-stigmatise mental health, especially through producing and sharing personal and authentic accounts of mental health experiences.

2.3.2 Best practices for the representation of mental health in mainstream media

I reviewed how pervasive the stereotypes portrayed in mainstream media can be in section [2.2.2](#) and have considered how films and videos of personal accounts of mental health experiences can be effective in counteracting stigma in [2.3.1](#). Therefore, it is not surprising that mental health campaigning also addresses the issue of rebalancing the misconceived representations of mental health in the media. Some studies from scholars and mental health charities have proposed best practice recommendations and tried to identify balanced representations of mental health as inspiration.

Amongst suggestions to counteract stereotypes views, Wahl encourages the direct involvement of mental health professionals in media productions as consultants. He also recommends the inclusion of an array of voices and experiences not limited to medical professionals in media representations of mental health to produce realistic accounts of recovery (Wahl 2003). Similarly, the 2009 report from Time to Change proposed solutions such as creating occasions for direct conversations with people who have lived experience of mental illness and avoidance of stigmatising language (Time to Change 2009). In 2012 Time to Change extended these recommendations with the production of a media guideline document, describing strategies for media producers, such as: avoiding sensationalistic reports of mental illness; avoiding “on air” diagnosis of public figures, as no accurate diagnosis can be provided if not by a professional who works directly and privately with the person; consulting people with lived experience of mental illness; ensuring checks on the accuracy of the medical information provided; offering helpline numbers; aiming for inclusive representations which do not frame a person with mental health conditions as separate or other. The guide also provides sensitive alternatives to most widespread stigmatising language (Time to Change 2012).

Birch identifies some successful examples of mainstream media representations which do not stereotype people with mental illnesses in *Rain Man*, a complex depiction of an autistic character shown in a wide array of experiences and expressions which allows the audience to perceive him as a multidimensional character; in *Family Life* the naturalistic approach of Ken Loach presents context around the mental distress of the main character, who is seen negotiating therapies with her GP and later experiences a worsening of her condition as a result of hospitalisation; the BBC2 mini-series *Takin' Over the Asylum*, produced in collaboration with mental health organisations, used humour to create a parallel of “madness” within the psychiatric hospital and in the external world; in *Mad, Sad, or Bad*, part of the *Video Diary* series, Sharon, a person experiencing schizophrenia, uses a camera to capture her experiences and to reflect the labels she feels stigma has imposed on her (Birch 2012). The same Video Diary is also cited as a positive depiction of mental illness by Cross, who describes it as a personal account of trauma with a high degree of agency from Sharon, who is able to negotiate her identity discussing the stigmatising language she is subjected to (Cross 2004).

Harper dedicated a paper to analysing what he defines “positive and sympathetic” representations of mental illness. These include an EastEnders episode dedicated to Joe Wickes in 1997 and a subsequent storyline on bipolar disorder in 2005, which are depicted with sensitivity and complexity. This is possibly allowed by the extensive format the soap, useful to represent conditions that have a long development without forcing them into condensed dramatic dynamics of climax and release. Harper mentions also other positive examples produced by Channel4, such as the TV movies *The Illustrated Mum* and *Losing It*, respectively on the struggle of a mother and a group of young people suffering from bipolar disorder. Some author films are also praised by Harper; as an example, *Spider* by Cronenberg has the merit of being able to convey the state of crisis induced by schizophrenia with a high degree of authenticity. In a more recent study, the TV show *You're the Worst* is praised for having depicted two main characters with mental health conditions, such as depression and PTSD, without using the illness as an oversimplified narrative device. Instead, the series dedicates ample space to the characters' diagnosis, representing the episodic and variable nature of those conditions, without using it as the sole motivation for the characters' stories and dynamics (McMahon-Coleman 2021).

However, Harper also outlines areas that are still problematic in the representations of mental illness. One of these is a gender imbalance when it comes to characters of “mentally ill geniuses”. While films like *Shine*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Walk the Line*, or *Pollock* frame the male character's state of mental illness as strictly related to outstanding achievement and

creativity, films who depict mentally ill female artists such as *Sylvia*, *Iris*, or *the Hours* touch only superficially on the characters' work to focus instead on their emotional lives. Also, representations of minorities dealing with mental illness, Harper noted, are extremely rare (Harper 2008).

Literature also warns towards “over-correcting” existing stereotypes by romanticising mental illness. The “balanced” representations these studies try to encourage are not supposed to be overly positive: studies have warned on the fact that an overly optimistic depiction of mental illness carries its own set of oversimplified assumptions. Harper states: “some of the recent cinematic biopics about psychologically disturbed ‘geniuses’, such as *Shine* and *A Beautiful Mind*, can be criticized for offering rather sanitized pictures of mental distress, which chart the virtuous hero’s passage from madness into enlightenment” (Harper 2004 p.172). Well balanced representations do not aim to portray mental illness necessarily as a positive experience, but rather open a space for complexity able to rebalance the reductive views of mental health who have been dominating the media.

It was mentioned that a key strategy to produce more authentic accounts of mental health within mainstream media storytelling is by involving consultants, usually provided by mental health organisations working directly with people who have lived experience of mental illness. Unfortunately, artistic and financial pressures at play can limit the way this exchange happens. A recent study by Henderson analysed how the negotiation process between producers and mental health advocates tends to happen in the UK. The study is based on interviews with story consultants and producers/writers. The first group spoke about the necessity of this kind of work and the potential media can have in promoting healthier beliefs and behaviours regarding mental illness. However, consultancy work tends to happen mostly in bigger productions and focus on main characters only. This means that if a secondary character is portrayed as mentally ill, usually there is no investment of time and resources in involving story consultants. In an ideal scenario, mental health consultants would be able to work directly with writers and actors and involve people with lived experience of mental illness to make sure storylines and interpretations capture genuine aspects of the experience of a certain condition. More often, consultancy is limited to checking the correctness of medical terms or props. According to story consultants what is mainly missing in today’s productions are representations of people with mental health problems coping without medication and presentations of holistic experiences of mental illness as opposed to overreliance on the bio-medical model. Consultants also complained about the already noted exaggerated emphasis on the “losing control” aspect of illnesses followed by quick recoveries. Producers and writers, on the other hand, mostly spoke of how

the need to produce entertaining content often means pushing characters to extreme situations in soaps and drama. This does not easily accommodate a balanced view of mental health and illness. Also, the complex events need to be squeezed in short storylines and writers want to preserve creative licence, including the freedom to possibly misrepresent some aspects of mental illness if it serves their artistic vision (Henderson 2018).

Having reviewed the most effective strategies in mental health campaigning and the best practice recommendations for media producers and the mixed results achieved so far, it can be noticed that everything points towards a need for the direct involvement of people with mental health problems to speak about their experiences, be it through interpersonal contact, mediated contact campaigns, or by being involved as consultants in media production. The literature on these subjects, while addressing different forms of practice, paints an overall picture in which forms of dialogue and representations necessary to create authentic accounts of mental health need to be:

- Open: dialogue on mental health should be free and unrestricted, allowing space of diversity of voices and experiences.
- Participatory: people with mental health problems should be involved directly in leading the conversation on subject such as mental health conditions, quality of services, effects of stigma.
- Personal: people seem to respond with empathy as opposed to social avoidance and distancing when the discourse around mental health is person-centred rather than generic.
- Safe: while disclosure presents beneficial effects, it can also lead to more discrimination, hence modalities of conversation must consider the safety of people with mental health problems and protect their privacy when necessary

While mainstream media might not be the ideal scenario to create the conditions for this kind of dialogue, other form of artistic and video-based representations could offer opportunities to explore a more dialogical approach to the discussion of mental health.

2.4 Participatory filmmaking as a way of producing authentic accounts of mental health

In conclusion to section [2.3](#) I identified characteristics of a mental health discourse that is able to counteract stigma and self-stigma (open, participatory, person-centred, and safe). It also emerged that, despite recent efforts, mainstream media does not appear to offer enough flexibility to accommodate complex representations of mental health.

Moving away from the realm of commercial media, the practice of participatory filmmaking, which consists of letting community members write, shape, and produce their own media pieces, can provide a space for people with lived experience of mental health problems to exercise their voice. In participatory filmmaking, community members become authors who can articulate their own experiences and, consequently, deliver highly personalised accounts of mental health and illness. This form of production can thus overcome the limits of mainstream media when it comes to involve people with lived experience in shaping stories and characters and, at the same time, could fulfil the anti-stigma effect of mediated contact initiatives by providing audiences the access to personal perspectives on what it means to experience mental illness. This section provides context on participatory filmmaking and explores how this has been applied to mental health.

2.4.1 Participatory filmmaking definition and context of practice

Participatory filmmaking (often called participatory video)⁵ is a form of production which consists in the use of video “as a social and community-based tool for individual and group development” (Shaw and Robertson 1997 p.11). In participatory film, professional filmmakers act as, or work with, facilitators who transfer technical skills to participants, allowing them to become authors of the films produced. As Yang (2012 p.103) explains: “participants blur the boundaries between filmmakers and film subjects or combine the roles, they can construct their experiences uniquely from their perspectives, thereby providing authentic data about themselves”. As such, participatory video consists of a form of

⁵ Most literature refers to participatory filmmaking as participatory video; however, I prefer to use the former definition as it seems to stress the importance of the storytelling process typical of this form of production over the finished output.

production which transforms the passive subjects of traditional documentary filmmaking in active agents, empowered to shape and create their own media messages and own the production process.

Traditionally practiced in the context of participatory communication and participatory rural appraisal (White 2003), participatory filmmaking assumes that “through video anyone can express ideas, articulate their viewpoint or voice opinions of importance with no barrier of status or consequence”; “it serves as a powerful force for people to see themselves in relation to community and become conscientized about personal and community needs” (White 2003 p.64). It is aimed especially at disenfranchised groups, where “unemployment, homelessness and other inequalities leaves people feeling discarded by society” (Shawn and Robertson 1997 p.12). As stated by Plush (2012 p.68), “with its visual nature and ability to capture the voices of people from marginalised group, participatory video holds the potential to educate, persuade, and advocate in ways that can bring about positive change”. The process of being involved in participatory filmmaking can present opportunities to participants such as: “to develop personal skills in the use of video technology, (...), to enter into a dialog with group members and reflect on interpersonal interaction (...), to modify personal behaviours and strengthen individual identity, to define goals and outline courses of action for self-development, and to construct messages focused on specific communication objectives” (White 2003 p. 65).

Participatory film found its grounding in the rise of collaborative documentary filmmaking, emerged as an attempt to establish more equal relationships between documentary makers and subjects, especially after the concept of the documentarian as an objective translator of others' experiences and viewpoints was increasingly criticised and deconstructed (Ruby 1991). Collaborative documentary is an attempt to overcome the exploitative approach to documentary subjects often taken for granted in traditional documentary, where an outsider who owns the film technology and the skills to operate it enters a community with the claim to capture its truth. In collaborative documentary, subjects are consulted, asked for consent, and given varying degree of agency on the content to include in the documentary, creating a partial shift of power dynamics. As Ruby explains (1991 p.50):

Cooperatively produced and subject-generated films are significant because they represent an approach to documentary and ethnographic films dissimilar to the dominant practice. They offer the possibility of perceiving the world from the viewpoint of the people who lead lives that are different from those traditionally in control of the means for imaging the world.

The first radical example of collaborative documentary is often identified in the Fogo project in the late 60s, part of the Challenge for Change programme by the National Film Board of Canada, whose priority was to use filmmaking to initiate social change which could benefit the communities represented. In what have been known as the Fogo Process, producers Donald Snowed and Colin Low let community members from the Fogo Islands take charge of the narrative authorship of a series of films, which were then screened at a variety of community events, with the tangible result that the planned relocation of the community elsewhere was cancelled (Crocker 2003).

The Fogo Process inspired much participatory filmmaking practice, but collaborative documentary, even in its shift towards empowering documentary subjects, still holds a certain level of power inequality when it comes to skill and expertise. Ruby highlights how critical awareness and knowledge of representational modalities is needed for subjects to be completely conscious of what they are agreeing to, and “unless one plans to spend the time and money training subjects to become film-makers or even reasonably competent critics, subjects will continue to lack the skill necessary to give informed consent” (Ruby 1991, p.55). This is, however, exactly what participatory filmmaking sets out to do: investing time and resources in equipping community members with the necessary skills to take on the challenge of representing themselves.

In fact, participatory filmmaking is inspired by Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire 1970), with its focus on transformational and relational education as a process of ‘conscientisation’ of the individual. As pointed out by Roberts and Lunch (2015 p.1, 2): “Freire’s praxis of reflection upon action can be seen as a means to decode the world, to better grasp the mechanisms of oppression and dehumanization, and better enable the oppressed to interpret and change their reality”. Participatory video aspires to be a tool in this process, by allowing participants to use media making as a way of reflecting and articulating experiences and circumstances with a view of raising awareness and shaping action. The educational value of participatory video consists in the possibility for participants to become active builders of media messages, as articulated by Shaw and Robertson (1997 p. 10):

Much media education work explores television by deconstruction, breaking a programme into its component images and sounds, and analysing how the message is put together. Through using video, groups gain experience of constructing their own communications and this increases their understanding of the media.

Overall, participatory video aims at creating space for community members to define themselves, represent their identities, create dialogue with other communities, identify ways in which they can control and change their circumstances, and affecting change at a larger scale (Shaw and Robertson 1997). According to White, “*self-disclosure* is the act of sharing either verbally or nonverbally those aspects of yourself that would not be readily recognized or understood if you did not dialog about those aspects” (2003 p. 84).

Traditionally, participatory filmmaking has been more engaged with the process of production and the beneficial effects it can have on participants, rather than on the quality of the final products (Rodriguez 2001, Benest 2011). The process is in fact where participants elaborate their circumstances through storytelling and find a supportive space, and participatory filmmaking is a holistic form of media production which is not necessarily result driven. However, films resulted from participatory filmmaking have been used extensively as means to diffuse messages in local communities. White recognises how the rise of internet represents an opportunity for reaching wider audiences: “the combination of participatory message-making and disseminating those messages via the internet, is unequalled as a means to empower individuals and communities” (White 2003 p.76). Also, the materiality of video makes participatory filmmaking advantageous for widespread knowledge dissemination and translation, as opposed to other forms of applied arts, such as drama or music (Mitchell *et al* 2012 p.9). As such, while it is important to preserve focus on the process, the film resulting from this dialogical and inter-relational work should not be underestimated, for they can become effective tools to facilitate communication amongst communities and society at large.

From this review of the nature and goals of participatory filmmaking, it is already evident how this practice reflects many of the principles for a fair and inclusive representation of mental health explored in previous sections. It can facilitate safe self-disclosure as an empowering strategy (Corrigan 2015) and make space for participants to review and articulate their experiences: “given that a major challenge for people with mental health problems has been to have their perspective viewed as legitimate, narrative approaches have provided opportunities for people suffering from mental distress to gain a previously denied authorship of their own biography” (Fisher and Lees 2016 p. 600). Participatory filmmaking can allow participants to take control and articulate their own viewpoints independently and it can aid dialogue with a range of external audiences. In the next section, I review how this storytelling approach has been applied to mental health.

2.4.2 Applications of participatory filmmaking in mental health

The use of filmmaking in mental health often falls under the provision of creative activities within Arts and Health programmes. Arts and Health is an umbrella term which comprises diverse art practices delivered or proposed in support of individuals' wellbeing in relation to both physical and mental health, as evidenced by a variety of recent research (Staricoff 2004, Arts Council England 2007, All-Party Parliamentary Group 2017). Arts and Health approaches differ from art therapy, where "creating images and objects plays a central role in the psychotherapeutic relationship established between the art therapist and client" (Edwards 2004 p.2). While art therapy is private individual therapeutic practice, Arts and Health approaches support people's wellbeing in community settings, where art making serves a double purpose, building "both an inward-looking self-esteem and self-awareness and an outward looking social confidence and connectedness" (Atkinson and Robson 2012 p.1349). At times defined also as Arts on Prescription (Bungay and Clift 2010), this approach to the arts is inspired by a holistic view of people's wellbeing as resulting from a variety of factors rather than limited to the treatment of a single condition (NEF 2011). Often delivered in form of participatory arts sessions by charities, third-sector organisations, or the NHS, Arts and Health provision usually stresses the importance of using arts as a way of building a social network for people in recovery from a variety of conditions. A study collecting the views of artists delivering sessions to community members stresses how "people had developed sustained friendships, with some students going on to form their own art groups" (Margrove *et al* 2013 p.1107). Arts and Health activities have proved to support recovery from mental health problems by fostering a sense of belonging, allowing creative freedom, providing opportunities for socialisation and connection, generating insights on one's own emotional wellbeing, amongst other benefits (Van Lith *et al* 2011). The realm of participatory arts and Arts & Health programmes includes a wealth of activities and artforms, like creative writing, visual arts, drama, and music. Film has been used considerably less than other forms of art (music, drama) in mental health, mostly due to technological barriers. However, recent developments in video technology have made the means inclusive and inexpensive, growing the popularity of participatory filmmaking.

Examples of the application of participatory filmmaking in mental health in the literature as still sparse, with most projects happening within the arts provisions of third sector organisations, in contexts where the practice is not always documented or evaluated.

However, some accounts of how participatory filmmaking can be applied to the field of mental health do exist.

A study in 2010 describes the involvement of a group of six young people with severe mental illness in participatory filmmaking experience in rural Australia. Following a tech workshop to learn filmmaking techniques, the young people used MiniDV cameras to film in several locations. The group produced two short films, one called *Insights into Mental Health*, which combines personal accounts of their own experience of mental illness, and a behind-the-scenes film capturing the fun times the youth had while producing the first film. Both films were publicly screened (Boyd 2010). Some of the benefits these participants gained in taking part in participatory film sessions were the possibility of getting absorbed in a creative activity, which temporarily eased symptoms of illnesses; the establishment of a supportive community, which could break the sense of isolation many people with mental health problems experience; an increased sense of agency resulting from expressing personal views on circumstances as an artist, as opposed to a patient; and the acquisition of technical and creative skills (Boyd 2010).

In 2020 participatory filmmaking was used with a group of people within an early psychosis intervention programme to support their recovery by building personal narratives. The study recorded not just high levels of feasibility and acceptance of participatory filmmaking by the group, but a clinically significant reduction in their level of self-stigma (MacDougall *et al* 2020).

These studies do not describe the films produced by participants in detail, rather focusing on the overall process. However, films created by people with mental health problems could have useful application and are often shared in community screenings and online. Studies on strategies for counteracting stigma have already proved how contact, that is direct conversations and exchange between people with mental health problems and general audiences, is the most effective way of increasing empathy and reducing stigma (Corrigan 2002). But it was also noted that creating opportunities for this kind of exchange in a live scenario presents several challenges and can only be achieved on a small scale. On the other hand, filmed accounts of personal mental illness experiences could yield beneficial effects on stigma reduction, while at the same time being more easily transmissible.

A study conducted in 2006 using filmed tapes of education and contact showed that presenting filmed life stories of people with mental health problems to an audience produced considerable reduction of stigmatised views in participants, obtaining better results than educational videos used for the same purpose (Corrigan *et al* 2006).

In 2013 a participatory film was produced in a psychiatric hospital in The Netherlands. The film captured the experiences of five hospital residents living with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Participants did not just share their stories with the filmmakers but shaped the narratives of the films as they spontaneously emerged from open interviews. Participants were also given editorial control before the final cut was approved. The final film, titled *At Least it Should Have Some Bubbles*, describes life in the hospital by exploring the hopes and fears of the five residents. They discuss their dreams, the impact of stigma, their views on the care provided by the hospital, using both documentary and poetry to investigate what good care is. The film was produced to aid dialogue between clients and health providers in the context of “moral deliberations”, sessions where stakeholders discuss personal experiences to inform care decisions in hospital settings. Due to the disparity of power between clients and health care providers, storytelling can be a useful tool in mediating the clients’ experiences and delivering them with focus and intention. The study assessed how the participatory film facilitated this exchange for clients and healthcare providers. It resulted that healthcare providers found that the film had a strong impact on both a cognitive and emotional level, it generated discussions and self-reflection on the prejudice that health care providers unconsciously held against clients. From the clients’ perspective, they felt empowered in being able to articulate their circumstances, felt the film preserved the authenticity of their viewpoints, and felt encouraged to take a more active role in the organisations of activities for their own support. Overall, the film and the discussions it generated shed a light on the relationship between clients and healthcare providers and acted as a catalyst for change (Van der Ham *et al* 2013).

A recent project, called Radar Mental Health, used participatory filmmaking not just to support participants’ wellbeing, but also with a clear agenda on reducing stigma and a strong focus towards audience involvement. The study was dedicated to working with three different groups of people with severe mental illness who produced twelve short films, which were shown to a total of 1542 people. A large portion of this audience took part in questionnaires and focus groups following the screenings, and the study reported a successful increase in the level of empathy of the audience towards people experiencing mental health problems. Key findings from the audience feedback focused on the understanding they gained of the challenges people with mental health problems faced in everyday life, on the relatability between participants’ and audiences’ experiences, on the humanising effect the films conveyed to a group that is so often marginalised. The film delivered multifaceted representations of people with mental health problems, that helped the audience perceive them as well-rounded individuals with goals, aspirations, and feelings, instead of reducing them to their illness. All these qualities combined produced a tangible

sense of understanding and empathy in the audience, with members self-reporting changes of attitudes towards people with mental health problems. One audience member explicitly compared the person-centred approach of these films with the stereotyped views so frequently found in mainstream media (*ibid.* p.9). The fact that the films captured the life stories of ordinary people was praised by some audience members as it allowed them to relate more easily to the experience of the film authors, in contrast to the, still beneficial, but somewhat detached effect of social media campaigns dedicated to celebrities and athletes opening up about their experiences of mental illness (Calhoun and Gold 2020, Parrot *et al* 2021). This study, first of its kind for scope and duration, clearly shows that “PV [participatory video] gives added value to contact-based sessions as it intensely enacts the ‘seeing is believing’ mantra, illustrating in a multi-faceted manner the strengths, capabilities and competencies of people with SMI [severe mental illness] (Whitely *et al* 2020 p.9).

The examples here considered show that participatory filmmaking with people who have a lived experience of mental illness opens space for much needed conversations, both amongst the participants themselves, and with the outside world, and “can create a form of ‘mediated contact’, with the potential to confront stereotypes and illuminate day-to-day ‘behind the scenes’ realities of recovery” (Whitely *et al* 2020 p.2). This practice has a considerable potential in counteracting the stereotypes endorsed by mainstream media. A study compared the representations of mental health in Canadian TV clips collected over a one-year period with accounts created by people with direct experience of mental health problems, using the films from the aforementioned Radar Mental health project. The study found that the accounts produced by people with experience of severe mental illness were much more positive, recovery-oriented, and solution-focused than the TV clips, which mostly associated mental illness with crime, legal issues, and violence. While the personal accounts provide a person-centred view of mental illness and recovery, TV production seemed keen in generating sensationalistic headlines, contributing to reinforcing stigma (Carmichael *et al* 2019).

2.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have explored how, despite affecting large portions of the population at increasing frequency, mental health problems are still a highly stigmatised subject. With stigma and self-stigma having dramatic effects on the quality of life of people experiencing mental health problems, it is crucial to find ways to counteract stigmatised views with more

inclusive and authentic representations. Mainstream media, despite recent efforts, is still reinforcing many stereotypes about people with mental health problems. Mental health campaigning helps, but the most effective strategy, direct contact between someone who shares their experience of mental illness and the public, is difficult to manage beyond limited events.

Participatory filmmaking, a practice where people with direct experience of specific issues build their own representations, is an excellent tool to produce those authentic accounts of mental health experiences which can both empower the storytellers through safe modalities of self-disclosure and reduce stigma in viewers. Participatory filmmaking can provide ways to explore mental health through an open, participatory, safe, and personal approach.

However, producing participatory films on mental health in community settings does entail some challenges too. In my experience working as a facilitator in this context, I have witnessed both opportunities and challenges of applying participatory filmmaking in mental health. The next chapter presents some examples of my own practice, illustrates some of the challenges that this kind of storytelling poses, and explores the new realm of interactive documentary as a fruitful avenue to expand the potential of participatory filmmaking on mental health.

CHAPTER 3 POLYVOCALITY IN PARTICIPATORY FILMMAKING AND THE OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY INTERACTIVE DOCUMENTARY

In the previous chapter I reviewed the potential of participatory filmmaking for producing genuine and well-rounded accounts of mental health which can counterbalance the stereotypes often present in mainstream media.

However, producing participatory films on mental health in community settings does entail some challenges. In my experience working as a facilitator in this context, I have witnessed a specific problem that presented itself on multiple occasions, and that is, finding a satisfactory way to manage the multiple voices (the “polyvocality”) and shared authorship involved in this kind of production.

To act in respect with its foundational values, participatory filmmaking needs to enable all participants to have an equal say in authorial and expressive decisions (Shaw and Robertson 1997). This is crucial in any participatory filmmaking project, but it becomes especially important when it comes to discussing mental health. Some participants find themselves sharing similar views, experiences, and background, while others may differ. The process of scripting and editing linear films forces some diversity to be streamlined to fit into a main story arc, with a sacrifice of polyvocality, intended as the presence of multiple voices and viewpoints within the same film text.

In this chapter I start by sharing some of my experiences as a facilitator making participatory films on mental health and trying to manage the challenges posed by coordinating the multiple authorial voices that need to be accommodated in linear films produced by groups of community members.

The chapter then considers the emerging practice of interactive documentary, as a possible tool to create space for polyvocal productions through narrative non-linearity. Also known as i-Docs, these non-linear films offer plasticity in their structures and the possibility of modelling ways of exploring narrative content according to the communicative needs of each project. They are often motivated by participatory aims and design space for viewers to input content in the film. This section provides an overview of the definition of interactive documentary, its main characteristics, its assonances with the practice of participatory filmmaking, and, finally, a brief list of narrative possibilities that could support the production of polyvocal participatory films on mental health.

3.1 Managing multiple voices in participatory filmmaking applied to mental health

Previous review of the values of participatory filmmaking and its applications in mental health showed the potential this practice offers in letting people with direct experience of mental health problems take control of their representations and design narrative accounts that convey the complexity and variability of facing mental health problems and recovery.

I have had the opportunity to witness many of the beneficial effects of participatory filmmaking both on participants and on audiences through my own professional practice. In 2016 I established an ongoing collaboration with Converge⁶, an organisation based at York St John University which provides courses to people in recovery from mental health problems. My work at Converge revolves around a yearly film course where participants learn filmmaking techniques and design their own films. This practice has allowed me to gain experiential knowledge on working with groups using film to discuss aspects of mental health. I have witnessed the empowering effects of engaging in visual storytelling which results in films produced collectively by a group of people experiencing similar problems. However, I also almost inevitably encountered a challenge which is not documented in the literature: how to ensure that the viewpoints of the entire group of participants designing the films are given appropriate space and exposure. While the group members usually agree on a theme to ground their exploration on, very often their personal views and experiences differ.

The linear nature of filming makes it difficult to accommodate these differing viewpoints. Traditional film is often intended as a linear text, with its specific grammar composed by a succession of scenes, made up by sequences, shots, and frames (Proferes and Medina 2017), all arranged in a pre-definite order by the act of scripting and linear editing. These linear film conventions tend to suit the representation of a narrative world which reflect one main viewpoint, articulated by one authorial voice. The practice of collaborative filmmaking, which includes participatory video, on the other hand, has a

⁶ Converge, York St John University: <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/converge/>

relational, anti-hierarchical agenda (Wiebe 2005), which makes it essential to find ways for all participants to be able to equally express themselves.

There are no pre-established workflows in participatory filmmaking, and participants are often encouraged to cover different roles and take turns in directing, operating cameras, sound recording, acting and so on; eventually, participants tend to choose tasks according to their predispositions and personal preferences. However, storytelling and authoring remain a collective effort which should include all participants. A skilled facilitator “should invite inclusion of more marginalised members of the community and ensure that the process does not become dominated by those in power” (Harris 2009 p.544). However, much literature describing participatory film projects (Wiebe 2005, Parr 2007, Harris 2009, Waite and Conn 2011, Haynes and Tanner 2015, Hakak and Holmes 2017) does not provide details on how collective narratives can be arranged in form of a script or film treatment, or which measures can be taken to ensure all participants are equally included. There seems to be a general lack of guidance on how multiple voices can come together to create a coherent but multifaceted narrative form, how this could look like, and how facilitators can support participants in this process. A tension emerges between articulating multiple voices and fitting them within a structure that has developed and evolved to accommodate one strong authorial voice. While the results of this tension can often be highly creative, in practice there are considerable challenges for participatory film facilitators, especially when it comes to mental health. In a practice that is so strongly rooted in self-representation (White 2003) dismissing one story idea often means dismissing the experiences and viewpoint of the participant who contributed to it.

In my experience as a facilitator the work usually starts with an exploratory stage where the group brainstorms ideas and themes that are relevant to their experiences. The challenge of polyvocality, that is the presence of multiple voices speaking together, emerges when the initial inputs from the groups need to be shaped in film story. While the presence of multiple voices in the group is what initially sparks conversations and creative ideas, when it comes to working out a film outline, a process of selection becomes inevitable. At times, participants spontaneously tend focus their representations on aspects of their experience they are aware they all have in common. If the group is small and homogenous this process can lead to satisfactory results for all participants. More often, however, it can oversimplify participants' personal accounts or model the film over dominant voices, especially when a portion of the group share similar viewpoints in contrast with a minority. There is the tangible risk that those who are less used to articulate their experiences, to speak in a group setting,

or whose viewpoint differs the most from the rest of the group might end up being silenced, defeating the very purpose of participatory filmmaking.

In order to try and preserve as much as possible of the polyvocality of this form of storytelling while working within the constraints of a linear narrative form, I often had to deploy two main strategies: the production of individual mini films centred around the same theme but led individually by each participant, or sub-groups of participants, who shared the same viewpoint; or attempts to create one unified narrative which could equally contain all the inputs from participants, often through stylistic experimentation, such as the adoption of abstract video poetry styles or mix of documentary and fiction. These strategies proved more or less successful according to the group, the theme explored, and the resources available.

The production of individual mini films has been a popular choice in my practice at Converge. The first film produced by the film group in 2016, *Stepping Through*⁷, which is the grounding case study of this entire research, is structured in five mini chapters that compose an 8-minute short film. Each chapter was produced in collaboration by the whole group but authored respectively by one participant. The film is unified by an agreed shared theme, the role of community in recovery from mental health problems. *Stepping Through* was perhaps the most successful example of a participatory film produced at Converge, striking a balance between a common theme amongst participants and their individual chapters, a result facilitated by the fact that participants knew each other very well from having worked together in other Converge courses. In this sense, I define *Stepping Through* as a rather successful attempt in streamlining polyvocality, meaning that the film manages to keep a general linear coherence while presenting viewpoints from the different participants.



Figure 1: Some stills from *Stepping Through* (Converge 2016)

⁷ *Stepping Through* on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8i91ArM6oTl&ab_channel=ConvergeYork

In 2017, the Converge film course focused on exploring the city of York and the participants' emotional connection with it by filming portions of the city and pairing the images with voice overs of their memories and reflections; it became apparent early in the process that each participant had a different experience of the city: some participants were from York while others had only recently moved, and they all lived in different neighbourhoods. Trying to unify their outlooks would have meant losing the individuality of each viewpoint and experience, so the group opted for producing individual short films which were collated into a longer film called *Through My Mind's Eyes*⁸. This film is composed by several internal chapters filmed and narrated by one participant at a time. The group supported each other working in turns and collecting images for each other's' chapter. The chapters in the film are completely different in terms of tone, approach, and style, making the film diverse but narratively disjointed, with a lack of the overall stylistic coherence found in *Stepping Through*.



Figure 2 Personal perspectives of York in *Through My Mind's Eye*, Converge, 2017

In a more recent case, another group of participants decided to work in mini groups producing completely different films that were not following a common theme at all. These ranged from an origami tutorial to an abstract exploration of nature and a short documentary

⁸ Some clips from *Through My Mind's Eye* on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qits7tmMBQk&ab_channel=ConvergeYork

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyyCTPvensI&ab_channel=ConvergeYork

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2K6HT0EN08&ab_channel=ConvergeYork

about public transport in York, amongst other themes. The limit of the individual films approach, which is more apparent in the latter case, is that the group can become fragmented, at times with sub-groups or individuals working completely independently or in isolation. In such cases, collaboration is limited to mutual technical support, which in turn can reduce the beneficial effects of working in a group and sharing personal experiences. This method also amplifies the workload of participants, who need to film and prepare a bigger volume of materials.

A more traditional approach to the production of participatory films is to make an effort to include all the contributions proposed by participants in one narrative structure, whether through a documentary or narrative fiction approach. Each member of the group works on developing the story by adding ideas and inputs. It can be tricky to incorporate every contribution as the story unfolds. While at times the work organically evolves and participants feel that even if it was not possible to include every idea the film still belongs to the group as a whole, there is the risk of having to dismiss someone's contribution as not fitting into the story. In our work with Converge, this challenge was managed successfully in examples such as *25 to Life*⁹, a film exploring stories of recovery from mental illness: the group combined a documentaristic interview proposed by one participant; symbolic images over voice over suggested by another; images of a dismissed psychiatric hospital, which were considered important by some participants; and video art inputs based on the artwork of one participant. In this case, the overall theme unified each input and the film worked organically.



Figure 3 Documentary and video art in *25 to Life*, Converge, 2019

⁹ *25 to Life* on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXVARWdKg8U&ab_channel=ConvergeYork

The challenge becomes more difficult to manage when the group decides to explore narrative fiction. In *Street of Thoughts*¹⁰ participants explored the encounter between a man and a woman through their respective streams of consciousness. In the development phase of the work, there were many suggestions that could not be fit in one story organically. The other film tutor and I decided to suggest a voting system to select which ideas were more popular. As a result of discarding some of the ideas which received the fewer votes, a participant left the group, feeling that his contribution was not valued by the rest of the participants. More problems arose later in the process: participants never felt they fully agreed on the direction of the film. The final result was considered satisfactory by some participants, while others felt the male character took a sinister turn and were not happy to be associated with the work. Overall, this experience was the least successful in my work at Converge in terms of bringing the group together, with some participants feeling that the work did not belong to them due to the selection process and the compromises made in the story development in an effort to include as many inputs as possible.



Figure 4 *Street of Thoughts*, Converge, 2018

There can be occasions where a group voluntarily relinquishes authorial control in favour of a single, dominant voice from one participant. In *The Good, the Bad, and the Upgrade*¹¹ everyone spontaneously agreed to work on a script produced by one member of the group, focusing on acting and camerawork over writing and self-expression. Participants

¹⁰ *Street of Thoughts* on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXVARWdKg8U&ab_channel=ConvergeYork

¹¹ *The Good, the Bad, and the Upgrade* on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scLa-CaPNG8&ab_channel=ConvergeYork

knew each other very well, trusted each other, and had already worked together on *Stepping Through*, so the choice, by vote, to work on a script written by one person only was not perceived as an imposition or a limit to their creative freedom. However, while this film was enjoyed by participants and their community, it does not explore personal experiences of all participants with the same depth and nuance and does not fully qualify as a participatory film in the sense of being authored by the whole group.



Figure 5 The Good, the Bad, and the Upgrade, Converge 2016

Overall, the challenge of managing multiple voices in participatory filmmaking is stringent and becomes even more crucial when paired with the complexity of representing experiences of mental illness. The strategies explored so far (producing individual mini chapters or mini films, trying to merge different and often disparate ideas, or privileging one authorial voice in the group) have proved to produce mixed results. This form of production seems to call for a multi-faceted form of representation which is difficult to streamline in a linear form. However, preserving the complexity of multiple authorial voices and viewpoints is what can make participatory filmmaking particularly effective against stigma. For this reason, finding ways of resolving these internal tensions could allow for more effective results.

By failing to address these challenges, it is possible to encounter several risks, both internal to the group, and externally. In terms of group dynamics, there is a risk of undermining the very aim of participatory filmmaking when facilitators fail to value individual contributions equally: some participants might not feel listened to, which can have detrimental, rather than beneficial, effects on their recovery, self-esteem, and self-empowerment. From a representational point of view, by oversimplifying complex mental health experiences to fit into a linear narrative, there is a risk of falling into one of the pitfalls of mainstream media: portraying a romanticised view of mental illness as something relatively simple to define and “snap out of”.

3.2 Interactive documentary as a polyvocal form of storytelling

The practice of interactive documentary, often shortened as “i-Docs”, could offer opportunities and narrative affordances which might fill some of the challenges related to managing the multiple voices involved in participatory film production. In this section, I first propose a general definition of interactive documentary as a genre, to then consider some of its key characteristics, such as non-linearity, polyvocality, and participation. This section then links interactive documentary to participatory filmmaking by highlighting some commonalities of intents and ambitions, but also some differences in authorial approaches, with a distinction between structural/maximalist participation and executory/minimalist participation. Finally, I review some narrative qualities of interactive documentary which, based on my direct experience and informal conversations with participants taking part in community filmmaking, could support the production of polyvocal participatory accounts of mental health.

The reason I am focusing on interactive documentary only and excluding fiction when drawing parallels with participatory filmmaking lies in the fact that most participatory filmmaking projects aim to capture the lived realities of the communities involved in the film production. While some participatory films take the shape of acted stories or video poetry, they still most often focus on the representation of something that is close to the lives and direct experience of participants. As such, participatory filmmaking’s agenda is in proximity with producing “a creative treatment of actuality”, with the fundamental difference that the authorial control lies in the subjects’ hands rather than those of an external filmmaker. Watson (2017) reflects on interactive documentary stating that “radical documentarians have had, as a fundamental basis of their work, a concern with the illumination of the usually “unseen,” and the strategic uses of witnesses, testimonies, archives, and evidence. This is coupled with the will to give access to representation for marginalized groups in the cause of global collectivity and exchange” (*ibid* p. 600). This declaration of intents seems perfectly aligned with the aims of participatory filmmaking in terms of making space for the self-representation of groups that are often marginalized or silenced.

3.2.1 Definitions of interactive documentary

Interactive documentary is a recent form of practice based on non-fictional storytelling which deploys interactivity. Most literature on interactive documentary defines it by bringing together the concept of documentary filmmaking “as the creative treatment of actuality”, according to the traditional definition of Grierson (1933), and the non-linear narrative qualities afforded by interactive media (Galloway 2007, Nash 2014, Alkarimeh and Boutin 2017, Aufderheide 2018).

Emerged in the context of the growing popularity of vernacular video practices online (Dovey and Rose, 2013), i-Docs “draw on many of the representational conventions of film and television documentary (...), interviews and observational sequences, sound and images collected on location, and commentary in the form of voiceover or text” (Nash 2012 p.198); but they also bring something that is completely new in the world of documentary filmmaking, that is interactivity as an array of choices offered to viewers who are now able to exercise control over the materials presented in the documentary. Viewers can make choices in “finding information (either within or beyond the documentary), learning, furthering the narrative, personalizing the documentary, adding to the documentary content, play or search “playfully” for hotspots within an image interface’ (Nash, 2012, p.201). According to Aston and Gaudenzi (2012), the definition of i-Docs can be quite wide and include “any project that starts with an intention to document the ‘real’ and that uses digital interactive technology to realize this intention” (*ibid* p.125-126). Nogueira (2016) defines an interactive documentary as a “non-fiction work clearly defined by the author’s point of view, which provides the audience with the ability to interact with the contents and shape the narrative within the interaction” (*ibid* p.157). While the documentary ambition to capture reality and express it authentically is strongly present in i-Docs, interactivity layers a series of additional forms of expression which modify narrative structures and the roles of viewers and authors. It can be deployed to serve multiples purposes: ‘finding information (either within or beyond the documentary), learning, furthering the narrative, personalizing the documentary, adding to the documentary content, play or searching ‘playfully’ for hotspots within an image-interface” (Nash 2012, p.201).

I-Docs also introduce a range of complexities in the relationship between audiences and authors, fundamentally shifting the role of the viewers compared to traditional linear documentary; they are no longer supposed to absorb a piece of media which runs in the same pre-defined order, but are rather asked to take on a more active role:

The viewers/users of interactive documentary projects find a greater burden placed on their engagement: they must actively navigate through these projects, making decisions, synthesizing disparate information, and creating connections between multiple forms of media. The combination of interactivity, data visualization, mapping, and open-ended narratives employs

interfaces that can be manipulated on a variety of screens in a multiplicity of settings (Watson 2017 p.603).

Viewers might be asked to perform different actions: “reading, watching, commenting, sharing content, talking to others, filling in a quiz, playing, and clicking (Nash 2012 p.196).

According to some, the raised agency of viewers corresponds to a diminished sense of authority for producers and filmmakers (Alkarimeh and Boutin 2017):

the viewer has the chance to choose and control the contents and the time while watching an interactive documentary. It has given him/her a significant role to be as an assistant director where he/she can add to or modify the contents. This shifting of roles has gradually led to diminish the absolute control of the classical authorship and the unmodified narrative (*ibid* p.5).

Gaudenzi (2013) states: “we can see how the interactive documentary changes the status of the narrative: it is no longer the author who owns the narrative of the event, of the encounter, of its expression and the consequential experience by the user” (*ibid* p.22). Viewers become co-creators, while authors need to embrace the challenge of visualizing “their work as the result of a dialogue between two practices: the production of a creative archive and shared authorship” (Favero 2013 p. 264-265).

However, even though the process of fruition enhances the role of the viewers as active creators of meaning, some literature suggests that authorship of interactive documentary still lies strongly in the hands of producers, as “authorial intention is the key element that sustains the interactive documentary as a consistent artwork. Without authorial intent, we would only have a mere conglomeration of random components ready to emerge from chaos” (Nogueira 2016 p.162). The multiple possible routes through an interactive documentary can challenge its narrative coherence (Nash, 2012) and the increased narrative complexity needs to be carefully curated through a strong, and somewhat expanded, authorial presence, where “the filmmaker becomes more the designer of a pattern of trails through a landscape of images” (Almeida and Alvelos 2010 p.128).

While interactive documentary as a genre is in evolution and still in many aspects defining its own practices and stylistic approaches, several categorisations of iDocs have been proposed, each classifying i-Docs according to their communicative, narrative, and interactive styles. I review here the main interactive documentary categories described in the literature, presenting some film examples along the way. According to Galloway *et al* (2007),

interactive documentaries can be classified by the type of response they require from viewers. They distinguish four different approaches:

- **Passive adaptive**, where the users' input is collected via devices which do not require a conscious response, such as eye-tracking or other smart systems, which make automatic changes to the content according to the data collected. This is defined by the author as a "responsive monologue", which operates outside of the user's awareness (*ibid* p. 332). These are films that might not look explicitly interactive as they do not require the viewer to take a specific action; however, they do adapt and shift the content proposed according to information collected on the viewer.
- **Active adaptive**, which requires a conscious response from viewers, who need to use an input device to operate a choice and select the content to watch. This modality takes the form of a "responsive dialogue", where user and device respond to each other with the user's awareness. Most interactive documentaries belong to this category, requesting the viewer to click, scroll, or press buttons in order to make choices. An example that combines two of these modes of interaction is *Hollow*¹² (McMillion 2013), a documentary about deprived town in West Virginia, narrated through thirty individual portraits of community members. *Hollow* allows users to navigate through its content by scrolling down to activate a series of animated and video sequences, choosing the pace at which the narration should proceed. At times viewers can pause and click on single portions of video to access interviews of the residents.

¹² <http://hollowdocumentary.com/>



Figure 6 Hollow (McMillion 2013)

- **Immersive**, a modality which the author considers fully “participatory” because the user is “fully absorbed into the narrative world by lowering their awareness of external, real-world stimuli to near zero” (*ibid* p.333). Virtual reality, as a technology which fully immerses the viewer into a perceptive space separate from their physical reality, is a device that can support this kind of modality. An example of this approach is *The Waiting Room*¹³ by Victoria Mapplebeck, which narrates the author’s experience of being diagnosed and treated for breast cancer by placing the viewer in an immersive space through the viewpoint of the author herself.



Figure 7 The Waiting Room (Mapplebeck 2019)

¹³ <https://victoriामapplebeck.com/films/the-waiting-room/>

- **Expansive**, a community-based modality, where viewers are authorised “to change the content of the documentary and challenge the points of view of other users” (*ibid* p. 334). An example of this approach is *Question Bridge*¹⁴ (Smith, Johnson, Thomas, Sinclair 2012), an interactive film about the experiences of black men in America presented through talking heads videos of men posing and answering questions. While the film presents a series of filmed questions and answers, viewers and community members can log into the film and add their own video answers to any of questions posed.

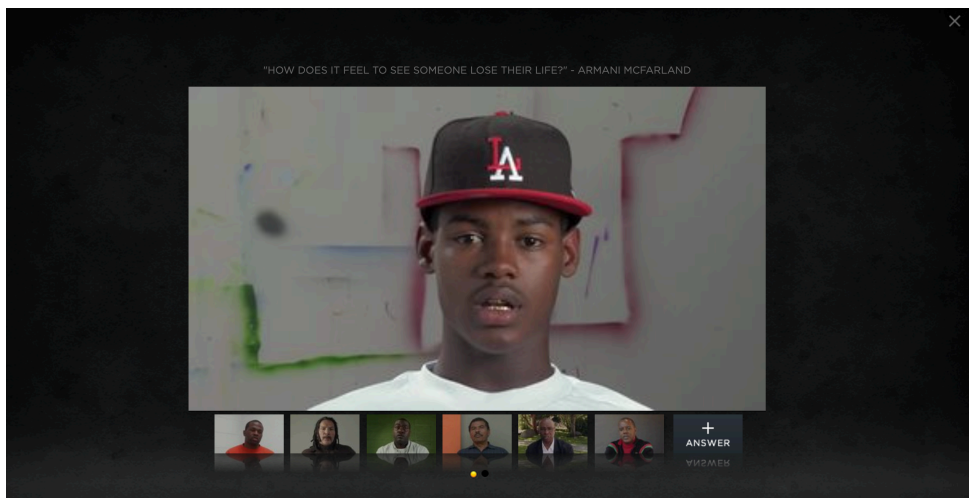


Figure 8 *Question Bridge* (Smith, Johnson, Thomas, Sinclair 2012)

Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) suggest four categories of interactive documentary forms, according to fruition modality:

- **Conversational** mode, which “which uses 3D worlds to create an apparently seamless interaction with the user” (*ibid* p. 126), positioning them in direct conversation with the computer. This category seems to match Galloway’s immersive documentaries, and it particularly applies to VR and 360 films.
- **Hypertext** mode, interactive films which “links assets within a closed video archive and gives the user an exploratory role, normally enacted by clicking on pre-existing options” (*ibid* p. 127). Many interactive documentaries make use of a hypertext structure. As an example, *Capturing Reality*¹⁵ (Ferrari 2008), a web-doc about the

¹⁴ <http://questionbridge.com/>

¹⁵ <https://capturingreality.nfb.ca>

practice of documentary, works as a closed database of interviews which can be accessed and navigated by category, theme, or interviewees.

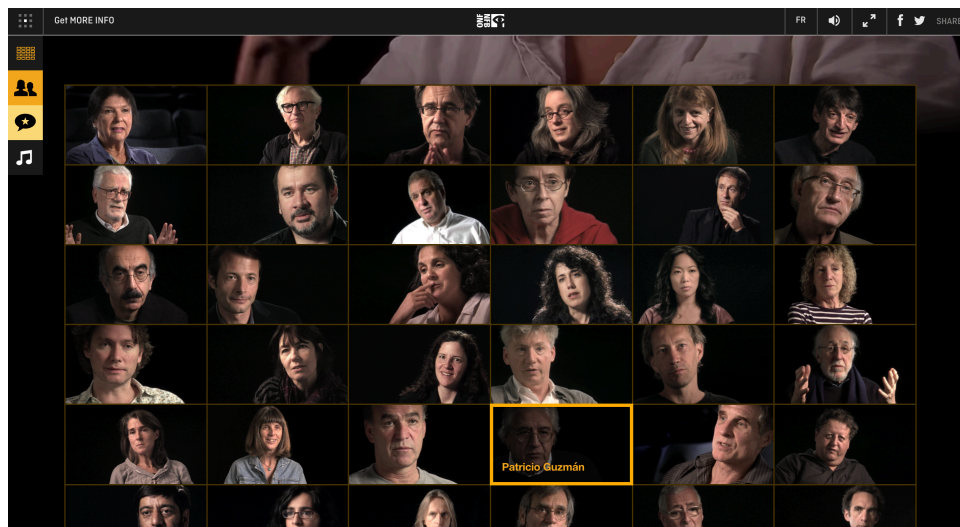


Figure 9 Capturing Reality (Ferrari 2008)

- **Participative** mode, which “counts on the participation of the user to create an open and evolving database” (*ibid* p.127), thanks the technical possibility of allowing users to input content into the film text, as in Galloway’s expansive category.
- **Experiential** mode, where the film “creates an experience that challenges their [*the viewers*] senses and their enacted perception of the world” (*ibid* p.128) by exploiting the physical space around users, as in AR. Examples of AR documentaries are still quite rare but this technology has been occasionally used to enhance the physical interaction of viewers with the space they are experiencing the documentary in (Zimmer *et al* 2018).

While these categories are useful in analysing and designing i-Docs, I am now going to focus on some general characteristics associated to i-Docs as a genre, that is narrative non-linearity, polyvocality, and participation.

3.2.3 Narrative non-linearity in interactive documentary

In order to understand how narration and authorial control differs in i-Docs compared to traditional documentary, it is important to consider the narrative non-linearity typical of

interactive documentary. While film is a linear medium, composed of sequences of moving images that are supposed to be consumed by viewers in a set order, interactive media is inherently multi-linear, with nodes, links, tags, and responsive elements that create changing landscapes which the user can explore according to different modalities. In interactive documentary, the non-linearity of the medium is reflected in the possibility of creating narratives that expand from traditional forms of linear storytelling. As Nogueira (2016) explains:

While in linear documentaries meaning was created by framing shots and editing them together, in participatory interactive documentary meaning is shared and layered: there is the meaning of individual clips (not controlled by the interactive documentary author), the meaning of the interface (normally conceived by the author) and the meaning of the browsing (the narrative route and association generated by the user, while jumping between videos) (*ibid* p.21).

While many i-Docs may still present an overall linear interface, or portions of linear experiences within a non-linear framework, they generally embed several options for viewers to explore the materials presented in the film. As a result, non-linearity generates new and evolving narrative forms, with a high degree of variability within the same film text:

In linearity, narrative structures cannot be modified if the viewer receives it. It is one-way communication from the author to viewer, and the feedback is usually passive, or at least limited. Narrative in linear documentary is generally a chronological narrative based on causes and effects, where each structure comes as a result or a reaction of the previous one. On the contrary, in interactive documentary, the narrative structures are interactive and exchangeable. User sometimes can even create the whole story of a documentary. (...) Interactive documentary is new way of structuring reality without going in one straight direction from a starting point to the end. It is a complex of potential networks and structures that interact with each other in intertwined directions (Alkarimeh and Boutin 2017 p.16)

A traditional documentary evolves and transforms in the filming and editing phases, to then take an immutable shape in the form of its final cut, which every viewer will absorb in the same way; in interactive documentary the film needs to be designed taking into account that it will re-combine and be explored in a multitude of different directions according to each viewing experience (Gifreu Castells 2011). I-Docs are fluid and layered (Gaudenzi 2013), more similar to adaptive systems (Gifreu Castells 2011) than linear videos. As a result, narrative non-linearity in interactive documentary requires a different grammar than traditional filmmaking:

The cut, that allowed the creation of meaning by establishing a fixed chain of events, is now an opening to possibilities where the intentionality of the author is replaced by a dialogue between the user and the possibilities that the interactive documentary system offers. Therefore the interactive documentary cannot be analysed as a single form composed by frames; in interactive media there are new variables: code, interfaces, algorithms and an active user (Gaudenzi 2013 p. 13).

Time, which is the defining dimension of a linear medium such as traditional film, is somehow transcended in interactive filmmaking: each viewer might experience an interactive film according to durations corresponding to their unique combination of choices. While “linear documentaries are time-based artefacts (...) composed of 24 images, or frames, per second that follow each other in sequential order” (Gaudenzi 2012 p.11), interactive documentary seems to work on a spatial dimension: “there is no denying that the emergent documentary media transcend some of the limitations of time-based, linear forms. In interactive documentary, for example, alternative versions of contemporary reality can be presented in a way that opens up multidimensional engagements with the text” (Husak 2018 p.19).

The way narrative non-linearity is handled and translated into specific narrative forms in the practice of interactive documentary is extremely variable. Literature provides some specific categorisations of non-linear narrative structures in the production of interactive documentaries. Nash (2012) characterises what she calls web-docs according to their general approach to the narrative materials they present:

- **Narrative** webdoc, an interactive documentary with a strong central narrative where the role of interactivity is to “emphasize the causal connection between events” (*ibid* p.204). An example of narrative webdoc described by Nash is Prison Valley¹⁶ (Dufresne and Brault 2010), which explores issues related to the prison system in the US through a road journey in Fermont County, a town in Colorado which hosts thirteen prisons. The film revolves around a main narrative linear structure that is interspersed with game-like interactive sequences at several intervals. While users can take their time exploring the game-like portions of the film, the development of the main narrative cannot be influenced.

¹⁶ <http://prisonvalley.arte.tv/flash/#en>

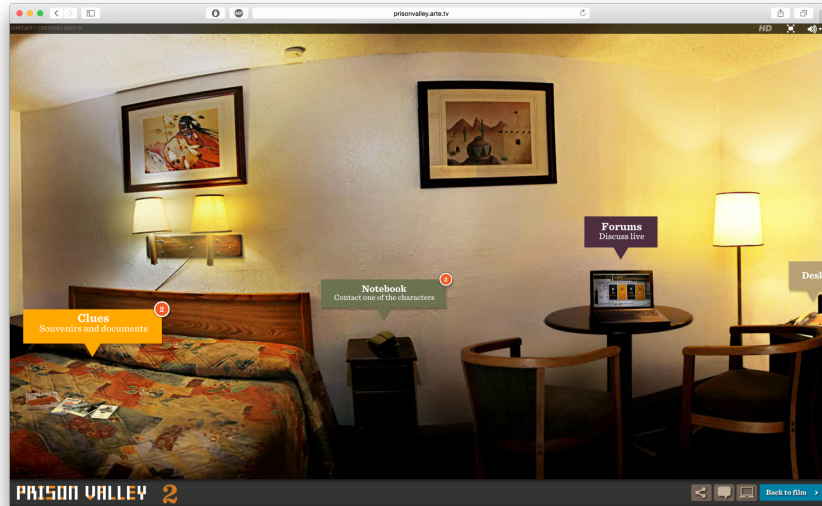


Figure 10 Prison Valley (Dufresne and Brault 2010)

- **Categorical** webdoc, which presents a collection of micro-narratives, made coherent by theme or “diegetic unit”, but with no attempt to create a “single narrative” (*ibid* p. 205). The viewers navigate the micro-narratives in the order they prefer, comparing, contrasting, and building connections along the way. An example of categorial webdoc as *Big Stories Small Towns*¹⁷ (Grieve and Potter 2008) which explores community life in small towns in Australia by building a database of individual short films. The clips do not build an overarching narrative but are rather fragments of daily life in small communities.

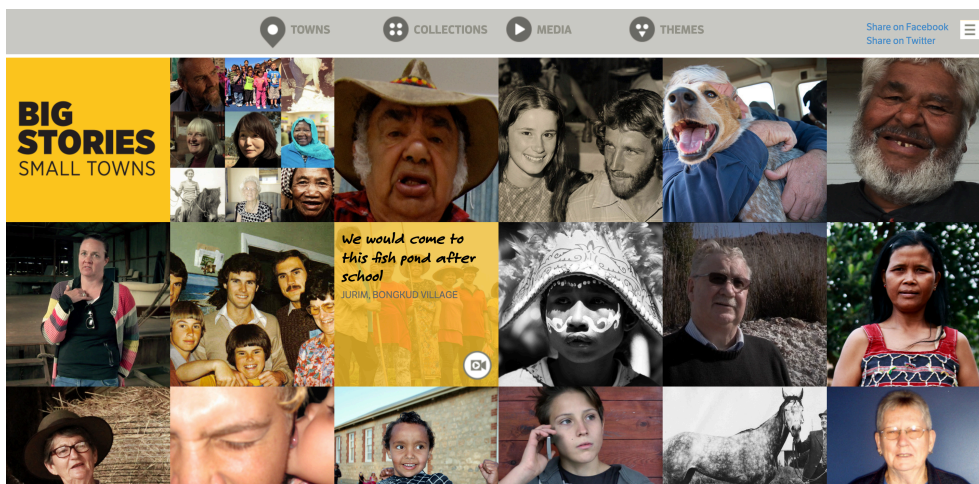


Figure 11 Big Stories Small Towns (Grieve and Potter 2008)

¹⁷ <http://www.bigstories.com.au/>

- **Collaborative** weboc, which requires the contributions of viewers to exist: the community that forms around the project provides the structure of the project in the first instance” (*ibid* p. 206), as in the previously described expansive and participative categories. An example from this category is *18 Days in Egypt*¹⁸ (Metha and Elayat 2011), a project covering the Egyptian Revolution by creating an online database of content produced by anyone who witnessed or participated in the events. While initially the focus of the project was on collating materials filmed or written by people directly involved, the platform is still open and welcomes contribution from anyone who wish to reflect on the Revolution and its aftermath.

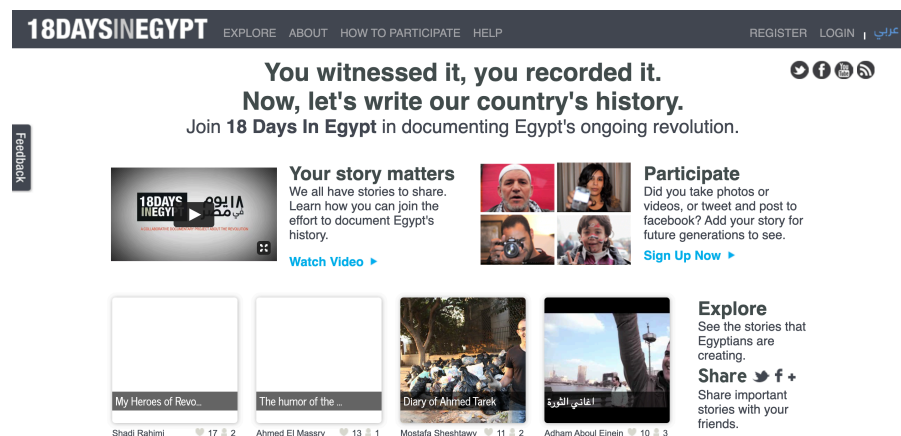


Figure 12 *18 Days in Egypt* (Metha and Elayat 2011)

In 2019 Baptista and Azevedo made an effort to develop a wider model for the analysis of existing interactive documentary narrative forms based on a structure inventory from teaching materials of Maurin (2011), who classified several structures as used in interactive documentaries in view of viewers’ freedom of choice and engagement. Maurin’s categorisation proposes several types of narrative structures in interactive documentaries:

- **Concentric narrative:** where “users are given access to a central ‘hub’ (a map, a thumbnail mosaic, a list of subject titles and whatnot), and radiate from there, in any order they want, to each and every different element of the story” (*ibid*). Here users can access any narrative material, as long as it is accessible through the main hub.
- **Fishbone narrative:** where “there is one linear central story, but from time to time, circumvolutions are suggested to the user, who can explore those “sub-stories” and

¹⁸ <http://beta.18daysinegypt.com/>

then go back on the main track” (*ibid*); this structure is similar to a linear narrative with regular departures that still lead back to one main storyline.

- **Branching narrative:** where “for the story to unfold, users have to make choices (sometimes binary choices, sometimes more complex ones). Once they decide what they want to “do” (or see) next, the documentary continues to the next decision nodes” (*ibid*). This structure is what is usually associated with the ‘choose your own adventure’ expression.

- **Parallel narrative:** where “the story is articulated around a series of nodes. Users decide to follow one of the many possible paths, but no matter what, they’ll at one point see those pivotal elements” (*ibid*). Here viewers enter portions of variable non-linear narratives that eventually bring them back to regular nodes experienced by all users, as in an expanded fishbone structure.

- **Threaded narrative:** which proposes different viewpoints to access the materials from and “bridges from node to node so that the user doesn’t always have to get back to a central hub” (*ibid*).

- **Dynamic object-oriented narrative:** where the narration is made up of mini stories, “which all include multiple entry and exit points” (*ibid*) and that can reassemble and re-order themselves according to parameters set by the authors or the viewers.

Maurin illustrates strengths and weaknesses for each in terms of productive cost, user engagement and freedom, and what he calls “information tsunami”, that is the risk of overwhelming viewers with an excessive amount of choices, which could hinder, rather than stimulate, agency. The more a structure is open and offers multiple entry points, the more agency is transferred to the viewers, the higher is, on the other hand, the risk of overwhelming viewers with choices before they had a chance to build a cognitive and emotional investment with the film (*ibid*). It is up to each project to strike a balance between opposing forces according to the effect required. Many interactive documentaries mix some of the structures illustrated by Maurin rather than applying a purist approach.

Baptista and Azevedo further developed Maurin’s categorisation by proposing an analysis method based on six dichotomies: “Technological innovation VS Filmmaking, Database VS Narrative, Participation VS Authorship, Interactivity VS AV Content, Gameplay

VS Poetics, Immersion VS Fluidity” (2019 p.1), where database, participation, interactivity, gameplay, and immersion are affordances of interactive media, while filmmaking, narrative, authorship, content, poetics, and fluidity are affordances of traditional documentary filmmaking. Each interactive documentary errs towards one or the other pole of all these opposite factors, creating a unique combination of elements in the effort of striking a balance between traditional filmmaking and interactive media.

Other literature reflects on the concept of database as a formal and narrative principle (Cohen 2012, Dinmore 2014, Keep 2015, Wiehl 2016). In interactive documentary the idea of database is multidimensional: it is a structural element of any interactive documentary, as they rely on systematic storage of assets that get recombined according to viewers' choices: “material is [...] assembled in short clips held in a database. The viewer is offered the choice of what order to view the clips in; this choice is made available to the viewer through links. Each clip can be linked to another by its tags” (Dovey and Rose 2013 p. 9). However, it can be also an aesthetic and narrative approach. For Baptista and Azevedo, the database is an affordance typical of interactive media which stands in opposition to constructed three-part narratives typical of traditional filmmaking. According to Nash, database i-Docs works as curated archives: “the documentary database, while still providing an interpretive framework within which documents are presented, facilitates a convergence between document and documentary through its archiving potential” (2014, p.388). The database as a structure holds polyvocal potential by deconstructing unified narratives and by treating “data as something to be stored, ordered, filtered, arranged, structured, searched, and so on” (Nash 2021 p.18), highlighting the contingent, pluralist, constructed nature of the information provided. Interactive documentary databases for Nash are not simple collections of media assets, but they rather speak in specific voices: “how database documentaries communicate a particular point of view, how they confer value on different perspectives, and the ways in which they foster modes of engagement, constitute the voice of the database documentary” (*ibid* p.24). For Nash the database is not necessarily the antithesis to narrative, but rather to univocal, immutable forms of narrative. She distinguishes two main families for approaches to the database structure according to how structurally important the overarching narrative is:

- *Narrative database*: interactive documentary where “it is the story that brings coherence to the database as a collection, providing a discursive frame in which the elements are made meaningful” (*ibid* p.32).

1. Forking paths narrative database: interactive documentaries which “provide one or more decision points which expand the narrative to create one or more parallel stories” (*ibid* p.29).
 2. Parallel narrative database: interactive documentaries where “in which two or more stories are presented alongside each other” (*ibid* p.30) to compare, contrast, or look for similarities amongst different stories or categories of materials.
 3. Modular narrative database: interactive documentaries working around units that can be combined in different ways. “By breaking the narrative into small units that can be reconfigured in different orders, modular narratives invite close reflection on the temporal relations between elements and the possibility of their resolution into a singular series of events” (*ibid* p.31).
 - *Non-narrative database*: interactive films which do not structure their materials around a strong narrative intent, but rather keep the database relatively open for viewers to explore in the order they prefer.
1. Categorical database: databases where materials are organised by category, classified according to theme, author, geographical location, date, or any other category relevant to the film.
 2. Mosaic database: “databases that are made up of multiple elements (which may take a more or less narrative form in themselves), linked with various degrees of tightness to an overall conceptual framework” (*ibid* p.35), mirroring Maurin’s concentric narrative structure.
 3. Poetic database: interactive documentaries that have an evocative and expressive agenda, making use of “fragmentation, juxtaposition, and the exploration of visual rhythm, mood, tone and affect, over representational realism” (*ibid* p. 36).

The formal categories reviewed through Maurine’s structures, Baptista and Azavedo’s dichotomies, and Nash’ analysis of the database provides a glimpse in the complex choices an interactive documentary producer has to take to find the best way to convey meaning is conveyed through their interactive film. This array of choices also includes which interfaces

to deploy to negotiate a relationship between the narrative structure and viewers. In Nash' words (2021 p.25):

Use of metaphors, timelines, or maps may promote particular ways of conceptualising the connections between elements. Similarly, menus, lists, charts, tables, categories, networks, family trees, and so on communicate something about the database's informational structure. A mosaic interface, for example, suggests a large collection of data organised non-hierarchically, that in some way adds up to a whole. Organising elements by theme or category, on the other hand, provides a conceptual framework that suggests relationships between elements; or a series of nested menus might promote engagement with informational hierarchies. The interface also has a functional level that shapes not only what a user can do but what it makes sense to do in terms of accessing and manipulating the documentary elements. Introductory, informational screens often spell this out directly giving the user instructions for navigating, searching, organising etc.

All the choices listed above depend on the communicative needs of each interactive documentary. This plasticity and formal flexibility mean that each project can harness narrative non-linearity in varied and original ways according to its communicative agenda. Here I briefly review how a small number of interactive documentaries have shaped their structures and features to successfully support their different expressive and communicative needs.

3.2.3.1 Living categorical database: 18 Days in Egypt

It was already mentioned *18 Days in Egypt* (Metha, Elayat, 2011) in sections [3.2.1](#) as an example of a collaborative web-doc. The film covers the 2011 Egyptian Revolution by building an ever-growing database of contributions from people who were directly involved in and later people who wished to reflect on the events. Contributions were encouraged through a call-to-action video¹⁹ which itself highlights the sense of lived presence, of having been part of an historical event as a multitude of people, each with their viewpoint on the experience. Given this communicative aim, the structure of a categorical database as per Nash' definition does seem the most appropriate for *18 Days in Egypt*. The content uploaded by participants in this project can be browsed by date, theme, producer, and popularity. Contributors can also create their own profile in the film and connect to each other, inserting elements of social media into the film platform.

¹⁹ <https://vimeo.com/35368376#>

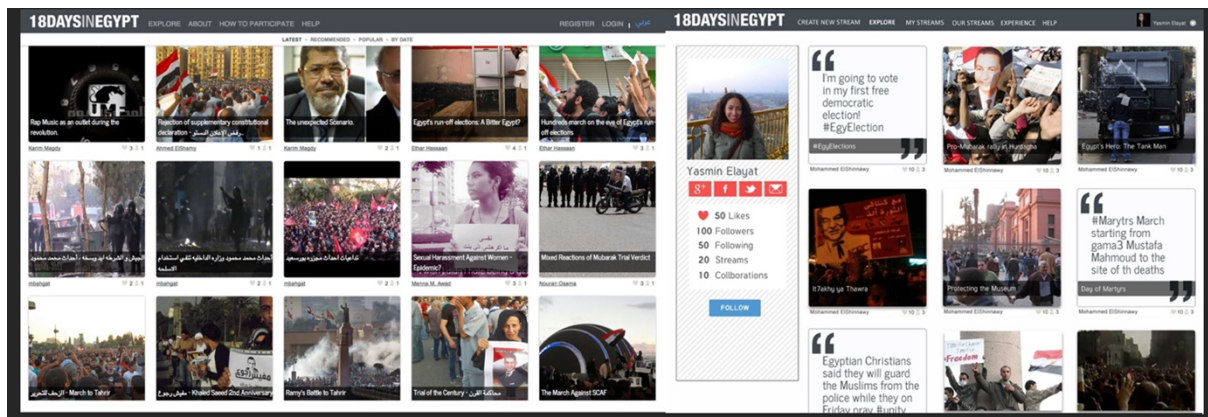


Figure 13 Examples of database interfaces in 18 Days in Egypt (Metha, Elayat, 2011)

The structure and the interfaces of *18 Days in Egypt* support its focus on polyvocality and its aim to represent the Egyptian Revolution thorough a plurality of perspectives rather than one “official” account. Here “participation is deployed in the service of preservation, bringing together diverse media forms (video, photos, texts and tweets) to preserve a historic event. The project frames participation as a collective writing of Egypt’s history” (Nash 2014 p.389).

3.2.3.2 Voices as threads: Quipu

*Quipu*²⁰ (Court and Lerner 2015) is an interactive documentary which collects sound-based accounts of witnesses and victims of the enforced sterilisation programme imposed by the regime of Alberto Fujimori in Peru during the 90s. Grounded on the value of oral history as a way of preserving the memories and documenting the consequences of collective traumas, Quipu uses a structure and interfaces that mirror the cultural elements it is referring to: the design reproduces the Quipu itself, a thread of coloured strings which were traditionally used for storytelling by the Incas:

The project is inspired by the Quipu/Khipu, an early Inca communication system used to record quantitative data as well as songs, genealogies and other narratives containing historical information. Each Quipu was composed of ‘pendant strings’ made of thin cotton fibers attached to thicker primary chords, with knots tied at different levels [...] The Quipu Project follows this concept by creating a collective string of oral histories in the original indigenous languages for multiple audiences” (Mitchell 2015 p.3).

²⁰ <https://interactive.quipu-project.com/#!/es/quipu/listen/intronode?currentTime=0&view=thread>

Here the Quipu is at the same time a tool which inspired the film, a symbol of its communicating aims, and the film interface itself.

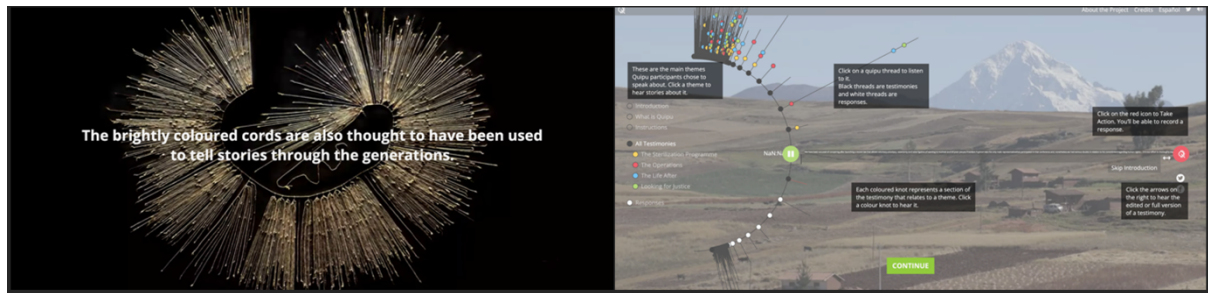


Figure 14 User interfaces mirroring traditional materials in Quipu (Court and Lerner 2015)

3.2.3.3 Linear fishbone: *The Choice is Yours*

*The Choice is Yours*²¹ (Open Your Eyes to Hate 2016) places the viewer in the shoes of lower-class young man who gets targeted by far-right extremists. This film can be considered as a linear documentary interspersed with some interactive inputs at regular intervals. The documentary is linear as the story is enforced regardless of what option the viewer picks in the binary choices proposed: even if the viewer decides to do the “right” thing, the film still progresses as if the wrong choice was made. While this can appear frustrating to users who were expecting a choose-your-own-adventure approach, the form supports the communicative aims of the project, that is to encourage reflection on which gradual steps are taken by someone who is being radicalised by an extremist right-winged group. Even if the choice is only simulated, the moment of pause forces the audience to reflect on the graduality of the radicalisation process, while at the same time inducing a sense of uneasiness towards choices that the viewers might not agree with. The combination of structure, interfaces, and the immersive first-point perspective of the filming, achieves the expressive aims of this film: placing the viewers in the uncomfortable shoes of the main character.

²¹ <https://openyoureyestohate.com/>

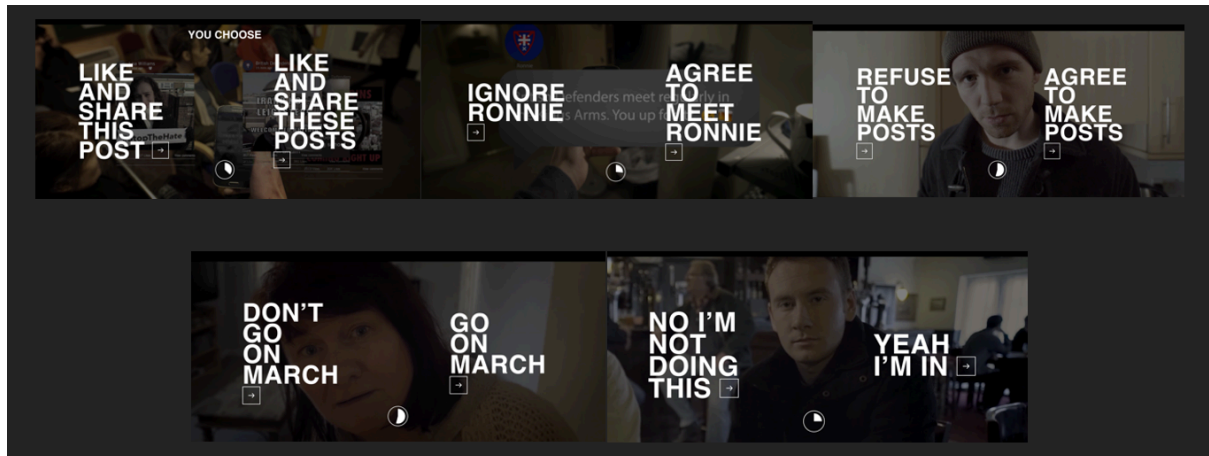


Figure 15 “Wrong” choices escalation from social media sharing to crime in the *Choice is Yours (Open your Eyes to Hate 2016)*

3.2.3.4 Interactive disclosure: *The Space We Hold*

*The Space We Hold*²² (Hsiung, Kang, Lee 2017) is an interactive documentary about another historical trauma, that is the sexual exploitation of women from South Korea, China, and the Philippines by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II. Three survivors present their stories through intimistic narrative structure which focuses the audience’s attention to the sensitivity of the materials. The film invites viewers to reflect on the act of listening, its value, but also the second-hand traumatic effects of listening to horrific testimonies. This communicative aim is supported by enveloping the testimonies into a series of introductory reflective text and video sequences, by checking in regularly on viewers’ will to continue listening, and by proposing an interface where viewers listen while holding down the space bar. Whenever the viewer stops pressing the space bar, the video pauses. This interface works as an interactive metaphor of holding space for these women and transforms listening into an active choice, where the physical gesture of holding the spacebar mimics direct contact between audiences and the women.

²² <http://spacewehold.nfb.ca/>

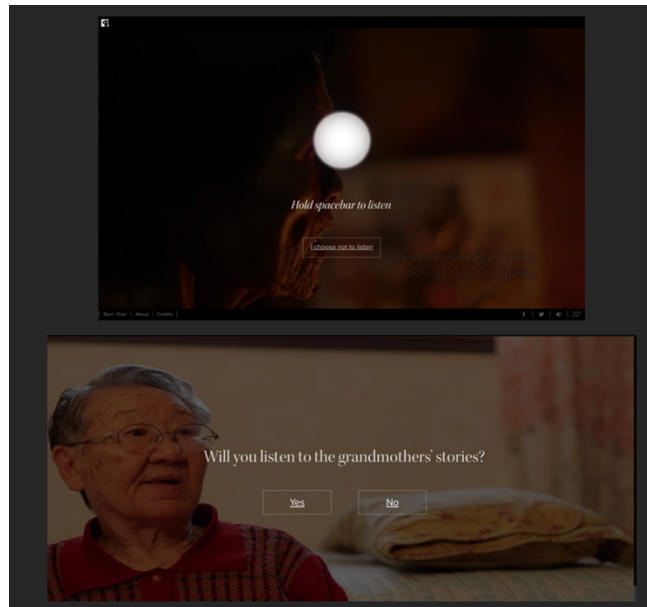


Figure 16 Interfaces in *The Space We Hold* (Hsiung, Kang, Lee 2017)

All these examples show how narrative non-linearity expands the film form by making space for multiple routes, combinations, and connections, creating complex structures supported by interfaces that allow viewers different degrees of freedom according to the intents of each film.

3.2.4 Polyvocality in interactive documentary

In the previous section I reviewed some of Nash' reflection of the polyvocal potential of the database structure (Nash 2021). However, polyvocality is not a prerogative of the database structure only, but of interactive documentary as a genre. In fact, as a result of the spaciousness of the narrative structures allowed by interactive media's non-linearity, i-Docs presents interesting opportunities when it comes to representing multiple perspectives on an issue. According to Aston and Odorico (2018): "i-docs have more capacity than linear film to contain multiple worlds, opening up more possibilities for movement across different perspectives, both within and between texts. I-docs can also be a powerful means through which to facilitate a shift between self and other, and between the subjective and the objective" (*ibid* p.72). By being multi-vocal, i-Docs can create dialogue around a theme or an issue, facilitating "knowledge exchange" (Aston and Odorico 2018 p.740). The authors identify the multiplicity typical of interactive documentary on several levels: "multiplicity of

aesthetics; multiplicity of narratives; multiplicity of authors; multiplicity of realities; and multiplicity of screens” (*ibid* p.74). All these combined result in a greater ability of interactive documentary to embrace complexity when compared with traditional documentary.

Husak (2018) reflects on this increased openness to complexity, stating that “whereas traditional documentaries build their arguments in time-based sequences, interactive documentaries often rely on spatial arrangements, rhizomatic structures, and various affordances of the digital, networked communication tools (...), by operating more in space than time, they allow for a much more complex structure where ideas and plots can freely unfold, pause, retract, run parallel to each other, or be completely taken apart (*ibid* p.19-20). According to the author, the polyphonic approach of interactive documentary “help make sense of increasingly complex power relations and visualise links between various records, people and situations” (*ibid* p. 28). Navigating the multiple voices contained in an interactive documentary “the viewer to compare and contrast narratives and draw specific conclusions—a polyphony over both space and time par excellence” (*ibid* p.22). For Aston and Odorico (2018) “here is a strong intention behind the approach to i-docs that we are investigating here to break down binaries, using juxtaposition, multiplicity, nonlinearity and layering to embrace complexity and, crucially, to still be able to celebrate the simplicity that can be found on the other side of it” (*ibid* p.6).

The possibility for audiences to negotiate their ways within the film text and exercise active agency in the construction of meaning means that the film can take the shape of a conversational device rather than a top-down speech. In fact, “voice has often been invoked to capture the changing relationships surrounding documentary production and consumption, with interactivity assumed to result in ‘polyvocality’ (Nash 2012 p. 384). This spatial, polyvocal, and dialogical approach seems to work particularly well for themes that engage social justice: “when multiple voices speak, in a manner that is intimate and personal, collective and performative, from the same experience of marginalisation and oppression, the scale and scope of injustice are revealed” (Daniel, Aston, Odorico 2018 p.100).

Overall, interactive documentary appears to be able to accommodate multiple viewpoints thanks to the non-linearity afforded by its interactivity, supporting the representation of complexity and the “constructivist idea that there are as many realities as there are perceiving individuals and that there is no single “truth” (Gaudenzi 2013 p. 24). It can stimulate viewers to engage “with a set of complex ideas through the presentation of multiple entry points and simultaneous storylines” (Aston and Gaudenzi 2012 p.133).

3.2.5 Participation in interactive documentary

Interactive documentary does not just present interesting creative opportunities for accommodating multiple viewpoints within its non-linear narratives; it also seems to express participatory ambitions in many of its theorisations and applications. Out of all the categorisations of interactive documentary proposed by different audiences, reviewed in section [3.2.1](#), three are dedicated specifically to the capability of i-Docs for active participation: the expansive, participatory, and collaborative categories described respectively by Galloway, Gaudenzi, and Nash, all indicate the same kinds of approach: that of documentaries which allow direct involvement of participants in contributing to the film, creating an evolving and ever-growing database.

However, as noted by Nash (2021), there are many different levels and depths of participation in interactive documentary. On a very basic level, the fruition of i-Docs could be considered “participatory” compared to traditional film in the active role that it demands from viewers (Nogueira 2016). This is a superficial form of participation which is confined to modalities of fruition only. As Nash puts it, “while choosing content from a documentary database transfers some aspects of the process of ‘authoring’ to the audience, claims about the destabilization of meaning and the creation of politicized environments require further investigation” (Nash 2014 p.386). Being able to select content and move through it cannot be considered enough to make an i-Doc participatory.

Many interactive documentaries offer further opportunities for audience’ involvement. These works “allow the audience not only to create content, but also to set up a presence in the narrative and become visible to other viewers” (Nogueira 2016). According to Dovey and Rose (2013):

At the meeting of participatory culture and documentary we are thus seeing the emergence of new arrangements within the production process and innovation in documentary form. Projects offer participants varying degrees and modes of editorial influence and control (...) and forms of distributed authorship whereby participants produce modules within a non-linear project (*ibid* p.20).

In fact, the possibility of involving the audience more directly and turn them into partial authors has created interest in using these kinds of platforms to explore social issues and themes linked to social justice (Favero 2013), with a view of establishing a dialogue

amongst authors, participants, viewers, and other stakeholders (Dovey and Rose, 2013). Moreover, “interactive documentary, with its polyphonic modalities, could help foster a shared political identity amid many varied struggles for inclusion and power sharing” (Husak 2018 p.28).

The participatory potential of these projects lies on two affordances typical of interactive media: the possibility to allow viewers to upload their own content (as footage, pictures, or text) and the possibility to let viewers comment, discuss, share ideas, impressions, or leave other traces of their passage through forums, chats, or reaction mechanisms embedded in the film. These developments are strongly linked to “the rise of mobile video and the social media as a parallel public sphere with its imagined communities” (Husak 2018 p.20). While both these possibilities present some participatory aspects, they offer two different levels of participation. At this regard Nash (2014) proposes a fundamental distinction between participation *in* media and *through* media:

two different concepts of voice that are often confused. Participation in media draws attention to the ability of participants to contribute to the documentary text and so captures the relationship between participation and representation. In this case, participation impacts on the textual voice by providing the potential for user input that is either structural or content-focused. Critical reflection on participation in documentary would focus on the nature of participant contributions, the ‘framing’ of the invitation to participate and the relationships surrounding production. In contrast, participation through media draws attention to documentary’s social dimension (*ibid* p.384).

While participation in media, when applied to interactive documentary, means that a viewer can input content that shapes the film itself, exercising a partial authorial voice in the project, participation through media highlights the possibility of engaging in dialogue with other viewers, without making any authorial contribution to the main body of the film. Participation in interactive documentary, as in viewers directly uploading content, creates new dynamics between authorship and reception, where the “reality provided by the interactive documentary is a participatory reality between the author and the user. Reality is no longer a solely product of the author. Instead, the user has become involved in this creative structure” (Alkarimeh and Boutin 2017 p.17). In the words of Aston and Gaudenzi “user generated content has emerged as particularly powerful when paired with social and activist causes. By transforming watchers into users, and then users into doers, the combination of a shared cause and social media is very effective” (*ibid* p.134). While participation in media has a stronger focus on raising viewers’ agency to the point of making them contributors, participation through media can still serve a considerable role in generating dialogue: “a documentary form that connects storytelling with engagement strategies to throw light onto

darkened areas and provides the viewer/user with an experience that can potentially change their perspective, even their actions” (Miller and Allor 2016 p.54).

In its more enthusiastic interpretation, the participatory potential of interactive documentary means that “the ownership of the production of the narration is communal: it belongs to all, author, user, environment, infinite possible transformations, all the causations it provokes – in a word: it belongs to the complex series of relations the interactive documentary is formed of” (Gaudenzi 2012 p.23), to the point where, instead of being a fixed text, the i-Doc becomes a relational device, a “living documentary” which, as an organism, keeps growing and evolving according to the use viewers make of it (Gaudenzi 2012).

Some have been more cautious in celebrating the participatory potential of interactive documentary. Whiel, for instance, argues that “it is vital to take a step away from limiting participation to user-generated content—that is, to reduce it to uploading of videos or photos, blogging on web pages or commenting on social media sites” (Whiel 2018 p. 273). In fact, while viewer-generated content assigns an empowered and creative role to audiences, it places them in a role that is closer to a creative collaborator than an author; the authorial control of the interactive documentary still resides in the hands of producers that have carefully orchestrated the structure and the limits within which viewers as contributors can operate. As Galloway *et al* (2007) suggest “the interactive documentary ‘filmmaker’ can dictate the rules, procedures and mechanisms for interactivity and, therefore, has the potential to remain in control of the specific levels of possible alteration to both the message, and the method of its delivery” (*ibid* p.336).

In fact, an interactive documentary is not made only by the footage it contains; the interactive structure which holds and curates the footage is an integral part of the film. A study conducted in 2017 on designing workflows for interactive documentaries that are truly participatory considers the issue of structural participation with a view of supporting polyvocality. Here, there is a recognition that while many interactive documentaries aim to be participatory in principle, they still limit authority to professional filmmakers and producers: “although these projects facilitate rich, mediated social encounters, which evolve in equally rich interactive narratives, they still fail to provide structural agency” (Green *et al* 2017 p.6318). The authors apply Literat’s distinction between executory and structural participation, where:

Executory participation is the task-based, generative participation in a predesigned artistic project. It is analogous to entering a contract by agreeing to its specific terms and conditions: when deciding to participate in the artistic process, the contributor accepts the parameters of participation, but has no structural agency—or, in other words, has no power to challenge or modify these parameters (Literat 2012 p.2977).

Executory participation can be tokenistic, when participants can only provide micro elements to the projects and will not be aware or included in the final result; or engaged, where the project is pre-designed, but participants can make a more substantial contribution. Most interactive documentaries which make space for audiences' inputs offer forms of engaged executory participation: they call for contributions but do not involve participants in the design of the overall project and, in most cases, in setting its agenda and creative aims. Nash (2021) defines this kind of executory participation as minimalist (*ibid* p.48):

Minimalist participatory intensities are characterised by some opening out of the production process, often facilitating documentarians' collection of content, but they tend to reinforce the status quo with respect to the relationships between the documentarian and subject/audience. Participation tends to be content focused rather than structural, focusing on contributions of content, but without inviting involvement in shaping the overall aims and direction of a project.

In structural participation, on the other hand,

participants have a say in the conceptual and artistic design of the project; in other words, they are allowed to demonstrate structural agency. In codesign, participants are invited to weigh in on the structure of the project; in the case of coauthorship, in addition to their conceptual input, their contributions are formally recognized and rewarded. Both codesign and coauthorship reflect a more genuine desire for openness, and they tend to function as statements on alternative modes of art making (Literat 2012 p.2978).

In this approach, participants are involved from the beginning in the project and their contribution is not limited to populating an existing structure with content. Nash defines this approach as maximalist, "characterised by moves toward greater equality in decision making in relation to all aspects of the documentary project" (Nash 2021 p. 48). The study from Green *et al* (2017) experimented with creating an interactive documentary prototype, called *Red Tales*, by devising a number of ways (an online film contest, in-person workshops, and a participation hub) in which non-professionals passionate about the topic of red squirrel conservation could provide materials remotely and make decisions on the design of the film. In 2020, *Suburbs of Istanbul* (Yelmi and Bayar 2020), attempted another experiment at designing a structurally participatory documentary via a combination of online submission of content and public workshops which involved some participants in designing part of the film interfaces. To this day, these are perhaps the only attempts that explicitly involved participants in the structural design of an interactive documentary presented in the literature.

In conclusion, while interactive documentary as a genre has the capability of including many voices, viewpoints, representations, and it often aims to become an open text, participants' contributions are most often limited to responding to a call for content or an encouragement to discuss online their experience of the film. The rules, structure, and ultimately the possible positions the viewers can occupy are still in the hands of professional producers. While the participatory potential of interactive documentary is cause of enthusiasm and celebration, so far, many participatory projects are only operating on an executory/minimalist level. In order for interactive documentary and participatory filmmaking to merge an exploration of the structural/maximalist approach is needed.

3.3 Participatory filmmaking and interactive documentary

From this overview of the main qualities of interactive documentary, it is possible to clearly identify some assonance with the practice of participatory filmmaking, in terms of ambitions and aims. According to Nogueira (2016) interactive documentary can offer the possibility for the viewers as active contributors of content to self-represent, where “filmmakers also invite the audience to participate because they are aware that this strategy can engage them in a process of self-representation” (*ibid* p. 161). Many interactive documentaries encourage viewers to reflect on themselves and to provide content accordingly, mimicking practice of first-person documentaries:

in interactive documentary the process of self-representation goes beyond the director's voice and story. In fact, the spectator becomes a character, a part of the world represented through inscribing himself in the narrative. By seeing themselves in the documentary content participants are transferring themselves to the screen and interacting, physically and conceptually, with their own beings (*ibid* p.161).

This dynamic closely resembles the self-reflective effect of participatory filmmaking, where participants gain self-awareness through representing their experiences on screen.

Interactive documentaries also seem to mirror, in some of their intents, the dialogical nature of participatory filmmaking. I-Docs as relational objects, embedding and promoting dialogue between creators and viewers, have some affinity with participatory filmmaking, which also sees film as means through which relations and exchange between different actors can be generated (whether using film in community screenings or online). I have discussed in section [3.2.5](#) how interactive documentary often expresses participatory

ambitions and many projects have been dedicated to exploring social issues and the experiences of underrepresented communities.

If there seem to be a synergy between the openness of the interactive documentary form and the dialogical aims of participatory filmmaking, some distinctions are still required. In a conversation with Whiel (2018), Kat Cizek, author of *HighRise*, distinguishes between participation and co-creation, stating that co-creation is to “make media with people that aren’t media makers” (*ibid* p.39) but without having them necessarily producing their own materials. Here the expertise of the filmmaker as author is still dominating, or at least equal to, those she collaborates with. As summarized by Stevenson (2011) “differing viewpoints can be presented, even juxtaposed, and a variety of actors are able to speak for themselves, albeit still subject to the direction and editing choices of the filmmaker (as any documentary)” (*ibid* p.181). This is where the practice of participatory filmmaking and documentary film differs: in the former those directing and editing choices need to be in the hands of participants. Structural/maximalist participation is the prerequisite of participatory filmmaking: executory/minimalist participation is not enough to place authorship in the hands of participants.

I mentioned a few projects which attempted to structurally involve participants in their designs (*Red Tales* and *Suburbs of Istanbul*). They do so via remote involvement of a large number of contributors or by creating public workshops which involve different parties who do not know each other or build any form of relationship with one another as part of this process. Participatory filmmaking, on the other hand, is a practice which focuses more on building a qualitative relationship with smaller groups of participants who are invested in the entire project from beginning to end, and who ground their storytelling on personal experiences. This means that, while these projects made a considerable effort toward structural participation, they did so with modalities and workflows which would not apply to participatory filmmaking in mental health.

Aside from the communion of interests between the practice of interactive documentary and participatory filmmaking in their attention to self-representation and participation, polyvocality is perhaps one of the characteristics of the medium that could make interactive documentary particularly well aligned with participatory filmmaking, especially if compared to linear filmmaking. Aston and Odorico (2018) list “multiplicity of authors” amongst the multiplicity options allowed by interactive documentary. As shown in the challenges reported in the first part of this chapter, managing the multiple voices involved in participatory filmmaking represents one of the hardest challenges in creating films that truly value the contribution of each participant. The capability of interactive

documentary to operate its narrative through a space structure which is not as time bound as linear filmmaking means that the film can expand and allocate portions of narrative to each participant, at the same time linking together experiences they have in common and conserving space for individual contributions. In this sense, “interactive documentary form allows viewers/users a multi-faceted affective encounter with a range of subjects and evidence” (Watson 2017 p.601), a fruition which could benefit multi-authorial projects.

Many of the cases from the Converge film course reviewed at the beginning of this chapter attempted to make space within the constrictions of linear video by creating chapters and internal references. Some of these examples could be envisioned as participatory interactive documentaries, where the existing content can be navigated via a map or a theme tag. In this sense, a practice of interactive documentary that is structurally participatory could provide interesting opportunities to facilitate the production of personal accounts by participants, especially when paired with the complexity of representing a complex issue such as mental health.

3.3.1 Some interactive documentary narrative qualities afforded which could support participatory filmmaking on mental health

I have discussed how the practice of interactive documentary and participatory filmmaking present interesting overlaps, with a view of exploring the way interactive documentary could support the production of polyvocal participatory accounts of mental health. Following is a preliminary exploration of some narrative possibilities afforded by interactive film which could offer opportunities to participatory filmmaking on mental health, based on my experience as a facilitator and informal conversations with participants that took place over the years. The strategies and qualities listed below are not mutually exclusive, very often working in synergy to engage viewers in the exploration of complex issues.

- **Coexistence of more storylines:** the possibility of placing multiple narrative materials into the same film can open the filmic form to the polyphonic nature of participatory filmmaking, solving the problem of having to streamline different storylines into one. This is a characteristic of many interactive documentaries. An

example of this approach is *Gaza/Sderot*²³ (Muzayyen, Elmaliah, 2009) which portrays stories of citizens' resilience in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by showing interviews of residents from Gaza and Sderot, side by side. This film allows viewers to move between parallel storylines, exploring different points of view on the same issue, making connections between the two sides of the story.



Figure 17 Parallel storylines in *Gaza/Sderot* (Muzayyen, Elmaliah, 2009)

A similar approach is found in *Amb Títol*²⁴ (Ballús, 2016), which explores university education through personal and collective stories. The film presents alternative stories from which to choose at specific intervals, based on the viewers' interests and own experience.

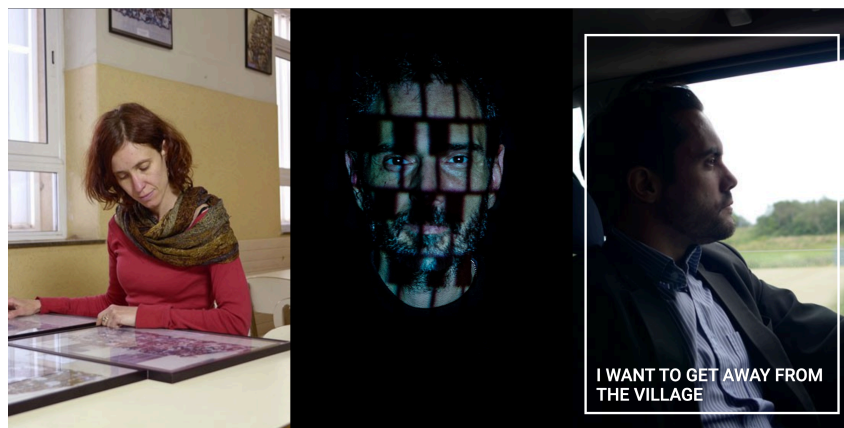


Figure 18 Three parallel personal accounts in *Amb Títol* (Ballús, 2016)

²³ <http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/time/all/>

²⁴ <https://www.ambtitol.cat/en/#/node/37>

*4Stelle Hotel*²⁵ (Palermo, Muscella, 2014) invites the viewers to visit an occupied hotel in Rome which has become residence to refugees, migrants, and homeless people. It does so by allowing viewers to select time of day and rooms/areas in the hotel, to compare the lives and experiences of diverse groups living in the same space.



Figure 19 Residents' stories presented by time of day in *4Stelle Hotel* (Palermo and Muscella, 2014)

These affordances seem particularly suitable to capture both group views and personal accounts of individuals, which can be linked by theme, participant, or any other parameter set in the production process.

- **Possibility of presenting extra materials in non-filmic form:** this is another feature of many interactive documentaries. There is one main narrative film which is surrounded by other materials (text, photographs, weblinks) attached to the storyline to add depth to the topic. These films align with Nash' definition of "narrative webdocs", where the role of interactivity is to "augment" the central narrative (Nash 2012). An example of this is *One Shared House*²⁶ (2014), a documentary produced by the design duo Anton & Irene about co-living. The documentary is structured around a linear narration which can be interrupted in places to access text and photographs providing context information. In participatory mental health films such as the ones I have facilitated so far this opportunity could be used to provide background information that participants are

²⁵ <http://www.4stellehotel.it/>

²⁶ <http://onesharedhouse.com/>

willing to share or other pieces of art many of them produce, in order to portray themselves more thoroughly.

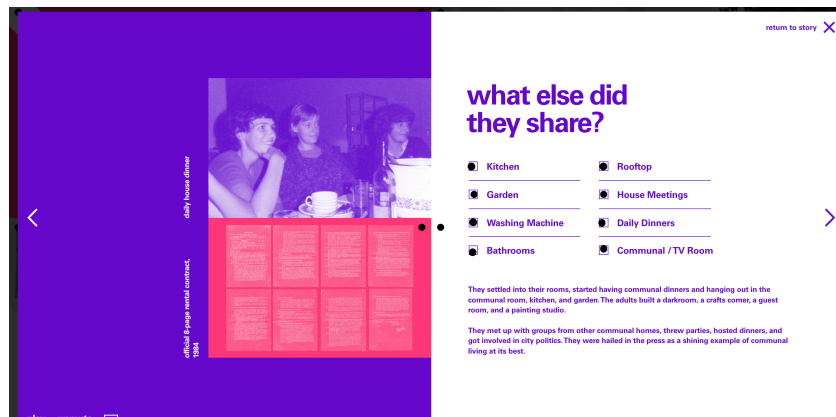


Figure 20 copresence of film and text in *One Shared House* (Anton & Irene 2014)

- **Responsiveness:** interactive technology such as Object-based media, or its predecessor ShapeShifting media, treats the filming materials as units that can be recombined at the moment of consumption, according to either or both pre-existing parameters set by the viewers and by their active choices during the course of the film. This strategy has been used in documentaries such as *The Golden Age*, which “allows (re)configuration in real time, while remaining coherent and aesthetically pleasing” (Ursu *et al* 2009). In the context of participatory filmmaking, this would allow the same material generated by participants to be aimed at different audiences. The same story could be used to promote awareness in audiences which are unfamiliar with mental health issues, and to offer support to those who are experiencing the condition. In this case, the narrative material could be recombined to allow a more sensorial and impactful viewing in the former case, and a gentler, more encouraging experience in the latter.
- **Empathy:** the effects of interactivity on empathy levels in the audience are highly debated in the literature, with some research showing that empathy can be stimulated by interactive film, as long as the narration is not overly fragmented (Hand and Varan 2009). However, giving some choices to the viewers as to when and how events unfold could raise awareness of key moments in experiences of mental illness, and how mental health is deeply linked to many aspects of life (relationships, material wellbeing, emotions, physical health, etc.). Allowing viewers to shape the course of events may encourage them to reflect on how mental health applies to themselves and the people around them. This

personalised approach to choices and their consequences might encourage viewers to respond differently in real life. Miller and Allor spoke of “a documentary form that connects storytelling with engagement strategies to throw light into darkened areas and provide the viewer/user with an experience that can potentially change their perspective, even their actions” (Miller and Allor 2016 p.54). Gaudenzi also spoke of the possibility of being “transformed” by the digital artefact (2012). An example of this kind of production is *Terminal 3* (Malik 2018), where viewers are placed in the role of an airport security officer interviewing Muslim passengers and gradually learning about their stories and experiences, allowing users to connect more deeply with the challenges Muslims face in the current political climate.

- **Immersion:** immersion is a concept often associated with VR (Jones and Dawkins, 2018). However, immersive viewpoints, such as first-person points of view, which are quite uncommon in traditional film, are often found in interactive documentaries. The use of first-person perspectives can offer the possibility of switching between an immersive/embodyed viewpoint and an external/objective one, allowing viewers to jump in and out of characters and to see how the same circumstances are experienced by different people. This opportunity may be used to show different ways in which people experiencing mental health problems perceive themselves, the reality around them, and others. Strategies like this are at play in films such as *Asylum Exit Australia* (SBS 2011), where the viewer takes the role of an asylum seeker and needs to take decisions on their circumstances, or the aforementioned *The Choice is Yours* with its use of first-person viewpoints. Both these examples make the circumstances explored closer to the viewer by intimately linking the viewpoints of the characters with the audience’.



Figure 21 First person viewpoint in *The Choice is Yours*

- **Audience input in the film:** interactive film offers opportunities for audiences to input their own comments and materials into the narration. This can happen at many different levels. In *HighRise*, *Out of My Window*²⁷ users can upload a picture to contribute to the film. The aforementioned *18 Days in Egypt* (Metha, Elayat, 2011) built a database of users' contributions to offer a complex mosaic view on the events of the Egyptian Revolution. In films like *Prison Valley* discussion forums allow viewers to comment and generate dialogue around the issues explored in the documentary. This form of interaction “has blurred the distinction between author and user/viewer/reader/player” (Gaudenzi 2013 p.22). The possibility of adding materials to the film can open up the conversation by allowing viewers to elaborate the issues explored in a personal way. This strategy could be particularly fruitful to participatory filmmaking, where the film is expected to become part of a wider dialogue.

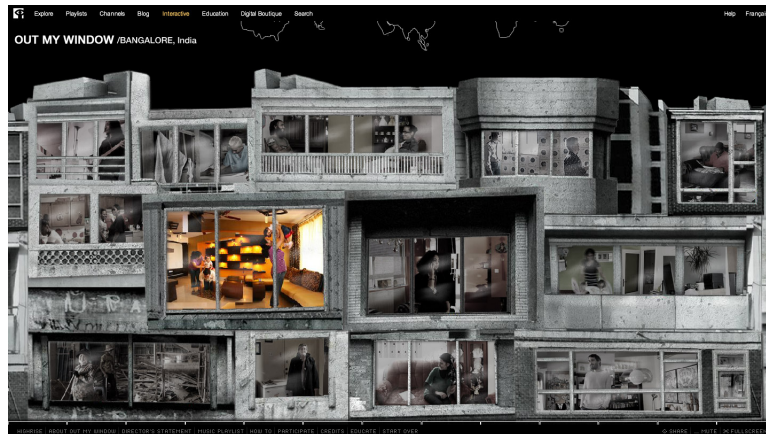


Figure 22 *HighRise*, *Out of My Window* (Cizek 2010)

3.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed some of the challenges of streamlining complex personal accounts of mental health produced in community settings within the constraints of traditional linear filmmaking and started to explore the possibility that interactive documentary can provide interesting narrative potential for the production of polyvocal participatory mental health films, especially when it comes to making space for multiple

²⁷ https://www.nfb.ca/interactive/highrise_out_my_window_en/

voices to co-exist. It was found that structural participation is an indispensable pre-requisite for participatory film production, and while i-Docs value participation, examples of structurally participatory interactive documentaries are rare. Our research aims to fill this gap by exploring the production of a participatory interactive film on mental health where participants have full authorial control on both the content and the design of the film.

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In previous chapters, I have looked at how the practice of participatory filmmaking in community settings can be an excellent tool to allow people with direct experience of mental health problems to represent themselves and their own experiences in direct and authentic ways, especially when compared to mainstream media production and its tendency to stereotype and overgeneralise mental health. However, I have also discussed how my direct practice as a facilitator showed that streamlining the multiple voices involved in participatory filmmaking means reducing some of the complexity which makes this form of practice rich and well-rounded. Finally, I started to explore the possibility that the genre of interactive documentary and its narrative non-linearity could offer interesting opportunities to create polyvocal participatory films on mental health; while interactive documentary authors, producers, and theorists have often praised the participatory potential of this storytelling device, we have found that so far very few examples have put in practice inclusive forms of structural participation which are of paramount importance in participatory filmmaking in order to allow participants to take ownership and authorial control of the piece.

This chapter introduces the methodology underpinning the project which stemmed from the context described to investigate how the narrative non-linearity afforded by interactive media can support participatory filmmaking in mental health. I present the fundamental research question that the project sets out to answer and consequential sub-questions that have been addressed by the three studies comprising this research. I review the main methodological approaches applied in this project and present some details of the research design, including context, the researcher's positionality, participants, methods of data collection and analysis, and the ethical implications of working with participants in a community setting.

4.1 Research Framework

This research project explores the application of non-linear narratives afforded by interactive media to the production of participatory films created by non-professionals with lived experiences of mental health problems. To do so, we planned a qualitative research

project based on the production of a working prototype of an interactive participatory film on mental health written and designed by participants with lived experience of mental health problems. The research is grounded on my own practice as a participatory filmmaker in the context of a mental health organisation in York, Converge, and uses an existing linear film, *Stepping Through*, as a starting point. This film, which discusses the role of community in recovery from mental health problems, was designed, written, and filmed by five Converge experienced participants who took part in a participatory film class led by me in 2016. The film attempted to make space for multiple viewpoints within its linear text and, in this research, it has been deconstructed and transformed into an interactive film by the same participants who originally produced it.

This work has been articulated over the course of three studies: the first study explored the limits of traditional linear participatory filmmaking in conveying the viewpoints of participants deconstructing *Stepping Through*. This study constitutes a baseline for motivating the rest of our research and uses creative methods (Kara 2015) to unlock participants' views and opinions. The second study revolved around the design and production of an interactive version of the same film by the same participants. Fieldwork involved co-design workshops, film production, post-production, and assembling of a prototype. The third study consisted in an evaluation of the final film prototype by the participants who produced it and by a range of external audiences. The aim of this study was to find out how the interactive film reached its expressive agenda and how it conveyed the viewpoints of the participants involved in its production.

The research is based on the hypothesis that narrative non-linearity afforded by interactive media could present interesting opportunities for participatory storytelling in mental health, as explored in [Chapter 3](#). A qualitative approach (Delzin and Lincoln 2011; Bloomberg and Volpe 2019) was chosen because this research sets out to investigate the “whats” and “hows” of this area of practice, with “an emphasis on exploration, discovery, and description” (Bloomberg and Volpe 2019 p.91) over the measurements of set parameters. The research is practice-led (Candy *et al* 2006), strongly based on my role as a facilitator working with Converge members and uses *Stepping Through* and its transformation in an interactive film as longitudinal case study.

4.1.1 Practice-led research

As explored in [Chapter 3](#), we found limited work that could be considered structurally participatory in the realm of interactive documentary and nothing that specifically addressed mental health and was designed by people with lived experience of mental illness. The works that made the most explicit effort towards an interactive design that is structurally participatory are the aforementioned *Red Tales* (Green *et al* 2017) and *Suburbs of Istanbul* (Yelmi and Bayar 2020); here the researchers and producers made considerable attempts to produce structurally participatory films involving participants in the design of the interactive film structure itself. However, aside from focusing on themes which do not concern mental health, both *Red Tales* and *Suburbs of Istanbul* differs from participatory filmmaking as considered in this research in the fact that they involved disparate participants recruited from many different avenues, unlike participatory filmmaking that tends to work with existing underrepresented communities who usually share a challenging social issue (Shawn and Robertson 1997). While the effort in the *Red Tales* and *Suburbs of Istanbul* was to adapt the dynamics of interactive documentary production to include a wider scope on participation, our research flips this perspective by establishing participatory filmmaking on mental health as our starting point and exploring how this may expand and transform through the non-linearity afforded by interactive film, an attempt that has so far been unexplored. For this reason, it was necessary to create tangible work in a context where a lack examples of practice and forms prevented us from exploring the research questions through the analysis of existing work or interviews with participatory filmmakers.

The research agenda itself emerged from my own practice as a participatory filmmaking facilitator working in mental health and from direct observation of the outcomes of my work with participants. As it often happens in practice-led research, “the making of an artifact becomes a ‘method of collecting and preserving information and understanding’ (Mäkelä 2007 p.158) and “in order to answer the research questions, the artistic production and experience--both facts and feelings--are to be captured, whether in visual or textual formats. The captured visuals and texts become data that can be used as research material” (Nithikul Nimkulrat 2007 p.3). In the investigation of a new and under-explored form of practice, we considered essential to directly experience the challenges and opportunities of making a participatory interactive film on mental health and to gain a tangible sense of the process and form that this experience would entail. The artifact in this context becomes a device that allows researchers to “translate messages between concrete objects and abstract requirements” (Mäkelä 2007 p. 159).

While this research is informed by practice, the making of an interactive film through an academic research project rather than direct practice presented the invaluable advantage of making space for in-depth reflection and analysis. As noted by Nash (2021) in regard to *Red Tales* and forms of maximalist participation, projects outside academia often “do not have the luxury of reflecting so frankly on the interpersonal complexities of participation” (*ibid* p.59) and “many projects seeking to foster more maximal forms of participation are envisaged as research projects, undertaken within academic settings” (*ibid* p.49). Along the same line of thought, we set up this research as practice-led, rather than practice-based, in the fundamental difference that we were not looking at making an artifact “for its own sake”, but rather as a “conscious exploration with the knowledge involved in the making of artifacts” (Nithikul Nimkulrat 2007, p. 2). The artifact is not the primary focus of the research but a translational object which requires to be interpreted and contextualised (Mäkelä 2007 p. 163).

Overall, a practice-led research approach allowed us, on one hand, to open space for a level of exploration which would be hardly achievable within a practice-only scenario, such as my usual work in the third sector; on the other, to gain a tangible sense of the challenges and opportunities which emerged from an under-explored form of practice.

Participatory filmmaking, as grounding practice in this work, has informed the research process by affecting the design of participants’ workshops throughout the research. The overall structure of the studies in this research mirrors the participatory filmmaking process familiar to participants by starting with an exploration of issues and personal experiences, followed by the design and production of a film, and culminating with a sharing of the work with audiences. This process has been expanded both in time and depth, starting with a deconstruction of the original *Stepping Through* in view of the complexity of personal experiences of mental health of participants; moving on to the design, production, and implementation of an interactive version of the film; and ending with an evaluation of the film with a number of external audiences. Each step has been documented and analysed, unlike usual participatory filmmaking experiences, where often lack of time and resources do not allow in depth reflective work. My participatory filmmaking practice has not just informed the research process on a macro-level: the workshops had the same duration and location of the Converge film sessions participants were already familiar with. This allowed them to start from a level of familiarity which made it easier for participants to focus on the challenging task of imagining and designing a non-linear film form.

In our research, we explored participatory filmmaking and interactivity in a way that, we believe, has not been achieved thus far, and in order to do so, we needed to expand

usual participatory filmmaking processes to include some methods and approaches that are suitable to the development of interactive media. In this attempt, we drew some inspiration from Participatory Design. Similarly to practice-led research in general, participatory design stresses the importance of the artifact as “outcomes that can transform the world from its current state to a preferred state” (Zimmerman and Forlizzi 2011 p.493). Several recent participatory design projects in the field of HCI (Lazar *et al* 2017) have explored physical and mental health and how to co-design tools and services with participants (amongst others: Bowen *et al* 2012, Bustamante Navarro *et al* 2013, Wadley *et al* 2013, Gordon *et al* 2016, Terp *et al* 2016, Ospina-Pinillos *et al* 2018, LaMonica *et al* 2019, Milton *et al* 2021). All these projects deploy participatory design as a research methodology to co-create or improve services such as online therapy and mobile platforms through the direct involvement of end-users, using methods such as co-design workshops and interviews to produce mock-ups, prototypes, and eventually final products. Some of these methods were embedded in our usual participatory filmmaking processes, as explored in [Chapter 6](#).

4.1.2 Participatory Action Research

Both participatory filmmaking and participatory design (PD) share some values with the overall framework of participatory action research, or PAR, (Mason 2015), an “emancipatory method in which individuals affected by an issue or problem engage in activities of practical relevance to their lived experience, generating new understandings of both process and context” (Mills *et al* 2009 p.665). Both PAR and PD encourage “people to take part and share in the research activity to ensure it is authentic, useful, fair, ethical, and relevant” (Kagan *et al* 2006 p.93). The agenda of PAR is to produce research which is completely participatory, where participants have a say in the research agenda, design, execution, and dissemination; and that is orientated towards actionable solutions that can be directly deployed in the contextual communities of participants. It values experiential knowing (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014) and is driven by “values of social and environmental justice” (Cargo and Mercer 2008, p. 329). This makes PAR particularly well-aligned with researching participatory filmmaking, especially when applied to a sensitive subject such as mental health.

For this reason, we decided to implement some PAR principles: the researcher (myself) was embedded in the community as someone familiar to participants with an established relationship of trust. I acted as “a discussion organizer and facilitator and as a technical resource person” (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014 p.585), with a view of co-producing knowledge rather than observing participants externally. Research findings have been regularly checked with participants for accuracy, by starting most workshops with a summary of preliminary forms of data analysis from the previous session, presented in an accessible and non-jargonistic language. Many workshops across the different studies were designed through an iterative structure of action/reflection spirals, where a preliminary discussion on a certain theme or prompt was followed by a dedicated creative activity devised with the purpose of deepening reflection on said theme or question, concluding with another discussion based on the materials generated from the creative activity.

However, while we drew inspiration from PAR in some aspects of our work, the research agenda and methods were selected and designed by the researcher only. Participants had complete creative freedom in the shaping of the artifact, but their agency in the research design was limited in the first two studies with more input on the design of the evaluation for external audiences. The reason to limit their involvement in the research design was due to the fact that as researcher/facilitator I was guiding participants through a new creative process foreign to their previous experiences and had to carefully manage the amount of information and input provided. Participants did not have enough knowledge or experience of interactive filmmaking to be able to direct the general aims of the research. The research agenda was also rooted in a combination of my own observation in practice and my research interest in polyvocality, rather than a pressing practical need in the participants' life. Overall, this research does not use a purely PAR approach, but rather draws inspiration to some of its principles while applying participatory design as a methodology that can provide tools to embed participation in the research process.

4.1.3 Longitudinal research

In this research, we worked longitudinally (Mills *et al* 2009) with a small number of participants, engaging with them for several years through a high number of workshops across three studies.

We adopted *Stepping Through* as unifying case study across the entire research project, rather than producing participatory interactive films with several groups for a series of reasons: the process of making an interactive film, especially when exploring a new form, is time consuming and requires prolonged focus; thanks to having access to highly motivated and committed participants with a previous practice of participatory filmmaking, we were in the privileged position of being able to dive deeply in the examination of all the phases of the film design, production, and reception; given the resources and time available, working with more than one group would have meant producing several mock-ups but probably no refined prototypes, generating more diverse but also more superficial findings. Case study as “an intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unit” (Gustafsson 2017 p.2) is particularly suitable to investigate “a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context” (Yin 1981 p.103), and as such adapts well to our practice-led approach.

We are aware that one of the limits of longitudinal case studies resides in the fact that results are highly specific and difficult to generalise (Gustafsson 2017). In fact, this research did not aim to produce a set standard of practice applicable to any mental health participatory production, but rather to identify some principles and examples of practice that could be re-elaborated according to the unique expressive needs of other groups of participants in other contexts.

4.2 Research Setting

4.2.1 Context

This research was conducted through the collaboration with an organisation which acted as gatekeeper, providing access to participants and facilities. This is Converge, a partnership between York St John University and mental health service providers in the York region, which offers a wide range of free courses on campus (drama, music, creative writing amongst many others) for adults who have experienced mental health problems. Converge has provided support throughout the course of this research by allowing access to a venue which was already familiar with participants, facilitating contact with participants, and overseeing the ethical requirements for this research.

In 2016 I established an ongoing collaboration with Converge, by setting up a yearly film course where participants learn filmmaking techniques and design their own films. The courses are often attended by a mix of regular and new participants. Leading the film course at Converge gave me the opportunity to develop a long-term rapport with the groups, unlike much work in this sector which tends to be based on single one-off projects. While there is no agenda or pressure for participants to produce films on mental health, this is often the chosen subject by the groups. Moreover, participants taking part in Converge film courses are granted complete creative freedom, with no pressure on following a funding or organizational agenda, as it often happens when charities use participatory filmmaking to document the impacts of their work through the viewpoints of their service users. This made Converge an ideal community for exploring the ways in which participatory filmmaking can be applied to films that have as only aim the self-expression to participants who produced them.

4.2.2 Participants

This research revolved around a core group of participants I already knew from my first Converge film course, run in 2016. These are five men with direct experience of a mental health problems and recovery, aged approximately between 30 and 65 years old. They have all used mental health services at different moments and intervals in their lives. Converge does not disclose any medical information on mental illness experienced by its students to allow them to rebuild their own identity in a label-free environment. Research shows that mental illness labels can be damaging to the sense of identity of people experiencing mental health problems and that spaces for redefinition of one's identity based on other factors are necessary (Hutchinson and Lovell 2013). Converge members are free to discuss their condition if they wish to do so but groups and activities are not dictated by specific conditions. This approach is in line with Arts and Health approaches (Arts Council England 2007), where the aim is to reinforce the sense of belonging and personal agency of participants, rather than providing therapeutic effects on specific conditions. This research followed the same line of thought and, while participants were granted complete freedom to explore any mental health related issue in their writing and film design, including their diagnosis if they so wished, they were not selected based on a specific illness. All participants in this group are Converge mentors, meaning that they have spent several years in Converge as students and have volunteered to use their experience to welcome and

support newcomers. Four out of five participants are also involved in Out of Character²⁸, a Converge theatre company producing award-winning work on mental health. These participants are:

- Adam: an experienced mentor who has attended Converge for a long time, Adam is involved in theatre through Out of Character and is part of the Converge choir. He had a previous experience in participatory filmmaking through a collaboration with Digifish, a media company in York which produced a short animation film about psychosis²⁹ involving people with a direct experience of it.
- Wayne: a long-term member of Converge, Wayne usually attends theatre and choir. He is also a member of the Out of Character theatre company.
- Nathan: a member of Out of Character and involved in a local football team for people in recovery from mental health problems.
- Laurie: an experienced artist who is also part of Out of Character and has an established practice of song writing and poetry.
- Paul: the only participant in this group to not be part of Out of Character, Paul also has a long-term involvement in Converge and is now a tutor in music courses and a co-tutor in the film course. He is also a support worker in another mental health organisation in York.

While Paul, Adam, Wayne, and Nathan were involved in the whole research, Laurie only took part in the first study and had to then leave the group due to long commuting times between his accommodation and York and for other commitments. The group agreed to still include Laurie's work in the final film, in the form of his contribution to the original *Stepping Through* film and some spoken word content produced by him during the first study.

The group lacks in gender diversity as it only involves men. This is due to the fact that, given the nature of this research, we could only involve the original creators of *Stepping*

²⁸ <http://outofcharactertheatre.squarespace.com/>

²⁹ Psychosis Animation, produced by Digifish for Community Links

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thmuqhNwrXg&ab_channel=CommunityLinks%28Northern%29

Through as core group members. Participants themselves were aware of this limitation and expressed an intention to include women by encouraging myself to take part in writing and producing my own section in the film and by involving a woman choreographer in the filming of a dance clip.

We found that this group would be particularly suitable of our research, not just because they showed immediate interest and willingness to be involved, but thanks to a combination of factors: first, this group of participants was experienced, having they all attended film courses at Converge more than once and as such were particularly equipped for reflecting on the difficulties and opportunities of participatory filmmaking. This allowed us to discuss non-linearity and interactivity immediately rather than having to provide a wider introduction on general filmmaking. These participants are also active in advocating for mental health, which makes them particularly aware of mental health dynamics in society and able to discuss and analyse experiences of stigma; in addition to this, participants have already worked with me and with each other, so trust and rapport were established before the start of the study. Working with participants who have previous experience of community arts has proved particularly useful when developing novel forms of technology which require sustained engagement and focus (Hook *et al* 2015).

While this research mostly revolves around a small core group of participants, the last study, which consisted of an evaluation of the film prototype, expanded participation to include several audiences: other members and professionals at Converge, a range of mental health professionals and researchers from other UK contexts, and a sample of generic audience members recruited online through Prolific.

4.2.3 My role

This research is largely based on my own practice as a participatory filmmaker in mental health. I embarked in this area of practice in 2014, following a training on the application of community arts in mental health by Hoot Creative Arts, an arts and mental health charity in Huddersfield, which resulted in a participatory dance film designed by people in recovery from substance addiction. In line with usual participatory filmmaking practices, my role in that film and consequent experiences in other settings consists of acting as a facilitator, assisting groups of participants in identifying a common theme of importance to their lives, exploring the themes and related subthemes through storytelling

techniques, creating storyboards and visual plans, and then passing on filmmaking skills so that participants can use cameras to capture content that delivers their shared message. The process is flexible and can be adapted to the needs of each community. The resulting films are often screened at community events and shared online. More details on the principles and strategies of the participatory filmmaking process I apply in my work are reviewed in [Chapter 6](#).

In 2016 I run my first film course at Converge, a pilot experience where I worked for the first time with the group of participants taking part in this research. Following this first experience, most of the participants have taken part in other film courses alongside new students. For this reason, I have an ongoing and established relationship with this group of participants. Given this context, I have embodied two distinct roles in this research: on one hand, I acted as a researcher, designing research objectives, activities, collecting and analysing data; on the other hand, I have also kept on working as a facilitator with participants as in my usual role, including supporting their creative processes, providing examples, giving focus to creative ideas, suggesting film techniques that could translate their inputs into images. This double role, which is very much in line with practice-based research (...) and practitioner research (Alvesson and Sköldbäck 2009), required particular attention to reflexivity, as the “requirement to think critically about the context and the acts of research and writing” (O’Reilly 2014 p.3), especially in relation to “self-monitoring of, and a self-responding to, our thoughts, feelings and actions as we engage in research projects” (Corlett and Malvin 2018 p.2.) I have kept a commitment to reflexivity throughout this research by keeping reflective logs of my input in the workshops, with a particular attention to monitoring my creative and authorial influence over participants, who are used to regard me as a guide in the articulation of their filming ideas. I have also closely monitored my relationship to individual participants and the way I responded to some of their inputs, with attention to possible biases, trying to “question [my] own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand [my] complex roles in relation to others” (Bolton 2010 p.13). While I made a considerable effort not to steer participants’ ideas, I am aware that I was closely embedded in the research environment and that my pre-existing relationship with participants did not keep the field neutral. As a result, both the research itself and the film prototype are the fruit of a process of negotiation and mutual influence between the participants and me. Some considerations on this ongoing process of reflection are included in [Chapter 9](#).

4.2.4 Collaborators

Aside from core participants and researchers, this work has involved a number of additional collaborators who have held different roles and have contributed to the work in different ways. Converge staff has provided admin support, organised venue bookings at York St John University and provided ethical checks on the study plans through their interact Converge Evaluation and Research Team³⁰. In the process of developing the design of the interactive version of *Stepping Through*, an Interactive Media student intern, Migle Markeviciute, was employed for nine weeks in the Summer of 2019 to support the design of an interactive film form which could support the participants' aims. Five performers from Converge and members of film courses were involved in acting as extras in the making of the film. A choreographer who works at Converge, Christie Barnes, developed and performed a dance piece featured in the film. Software engineers from DC Labs, University of York, John Gray and Dr Andrew Walter were heavily involved in implementing the interactive structure of *Stepping Through* in Cutting Room, an object-based media authoring tool in development at DC Labs.

4.2.5 *Stepping Through* as a starting point

Instead of starting our investigation of non-linear narratives and their polyvocal potential from scratch, we decided to use an existing film produced by participants during the Converge pilot film course in 2016. This 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 theme agreed by the group was the sense of relief in joining a community (for most Converge itself) after a long time of isolation induced by mental illness. *Stepping Through* explores the experiences of participants through five short chapters, each written by one participant and filmed by the whole group. More details on each film chapter are presented in [Chapter 5](#).

³⁰ <https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/converge/evaluation-and-research-team/>



Figure 23 Some still images from *Stepping Through*

There are several reasons for which we thought *Stepping Through* could be a good case study to investigate how participatory film could benefit from non-linearity. It contains several narrative layers and a coexistence of polyvocal parts and individual inputs. An effort to balance authorial voices was already attempted and the film tries to incorporate some non-linear constructs even within its traditional linear shape, attempting to streamline the polyvocality of the content. For this reason, we considered it a particularly suitable film to explore the advantages of non-linearity. Also, *Stepping Through* was appreciated by participants who created it and very well received in their community of belonging. Choosing a successful film meant that participants did not find a motivation in working on and expanding the film simply because of wanting to improve it or correct its flaws. Starting from an example of previous practice from the group rather than diving straight into the exploration of existing i-Docs also meant that the narrative forms designed by participants were grounded on their own expressive needs as a group of authors, rather than in the imitation of existing narrative forms. While I did show examples of i-Docs, I only introduced them after the expressive needs of the group were clearly established.

4.2.6 Data collection and analysis

While some details of the methods of data collection and documentation deployed throughout the research process varied according to each study, we overall applied an empirical approach aimed at carefully documenting the processes and narrative forms emerging from practice.

The process of documenting has a particular importance in practice-led research, where the researcher is embedded in the field of practice and often immersed in multiple co-occurring dynamics. While this research produced a tangible output in the shape of an interactive film, we were aware that “artifacts produced in the practice without the documentation of the artistic process may not be sufficient to support a research claim” (Nithikul Nimkulrat 2007 p. 5). As our research was a longitudinal practice-led study, I collected data in multiple forms, some typical of case study research, such as reflective logs, fieldnotes, and interviews (Lazar *et al* 2017), and some closely related to practice-based work, such as production diaries, artifact sketches and graphs, and notes taken spontaneously by participants during workshops (Lin 2019).

The most considerable portion of data collected came from participant observation fieldnotes (Mills *et al* 2012), which were written by me immediately after each workshop. These notes aimed to capture the process, participants’ reactions to prompts and creative activities, discussions on emerging narratives and personal experiences of mental health shared by participants. We opted for not having an external observer due to the small group of participants, the familiarity they had amongst themselves, and the confidentiality of some of the issues discussed. However, I was aware that by being involved in leading the workshops as a facilitator, I could not objectively recall all aspects of a workshop afterwards. To counterbalance this limit, I sound recorded each workshop with the participants’ consent. The fieldnotes written immediately after the workshops could then be supplemented with more detailed notes written while listening back to the recordings and with selected quotes from participants.

Given my mixed role of researcher and facilitator in the project, I regularly added reflective logs to the workshops’ fieldnotes, in order to reflect and respond to thoughts, feelings, and impressions emerged during the workshops (O’Reilly 2014, Corlett and Maving 2018). These logs had the function of helping me monitor my attitudes and biases in the context of working with participants and to track my own creative input in the film.

Other forms of data consisted of interviews (Lazar *et al* 2017) with participants in groups or singularly, according to the needs of each study. Some of these interviews were filmed to become part of *Stepping Through Interactive*, but still provided data on participants' views of the filming and the message they were trying to convey, while others were designed specifically for the research agenda. In both cases, interviews were semi-structured, with a set of pre-designed questions and openness to impromptu developments. We also made use of questionnaires for the evaluation study, which involved overall 101 external audiences' members. While this study was decidedly larger in terms of participants involved, it was still a qualitative study aimed at eliciting detailed description of audiences' impressions. For this reason, we designed a "qualitative" questionnaire (Torerien and Wilkinson 2004), based on open questions with unlimited space for participants' inputs.

The diverse range of data collected through the methods above needed to be analysed according to each study's agenda and research questions. The method of choice throughout the research has been thematic analysis, a "systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles" (Mills 2009 p.926). Thematic analysis marries quite well with practice-led research as described by Lin (2019). It is particularly suitable for "evocatively aimed, creative-production projects that have the potential to unlock the merit of creative art" (*ibid* p.155). Thematic analysis does not enforce a set of theory on the materials analysed, allowing the process to remain open and being able to "capture and report on the emerging nuances and directions possible in the work" (*ibid* p.156). Coding the materials gathered to search for, review, and define themes (Braun *et al* 2008) according to each study and stage of the project development was a flexible method that allowed up to find "connections and contrasts between seemingly unrelated materials" towards the production of "coherent knowledge" (Lin 2019 p.158).

4.2.7 Ethics

Each study comprising this research has been subject to ethics approval through full application submitted to the Ethics Committee at the Department of Theatre, Film, Television, and Interactive Media at the University of York. Ethics approval was also

achieved from Converge as the gatekeeper organisation and all participants provided informed consent to take part in the research.

We aimed to design the studies so that participants could get involved in the most comfortable and engaging way possible. While all core participants have used mental health services, they were not experiencing acute episodes of mental illness while taking part in this research, they were leading independent and active lives, and were involved in a number of other commitments both professionally and socially. However, I ensured that the rhythm, length, content, and frequency of the workshops were comfortable to all participants by regularly checking in with them and asking for feedback. The workshops dates were agreed upon together with participants, several workshops were repeated for participants who could not attend an agreed date, and breaks were taken as needed to respect participants' wish especially when they were not feeling well or when commitments with the theatre company would make it overwhelming for them to be involved in the workshops at the same time. In spite of the level of flexibility that this approach required, the engagement and commitment of participants ensured that all research objectives were met and being offered the possibility to negotiate a schedule, rather having it imposed on them, appeared to increase the sense of agency of participants over the project. As it often happens in participatory filmmaking processes, we ensured that the workshops kept some time for social interaction, provided refreshments, and overall made an effort to foster a sense of community, so that the experience of taking part in the research could become a positive moment in the participants' lives. Thanks to the level of trust and familiarity of this group, there were no instances of conflict or tension amongst participants. Choosing York St John University as a venue for this study was also a way of creating a comfortable scenario for participants, who were very familiar with the campus and used to attend it several times a week for Converge activities.

Being aware that much discussion in the workshops would revolve around personal experiences of mental health, I set the tone for the workshops by having a conversation around boundaries and the fact that participants were not required to share any personal story unless they wished to do so. Participants were given control to manage the sound recordings by asking for the recording to be stopped at any time in the sessions. After a few workshops, participants realised that they would soon forget that the recording was running, and the group agreed that any discussion that did not address the research and that contained personal details of participants or others would be deleted by me at the end of the sessions. While there was no incident where participants found discussions, activities, or materials watched in the sessions triggering or upsetting, I knew that Converge support staff

would have been available in case this had happened, or any other form of safeguarding concern had arisen.

While participants were left anonymous in the first study fieldnotes and relative published paper, it soon emerged that enforcing anonymity on them would have been a disempowering approach. Participants are all mental health activists known in their community and art performers who are vocal about mental health challenges. As such, they did not need to have their privacy protected in this regard, while, on the other hand, they wanted ownership of their film work. The original *Stepping Through* film had been available online for a few years before the start of this project and had been showed at several community screenings, where its creators had taken part in Q&As and discussions with audiences. Since the whole project revolves around authorship and agency, we found ethically sound to allow participants to keep their names and identities in the film and throughout the research.

4.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the main methodological frameworks applied in this research project in order to explore how narrative non-linearity afforded by interactive media can support participatory filmmaking in mental health. In particular, we opted for a practice-led longitudinal qualitative approach, which would allow us to explore this area of investigation through intensive work with participants and the production of a tangible piece of interactive film, the making being necessary to navigate challenges and opportunities of an under-explored form of practice. The research process was grounded into and mirrored my work as participatory filmmaker while incorporating some methods from Participatory Design and some principles of Participatory Action Research, through a mixed rather than purist approach. The research produced a high volume of diverse data which was analysed through thematic analysis, a flexible method adapted to the aims and agenda of each of the three studies comprising this research.

This chapter also introduced the context of this practice, Converge, our core group of five participants, our research collaborators, my positionality as researcher and facilitator, the film chosen as case study, and the ethical principles applied to this research.

CHAPTER 5 EXPLORING THE LIMITS OF LINEAR VIDEO IN *STEPPING THROUGH*

In previous chapters I reviewed the role of media representations in reinforcing stigma and self-stigma and the dramatic impact they can have on the quality of life of people experiencing mental health problems. I have discussed how stigma contributes to a culture of silence in relation to mental health and how, on the other hand, safe, participatory, personal, and open forms of dialogue on mental health have a healing effect on an individual and societal level. While mainstream media might not be an ideal platform to support this kind of dialogical representation of mental health, participatory filmmaking as an inclusive, grassroots, community form of media practice can do an excellent job at allowing people with lived experience of mental health problems to disclose their personal accounts with authenticity. Participatory filmmaking, however, runs into a different kind of challenge, related to the fact that multiple voices of community members, all of equal value, need to be merged in one main storyline which fits the linear narrative form of traditional filmmaking. I have shown the kind of issues this can cause on a practical level through some cases from my work a participatory filmmaker ([section 3.1](#)). I have analysed interactive documentary as a more flexible and open film form which could successfully accommodate the polyvocality of participatory filmmaking, as long as structural participation is allowed and people with lived experience of mental health problems are given the chance to not just populate an interactive platform with their content, but to shape the structure of an interactive film.

Since no examples of making structurally participatory interactive films on mental health were found, we designed a practice-led research project which explores this area of practice, with a particular attention to the polyvocal possibilities afforded by narrative non-linearity and how these can support the production of participatory mental health films. The first step in our research was to expand the observations I gathered in my professional practice about the limiting effects of narrative linearity on the polyvocal nature of community filming by dedicating a study to investigating how the linear narrative form of traditional filmmaking has affected the self-expression of the five participants who produced *Stepping Through*.

This chapter starts by reviewing the aims of this study and the main research question and relative sub-questions it sets out to answer. The chapter also provides details

on the methods applied in this study, describing the activities designed for participants across seven workshops.

Finally, the chapter presents and discusses the findings of the research activities, with the identification of some expressive needs that participants could not fully articulate within the linear narrative form of traditional filmmaking and a brief review of which non-linear narrative qualities afforded by interactive documentaries could support them.

5.1 Research questions and aims

While the opportunities interactive film poses for participatory filmmaking on mental health appear to be rich and varied, we are mindful that some features and techniques of interactive filmmaking may not be suitable, may not serve the expressive needs of participants, or may need to be re-configured to do so. Also, we anticipate that there will be additional opportunities for applying interactive forms in participatory mental health filmmaking that will only be discovered by exploring how they relate to real people's lived experiences of mental health. Our study deconstructs a pre-existing participatory mental health film with its participants, with the aim of identifying possibilities of both form and content that could be revealed if the film was transformed into a non-linear interactive film. The aim of the study was to review *Stepping Through* as a linear film, exploring possible limitations it had in representing personal experiences in a group context.

The main research question for the study is:

RQ1: what are the limits of participatory linear filmmaking in articulating individual and collective viewpoints on the experience of mental illness and recovery by people with lived experience of mental health problems?

This question has been broken down in several sub-questions which were addressed by specific workshop activities during this study:

- SQ1 What is the impression that *Stepping Through* left on the participants who made it?
- SQ2 What are the links between the existing film and the personal experiences of each participant?

- SQ3 Which parts of the stories of each participant are explicitly articulated in *Stepping Through* and which are only symbolically suggested?
- SQ4 Which additional information participants would want to include in the film to fill gaps in their accounts and how does this sit in relation to the existing film?

Addressing these questions helped us assess the overall limitations of *Stepping Through* as a linear film by focusing on what is currently missing in the film, what is only hinted at, which materials would be useful to fill the gaps, and how this would sit in relation to the existing film. By exploring these areas, we could also start to envision whether producing a non-linear version of *Stepping Through* could make space of unexpressed viewpoints and which of the narrative opportunities identified in section [3.3.1](#) could suit the work of this group of participants.

A secondary aim of this study was to review and collect views on the process of making *Stepping Through*. This part of the study, which was addressed through one workshop, was dedicated to reviewing the participants' memories and impressions of the participatory filmmaking process to assess possible limitations or barriers they faced in the process, and which aspects of the process they found more effective. This investigation needed to be addressed at the beginning of this research to create a baseline of knowledge which would then allow us to design a new participatory filmmaking process to make an interactive version of *Stepping Through*, as explored in [Chapter 6](#). It was especially important to review the process of making *Stepping Through* as participatory filmmaking is not based on a pre-determined process or workflow, which is rather designed and adjusted according to the preferences of each facilitator and the needs of each project and community (Hight *et al* 2012). The process of making *Stepping Through* was just one of the possible approaches to participatory filmmaking, and since this practice-led research mirrors that process in many aspects, we needed to know from the start how participants felt about it. At the time of making *Stepping Through* in the summer of 2016 there was no opportunity to review the process with participants, so we needed to do so at the start of this research. The research question which guides this secondary part of the study is:

RQ2: what did participants find effective or ineffective in the participatory filmmaking process that led to the production of Stepping Through?

5.2 Research context

Stepping Through was the result of a film course pilot at Converge during summer 2016. The pilot course was run to gauge if there was an interest from Converge members in taking part in an ongoing yearly film course. The approach to the course was agreed to be hands-on and participatory, a short experience through which students (as Converge, an educational provider, defines its participants) would explore how to use film for self-expression. The information sheet for the course indicated that filmmaking would be explored as a multimedia form of art, in which images, colours, sound, and storytelling would be used to work around themes established by the students themselves. The group was kept small and limited to only mentors, Converge students who had attended courses for a number of years and were familiar with the structure of the organisation and the university setting. Their role is to welcome and support new students, while also taking part in courses of their choice. They regularly volunteer as buddies for new Converge students and are often involved in outreach activities. *Stepping Through* was produced through nine weekly sessions and presented to the Converge community through a screening event at York St John University in August 2016. Since then, *Stepping Through* is often used to introduce Converge' work at presentations and events. The film course which was established as a result of the *Stepping Through* pilot is still ongoing.

I have discussed how this group of participants, (details of which can be found in section [4.2.2](#)), is particularly experienced and sophisticated in comparison to more typical participatory filmmaking settings, where generally participants are not only new to filming, but also to the use of creativity for self-expression. All participants knew each other from previous Converge experiences and most are colleagues in Out of Character and have been working together for years. They already knew me from 2014, year in which I started documenting the work of Out of Character on a voluntary basis. This means trust was already established both amongst participants and between me and participants when we started working on *Stepping Through* in 2016.

5.2.1 Description of *Stepping Through* as a linear film

Stepping Through is divided in five short chapters, each directed by one participant. Each participant is introduced by a close-up shot of his eyes, whose look and attitude were chosen to reflect his personality and the content of his video poem. Each chapter has its own soundtrack, picked to complement the emotional content of the segment.

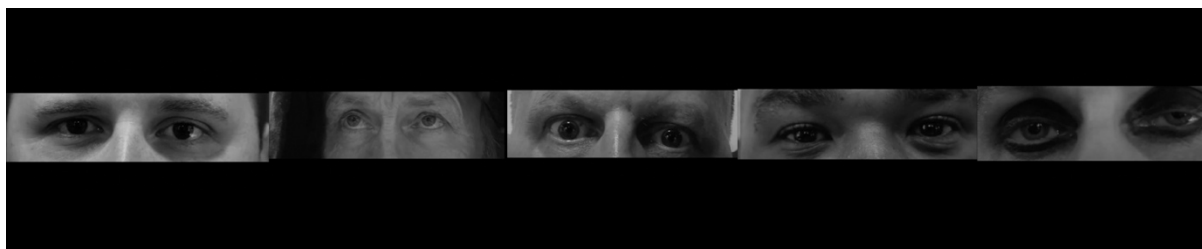


Figure 24 Shots of participants' eyes which open each of their individual chapters

Chapters unfold as follows:

Chapter 1: directed by Adam and featuring Wayne as an actor. This chapter is centred on a feeling of loneliness which forces the character to move through an unknown space without a clear direction. The image of the character overlaps with its double to indicate a sense of depersonalisation, time confusion, lack of clarity, and entrapment. This “doubleness” is resolved when the character joins a supportive environment of other people.

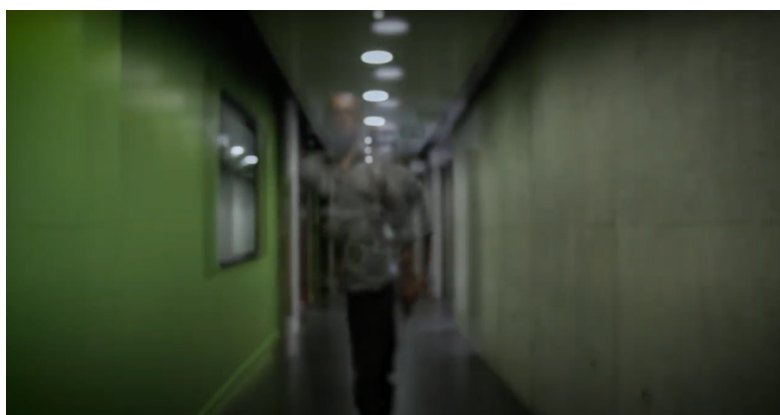


Figure 25 Overlapping images in Adam's chapter

Chapter 2: directed by Laurie and featuring himself. This chapter focuses on elements from Laurie's personal story of mental illness and recovery. Central is a need of empowerment, of taking charge of his own creativity, and being recognised by others. The writing on the wall meant to represent his self-exploration, as opposed to some black and white images, which indicate parts of his life when he felt alienated from himself and others.

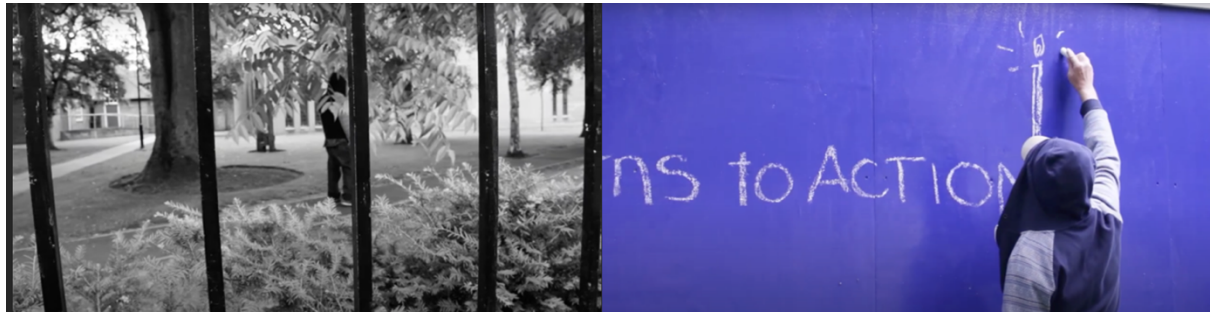


Figure 26 Black & white and coloured footage in Laurie's chapter

Chapter 3: directed by Wayne and featuring all participants, this piece contains mostly symbolical images to express the sense of relief and comfort induced by joining a supportive community. The tone of this chapter is uplifting and the poem expresses a sense of enthusiasm towards a brighter future.



Figure 27 A symbolic image in Wayne's chapter

Chapter 4: directed by Nathan and featuring all participants plus some extras. Nathan found by chance a studio set up with chairs at the university campus and decided it could be a good setting for his piece. The space was used to represent an initial sense of isolation, in which people are scared to look at each other. After one of the characters finds the courage to reach out to others, actors get closer in mutual support and friendship.



Figure 28 Act of reaching out in Nathan's chapter

Chapter 5: directed by Paul and featuring himself. This piece was designed to be snappier and to express a sense of accomplishment and openness towards the possibilities offered by recovery. Paul uses images of himself to depict those emotions. The conclusion of the film introduces an element of humour and play, with the aim of energising the viewers.



Figure 29 An image from Paul's film

After the final title, viewers see an image of Paul appearing with half of his face painted in blue (Fig.34). This image was meant to be a reference to another film idea centred on some poetic material which the group could not fit into this specific film. The theme of this extra story was the same: joining a supportive community of people. However, in this occasion the film would have also addressed feelings around living with different mental health conditions, symbolised by different colours. The plan was for the characters to wear colours that represented their mental health conditions as make-up covering half of their faces. While at the beginning of the film characters would hide the coloured part of their

faces as an act of self-stigma, they would eventually find the courage to share their colours with others. Characters would then start to talk, share, mix colours with each other, and involve others, until the sense of liberation and creativity emerging from a frank and open discussion on mental health would generate a colour run, in which all colours are mixed in celebration. This additional idea is linked thematically to *Stepping Through*, but participants could not find a successful way of adding this narration to their individual chapters. They instead saved these materials with plans to make a separate film and referred to it in *Stepping Through* by adding Paul's half-painted portrait. The film was not produced in the end, as subsequent film courses included other participants who were not in the *Stepping Through* group and needed to be included in the production of new narratives which belonged to all.

Finally, *Stepping Through* ends with an outtake section which runs alongside end credits. The outtakes are quite long for a short film. Participants expressly decided to keep all of the outtakes because they found it was important to convey the general sense of enjoyment and mutual support of the filming sessions, showing participants helping each other, facing technical difficulties, and testing out ideas.



Figure 30 Behind the scenes image from the film's outtakes

Overall, the film is centred on expressing emotions related to experiencing mental health problems, recovery, and finding a supportive community. The style of the film is an evocative emotional combination of spoken word and symbolic imagery, rather than factual interviews. Participants opted for this approach because they wanted their message to reach an audience of people who might themselves be facing mental health problems and to communicate with them on an empathic rather than intellectual level. Poetic/abstract approaches are deployed quite often in first-person documentaries or documentaries pieces

on mental health related subjects and trauma (Walker 2005, Bilbrough 2013, Frankham 2013), and are described by Nichols as a style which “emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization” (Nichols 2010 p.31). *Stepping Through* uses this approach to create an emotional journey for viewers, taking them from the more contemplative moods of the first chapters to increasingly uplifting tones as the film carries on, with the outtakes inputting humour and fun into the final section of the film. During community screenings of *Stepping Through*, this structure was praised as it allowed audience members to reflect on their own emotions and experiences of mental wellbeing but, at the same time, to leave the screening feeling amused and energised rather than gloomy.

5.3 Research Methods

Our investigation is centred around *Stepping Through*, and its first step consisted of exploring how the linearity of the film form might have limited the articulation of the participants’ viewpoints. The reasons for choosing to centre our investigation on *Stepping Through* are explained in detail in section [4.2.5](#).

This study, as the rest of the research, was conducted through a partial participatory action research approach and mirrored the participatory filmmaking process participants were already familiar with as detailed in section [4.1](#).

The sessions were structured as workshops, as it normally happens in participatory filmmaking, allocating time to practical work and discussion. Each workshop was centred around a topic of discussion explored through creative methods (Kara *et al* 2015). Interviews or direct discussions without going through creative activities would not have been as effective because the topics explored (how much of participants’ experiences were reflected in the film, what was missing, what was left unsaid) were rather complex and nuanced, and difficult to articulate on the spot. Creative activities, on the other hand, presented a series of advantages: participants were already well-versed in several creative arts and I knew from working together previously which activities they could find engaging; creative activities could be adapted and shaped according to the aims of each workshop and related research question; spending time on a creative exercise helped participants reflect on a topic individually before taking part in group discussion; and finally a hands-on approach helped vary the rhythm of the workshops, making them more enjoyable than long discussions, a

factor to consider especially in view of the long-term involvement that the overall research demanded from participants. Some inspiration for the activities used in this study came from my practice of facilitation and some of the handbooks I have used over the years to design creative workshop activities (Darley *et al* 2007, Taylor and Murphy 2014). In order to assess how linear *Stepping Through* could have limited the expressive intentions of this group of participants, I designed a series of creative activities based on different strategies: a deconstruction of the film itself looking for images “behind” which there was more to be said; a review of the personal experiences of participants to assess how much of it is represented or missing in the film; creative writing to explore reflections or narratives not present in *Stepping Through*; a review of materials who could not be accommodated in the film at the time of making it. These range of activities (details of which are described in section [5.3.1](#)) helped assessing the limitations of *Stepping Through* from different viewpoints and has facilitated the emergence of a series of themes and ideas which have shaped the research beyond its first study.

Each workshop had the following general structure:

- a. Social time and refreshments
- b. Preliminary discussion of a theme or prompt
- c. Execution of a creative activity dedicated to that theme or prompt
- d. Discussion of the activity
- e. Break
- f. Repetition of phase b to d
- g. Recap of workshop and end of session

According to the complexity of certain creative activities and the time it took for participants to complete them, the cycle b to d could happen just once in one workshop or more than twice. I made an effort never to rush participants and to allow plenty of time for the discussion of each activity. This approach presented the benefits of:

- Making the workshop overall similar to participatory film sessions, where brainstorming and idea generation are supported by a number of creative group activities; this way participants felt familiar and comfortable with the structure of the sessions.
- The creative activities unlocked information and ideas which may have not been accessible through discussions only; each activity was designed to stimulate deeper reflection on specific questions/themes.

- The presence of creative activities has facilitated discussion amongst those participants who are less inclined to talking “on the spot”.

In terms of discussing interactivity and narrative non-linearity, participants had a basic knowledge and experience of filmmaking through attending participatory film courses at Converge, but they were foreign to the idea of non-linearity in film structure and interactivity. These concepts were not formally presented to them during this first study, but rather hinted at by introducing the possibility of expanding the film from its linear structure to a multiplicity of directions. Non-linearity was explained in very general terms and no example of interactive film was shown during this study. This choice was motivated by a need to keep the idea generation at this stage as spontaneous as possible and focused only on the expressive needs of participants. By presenting examples and stronger ideas there could have been a risk of inadvertently forcing participants to mimic certain structures or forms rather than generating their own based on what they felt was not expressed, or not expressed authentically enough, in the film. This could have possibly induced a shift in the focus of this study from assessing how more or less successfully *Stepping Through* represented their experiences to wishing to create a “shinier” (Posetti 2018) version of the film based on fascination towards a new form of technology. Even though interactivity was not formally explained or presented in the study for these reasons, I still referred to it in general terms, and the way I did so could have impacted on participants’ understanding and expectations of what interactivity is in filmmaking; I included notes on the way I spoke about interactivity in this first study within my self-reflective logs to keep track of this phenomenon.

5.3.1 Workshop list and activities

Seven workshops took place between the end of September and November 2018. It was decided to run the workshops mostly on Saturday evenings, when the university was very quiet and there were no other classes running, ensuring that participants did not feel rushed. The room booking system was flexible and while sessions were meant to last for two hours, the rooms were available to be used for any amount of time necessary. Out of the seven sessions, two were repetitions for participants who could not make it to the previous one for any reason. To keep the study as inclusive and stress-free as possible, participants were not questioned as to why they could not make it and time was accommodated to a repetition of activities whenever possible. While this approach implied a risk of disengagement in the most assiduous participants, who at times had to wait for others to catch up, the friendship

amongst participants helped ease this process as every participant was interested in knowing the opinions and viewpoints of the others. When possible, I tried to involve participants who were present at previous workshops in supporting those who were repeating a certain task due to absences. One participant only made it to two workshops in this study, despite having formally agreed on taking part in the study. He struggled to reach the venue, which required him a long journey. I arranged a separate meeting with him to explain what was happening in the session at a time when he was on campus for other commitments, and he did attend the last two workshops. A register of these workshops can be found in [Appendix 1](#). In the next sections, I review the activities and agenda of each workshop.

5.3.1.1 Workshop 1

The first workshop was dedicated to an introduction of the research itself (a lengthier introduction to the study and collection of informed consent happened during a preliminary meeting which took place before the first workshop). I also discussed with participants the main differences between this study and the usual film classes, in particular the fact that the group would focus more time and attention to each activity, that the sessions would be sound recorded, and that I would stay in the room at the end of the workshops to take notes instead of leaving together with participants as I would normally do in film classes.

The focus of this first workshop was to remind participants about *Stepping Through*, record their reactions upon watching the film again, review the themes of the film retrospectively, and discuss the process that resulted in the film. These steps were necessary to re-establish a connection between participants and their film two years after it was made. I posed some questions to participants and allowed them to brainstorm any memory or reaction to the film; these were written on post-its and placed on posters which were then discussed in the group.

Before participants watched the film, I asked:

- What do you remember of the film?
- What do you remember of the process of making the film?
- Have you had occasions to re-watch the film after it was made and if not why?

The aim of these questions was to gather possible enduring effects/memories of the film and check whether participants had engaged with it in the meantime.

After *Stepping Through* was screened, I asked:

- What are the first things that come to mind now that you have re-watched the film?
- What is your favourite thing about it? What is the thing you like the least about it?

The aim of these questions was to open a discussion about the film itself, whether and how participants still enjoyed it, and if they found anything problematic in it two years after its completion.

The next activity was centred around discussing the themes of the film as if participants were now audience of the film. The aim was to find out if there still was a shared agreement on the overarching theme (the role of isolation and community in recovery) and whether this theme was still relevant to the participants.

Finally, the last activity in this workshop was discussing the process. I reviewed the steps involved in filmmaking process with participants, both to check with them that my memories were correct, and to gauge participants' views of the film. This part of the workshop asked participants:

- What was your favourite part of the process?
- Were there any parts of the process that felt difficult or boring?
- What would you do differently?

5.3.1.2 Workshop 2 and 3

Once a general review of the film was completed and memories of the film were fresh in participants' minds, these two workshops (with the second being an exact repetition of the first) were dedicated to deconstructing *Stepping Through* and reviewing the personal circumstances and experiences of mental health participants were trying to express in it. The aim of these workshops was to assess how well *Stepping Through* expressed the personal experiences participants were trying to convey through it.

This was achieved through two main activities. The first activity consisted of playing *Stepping Through* and encouraging participants to stop the screening anytime they found an image in the film which acted as a symbol “behind” which they felt there was more to be said, images that they found packed with meaning which was not explicitly stated. This activity was tailored on the specific characteristics of *Stepping Through* as a poetic film where participants often used symbolic imagery to express a feeling or reflection, they could not explicitly articulate in the film narrative. While participants mostly focused on their own chapter in the film, I encouraged them to feel free to stop the screening at any time and not to overthink, at this stage, the reasons why they felt the need to identify certain images. All the symbolic images indicated by participants were screenshotted, saved, and became the basis of activities in later workshops.

The second main activity in this workshop was dedicated to exploring the personal circumstances or experiences of mental health that participants intended to express in the film and how well these were conveyed. In order to do so I adapted a personal mapping exercise which I often use in participatory film sessions when reflecting with participants on internal and external factors that affect someone’s experiences. The exercise consisted in drawing a human shape surrounded by two circles. The first step of the exercise was to list elements present in the film chapter of each participant in the space between the two circles; this meant writing only images or words that are in the *Stepping Through* chapter of each participant in this area. It was important to start this activity with listing personal elements in *Stepping Through* so that participants could focus on personal experiences they tried to convey in this specific film, rather than any possible personal experience of mental health. The second step consisted of writing in the space between the human shape and the first circle, listing life circumstances and experiences that are related to the film or inspired parts of the film. The third step consisted of writing inside the human shape emotions and inner states related to those experiences. The fourth step consisted of creating links between the emotions, the circumstances, and the elements present in the film. This step was important to understand how images or words in the film are directly linked to personal circumstances and emotions and to check whether there are personal elements that were not represented in the film, even though they were important to the participant. The final step consisted of writing in the external part of the page what the participants wish an audience could take away from the film. This was to help clarify who the audience for the film might be and how having the film standing between participants’ personal experiences and audiences could influence how viewers can understand participants’ messages. This exercise was designed to also identify which parts of the film and themes were in common for all participants and which were personal elements that are unique to each. To demonstrate how to do this

exercise, I planned to show a film made by myself on mental health and creativity commissioned by Hoots Creative Arts as part of their Going Sane? exhibition, a first-person point of view short film on stress, burnout, and self-care³¹. During the workshop I showed my film and the mapping exercise done by myself before asking the participant to execute each step. This was done for two reasons: firstly, in participatory filmmaking, and applied arts in general, practitioners often join participants in sharing their own experience of whatever subject is discussed. Expecting participants to share experiences while not doing the same places the practitioner in a safer and somewhat dominant level, in which vulnerability is one sided. Secondly, due to the complexity of the exercise I wanted to provide an example which would illustrate each step without being too similar to the participants' train of thoughts. My film is about mental health and reflects on my personal experiences but approaches the subject through a different theme (stress and self-care as opposed to isolation and community); this way I could provide a practical example without the risk of indirectly forcing the participants to use similar words or metaphors.

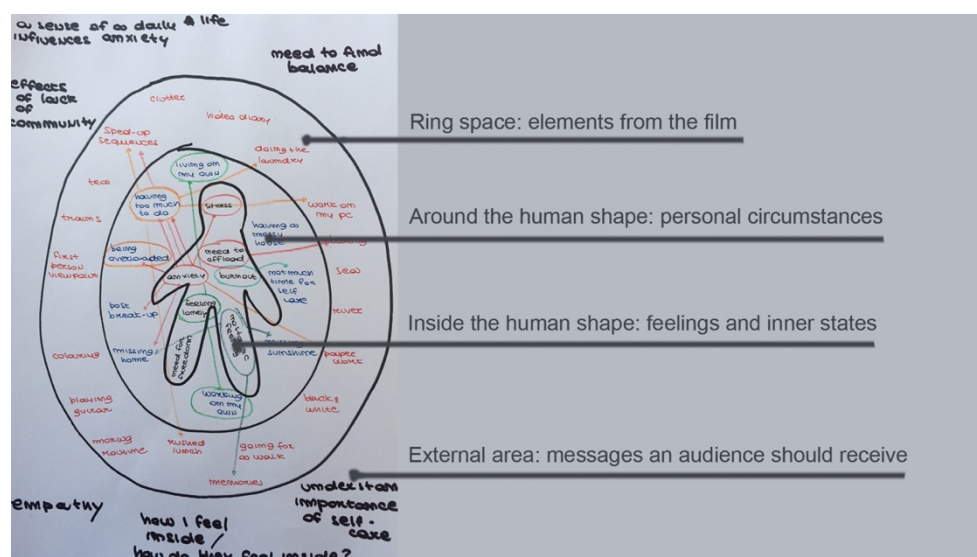


Figure 31 My own mapping exercise used as demonstration for participants

After completing these activities, each participant shared his own map and engaged in discussion on the results of the exercises.

³¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJp2GcO1ZwA&ab_channel=HootCreativeArts

5.3.1.3 Workshop 4

This workshop, like most of the following ones, used creative writing as a method to unlock more information on how the participants would articulate their experiences of mental health problems and recovery if they had more space in the film. Creative writing is an activity that participants engaged with during the *Stepping Through* process and that shaped their storytelling direction at the time. Some of the participants also attend creative writing courses at Converge and enjoy this artform.

In this workshop I proposed two different writing exercises: in the first, I encouraged participants to use the personal mapping done in the previous workshops and pick 3-5 words/topics they found particularly important to create sentences or paragraphs. The aim of this exercise was to explore which of the elements emerged in the mapping activity participants found particularly relevant. In the second activity, I asked participants to pair the writing they just did with the symbolic images they had extracted from the film in previous workshops (which I had printed out), or to devise a new symbolic image if none of those would fit their sentences. The aim of this second activity was to explore whether the meaningful themes captured by the writing just created by participants was visually represented in *Stepping Through*, or whether it needed new visuals to be expressed. Finally, the third activity overturned the instruction of the previous exercise, by proposing to write a sentence for each of the symbolic images extracted for the film. The outcome of these combined activities was a body of writing in which each participant better defined what they found important to express in relation to the theme of the film.

5.3.1.4 Workshop 5 and 6

By the fifth workshop, I had the chance to work out a number of new storylines which were hinted at in the film but not fully expressed from the materials generated by participants. These storylines were discussed with participants and a new activity was proposed to visualise how these themes sat in relation to the linear form in *Stepping Through*. The activities consisted of recombining the printed symbolic screenshots from the film in different orders according to the 7/8 new storylines discovered. This exercise allowed me to carry on exploring how the new stories resonated with each participant, what new imagery was needed to illustrate them, and to introduce participants to the possibility,

offered by interactive film, to recombine footage in different orders to convey different meanings.

The sixth workshop was a continuation of this work and related discussion, followed by a recording activity, where participants read their own writing. This activity was included in order to provide a tangible production activity which could give a sense of “making” to participants, who were getting somewhat overwhelmed by the writing focus of the previous workshops. Recording lines offered some variety in the activities by focusing participants on performing and it provided something to listen back to for future workshops. This workshop also contained a discussion of the half-painted face film idea, which I re-introduced to participants. The meaning and relevance of this second film storyline was discussed with the group.

5.3.1.5 Workshop 7

The last workshop in this study was dedicated to the half-painted film idea building on the discussion of the previous workshop. Since participants had stated that the half-painted face film idea was still relevant to all and important to convey some of their viewpoints in the film, I proposed another writing activity based on prompts which belonged to the concept of the film idea. The purpose of this writing exercise was to better define the scope and expressive aims of the half-painted face idea.

5.3.2 Data collection and analysis

The data generated from the study consists of field notes, selected transcriptions from the sessions’ recordings, writing from participants, and transcriptions of the paper artefacts generated by participants during the activities (posters and personal mapping). Due to the small size of the group, we have decided not to have an external observer. I facilitated the workshops and audio recorded them in their entirety. While I initially set myself the task of taking some notes during the workshops, I soon realised it was not possible to facilitate the session, engage with participants, explain and overview the activities, and provide support while at the same time taking notes. I decided to take fieldnotes immediately after the sessions and completed them referring to the recordings during the week. I only transcribed

relevant quotes from participants. The portion of the audio files which contained private conversations between participants or personal details of their lives were deleted.

This rich amount data was analysed through thematic analysis (Braun *et al* 2008), in order to identify emerging themes. The data was coded according to symbolic content, new ideas, mental health themes, personal experiences, role of the audiences, process, interactivity. Self-reflective logs were coded by group dynamics, self-observation, and method's reflections. These codes were later further elaborated to produce the overall themes described in the next section.

5.4 Findings

The themes generated from the data were grouped in two main areas:

- a review of *Stepping Through*, which includes first impressions, themes, and process.
- expressive needs not fully accommodated in the film: the need for extra storylines in the film, either generated at the time of making the film and not used or generated during this study; the need for extra materials and context information in the film; the need for linking portions of the materials together; the need for audience involvement. The next sections review these findings in detail.

5.4.1 General review of *Stepping Through* and the process of making it

Most of the findings on participants impressions of *Stepping Through* as a finished film and of its production process came from the brainstorming activities conducted before and after watching the film during the first workshop.

Four out of five participants did not engage with the film after the time of its making and first screening in the summer of 2016. They indicated as reasons their limited or absent access to the internet, as the film is now stored in Converge' YouTube account. Paul, who is more active online and has since started tutoring in film at Converge, saw the film several times and screened it in lectures, so had a much more vivid memory of it.

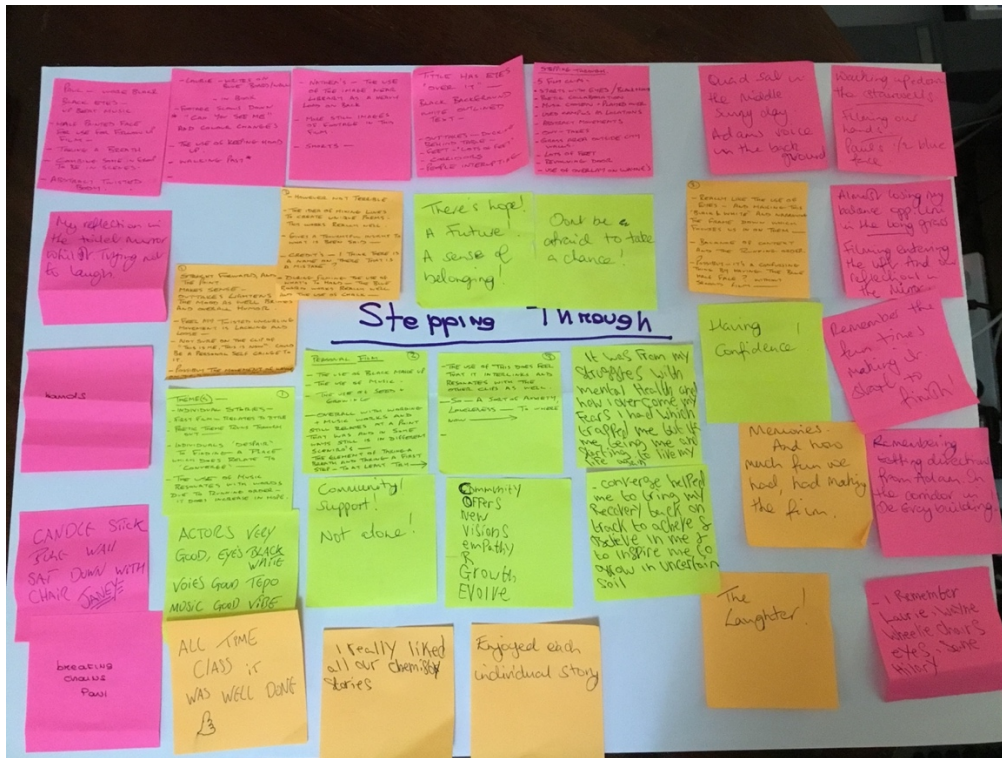


Figure 32 Pink post-its: memories of the film; orange post-its: impressions of the film, likes and dislikes; yellow post-its: elements that resonated with each participant and themes

The first reactions upon watching back the film were enthusiastic for participants: they were overall happy with the film and its qualities. They retrospectively reflected on the topic of the film and what they remembered their expressive needs to be at the time of making the film. For Adam, the main focus of his chapter in the film centred on “being trapped with a condition like mental illness, that stopped me from achieving my goals until I started Converge, which inspired me, my creativity, to stop being trapped, stop being fearful, (...) and it was a breakthrough really (...) walking into health again, and it was like a recovery walk, from the old me to a new me, and that’s what it was, from mine, but there is a lot from other people, their stories, have that sort of similar feel, of an actual breakthrough”. Paul agreed: “there is that underlying theme link of each person being an individual (...), with anxiety provoked loneliness, despair, unsure, uncertain, to then (...) how each individual kind of found their path, or journey, or connection, or a link in that, and that thing runs throughout in each film”. For Wayne: “mine it was a bit like a journey sort of thing, it was like the beginning from before I became involved in Converge, I was kind of lost”. Overall, for all participants the film captured their individual journey of recovery through engaging with the supportive community of Converge and participants appeared to be very responsive to these

themes and to recognise them promptly, even if two years had passed since the film was produced, and, for most of them, watched.

They also acknowledged the fact the film contains this idea of a “journey of recovery” as a thread that runs through every chapter, in which the individual inputs in the film resonate with the experiences of the whole group. Adam talked about other people’s contributions, saying “other people as well, pick bits out of other people’s, even some of the words that they were saying that you could put against your own”. For Wayne “it all comes into the mix with each personal story somehow”. For all participants, the collaborative process in making the film reflects its very theme, mutual support within a community: as phrased by Paul “we’re watching the film, we can actually see that because of us making it, that we are involved in each other’s story, because there are clips of others (...) so you can tell that that community of support is there, in the five films (...), so even if we sort of sectioned it off, it kind of has the individuals focusing, there’s still that slight curve of having somebody else in that clip, there’s the thing of the context with the lines, so again you have got that feel of community and what we’re trying to achieve and what it’s about within the context of those five films”. In fact, participants were aware, at the moment of creating *Stepping Through*, that they were mixing layers of voices, as even if each chapter was directed by one specific participant, it still contained the voices of others via the poetic fragments that were written by everyone and remixed by each participant.

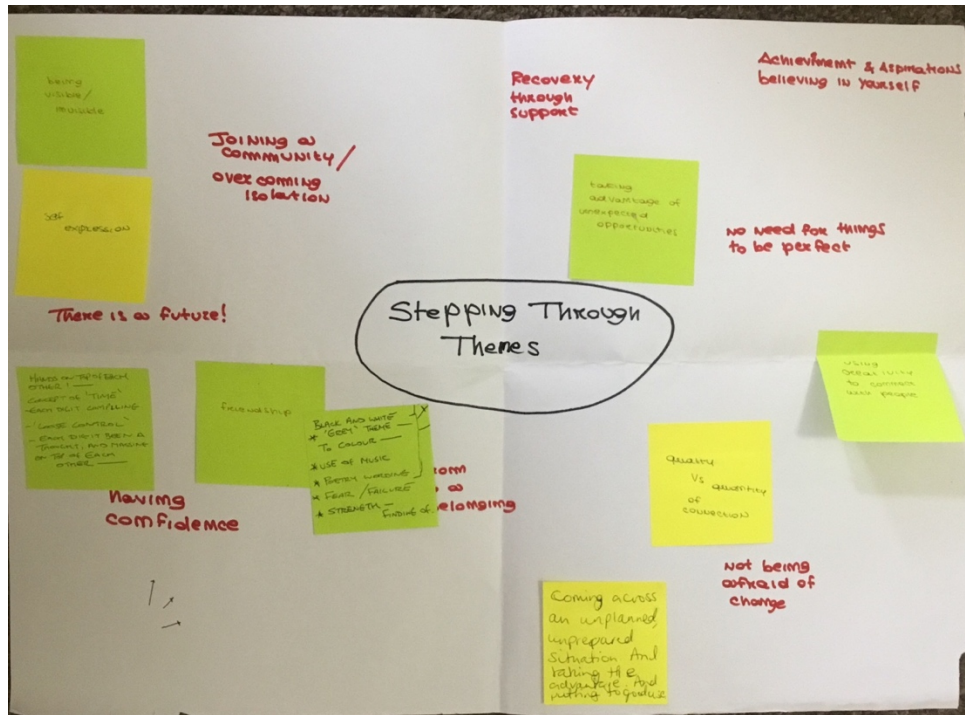


Figure 33 Recap of themes in the film

Most participants affirmed that they still felt the film was relevant to their experiences. Paul talked about how his life circumstances have changed since 2016, but the feelings expressed in his chapter of the film still apply to his life, to different but somewhat still challenging circumstances.

A review of the process of making the film generated mostly positive feedback, with participants remembering the work as fun and engaging. They talked about their favourite parts of the process: for Adam “my favourite part is learning how to edit, and just (...) look at what you do when you edit and you put different effects on the film and all of that, and different style in which you do it and it's good to learn these things”; Nathan and Wayne found the part of recording poetry and finding the right music track for each poem as their favourite; Paul appreciated the process as a whole, but also remembered a challenging time of trying to work with collective poetry when another participant, who is a poet himself would have preferred to use his own work, rather than produce writing as a group (Paul: “I remember one part that was (...) also really stressful and it was the whole debate on the poem side of things (...) with someone wanting to write their own film poem, and not mix it up or writing something different”). Despite this episode, Paul, who like Wayne, Nathan and Adam, has since taken part in other group film experiences at Converge, remembered *Stepping Through* as one of the most successful. Participants agreed and identified the

reasons as the fact that they already knew each other and were used to do creative work together in *Out of Character*, that they had been knowing me for a couple of years through my volunteering filming of *Out of Character*, and that everyone in this group was committed to the process and did not skip any session. Therefore, participants identified quality of relationships and trust as key elements towards engagement with the filmmaking process.

Overall, the review of *Stepping Through* with its participants did not highlight any particular dissatisfaction with the film or the possibility that the film did not fulfil its expressive potential, with two minor exceptions consisting of some tensions in the experience of community writing cited above, and the fact that the related half-painted face film idea, which is referenced in *Stepping Through* using a portrait of Paul, was in the end not produced, leaving that shot in the film as an empty reference that the audience could not catch: “the more I look at it the more I think, yes that just doesn't make sense to anybody, we know what that is, and we know that that was going to be the lead on to the next film that we were going to be making, but because we haven't made that film (...), I think from experiences of people watching it, nobody has really turned around and sort of gone well, what's that about, the half painted face, it's just that and that was it”. This portrait stands as an empty reference in the film, with participants joking on the fact that the audience must have assumed it was a reference to *Braveheart*.



Figure 34 Empty reference to the half-painted face film idea

5.4.2 Expressive needs not fully accommodated by the linear film

While a first review of the film did not show a pressing need to “correct” any particular shortcoming in *Stepping Through* as a linear film, the subsequent workshops highlighted a number of possibilities which could not be explored in the original film. The activities in the

workshops generated fruitful discussions, in which participants tended to operate across two main levels: discussing mental health, with participants identifying how the experience of loneliness and joining a community meant different things to each and how other experiences have an importance in supporting recovery; a discussion on how the film chapters may or may not convey those individual viewpoints and what additional materials (imagery, more writing) might fill those gaps. The findings of these discussions have been grouped here around needs that non-linearity could support.

5.4.2.1 Need for presence of more storyline

One of the needs that more strongly emerged from the workshops is to create space for multiple storylines that could link to each other, starting with the half-painted face film idea described above. Every participant in the group expressed their will to produce this additional film, and non-linearity could mean that the film could be accessed through the reference image in *Stepping Through*, which at that moment did not link to anything. This line of enquiry was straightforward to explore, as participants have been keeping in mind the half-painted face film idea since summer 2016, waiting for the right time to produce it. However, non-linearity would mean that the two films do not have to stand as separated films but could be explored as a unique piece. According to my 2016 notes, the half-painted face film idea would serve to enrich the concept of community, meaning not just considering community as a specific place of support (in this case Converge), but as a need for dialogue and understanding in society as a whole. Participants expressed unshaken enthusiasm (Adam: "I wouldn't change the idea, I like it") towards this idea and produced some writing around it, using colours as a starting point.

Aside from this pre-existing idea, the personal mapping activity and the writing which was produced as a result highlighted a number of differences amongst participants' experiences of loneliness and recovery. This part of the study clearly shed a light on the unique elements of each participant's experience and how the film, as it is, has privileged what participants had in common. A summary of the different experiences of participants as emerged through the mapping exercises can be found in [Appendix 2](#).

This exercise paired with creative writing produced by participants using keywords and key images from the film, showed the emergence of several sub-topics that are relevant to just some or only one participant, but that are still critical in conveying how recovery happened for them. Some

of these storylines are completely absent from the film, while others are hinted through a symbolic image, but not explicitly articulated. Table 1 presents a list of these storylines with description, level of relevance for each participant, and whether or not they are somehow expressed in *Stepping Through*.

Table 1 Description of new storylines identified

Storyline	Description of Storyline	Relevance to participants	Presence in the current film
Feeling lonely in a crowd	This theme centres around the fact that the presence of a community is not necessarily an element which supports recovery. Two participants spoke of the fact that during their illness they often felt lonely in a crowd – isolated even when surrounded by people. Participants felt it is necessary to underline that the quality of connections is more conducive to recovery than their mere presence.	Wayne, Laurie	Absent in the film for Wayne; hinted at in one of Laurie's symbolic images
Being an artist	For two participants developing their identity as creatives has been key to recovery; in both cases this has happened through joining a community and receiving support and validation from others. Their creative development has unlocked aspects of themselves they were not in touch with before their illness. Those aspects of their identity needed to be integrated to become full individuals. Also, creativity has allowed them to work through issues in their lives.	Paul, Laurie	Hinted at in Paul's chapter through the symbol of the eye make-up; hinted at in Laurie's chapter through the image of a notebook

Self-care, healthy habits	For one participant, while external support helped, it was fundamental to develop healthy habits (diet, exercise, no alcohol) and break addiction in order to recover. His healthy habits have then developed into a series of community activities that helped breaking his isolation.	Nathan	Absent in the film
Liberating parts of yourself which were always there, but unexpressed	This storyline describes an integration of lost or repressed parts of participants' personalities which were reintegrated and expressed through friendship and community support.	Adam, Paul	Present in the film in Adam's chapter but could be deepened
Achievement later in life	For some participants, it was very important to accomplish creative or personal goals after a certain age (50s) through Converge. They had negative experiences in school which affected their self-esteem during their entire life. Having recognition later in life has had a fundamental role in their recovery and the way they interact with others.	Wayne, Laurie	Absent in the film

Building a new you	This storyline is particularly important to Adam. It links to rebuilding one's sense of identity and belonging after the disruptive effects of mental illness.	Adam	Hinted at in the film through some of the poetry lines
Sustainability of recovery	This storyline encompasses ideas on the ups and downs of recovery, the fact that recovery is not linear, and that expectation of it being so could hinder the process. Support from others can be key in relapses to maintain direction.	Adam, but resonated with all	Absent in the film
Down to me	This theme highlights the importance of an inner resolve towards recovery and building bridges with others, without which it would not be possible to establish meaningful connections with the outside world.	Adam and Paul	Present in the film in form of a line in Paul's poetry, but not fully articulated

All of these sub-topics have a validity and meaning of their own, and some of them have been inserted in *Stepping Through* in the shape of symbolic images, which are, however mostly impossible for an audience to catch in their full meaning. In this study, participants envisioned each of them as a possible separate storylines, created combining images already present in the film in different orders, and by possibly adding new ones (for the sub-topic "Lonely within a crowd", for instance, Wayne presented a poem he had already written in a creative writing class and Adam suggested imagery such as "I can see all of us maybe doing a scene, we're in the same room together and with a lot of other people but, then you use stills and slow motion (...) just saying, oh I feel really lonely in this room, I'm not feeling myself (...), the voices are our voices, but it's saying isolation, or I'm not feeling myself, (...) we could visualise on each person (...) [that] yeah, you can be in a crowd but

you can be the one who's the most isolated there"). As with the half-painted film idea, these sub-topics expand the original theme of isolation and recovery, painting a more personalised and complex view on the matter. As discussion around these storylines continued during workshops 4 and 5, two storylines, "Liberating parts of yourself which were always there, but unexpressed" and "Building a new you" started to show increasing similarities and were eventually merged. On the other hand, a new storyline emerged strongly from participants' writing, and it consisted of reflections around the theme of friendship. This is a theme that applies to all participants, and it is present in *Stepping Through*, especially in Nathan's chapter and in the outtakes. However, participants felt that it deserved more space as it was a forging element of the film, and it strongly links to the beneficial effects of being part of a community. "Friendship" became a storyline in itself and the finalised list of new storylines was further explored by building sequences of images using the symbolic shots extracted from *Stepping Through*. This exercise showed that while some of these new storylines had plenty of imagery to work with in the original *Stepping Through* and were somewhat embedded in the visual tapestry of the film, some, especially "Self-care", "Achievements Later in Life", and "Lonely in a Crowd" would require the creation of new images and symbols as they are almost invisible in the current film. This translated to the fact that the experiences of those participants for whom those storylines are essential were currently under-represented in *Stepping Through*.

Finally, Paul talked about creating a chapter of the film about myself. In my practice of facilitating participatory filmmaking, I often add my contribution to the film in order to further deconstruct the power dynamics of a filmmaker/expert, who does not talk about herself, and participants who are put in the vulnerable position of sharing personal issues. In this case, my contribution to the film was going to be a chapter about living abroad as a foreigner and looking for a community of like-minded people, which I found through my volunteering at Converge. However, due to lack of time, my chapter was not produced to give priority to the participants' work. Paul acknowledges the fact that I joined Converge through a different path than participants in the group, and sees it as an element of diversity in the film: "I would be interested to see if you could get that into it somehow, even if it's an extra, like a special edition or whatever, I think it would be nice because your one was about paths, coming from elsewhere, from a different way, in where we all came from quite of a similar sort of mental health thing, plus also with having a female context in there, I think for me in this process I would be really interested in". The rest of the participants mirrored Paul's interest in having a chapter about myself as one of the voices in the film.

Overall, this research theme shows at least ten storylines which could not find space in the film: eight personal themes of mental illness and recovery with different levels of relevance to each participant, which are at times hinted through symbolic images in *Stepping Through*, but which are not fully developed; the half-painted face film idea and my own chapter in the film, which were designed but not produced at the time of making *Stepping Through*.

5.4.2.2 Need for adding context and extra materials

This research theme encompasses extra materials participants would have liked to add to complement the film, which I distinguished from the “storylines” as they do not mirror the film poetry style of *Stepping Through*, and they include a couple of examples that are not necessarily in film form altogether. These additional materials emerged spontaneously from discussions and conversations in the workshops, rather than through writing activities.

From the first session, Nathan discussed a couple of scenography elements in the film that were found at York St John campus and were produced by university students. One is a poster appearing in one of the shots. He was intrigued by researching who made that poster and what was the meaning of it. Another element are chairs found in the dance studio as part of a student’s performance, used as scenography of Nathan’s chapter in the film.



Figure 35 Scenography from York St John students in the film

He said: “it would be nice to know what that actually all meant (...) because somehow they come inside [the film] without knowing what we were doing (...), that’s definitely one that we should look into, because the person who’s done it might want to get interviews and explain”. Adam also talked about researching and interviewing the students who worked on

that project. These elements could have a particular value for participants, as Converge works around establishing collaboration and dialogue between Converge students and York St John university students, in order to break down barriers between mental health service users and the university as a whole. This for Paul also represented a possible mental health metaphor in that “from a mental health point of view, it’s that thing where the creativity element of being spontaneous and going with finding these things and working it, I suppose because there’s that community element and support element and where there’s this anxiety focus (...) because that can be quite anxiety provoking, like gosh, shall I, shouldn’t I, but because we were there together it was fine because, we were all on it together”. What he meant with this comment is that by doing the film as a group, participants found the courage to use their surroundings creatively and spontaneously, incorporating other people’s work. With the idea of including interviews or written content about these elements, participants were expressing a need to provide additional context on how Converge works and how collaboration with York St John students takes place.

Along the same line of thought, Nathan proposed the production of a “making of” that could be accessed while the film is running: “you stop it and you play something else, in which maybe I’ll be chatting about what I’ve done”. This links to a general need of participants around adding context on Converge and how their relationship was born. For Adam this meant “the background of like maybe Nathan’s story or whole background of M’s story or maybe some sort of how the idea came up”. Laurie spoke of wanting to add information about how participants met through Converge and how he started writing. This would complement and enlarge the role of the outtakes currently present at the end of the film, a portion which participants found very important to keep to show how the process of making the film incorporates in itself many of the elements discussed in the main theme of the film. In Wayne’s words “I think it [the outtakes] also shows that obviously things aren’t always perfect you know, you can make mistakes, but they don’t have to be big mistakes that are going to really affect you (...) I just found laughter was like a tonic, just that sort of thing when it’s fun to see it”. Regarding the outtakes, Adam said “it’s all the groundwork plus the chemistry between all of us, and how we work together and how (...) maybe it went wrong a few things, but (...) we were just testing the waters until we get to the right thing (...) and it shows others even if you get things wrong you still ok, you are still doing perfectly fine”. As such, a “behind the scenes” section of the film would provide context information on Converge, the relationships between participants, how they develop their film work, and how they incorporated students’ work in the film. This is important to participants as they realise the current film takes for granted the presence of an audience who is already aware of what Converge is.

5.4.2.3 Need for linking portions of the materials together

This research themes looks at how the additional materials listed above (storylines + context) were envisioned by participants as being linked in different ways to each other, which differentiates an imaginary non-linear version of *Stepping Through* from simply making a certain number of additional linear films, or a longer linear film. The half-painted face film idea was envisioned from the start as a film that could be accessed through the shot of the actor appearing just before the closing title. In producing new storylines that deepen the personal relationship of each participant with the theme of the film, they also identified which of these elements are in common between different chapters. Out of the eight additional sub-topics identified above, two apply to only one participant each, while six of them are in common amongst different participants. For instance, the sub-topic *Recovery through the use of creativity and developing an identity as an artist/performer* is relevant to Paul and Laurie, who both developed a creative identity in different ways and at different ages. For Laurie this sub-topic also links to *Achievements later in life*, which is relevant to Wayne but does not apply to Paul. Participants have imagined these sub-topics as storylines accessible or linked to different chapters in the film. Nathan, quoted above, imagined a “behind the scenes” section which could be accessed at different points in the film, according to viewers’ interest.

Participants also identified recurring symbols and stylistic tropes in the film that link parts of the film together and could be used as a “tag” to explore different portions of the film combined, such as the use of black and white from the opening title to places in the film that wanted to represent a challenging time for its author (identified by Paul); or the presence of posters, about which Adam affirms: “because sometimes the theme can go through it you know, the same theme, having a poster at different points, because sometimes it interlinks”. Another recurrent symbol is the revolving door, which can encompass different meanings for each participant. For Paul, it represents “going in different directions, for going forward and going back (...), this feeling of searching to understand, what had gone on, and why it had gone on, which would then revolve as a kind of a passing of time, the passing of time is a kind of symbolism over the revolving door”; for Adam that “we are all going in circles in our lives but we eventually connect again”, while for Wayne and others it also has the meaning “the fun of doing [the film]”. Creating new combinations of images for the new storylines from the pool already present in *Stepping Through* generated discussion which highlighted how several symbols in the film have different meanings for participants: these symbols are more

layered than they appear to be in *Stepping Through* as a linear film. [Appendix 3](#) presents a table of how symbols in *Stepping Through* have different meanings for different participants.

The prospect of non-linearity allowed participants to review additional materials and existing recurring symbols in the film as fundamentally interlinked with the body of the film, rather than generating separate films as discrete units. Exploring these symbols as possible “tags” in the film generated interest in participants, with Adam stating: “I like the way we are developing our film again, to like open it to an audience by showing the other side to it, the background and our stories and that pictures can mean different things”.

5.4.2.4 Audience involvement in the film

The personal mapping activity reserved space to a reflection on the role of the audience in *Stepping Through*. Generally, all participants agreed that they would like to use the film in supporting people who are struggling with mental health problems and inspire them through to join a supportive community and action towards recovery. Raising awareness in people who might not know about mental health appeared to be a secondary aim of the film. For Wayne the film should encourage people by showing that “there is light at the end of the tunnel” and that “there is hope, that you are not alone, that there can be laughter, good times, keep positive, and being yourself”. Paul saw it as an opportunity to “speaking to other people that are experiencing it themselves, because of each person having their own different experiences and talking about the stuff you have, you know, isolation, vulnerability, etc. etc., is giving that message because while you’re going through it you think right, I heard that people go through this but I don’t believe it, it’s only me that’s going through this (...). It’s saying no, there’s others, we’ve been through this, we’re still going through it”. Paul also spoke of the film as a “trigger” to inspire the audience to see multiple possibilities and discover their own stories: “I was going for inspiring or inspirational (...) to see paths walked on, or want to walk, or still being walked (...) for others to sort of reflect and discover their stories, as reflection of other people’s stories”. This seemed to resonate with Adam, who from the first session demonstrated an understanding of interactive films as those “where you can dictate what’s happening in your journey”. By bringing these viewpoints together, participants imagined the possibility of allowing the viewers to mix words and images to create their own chapter in the film as a result of the reflection induced by exploring their stories.

5.5 Discussion

The findings from the study demonstrated that, while there was no pressing dissatisfaction with the film at a first review, the introduction of the possibility of non-linearity pushed the film boundaries in new directions, with participants developing new ideas as a result. Four expressive needs not currently supported by the film were identified and the group started imagining possibilities towards fulfilling those needs via non-linearity.

5.5.1 A more complex representation of isolation and recovery

In the linear film, participants worked around an experience they all had in common (joining a supportive community and reducing isolation) and, as a result, tended to pick and highlight elements of their experiences that they knew were in common with others. Through the workshops they started to reflect more on their particular circumstances and explored elements of those experiences that were unique to just themselves or were in common with just a number of other participants. This showed that, while joining a community was helpful for each of them, the dynamics are slightly different in each case, and so are the conditions that were conducive to recovery. Imagining a non-linear version of the film painted a more complex picture of recovery, where overcoming isolation does not consist simply of joining a community, but of a synergy of elements. These included finding an inner resolve towards recovery; establishing productive and authentic relationships with others; developing a new identity in which the experience of mental illness can be incorporated in the sense of self of the individual without shame; valuing creativity, achievements, and self-care as ways of increasing self-worth; being aware of the ups and downs of recovery. These are all aspects that can be influenced by the presence of a supportive community and, crucially, that have different degrees of relevance to each participant.

A first limit of the film in terms of representation thus consists in partially depicting a binary relationship between isolation/mental health problems and community/recovery. Participants considered the message in the original film significant and still relevant to their lives, which means this film cannot be considered a misrepresentation of participants' viewpoints; it is still a film that successfully conveyed what the participants wanted to express. However, the representation of the issue isolation/recovery that emerged through exploring non-linearity is a more complex and well-rounded view on the matter that preserves inner tensions and possible contradictions, in line with best practices on how to represent mental health (Time to Change 2012 and 2014). Drawing upon opportunities of

interactivity to create more personalised films in which participants can express their unique viewpoints on the issue could, therefore, allow both a safe and empowering level of self-disclosure. As discussed in section [2.3](#), this could be an effective strategy against self-stigma according to Corrigan (Corrigan *et al* 2015) and offer mediated form of contact for viewers, which again was demonstrated to help counteracting stigma (Angermeyer *et al* 2004). These strategies, facilitated by the possibility of non-linearity, would be better supported by an interactive film, which, as a result, could be particularly effective in counteracting those mental health stereotypes widely portrayed in mainstream media (Wahl 1995, Philo *et al* 1996, Cross 2004, Harper 2005).

5.5.2 A polyvocal film form

In imagining a non-linear form for the film, participants identified the need to provide extra context to describe both *Converge* to those who are not familiar with it, and their experience of participatory filmmaking, as a form of mutual support. They deepened the meaning of recurring symbols in the film by envisioning them as “tags”, explored how they may have attached slightly different meanings to each of them, and found a number of thematic links that bridge different portions of the film together.

These findings are not necessarily exclusive to non-linearity: other forms of complex storytelling might have been able to bring out these additional viewpoints in participants. However, with a view on participatory filmmaking, they indicate that the main limit of the linear film might consist in the fact that participants felt the implicit pressure of exploring mostly portions of their experience that were in common with other participants. Some of them still inputted personal elements in their own chapters of the film in the form of symbolic elements (eye makeup to represent being a performer, overlapping images to suggest a split self, the presence of a notebook to indicate the importance of creativity); the evocative form of video poetry and structuring the film around personal chapters allowed a degree of flexibility on this. Even so, it would be difficult for an audience who is not familiar with the participants to catch the importance and depth of those symbols. On the other hand, the chapter structure of *Stepping Through*, which attempted to create a dedicated space to each participant, limited the possibility of including the half-painted face film, which is a collective take on the same theme. In this sense, *Stepping Through* as a linear film tried to reach a compromise: a common theme expressed by five personal participants' chapters. While this form partially succeeded in its attempt, it pushed participants to focus mostly on

experiences they had in common to create a coherent storyline, and it has excluded the possibility of including a collective piece which would not fit with the chapters structure. The prospect of non-linearity allowed participants to imagine a film form that would accommodate storylines which encompass group views while branching out in a number of personal directions, each linked in complex ways with the original body of the film, with the addition of a broader context. The participants also envisioned a more precise role for the audience and thought of ways of making it capable of inputting their views in the film.

The expressive aims identified in this study cannot be achieved by simply making a longer linear film: throughout this study, even with a very little input on narrative non-linearity and without watching any example of interactive films, participants envisioned the new storylines as elements that could be accessed through tags according to viewers' interests; they identified links between the existing film and the additional materials they would like to explore; and they explored the layered nature of the symbols present in the film. A spacious non-linear form of narrative appears as the natural development for a film that contains multiple voices in complex relations with each other. Thinking back at the narrative qualities that interactive documentary could offer to participatory filmmaking, as described in section [3.3.1](#), participants in this study seem to have spontaneously moved towards three of them:

5.5.2.1 Coexistence of more storylines

As demonstrated in the findings, the emergence of more storylines interlinked with each other was one of the strongest directions originated from the study. This matches the potential of i-Docs to build complex arguments and to open the linear film form to a polyphonic structure able to accommodate both personal and group views.

5.5.2.2 Possibility of presenting extra materials in non-filmic form

This possibility emerged in the context of linking existing poetry produced by participants in their own creative writing practice to their chapter of the film and in offering context information on the organisation by linking audio clips or other works produced in the film classes. This would “augment” the central narrative of the film (Nash 2012) and allow

viewers who are not familiar with the organisation to explore this extra material according to their level of interest. It could also ease the process of sharing and writing for participants: during this study Wayne presented a poem created in the Converge creative writing course, Paul reflected on some tensions while making *Stepping Through*, when Laurie, who is a professional writer, refused to take part in communal writing activities and wanted instead to use his own writing. By making space in the film for participants to share relevant artwork produced in other contexts, which they find contributes to their self-representation as artists, could mean that they can feel their expertise is valued and accounted for in the film.

5.5.2.3 Audience input in the film

Some of the participants talked recurrently of pathways and journeys, both as metaphors of their experiences of mental health problems, and of the possibilities they would like to present to an audience (defined as “pathways” and “doorways” to explore). They would like to inspire an audience to reflect on their circumstances as a result of participants’ stories. As such, it seems that a film form that allows an explorative journey for audiences, such as interactive documentary, would be particularly suitable for this film. Participants imagined ways for viewers to interact with a pool of images and words to create their own chapter in the film, in fact opening the film form to a dialogic potential that is one of the key aspects of participatory filmmaking (White 2003). An interactive film that grants the possibility of an active dialogue taking place between the original creators and audiences – who are in fact ideally turned into co-creators – would allow for a truly dialogic participatory film, whose life does not end with community screenings, but keeps on transforming over time, a ‘living documentary’, according to Gaudenzi’s definition (Gaudenzi 2013).

5.5.2.4 Other opportunities

Other possibilities previously identified (responsiveness, empathy, immersion), which could present fruitful opportunities to participatory filmmaking, were not explored by participants in this occasion, nor have they been presented to them. The reason not to present additional opportunities to participants, in this instance, was to allow them space to develop possible solutions based on their current expressive needs. This is in line with the

scope of study, which revolved around an analysis of existing limits in the film, rather than designing a functional interactive film prototype. For the same reason, the study did not entail an evaluation of which of the ideas developed by participants could be realised in practice according to the non-linear editing tools available at this stage, nor analysis on possible workflows to get non-professional filmmakers familiar with those tools. These issues were rather explored in the second study of this research project.

5.6 Chapter summary

The study presented in this chapter showed that, while *Stepping Through* as a linear film made a considerable effort towards allowing authors a certain degree of personalisation through the use of poetry, visual symbols and chapter division, some expressive needs were not met by linear filmmaking. Rather than trying to adapt the creative process to the medium, we explored what additional ideas could emerge if the medium could be shaped according to the expressive needs of the participants. The results indicated that non-linearity of interactive documentary presents an array of opportunities for participatory filmmaking thanks to its capacity to “afford new ways of presenting multiple points of view”, including “the perspective of a community of authors working collaboratively around points of view”; also, non-linearity “can offer more scope for in-depth engagement with a set of complex ideas” (Aston and Gaudenzi 2012 p.133), which makes it particularly suitable for discussing mental health. In this case, participants have spontaneously moved towards imagining a film form that allows the coexistence of multiple storylines, the presence of background information, the possibility of linking these elements through tags, and modes of interactive engagement of viewers.

Overall, they imagined the possibility of a film that not just linearly presents, but rather non-linearly embeds in its very form both the complexity of the topic discussed and the multiple voices discussing it. The next chapters explore how these expressive needs became the basis for the creation of an interactive version of *Stepping Through*, with a particular attention at the process adjustments necessary to guide participants through the production of a piece of interactive media ([Chapter 6](#)), and to the quest of a non-linear film form that could accommodate the expressive needs identified in this study ([Chapter 7](#)).

CHAPTER 6 DESIGNING STRUCTURAL PARTICIPATION IN MAKING *STEPPING THROUGH INTERACTIVE*

In the last chapter I presented the first study conducted with participants who made *Stepping Through*, where the group deconstructed the film and the experiences participants intended to convey, uncovering how some key expressive needs remained unfulfilled due to the constraints of structuring materials within a linear narrative form. Participants expressed the need to have more co-existing storylines encompassing both personal and communal viewpoints; the need to present context materials; the need to link portions of narrative materials together according to thematic or visual similarities; the need to involve audiences in having a say in the film, with a view of encouraging self-reflection. I have also touched on the fact that interactive filmmaking and its narrative non-linearity could allow enough flexibility for these needs to be accommodated, due to its capacity to make space for multiple storylines to coexist, the possibility of adding materials in non-filmic form, and to reserve an active role to viewers.

Given this scenario, the next step in our practice-led research consisted in proceeding towards the making of an interactive version of *Stepping Through*, designing with participants a non-linear narrative structure which could accommodate those expressive needs that were sacrificed in the original linear *Stepping Through*. All aspects of this work constituted the second study in this research.

The experience of re-creating *Stepping Through* as an interactive film presented a series of challenges on two main levels: how to adapt the participatory filmmaking process to the creation of a more complex form of non-linear media; and what kind of non-linear narrative form could serve the expressive needs of participants. In both areas, we had very limited applicable input from other existing projects and a lack of established processes

and forms, which is what motivated the practice-led approach of this research. In order to navigate these new areas of investigation, we had to test and experiment with participants, adjusting processes and forms as the work progressed, through on-going exchange of ideas and negotiations.

The development of a process that could merge participatory filmmaking and interactive film design and the emergence of a non-linear narrative form for *Stepping Through* were inextricably linked and influenced each other as part of the same body of work. However, for clarity, we have separated the two main themes of this study, process and form, and dedicated one chapter to each. This chapter focuses on the overall process of making *Stepping Through* and the next to the narrative form this process led to, in order to better reflect on these aspects and to extrapolate some general considerations which could be of inspiration for other practitioners and researchers.

This chapter is a reflective study on how the process unfolded and which principles proved helpful in merging participatory filmmaking and interactive media design for participants who had no previous experience of producing interactive media, led by a facilitator (myself), who was also new to this kind of practice. The chapter starts by reviewing the challenges we faced in the attempt to design an inclusive process for structural participation in interactive filmmaking, followed by a description of the research question and methods applied to analyse the process of turning *Stepping Through* into an interactive film.

The second part of the chapter describes the participatory process that led to the production of the original *Stepping Through*, followed by a description of how this process was expanded to explore non-linear storytelling in this research, reviewing similarities and dissimilarities between the two.

The last part of the chapter discusses how participatory filmmaking processes can be amplified to include new activities that facilitate interactive storytelling while respecting the principles of structural participation typical of participatory filmmaking, which strategies proved successful in tackling the challenges identified in the first part of the chapter, and which elements had a detrimental effect on participants' engagement. The aim of this reflection is to identify general strategies which could be of direct use or inspiration for similar experiments in creating structurally participatory interactive films.

6.1 Challenges in designing a production process for participatory interactive films

In section [3.2.5](#), I have reflected on how the practice of interactive documentary often expresses participatory ambitions (Favero 2013, Nogueira 2016), that are, however, most often limited to forms of executory/minimalist of participation where viewers are invited to provide content in form of footage, images, sound, or written text, without having a say on the overall authorship of the project. The practice of participatory filmmaking, on the other hand, revolves around devolving the role of filmmakers to community members who can shape their own film productions from the very beginning, writing, designing, and producing films that reflect their own experiences and viewpoints (White 2003).

In participatory film experiences, such as the one that led to the creation of *Stepping Through*, structural participation, that is authorial participation, is embedded in the entire process of filmmaking: participants choose a theme they wish to explore, they develop storytelling ideas, get trained in filmmaking skills, and finally actively make their own film, supported by facilitators who make a conscious effort to guide participants without taking over or steering their authorial intentions. When it comes to interactive documentary, the goal of increasing participants' involvement in the structural authorship of the film cannot simply be achieved by applying the participatory filmmaking processes without modification. Participatory filmmaking is based on supporting community members in exercising skills that directly relate to traditional linear filmmaking. To introduce a different medium in the process means having to face and accommodate an increased level complexity.

In our attempt to design a process that would allow us to guide participants in producing an interactive version of *Stepping Through*, according to the expressive needs identified through the deconstruction of the linear film, we have identified three main challenges.

6.1.1 Lack of prescriptive guidance

Both participatory filmmaking and interactive documentary production are flexible practices that have never been crystallised in any mainstream workflow. Accounts of participatory film work, in contexts ranging from rural development (Chowdhury *et al* 2010, Richardson-Ngwenya *et al* 2019), advocacy (Flower and McConville 2009), health (Buchanan and Murray 2012, Sitter 2015) to academic research (Parr 2007, Mistry *et al* 2016, Koningstein 2018), are not lacking in the literature, most projects' workflows vary greatly according to agenda, communities involved, size of participants' group, time, and budget available. Unlike traditional filmmaking, where practitioners can refer to formalised

workflows both for fiction (Tomaric 2013) and even for the most fluid practice of documentary filmmaking (Rabiger 2014), participatory filmmaking tends to flexibly adapt to each project according to its specific requirements, keeping as unifying criteria “a focus on skills and values rather than methods and techniques” (High *et al* 2012).

The practice of interactive documentary, on the other hand, is not defined by a set of values but rather by the features of finished products (i-Docs) which present a set of characteristics: they are grounded in reality (non-fiction), and they make use of some form of interactivity (Galloway 2007). In terms of workflows, there is a similar fluidity as observed in participatory filmmaking: each i-Doc is very different from the next and there is not a set of standard practice towards the production of an interactive documentaries. Detailed descriptions of production processes are not easily available (Koenitz 2015), unlike traditional filmmaking which presents a body of standardised practices.

To merge these two forms of practice is still a relatively infrequent endeavour and it requires stepping out into uncharted territory and having very few case studies (Nogueira 2016, Green *et al* 2018) that can be used as reference point.

6.1.2 Technical skills and limitations

In traditional participatory filmmaking, facilitators have direct experience in filmmaking and can pass on skills to participants and guide them through the process. However, very few participatory filmmakers have the technical skills that would allow them to use coding to shape an interactive film in non-linear storytelling software.

While there is a considerable effort from R&D teams and research labs to create software that can support interactive media productions for practitioners with no programming skills, at the time of conducting this study, most accessible tools do not offer the level of complexity required by a tailored interactive filmmaking project and external technical support can be necessary. While a participatory filmmaking facilitator is able to manage participants’ expectations of what is technically possible in a linear film, when designing a participatory interactive film there is a risk of imagining unfeasible features, or, on the contrary, leave possibilities unexplored due to the unfamiliarity of the facilitator with the technical resources available.

6.1.3 Imagining the unfamiliar

A challenge, which is unpacked with higher levels of details in [Chapter 7](#) and is linked in part of the technical limitations just described, regards how to guide participants in imagining a film form which is not familiar to them, which many of them have never consumed as audience before, and that is not yet crystallised in our shared idea of what a documentary looks like. This implies that participants need to be supported in imagining which features and structures can best support their authorial intentions without falling into the temptation of imitating existing models. While there is nothing wrong with drawing inspiration from existing interactive documentary, the scope of our research was to investigate what kind of structures and forms would organically emerge from the expressive needs of participants. To work within this research aim meant to carefully consider when and how to introduce examples and concepts to participants.

6.2 Research question, aims, and methods

In this chapter, I explore responses to the challenges of making participatory interactive films and setting up workflows that merge these two forms of practice. The making of an interactive version of *Stepping Through* with the participants who created the original film acts a case study through which we review the strategies deployed to expand participatory filmmaking processes to facilitate the production of interactive narratives. This portion of the research seeks answers to the following research question:

how can we merge participatory filmmaking and interactive filmmaking processes to guide people with lived experience of mental health problems in producing polyvocal interactive films on mental health that are structurally participatory?

In accordance with the rest of this research, the work analysed in this study is practice-led (Arnold 2012), in that we sought to come to an understanding of participatory interactive film design through the practice of making an interactive film. In exploring and assessing qualities of the design process resulted from merging participatory filmmaking and interactive documentary, we take into consideration the overall production of *Stepping Through Interactive*, from the writing produced in the process of deconstructing the original film to the achievement of a final working prototype.

The activities which supported the production of *Stepping Through Interactive* included: fieldwork with participants through writing, filming, reviewing, and editing workshops; an internship as part of a Summer School programme in our research lab which involved a first-year interactive media student in supporting the design of an interactive structure for the film; an ongoing collaboration with software developers at our research lab to implement the interactive film in Cutting Room, an authoring toolkit for interactive storytelling. A detailed description of these activities can be found in section [6.4](#).

As per the entire research, I acted both as a researcher and a participatory filmmaking facilitator, guiding the group in filming activities and supporting them in articulating their narrative ideas; participants were central to the research design, with their needs shaping the content and frequency of sessions and the range of activities; their communicative needs in the film held a central role in the design process; dialogue and reflection were key to both the research design and the film design; we adopted an iterative, rather than linear, approach to the work; the workshops were designed to be as similar as possible to the participatory filmmaking sessions participants were familiar with. We limited the presence of external parties to the student intern who helped with fieldnotes and behind-the-scenes filming, in order not to disrupt the group dynamics and rapport.

The production of *Stepping Through Interactive* was documented through a body of data comprising workshop plans and transcriptions, writing created by participants for the film, film footage and behind the scenes footage, production diaries, reflective logs, and images produced by participants during the sessions. To be able to compare my fieldnotes against objective data, I kept recording the discussions taking place in writing, design, and reviewing sessions. The filming sessions were not sound recorded but rather documented by creating production diaries (see [Appendix 5](#) for a sample production diary entry).

To assess qualities of the overall production process, we focused our analysis particularly on registers of the workshops, planning notes, notes related to the student internship and the work with software developers, and my own reflections on methods and activities, to gain a bird-view perspective of the process that led to the production of *Stepping Through Interactive*. With frequency, content, and structure of the sessions tending to be flexible and responsive to the needs of participants, many decisions were taken in the moment and the work was continually adaptive. Consequently, we analysed this data to track key decisions; work phases and their interplay; negotiations between myself and participants on the range of activities and their rhythm; descriptions of activities and their efficacy; and participatory filmmaking principles at play. This analysis helped us identifying key stages and long-term trends in the overall process.

6.3 Participatory filmmaking process in *Stepping Through*

The participatory filmmaking process that led to the production of the original *Stepping Through* followed a structure which I often apply in my participatory work with communities. It is worth reviewing this process because, as previously discussed in [6.1.1](#), participatory filmmaking tends to vary in methods and applications. Reviewing what happened in the making of the original *Stepping Through* can help making sense of how the process was adapted and extended to allow participants to experiment with non-linear storytelling.

As discussed in section [4.2.5](#), *Stepping Through* emerged as the result of a pilot film course at Converge. Participants were granted freedom to explore any subject of their choice through the use of film, with no pre-established agenda. The work started during the summer of 2016, when most Converge courses were paused. The setting was York St John University, where Converge is based. The length of the course was set as 9 weeks, with weekly two-hour sessions. The length of the classes reflected the general approach at Converge, where most sessions are kept to a maximum of two hours and a break is allowed in the middle of the session.

6.3.1 Participatory filmmaking principles in the original *Stepping Through* process

The approach to the sessions which led to the production of the original *Stepping Through* in the summer of 2016 followed some principles which I had established as a participatory filmmaker over several years of working with different communities, and which are not necessarily standard practice.

6.3.1.1 *Storytelling and self-expression precede the use of technology*

In my practice, I usually start by focusing participants' attention on which themes and stories they would like to explore, regardless of the art form chosen. I then gradually introduce concepts related to the technology, by proposing exercises using paper, drawings, and sounds. Only when an idea has taken shape and the concept of a series of images on a timeline accompanied by sounds has been roughly developed, I then train participants in the use of cameras and sound equipment. This approach is aimed at

avoiding excessive focus on the technological aspects of filmmaking, which may detract from expressive storytelling; and at diminishing the intimidating effects of technology on participants who may have never used it before. This approach generally differs from the practice described by some participatory video practitioners, who prefer to introduce the technology very early in the process (Shaw and Robertson 1997).

6.3.1.2 Showing films for inspiration

I usually start the sessions with a new group by following ice breakers and brainstorming exercises with showing some different styles of films: an example of a movie trailer, of a participatory piece made by another group, a short documentary clip, a short fiction film, and a film poetry piece. Each example is usually commented on to get spontaneous reactions to the style and themes. Then I guide the group in analysing of each piece according to three basic elements: content – emotion – style. The aim of this exercise is to explore the preferences of each participant in terms of filmmaking approaches and to get them inspired to explore their own ideas.

6.3.1.3 Tangibility in the film design

In line with the general aim of dismantling the intimidating effect that the filming technology can induce in first-time filmmakers, I often use paper techniques in my sessions. These prove particularly useful when it comes to introduce the concept of editing. I often use storytelling exercises which ask participants to build sequences of photographs to reflect on how placing images in certain orders affects their meaning (Fig. 36). This introduces very intuitively the concept of placing footage on a timeline. Moreover, I support participants in producing paper edits of their films that I can use as reference for editing, especially in the frequent case where participants do not have access to an editing software. The use of paper-based methods facilitates understanding of filmmaking concepts, especially around video editing, while removing technological barriers.



Figure 36 Creating sequences of photos to introduce the concept of video editing in a participatory filmmaking workshop

6.3.1.4 Participants as filmmakers rather than film subjects

Unlike one popular approach in participatory filmmaking which encourages participants to film each other early in the process and use the footage of themselves as feedback to examine their own attitudes and behaviours (White 2003), in my sessions I tend to treat participants as creative filmmakers, who can decide which style and narrative form they would like to employ to express their viewpoints. Participants can film themselves if they wish to; however, there is no pressure to appear on camera. The point here is not for participants to look at themselves from an external viewpoint, but rather to express themselves as filmmakers. Pressure on being filmed could also create concerns around confidentiality and inhibit participants who are not willing to lend themselves as “actors” in a film. Participants can choose to be their own subjects in the film if they wish to; or they may choose to represent their experiences through any other creative means.

6.3.1.5 Collaboration

Participatory filmmaking is a highly collaborative approach to filming (White 2003). Collaboration is encouraged amongst participants, who usually support each other in the filming process, but also with members of the same community. In the context of Converge, participatory filmmaking sessions have often included the involvement of other Converge students, especially from the theatre and performances course who would join the film

course as actors. Often university students get involved as volunteers supporting the filming process. Making use of the university spaces when filming also implies collaborating with university staff. The collaborative nature of this process can help participants strengthening bonds amongst themselves and other community members and increase their levels of self-confidence (White 2003).

6.3.1.6 Taking turns and trying out different roles

In my sessions, I encourage participants to take turns in the various roles involved in making the film: writing, directing, interviewing, camera and sound work, etc. This avoids creating pre-determined fixed roles (director, cameraman, sound person), unless the group strongly opts for it for creative reasons. Working in fixed roles may limit the democratisation aspect of participatory filmmaking, placing one participant in the role of decision maker and the others in the role of crew executing the director's instructions, and can also limit the range of skills each participant learns through the process. However, after an initial exploratory phase, if participants express a strong preference towards a certain role (acting, sound recording, camera operating, interviewing, etc.) and the group agrees, they are free to take on specific tasks for the rest of the filming process.

6.3.1.7 Striking a balance between process and product

Participatory filmmaking traditionally reserves more attention to the beneficial effects of being involved in the process of making a film to participants over the quality of the finished product (Rodriguez 2001, Benest 2011). This helps remove the pressure of technical perfectionism on participants who have no previous film experience. While I agree on placing attention on the values inherent to the process, I also try to strike a balance with ensuring that the final film production is of a good enough quality for participants to feel proud of their achievements. This often means allocating enough time for filming multiple experiments, managing participants' expectations on what is technically achievable, and simplifying complex scenes without altering their meanings, so that participants can capture well executed footage. At the same time, attention on the process means allowing space for participants to get to know each other and curating a flow of activities which ensures variety and inclusion. For longer participatory film processes, which span over several months and require long ideation time, I found as good practice to offer "rewards", such as the production of photography or mini films (Manni 2022), at regular intervals so that participants can see a

concrete result of their efforts when the completion of final film is still far ahead. This usually helps keeping a good level of engagement from participants.

6.3.1.8 Making creative use of the resources available

Due to their non-commercial nature, very often participatory films have zero budget for locations, props, actors, music, etc. This forces participants and facilitators to make the best use of the resources available to them. While the process of writing the film defines its content and leads to the production a shot-list, I usually avoid creating locked scripts with participants, leaving some space for improvisation. Exploring locations and objects during the filming stages usually inspires participants to experiment and create new improvised imagery on the spot, which has often been used successfully in final cuts. Where participants are well-versed in other arts, they have contributed music and visual art pieces to their films. Feedback collected during my work has shown that participants enjoy interacting with the space and with each other abilities in these ways.

6.3.1.9 Participants are in control of the final cut

Even when participants cannot be directly involved in the video editing phase of the work (which is often the case for lack of resources and time for one-to-one tutorials), the final approval of the film lies in their hands. In order to respect their expressive intentions while carrying out video-editing tasks, I refer to paper edits created by participants, and I plan a set number of workshops to present rough cuts and make changes as requested by participants both during the sessions and alone. The film is not considered finalised until the group agrees on a final cut. This ensures that the authorship of participants is respected.

6.3.2 Process stages and sessions

The nine workshops which led to the production of the original *Stepping Through* in 2016 were grounded on the above principles. The process was structured around a number of consecutive stages: gathering inspiration by watching a variety of short films; brainstorming and writing content for the film, using creative writing activities, which, in this case, resulted in a series of poems; creating a soundscape; producing list of imagery and

paper edits; filming; video editing; reviewing rough cuts; and once these got approved, sharing the results in a community event.

This kind of workflow is mostly linear, with iterations of the video editing and checking rough cuts phases for as many times as needed to obtain approval from participants. In the case of *Stepping Through*, thorough work on the paper edits meant that the group approved on a final cut in the space of two sessions (Fig. 37).

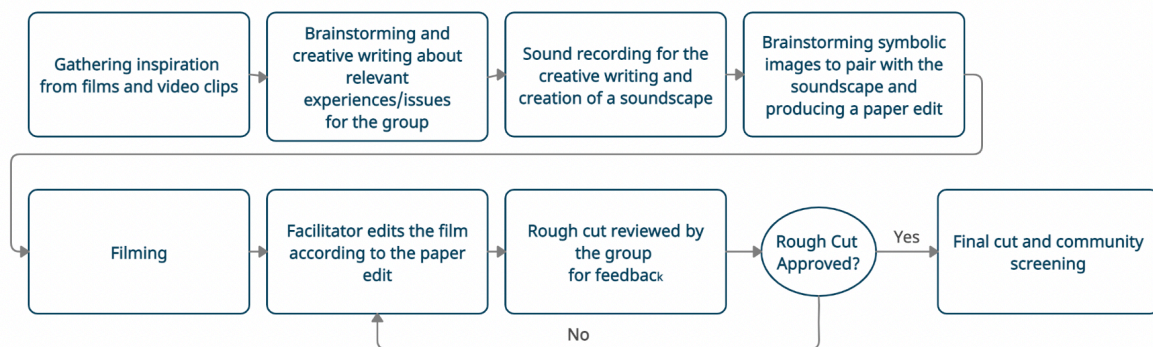


Figure 37 Linear participatory filmmaking workflow

Some of these stages were carried out in the space of one workshop, while some required two. Each workshop had a number of structured activities, but also allowed flexibility to adapt to participants' pace of work. A detailed diary of the project was not kept in this occasion, as at the time there was no pressing need for documentation or evaluation. A breakdown of the process of making the original *Stepping Through* by workshop is available in [Appendix 6](#).

While the heart of participatory filmmaking happens when participants and facilitator work together, there are necessary tasks that the facilitator needs to carry out on their own, including planning, activity design, and in the vast majority of cases, video editing. While it would be ideal to get participants to carry out video editing themselves, in my direct experience this is only possible in the very rare occasion of having at disposition an adequate number of laptops or the possibility of working one-to-one with single participants. Most often, time and budget constraints force facilitators to carry on video editing work on behalf of participants, making their best effort in respecting the expressive plans of

participants. While the editing is then checked and reviewed by participants, it is still inevitable that the filmmaking style of the facilitator informs parts of the finished product.

As part of the review of *Stepping Through* described in [Chapter 5](#), participants were asked to comment on their memories of this process. As detailed in section [5.4.1](#), they expressed positive memories of this process, citing the writing exercise, recording lines, creating the soundtrack, and trying visual effects in the editing software as some of their favourite activities. They also identified their familiarity with each other as a strength in the process, especially when compared to other Converge film courses, where attendance was more discontinuous.

This section helped us review the principles and activities involved in making the original *Stepping Through*, to gain an understanding of the background our participants were coming from in their participatory filmmaking work. Working with experienced participants who had been through this process provided a baseline against which we could model an extended process, with expanded phases and activities to facilitate the development of a non-linear version of the film.

6.4 Participatory filmmaking process in *Stepping Through Interactive*

In order to turn *Stepping Through* into an interactive film, which would involve the structural involvement of participants, we designed a process which comprised different phases and activities. While the main chunk of work revolved around participants' workshops, some phases involved other collaborators. Much of this work was flexible and responsive to reactions from participants, which meant original plans were very often adapted and modified. In this section, I provide more details and a general overview on the process that led to the production of *Stepping Through Interactive*.

6.4.1 Participants workshops

Over the entire research, which includes all three studies, participants took part in thirty-nine workshops, spanning from September 2018 to November 2020. This overall number of workshops include workshops dedicated to de-constructing *Stepping Through* as described in [Chapter 5](#), a core number of workshops dedicated to the production of *Stepping*

Through Interactive, and four final workshops dedicated to the evaluation of the film. While the initial workshops are described in detail in [Chapter 5](#) and the evaluation workshops in [Chapter 8](#), I consider these as an integral part of the overall process of making *Stepping Through Interactive*. The deconstruction of the original *Stepping Through* laid the foundation for the writing of additional narrative materials which found their placement in *Stepping Through Interactive*, while the evaluation constituted an important moment of reflection with participants on the interactive film they made, which echoes the final session of a traditional participatory filmmaking process.

Following is a description of each main family of activities carried out in the workshops. Some workshops included more than one type of activity and many activities run alongside each other.

6.4.1.1 Preliminary activity: deconstructing Stepping Through

The initial sessions in this project were dedicated to the deconstruction of *Stepping Through* detailed in [Chapter 5](#). While these workshops were not expressly dedicated to the design of an interactive film, the results emerged from this work shaped the expressive intentions and aims of the interactive version of *Stepping Through* and informed many of the following activities. This preliminary stage can be compared to the initial phase of a traditional participatory film process, where facilitators gauge the expressive intentions of participants. Personal mapping exercises, as the one deployed in this part of the work, are often used at the initial stage of participatory filmmaking to explore circumstances that participants feel are important to them.

6.4.1.2 Writing, sound-recording, imagery brainstorming

Nine sessions were dedicated to working out new film themes and content using a combination of writing and brainstorming. Some of these writing activities were developed to further investigate which content was left unexpressed in the linear film, and this written content then became the basis to create new storylines.

Participants used a combination of key images extracted from the linear film and writing prompts developed from their personal mapping exercises to produce new poetry writing. The writing was combined with new sequences of key images extracted on the film and re-arranged to create new storylines (Fig 38-39). These writing activities are an expansion of those deployed in production of the original *Stepping Through*. Some writing activities were also dedicated to the development of the half-painted face film idea, which was further explored through the use of photographic portraits in workshops 8 and 9 (Fig. 40). The use of photography is here considered part of the writing and brainstorming phase as it constituted a visual experiment for a preliminary exploration of how the half-painted face idea could work in film and as a support for devising additional imagery. It also served the purpose of providing participants with a hands-on enjoyable activity which would break the uninterrupted writing of the previous workshops, which some participants started to find tiring. Workshop 10 was instead dedicated to writing personal profiles of each participant, where they narrated some of their life experiences and thoughts related to mental health, to become the basis of documentaristic interviews that were filmed later on.

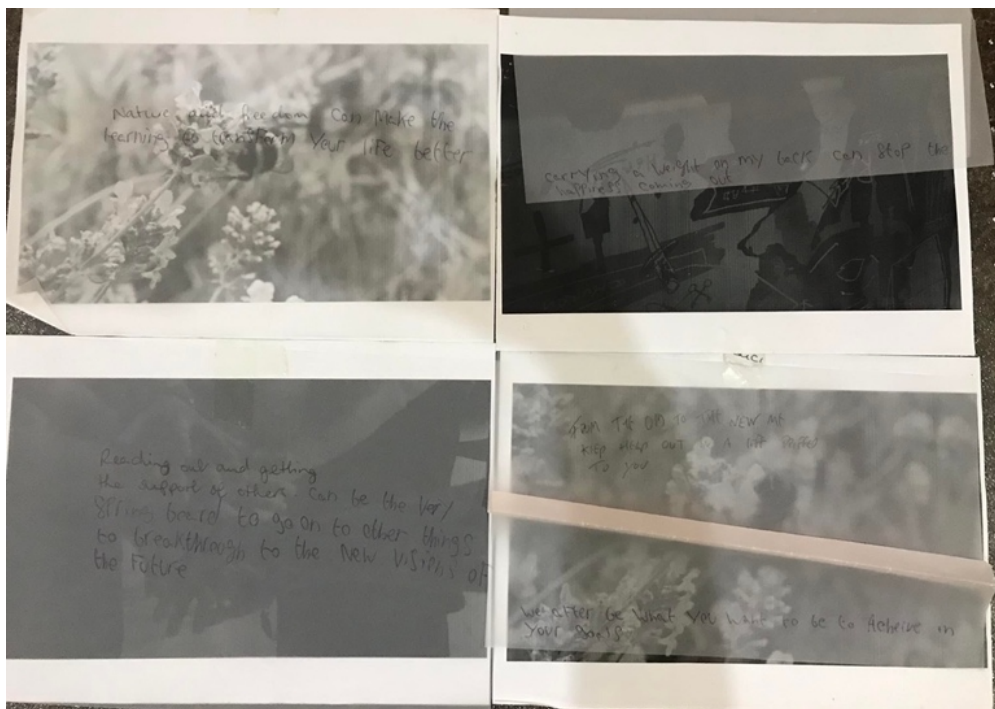


Figure 38 Writing on key film shots

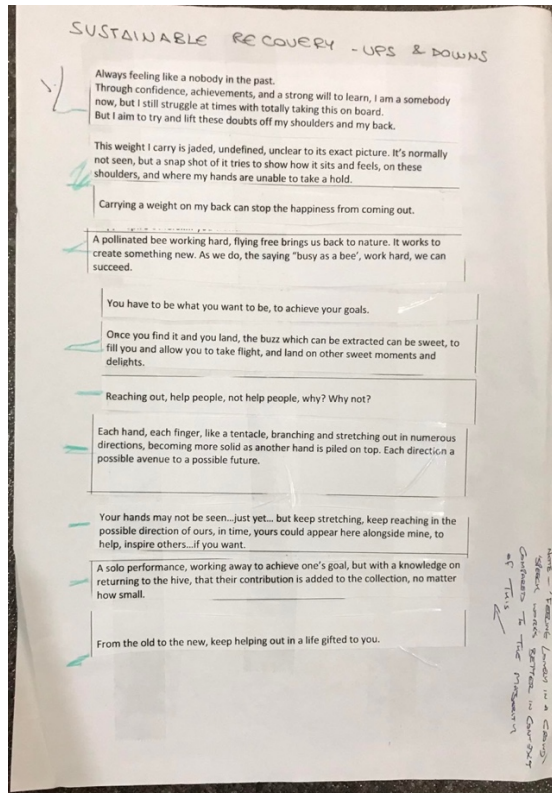


Figure 39 Assembling poetry by storyline



Figure 40 Photographic portraits as visual notes for the half-painted face storyline

Once the writing was completed, voice recordings were paired with music to assembled eight new soundscapes in workshop 11. Workshop 12 consequently used the soundscapes to list imagery ideas that were turned into rough filming plans. These two sessions closely mirror the equivalent stages in the production of linear *Stepping Through*. While these workshops sit towards the first half of the process, participants kept producing writing or recording lines occasionally while reviewing rough cuts later in the process.

6.4.1.3 Designing interactive narrative

Four sessions focused strictly on exploring and reflecting on non-linear forms of narrative for *Stepping Through*. These only happened after participants had a clear idea of the additional content they wanted to add to the linear structure, how this linked to the original film, and their expressive needs were clearly articulated. The reason to start the non-linear narrative design at this stage was to encourage participants to think of and design interactivity as a support for their authorial intentions. The first two design sessions took place consecutively, while the third and fourth were interspersed with filming and reviewing workshops. This approach was applied for two main reasons: on one hand to vary activities for participants and to leave them enough time to digest the concepts explored in the design sessions; on the other hand, to allow time for the student intern and myself to create partial prototypes we could show participants.

The first session took place once participants had gained a clear idea of the new content they were going to film and where this would roughly sit in relation to the existing linear narrative and it consisted of building a physical map using objects such as cards, tape, and small envelopes, each of which signified a segment of content or a link between content (Fig. 41). This workshop was key to determine how participants linked the materials together and which kind of viewer's journey they were envisioning (details on this activity and its form-related findings are presented in [Chapter 7](#)). It also stimulated the emergence of two main questions from participants: how to signal to viewers that there is more content to watch in relation to specific portions of the film, and whether to provide explicit instructions to viewers or rather hide content for viewers to find.



Figure 41 A physical map of the interactive structure

With these questions in mind, the second design workshop was centred on watching examples of interactive films, with a particular attention to how information was presented to viewers and how interactive content was signalled. Examples were selected according to the dilemmas participants were faced with while they were compiling their physical map. Each example was discussed in the group and compared with participants' ideas.

The third workshop took place several weeks later, when the intern student and I presented a rough prototype of some of the interactive features envisioned by participants in order to collect feedback. Later in the process, a session was split between reviewing the video editing done so far and reviewing the interactive structure designed, using an updated prototype which took into consideration the feedback collected from participants. A detailed review of the full working film prototype, however, only happened at a later date, in workshops 36 to 39, which were dedicated to the evaluation of the interactive film. While the four design workshops were specifically assigned to design activities, spontaneous reflection over possible non-linear film forms kept happening during the entire process.

6.4.1.4 Filming

Twelve workshops were dedicated to filming, either exclusively or in combination with other activities. All the filming was carried out at York St John campus.

As for the previous linear film, participants started their filming work with a list of imagery and symbols to capture but were open to filming more content according to inspiration and ideas emerged in the moment. They took turn at using the camera but required more assistance from myself with the camera work, compared to the original *Stepping Through* process. This could be due to the fact that they were often acting in the film, but also to the more “official” feel of this project³². Some of the filming work, such as documentary-style interviews of participants and filming of eye shots, took place in classrooms alongside discussion and planning. One of the filming sessions was unplanned and covered the craft work involved in the making of notebooks to be used as props in the film. Paul proposed to film the session as it could look visually interesting, in that it required participants to create a sketchbook collage using fragments of images and lines from the original *Stepping Through*: for Paul the act of making the sketch pages could visually symbolise the work involved in the entire project, where an existing film was deconstructed and expanded. Most filming sessions were dedicated to film content for the eight additional storylines developed in the writing stages of the research, with good attendance from most participants. One filming session was dedicated to working with extras and one session with Christie Barnes, a dancer and choreographer from Converge, who produced a dance piece for one the soundtracks created. The filming sessions were often interspersed with planning and reviewing workshops, to ensure that participants could have an early input in the rough cuts and plan eventual additional film work as needed.

³² My impression was that participants particularly cared that the new footage looked as professional as possible compared to other previous projects, as they might have felt this was a more “official” undertaking, with it being part of a research, another university being involved, and them being aware that it was going to be sent for evaluation to a large number of people. This might have caused a stronger necessity for expert support in camera work. However, this is an observation I did not manage to capture from participants’ comments directly and which did not come up in the evaluation study, and as such it can only be my own interpretation on their preference to focus on acting over camerawork.



Figure 42 Some behind the scenes images of filming

6.4.1.5 Planning and reviewing of video editing

Nine workshops were dedicated to organizing the filming and reviewing the video editing of the new clips. Planning consisted of reviewing the imagery idea and soundscape of each new storyline to film, according to plans developed in workshops 11 and 12. Planning sessions started with listening back to the soundscape of each new clip and reviewing the list of images to take. In most cases, participants proposed ideas for additional imagery, film locations on campus, changes to the music tracks used or the spoken word lines. In planning workshops, the group also discussed timings, duration, props to bring, and other details of the upcoming filming sessions.

Once enough filming had taken place to capture the materials covered in the relative planning session, I prepared rough cuts to show participants and presented them at allocated reviewing workshops. The role of these workshops was to collect feedback and adjust the editing with participants. As the process moved along, some workshops contained both reflection on the editing from the previous filming session and planning for the following one.

6.4.1.6 Concluding activity: evaluation

Evaluation of the finished film prototype with participants is discussed in detail in [Chapter 8](#). However, it is worth considering it part of the interactive film production, as it was a key stage in assessing how the interactive film as a whole met the expressive needs of participants and which features they wished could be changed or added in future design.

With the interactive film project being much more complex than its linear counterpart, it was not possible to show participants every detail of the interactive prototype while this was being developed. For this reason, several evaluation workshops were necessary for participants to navigate different paths in the film and express their opinions. This stage somewhat mirrored the final film review and approval phase of the linear film production process.

Overall, turning *Stepping Through* into an interactive film required a high number of workshops and the consistent involvement of participants, who were willing to commit to long-term work (Fig. 43). While the aim of the different activities which make up this process was planned in advance, we did not create a pre-determined list of workshops, keeping the process open both to explicit feedback from participants and to my own judgement as a facilitator as to where a change of activity was necessary, either to address specific problems in the filmmaking process or due to participants not responding or engaging with certain tasks. [Appendix 4](#) includes a register of attendance, activities, and outputs of all the participants' workshops.

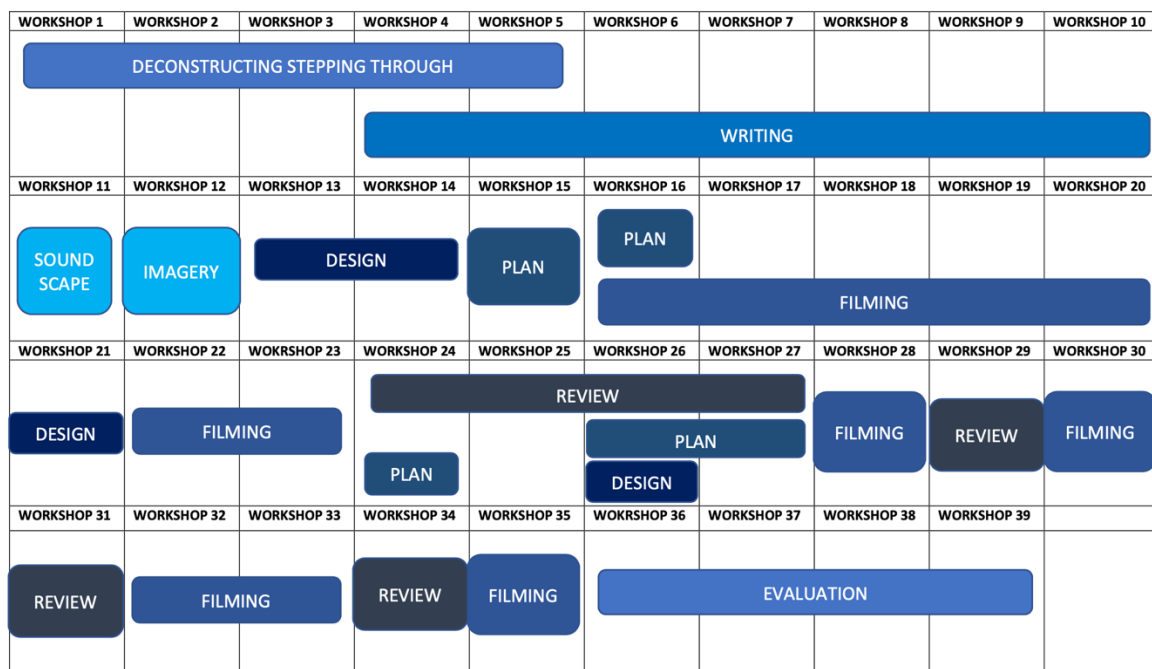


Figure 43 Distribution of activities in participants' workshops

6.4.2 Work carried out without the direct involvement of participants

Participants' workshops constituted a considerable proportion of the work necessary to bring *Stepping Through Interactive* to life. However, when compared to the process of making the original *Stepping Through*, the amount of work taking place without the direct involvement of participants grew considerably. In this section, I review the work carried out with other research collaborators.

6.4.2.1 Student internship

Alongside the workshops with participants, a 12-week student internship was organized to bring in the project a first-year Interactive Media student who could support myself and the participants in the design of an interactive narrative structure for the film. This internship took the form of a Summer School, starting in June 2019. The work with the student intern, Migle Markeviciute, started immediately after the participants had created a physical map of their interactive design in workshop 13 and I had turned said map into a digital version. Migle's contribution was useful to fill a skillset gap, as I, like many other filmmakers, did not have previous experience in producing interactive media nor knowledge of coding languages that were necessary to programme part of the interactive film in Cutting Room.

Initially, the aim of the student internship was to get Migle involved into producing the interactive structure and interfaces for *Stepping Through Interactive*. However, it quickly became evident that this task required more extensive and specialist development work than was achievable during the internship. Instead, Migle focused on supporting our work by helping to devise an interactive structure that could accommodate most of the participants' request. The student took part in some workshops and got familiar with participants and their plans. She conducted research on interactive films that resonated with the participants' ideas and helped to prepare graphs and mini prototypes to test some of the interactive features with participants using Klynt, a software with more limited capabilities than Cutting Room, but greater ease of use and accessibility. These partial prototypes were shown to participants as part of their design workshops. As collateral activities, Migle also helped with notetaking during participants' workshops and filmed behind the scenes footage during filming sessions. A breakdown of the work phases and tasks involved in the student internship can be found in [Appendix 7](#).

Overall, the internship provided support in moving from a physical map of linked content to a flowchart of curated viewers' journeys, a crucial step in the definition of this

film's non-linear narrative. Details of the evolution of the film structure are discussed in [Chapter 7](#).

6.4.2.2 Technical implementation

Once most of the footage was produced and a clear structure for the non-linear narrative was in place, a collaboration with software developers from our research lab became essential in order to implement a final interactive film prototype. While the lab is working on the development of Cutting Room by creating interfaces which do not require specialist skills to operate, at the time of completing this project the tool was not yet ready to be handled by a filmmaker without programming skills. In February 2020, two researchers from the lab, John Gray and Andrew Walter took on the role of technical team to put together a working film prototype.

Assembling a working prototype of the film which could be shared online took over a year, from the first setting up meeting in January 2020 to a final round of debugging of the online film in May 2021. The duration of the work was due to several factors: the technical requests from participants needed to be adapted to the capabilities of the then-current version of Cutting Room and film assets adjusted to ensure that the interactive film would run smoothly; software developers were engaged in other projects, including the development of Cutting Room itself and could not work full time on *Stepping Through* alone; debugging tests were very lengthy as every version of the film needed to be played in its full length (around an hour) without the possibility of skipping clips and all possible combinations of paths in the interactive structure needed to be explored; the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK in March 2020 caused general delays.

The work for the technical implementation of the film unfolded through several phases. The first part of the work, started in January 2020 with Andrew Walter consisted of creating the overall structure of the film in Cutting Room and optimising media assets for Cutting Room use. The first prototype of the interactive film was produced in February 2020 and got tested in several rounds, resulting in iterations and corrected prototypes. Given the high number of bugs identified in these tests, we created lists with varying levels of priority according to the disruptiveness of the bugs: bugs that interrupted the film viewing by freezing the film or crashing; bugs that disrupted the film structure but did not interrupt viewing; user interface issues and lack of clarity; stylistic issues. From June 2020 John Gray

got involved to solve some structural issue in the workings of the film, while Andrew Walter worked on solving bugs in the film interfaces.

In Autumn 2020, participants tested the film during the evaluation study and required some modifications, which were implemented in the seventh and eight versions of *Stepping Through Interactive*. At the same time, we started to discuss moving the film online to conduct remote evaluation with a wider pool of participants. While ideally the participants involved in making *Stepping Through* would have liked to conduct at least part of a wider evaluation in person, presenting the film to the Converge community and other mental health related groups, restrictions and lockdowns related to the pandemic made this impossible and the need for an online version of the film which could be evaluated remotely became pressing. The film was successfully moved online in February 2021 and consequently tested to solve some bugs triggered by its online publication. In March 2021 John Gray added features which allowed us to collect anonymous viewers' data to track the behaviours of the audience for evaluation purposes. The final changes to the online version of *Stepping Through* were carried out in May 2021 in response to some feedback emerged in the preliminary pilot evaluation of the film. Overall, the offline prototype reached a number of eleven iterations to solve bugs and technical issues.

6.5 Comparing the two processes

By comparing the process that led to the creation of the original *Stepping Through* and the expanded process deployed to turn the film into its interactive version, it is immediately clear that, unsurprisingly, non-linear *Stepping Through* required a much longer and more complex process than that which led to the production of the original *Stepping Through* in 2016.

Table 2 Comparison of the process to make the original Stepping Through and the process to make its interactive version

	<i>Stepping Through Linear</i>			<i>Stepping Through Interactive</i>			
	Participants workshops	Facilitator solo work	Community	Participants workshops	Summer School	Facilitator solo work	DC Labs technical team

Phases							
Ideas development and brainstorming	1 workshop			5 workshops (1 combined with other activities)			
Writing	2 workshops			7 workshops (1 combined with other activities)			
Production of soundscapes	1 workshop			1 workshop			
Production of shot lists	1 workshop			1 workshop			
Planning	included in shot list workshop			5 workshops (4 combined with other activities)			
Filming	2 workshops			12 workshops (1 combined with other activities)			
Video editing		Video editing of 1 short film				Video editing of 10 short films, 4 interviews, and a series of media assets (texts, menus, images, buttons)	
Reviewing rough cuts	2 workshops			6 workshops (2 combined with other activities)			

Interactive film design	N/A			4 workshops (2 combined with other activities)	3-month student internship		
Technical implementation	N/A						Preparation of 11 iterations of film prototype, debugging, and online film achieved over 15 months
Evaluation	N/A			4 workshops			
Sharing			Community screening	N/A (due to unexpected obstacles)			

Eight work phases over twelve are present in both processes: this a natural consequence of the fact that we have modelled the *Stepping Through Interactive* process on the participatory process that led to the production of the linear film and that these participants already knew. This was necessary in order to forge a new process that participants could be as comfortable as possible with and to ensure that their participation was valued and central in the development of the film. Of the eight stages that are present in both processes, six of them (ideas development and brainstorming, writing filming, video editing, reviewing rough cuts) have been considerably expanded, involving many more workshops than the linear process and more video editing hours on my end. This is due to several factors: first of all, the fact that interactive filmmaking inevitably requires the production of a bigger volume of footage and media assets than linear filmmaking, and, secondly, the time required to navigate non-linear storytelling through writing activities and adapting these to the pace of work of participants. Two stages, soundscape production and shot-list ideation, required the same number of workshops in both processes despite the higher volume of materials needed for *Stepping Through Interactive*. While this could be due to the fact that participants were already familiar with these tasks from having experienced them in making linear *Stepping Through*, and consequently able to work faster this time around, it is also important to consider that much of the film planning sessions for *Stepping*

Through Interactive contained an ongoing review and re-adjustments of the soundscapes and shot lists. While in making linear *Stepping Through* the group usually completed one task before moving on to the next, in making *Stepping Through Interactive* many tasks were repeated cyclically and reviewed ideas and concepts at regular intervals, not expecting to be able to finish one group of tasks before starting the next.

While most stages of the linear filmmaking process are still present, and most often expanded, in this new process, some activities, in particular the design workshops, the student internship, the technical implementation phase, and the film evaluation were added to the process due to the necessities of producing a piece of interactive media. These additions to the work were completely new to our process and required the intensive involvement of other parties, such as the student intern and the software developers. This is an approach that both me and the participants had no previous experience of. The sharing phase of the work, which in usual participatory film processes involves one or more community screenings, could translate to evaluation work with external audiences, especially if we had managed to follow participants' wishes to lead some of these activities with face-to-face workshops where audiences could experience the film individually and then discuss it with the participants. However, due to COVID-19 pandemic related restrictions, this phase of the work had to be carried out exclusively online through individual viewing and questionnaires.

Overall, a comparison between the linear filmmaking process and the non-linear one shows that merging the participatory film process with interactive media production has expended the former both quantitatively (more workshops necessary to cover a higher volume of media assets needed) and qualitatively (new workshops, activities, and stakeholders). The next section reflects on how this expanded process mirrors some of the grounding principles of the usual participatory process, how the new activities were managed and introduced so to respect those principles, and where new best practice had to be developed to ensure the structural involvement of participants, including shortcomings at this regard which would need to be considered for future or similar projects.

6.6 Process design principles for participatory interactive filmmaking

In this section I explore the key principles emerged from reflecting on the overall process of turning *Stepping Through* into an interactive film. Some of these principles mirror closely those which inform the traditional participatory filmmaking process as described in

section [6.3.1](#) but have been expanded and modified; other principles emerged from new practical needs related to making interactive films. These principles can help adapt participatory film processes in response to the challenges identified in [6.1](#) or to work out satisfactory negotiations amongst contrasting factors.

6.6.1 Circularity and adaptability of the process

As previously discussed, the work involved into making an interactive participatory film presents a higher level of complexity than producing traditional linear films. The process participants were already familiar with from their experience in 2016 was flexible and adaptable linear plan with some iteration around the video editing stage (Fig. 37). In our attempt to transform *Stepping Through* into an interactive film, however, we realised that trying to enforce a linear production process would present a number of disadvantages. These included the risk of taking rushed decision on narrative forms both the participants and me as a facilitator were still unfamiliar with, the risk of overwhelming participants by not varying tasks, and the risk of not producing all the footage needed to fill in a non-linear narrative form. I observed that participants tended to become overwhelmed at times where several workshops focused on one activity, and I recorded better levels of engagement where there was a variety of tasks. Also, given my own lack of experience in producing interactive films, the participants and I often realised more footage was needed as film design and technical implementation progressed. As a result, we found that, instead of expecting the group to produce a finalised film structure before moving onto to filming, we could let different stages of the work run alongside each other.

Rather than structuring the work in a linear chronological manner around main activities, keeping the workflow open, placing filming sessions when the participants felt ready and interspersing design sessions at different places resulted in better levels of engagement and reduced pressure around having to figure out each stage before moving to the next.

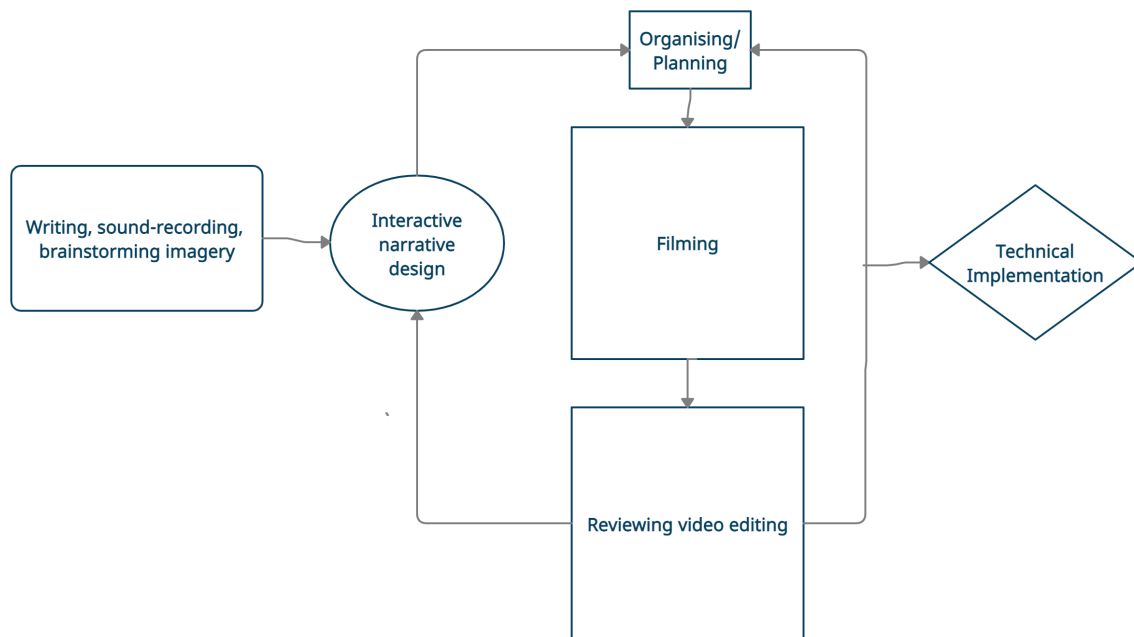


Figure 44 Non-linear participatory and interactive filmmaking workflow

After an initial block of writing and brainstorming, which was necessary to better define the expressive intentions of participants, we followed a circular workflow which saw an alternation of filming, reviewing, and design sessions repeated as many times as needed until the group achieved a sufficient level of satisfaction both with the filming produced and with the interactive structure (Fig. 44). By placing the last two design sessions during filmmaking breaks, we allowed time for participants to look back at their structure ideas with the added awareness of the quality and amount of filming done up to that stage, which helped clarify how much extra content a non-linear structure could require. At the same time, new storylines brainstormed at the initial writing workshops were reviewed at different stages, so that participants could have the chance to rewrite or add ideas according to insight brought upon by recent developments in the design of the film structure.

By varying tasks cyclically, we avoided participants getting overwhelmed with design work before being able to film, which was considered overall the most enjoyable activity. However, filming sessions were also tiring and often physically demanding on participants, especially since the volume of filming was considerably higher than our first linear film. Breaking up the filming sessions with regular reviews of rough cuts allowed participants to watch what they had produced regularly and adjust their filming objectives according to their level of satisfaction with their current footage.

This circular workflow has created a fluid rhythm of different tasks and reflection, where each task has informed the other, rather than being confined in a set linear development. In this kind of approach, filming and video editing activities were not consequential to the film design but played a supporting role as creative methods to clarify the film aims and its content placement in the overall structure. This strategy has also kept participants' long-term engagement high and avoided strain caused by prolonged focus on one task only. The modular approach to the work was facilitated by the video poetry nature of much of the film content, which is particularly flexible and remixable, allowing us to start filming while still working at defining the overall film structure, a process that might probably be impossible for films that rely on more traditional forms of narration.

Overall, we found particularly important to consider the history, needs, and wishes of the group and take this into account in producing a personalised workflow, thinking carefully about their previous filmmaking experiences, their level of tolerance for repeated tasks, the time needed to absorb and elaborate new narrative ideas, the expressive needs they wished to fulfil as a result of the experience. We also realised that a certain design phase did not need to be concluded before we could engage the group into the next one and that working cyclically, rather than linearly, on several design activities required more time than expected but added clarity to the process.

6.6.2 Letting expressive needs shape the film form

Part of ensuring that structural participation was respected in the making of an interactive version of *Stepping Through* consisted in allowing participants to inform the narrative structure of the film according to the expressive needs identified in the deconstruction of the linear film. In fact, what distinguishes structural from executory participation is that participants' contribution should not be limited to populating a structure created by other authors with content (Literal 2012). In section [6.3.1.1](#), I discussed the importance of focusing on expressive needs before starting technical film work. Similarly, in the process of making *Stepping Through Interactive* we made an effort to sure that the participants' expressive aims and communicative needs were clear before starting work on the film structure. Moreover, keeping participants' expressive needs as focal point in the workflow was important as they closely related to the possibility of producing richer and more accurate accounts of the participants' experiences of mental health and recovery, which motivated this entire work.

However, implementing this principle in the context of making an interactive film presented its own sets of challenges. Due to the participants' and my initial unfamiliarity with interactive filmmaking, identifying the appropriate non-linear film structure for the expressive intention of this group presented two possible risks: to gravitate towards more obvious non-linear structure, such as hypertexts, due to its familiarity; or to fall into the temptation of imitating our favourite i-Docs, as a result of fascination with the novelty of their features. This was opposed to our overarching aim, which was to discover a film form that was most well suited to the participants' expressiveness. Details of these challenges and how a film form was achieved are explored in [Chapter 7](#).

In traditional linear filmmaking, groups usually work from a pool of established genres that participants are in most cases very familiar with: documentary, drama, horror, thriller, sci-fi, music video and so on. While many participatory film projects tend to gravitate towards a documentary approach, usually the work starts with a review of different film genres to explore which, or which combination of narrative approaches, is the most appropriate to express the views of the group. In producing the 2016 linear film, as when working with other groups, we started by watching clips from other films and videos to collect inspiration and then moved to brainstorming creative ideas. Participants usually have enough familiarity with mainstream forms of linear filmmaking as viewers to critically assess which genre or combinations of genres could best serve or hinder their intents. In this project, however, we could not count on a library of implicit shared knowledge amongst participants and facilitator. I had an idea of what participants wanted to express but not which form could better express it.

In order to allow the expressive needs to inform our narrative structure of choice, it was agreed to move into the first design session before having shown any interactive documentary examples to participants. This only happened in workshop 14, after a physical map of the interactive structure was produced for participants. By delaying the introduction of other examples of work, we aimed at allowing the group to review them according to which interactive feature would be best suited to their expressive needs rather than being tempted to mimic the most enjoyable aspects of those. Participants had formulated specific questions around their own narrative structure and looked at other examples by comparing them with their own project.

Being mindful of the unfamiliarity with interactive documentary as a genre in structuring and arranging design activities has allowed us to ensure that the expressive needs of this group of participants were respected in the final product and that an original structure that would cater to those needs would emerge organically, rather than guiding the

design process toward the re-production of a an existing structure before the participants had the opportunity to explore their expressive needs and how they related to possible film forms sufficiently. Introducing examples only following the writing stage allowed to avoid steering participants' ideas. However, it is possible to introduce examples much earlier on (Yelmi and Bayar 2020) in order to motivate participants in taking part in the experience and giving them a library of ideas. In our project, one of the interests of the research was to explore which narrative form would emerge from the expressive needs of participants and time and resources were allocated with this aim in view. We also worked with very motivated participants, which did not need to have an existing with interactive filming in order to take part. According to the needs of other projects, it might be more appropriate to introduce examples earlier. However, we believe practitioners working with participants who are still unfamiliar with this form of storytelling should carefully consider how to prioritise participants' communicative needs, in order to respect a fundamental requirement of structural participation: that the structure be shaped by participants' inputs.

6.6.3 Tangibility in the design process

Another design challenge emerged as a consequence of the participants' and my initial unfamiliarity with the practicalities of producing interactive media revolved around how to imagine unknown non-linear narrative forms without bringing in external examples too soon and without directly experimenting with dedicated software.

In traditional participatory filmmaking, a similar, although simpler, challenge is faced when participants need to be introduced to video editing without having access to or the capability to use an editing software, as explored in section [6.3.1.3](#), where I touched on how activities based on building sequences of physical photographs and paper edit exercises can be particularly useful, with the tactile nature of the props becoming a vehicle for cognitive understanding (Perry 2003).

Inspired by boundary objects, tangible interaction design, and paper prototyping (Star and Griesemer 1989, Snyder 2003, Hornecker and Buur 2006), we extended the same approach to this study and designed two paper-based activities that could support participants in reflecting on the non-linear structure they were developing. The first activity, described in section [6.4.1.3](#), consisted in re-arranging key shots from the original linear film

in form of printed images to assemble new combinations according to each new storyline identified. This activity served to introduce the idea of responsiveness, as the ability of a piece of interactive media to automatically rearrange the order to units of video or sound according to specific criteria. The same images were connected to keywords that kept their meaning in the different combinations, mimicking the workings of tags. This activity was used during the first part of the work, in conjunction with writing tasks. The second activity took place during the first design workshop and consisted in creating a physical map of the film content represented by different materials. By placing all the materials on a map and physically moving them, participants were able to discuss the meaning of each location and decide which materials should be linked together.

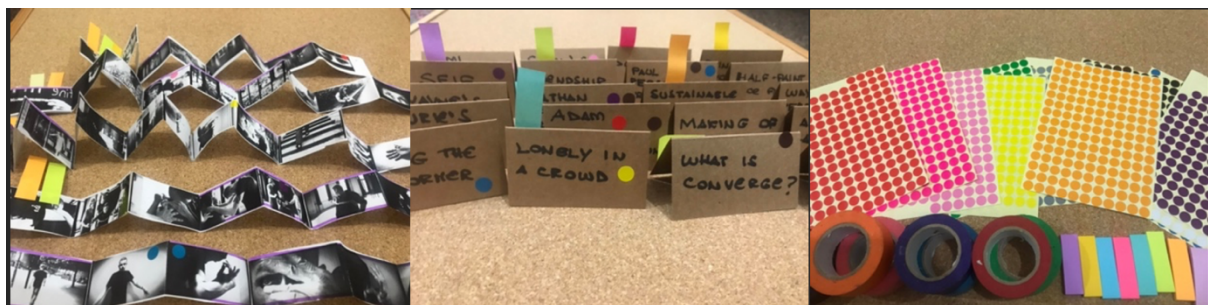


Figure 45 Some of the materials used to create a paper prototype of Stepping Through Interactive

Producing a physical map allowed participants to discuss concepts around interactivity that they could otherwise have found difficult to articulate abstractly. Their initial reactions were enthusiastic, probably as a result of the colourful and creative nature of this activity. They spontaneously started a discussion on tags and entry points and got immersed into the work. At the end of this workshop, both participants and I had a clearer idea of how materials in the film were linked together and had formulated specific questions that could be addressed by watching existing interactive documentaries.

We found that using physical objects for design activities has been a successful strategy to envision new narrative forms in a way that participants found enjoyable and easy to grasp. The use of boundary object or other physical media can support experimentation with the concept of granularity as an affordance of interactive media: that is, the possibility of building multiple relations amongst units of content through remixing, indexing, and spatial montage, and their effects on meaning-making (Keen 2018).

6.6.4 Balancing process and final product

While recognising the utility of participatory films for dissemination and communication, participatory filmmaking has traditionally assigned a limited role to the final film products as opposed to the process of making those film, which is considered the essential place where the empowering effects of participatory filmmaking manifest (Lunch and Lunch 2006), assigning more attention to the participants creating than their future audience. I have already discussed in section [6.3.1.7](#) how product also has its importance in the participatory film process. When it comes to producing interactive media, attention on the final product seems to increase further. In interaction design, the role of the user/viewer in relation to the final product is central and needs to be clearly accounted for in interactive film production too.

In our work, we found that participants naturally gravitated towards reflection on the role of the audience: how viewers will move through the content, which choices they will make, when will they be expected to act and when to sit back, which message will they take away from the unique combination of content they will experience, have been all crucial discussions that participants spontaneously generated during every stage of the design process. Since the deconstruction of linear *Stepping Through*, participants stated clearly their objectives for the role of the audience: to be actively involved in a process of self-reflection and to explore their own journeys in relation to participants' life journeys (section [5.4.2.4](#)). To be able to accommodate this exploration is to assign a considerable importance to the finished product and how it will work. Compared to the linear filmmaking process, where participants still had an idea of the audience they wanted to reach, here audiences were more clearly present in participants' minds and, as a result, focus on the final product was crucial. In an ideal scenario, it would have been important to involve participants in user testing with a variety of audience members, so that they could get a direct sense of how their authorial choices were received by viewers and could require adjustments accordingly. While this was not possible in this case due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, we encourage this practice whenever possible.

While this project had a stronger focus on the final product and the viewers' role than in most participatory filmmaking projects, some attention still needed to be paid to the process to ensure that participants could still get from it those benefits that are associated with participatory filmmaking: establishment of stronger social bonds, development of

confidence, self-expression, and critical awareness (Shaw and Robertson 1997). In order to maintain the importance of the process as a support for the group well-being, we made sure there was plenty of time for participants to talk freely, to discuss their views of mental health and to confidentially share their personal experiences whenever they felt the need to do so; we kept checking in with participants on their level of enjoyment of the activities and took on their feedback on the frequency and content of the workshops; we allowed participants generous time to chat, laugh, catch-up and have fun.

While these elements were central to both the linear filmmaking process and the interactive filmmaking process, we encountered an extra set of challenges related to the fact that the latter was a much longer and more complex process. This required long-term commitment from participants and a need emerged to ensure that the process could be as engaging as possible. Aside from varying tasks as discussed in section [6.6.1](#), I found particularly useful to insert some “rewards”, that is moments in the process where participants could have direct feedback of their efforts through the production of creative content, well before the start of the filmmaking stage. These “rewards” were:

- Creating photographic portraits of the half-painted face make up, in workshops 8 and 9. Making the portraits was a creative break from the taxing activity of writing, which had dominated several workshops. It allowed participants to experiment with make-up, use camera and lights, and reflect on the half-painted face film idea through a hands-on approach.
- Making sketchbooks pages to be used as props in filming in workshop 17 (Fig. 46). Again, this creative activity generated enthusiasm and had recreational value, but also stimulated some reflection on the overall process of de-constructing and re-mixing *Stepping Through* as it was based on making collages of fragments of images and lines from the film. This session was also filmed and became part of the introductory clip of *Stepping Through Interactive*.



Figure 46 Sketchbook making workshop

These activities supported participants' engagement by giving them a tangible reward for their work and are especially important for long-term processes, where participants might not have access to their final work until months, or even years, after their initial engagement in the process. Watching and reviewing rough cuts at regular intervals between filming sessions serve a similar purpose. Instead of accumulating a lot of footage without a tangible sense of what it looked like, reviewing rough cuts motivated participants in carrying on filming and often elicited enthusiastic reactions.

Another challenge related to the long-term and complex nature of this process was keeping track of participants' inputs and reminding them of emerged ideas at the most appropriate time. This was very important in design workshops and planning workshops, where often ideas formulated weeks or months earlier were discussed. It required careful documentation of the process, which here was also necessary due to the research nature of the work. However, we believe that robust documentation might be necessary for work of this kind conducted outside of academia too. We found that regular recaps of ideas and inputs was particularly useful. This is also a delicate portion of the work, where the facilitator might have a bias towards summarising the ideas they find more useful or interesting. This is partially inevitable but should be carefully monitored, as participants might not remember what they had proposed weeks or months earlier.

Overall, we believe a process of negotiation should take place between the attention reserved to the final product, as an interaction design input, and to the intrinsic value of the process, as a participatory filmmaking input. Reaching a satisfactory balance between the

two means ensuring that the group can benefit from the participatory filmmaking process, while also producing a piece of work that authentically represent their viewpoints.

6.6.5 Forging new partnerships

Participatory filmmaking is a collaborative practice, often taking place as the results of fruitful alliances between communities, practitioners, third sector organisations, academia, and others, but working on a piece of interactive media could require the involvement of additional parties. This is particularly linked to the need of bringing in expert skills, which in this case did not belong to participants nor the researcher. Literature on the topic recommends that filmmakers venturing in interactive documentary have at least an understanding of coding (Keen 2018) but in our experience, most filmmakers still come from a humanistic or artistic, rather than a technical background.

Our case is no exception: in the making of the linear film in 2016 the group had already faced a technical barrier, typical of many participatory film projects, that limited the ability of participants to edit their films directly, but this time we had to face the double barrier of working through a software that was not accessible to neither the participants nor their facilitator. This led us to identifying a clear need for external support.

One way of achieving the support needed was through the student internship and through working software developers. While the student intern worked directly with participants, I acted as an intermediary between software developers and participants, communicating participants' plans and intentions to the technical team and providing regular updates on the state of the film development to participants. Here the ability of the facilitator to act as a mediator that could express the views of participants as closely as possible to their original intention has been fundamental and has been facilitated by the familiarity between myself and this group of participants. However, where circumstances allow, a better approach could be to involve software developers in facilitation and direct contact with participants. This would not just help building rapport and easier communication between the two parties but could also help in managing the expectation of participants as to what is technically achievable. A filmmaker with no programming background incurs more easily in the risk of encouraging impossible technical ideas, or, on the contrary, dismissing plans that look complex but could be easily achievable.

This additional layer of collaborative work has also meant that participants could not have the same immediate and regular confrontation with the development of their project as it is usually possible to provide in the editing process by showing rough cuts of linear films. However, this can be counteracted by using more accessible non-linear storytelling tools, such as Klynt: while this software was not suitable to take on the entire film implementation, it proved very useful to produce quick partial prototypes that could be shown to participants to gather feedback on specific portion of the film or interactive interfaces. The feedback collected could then inform more in-depth work from software developers on their software of choice. This was an essential step to ensure that participants could get a tangible idea of how interfaces and structures looked like and could interact with them before they became part of a finalised prototype in Cutting Room, where changes were more difficult to make. Using less sophisticated but more accessible tools to make low-fidelity prototypes for participants testing before and alongside producing a master prototype with software developers is a practice we recommend for similar projects.

Overall, we found a crucial need to assess the level of technical skills required when producing a participatory interactive film and to be open to new forms of partnership with agents such as software developers or interactive media experts, that can bring in the skills required to operate the non-linear storytelling software and to provide valuable feedback on what is technically possible. While the future design of dedicated software will probably support the direct involvement of filmmakers with no programming skills, the input of experts could still be a fundamental contribution to the design process towards creating the most efficient architecture to support participants' plans.

6.7 Approaching filmmaking as design in participatory interactive documentary

By comparing the original participatory filmmaking process with its new and expanded version, with its higher number of workshops and addition of extra stages and stakeholders, it is noteworthy how the latter might look like a combination of participatory filmmaking and participatory design. With its focus on finding “ways for people to get involved in research and design activities that may impact on them” (Kagan *et al* 2006 p.93), participatory design resonates with some of the practices involved in participatory filmmaking. Participatory filmmaking and participatory design also share a focus on empathy (Thieme *et al* 2014) and on including groups in the production that are usually excluded from the production of tools and systems (Vine *et al* 2013). Participatory design processes often

operate in stages, going from initial exploration to discovery process and finally prototyping (Spinuzzi 2005), with an overall intention of “ideating, iterating, and critiquing potential solutions” (Zimmerman and Forlizzi 2011 p.497). Over the course of making *Stepping Through Interactive*, the design workshops and their activities, the production of intermediate prototypes to test solutions with participants, the technical implementation, and the evaluation work are all stages that have much more in common with interactive design processes than traditional filmmaking. The participatory processes as developed and adapted for use in the design of interactive technology could provide a fruitful balance to guide the participatory production of interactive films, being more flexible than traditional filmmaking workflows, but at the same time able to provide structural guidance that is still uncommon in participatory filmmaking or interactive film production.

Approaching film production as a design process has been described as a flexible and efficient strategy, especially for collaborative filming (O’Connell 2002) even in the case of linear filmmaking. In the context of non-linear storytelling and interactive media, a design framework becomes even more appropriate. In fact, Keen talks about a new figure which combines filmmaking and designing skills towards the production of interactive documentaries, that of the documentary designer. This is someone who is able to merge traditional film language concepts with a knowledge of affordances related to interactive media, using granularity, remixing, spatial montages as creative elements, through a hands-on approach, and openness to practices from other fields (Keen 2018).

While participatory design could offer a useful framework to expand the processes of traditional participatory filmmaking, there are some conceptual differences to consider: in filmmaking, linear or interactive, the focus is to produce a work of art which encapsulates a worldview and allow authors to express themselves. While this often has also practical applications, the aim is not to design a system for utilitarian purposes, and space needs to be maintained for elements that might not be efficient or economical but express meaning for the authors. Likewise, the concept of end-user is different from that of audience: while, as discussed in section [6.6.4](#), designing an interactive film implies a much deeper reflection on viewers, their journeys, and their choices than traditional filmmaking, the focus has still been predominantly on the participants as authors and what they wanted to express, over their audiences. While participants have envisioned that some viewers will be people in circumstances similar to their own, and they have expressed the intention of letting viewers input their viewpoint in the film, the two categories do not completely overlap, as it often happens in participatory design, where participants contribute to the design of systems that they will use in daily life. The participants who made *Stepping Through* and its interactive

counterpart are most of all non-professional filmmakers who wanted to articulate their own experience of mental health and did so by structurally designing a non-linear film form and the content which populates it.

In participatory filmmaking, an additional challenge consists in the fact that the facilitator should be not just a documentary designer, but someone able to pass on both filmmaking and interactive design skills to participants as well. In our project, much of the design development work was conducted by the student intern and I, while all the technical implementation was carried out by software developers. This means that some of these specialist skills were not passed on nor directly exercised by participants. This barrier might be overcome in the future through the development of more intuitive and inclusive tools for non-linear storytelling which can be used by non-professionals. Until then, involving technical specialists in working directly with participants could be an effective way of reducing the distance between these two parties and encourage conversations, learning, and exchange.

Facilitation is, in fact, a crucial element in participatory filmmaking and has proved to be central in our process too, especially in the constant adjustments and negotiations involved in it. We found that the quality of dexterity, described by Keen as “the ability to adjust to change in a responsive and fluid way” (Keen 2018 p.64) has been crucial in this project for negotiating satisfactory solutions to different needs and requirements. The facilitator needs to be particularly agile in order to interpret the participants’ intentions, to let these inform processes and final products, and to be able to communicate them to other parties involved.

6.8 Additional guidance for other participatory interactive film work

We anticipate that similar work carried out outside of long-term academic projects will face considerable additional challenges, especially in terms of time and resources available. Some ways to overcome these could be to use simpler and more accessible non-linear storytelling tools which require minimum external support and introduce technical possibilities earlier in the process to better manage participants’ expectations. Participants and possibly volunteers could also be involved in testing the films for bugs, a very time-consuming work if carried out by one person. Whereas participants do not know each other, time needs to be allocated to build rapport and a relationship with the facilitator as well. Also,

different idea development and brainstorming methods would be needed in the most likely scenario of participants not having a previous film to ground their experiments on and would need to develop a film idea from scratch.

However, while the particularities of this experiment are unique to this group of participants and their specific requirements, we believe that the higher-level principles we deployed to ensure that the views and expressive needs of participants were respected in the making of the film (circularity and adaptability of the process, letting expressive needs shape the film form, tangibility in the design process, balancing process and product, forging new partnerships) could be of support and inspiration to similar forms of production in other contexts.

6.9 Chapter Summary

In expanding participatory the filmmaking process we were familiar with to include the design of interactive documentary, we have attempted to merge executory and structural participation in the production of a structurally participatory interactive film which could convey the personal experiences of mental health and recovery of our participants, respecting the plurality of their individual and communal viewpoints.

We have found that this process entails a number of design challenges: the lack of a standardized body of practice, the fluidity of narrative structures of a new and still evolving genre, the need for specialist skills, are problems that most participatory filmmaking facilitators are likely to face when guiding a group in the production of their first interactive film.

We have identified strategies to overcome these challenges in ways that respect as much as possible the integrity of vision of the participants involved. We found especially useful to consider the needs and aims of the group in designing a tailored workflow that could support participants' work through numerous iterations and a modular repetition of activities; to establish clear expressive needs and let them inform the narrative structure of the film; to make use of physical objects and tangible interaction strategies; to balance a goal-oriented focus on the final product with attention to a participatory process that could benefit participants' wellbeing; to be willing to create new forms of partnership with interactive media experts that could bring the technical skills required.

CHAPTER 7 DESIGNING FORMS AND STRUCTURES FOR *STEPPING THROUGH INTERACTIVE*

The previous chapter analysed the overall process that led to the creation of *Stepping Through Interactive* in order to identify a series of principles that could guide the expansion of participatory film processes to support the production of interactive films. This chapter documents and analyses the design stage of the work. In particular, it reviews how we co-designed an interactive film structure which was informed by the expressive needs of participants, how the film form evolved through different stages, and how it was crystallised into a final prototype which fulfils part of the participants' aspirations.

The first part of the chapter reviews the challenge of imagining and devising interactive film forms that do not yet exist in practice. In fact, while some trends in interactive documentary can be identified, there is not a pool of established forms to choose from; rather each project designs structures and interfaces according to the expressive and communicative aims it embodies. This opens a highly flexible and creative field of practice, but it also presents challenges, particularly in the context of participatory filmmaking, where it is not just a matter of professional practitioners exploring new forms, but there is also a need to guide groups of non-professional participants through this exploration.

The second part of the chapter presents the research question we aimed to answer by analysing the gradual development of an interactive film form for *Stepping Through*, the methods used to guide this analysis, and the range of activities and artifacts analysed.

The third part of the chapter is dedicated to a review of the different stages of development of the interactive structure for *Stepping Through*, starting from the initial building blocks (expressive needs, initial linear film, extra linear content devised for the interactive version, a series of symbolic concepts produced by participants), moving to a physical map of content and links, to then develop a database structure, which finally turned into a curated empathy-based quiz structure. This part of the chapter describes how each stage developed into the next, which ideas emerged from participants, and how these were elaborated and transformed according to technical requirements and limitations.

The chapter then moves on to describe the achieved final prototype of *Stepping Through Interactive*, reviewing its features and comparing the achieved design with the ideal design that participants envisioned. Finally, we analyse the structure achieved and discuss how the final prototype meets the expressive needs participants articulated in the deconstruction of linear *Stepping Through*.

7.1 Imagining the un-familiar

The main challenge we faced in designing an interactive narrative structure for *Stepping Through* was moving into a space of practice where forms are flexible and un-prescriptive. Both I as a facilitator and the participants embarked on the task of imagining narrative forms without selecting them from a pool of established genres and conventions. In section [3.2.3](#) of this thesis, I reviewed some of the narrative structures that an interactive documentary can shape itself into. I also looked at how these structures are flexible and depend on the specific needs of each project. The lack of formalised processes in making interactive documentary discussed in section [6.1.1](#) mirrors a lack of precise formalisation of narrative models, with projects shaping forms according to their own communicative agenda. This indefiniteness generates both challenges and opportunities: on one hand practitioners must engage in extensive experimentation and testing to find the most appropriate narrative form for their interactive film productions; on the other, this encourages a level of creative freedom which is more difficult to exercise in traditional filmmaking, where grammatical rules and established expectations tend to impose pre-set ways of approaching narration.

In section [3.2.3](#) I reviewed how some interactive documentaries created unique combinations of structures and interfaces to support their expressive needs. The examples proposed served as inspiration for our practice not because of the specific narrative structures or interfaces they make use of, but rather for the way the authors managed to let the stories and expressive aims inform the documentary's structures and interfaces. In doing so, these interactive films have found ways for their narrative structures to reinforce and embed the key messages in the film. This is the goal we set out for *Stepping Through Interactive* as well: not to use interactivity for its own sake, but to shape interactive elements according to the expressive needs and intentions of the participants authoring the film.

7.2 Research question, scope, and methods

This chapter reviews the process of development of what became the final prototype of *Stepping Through Interactive*, including the initial materials, the design activities carried out, creative decisions taken by participants and me, negotiations with the technical possibilities available, and the features of the final prototype in terms of structure and interfaces. This review aims to answer the following question:

how can non-linear forms accommodate the expressive needs of participants to convey personal experiences of mental illness and recovery in participatory filmmaking?

The chapter mostly focuses on data emerged from the design workshops with participants, the student internship, and the technical implementation work. The placement of these phases of the work within the overall process of creation of *Stepping Through Interactive* were described in [Chapter 6](#). Here I review some of the activities and resulting artifacts and prototypes in detail, describing the outcomes and findings of the design work carried out. A pool of data, including workshops fieldnotes and transcripts, internship notes and documentation, descriptions of artifacts produced during design activities, digital flowcharts, and prototypes, has been analysed using thematic analysis and coded to identify trends in the development of an original interactive narrative form. Findings are then discussed in relation to participants' expressive needs emerged during the first part of the work.

7.3 The journey from initial building blocks to a structured narrative form

Our work in developing a narrative structure for *Stepping Through Interactive* moved through different phases, each of which included specific activities, parties involved, tools, and paper or digital prototypes. The work started with a pool of initial building blocks which included a list of linear videos, both pre-existing and filmed in course of production, a series of expressive needs, and some symbols and stylistic choices that participants wanted to include in the film. The content was first arranged into a physical map by participants, consequently developed into a database, and after several rounds of reflection and experimentation, structured in a finalised narrative form.

7.3.1 Initial building blocks

The baseline of our work towards the development of a non-linear structure for *Stepping Through* consisted of a series of materials which I here define “building blocks”. These materials emerged during the first part of the work, the deconstruction of the original *Stepping Through* and the consequent writing workshops, and are a set of ideas, intentions, and stories which needed to be accounted for in the new film design. These were all defined before the group moved into its first design workshop. For details on the frequency and placement of initial workshops, writing workshops, and design and production workshop, please refer to section [6.4](#).

As analysed in [Chapter 5](#), the deconstruction of *Stepping Through* allowed the emergence and definition of a number of expressive needs that had been sacrificed due to the linear narrative structure of the film. These expressive needs were:

- **N1:** Co-presence of several storylines which represent mental health sub-topics with different degrees of relevance to each participant. These are needed to present a more complex and personalised view of the overall theme of mental health and isolation and to reflect the experiences of all participants (Table 3).

Table 3 New mental health themes and their different degree of relevance to each participant

Film sub-topic	Relevance by participant				
	Adam	Laurie	Wayne	Nathan	Paul
Feeling lonely in a crowd Vs meaningful connections	Medium	High	High	None	Medium
Recovery through the use of creativity and developing an identity as an artist	Medium	High	Medium	None	High
Self-care and healthy habits	Low	None	None	High	None
Liberating parts of ourselves that were always there, but unexpressed	High	None	None	None	Medium
Achievements later in life	None	Medium	Medium	None	None
Building a new “you”	High	None	Low	Low	Low
Sustainability of recovery	Medium	None	High	Low	Medium
“Down to me” – inner resolve towards recovery	Medium	None	Medium	Medium	High

- **N2:** Presence of contextual materials: information on Converge, personal histories, and behind the scenes of the film to complete the knowledge gaps left by the video poetry style.
- **N3:** Links between portions of the materials: storylines to be linked according to participant, theme, and/or symbol. Film to be explored as in a journey of discovery through these links, to mirror the journey from illness/isolation to recovery/community.
- **N4:** Active audience involvement: ideally, the audience to be able to actively input reflection, or to choose amongst a poll of images and words to create their own small chapter in the film; to stimulate self-reflection in viewers regarding their own emotional wellbeing and to create a dialogical film.

For these needs to be fulfilled, the non-linear narrative structure of the film needed to somehow accommodate them. Our aim throughout this research was to let these expressive needs inform the new structure for *Stepping Through*.

While the expressive needs considered required interactivity and non-linearity to come to life, some of them also implied the production of new linear assets to populate the interactive film structure. In fact, imagining a non-linear structure for *Stepping Through* allowed participants to envision new spaces in the film, new storylines, and new ways of connecting those. Through the writing workshops, participants created plans for new film materials that were then produced during the filming workshops. The mental health sub-topics illustrated in table 3 became the basis for the development of eight theme clips, each dedicated to a mental health theme and relevant to specific participants. The half-painted face film idea was another addition to the poetic content. Some new filming materials would be documentaristic: an interview for each participant talking on camera about their experiences of mental health problems, recovery, and the making of the film, a clip of Converge to provide contextual information, and a behind the scenes sequence to show the work involved in making *Stepping Through Interactive*. Participants also decided to keep content from the original *Stepping Through*, except the outtakes. As discussed in section [5.2.1](#), the original version of *Stepping Through* contains five chapters, each assembled and directed by one participant. From now onwards, I refer to these as “personal chapters”. Participants decided to draw these chapters out of *Stepping Through* and have them as independent units in the new version of the film. These original personal chapters together

with the new short films planned for production during the filming workshops created a pool of linear videos that needed to find an accommodation in *Stepping Through Interactive*. Participants also asked me to film a personal chapter of my own, an idea that was already proposed for the original *Stepping Through* and then sacrificed for lack of time. Some written poetry and photo portraits of the half-painted faces were included as possible non-filmic materials to use. In [Appendix 8](#) all linear films materials designed to populate *Stepping Through Interactive* are listed and described.

While discussing the original *Stepping Through* film and producing new writing, participants reflected on which symbols present in the original film they wanted to develop further in this new film, and which additional symbols they might have wanted to bring in. Due to the poetic nature of *Stepping Through*, symbols had a particularly significant role in depicting participants' experiences of mental health and illness. Some research shows how metaphorical expressions can be particularly effective when it comes to conveying experiences of mental health problems and recovery, which are often difficult to verbalise, and how visual metaphors can be more effective than textual fact-based communication in counteracting stigma (Lazard *et al* 2016). For this reason, it is not surprising that much of the participants' writing revolved around the use of metaphors and symbols; while most of these symbols became imagery for the new poetic clips, some were proposed by participants as possible interfaces and ways to present information to viewers. [Appendix 9](#) lists some of the symbols which recurred most frequently in participants' discussions and writings. Many recurring symbols in participants' writing and discussion revolved around space/movement metaphors: *journey* of recovery, *walking* through tight and spacious areas as a symbol of transformation from a sense of oppression to a sense of liberation, *tunnel* to symbolise mental illness, *lift* as a contained space of incubation. Other recurring symbols revolve around body parts: *hands* in group to suggest mutual support, or a hand alone to symbolise individual research for stability; *feet* as symbols of finding one's grounding. As per the mental health themes, different symbols also had different degrees of relevance to each participant.

Finally, early in the process participants identified stylistic choices they wanted to make use of in the film, some of which were already present in the original *Stepping Through*. These are:

- The use of black and white or desaturated colours in opposition to bright colours to express passage of time and transformations.

- The use of poetry, both visual and textual, to convey the emotional and abstract aspects of mental health.
- The introduction of documentary to fill in contextual information which the poetry does not cover.
- Expressive use of music, which according to Paul can hold the film together.
- Claustrophobic shots Vs spacious shots, to express the liberation of constrained aspects of oneself.
- Overlapping see-through footage, which according to Adam conveys a sense of being split, “meeting yourself going back”, not knowing in which direction to go.

All these building blocks (expressive needs, bits of linear content, symbols, and stylistic elements) were identified and articulated by participants before the group moved to the first non-linear narrative design workshop. The expressive needs can be considered the key shaping criteria of the narrative as they are what motivated the transformation of *Stepping Through* into an interactive film and they are crucial to respecting the structural authorship of participants. Linear videos and narrative materials are content elements that needed to find space and connection with each other within a non-linear structure. Symbols and stylistic choices were expression of the creative identity that participants wished to infuse the film with: while they could have easily found application in the linear contents as footage, and so they did, they were worth considering here as some of the symbols were proposed by participants for the interactive interfaces in the film.

7.3.2 Producing a physical map

Only after the film building blocks were articulated and defined in participants' work, we moved on to starting the design work to create a non-linear narrative structure for *Stepping Through*. The first activity, in workshop 13, consisted of inviting participants to use a board and using paper-based tools to place materials and create links amongst them. I discussed how linking materials together was a key expressive need emerged from participants since the first research study (section [5.4.2.3](#)). As such, it was important to

dedicate the first workshop to placing contents in relation to each other and drawing links amongst them. The reasoning behind the adoption of paper-based methods has been discussed in section [6.6.3](#). Here I review details of the materials used and the outcomes of this activity.

I provided a series of materials to use in this activity. Some pre-prepared paper materials represented the linear content in the film: the black and white stripes represented personal participants' chapters from the original *Stepping Through*, separated from each other as per participants' wishes. The folded cards represented the new content devised for *Stepping Through Interactive*.



Figure 47 Paper strips representing segments of the original Stepping Through, marked and tagged by participants during workshop 13



Figure 48 Folded cards representing new content for Stepping Through Interactive, which participants tagged with colours in workshop 13

Other materials, such as mini post its and coloured taps and stickers did not have a pre-defined role. I invited participants to use these as they preferred to connect or tag the content materials.



Figure 49 Connective elements used in workshop 13

As soon as the activity started, before the materials were placed on the board, Adam saw a relationship between the coloured connective materials (tape, stickers, post-its) and the fact that each participant had assigned themselves a colour for the half-painted face clip (Adam: “oh yes, so colour coding different people [...] do we go by our colours?”). In fact, in the half-painted face film idea, each participant used a colour to symbolise their experience

of mental illness (see fig.50 for an example – Adam used the colour red). Participants started to assign themselves their colours (red for Adam, green for Laurie, yellow for Wayne, purple for Nathan, blue for Paul). I was also assigned a colour. Participants took their stickers and started to tag the card materials with their respective colours according to personal relevance. So, for instance, any theme clip which was relevant to Adam was assigned a red sticker. From this very initial moment onwards, it became clear that the colours used to represent different mental health conditions in the half-painted face film were going to inform the structure of the entire film as well. Participants also proposed the idea that only once viewers had watched content tagged by all their different colours, they could then access the half-painted face film (Adam: “I think yeah because it’s like in a game if you’ve got all the colours the next bit can unlock”).



Figure 50 Half-painted face portrait of Adam

After tagging all the content, participants started to discuss how to place the materials in relation to each other. They first placed all the strips representing the existing film on the board and established main entries (*Stepping Through* title) and exit points (outtakes and credits) as per Fig.51.



Figure 51 Placing chapters from the existing film in the space

At first participants grouped all the new content around the clips from the existing film whenever they saw a connection (for instance *Self-Care*, which is a theme clip relevant to Nathan, would be placed next to Nathan's chapter). This way they created big groups of content by participant (for examples Nathan's interview close to Nathan's personal chapter, close to *Self-Care*, a theme clip relevant to Nathan – see Fig.52). However, they soon realised the overall form looked too disjointed by grouping content by participant and that content relevant to more than one participant had to be in two places at once.



Figure 52 Content grouped by participant

Reflecting on this issue, the group agreed that if the colours would work as tags, then the content could sit anywhere and still retain its links thanks to those tags. With this consideration in mind, they placed all the theme clips in a specific portion of the board and in an order which in their views reflected an overall trajectory of recovery.

Once most elements were placed on the board, participants started to discuss how viewers would access the content. Paul suggested: “you could come in linear, you could do *What is Converge* which can lead off [...] to this other chapters as well, as a separate thing. This point is separate so that they will have to watch all of that to get here [...], either watch all our chapters or watch all the majority of these chapters, so unless there's a point in these, well, they've got a choice”. What Paul was reflecting on here was that viewers could access the film by watching the poetic chapters and then moving on to the documentary part of the film, or they could explore the film the other way around, accessing documentary materials first (Paul: “normally you would watch the film then the making of. But it's giving people an option as well, isn't it?”).



Figure 53 Paper map of Stepping Through Interactive from workshop 13

In this structure participants decided that viewers would have several options at the beginning of the film: they could either pick a documentary route, which included behind the scenes footage, documentary materials, and information on Converge; or they could pick clips from the original *Stepping Through*; or they could pick the new thematic clips and watch them in a specific order (*Lonely in a Crowd*, *Down to Me*, *Reinventing Yourself*, *Self-Care*, *Friendship*, *Achievements Later in Life*, and *Sustainable Recovery*). Throughout these three routes, however, participants could jump into another via the several links existing among this content (for instance, if they took the documentary route and were currently watching Nathan’s interview, they could from there access Nathan’s personal chapter, and find themselves into the original *Stepping Through* route). Paul suggested that symbolic images in the original *Stepping Through* could become doorways to the thematic clips, inserting interactive elements within the body of the original film segments, without having to watch an entire linear clip before accessing a menu or choice.

With such abundance of links and tags, entry points became one of the strongest debate topics in this activity. By connecting materials by chapter, by image, by theme, and by route, participants found that there was a risk of overwhelming viewers with choices: Paul: “if we try and do *Friendship* connected to each individual there's too many entry points

into that". At this regard, Adam suggested: "you can do too much and then it goes a bit confusing [...], if you go too much more it could get a very complicated and you don't want it to because then it'll lose it for people".

Discussion continued and participants started to reflect on how some thematic clips had different relevance and meanings for each participant and how this could be signalled to viewers (Nathan: "you're going to get stronger characters and weaker characters here, if you get what I mean so you're going to get more *Friendship*, you might get a bit more *Self-care*, *Down to me*, a bit more according to where you're coming from"). This discussion indicates how participants were processing the spatial elements of the non-linear narrative and how viewers should be given a sense of how each theme clip related to each participant.

Nathan introduced the issue of how to guide people through the choices available: "if you try to put too much information on it, people would lose information" and "it needs something to help you out, you can't just do it as if to say, just definitely click on the blue and then definitely you would get to the next one [...], so add something at the beginning that tells you these colours are going to do something for you". Participants debated on whether they should be subtle and let viewers figure out the array of choices available, or whether they should provide clear instructions from the start. At this regard, Paul said: "so either we tell them beforehand so they've got that information thing, all right so any point when a colour comes up I click on it, it might just open up another access point or we tell them that anyway but it's also going to come up with a title (...) because like on YouTube, if there's anything with a link it comes up, it might just show you an inbox of a new video, a square title or that white strip that come up where it says subscribe, link to dadada, so there's already information in there, so that's something we might consider". The question of how to signpost viewers did not find an answer in this session but was rather something that participants wanted to explore further in future sessions.

This workshop was a key step towards turning the initial building blocks into a general non-linear narrative structure. Participants at this stage had no direct experience of watching an interactive documentary, yet they managed to start exploring how they wanted to place, tag, and design routes through the materials and to articulate their intentions. To summarise the findings in this session, participants explored:

- Using symbolic personal colours from the half-painted face film to tag each material in the film according to relevance to each participant

- Giving three starting options to viewers: documentary route, original *Stepping Through* route, and thematic clips route.
- Unlocking the half-painted face clip as concluding film clip only for viewers that had passed through content tagged with each colour, earning all six “colour points”.
- Linking together all the materials that had a point of contact, either by participant, by theme, by route, and even by similarity in imagery.

I also prepared a summary of some of the authorial intentions that were re-confirmed or emerged anew from this workshop in a list that was later approved by participants:

- We³³ want viewers to create their own journey through the film, exploring areas according to personal interest.
- We want viewers to appreciate the links between stories and elements: how all the themes affect our mental health and how joining a community might help.
- We want viewers to find out more about ourselves, from the symbolic poetry to more personal information, according to their level of interest.
- We want viewers to be able to input their ideas by creating their own chapter in the film.
- We want the half-painted film to be a “gift” for viewers who are particularly interested.

Participants formulated questions indicating structural dilemmas that were still unsolved:

- How to signal to viewers that something they are watching could be a doorway to another route.
- How to manage the high number of links present within the overall content without overwhelming viewers or creating an unescapable labyrinth.
- How explicit or subtle to be in their instructions to viewers.

³³ “We” as in the participants

7.3.3 Inputs from other interactive films

At the end of workshop 13, participants had designed a physical structure for their non-linear film and formulated specific questions. Exploring those questions raised curiosity towards finally watching some other works. In workshop 14, participants were shown a selection of interactive documentaries for the first time (reasons as to why examples were introduced at this stage in the process are discussed in section [6.6.2](#)).

I tried to select examples of interactive films according to the dilemmas participants had expressed while making their physical map, in particular how to guide viewers through the choices available, how to present instructions to viewers, and how many options to provide at any one time. Participants watched some portions of these films through a big screen as a group and decided collectively where and what to click in the interfaces presented. As facilitator, I guided discussion around the characteristics of the different interfaces and how they could relate to *Stepping Through*. During the workshop and in the fieldnotes, I recorded the reactions of participants, looking specifically at their spontaneous response to particular features and interfaces. Some of the examples presented were briefly described in [Chapter 3](#).

I started in order of simplicity, by presenting *Open Your Eyes to Hate* and *Bandersnatch* (Slade 2008) as these two films both present a series of binary choices through time-limited menus:

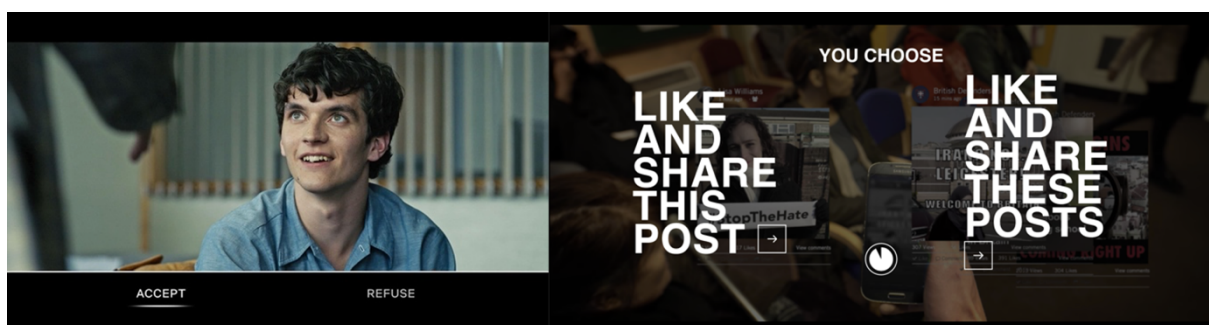


Figure 54 Binary choices in *Bandersnatch* and *Open your Eyes to Hate*

While this worked as an introduction to choices interfaces, participants did not seem to have any particular reaction to this approach.

The aforementioned *Amb Titol*³⁴ (Ballús, 2016) proposes three alternative stories and other options for navigation. Adam particularly liked the fact that each subject in the film is introduced by a text profile (Adam: “yeah we can do something similar to that”). But what participants appreciated the most in this example was the map of content which shows viewers what they have watched and what is left to watch (Adam: “it would be good to have, what about a map of this university [...] and it’s linked in ‘cos we were in there, we’re in the university”; here Adam is suggesting using a map of campus as an interface to access clips that were filmed in certain campus areas).

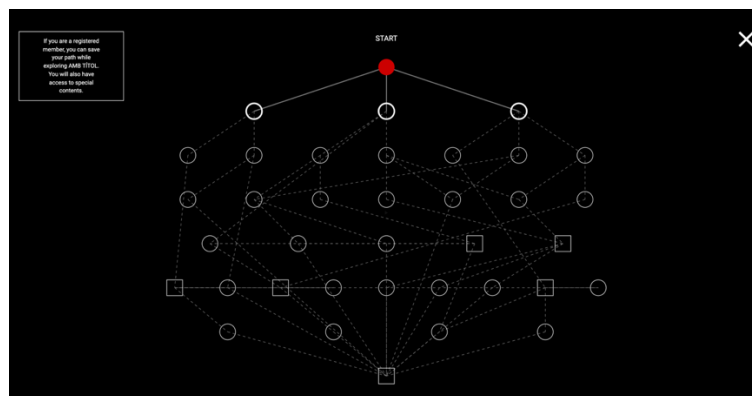


Figure 55 A map showing the content in *Amb Titol*, its links, and the viewer’s position

*One Shared House*³⁵ (Anton and Irene 2014) uses a timeline to signpost additional content. Adam responded to this: “it’s good to have because it keeps you up to date with what’s going on”.

³⁴ <https://www.ambtitol.cat/en/#/node/37>

³⁵ <http://onesharedhouse.com/>

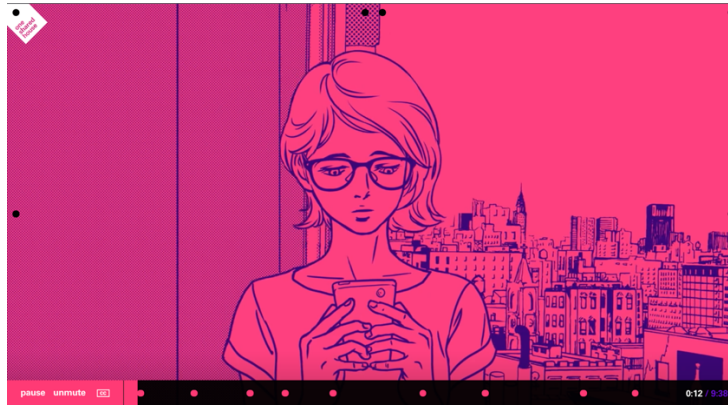


Figure 56 A timeline with highlighted interactive points in *One Shared House*

Another example proposed was *The Space We Hold* (Hsiung, Kang, Lee 2017). Participants were not very responsive to the idea of watching interviews by holding the space bar. Here the elements that created general enthusiasm were the messages left by viewers to the women (Adam: “it’d be good to have that sort of feature maybe of feedback yeah what they thought of what they’ve experienced of doing um our interactive thing”). Participants especially enjoyed the fact that all the comments in the film came together to form a galaxy.

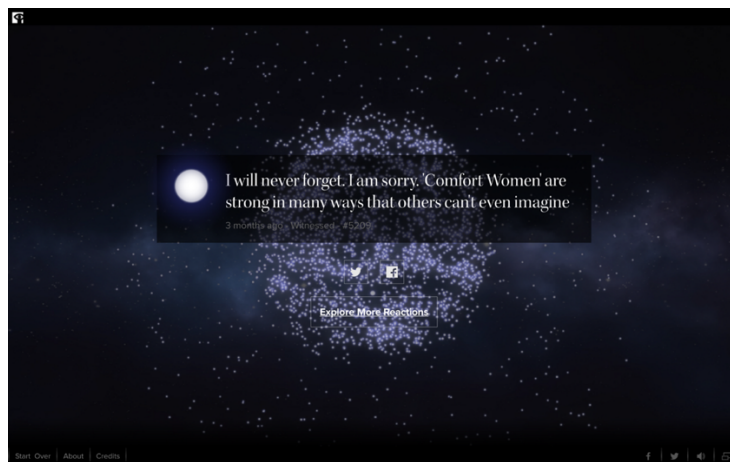


Figure 57 Constellations of viewers’ comments in *The Space We Hold*

In *Hollow* (McMillion 2013) a scrolling animation brings coherence and unity to bits of linear content dedicated to various community members. Here participants seemed fascinated with how the animation made past and present photographs morph into each other. Adam and Nathan proposed ideas on how footage of our faces could morph. Wayne commented: “it’s good that as well because it’s showing you even like the town, what it was

like and what it's now like, it's clever that". While this interface generated admiration and enthusiasm, my sense was that participants' comments did not focus on the functionality of the interface itself, but rather on the morphing effect, a visual effect participants are particularly interested in, as discussed in regards to the stylistic choices for this film (section [7.3.1](#)).



Figure 58 Past and present photographs merge during the scrolling animation in *Hollow*

Finally, participants found *After the Storm* (Grace 2015) particularly interesting for the richness of menus it presents. This interactive documentary, which explores experiences of surviving a natural disaster, offers several ways to navigate its content. It uses visual devices as menus, including a camera viewers can flip through to then select their clip of choice, or a photo book that can browse. This inspired participants to devise an image that could be used as map of content, as per the concentric narrative structure illustrated by Maurin (2011), where content in an interactive film is accessed from a central hub which contains links to all materials. Adam proposed "is there a picture that you can associate what we're doing, and then it could be like the bare bones of that picture that points on each way?"; Nathan responded: "is it like a book that it's going to go page to page?". Adam proposed adopting an image that is meaningful to participants themselves, like the revolving door, a symbol appearing in several chapters of the original *Stepping Through*: "what if we have like a revolving door that we could each time go through? Like a bit of an animation of a revolving door, when you click it just starts moving and then you go to next bit?"



Figure 59 Image of a camera acting as content menu in *After the Storm*

Other films, like *Question Bridge*, *Prison Valley*, *Capturing Reality*, and *18 Days in Egypt* did not elicit any particular comment from participants.

From these discussions, what emerged particularly strongly was an interest from participants in finding ways to visualise and keep track of the entirety of the content available. They seemed to especially like the idea of an image or map which could be interacted with and show the viewer's position in the content, and which could perhaps be inspired by their own work (a map of campus, a revolving door). They also expressed interest in allowing viewers to leave their footprints in the film, especially in the form of feedback and reflection on their experiences of watching the film.

7.3.4 Identification of three main possibilities: categorical database, map structure, quiz

The two design workshops just described were important steps towards starting to devise a non-linear narrative structure which would support participants' authorial intentions. By the end of these workshops, we got a sense of how participants wanted to link materials together, how they wished to engage viewers, and which kind of interfaces they found most interesting.

From workshops 15 onwards the work with participants started to focus on planning and carrying out filming activities. Meanwhile, the student internship was dedicated to reflection and re-elaboration of the participants ideas and their physical map, in view of finalising a structure and identifying technical solutions to implement it.

The first step in this work was to turn the paper map produced by participants into a digital flowchart:

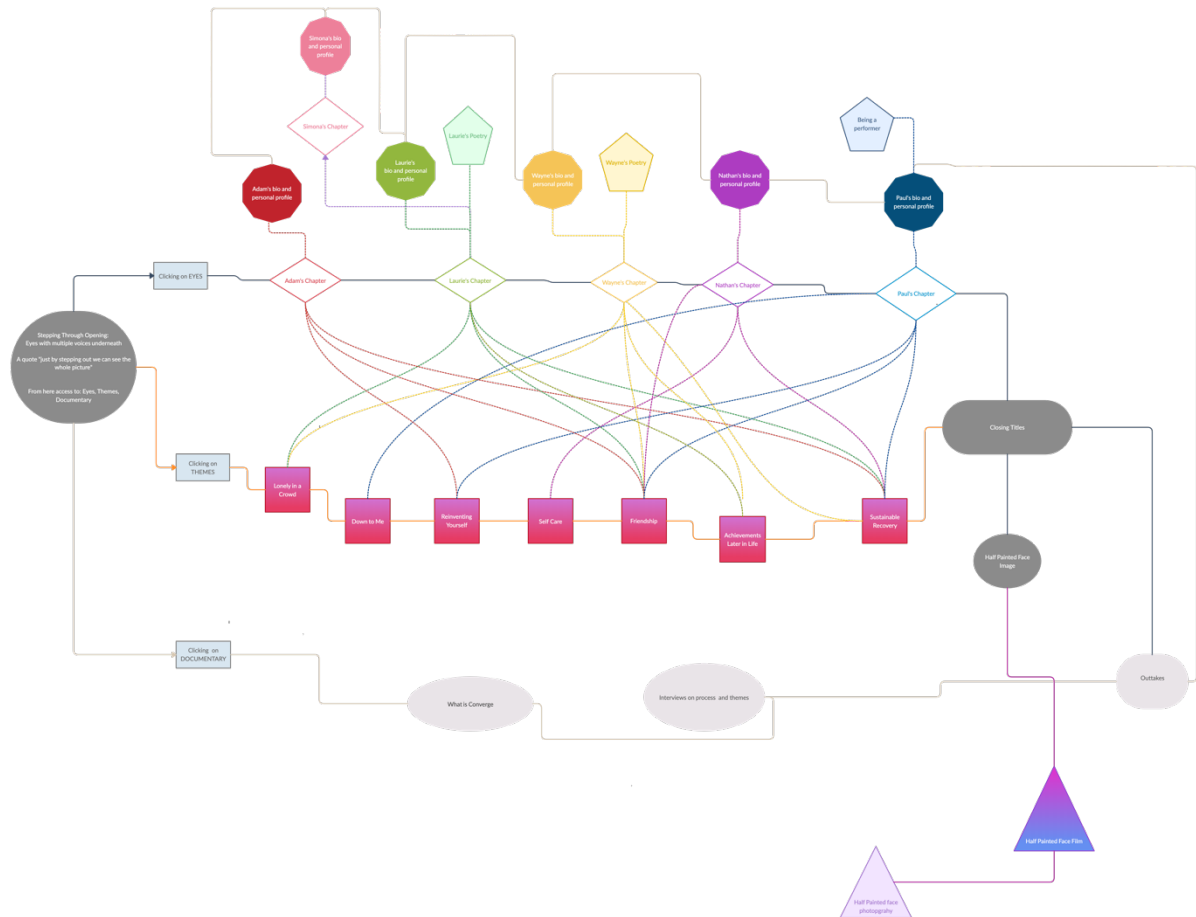


Figure 60 Digital version of the physical map of *Stepping Through Interactive* produced by participants

For a breakdown of all the portions of this map and an example of users' journey, please refer to [Appendix 12](#). This map presents three entry points. The path illustrated in the upper part of the flowchart corresponds to the original *Stepping Through*, with one personal chapter after the other, and the added possibility to access interviews and extra written materials for each participant, offering the chance to know each participant better after having watched his poetic chapter from the original *Stepping Through*. The middle path in the flowchart is constituted by the theme clips placed in order, offering a poetic journey through mental health topics, moving from more problematic aspects to topics related to achieved recovery. The path in lower part of the chart includes all the documentary materials. Each one of these paths leads to the same closing titles and outtakes, with the

additional possibility of watching the half-painted face film, if viewers have been through materials coded by all of the six colours. While there are three main paths in this structure, many smaller paths (represented by the coloured dotted lines) connect materials by relevance to participant.

This flowchart is a literal translation of the work done by participants in the physical map. After having produced this flowchart and taking into consideration the other authorial intentions participants expressed during the design workshops, the intern student and I started to explore the technical possibilities available through the tools at our disposition. In particular, me and the technical team were working with two main tools: Klynt and Cutting Room. Klynt³⁶ is an interactive editing and publishing software which does not require programming skills to operate. It allows filmmakers to create menus between portions of linear videos, to make part of the videos or still images clickable and linked to other content, and to have different recap menus available for viewers. It is a tool that is particularly suitable for building branching narratives. While very accessible, it presents as main downside the inability to track viewers' behaviour and arrange the film according to clips watched or options selected. In Klynt films work more as hypertexts and it is the viewers' job to find their ways through them. Cutting Room, on the other hand, is an object-based authoring tool which can automatically reconfigure media assets according to individual viewing experiences and set parameters established by the producers (Ursu *et al* 2020). A further comparison between the two software can be found in [Appendix 10](#).

Comparing the tools, the student intern and I also realised that the paper map produced by participants could have different functions. The reflection on the map taking place as part of the student internship revolved around one main question: shall this be considered as the actual film structure or rather a map of the entirety of contents and their mutual links? On one hand, the structure mapped out by participants could be considered as the "skeleton" of the film, illustrating all the materials available and all the links amongst them, but not necessarily the way viewers could access them. In this case, the structure achieved so far could have been considered as a baseline upon which the group would have needed to carve some additional form of curation. On the other hand, the structure could be literally translated into a database film, presenting materials exactly as mapped out by participants. This was an important distinction to consider which only emerged at this stage in the process, being an issue which does not belong to traditional filmmaking: while linear film editing work places content in a fixed timeline which is experienced in exactly the same

³⁶ <https://www.klynt.net/>

way by the creators and the audience, in interactive filmmaking the way the content is structured overall and the ways audiences can access it do not necessarily overlap.

In collaboration with the student, the group explored several possibilities at this regard:

- a. **Film as a database:** if the map produced by participants was to be considered not just as the “hypertextual skeleton” of the film (Gifreu Castells 2011 p.361), but also as the way materials were to be presented to viewers, the narrative structure resembled that of a categorical database film as per Nash’ definition (2021), where all materials are accessible at the same time according to categories (documentary, original *Stepping Through*, mental health themes, participant). In this case the film would rely on the viewers’ ability to navigate film contents according to their interests, in a similar way as the navigation of a website. Viewers would likely be able to access lists of all possible choices presented through menus, excluding the clips already watched as they go along, with a gradual narrowing of choices until they get to the closing titles. This model would have closely reflected participants’ original design but might have presented some downsides, such as: the content would be presented without curation; viewers would be presented with a very high number of choices at the start of their experience, having had not enough time to familiarise themselves with the film (the “information tsunami” effect as per Maurin’s definition, that is providing too much choice too early in the viewing experience); the emotional dynamic of each viewer’s journey would be random; the progression of the journey into the film would have a rapid alternation of film viewing and menu-related tasks, possibly resulting into a “bumpy” or fragmented experience.

On the other hand, if the first structure is considered as an overall map of the entirety of the content and its links, above which to install curated ways for viewers to navigate content, there would be need for additional design work. The student and I started to explore possible options based on preferences expressed by the participants, through the analysis of transcripts from the design workshops. Considering some keywords emerging through the transcripts, participants’ symbolism, and their overall expressive needs, two possible alternative designs emerged:

- b. **Film as a self-reflective quiz:** based on participants’ ideas of reserving space for the audience to input their own reflection and to move through the emotions in the film as a way for checking in with themselves, the film could take on a quiz structure,

where viewers are asked to assess their own feelings and reactions to the materials watched, possibly around themes explored by the participants (isolation, community, friendships, quality of connections, inner resolve towards recovery, reinventing own identity, and so on). This model had the advantage of a higher level of curation of the materials based on one of the participants' expressive needs.

- c. **Film as an explorative map:** based on participants' symbolism of the journey and moving through paths, strongly present in their writings, and their fascination with interfaces presenting content spatially, the film could take on a design where audiences could explore the film by moving through a map and creating a path amongst the content.

In hypothetical designs b and c, the underlined database of content would remain the same, but different interfaces would modulate access to content by viewers in different ways, changing the dynamics of how the film is experienced. In this sense, interfaces are not just functional elements in the film, but expressive devices in their own rights, capable of influencing the experience of viewers.

We tried to compare how each of these designs could accommodate the expressive needs emerged from deconstructing *Stepping Through*.

Table 4 How each narrative approach relates to participants' expressive needs

	N1: presence of multiple storylines	N2: presence of contextual information	N3: Film as a journey through linked materials	N4: Film as a self-reflective tool for viewers
a. Database	V	V	partial	X
b. Self-reflective quiz	V	unsure	unsure	V
c. Map	V	V	V	X

While this assessment was just informal, it helped us reflect on possible shortcomings of each structure, taking into consideration the technical tools available.

At this point in the student internship, we planned to produce three mini prototypes, one for each of the model explored, so that we could present the different options to the

participants and let them make a decision. However, as the Summer School progressed, the student intern and I investigated technical solutions and found that the map model was particularly challenging to implement for the student given the tools available. It would require considerable development work to build animation, movement, and meaningful ways to convey a sense of journey to the viewers. After several attempts, not having managed to reach a satisfactory map prototype, we decided to focus on the remaining options, even if we were acutely aware that, by doing so, we were sacrificing one of the avenues that participants seemed particularly fascinated by.

7.3.5 Working towards one structure

After having established possible avenues to explore in the work with the student intern, we brought these possibilities to the participants during workshop 21. Participants were presented two mini prototypes created in Klynt, which was the preferred tool to sketch out prototype drafts thanks to its accessibility.

The database mini prototype featured an overall menu with all the possible choices of content available to viewers (eyes icons for the original *Stepping Through* chapters, one icon for every mental health film theme, and a text button to follow the documentary route).

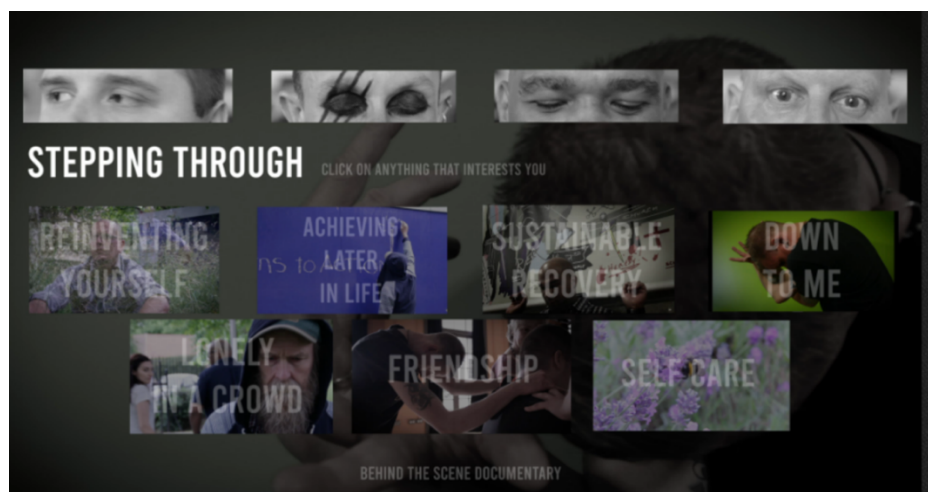


Figure 61 Database mini prototype menu

Only a few of these buttons were activated in this prototype, as participants were still in the process of filming most of the video materials needed for the film. In order to test this

prototype, participants could click on the icon of Paul’s eyes and watch Paul’s chapter from the original *Stepping Through*. After having watched the chapter, they could access a second menu, where they could select themes related to Paul, choose other participants’ chapters, or head for the documentary route. Viewers would continue to move through these families of content, being presented with gradually fewer options as the film would track their choices and only propose unwatched possibilities, until exhaustion of options available.



Figure 62 Database mini prototype's post personal chapter menu

The self-reflective quiz mini prototype started instead with a more minimalist menu based on eyes icons only, which linked to chapters from the *original Stepping Through*.

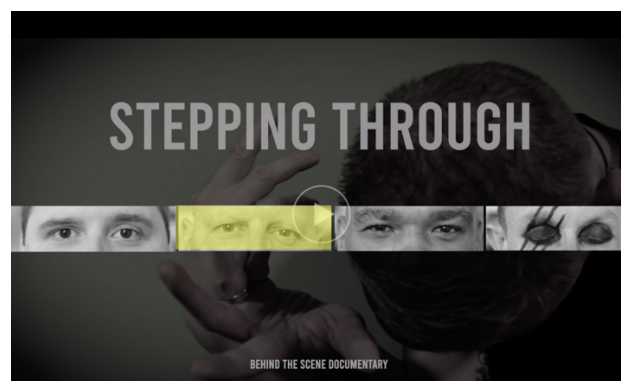


Figure 63 Self-reflective quiz mini prototype initial menu

Once one was clicked on, viewers would watch the corresponding personal chapter and then access a menu presenting the three main emotions encountered in the chapter. In this prototype, the only activated option was to click on Adam’s eyes, so participants could

watch his personal chapter from the original *Stepping Through* and then be presented with three choices of feelings, all expressed in the clip just watched:

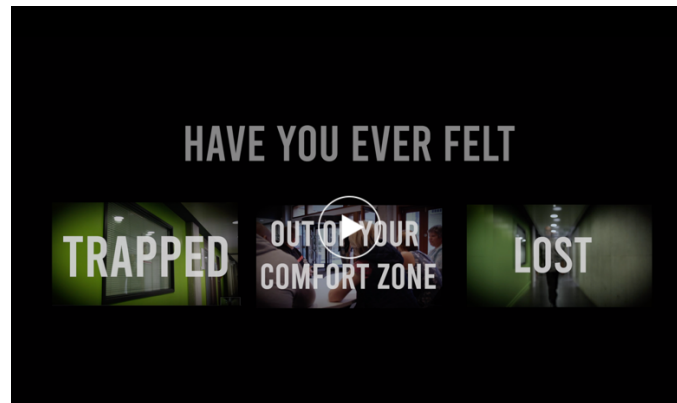


Figure 64 Self-reflective menu

Once viewers clicked on the feeling they found more relevant to their own experiences, they would move into a mental health theme clip that had some relation with that emotion and with the participant whose personal chapter they just watched. In this example, clicking on *Lost* would move the viewer to the *Reinventing Yourself*, a theme clip dedicated to feeling lost and rebuilding one's identity. After watching the theme clip, viewers would be redirected to another participants' personal chapter, whose experience is related to the theme clip just watched. The passage from one participant's content to the next would be underlined by a text which highlighted commonalities of feelings amongst participants:



Figure 65 Example of connective text between a mental health theme clip and the personal chapter of a participant for whom that theme is relevant

Viewers would continue to move through this alternation of personal chapters, feelings menus, the theme clips until exhaustion of possibilities.

Participants overall enjoyed seeing the options that viewers could take in both scenarios. Adam in particular expressed enthusiasm towards the raised viewers' agency in this form of storytelling (Adam: "it does work because it gives them a choice [...] it's their journey as well" and "they dictate where they want to go, it's good that 'cos what they watched in the past dictated itself, but they for this one you can like you're in control"). While participants seemed to like both versions, the feelings menus ignited more enthusiasm in Adam, Paul, and Wayne (Adam: "I think it's a good idea that [...] I like the questions"; Paul: "that's cool, I like that"; Wayne: "with the feelings a lot of people would have felt one of those feelings, whether it's in the past or whether it's now"). Nathan expressed some concern in introducing changes, and that perhaps the menu was too descriptive (Nathan: "I think we should do what we set out to do and not trying to change too much, when you start chopping and changing you can get thrown off, can't you. If it's a bit of a challenge for people to look in and go back, they'll enjoy it, if it's 'oh I have to press this' oh, you want it to be a bit of a challenge in the first place, don't you"). A conversation started on the fact that the main difference in terms of guiding people in these two examples is that the database simply signposts viewers to more content available while the quiz provides guidance through questions around feelings.

The debate found a resolution when participants started exploring the "map" and "index" functions in Klynt. These are features that Klynt automatically inserts in all its interactive films and are included to help viewers keep track of the content watched. The index shows a list of film's chapters with title and duration, while the map brings out the overall structure of the film.

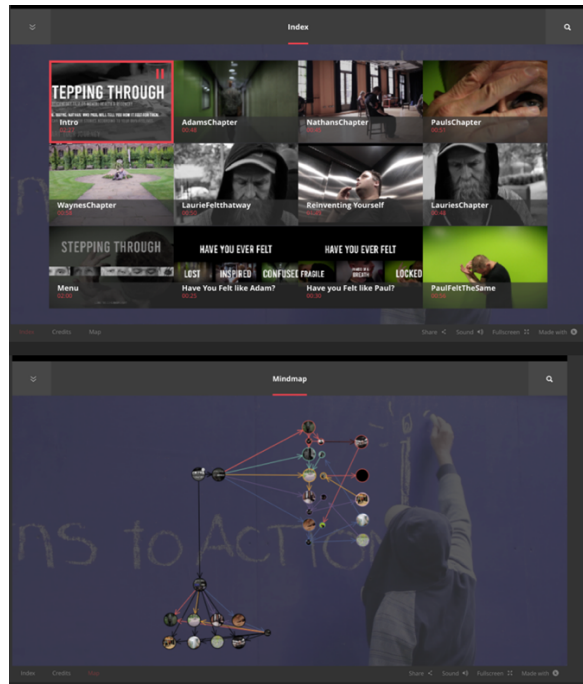


Figure 66 Menu and map of the whole content automatically created by Klynt

Participants particularly liked these features, re-confirming their tendency to embrace a map structure, which was unfortunately impossible to technically produce as a standalone prototype. Paul suggested the presence of a map interface that does not show all the content at once, but rather reveals it gradually according to where the viewer is positioned (Paul: “also does that expand as you move along, will other things be revealed, or will the entire map be on there?”). Participants agreed that they wished to include both the feelings-based quiz interface and the map interface for navigation. The fact that the tools at our disposition (Klynt and Cutting Room) could not easily accommodate both functionalities raised an important point of reflection: both myself and participants realised that from this moment in the design of *Stepping Through Interactive* onwards there was probably going to be a mismatch between ideal design participants would have liked to implement and the design which it would be technically achievable with time and resources available. I encouraged participants to propose ideas and that these would be documented even in the case in which they were not technically possible with the tools available.

Another aspect in which desired and achievable designs were not going to match was in participants’ ambitions on the role of the viewers. In workshop 21 and in workshop 26, where the interactive structure was briefly reviewed again, participants kept providing interesting ideas on how viewers could input their own reflection and opinions in the film themselves: Adam proposed the idea of viewers describing their own emotions in the

feelings menus rather than having to choose between predetermined ones; he also suggested the creation of a word cloud which would include all of the keywords inserted by viewers; Nathan proposed the idea of viewers inserting elements in a puzzle frame or colouring a black and white image produced by participants, which would as a result become more alive as more viewers would interact with the film. From conversations with programmers, I was aware that all of these possibilities were not achievable with the tools and time available and proposed a more modest alternative: to create a recap clip for each viewer which would review all of the feelings picked up while watching the film. While this solution does not match the ambitions of participants, it was an attempt to translate some of their intents in a technically achievable feature.

Through this process of negotiation between participants' authorial intents and technical possibilities available, we compiled a plan for the film which mixed some of the quiz structure with parts of the database model towards the production of a final prototype, implemented in Cutting Room through the support of programme developers at our research lab. The next section describes the features of the achieved prototype.

7.4 Stepping Through Interactive

The final *Stepping Through Interactive* prototype was assembled alongside and after the completion of the filming work, using Cutting Room. Section [6.4.2.2](#) described the phases of the technical implementation, from the production of a revised flowchart to the installation of the film on an on-line platform. The decision to use Cutting Room as the tool to implement this film was motivated by the need to harness its capability of automatically reconfiguring the film according to the viewers' choices and behaviours. While Cutting Room would not allow us to include those mapping features that participants expressed a clear need for, the ability of this software for taking into account viewers' choices in the film to recombine following choices and footage, a capability typical of the object-based media approach, was essential in order to fulfil all the other key requirements of *Stepping Through Interactive*.

The initial flowchart of content (Fig.60) was transformed into a final structure which attempted to fit as many of the participants' requests as possible by mixing the empathy-based quiz, which was used for the poetic part of the film, with a database structure for a documentary section which concludes the film. The main body of the film is composed by

these two interactive sections. This central structure is enclosed by linear films, which act as intro and outro.

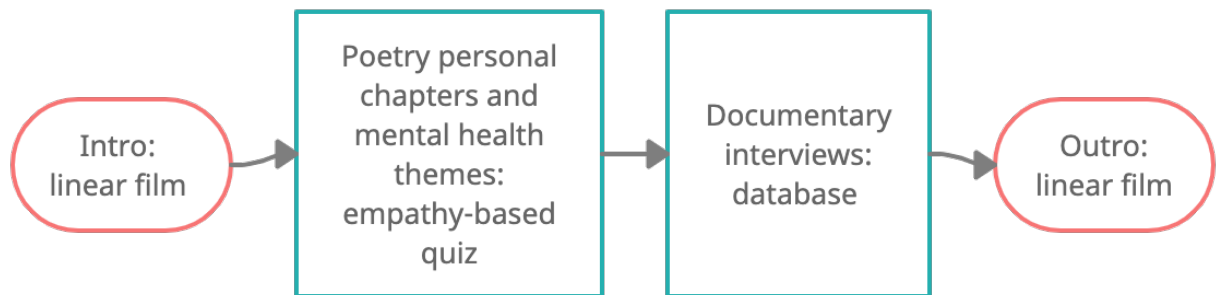


Figure 67 Stepping Through Interactive structure

In this structure, after an introductory clip, the viewer moves between different chapters from the original *Stepping Through* and new mental health theme clips, while the film automatically tracks the path chosen and reassembles itself to only show unwatched content. When all the possible combinations of content are exhausted, viewers arrive to a menu which recaps their experience through the poetry materials: they can choose to watch a review clip of the feelings that have just been through, which is automatically generated by the film; or they can opt for a documentary-style interview of the participant they seemed to have similar feelings to, gaining access to vox pops where participants speak directly of their experiences.

The next sections describe in more detail the key features of the final prototype.

7.4.1 Empathy-based quiz and self-generated recap clip

After an introductory linear clip which explains the aim of the film, viewers are presented with a menu which includes the eyes of each participant. As explained in section [5.2.1](#), in the original *Stepping Through* each film chapter was introduced by an image of the eyes of the participants who directed that chapter. In the eyes' menu, all the eyes are presented at the same time. This menu is intentionally mysterious, with participants only revealing a small part of themselves, as opposed to the second part of the film, where participants speak directly on camera and are fully visible and recognisable. The choice

offered to viewers in this menu is purely based on a possible abstract interest in what each pair of eyes is conveying, setting the tone for an emotional, rather than cognitive, modality of exploration. When selecting a pair of eyes, the icon is highlighted by the colour assigned to specific participants.

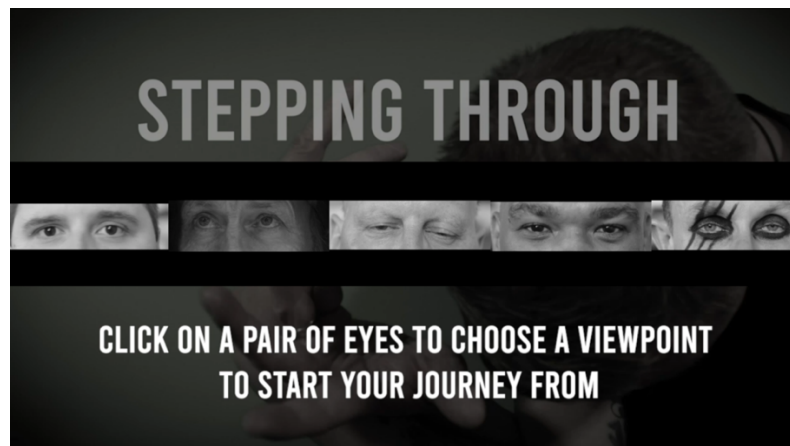


Figure 68 Eyes' menu in *Stepping Through Interactive*

From the eyes' menu, viewers can access the original *Stepping Through* chapter of the participant whose eyes were selected. After watching the chapter, viewers are presented with a feelings' menu which asks them to choose between three main feelings expressed in the chapter just watched.

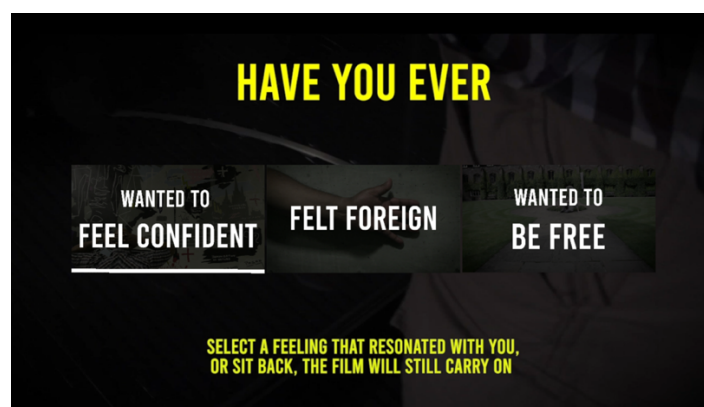


Figure 69 A feelings' menu in *Stepping Through Interactive*

According to the feeling selected, viewers are guided to a mental health theme clip related to the participant whose chapter was just watched and to the feeling selected. Each

theme clip is introduced by a text which highlights its content and shows which participant the theme is relevant to, using half-painted face portraits.

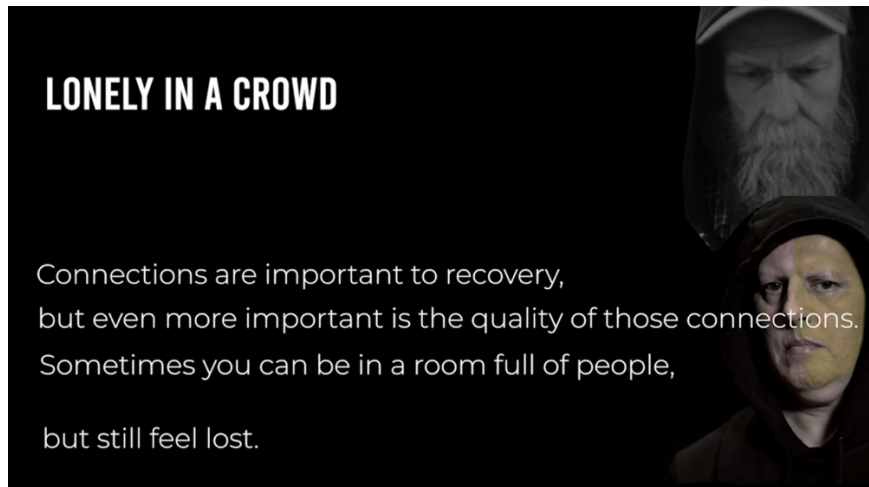


Figure 70 Lonely in a Crowd theme clip's intro text

After the theme clip has been watched, the film automatically directs the viewer to the personal chapter of another participants who relates to the mental health theme clip just watched, according to the following underlying structure:

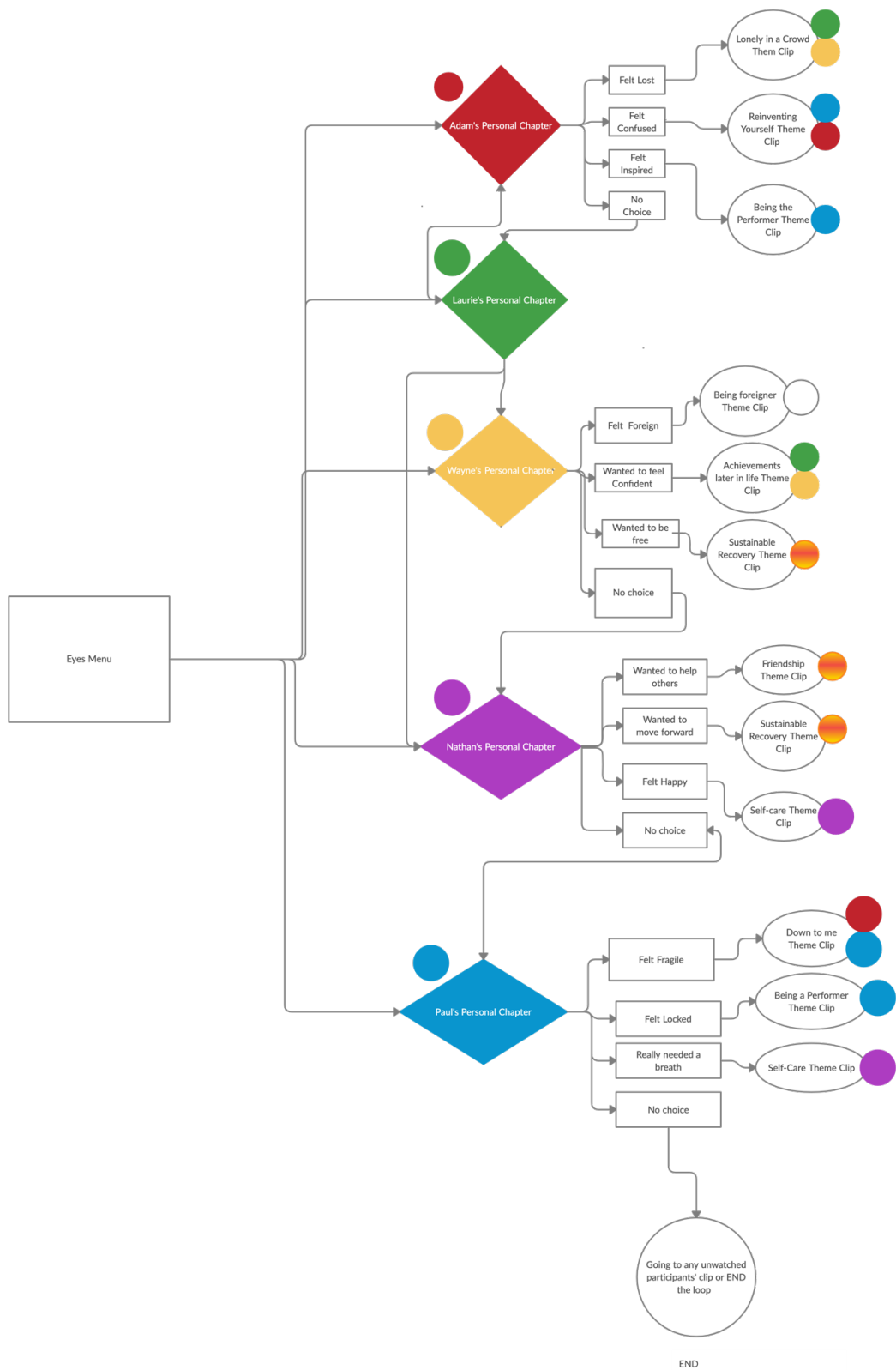


Figure 71 Structure of the poetic portion of *Stepping Through Interactive*

The coloured dots in the chart represent the fact that each piece of linear film is tagged by a colour according to relevance to a specific participant. The tags connect each theme clip with a participant's personal chapter in order to move the film along. For instance, a viewer could click on Wayne's eyes from the eye's menu and watch his personal chapter. They are then presented with a choice of feelings and select "wanted to feel confident". As a result, they watch the theme clip *Achievements Later in Life*, which is tagged as a clip relevant to Wayne (yellow) and Laurie (green). Since Wayne's personal chapter has already been watched, the film automatically moves to Laurie's personal chapter, using a connecting text to bridge *Achievements Later in Life* and Laurie's chapter.

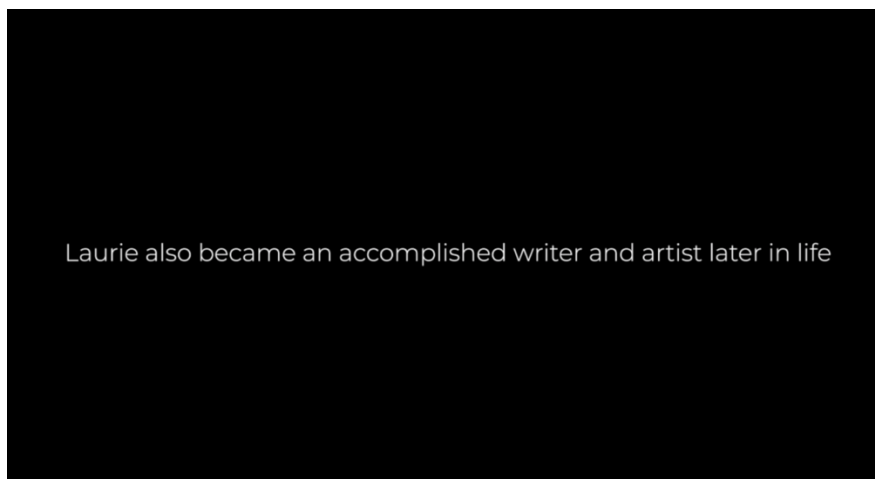


Figure 72 Connective text between *Achievements Later in Life* and Laurie's personal chapter

This way the film moves between personal chapters and mental health themes, gradually narrowing choices, until all combinations are exhausted. While the viewer is moving through the content, the film records two kinds of information: which feelings were selected by the viewers, and how many tags of each colour has the viewer been through. This information is used by the film to create a self-generated recap clip which offers a summary of the viewers journey once their experience through this portion of the film is completed. The self-generated clip contains images and text related to each feeling selected by the viewer. The soundtrack is determined by the number of coloured tags collected: if a viewer has watched mostly red tagged content (red = Adam), the soundtrack of the self-generated clip is a piece of spoken word written by Adam.



Figure 73 Shots from a self-generated clip

The aim of this empathy-based part of the film is to build a navigation experience guided by the emotions expressed by the poetry content. Selecting feelings, viewers move through content relevant to specific participants who expressed those feelings. The function of the feelings menus is to highlight the emotional commonalities between the participants who made the film and the viewers, inducing self-reflection and implicitly suggesting that there is no emotional difference amongst people who had experiences of mental health problems and viewers, as mental health affects anyone.

7.4.2 Documentary database

Once the viewer has completed their journey through the poetic part of the film, they are presented with a series of menus that more closely resemble a database film. In the first menu encountered, the viewer can choose to watch the self-generated clip built from their choices, or the interview of the participants whose relevant content has been watched the most by the viewer.

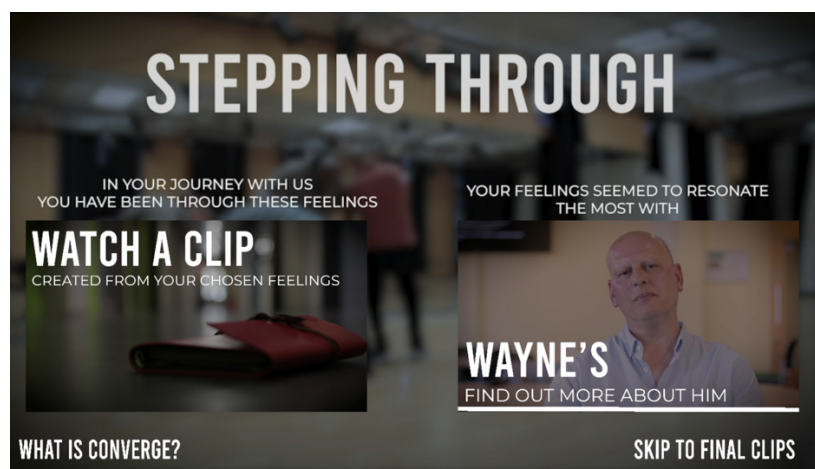


Figure 74 A recap menu in the documentary portion of *Stepping Through Interactive*

Subsequent menus allow viewers to move back and forth amongst the content of this section and select interviews from other participants if they so wish, to watch a clip which contains context information on Converge, or to skip at any moment to the final clips.

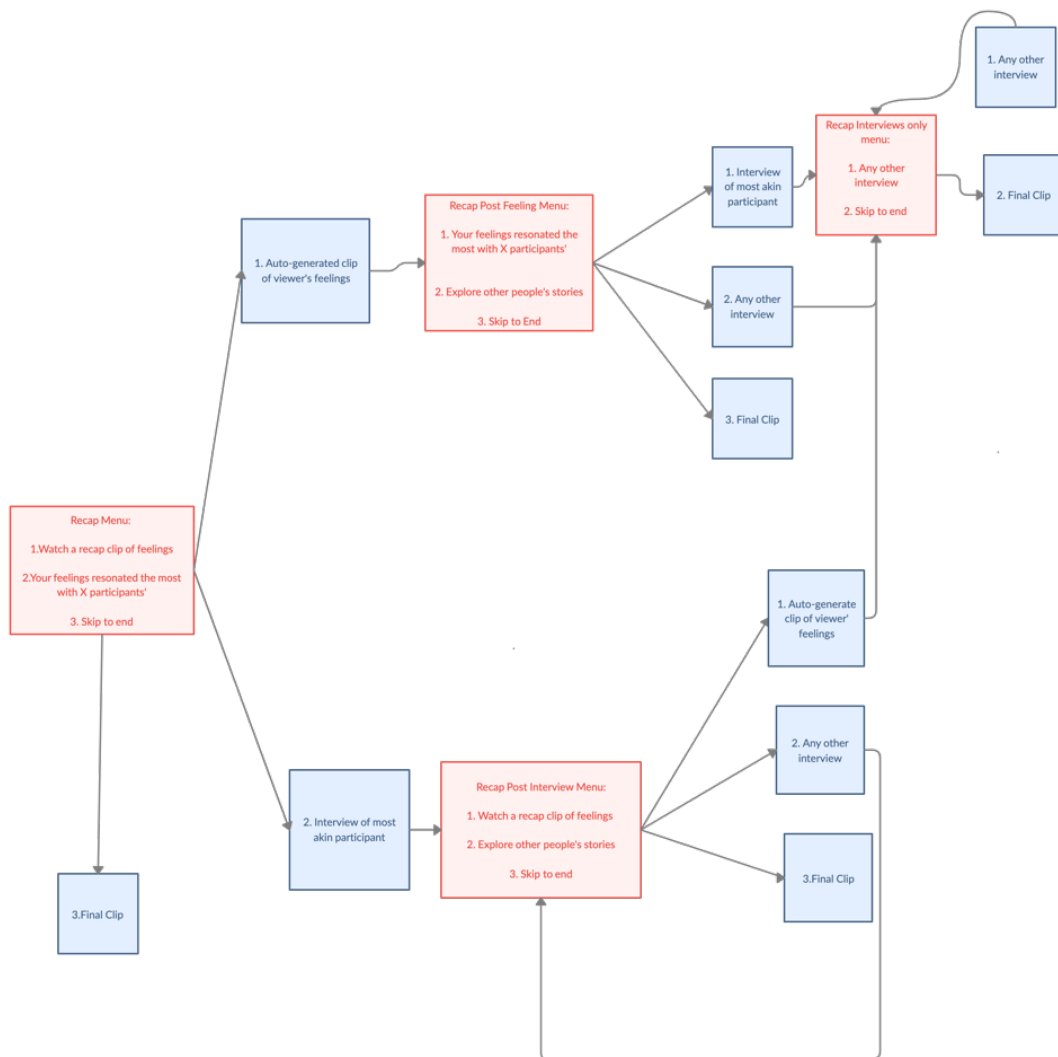


Figure 75 Structure of the documentary part of Stepping Through Interactive

Viewers who watch all the content contained in this section are automatically moved to the final clips. This section changes the tone of the representation from poetry to documentary, where participants drop the use of symbols and speak directly of their experiences of mental health, explaining the meaning of some of the imagery contained in the poetry section of the film and how certain theme clips were particularly important to them. While previous plans in the design workshops placed the documentary content as a

route running alongside the poetry, and accessible at any time, in later reviews of the prototype participants decided to place this more explanatory content after the poetry for several reasons: not to spoil the poetic content by risking explaining imagery before the viewer may have encountered it; not to transform the film into an “essay”; giving precedence to the emotional exploration of mental health through poetry, which has been central to *Stepping Through* since its first conception, and, interestingly, opening up the details of their stories only to viewers who were invested enough in their emotional content to arrive to this second segment in the film.

The final part of the film consists in the half-painted face film clip, which brings back the poetry and recaps the overall themes of the film, with a focus on the importance of opening up about the topic of mental health. This film is followed by a sequence alternating credits with behind-the-scenes content.

7.4.3 Cinematic menus

In line with a strategy proposed in the *An Interactive Documentary Manifesto*³⁷, all the menus presented in the film act as a film clip: they all have a soundtrack and at times moving images. The tone of the menus is usually quiet and introspective, upon Adam’s suggestion to use the menus as an opportunity to take a breath from the emotional investment of the rest of the materials, a moment of pause that he linked to mindfulness practices.

7.4.4 Possibility of linear viewing

While the film is based on a non-linear interactive structure, all menus contained the option for viewers to not press anything and just let the menu play as if it was a simple film

³⁷ “The interface should be moving images based (any other approach will easily lead to a traditional multimedia piece) and has to merge with content to the point where one cannot be dissociated from the other” (Almeida and Alvelos, 2010, p.126)

clip. In this case, each menu automatically moves the film along to specific clips. This option is embedded to accommodate viewers that might prefer to sit back, and to avoid the film getting stuck if the viewer fails to make a choice for any reason. The viewer can opt to make active choices in some menus and sit back in others. If the viewer does not make any choice in the entirety of their viewing experience, the film moves along each participant's personal chapters avoiding the theme clips, it skips the self-generated film clip and the documentary content (not having at disposition any data on the viewer's behaviour), and moves directly to the half-painted face film, resembling the structure of the original *Stepping Through*.

7.4.5 Features not included in the final prototype

Constraints in the time available from software programmers who worked on the technical implementation and the fact that the debugging stages of the film took a considerable time, forced us to exclude some features the film design. The most significant gaps in this achieved prototype compared to the ideal design are:

- Absence of an overall map/menu of content: participants expressed on several occasions the fact that they would have liked a map that would allow viewers a bird-eye look on the entire content, the possibility to see which content remained unwatched and to access it. This feature would have required extra programming work to design ways to let it run alongside the film structure without disrupting the continuous re-configuration of the film according to the viewers' behaviour. In the achieved prototype, viewers watch and select from menus not knowing exactly what other options they could have had in case they chose differently, or how much materials lies ahead of them.
- Absence of a direct viewers' input in the film: participants had expressed a wish in designing active ways for viewers to input their viewpoint. This included allowing and storing written comments from viewers; allowing viewers to compose their own chapter in the film selecting from a pool of images and sounds, to then upload said chapter in a database within the film; colouring portions of a drawing made by participants; adding elements to a puzzle. Unfortunately, none of these options were feasible with the resources available. The self-generated clip encompassing feelings chosen by a viewer during their journey partially covers some of these intents;

however, the clip only exists of the viewer who is watching the film. It cannot be stored in the film and watched back by anyone else.

Other secondary elements, which do not relate as closely to the authorial intentions of the participants, could not be implemented. These include slower and more gradual fading between clips and menus, clearer feedback on buttons pressed, and the possibility of pausing videos.

7.5 *Stepping Through Interactive's* efficacy in supporting participants' intentions

This section reviews its level of success in supporting the authorial intentions and expressive needs of the participants. For an analysis of the narrative structure of *Stepping Through Interactive* in view of existing literature on the categorisation of structures in interactive documentary, please refer to [Appendix 11](#).

The final prototype of *Stepping Through Interactive* partially succeeds in supporting the expressive needs participants had identified in the first part of the work, and which acted as motivation for transforming *Stepping Through* into an interactive film. The following table reports how each expressive need was met by the film:

Table 5 How Stepping Through Interactive supported participants' expressive needs

Expressive needs	Supported by final prototype?	Analysis
Co-presence of several storylines which represent mental health sub-topics with different	Yes	The storylines identified in the first part of the work were developed into a series of short films which completed the content already present in the original <i>Stepping Through</i> . The different degrees of relevance of these materials to each participant has

<p>degrees of relevance to each participant.</p>		<p>been embedded in the interactive film structure itself through the feeling-based navigation. The entire viewer journey revolves around exploring which mental health theme is important to specific participants, and potentially, to the viewers themselves.</p> <p>All the planned additional content was successfully filmed and inserted into the non-linear narrative structure.</p>
<p>Presence of contextual materials: information on Converge, personal histories, and behind the scenes of the film to complete the knowledge gaps left by the video poetry style.</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>This expressive need was supported by adding content such as documentary style interviews and a What is Converge clip. This provides information that both deepens the level of disclosure of participants towards viewers and helps audiences who are not familiar with Converge understanding the context of this film.</p>
<p>Links between portions of the materials: storylines to be linked</p>	<p>Partially</p>	<p>All the materials in the film are linked together, but while the initial content map produced by</p>

<p>according to participant, theme, and/or symbol. Film to be explored as in a journey of discovery through these links, to mirror the journey from illness/isolation to recovery/community.</p>		<p>participants linked every bit of content by theme, participants, and symbolic imagery, the amount of links was later diminished to rather highlight the content's relevance to participant and feelings. This helped transform the film from a categorical database to a more strongly curated journey. While the audience does explore the content in a journey-like progression, it was not possible to add the option to also explore the film through a literal map.</p>
<p>Active audience involvement: ideally, the audience to be able to actively input reflection, or to choose amongst a poll of images and words to create their own small chapter in the film; to stimulate self-reflection in viewers regarding their own emotional wellbeing and to create a dialogical film.</p>	<p>Mostly no</p>	<p>This is the area where the final prototype mostly fails to support participants' plans. While the self-reflective invitation to viewers has structurally informed the empathy-based quiz, and is as such strongly present, this could only happen through the use of pre-determined menus. The viewers are not able to input reflection directly, choose from a pool of images, nor upload their contribution in the film.</p>

While expressive needs were articulated very early in the process, participants also formulated a series of authorial intentions as a result of their first design workshop. The following table explore how these were met by the final film prototype:

Table 6 How Stepping Through Interactive supported participants' authorial intentions

Authorial intentions	Supported by final prototype?	Analysis
<p>We want viewers to create their own journey through the film, exploring areas according to personal interest.</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>The use of feelings' menus and later recap menus allow viewers to explore the content according to their level of interest and their emotional responses to the content watched. Instead of having a pre-determined emotional progression, the film allows viewers to create their own emotional dynamics in the film, which is then reflected in the self-generated clip.</p>
<p>We want viewers to appreciate the links between stories and elements: how all the themes affect our mental health and how joining a community might help.</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>The film was designed to highlight, through feelings menus and connecting texts, how the mental health themes relate to different participants. The documentary interviews reinforce participants' personal reflections, while the final half-painted face film recaps the importance of joining a community and the healing effects of disclosing.</p>

<p>We want viewers to find out more about ourselves, from the symbolic poetry to more personal information, according to their level of interest.</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>The presence of the documentary interviews allows viewers to deepen their knowledge of participants' circumstances and the meaning of some of the poetic imagery present earlier in the film if they wish to do so. This content can be skipped to move directly to the final clips if viewers are not interested.</p>
<p>We want viewers to be able to input their ideas by creating their own chapter in the film.</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>This intention was not supported by the achieved design.</p>
<p>We want the half-painted film to be a "gift" for viewers who are particularly interested.</p>	<p>Partially</p>	<p>At first participants wanted to unlock to half-painted face film only to viewers who had watched content tagged by all their respective colours. However, they later decided to make the clip available to any viewers who reach the final stage of the film.</p>

Overall, the final prototype mostly succeeds in supporting participants intentions and expressive needs, with the exception of the active role reserved to viewers, which was only supported in the ideal design of the film. Interestingly, part of the expressive needs is

activated by the mere presence of a higher volume of audio-visual content (presence of more storyline, presence of contextual information). However, a longer film comprising all of the video contents of *Stepping Through Interactive* into a linear progression would have failed other key expressive needs, such as the need for linking materials together, for allowing viewers to carve their journey through the content, and for showing the different levels of relevance of mental health themes to participants.

The half-painted face film is an interesting point of reflection to assess the limits of the linear form explored in Chapter 5. The film was originally written in 2016 to be a strong companion to *Stepping Through* and participants tried to link the two by including an image of a half-painted face into *Stepping Through*. In *Stepping Through Interactive*, symbolism of the half-painted face film (personal colours representing personal experiences of mental illness) worked a structural element of the entire film. The entire content was tagged by participants' colours (Fig.76) and splashes of the personal colours were interspersed in the entirety of the content. This demonstrates that having *Stepping Through* and the half-painted face film as two separate linear films would have strongly diminished the expressive power of the two, which are in fact deeply intertwined. The space opened by non-linearity has allowed these two films to merge, reinforcing each other's narrative.

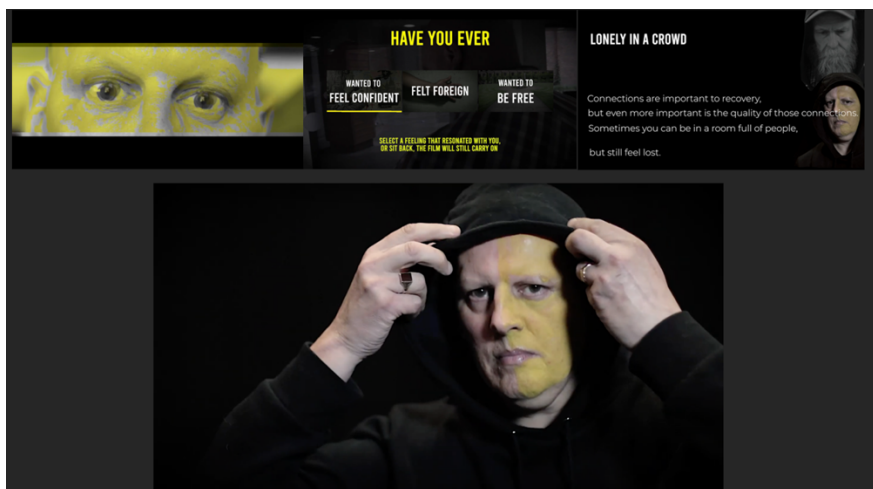


Figure 76 Touches of yellow colour (symbolising Wayne) appearing during the film and then finally in the half-painted face clip

Finally, the design of the non-linear version of *Stepping Through* also facilitated the emergence of another expressive need, which was never explicitly articulated by participants, but rather materialised from their authorial choices. The decision to place their documentary interviews only at the end of the poetic exploration creates a dynamic of gradual disclosure, where participants reveal details of their circumstances and experiences

only to viewers that have first established an empathetic connection with them, based on commonalities of feelings. This progression of gradual disclosure is underlined by the passage from an initial eyes' menus to participants offering their full face and names in the documentary section.

7.6 Final considerations on *Stepping Through Interactive*

The design and technical implementation of a non-linear narrative structure for *Stepping Through* has resulted into a mixed narrative form, which makes use of object-based media to automatically configure combinations of materials based on feelings chosen by viewers in response to materials watched. The film structure was informed by concepts such as self-reflection, empathy, and gradual disclosure, resulting in a viewing experience based on the audience' emotional reactions. The film mostly succeeds in supporting participants' intentions and promoting their structural participation. The most notable exceptions in this sense reside in failing to insert an overall map of content in the film which can be used to move across content independently from the feelings' menus, limiting what Husak (2018) described as "spatial arrangements", an affordance typical of interactive documentary; and in failing to include ways for audiences to actively input their views in the film. While these features are missing from the final prototype, they are included into the ideal film design and could have been potentially implemented through additional technical support.

A key stage in the design of this narrative structure resided in the reflection around differences between designing overall maps of content and links, and specific curation of the viewers' experience. Unlike linear film, where there is only one linear structure encompassing both the way materials are edited together and the resulting viewing experience, in interactive filmmaking, the film needs to be designed on two simultaneous dimensions: the surface level of what a viewer can access moving through interfaces and portions of linear film, and the deeper structure, unseen by the viewers but very much underlining the entire project. The interface here is "the most visible dimension of database voice (...) mediating relations between users and the database" (Nash 2021 p.24). Underneath lies an "hypertext skeleton constituted of nodes, links and anchors" (Gifreu Castells 2011 p.361). Managing the relationship between these two dimensions of the interactive film depends on the intended meaning of the film itself, as "the challenge is to design interfaces and databases that offer a meaningful user journey for their viewers" (Dovey and Rose 2013 p.15). In *Stepping Through Interactive*, one of the main logics that

shaped the final film structure revolved around facilitating an affective encounter between viewers and participants, exploiting the fact that “the interactive documentary form allows viewers/users a multi-faceted affective encounter with a range of subjects and evidence” (Watson 2017 p. 601).

Transforming *Stepping Through* into an interactive film has also affected the way mental health is represented in the film. The presence of multiple viewpoints on the experience of recovering from mental health problems in *Stepping Through Interactive* has turned the representation from a linear journey moving from isolation/illness to community/recovery into a multi-faceted co-presence of several elements that can concur to recovery.



Figure 77 Evolution of the representation of mental health from the original *Stepping Through* to *Stepping Through Interactive*

These elements are not all equally important to all participants, but rather have different levels of influence according to the personal circumstances, histories, and personalities of each participant. By selecting feelings that resonate with themselves, viewers would hopefully come across mental health themes that can be helpful and relevant to their own experience too. Participants were acutely aware that this film could not possibly explore the entirety of recovery related themes relevant to any viewer, and for this reason, amongst others, they were very keen to find ways for allowing space for conversation with the

viewers. This could potentially be addressed by future research and additional iterations of the film prototype.

7.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I analysed how participants moved from initial building blocks emerged from deconstructing the original *Stepping Through* and producing writing around it (a set of expressive needs, a set of additional linear content, stylistic intents, and a set of symbols) to a final film structure, passing through paper-based mapping and a series of negotiations with the technical possibilities available.

I described features of the final *Stepping Through Interactive* prototype, including its combination of poetry and documentary, empathy-based menus and database structures.

I also listed which features from the participants' design did not find an allocation in this prototype, namely the possibility of presenting access to content spatially alongside the feelings' menus and the possibility of inputting and storing content and reflections from viewers. While *Stepping Through Interactive* meets most of the expressive needs and authorial intentions of participants, the lack of these features fails to support some of their requests, imposing limits on their intentions to directly involve viewers in the film and to show the content through maps which would symbolise their idea of a journey of recovery.

In order to more deeply explore the level of efficacy of this non-linear film structure, we needed to involve both the participants who authored the film and a number of external audiences in evaluating the film. [Chapter 8](#) covers the film evaluation and reviews how audiences responded to the film features described in this chapter.

CHAPTER 8 EVALUATING *STEPPING THROUGH INTERACTIVE*

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the features of *Stepping Through Interactive* and the ways in which it fulfilled part of the participants' authorial intentions in view of their initial expressive needs. However, it was also necessary to evaluate the final product with audiences to understand the extent to which the different non-linear narrative approaches deployed in the film supported the participants expressive goals.

This chapter presents the evaluation study for *Stepping Through Interactive* with several types of audiences. These included firstly our core group of participants: in fact, after completing the design and filming work, there was a long phase of technical implementation and debugging in which participants were not directly involved. Once the final prototype was functional, participants could look back at their work and experience the film as a whole rather than a partial prototype. Evaluating the film at this stage with the group who produced it was essential to gather their views and reflections. The film was then evaluated with a number of external audiences with varying degrees of mental health awareness, another key stage to explore how viewers would react to the film structure and its content.

The first part of the chapter describes the methods applied in carrying out the evaluation and presents the audience groups who took part in the evaluation. This part also briefly reviews the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this study, and how original plans were adjusted to respond to limitations imposed by national lockdowns.

The second part of this chapter is dedicated to findings emerged from the evaluation carried out with our core participants. This section analyses their reactions, preferences, and feedback to explore how the film, experienced as a whole, met their expressive needs. In particular, it analyses the way participants reflected on the representations of mental health emerging from the film and on its interactive features.

The chapter then moves on to reviewing findings of the evaluation with external audiences, which included groups with a strong awareness of mental health and a sample of a general audience, to investigate how they received and responded to both the messages of the film and its interactive structure.

Finally, the chapter discusses points of convergence and divergence between the reactions of the participants who created the film and the external audience, reflecting on how the film facilitated the encounter between these two groups.

8.1 Research questions, aims, and methods

The aim of this evaluation study was to present *Stepping Through Interactive* to different audiences and to capture their responses to the film. The study was organised in two main stages. In fact, it was important to evaluate the film not just with external audiences, but also with the participants who created it.

8.1.1 Evaluation of *Stepping Through Interactive* with its authors

The first part of the evaluation work was dedicated to working with the same core group of participants who made the film. In fact, due to the technical implementation and debugging stage of the work requiring several months (section [6.4.2.2](#)), and a series of general delays caused by the global pandemics (section [8.1.3](#)), the participants did not have access to a finished prototype of the film until eight months after their last filming workshop. During previous stages of the design work, participants had the chance to try partial prototypes of some of the film features or mock-ups produced in Klynt, but they lacked a direct experience of the film in its entirety. Consequently, it was essential to reconnect participants with their work and capture their impressions and feedback on the finished product. This section of the evaluation aimed to answer the following research question:

*How has *Stepping Through Interactive*, as a non-linear film, supported self-expression and self-representation for the participants who produced it?*

This question could only be addressed by working directly with the participants who created the film, as it is dedicated to the empowering effects of participatory filmmaking in supporting the self-expression of participants. According to the first part of the work ([Chapter 5](#)), non-linear storytelling looked promising in allowing participants to enrich their self-representation by making space for views that the group did not necessarily share evenly. One of the expressive needs emerged from the deconstruction

of the film was centred on presenting multiple storylines with varying degrees of relevance per participant. The rest of the expressive needs (possibility of linking materials together, presence of contextual information, and facilitating audience involvement) also revolved around creating a more complex representation of the participants' experiences of mental health problems and recovery. In this part of the evaluation study, the participants interacted with the film as a viewer would and were encouraged to reflect on how what they watched as a result of their work supported their self-representation.

In order to explore this area, we designed a number of workshops in which participants could watch the finished film several times. Four workshops took place in October 2020 at York St John University. The film prototype was pre-loaded on three laptops, so that participants could watch and interact with the film individually wearing headphones, while I was present in the room to provide technical assistance as needed. Participants had a chance to watch the film in several rounds, spontaneous reactions were captured, and participants were then individually interviewed about their views of the film.

8.1.1.1 Interview design and analysis

We designed a semi-structured interview which presented a list of questions to encourage participants to reflect on the following themes: general impression (*What did you liked and disliked the most about the film?*), representation of mental health (*How do you think the experience of recovery is represented in this film? What do you think of the way your viewpoints were represented in the film? Thinking back at the original Stepping Through, how do you think this film compares to it?*), audience, with a focus on feelings (*How do you think the audience might feel watching this film?*), interactivity (*What do you think of the interaction in the film? Did you experience any issue or moment of confusion while watching the film?*), and future design (*What changes would you make to the film?*).

We opted for a semi-structured approach to ensure the interviews would cover the essential points of investigation listed, but also to include a degree of flexibility to further discuss any idea spontaneously emerging from conversations with participants. Both the spontaneous discussion amongst participants in the first evaluation workshop and the individual interviews were sound recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions and fieldnotes produced after each workshop were analysed through thematic analysis using the

approach described in section [4.2.6](#): transcripts were first coded openly to identify patterns, and these were then synthesised and refined to produce a set of themes.

8.1.1.2 Workshops

During the first workshop, Nathan, Wayne, and Paul watched *Stepping Through Interactive* on individual laptops. Despite extensive testing of the film for bugs and having reached a satisfactory level of fluidity in the film experience before this workshop, the session was partially disrupted by a series of technical issues. For two participants, the lack of clear feedback upon pressing buttons in the film meant that they were not completely sure that their clicking was effective, and in fact in a couple of occasions their choices were not recorded by the film. Also, for both participants, the film froze at the stage of watching documentary interviews. While one participant decided to restart watching the film from the beginning, trying new choices, the other preferred to interrupt viewing. The remaining participant also experienced a technical issue in the film, which skipped from the poetry clips directly to the final clips, avoiding the documentary section of the film. Dealing with these issues and explaining to participants what happened and how the film should have worked instead occupied a considerable portion of the session. Given the fact that all participants could not access the documentary section of the film, I showed the menus and content included in that part by connecting my laptop to a big screen in the room, to at least give a sense to participants of how that section would pan out. The workshop was then opened to discussion for participants to express unprompted views on the film. However, technical issues occupied a considerable portion of the session, limiting the exploration of how the film represented the participants' experiences in this first workshop.

The following workshop presented a newly debugged version of the film with updated feedback system upon clicking. Participants could watch the film again and try a different path. The workshop was attended by Paul and Nathan, while Wayne had to cancel his participation as unwell. The film worked without any issue for Nathan, who was interviewed first, while Paul had to restart the film due to other unforeseen glitches in the film flow. By the time Nathan's interview was completed, Paul had the time to watch the film again and was ready to be interviewed. After the interview, Paul asked to watch the film again to experiment with different choices.

The third workshop was organised to accommodate Adam's new working schedule, which did not allow him to attend any of the previous sessions. The workshop was open to Wayne too, who, still unwell, had to cancel. Adam watched the film on a laptop and was then interviewed by me. Adam's first viewing experience worked well but due to the combination of choices he made he ended up on one of the shortest paths through the film. Wanting to be able to access a wider range of content, he decided to try again and restarted the film making different choices. However, during the second round the film froze. Adam decided to restart his viewing experience once again and managed to successfully explore a different path watching the film until its conclusion.

A fourth workshop was organised to conduct Wayne's individual interview and to offer Nathan another chance to watch the film on his request. On the day of the workshop Wayne communicated that he was still unwell and preferred to shield and not to be interviewed for the time being. The workshop turned into an informal session with Nathan who watched the film again and discussed some developments and recent events at Converge. This material was not recorded as it did not add information of Nathan's interview.

8.1.2 Evaluation of *Stepping Through Interactive* with external audiences

This part of the evaluation study was dedicated to showing the film and collecting feedback from a number of external audiences. These had different degrees of familiarity with the subject of the film, ranging from Converge members, who are immersed into the same community the participants who made the film belong to, to anonymous online audiences with no direct experience of mental health problems. This part of the study aimed to capture how the themes and expressive intents of the authors were received by external audiences with a particular interest in how the film might have encouraged self-reflection on mental health, provided motivation towards self-care and reaching out for help, and raised empathy towards people who struggle with mental health problems. The research question addressed by this part of the study is:

*How has *Stepping Through Interactive*, as non-linear film, engaged audiences with varying levels of mental health awareness and familiarity to the participants who produced it?*

The choice of viewers to recruit was based on the definition of the target film audiences envisioned by participants during the first part of this research (section [5.4.2.4](#)): that is,

people with direct experiences of mental health problems and general audiences who might not have a high level of mental health awareness. Participants had planned specific communicative aims for each of these audiences: those struggling with mental health would find in the film support, understanding and encouragement towards reaching out for help; those without a particular awareness of mental health would reach a better understanding of those who struggle with mental health problems, as people with feelings and capabilities just like anyone else. We also involved mental health professionals as a secondary audience who participants occasionally mentioned in discussions. We wanted to explore how this category of viewers might respond to the themes represented in the film and to its possible applications for training and understanding of factors involved in recovery. Overall, audiences involved in this study, in order of familiarity with the film content, consisted of:

- a. **Professionals and service users at Converge** (York St John University). This groups includes people who are familiar with our original participants and the context they belong to. Ten viewers were recruited in this category.
- b. **Service users from other mental health organisations, mental health professionals or researchers**, who were not familiar with our original participants but could share similar experiences and viewpoints. This category also included professionals from other third sector organisations and community groups with an interest in emotional wellbeing and mental health. Seventeen viewers were recruited in this category.
- c. **A sample of general public** who might have different degrees of mental health awareness, but who declared to have no direct experience of mental health problems. Sixty-five viewers were recruited in this category. An additional nine viewers included in this category participated in a small pilot of the study. These are university colleagues whose work does not involve mental health.

These evaluators were anonymised in records by using R (“reviewer”) with a number. Later in the chapter, quotes from evaluators are marked with their respective code. Please refer to [Appendix 13](#) for a details on this coding system. The following sections provide additional details on the recruitment of viewers from each category.

8.1.2.1 Recruitment of members of the Converge community

Converge members (both professionals and service users) were invited to join the evaluation study by first contacting members of staff. The film was firstly watched and evaluated by some members of staff, and then passed on to the Research and Evaluation Team, a research body in Converge composed by people with lived experience of mental health. In fact, Converge requested that the study be reviewed by them before it would be circulated externally. After having collected and implemented feedback from CERT, I produced an image to be used on Converge social media to recruit other Converge members. Overall, ten Converge members took part in the evaluation, of which five were professionals and five Converge students. All these viewers completed the questionnaires.

8.1.2.2 Recruitment of other mental health professionals, researchers, or people with experience of mental health problems

Participants for this segment of the evaluation were recruited by contacting several mental health organisations, reaching out to professionals first, with a plan to then encourage them to share the film with service users who might be interested in taking part in the study. However, out of all the mental health organisations contacted directly, only one actively signed up for the study (Amitola Community in York³⁸, an organisation which supports people with mental health problems). All the other organisations were struggling with increased workloads due to the pandemic and screen fatigue from both staff and service users due to many activities being moved online. Some ignored our attempts to get in touch while others responded that they would like to participate, but failed to take part within the deadline, even though this was extended twice.

For this reason, we decided to instead recruit mental health professionals and researchers from personal contacts. The UK Participatory Research Network³⁹, which connects academics and practitioners active in the field of participatory research, sent a call for participants through their mailing list to researchers and organisations. This call received a satisfactory number of responses. Overall, this segment of the evaluation involved sixteen participants. Out of this group, seven are researchers from the field of

³⁸ Amitola Communities: <https://amitola-communities.co.uk/>

³⁹ UK Participatory Research Network: <http://ukprn.weebly.com/>

mental health, health sciences, psychology, or social sciences, all sharing a keen interest in mental health. Five are professionals from a mental health organisation, from public health, and from other third sector organisations. Three are people with lived experience of mental health problems. One is a community artist.

Out the three people with lived experience of mental health problems, two could not watch the film due to technical issues. This reduces the number of questionnaires filled to fourteen for this audience section.

8.1.2.3 Evaluation with a sample of general population

For this part of the evaluation, we used Prolific⁴⁰ as a recruiting platform which allowed us to select participants according to the parameters we needed. We were looking for participants who declared not to have direct experiences of mental health problems, for two reasons: because we wanted to capture reactions of audiences who were not necessarily familiar with the subject, in contrast with the other range of participants; and because it would not have been possible to perform appropriate safeguarding practices on an anonymous online platform for viewers with potential current health conditions. Prolific allowed us to filter participants according to several parameters, including health conditions: for this study we excluded people who had ongoing mental health conditions, mild cognitive impairments or dementia, autism spectrum disorders, and mental illness daily impact.

This part of the evaluation started with a first group of thirty participants, as we wanted to check the levels of participants engagement through the platform, who is normally used for shorter studies, before involving more participants. Since we recorded a satisfactory level of engagement, we raised the total number of participants involved to sixty-five. Out of these sixty-five, three could not play the film on their devices and had to leave their questionnaires blank.

Across all the groups described, a hundred and one viewers were recruited but six of them were not able to play the film. Two of these were viewers with direct experience of mental health problems, meaning that throughout the study only six people identified as someone who had lived experience. In proportion to the entire sample, this is a small group

⁴⁰ Prolific: <https://prolific.co/>

considering that the participants who made the film envisioned this group as their main audience. The fact that we could not lead the evaluation in person or connect more closely to other mental health organisations due to the pandemic severely limited our ability to access more people with lived experience. While we still consider the results of the evaluation sufficiently informative about the film and its uses, it would be ideal to conduct a more in-depth study with mental health service users as a future research project.

8.1.2.3 Online set-up, questionnaire design, and analysis

While initial plans saw participants involved in leading this part of the evaluation by presenting the film to a selected Converge audience, and later, to service users and professionals from other mental health organisations, lockdowns and restrictions induced by the pandemics did not allow us to carry out the study in person. Instead, the evaluation work was conducted completely online. This was organised by uploading *Stepping Through Interactive* onto a server so that it could be viewed through a website. Evaluation participants were sent an email of instruction containing links to information sheets, consent forms, the film itself, and a questionnaire in Google Forms. Participants were assigned a code they could use to access the film. The film had an anonymous tracking system built in which recorded the duration of each viewing experience and the choices made by each participant, identifiable via their codes. This data was needed to investigate if and how the responses to the questionnaires could be influenced by the amount and combination of content watched in the film.

The questionnaire was composed by open questions, an option needed for an area of investigation which heavily relies on subjective impressions and reflective inputs. There was no limit to the length of the answers and there was no obligation to answer every question. While this opened the study to the risk of partial completion from participants, we decided that given the sensitive nature of some of the topics discussed it would have been unethical to impose mandatory answers from the audience. Overall, the majority of evaluation participants filled in every question.

The questionnaire was organised in three sections:

- **Viewing experience:** this part of the questionnaire asked viewers whether they encountered any technical issue or barrier in watching the film and if so, to describe them. This part was necessary as, at the time of being moved online, the film still

presented some bugs and did not work smoothly on every platform. It allowed us to understand the extent to which technical issues were surfacing for viewers and how the nature of these issues could influence the rest of questionnaire results.

- **Film content and represented issues:** this part of questionnaire was dedicated to exploring how the audiences reacted to the issues represented in the film. It is composed of several questions focused on general impressions of the film (*What was your general impression of the film? How did the film make you feel? What was your favourite thing about this film? What did you not like about this film? How would you summarise the main messages of this film in your own words?*). This combination of questions, which can appear repetitive in places, was designed to prompt participants to articulate their response to the film as thoroughly as possible. An emphasis on feelings in one question was also included as relevant to the overall tone of the film and its modality of navigation. Two questions were dedicated specifically to the representation of mental health in the film (*What do you think of the way mental health was represented in this film? If you could change anything about the way mental health was represented in the film, what would you add or remove?*). Two final questions in this section enquired on possible film uses (*Who would you show this film to? What do you think could be possible uses for this film?*).
- **Interactive Filmmaking:** the last part of the questionnaire asked viewers about the interactive nature of the film. We placed this section after the Film Content and Represented Issues sections as we were giving precedence to the general impression of the film and its representation over an assessment of the technology by viewers. However, we also wanted to collect viewers' impressions on the interactive aspects of this film. The questions were open and aimed at letting viewers articulate their experiences of interacting with the film as freely as possible (*What are your thoughts about the interactivity in the film? What was for you the best aspect of being offered choices in the film? What was in your view the worst aspect of being offered choices in the film?*). A final question was dedicated to ideas for possible changes to the film (*If you could change the film in any way, what would you add, remove, or modify in the film?*). While this question sits in the interactive filmmaking section, it was left deliberately generic to check whether viewers would suggest changes to the structure of the film or rather to its content.

A closing portion of the questionnaire offered participants an extra blank space to add any remaining views or opinions which might not have fit any of the questions. We were

originally planning to use different questions for different audience groups (for instance, only asking “*If you could change anything about the way mental health was represented in the film, what would you add or remove?*” to people with clear awareness of mental health, or only asking “*What do you think could be possible uses for this film?*” to mental health professionals or researchers). Instead, we ultimately decided to keep all the questions in every questionnaire. In fact, asking any viewer to articulate possible applications for the film or how they thought mental health could be best represented, even when they could have a limited awareness of it, was going to further clarify their opinions and impressions of the film.

As a result of their feedback collected from CERT, parts of the instructions were clarified, and an additional question was added to the second portion of the questionnaire (*Was there any scene in the film which you found upsetting or potentially triggering? If so, which one?*). Adding this question was deemed important to ensure that no part of the film could result in an upsetting experience for viewers.

The questionnaires’ answers were analysed using thematic analysis: the data was coded by answer category, viewer category, and positive, neutral, or negative response. These coded were then refined and developed into the themes reviewed in section [8.3](#). Some of the viewers’ questionnaires were checked against the data recorded by the film, when answers indicated that viewers might have only watched a very small part of the content, in order to understand if there was a correlation between shorter viewing experiences and specific reactions to the film.

8.1.3 COVID-19 impact on the study

As mentioned in some of the above sections of this chapter, the Covid-19 pandemics had a considerable impact on this study, affecting particularly our ability to conduct the film evaluation in person.

The first part of the evaluation, carried out with the core group of participants who made the film, was delayed but still manageable in a face-to-face setting. In fact, in the Autumn of 2020 university premises were open to small groups of students and staff. The workshops took place at York St John University, where the policy at the time required to keep the group number to less than six people, to sit at a distance of at least two meters, and to wear masks for the duration of the sessions. These were all conditions that we could meet

successfully. However, there were aspects from the original plan of this study that we could not implement. These were:

- Allowing the participants who made the film to discuss the film in my absence: original plans included a session where participants could discuss the film amongst themselves and interview each other without my supervision. This stage would have facilitated participants voicing views or perplexities which they might have otherwise felt less comfortable to explore because of their investment in my work and efforts. However, according to the university policy at the time, it was not advisable to leave participants unsupervised as I had the responsibility of ensuring that everyone would keep distances and wear masks. Consequently, this activity had to be sacrificed. However, I encouraged participants to discuss any problematic aspect or perplexity about the film as freely as possible. Thanks to the relationship of trust developed with these participants over the years, it was my belief that they felt free to discuss any aspect of the film without fearing that I could take comments personally.
- Participants who created the film had expressed a wish to present it to a selected Converge audience through the equivalent of a test screening which often happens in traditional filmmaking. This involvement was initially encouraged as it showed ownership and agency from participants. Also, capturing how participants would present and discuss the film with audiences could have been a valuable source of data on the way they see the film. However, gathering of a group of people was not allowed at the time of conducting this study, so we had to unfortunately cancel plans for this screening event. We plan to still organise a community event to share the film and let participants guide viewing and discussion outside of this research project, as soon as safety conditions allow. Doing this would still be very important to reward participants for their commitment to the project and to act ethically towards their ownership of the work.

The pandemic affected the first part of the evaluation by not allowing to carry out these two activities, but the overall plan for this part of the work could be respected. Instead, it had a more considerable impact on the second part of the evaluation. Original plans for working with external audiences included pairing the questionnaires' data with a small number of in-depth interviews co-led by the core group of participants who made the film. Again, restrictions and lockdowns did not make it possible to involve the core group of participants in leading this kind of activities, as no face-to-face activity was in fact advisable at the time. Instead, the evaluation was carried out completely on-line.

The pandemic also severely affected the rate of responses we could gather from mental health organisations and third-sector communities. While these are usually tendentially open to work with researchers and welcome opportunities to provide meaningful activities to their service users, we registered a considerable lack of engagement, with organisations not responding at all or postponing their participation until after the final deadline. This is most likely imputable to the increased workload and efforts communities were making to transfer their activities online and to support service users in accessing digital tools. Also, after several months of lockdowns and restrictions, both staff and service users in several organisation started to experience screen fatigue (Nadier 2020) and were not enthusiastic about conducting another activity online. The support from the UKPRN helped us mitigating the lack of engagement from organisations by reaching a high number of network members.

While the pandemic has certainly had an impact on the plans we would have ideally implemented in this evaluation study, we still believe that the number of participants involved and the variety of their backgrounds are sufficient to provide a rich picture of audiences' reactions to the film.

8.2 Responses to *Stepping Through Interactive* by the participants who made the film

The evaluation with the participants who made the film provided rich data on their viewpoints and reactions. The following sections describe the themes emerged from participants' reactions and their individual interviews.

8.2.1 Participants received the film positively

Despite some technical issues, the overall response from participants was very positive, with numerous expressions of enthusiasm towards the film, its interactive structure, and its content. Some first impression from participants included appreciation for portions of the new content they had not seen in a while (Nathan "It's good to see a fresh clip", Wayne "I thought it was quite atmospheric really" and "the part with the paint [...] I loved seeing that finished, that looks really good", Paul "It's really good, yes, I like that introduction"). During all of the viewing experiences, Adam spontaneously commented on many of the film aspects

(“people are watching and empathising” while watching Wayne’s interview; “I like the evolution of Paul from being unwell to make changes and grow in his goals” while watching Paul’s interview; “I agree with myself!” while watching his own interview; “it looks excellent” while watching the half-painted face film; “I think that because of all what’s happened after this in the world, this is like breath of fresh air” referring to the sociality and fun moments depicted in the outtakes). This enthusiasm suggested that he found the film engaging and relevant to his life and experiences.

8.2.2 Participants dedicated different levels of attention to the film process

While the evaluation was mostly focused on the film form, participants spontaneously commented on the process of making the film as well, expressing pride for their work and sense of achievement. This is particularly relevant to Nathan’s case, who reflected more on the process than the film form in his interview. He expressed enthusiasm about the work itself and his role in it (“I’ve actually come, participated, said stuff out to the people, had a laugh, and it’s all you can do, isn’t it?”) and excitement at the thought of sharing his work with his circle (“I can’t wait until my friends see it because some of them will be like “oh you did that, did you? Is that what you’ve been doing for the past two years?”). Similar to previous comments on the process of making the original *Stepping Through*, Nathan identified the closeness and trust amongst participants as a fundamental factor in making this work successful (“what helps as well is that we actually know each other before we started”). When asked about comparing the interactive film with its linear counterpart, Nathan responded by comparing the two processes instead, and how by attending several Converge film courses he felt he had accumulated more film experience by the time the group came to work on *Stepping Through Interactive*. He also expressed how watching clips reminded him of parts of the process, some of which he might have forgotten meanwhile (“it’s weird you’re there with people and you’re like “Oh, I remember doing this”, and then the music kicks in and you’re like “right, but I don’t remember doing that bit”).

Wayne and Adam also expressed positive comments on their memories of the film process (Adam: “I enjoyed every minute of doing of doing this”; Wayne: “there were quite a few things that still made me smile [...] it just brings back memories, happy memories, which is a good thing I believe”). Paul touched on the extended amount of work required to make this interactive film and how he enjoyed the process as not just a person with

experience of mental health problems, but a creative practitioner. However, his interview focused more strongly on the final film.

8.2.3 Participants thought that the representations of mental health emerging from the film was accurate in relation to their own viewpoints

Participants found that the mental health representations emerging from *Stepping Through Interactive* experienced as a whole respect their viewpoints and experiences. The varying combinations of content as a result of the viewers' choices do not impact on the overall message and its coherence, according to these participants. All participants felt that the film represents their own personal journey of recovery effectively.

Adam expressed a strong appreciation of the hopeful and supportive tone which emerges as a result of the combination of clips in the film: "I like the community feel and I like the informative way of how you go from when people are not very well and then they're going through their different things of getting yourself better through Converge". He was also content with the fact that the overall representation of mental health was hopeful and uplifting: "it wasn't like showing people [...] the negativity around mental health, it showed a lot of positivity, and it showed the building blocks and on the way to recovery and I think it worked". In fact, Adam focused particularly on how the film could support people struggling with mental health problems: "people watching who would be going through the same thing, they would get the right advice from Wayne or me or others and they would be thinking no, I can't get out of this place, I can't but showing they can, that can help". Adam also considered how the film could be received by people who do not have a direct experience of mental health problems or keen mental health awareness and he imagined how the film could help this specific group understanding more how someone in recovery might change" and "it gives me maybe an understanding of how we are going through things with the people who maybe haven't experienced it [...] it sits at the different side of people with mental health problems and then it gives them more understanding of how people are going through things and how they have to have a journey to get to the other side to be better and it might not be the same person that comes out on the other side". For Adam the film is "very reflective and it shows the human behind the person, the heartbeat of the person", painting a picture of recovery where the viewers can immerse into the participants' experiences ("people spiralling not out of control, but spiralling into

people's minds and hearts really with their stories”) and realise that “everybody will have all the same different fears and emotions”.

Nathan and Paul expressed a clear awareness on the fact that the film, even in its increased complexity, does not aim to, nor could be capable of, creating an all-encompassing representation of mental health. Nathan mentioned age as a criterion which could influence different representations of mental health: “I think it's well explained, I think it's explained to a certain degree”, but, he added, it only addressed certain age groups, and the same film could be completely different if made by young people. Paul expressed a similar viewpoint: “I think it gives you a fragment of a group of people's perspectives [...] conversations that go on about mental health are so vast that you can debate back and forth about numerous different things, and we're just trying to, what we show there is a part of that bigger picture and from the perspective of a group of people, whether other people experiencing certain things [...] in a creative manner, and in the style in which it's done I think it opens up potentially interesting conversations”. These fragments can be considered “as a piece of the puzzle, as a piece of the conversations, the continuing debates and arguments and feelings of whatever that go on, only by the context of a group of four or five, six people as such”.

Paul also expanded on this point in his interview, reflecting on the scope of his experiences compared to the people he now supports in his work as a mental health support worker. He expressed awareness of how the film does not aim to cover specific conditions: “we're not necessarily defining certain mental health conditions as such, so we're not necessarily diving into the realms of too much of schizophrenia, or hearing voices or bipolar disorder or etc. etc.” However, while the film keeps its expression deliberately free from labels and diagnostic language, some of the poetry and evocative imagery seem to err towards the exploration of feelings related to anxiety or depression. According to Paul, both through his direct experience of mental health problems and through his work supporting others, he came to observe how anxiety and depression are often co-occurring in any other kind of mental health conditions: “anxiety and depression are always there in any other condition anyway there is a certain link, association, as a linear format, I've worked with people that hear voices and things like that and I know anxiety comes in with it and I know past experiences, there's always seem to be the anxiety and the depression and then everything else comes in afterwards, I'm not saying that is always true, that's how it's described before you start going into the other things”. This reflection reinforces the fact that participants wanted to produce a representation of mental health that could focus on emotions common amongst people experiencing different conditions. For Paul, however,

different individuals might respond very differently to the film: “whether people understand what we 're trying to say, again will come down to the different individual”.

8.2.4 Interactivity supported participants’ representations of mental health

The successful representation of participants’ viewpoints about mental health in *Stepping Through Interactive* is imputable to two different dimensions of the film: its interactive structure and the linear content which populates it. In the discussion of the non-linear structure in the film, very interesting reflection from participants emerged.

Nathan talked about the initial sense of confusion about the workings of the film, and the gradual sense of clarity gained by interacting, getting a better sense of its logic (“confusing, and other things were confusing at the time, but obviously we hadn't done it before but what we were doing was all fresh to us anyways, so it felt good to be confused and then actually do something, and then seeing it, and then you're not too confused then”). He saw this as a metaphor of how the mind works in the process of recovery. Interestingly, for Paul the non-linearity of *Stepping Through Interactive* might also make it closer to being inside someone’s mind: “it's a different experience, because it's interactive and it jumps and it changes, and you don't know where you going to get, there's an element with that where I think, yes that's how our minds work as well, one day you're like this, then we jump to this, then we're a bit like this, then we're a bit like that, and this is what that film does”. In both cases, these two participants seem to imply that the non-linear structure of this film could, in its very form, express the fragmented nature of mind processes which are much more chaotic than the orderly arrangements typical of some traditional linear narrative structures.

For Adam, the interactivity in the film added to the quality of the viewing experience: “my spontaneous impression I would say is very creative and very thought-provoking [...] and it straight away it made me want to see more when from the beginning, I wanted to know about different other things it was like enticing [...], other routes and other things and the people and all of the stories”. The combination of the routes and themes explored in the film for Adam creates “a map of wellness”, using a metaphor which reinforces the attraction of participants towards the concept of map (see section [7.3.4](#)).

In terms of specific interactive film features, Adam enjoyed the self-generated clip which recaps the viewers’ feelings (“I like how it's showing you back what you pressed, that's very good”). Paul discussed the feelings menus and how these helped deepening the

relations with viewers: “you've got to think a bit more emotionally, within the same bracket context, it gets you to dig a little bit deeper”. On the other hand, he did not seem impressed by the self-generated clip, which he thinks only lasts a few seconds and does not add much to the viewing experience. For him, the idea of the map would have been more interesting as a tool to recap the viewers' journeys: “you can also get it where you got the map, and it's kind of doing it as going, so you've got the full map and it's going you felt this, this, and this, and you kind of get the picture opaque in the background and the map is you went through this, this, and this”.

Overall, participants comments indicated that the interactivity in the film made the content more engaging, and two of them see the non-linearity of the film as a reflection of how the mind works in experiences of recovery from mental illness.

8.2.5 Part of the linear content in the film was particularly effective at supporting the representations of mental health in the film

The linear content within the structure also had a relevant role in supporting participants' expressive intentions. In particular, all three participants interviewed praised the combination of poetry and documentary in this film. For them, while the poetry creates an emotional and abstract communication with viewers, which Adam links to inner states (“the poetry is really good because it's like a snapshot of a force of your thought, what you're thinking at that moment”), the documentary segments allow participants to explicitly articulate their experiences. For Wayne this is needed to allow viewers to access more information about the participants, a request strongly connected to one of the participants' expressive needs (presenting contextual materials). Other participants echoed this feeling. Nathan said: “I think when I'm summoning up at the end, I think that makes me like, yeah, I understand what you're saying kind of thing [...] I understand where he's coming from”. For Paul: “[There is my section] explaining my clip, explaining how I got in contact with Converge, my own experience of mental health, what motivated me, then, [...] what is converge, 'cause that would be the most confusing part for anyone who's not from York”. Paul felt that the documentary section helps giving viewers more concrete grounding between the feelings-based exploration and the half-painted face film: “in that sense that it gives you a breather, it gives you a break from all that what you have just watched, and you actually get a bit more of a linear context of, this is what we've done, this is what I'm thinking, this is my own interview”. For Adam: “looking at the interviews it's a good way of getting to

know the person within, the person who [...] you've seen the eyes [...] it's like you're a destruction of a body and then you've got all the elements, then you find out the person behind the mask". Here Adam is referring to the process of gradual disclosure happening in the film, where viewers move from a partial view of the participants (the eyes) and access their thoughts in form of poetry, to them move to talking heads, where participants speak explicitly of their experiences. This seems to suggest that while the use of poetry facilitated the articulation of emotional states that are difficult to verbalise, it also acted as a protection cover, through which participants could choose which fragment of themselves to reveal. The realism of the documentary part shows participants in a more literal, hence vulnerable position.

Wayne appreciated the presence of outtakes to lighten up the tone of the film: "some of the topics we covered are quite serious, but being able to see that, although we did that, there was the fun side element of it, which I don't think it's always a bad thing to be shown and let people see that". Paul also thought that the outtake segment, even if long, served an important purpose of showing the amount of work involved in making the film and ending the experience in humour: "the outtakes is brilliant and there is part of me sometimes that thinks is it too long? But at the same time I think, no, you kind of need that kind of breath, and at the end of the day that's a lot of work that a lot of people has done and I think people should be able to get to see that" and "it's nice to finish on those outtake things, as opposed as to having the seriousness of the interviews". These comments reinforce an authorial choice that participants committed to since the making of the original *Stepping Through* in 2016, that is to allow viewers to leave the film experience feeling elated and amused.

Another linear asset that was praised by participants was the connective text sitting between menus, personal chapters, and thematic clips. Thanks to this text, which often uses the same keywords recurring in the spoken word, the viewer is guided through the different combinations of content. Both Nathan and Paul spontaneously praised the connective texts between menus and video segments helped (Nathan: "there was a build up of words, before your choice came up so you're not missing anything so you get a full sentence of words or you get a caption to read" and Paul "I think it's very good that we have that text that falls in between after certain choices as in the dialect [...] it allows you to then still follow what's going on [...] so there is a bit of human connection with us in names' terms as to where it's going and it gives you a little bit of an insight just through few phrases as well"). For Paul it was particularly important that the text in the menus mirrored the spoken word from the poetry clips: "you could pull out certain words that were said maybe in the previous film, within that dialect, then that would go to have you felt lost, have you felt confused, I think you

see some ties in there”. This indicates that something as simple as video text on screen can be as crucial as well-designed interfaces in maintaining the coherence of an interactive film.

8.2.6 Participants saw *Stepping Through Interactive* as an organic expansion of its linear counterpart

Asking participants to compare *Stepping Through Interactive* with the pre-existing *Stepping Through* unlocked interesting definitions of the non-linear film. All three participants interviewed saw the non-linear film as an organic development of its linear counterpart. Paul extensively reflected on how the film had transformed from its original linear counterpart: “it changed so much since doing that first initial film to now having this whole other huge monster of a thing with all these different little films” with “a lot of different visuals and interesting ways of how you try to interpret it”. He also said: “There's a lot more open to it, there's a lot more conversation, a lot more thought, a lot more depth”. He used several metaphors to express his view of the difference between the two: “it's like you're watching *Stepping Through* and it's like your GCSE, and you watch this and this is like doing you're degree, it's two different ways of viewing it”, and “it's like watching a film in 3D or something, ok well, does that work for you, no that gave me a bloody headache!”. The last comment underlines how some viewers might prefer one version over the other: “[some viewers]’d prefer this, because it's engaging, it's more, it's kind of more full at you, but I can imagine a couple of people I do work with would find this too much and would just prefer it to be nice and linear”. Here Paul was referring to people with more severe mental illnesses that he supports in his job as a mental health support worker. He also described non-linear *Stepping Through* as something moving and shapeshifting, like water or clay, and as a more layered and playable experience.

Adam mirrored part of these metaphors. He underlined the sense of progression between the two films, which reflects the progression in the participants’ own journey of recovery, and how *Stepping Through Interactive* can be considered an organic evolution of the first film: “the first one was the beginning and then this is the next chapter in in our progression in our health and this is a progression in the work of all of us , of what's gone into this project, like early beginnings with an acorn which grows, structure, tree then two strands of recovery which has evolved into the other film, and it metamorphosis into this finished product”.

In relation to the comparison with the original *Stepping Through*, an area of discussion which spontaneously emerged in these interviews centred on the different

lengths of the two filming experiences: while the original film was only slightly over eight minutes, an average viewing experience in *Stepping Through Interactive* takes around forty-five minutes. Both participants said that they did not find the film to be too long, especially since the interactivity in it made the experience not simply longer, but qualitatively deeper. Nathan stated: the longer the better, to be honest with you (...) I wonder what's going, I'll click on to that, and people click, oh, but I wanna see what happens, and then like, oh alright I get it! and then they get more interested as they get into it". For Paul: "this is the extended edition cut [...] but it's in a different way, it's like moving water, it's moving clay, it's like you ply and play, and pulling and pushing, it's not just a linear one after the other".

8.2.7 Participants identified clear limits in the interactive structure

In spite of the overall enthusiasm towards the film, participants clearly articulated its limits as well. All four participants strongly stated that they would like to include the possibility to rewind and try different choices without having to re-start the film from the beginning. The impossibility to move freely in the content with some independence from the feelings' menus was perceived as considerable limit to the film. Nathan praised the interactive elements in the film ("it's good to have a choice") but was disappointed at the lack of possibility of going back to watch a clip again or to select a different option from a menu ("with all the choices you're like, oh! that sounds good, but I couldn't come back, I don't think you can come back" and "it'd be good to go back off your first choice, next choice, go back, next choice, next person"; "the only thing I didn't like I just said earlier on is the format of not being able to rewind, go forward to be able to go to another object"; "I'd like to watch more of it, all the people, other clips that are on it that I haven't seen today but hopefully see it in the future").

All participants said that they would want the viewers to watch as much content as possible without being confined into one main path. Paul said that one of the few things he disliked about the experience was that "I wanted more, I want to see a bit more, I want to get a few more choices in, I only had three choices, and I want to go check out that, or I want to go back, and the only other thing that came to my mind". Adam also expressed an interest in proposing more than three choices of feelings in the feelings' menus, or perhaps the possibility of picking two at the same time and creating a blend of emotions: "there's three options or four options, but would it be good to have more options [...] because a lot of people would have multiple things that I've gone through multiple choice and then you can make up your mind". Adam specifically linked the ability of access the entire content in the

film as a way of reinforcing its message: “when they've watched it all and they've gone through everything, all the stories and clicked on everything, they'll feel like they're not alone, they'd feel like there's somebody there who's experiencing the same things”. Paul said: “I'm just hoping people will go back and go through and will try to find other things and I just hope people don't miss out on all of it, that they do go back in and get to see every little bit of it and that's why that map idea, or something being able to chart it”. These comments suggest that that for participants to feel well-represented in the film an overview of the entire content is necessary. Interestingly, the idea of having a map of content, which could not be accommodated in this final prototype, comes up again in relation to the possibility of moving more freely across the content, in combination with the feelings' menus. The fact that this idea held such strong relevance indicates that it is a key feature in the ideal design of the film and, by not including it in the final prototype, we have in fact limited the effectiveness of the film structure for participants. Paul also reflected on an important aspect of this issue, that is by being an author of the film he is aware of how much content does not get seen during one viewing experience “because I'm also aware of other clips that I haven't seen, I'm aware there are other clips that I haven't seen yet, which is a little bit annoying”. External audiences might instead on be aware of how much unseen content they could not access within their viewer journey and be less affected by the *fear of missing out*.

Another issue that participants expressed concern about is the impossibility to pause the clips. This is an understandable concern, as online viewing usually implies the possibility of pausing in combination with rewinding. Paul discussed this aspect at length (“I think when people watch it or whatever, do they wanna pause it or do they want to jump out? Now the idea with this with it being interactive is no, you can't, but I don't know if there is a point in it where do you actually have a pause thing to be able to go back or rewind” and “I can imagine some people might wanna try and watch this and not realise how long it could and want to go for a pee halfway through and thinking oh crap I can't pause this which you know is well, it is what it is, and whether or not a disclaimer should be put at the beginning”). This sentiment was echoed by the other participants during their first viewing, when they realised it was not possible to pause clips. Paul and Nathan expressed some perplexity on the fact that while this film presents a sophisticated systems for interactive viewing, its lacks basic features that participants would expect from regular DVDs or online videos.

Overall, the main limitations participants identified consisted of the fact that viewers did not have as much choice as they expected and were too enclosed into the path created by their choice of feelings, without an overview of the entire content.

8.2.8 Participants expressed their wish to keep engaging with this form of storytelling in the future

Participants expressed interest in continuing working with interactive storytelling. This emerged from their interest in being involved leading part of the evaluation with external audiences and from individual comments. Nathan, for instance, expressed that he would like to create something similar with a different group (“it’d be good to continue doing this with another group [...], other people from sort of mental health will watch this and they will want to know how they can get involved with in in a similar way”). Watching the finished film inspired Adam in thinking of a new possible idea for an interactive film on mental health, which would visualise thoughts on the screen and allow viewers to choose and follow the inner dialogue of different characters: “you see them like thought clouds and then you’d be able to maybe like go back to the main area where there’s like loads of thoughts going around and [...] then you just like click onto another thought”. These comments, together with some requests to watch the film repeatedly and Paul’s investment in re-watching several times outside the sessions, suggest that the experience of being involved in interactive filmmaking has stimulated engagement and new ideas which go beyond this particular research project.

Overall, participants responses to the film were very positive, painting a picture where non-linearity has helped building an organic expansion of the original linear film which enriched the representations of mental health produced by participants and made the viewing experience more engaging, a result supported also by the quality and range of the linear content which populates the interactive structure. The final film prototype, lacks some features that participants would like, including the possibility of moving more freely through the clips and having an overview grasp of the entirety of the content available. This is not only a technical requirement, but rather participants found that it is particularly important for them that viewers can access and watch all the linear content in the film if they wish to do so. While the current *Stepping Through Interactive* prototype has not achieved these goals, the original design ideas from participants developed through the design workshops (section [7.3](#)) potentially could. Participants enjoyed the process in spite of the fact that this research is the longest and more demanding undertaking they took up in terms of working on a filmmaking project and expressed a wish to continue this type of work in the future.

8.3 Responses to *Stepping Through Interactive* by external audiences

The evaluation carried out with external audiences also produced a rich set of data revolving around several themes, which can be mostly grouped around general reactions to the film, reflections on the mental health representations in the film, and reflections on the interactive elements in the film. Most responses were consistent regardless of which category the audience members belonged to, with some exceptions which are described in the following sections where relevant.

8.3.1 Most of the audience reacted positively to the film

When asked to describe first impressions to the film most of the answers from the diverse audience involved in this part of the evaluation expressed positive rather than negative views (59 Vs 18). Some recurring comments on the film from the audiences combined described it as “enjoyable” R2, R26; “insightful and revealing” R18; “creative” R19, R40, R66, R84; “innovative” R22; “honest” R4, R22, R24, R33; “powerful” R9, R13, R26, R44, R82; “evocative” R36; “thought-provoking” R26, R37, R62, R84, R90, R97; “eye-opening” R53; “inspiring” R13, R22, R86; “unique” R48, R73, R82, R93; “immersive” R7, R14; and “engaging” R7, R95. The most enthusiastic comments came from Converge professionals, mental health professionals from another organisation, mental health researchers, and professionals from the third sector (“excellent” R1, R18; “a phenomenal achievement” R4; “very well made, beautiful” R3, “a fabulous experience” R19, “I loved it!” R27, “amazing” R26). In the practice of applied arts this kind of audience is sometimes defined as “benevolent”, meaning an audience who sympathises with the participants’ circumstances to the point of wanting to praise effort rather than critiquing a work of art. However, in this study we found that these generally positive tones in answers were present in all audience groups, including people with direct experiences of mental health problems and those who did not have any.

Emotional reactions to the film were also predominantly positive (29 answers), with some mixed feelings expressed (13 answers), and a minority of negative emotional reactions (8 answers). The most common positive feelings expressed were feeling “uplifted” R1, R4, R28, R33, R57, R61, R64, R66; “interested” R2, R27, R30, R32, R34, R37, R56, R62; “hopeful” R8, R9, R29, R38, R24, R46, R52, R78, R80, R82, R92; and “inspired” R13, R36, R38, R45, R57, R62, R66, R91. The mixed feelings answers were more common in the general audience (“I felt sadness and empathy but inspired as well” R26; “quite sad at times but I felt warmth from it” R40; “it was a rollercoaster to be honest, there are moments where I

felt saddened by the character's struggles but other moments when I felt uplifted and inspired by their successes" R57). Some viewers praised the fact that the film helped them accepting negative feelings too ("it made me feel it's ok to not be doing well" R3; "it made me feel like it's ok to feel down and depressed [...] but also that it's ok to share these feelings with others and that there are better days ahead" R7). The coexistence of positive and negative feelings and the encouragement to accept negative feelings as temporary match some of the authorial intentions of the authors of the film, who tried to strike a balance between representing positive and negative feelings related to mental health and to encourage resilience.

8.3.2 Audience members who reacted negatively to the film mostly felt confused by the poetic approach of the first part of the film

Even though negative reactions to the film were minoritarian in the sample considered, they seemed to share similarities: viewers in this category expressed confusion ("could be more clear" R12; "the overall message was unclear" R35; "too obscure for me" R72; "too weird and sombre for me" R20; "felt a bit confused as it wasn't always clear what was happening" R14). The film made some of these viewers "gloomy" R20, "sad and bored" R83, and "depressed" R39, R42. They also expressed confusion on the film's aims ("it was hard to tell exactly who the film was aimed at" R6; "not too sure what the aim was" R23; "I wasn't sure about the point of the film - is it to advertise Converge? for people to learn about mental health recovery?" R25; and "I wonder if the intention of the film was clearer at the beginning I wouldn't have felt so lost with it" R25).

For several of these viewers, the reason for this reaction lied in the abstract and poetic nature of the first part of the film ("the only thing I did not like was the fact that it was written in a poetry-style way" R78; "the type of narration makes it a bit difficult" R11; "[because of] its abstract nature, I couldn't really get the sense of what was happening" R14; it felt a bit too poetic" R59; "the poetical nature of the voice overs meant that it didn't feel guided or informative, it just felt random" R72; "random thoughts" R15). This clearly indicates that for some audience members the poetic approach of the film was off-putting, and they would have liked a more logical and factual approach ("there didn't seem to be any structure or story" R15; "it would have also been helpful to show rationality & logic" R6). For a viewer, the poetic language was difficult to absorb as a non-native speaker ("as a non-native English speaker, sometimes the dialogues were a bit too abstract or

metaphorical to build a clear message in my head” R16). Some of the viewers who did not enjoy the poetic side of the film did not watch for enough time (either because they decided to stop viewing or because of technical issues) to access the documentary part of the film, which might have counterbalanced their need for factual and concrete storytelling. Viewers who watched the film until the end of their journey in spite of not enjoying the poetry section, reflected on the relationship between the poetry and the documentary content:

“At the beginning it felt quite weird, as I am not used to this kind of productions. I felt confused and my heart felt weird as a combination of the story, lightning, and music. Later on it improved, especially when they talked about the character that represents me the most, as well as the last scene with the painted faces” R54.

“It started off a bit too abstract for me, and I couldn't really work out what was happening and why. Took 5 or 10 minutes for me to start to warm up to it” R75.

“Switch the first and second section around. Then I could start with something more familiar and move into the choice section which was more unfamiliar to me” R10.

For some viewers, on the other hand, the poetic approach seemed to be a strength of the film:

“[My favourite aspect of the film was] their deep thoughts, which were expressed with simple and powerful words and phrases, e.g. "When you let fear go you are free", "Down to me to change", "My new me". They were performers creating at the same time their own and unique identity and lives again” R18.

“I felt that the language used during the narrative parts was quite impactful and while not linear it gave you a good understanding of the emotional states the people narrating were experiencing” R36.

These contrasting opinions suggest that the film tends to appeal to viewers who privilege an emotion-driven viewing experience over a more structured and guided narrative. While the documentary section in the film could support the interests of the latter group, it might be placed too further in the viewing journey for those to continue viewing.

8.3.3 The vast majority of viewers accurately understood the mental health representations present in the film

Most viewers (81 participants) correctly understood and were able to summarise many of the mental health messages contained in the film. Interestingly, the questionnaire portions about mental health contained the lengthiest and more detailed responses compared to the other parts of the questionnaire, indicating that the subject of the film

was pervasive and provoked reflection in most viewers. For these viewers, the representation of mental health was “accurate” R1, R61; “insightful” R4, R18, R97; “honest” R3, R4, R7, R21, R22, R24, R33, R82, R84; “hopeful” R5, R9, R14, R22, R29, R82; “a positive message” R78; “sensitive” R8; “nuanced” R8, R70; “real” R40, R44, R45, R90. Some viewers also praised the authenticity of the film, especially in its involvement of people with lived experience of mental health problems (“the authenticity of the people involved really shone through” R5; “it was represented well by people who are living with it” R62). While most viewers enjoyed the film as a whole, most of those who did not like the interactivity of the film or the overall style were still able to recount the representations of mental health in the film with a high degree of precision, meaning that regardless of their appreciation of the film they could still absorb the messages represented by participants in the film.

In summarising the main messages of the film, some viewers used a language that closely resembled the words that the authors of the film deployed to describe mental illness and recovery (some examples: “onward *journey of recovery* for yourself and others” R2; “everyone is on a *journey* of development with many *twists and turns*” R14; “that there is always a *light at the end of the tunne*” R40; “so many *twists and turns*, one gets to the point of *feeling lost* and don't know where to go next. At that point there is a need for a *guiding hand* to lead us to *the right path* and turn all them curves and junctions into a *straight road* with a beckoning purpose on the *horizon*” R92; “*taking the first step* is the hardest” R94). This is an indication that these viewers were able to receive the viewpoints of the authors to the point endorsing a similar language.

Reflections offered by viewers in the questionnaires around the representations of mental health revolved around the main areas: a discussion of specific mental health themes that viewers absorbed through the film and comments about the sense of connection they felt towards the authors of the film.

8.3.3.1 *Mental health themes identified by viewers*

When asked to summarise the messages of the film, viewers commented on a number of mental health themes that stood out for them. Often, viewers identified more than one theme and drew connection amongst themes. These are:

- **Mental health affects everyone:** several comments indicated that the film gave viewers a sense that mental health is not something that only affects people with severe conditions (some examples: “mental health is something that affects everyone, and we all experience it in different way” R7; “we all shares worries and struggles and feel lonely every now and then” R11; “how universal and panhuman experiences of loss and hope are” R36; “there is a way past mental health struggles, and they can be as big as harmful feelings, to as small as a lack of confidence” R39; “it's something that affects us all and not something there should be any stigma attached to” R61; “we're all human and we all experience different emotions for different reasons” R90). This family of comments indicates that the film managed to convey how experiences of mental health are part of everyone’s life and are often linked to feelings that everybody shares.

- **Mental health is not necessarily a dark subject:** many viewers praised the fact that the film portrayed both negative and positive experiences of mental health: “[it was represented] without dwelling too much into sadness and despair” R54; “it was represented at times as a struggle but also in a positive note” R56; “I liked that mental health was both depicted as a negative AND a positive thing. Sometimes the term 'mental health' is put across in that it's a one-way road where things only get worse, but this showed the positive sides of taking control and making things better” R75. Interestingly, most comments in this section of the questionnaire are coherent amongst the different audience groups. However, viewers with no direct experience of mental health problems more often than other groups used a language which expressed how the film helped make mental health a less scary subject: : “it shows that people shouldn't be afraid to share their experiences” R38; “it was represented as normal, and not something to be scared of” R41; “I thought it was presented in an excellent non-scary way” R71; “it made it feel not as scary and isolating as sometimes people think of it” R52). This shows that the film might have helped reduce some of the stigma attached to the subject of mental health for non-specialist audiences.

- **People experiencing mental health problems or moments of despair are not alone:** these comments capture one of the reassuring messages in the film, which authors particularly designed as a form of support to those audience members who face acute episode of mental health problems or distress (“you are not alone in your mental health struggles and you can get through it if you work on yourself” R52; “it made me feel like I shouldn't ever think I need to struggle on my own, and that others

feel the same also” R50; “we are not alone in our pain” R53; “when you are feeling lost, insecure, etc., it is reassuring to know there's people out there feeling the way you do” R16).

- **It is important to reach out and find support:** linked rather closely with the previous theme, many viewers also clearly perceived that the film offers an encouragement towards reaching out for help and finding support (“it’s okay to feel down and to get help, also being around the right group of people is important” R3; “you can find new ways to connect with other people and understand who you are through getting out there and having new experience” R5; “being part of a supportive community of peers where feel safe to be/to communicate your 'true' self” R8; “that there is help mental health matters and there is help out there for everyone” R45; “talk and get help, overcome the fear and enjoy every moment of life” R48).
- **It is important to openly talk about mental health:** viewers often reported on how the film encourages open dialogue about mental health (“talking about the way someone's feeling is vital to mental wellbeing” R17; “[the film showed] the importance of others in one's recovery from mental health and how important it is to support people” R56; “my favourite thing about the film was seeing how the participants mental health benefitted from being able to talk about their mental health” R61; “by talking about them with other people with similar or different issues you can achieve what you want and you can help alleviate the pressure of living with such issue” R66; “by coming together and sharing the thoughts and feelings, it's amazing what people can achieve” R75).
- **Recovery is possible:** another theme that closely relates to the previous ones addresses recovery. Many viewers commented on how the film portrays a positive and hopeful outlook on recovery: “[it showed] the possibilities for finding hope, purpose and re-building a life on a healthier and happier foundation” R8; “change is difficult but things can be difference and it's never too late” R9; “never give up” R38; “you can overcome everything, and even bad feelings are necessary, you just have to learn how to live with them and use them to your advantage” R54; “there's always hope, it's hard but it gets better and you're not alone and will be okay” R61; “the film made me have a new sense of power that no matter how difficult things are, there are ways through” R75.

- **Experiences of mental health and recovery vary from individual to individual:** this theme is related to how the film shows different viewpoints on mental health from the perspectives of the different film authors. Viewers often perceived this aspect of the film: “many emotions and opinions were expressed showing that there is not one way to experience mental health problems” R7; “I think is represented in its complexity, and the film tries to show different aspects and different angle through mental health can be seen” R17; “the way that people navigate mental health difficulties is extremely individual and specific” R13; “many different coping mechanisms” R37; “everyone experiences these different feelings in their own way, it's not the same for everyone and it's important to understand that” R48; “everyone has an individual mental health journey” R74; “everyone has different experiences and moments of confusion, depression, fear” R82. While these sections in the questionnaire were not asking viewers to comment on the non-linear film narrative, the fact that many viewers perceived individual voices in the film is a promising indication that *Stepping Through Interactive* managed to preserve the individual voices of the authors in this film.

8.3.3.2 Connection and empathy between audiences and authors

Many comments focused on how the film allowed viewers to feel emotionally connected to the stories presented. This happened in different ways: some viewers felt that parts of the film closely resembled some of their own experiences (“there were some scenes which really resonated with me because they articulated exactly how I feel sometimes” R7; “enjoyed the part about the performer as I am a performer myself so I can relate to the way in which they felt” R37; “choices like “feeling lost” brought back memories” R73; “it made me feel hopeful, especially considering the fact that I could relate to some of the feelings described by the stories” R78). In some cases, this helped viewers reflect on their own experiences of emotional wellbeing and thinking of ways to find support. One viewer articulated this very clearly:

“As an immigrant struggling with loneliness in a foreign country and with the pandemic, I've been feeling lost and alone for the last months. This film showed me ways to address these emotions in a helpful way, and it made me connect with the people shown in the story. [...] It personally helped me to revisit some of my mental wellbeing issues” R16.

Some viewers felt they could emotionally relate with the film authors (“despite lacking a linear narrative of people's stories it still felt like I got to know them a bit and related to them on a more emotional level” R36; “although myself I thankfully have not experienced any mental health issues I could really understand the struggles and the experiences of the people with mental health” R56; “[I liked] how relatable the characters seemed, they seemed really like normal people like me I liked that” R61). All the comments in this section belonged to people who had no direct experience of mental health problems, showing that the film helped highlighting the commonalities of human experiences between those who have faced mental health problems and those who have not. Along the same line, many viewers with no direct experiences of mental health problems felt the film helped them establish a sense of empathy or understanding towards the authors’ circumstances (“[I felt] sympathetic to the many people that struggle with mental health” R43; “made me empathise with them and resonate with them” R56; “it made me interested to explore these different stories and also empathetic towards the experiences of others” R85; “the film made me feel very attentive to listen to the story and attempt to understand their experience” R89). For one viewer watching the film made them more willing “to help other people when they are down” R99.

Many of the results mentioned so far offer an indication that the film might have helped reducing the stigma attached to mental health by representing it in a less scary way through the inclusion of positive viewpoints on it, and by underlining similarities of experiences and feelings between film authors and viewers. One audience member explicitly articulated the stigma-reducing effect the film had on them:

“I love that it has opened my eyes. I don't have much experience and certainly no personal experience with people with mental health issues and because of this ignorance I thought that they couldn't function well and were limited as to their capabilities, however now I have been shown how wrong I was as it clearly isn't the case, the characters in the film are all capable, creative and driven individuals. I would say that this film is about giving hope to those who have mental health difficulties that they don't have to be shackled by them, it is up to them to believe and work towards breaking themselves free and it is up to us to support them in this hard process. And that if they do, they have an untapped potential that will lead them to many achievements. To be honest I don't know much about mental health however this film has inspired me to learn more. Well for me, a person who was ignorant to mental health before this film it was a shock to my system” R57.

8.3.3.3 Neutral and negative reactions to the representations of mental health in the film

While the majority of viewers expressed appreciation of the way mental health is represented in the film and correctly identified what the film authors were trying to express, we also found a small number of people who did not react positively to them. For two viewers, the film style made the topic of mental health impossible to fully understand and left them indifferent (“hearing it over stylised movement did not have any meaning for me” R14; “the style of the film completely overshadowed the content, and it became a work of art vs a work of support” R72).

For a small group of viewers, the representation of mental health was decidedly negative. Some of these viewers felt that the film had a depressive effect on them and taught them that mental health is something scary: “mental illness is confusing and makes you feel out of control, it simulates a sense of confusion” R15; “if you feel depressed it would make you feel worse” R39; “I got the impression from the film that mental health makes you stand out in a bad way” R59; “it made it seem very bleak” R83. Even if these comments are minoritarian they are noteworthy as messages perceived by this group of viewers are almost the exact opposite of what the participants who made the film intended to convey.

All these comments came from people who had no direct experiences of mental health problems. However, a viewer with lived experience also did not appreciate the representation in the film, questioning one of its fundamental assumptions, empathy: “individual stories are that, individual to the owner...at one point there was a suggestion to walk in someone else's shoes, why would I?” R23. While we only registered one example of this kind of reaction, this might be an important point of consideration for future designs, and that is exploring the motivations of people who have direct awareness and experience of mental health problems in exploring the experiences of others. While no viewer found any scene in the film triggering or upsetting, there were some sparse comments from people with experiences of mental health problems that indicate the need for a sensitive approach: one viewer with lived experience found that being asked to reflect on their own feelings was “uncomfortable” R32; another said: “it made me tearful because it was beautiful, but also because it brought back painful memories” R29.

8.3.4 For some viewers the representation of mental health was not specific enough

Some viewers proposed suggestions on how to complete the representation of mental health in the film to make it more inclusive.

A recurring suggestion revolved around the need to be more specific, both in terms of discussing mental health conditions and specific circumstances experienced by the participants who made the film, and by offering suggestions for support. For these viewers the way mental health was represented in the film was too vague (“it was a bit vague about mental health issues and how the people actually benefitted” R46; “I thought that some of the ideas expressed were too vague” R66; “I do think that the mental health issues was more describing of feelings rather than maybe having a story of severe mental health breakdown and how a person has maybe overcome that” R55). Viewers proposed ways to fill this gap. One possible way was to add more resources for support (“maybe adding some resources for help at the end” R7; “more info about how to go about getting help, who to turn to, who to contact” R87). For some viewers this need for more support information was linked to a need for translating some of the messages in the film into practical actions they could perform in their lives (“if I don't have access to Converge, or a supportive and positive community what can I do?” R22; “someone can't just automatically go and meet new people or try new things when dealing with poor mental health. There should be a focus on how one can push themselves to do these kinds of things” R82; “I would have liked to have seen some activities in day to day life that some of the people in this had undertaken to cope with their mental health issues, as an example to others” R66; “greater emphasis could have been put on encouraging the viewer to talk about their mental health more and could have provided resources to make this easier to do” R6).

Some viewers, all with no direct experience of mental health problems, thought that participants who made the film should have gone into more detail on the mental health issues they faced (“I'd add mental health issues such as anxiety and depression” R45; “they should go in more detail about their mental health” R47; “could have been more specific about types of mental health issues” R79; “I would want to hear more about the struggles and pains of individuals” R84). While this is an understandable request as mental health is most often associated to diagnosis of specific ill conditions, what viewers are asking for here is a higher level of self-disclosure from the film authors than they were willing to provide through the film, including the discussion of private medical information.

In line with some comments reviewed in section [8.3.3.3](#) some viewers found that the poetry did not help them understand what the authors wanted to convey and would have preferred a factual approach: “it sometimes felt like it was being abstract about the idea, using metaphors and colours to describe behaviours” R50; “a poetry teamed interpretation was good but I would prefer a real life scenario would be more effective where people act out a specific scene to show how serious it is and how awareness can be created for it” R73;

“I would change the narration to story-like instead of poetry (...) just to make it easier to follow” R78. Some comments focused on a need for more commentary (“not enough explanation and commentary” R67; “include more terminology to help people understand more” R38).

In contrast with some of the views analysed in section [8.3.3.1](#), according to which the film reached a good balance between representing positive and negative aspects of mental health, some viewers thought that more positivity was needed in the representation (“more messages about positivity, colour, joy, love” R20; “I feel as though it could be more empowering and portray mental illnesses in a better light” R59). At the same time though, a few people with direct experience found that the representation tended to avoid discussing the most difficult aspects of mental health (“I did feel it was perhaps a little sanitised, that the real depths of the struggles and pain weren't acknowledged” R84; “it was idealised; it did not show the raw pain of the suffering” R29).

For several participants, the representation needed to involve a more diverse group. Many viewers commented on the lack of women's perspectives in the film (“try to get a gender balance” R18; “there were too many male voices for me” R19), younger people (“I would maybe add some younger people to the film” R39; “I would add the teenage experience of mental health” R61), or other ethnic backgrounds (“you don't see many Asian women for instance to represent actually under-represented and ignored groups” R72; “I would add women to the stories and also women of colour” R55). On the other hand, one viewer praised the fact that men, a category which struggles particularly to reach out for help (Affleck *et al* 2018), expressed vulnerability in this film (“I liked how the stories were from men, who are probably under-represented in mental health awareness” R72).

Finally, a few viewers mentioned very specific mental health-related circumstances, which they felt were essential to paint a thorough representation of mental health:

“I also didn't like that it didn't include representation of what causes many to suffer mental health, i.e the actually under-represented and ignored groups in society, media and companies talk about supposed inclusion but this doesn't happen, where was the man wearing a Jewish yamulka, the man wearing a turban, the person with severe eczema, vitiligo, the person with severe health issues, I didn't feel that it understood or stemmed from many of the issues surrounding the subject that cause alienation, mental health issues and feelings of being outcast and not understood” R72.

“I wish the spectrum of mental health issues was slightly broader and covered most popular ones people tend to struggle with in daily life as well as how modern traits which are applauded as assets can bring the eventual downfall to an individual like workaholism, abusive family or general rejection by the society for individual believes and give solutions and/or hints how to approach it and start changing lives for better” R92.

The fact that some viewers felt that they would add specific mental health-related reflections to the representations offered by the film and that they thought more viewpoints were necessary might indicate that a feature to allow viewers to input their own views in the film, as theoretically designed by the participants who made the film, could help make *Stepping Through Interactive* a more inclusive film, able to encompass a higher level of diversity.

8.3.5 Most viewers enjoyed the fact that the film was interactive and identified interactive affordances in the film

Overall, the positive comments on the role of the interactivity in the film outweighed uncertain or negative comments (74 Vs 43).

General positive reactions to the interactivity in the film mostly expressed sense of excitement and novelty (“excellent” R1, R18, R71; “innovative” R18, R22, R35; “exciting” R21, R57; “cool” R35; “more fun than a standard style documentary” R46; it gave me a sense of exploring” R69; “inventive” R21, R70; “unique” R73, R82, R92). A few viewers commented on the fact that they had never experienced an interactive film before: “it was something new which had never experienced before” R91; “this is something that I have never encountered before and I found it great” R57).

More specific comments tended to fall into two main categories: some praised features that are afforded by interactivity in general, offering comments that could be applicable to interactive films as a genre; some discussed elements that were specific to the way this film deploys interactivity.

8.3.5.1 General interactive storytelling affordances identified by viewers

As general interactive affordances, viewers mostly commented on:

- **Having a choice:** many viewers enjoyed being offered a choice (“[I liked] that you could choose your own path, kind of like with the books I used to have when I was young” R64; “I liked the full variety of people and paths that you could choose from” R70; “I liked having the choice of hearing different stories” R87).

- **Personability:** many viewers commented on the fact that, by having access to different options, they could create a personalised journey into the film (“I was able to have a personalised experience” R38; “I could tailor it to me, it was personal, I saw a personal video” R41; “it drives a more personal experience” R44; “it allowed me to tailor my viewing experience to myself which lead me to maximise the benefits and enjoyment that I could extract from the film” R57).
- **Increased viewers’ agency:** as a result of being able to make choices, many viewers felt an increased sense of control (“It made you feel as though you have some control” R28; “I also like the sense of control” R7), active agency (“I enjoyed being my own narrator” R92; “the viewer is not only a passive spectator, but they become part of the narration” R17; “I was able to input my thoughts into action” R35; “I enjoyed feeling like I was choosing the course the film took rather than being a passenger” R31), and a sense that their viewpoint mattered (“I also felt like my opinion mattered” R56).
- **Immersivity and inclusion:** many viewers commented on the fact that interactivity made them feel more immersed into the experience (“it really allowed you to submerge yourself in the content and message - you felt part of something” R2; “it made the watching experience more immersive” R16) and as an integral part of the film (“it makes you more a part of it” R22; “it made me feel part of it I enjoyed it” R62; “it makes you feel like you are taking part in the whole project” R66).
- **Increased engagement:** as a consequence of the combination of the elements just described, many viewers felt that the interactivity increased their sense of engagement with the film, sustained their level of attention, and stimulated curiosity (“it kept you focused on the film” R6; “it made the film very engaging and allowed the audience to form a connection with the content” R7; “it certainly made it more engaging and I was motivated to replay it and choose some other options” R8; “It made me feel very engaged in the film and interested to keep watching” R56).

8.3.5.2 Interactive storytelling affordances specific to this project as identified by viewers

A considerable portion of viewers’ comments on the interactivity in the film discussed elements that were specific to *Stepping Through Interactive*, such as the use of

menus to stimulate self-reflection, showing back the feelings selected by viewers through a self-generated recap clip, and the fact of being matched with the film author who they had feelings in common with.

- **Self-reflection:** many viewers commented on and enjoyed the fact that the film encouraged them to reflect on their own feelings while watching through the use of feelings' menus ("the best part is that you can choose feelings you most relate with, and understand how they affect people" R48; "I could focus on the feelings which resonated with me most" R76; "it allowed me to reflect on my feelings during viewing" R36; "I liked how our own mental health was reflected back to us by showing us who we connected with/ which feelings we connected with" R33). On one hand, this helped building a connection with the authors of the film ("an excellent way to identify similar feelings to the ones' of the performers" R18). On the other hand, it encouraged viewers to explore their own feelings more deeply and prompted self-exploration ("it helped me to reflect on feelings I was having that I wasn't aware of" R5; "having to choose at points and declare how you felt, made me more conscious of my reactions to the film and prompted me to be more reflective about the content and how it intersected with my own experiences and understanding of mental health" R8; "clever to be able to do some self-reckoning during the film, in the way that these decisions seem to be intended to affect not only the film, but also our perception of ourselves" R11; "it prompted me to explore my own feelings when I was watching it and then reflect on why those specific parts made me feel that way" R36). Some viewers commented on the effect of watching the self-generated clip which reminded them of the feelings chosen: "I really liked that the movie 'kept track' of my choices and presented them to me at the end" R17, and "seeing the part about the choices you picked was the best part it was very accurate, I felt it was good [...] to get my own feelings out there, was quite emotional when you say it out loud, how you're feeling becomes more real and makes you think" R86. This kind of self-reflective thinking is exactly what the participants who made the film intended to encourage viewers to explore.
- **Empathy:** many viewers enjoyed the fact that their choices in the film led them to being matched with one of the film authors whose feelings were resonant with those of the viewer ("I liked that at the end of the movie, you are matched with one of the character" R17; "I liked having my feelings profile matched with one of the participants" R10; "the best aspect was being given the choice to find out more about a person who's feelings aligned with some of my own based on the answers I

gave” R40; “I thought it was really interesting that it linked directly to the viewer - highlighted who I related to in the film” R26). This in turn stimulated a sense of understanding of the authors’ circumstances (“I can see how someone who has gone through similar emotions has worked on their mental health” R82), increased empathy (“I think it made me better empathize with the people in the film and their stories” R16; “it allowed you to directly identify with one of the people involved” R66; “the best aspect of being offered choices in the film was the intention of reinforcing the idea that anyone there could be me” R18) and the establishment of an emotional investment in the authors (“I was intrigued by the feedback that your perspective is closest to that of 'n' and thought was an effective means of building rapport with the characters and then leading you into finding out more about their personal stories” R8; “you could link into your own personal feelings choices are good to make you more curious to meet the characters” R53).

One additional aspect that some viewers expressed appreciation towards was the fact that the film allowed to decide whether they wanted to make an active choice or just sit back (“I liked that you could choose not to choose, and just let the film progress if you did not feel like steering it at that point” R70; “I liked that you could either choose an option or not - sometimes I did not connect with one of the choices and it was nice to not be forced into making a choice” R74; “sometimes there wasn't any choice I particularly wanted but that was ok as the film would keep playing after a set time anyway”; “it was nice to be able to pick options that resonated with me as it was something I could relate to, but it also nice to have the option to sit back and just enjoy the film” R76).

8.3.6 Some viewers felt that the interactivity in the film was confusing and interfered with the narration

While many viewers enjoyed the interactive features in the film, some found that interactivity was not helpful to them.

For a few viewers, interactivity was simply unnecessary (“you could delve in to characters and be in control I liked it, but it would have worked just as well without it” R67; “I'm pretty neutral on the choices offered, I wouldn't say that there was a best aspect” R60).

For another group of viewers, the interactivity per se was not a negative element, but they thought that the way it was designed into the film was confusing (“it got confusing as to

which way I was going” R37). This sense of confusion most often stemmed from the fact that these viewers did not see a connection between the feelings chosen and the clips they were proposed as result (“found the mental link between my choice and the statements/text displayed immediately afterwards was not always aligned” R9; “I think the narrative could have been more clearly linked to the emotions that drive each decision [...] sometimes they feel a bit random” R11; “I would click an emotion that I have felt but the video that followed did not quite link” R97; “I didn't really understand the consequences of my actions, where will 'I feel Happy' take me, and why?” R69).

The sense of not having a clear or logical link between the choices from the feelings' menus and the following clips demonstrates that the connective texts, discussed by the participants who made the film in section [8.2.5](#), were not enough to guide these viewers through the content. The connective texts and the links between feelings' menus and theme clips work through recurring key words in the spoken word content, while these viewers would have needed a stronger and more formalised narrative structure to feel supported in their viewing experience (“the worst aspect is that the choices don't really follow a storyline, they feel random at times” R48; “I felt it lacked a cohesive narrative” R60; “I didn't understand what impact my choices were having on the narrative” R10; “sometimes I could not see the choices or there was not much info behind each choice so it was almost a blind choice” R83).

This sense of randomness produced an effect that was opposite to the empowered agency reviewed in the previous section. For these viewers, having to choose amongst random options felt disempowering: “I had no sense that it made any difference to anything” R15; “I felt that the choices didn't really make that much difference to the content”; “I was expecting it to be a bit more interactive, in the sense of decisions affecting the story or something like that” R54; “I didn't feel like my choices made any difference” R60).

Interestingly the opposite applied for a viewer who is a creative writer and poet: she felt that the abstract menus worked better for her while the feelings' menus were too descriptive (“I liked the first bit where you chose the eyes - this worked well for me rather than the worded descriptors of feelings, felt like an advert” R19). This seems to suggest, that, similarly to what observed in section [8.4.3](#), this film works best for those who are more inclined to an emotional and abstract modality of viewing, than a logical structured one.

For a few viewers, however, the presence of the interactivity was negative, independently from how it was integrated into the narration. These viewers found that the interactive elements were distracting and interfered with their viewing experience, while a traditional linear film would have worked better. One viewer said: “I would have preferred no

choices, just allow the individuals in this film to tell their story, made the film confusing, felt like I had missed bits” R23. Another viewer commented: “I didn't like the interaction, it took me out of the moment and made me feel like I would miss something by being forced to make a choice. Take away the interactivity. Just make it into five shorts about each of the individuals” R50. A viewer, even though they had no direct experience of mental health problems, added that feeling forced to make choices could be anxiety-inducing: “it made me feel like the decisions may have caused me to miss out and not get the best value from the film, and this in of itself can cause anxiety and be a trigger of mental health stress” R72. Another viewer linked the opportunity to make active choices with a potential sense of anxiety: “[I disliked] feeling that I might make a wrong choice” R24. For one viewer, who was overall very positive about the film, it was the reflective self-generated clip which might have caused some unpleasant feeling: “somehow it felt like the film was reinforcing the fact that I felt these negative emotions (e.g. a list of statements like “you feel lost;(…), you feel insecure…”)” R16. While emerged in a very small group of cases, these inputs still encourage us to consider how interactivity might impact on viewers’ sense of well-being for future designs or different projects.

8.3.7 Viewers suggested ways they would improve the interactivity in the film

Many viewers, including those who expressed keen appreciation for the interactive features in the film, offered suggestions on how they would like to improve them. These forms of feedback addressed several issues.

The majority of comments revolved around the fear of missing out and wanting to be able to move through the content more freely. Many viewers who enjoyed the film identified a sense of uneasiness from missing out some of the content (“I wanted to know where I would have gone if I had made a different choice!” R29; “[I disliked] not knowing if you were missing out on something if you made one choice and not another” R28; “[I disliked] that I couldn't pause it at points or replay pieces” R31; I wanted to see them all” R27; “I was concerned that I might not have seen it all” R33; “you feel like you might have missed out on a scene” R7; “I had needed to see more than one option, I was not given the chance” R41). This kind of response are indeed more common amongst viewers who enjoyed the film and might indicate a mismatch between how the film stimulates their engagement and curiosity, while at the same time not supporting additional explorations. As noted by one viewer, the only way to explore additional options is to restart watching from

the beginning (“I didn't see the other choices and would have to re-watch it” R45). Because the film in its current state does not allow to skip clips, watching from the start for a second time inevitably means watching entire clips that have already been watched to discover new content.

For this reason, many viewers demanded access to more options. Several viewers suggested an overall menu of content or other systems of navigation that would allow audiences to move more freely (“maybe a menu would have helped” R33; “make it easier to revisit sections you missed, possibly adding all the faces or names so you know how many peoples stories to expect and somehow a way to tell if you've seen everyone's story or not” R44; “I would have liked the opportunity to go back and click on more pairs of eyes” R40; “it would be good to be able to make a choice and then return to the point in the film where you made that choice and continue” R28). One viewer articulated this very clearly:

“I would have liked a DVD style menu system. I felt the branching narratives didn't give as much control I would have liked or offer any sense of progression towards an ending or resolution. I would have preferred a hierarchical menu system that let me go back as well as forward (or up as well as down). It felt a bit prescriptive at the branch points. In some cases, I didn't want to follow any of the three options. At others, I wanted to explore more than one option” R14.

Other viewers echoed this sentiment about wanting to choose more than one feeling from the menus: “would possibly add the opportunity to choose more than one emotion on each interactive screen” R90; “a person can resonate with multiple feelings in the film [...] enable multiple choices for feelings and also increase the choices a bit more” R49; “some other choices would have been welcomed” R18.

Interestingly, two viewers suggested more active ways to make their viewpoint present in the film that almost exactly match the original participants' intentions explored during the design work: one viewer asked for an empty box that could be filled with emotions of their choice (“I talk about the limited choices we have. If instead there could be an empty box for the viewer to fill in in his-her mind and not restrict to the ones that appeared as options” R18); another would have liked “options to pick your colour at the end and explore more help / information on particular areas” R94. Some viewers used the blank questionnaire space to leave comments directly addressing the participants who made the film, asking that the message would be passed on to them. Most of these messages contained praise for the project and the honesty expressed by the authors of the film and shared some thoughts on relatable experiences and feelings. The presence of these messages indicate that some viewers felt a need to communicate with the film authors,

reinforcing the concept that participatory filmmaking is often a dialogical practice and interactive films practiced in this context would benefit from providing solutions to support these two-way conversations.

While most viewers would have wanted richer access to options or more options in the film, a minority felt the opposite way: they thought that there were too many options, making the experience overwhelming (“too many different things going on so felt like I was jumping around” R19; “there’s more material than I could concentrate on” R32).

Other feedback included the film length which was impossible to monitor during viewing (“it was all good but longer than I expected” R30; “it was incredibly enjoyable to watch but I might have felt overwhelmed if I hadn’t known the total potential time of watching (...) [I did not like] not knowing what I was committing to” R26. “[I did not like] being unsure about the length of time it was going to take” R5). Some viewers also wished they could pause the film: “[I wanted to] being able to pause it if there were interruptions” R33; “I felt it could have been uploaded to YouTube instead of Unity so I could pause certain parts and rewind to them” R4. Overall, this family of comments closely resembles what the participants who made the film discussed in section [8.2.7](#): they all concern the amount of control viewers have over the materials and the paradox that, while the film offered some very sophisticated forms of interaction, it removed those basic ones any viewer takes for granted (being able to pause, rewind, keep an eye of the duration of the film).

8.3.8 Viewers spontaneously praised some linear segments in the film

In sections where viewers were asked general questions about what they enjoyed in the film, several viewers spontaneously commented on linear segments or stylistic elements in the film, similarly to what the participants who authored the film did in their own evaluation (section [8.2.5](#)).

Out of this group of viewers, the majority mentioned a strong appreciation for the half-painted face film clip. They found that this part of the film was powerful and effective in describing different mental health problems through the colours metaphor (“[I liked] the use of the paint to discuss talking about issues” R41; “I liked the part of the film where people had the same colours as other people on their faces, and they were painting their colours on each other to show the sharing of experiences and how that can help to lift you

and understand your own mental health” R78; “I found the Colours scenes emotional and actually had tears not out of empathy but because I found these scene so very powerful” R4; “I really enjoyed the clips about colour and think it would be great to see more of that throughout the film” R40; “the colour symbolism really made sense to me, I thought that was a good use of the colours to represent each person’s struggles” R52; “I thought the colours sections at the end was very powerful and presented a strong message” R94). One viewer found inspiration in this part of the film to start using colours to explore their own emotional reactions: “and I may actually pick that idea of assigning colours to feelings from now on to think about my own problems” R54. For one viewer, this clip was more helpful to explore experiences of mental health than the interactive elements in the film:

“I was completely blown away by the simplicity of people painting their voices and working through emotions through colour - and using the bushes to do this - wanted the whole film just to be like that - it completely talked to me and I felt it took a lot less work to try and keep up with where I was in the film ...” R19.

Another linear segment in the film that was often mentioned is the outtakes and credits final sequence, showing the behind-the-scenes of making the film. Several viewers enjoyed this part of the film: “my favourite thing was watching how it was made in the end scenes, and how connected the people seemed to be. It looked like it felt worthwhile and fun to be a part of it and I could see the emotion that was put into conveying the stories properly” R70; “[I liked] the impression of seeing people getting involved and enjoying the process” R51). For viewers who did not enjoy the first poetic part of the film or found it too dark, the outtakes help lighten up the mood: “earlier in the film you feel like the people have things really bad, but the smiling and laughing at the end gives hope” R75; “my favourite thing about the film was the ending, simply because it was really nice to see everyone with smiles on their faces given that they were previously in a dark place” R78. For a few viewers, however, the outtakes segment was too long: “though interesting getting some insights into the making of the film, some of it felt a bit like the cast and crew getting carried away a little with reminiscing” R8, and “good to see the nature of the participatory process but began to feel like a new film about the process rather than about mental health” R12.

Some viewers did not comment on specific film portions in the film, but on the overall style. Several viewers commented on the fact the film helped supporting the representations of mental health through specific stylistic approaches. These included “its fragmentary nature, it helps to describe what it's like to experience some kind of mental health issues” R17, where “the portrayal and filming captured the disjointed and confused feeling that one can experience” R2; the fact that the imagery and tone of the film represented the positive and negative aspects of mental health (“I believe the tone of the

film starts being more ethereal / dark / etc and progresses until it comes to a brighter end in the credits, with the explosion of colors” R16); and the overall creative approach of the film (“I enjoyed it as I haven't seen mental health represented in this way before. It was very interpretive” R40; “it was represented in the purest artistic ways I think it is great how it helps people to express their struggles through art” R53). Some liked the atmospheres built by the music and the photography (“beautiful cinematography, sound track well-chosen and enhanced mood/experience” R8; “I liked how music, dark visuals and interactive choices combined to create an immersive "atmosphere" R16; “the music in the background made it really uplifting to watch” R89). Some enjoyed the use of visual metaphors (“I loved the fact you used the eyes to tell and enter each story” R4; “I liked the hand imagery throughout” R6). One viewer mentioned the use of visual effects as a way to enhance empathy towards the film authors: “I found the subtle use of effects e.g. shading the edges to give a sense of a tunnel/walls closing in and speeding up people walking around the central character really help me imagine/empathise with how the participants might feel” R9.

8.3.9 Viewers thought the film could be used as a support tool, and for training, education, and advocacy

Almost all viewers taking part in the questionnaires suggested uses for *Stepping Through Interactive*, often offering multiple suggestions. Overall, there were 43 suggestions that the film should be used to support people with mental health problems, 18 to explore the subject of mental health with young people, 17 for campaigning and to raise awareness of mental health problems, 5 to influence policy makers, and 2 to reduce stigma in the workplace.

The most recurring suggestion from viewers was that the film could support people struggling with mental health problems, especially to inspire them to pursue a recovery journey (“[it can be used] to show people experiencing mental health difficulties that recovery can be an achievable option” R1; “to inspire people who are struggling that recovery is possible to encourage them to do something creative” R5; “for providing a message of hope and examples of recovery for those currently suffering from mental health problems” R8), to reach out for support (“to make others know that they're not the only ones who feel like that and that there is help out there” R45; “encouraging people to seek help if required” R49), and to join a supportive community of creatives (“show that art and theater community groups can support people with mental health issues and develop community” R46; “to show that through art and community one can start the healing

process” R53). These messages would be especially effective for people seeking help for the first time, according to some viewers (“I think it could be very inspiring for people encountering mental health challenges for the first time” R13; “people experiencing quite severe mental health challenges and/or starting a recovery journey for perhaps the first time to give them hope, courage and motivation” R9). Some thought that the film or this form of storytelling could also be used in therapy (“as a form of therapy [the process of creating similar films] R7”; “it could be used in a therapy context to help people navigate their own issues and better understand them by interacting with the film in their own way” R70; “as an introduction to group therapy” R17). All these suggestions strongly reflect what the authors of the film wished *Stepping Through Interactive* could be used for.

Several suggestions revolved around using the film for young people, as part of school programmes (“secondary schools, youth groups or other groups as stimulus for discussion” R22; “this could be shown in schools/colleges to help young people understand the importance of finding yourself and looking after your mental health; could be viewed in PSHE classes in school as an activity for kids in a lesson” R50; “teenagers (15+) to encourage conversations around mental health” R63). These suggestions point to an application that the authors who made the film never specifically discussed and might have been encouraged by the fact that the interactivity in the film appears as something that young people could engage with. While the film was designed for individual use, one viewer suggested that young people could choose feelings collectively and use the choice as an opportunity for discussion and reflection in group settings (“teaching in secondary schools, it would be great to have groups of kids choose which path they wish to take together” R21).

Some comments, frequent especially amongst mental health professionals and researchers, suggested that the film could be used for training of other mental health professionals, including “mental health workers, nursing and OT students” R1, “health and social care professionals/students” R2, “medical professions” and “GPs, NHS and non-NHS staff” R28. There were also suggestions to use the film to influence policy (“commissioners who decide where the budget for mental health services is spent”; “local authorities” R5, “funding agencies” R28), or as tool for general mental health awareness training (“think this film would be great as part of training sessions for mental health first aid [...] I am part of the mental health working group at the organisation I work at and I think they would love to see the film” R40).

Several comments advised that the film should be used for mental health awareness and reducing stigma (“to raise awareness about mental health and to fight the

stigma” R17; “promoting de-stigmatisation of mental health difficulties, help promote and create alternative understandings and representations of MH issues that are more humanistic in nature as opposed to the more dominant medical centred model” R36; “to humanise mental health issues community members” R46; “I have some friends similar to me who also aren’t very aware of mental health; It could be useful to show people who maybe don’t struggle with their mental health how it is to live with different manifestations of mental health issues, and can lessen stigma or stereotyping of mental health issues” R57). For two viewers the film should be aimed specifically at reducing stigma in older people:

“for educating older people on mental health who haven’t grown up with it being a prominent issue. It could help them to understand it more and be able to sympathise and talk to people with mental health issues” R43.

“probably middle-aged/older men who want to increase their awareness of mental health issues” R74.

Other viewers kept the field more open instead (“anyone of any age, regardless of whether they are dealing with mental health troubles or not, as it can help people both learn to understand themselves and others” R82; “everyone. I think this way of conveying mental health needs to be brought into the whole of our culture” R26).

Two comments addressed the workplace and how the film could be used to raise awareness in those specific settings (“to upskill line managers in the workplace about the effects of mental health on employees” R89).

Finally, a few comments expressed that the film could also be used on a personal level as a support tool (“myself again if I am having a moment of self-doubt” R5; “as a way to explore how we manage our emotions” R19).

8.4 Discussion

Evaluating *Stepping Through Interactive* with the participants who created the film and a diverse range of external viewers helped us gain a deeper understanding of the overall film and the narrative non-linearity’s contribution to producing a multi-faceted representation of mental health. In this section of the chapter, I bring together views from the core group of participants and audience members around some of the most pressing themes emerged in section [8.2](#) and [8.3](#).

8.4.1 The film generated mostly positive responses from both authors and audiences

The evaluation showed that both the participants who made the film and the majority of viewers responded positively to the film.

For the participants who made the film, *Stepping Through Interactive* represents an expansion of their original linear work which, through non-linearity, managed to encompass a deeper and more layered representation of their views. They also positively commented on the process of making the film, which motivated them in wanting to produce more work around interactive storytelling. Different participants put a higher or lower focus on the process over the film product in their interview. This seems in line with the conceptual framework of participatory filmmaking, where process and product have equal level of importance (White 2003) and participants often find different degrees of motivation on one over the other (Blazek and Hraňová 2012, Mistry *et al* 2016).

Most external audiences expressed positive reactions to the film, commenting on the novelty of its technological approach and the sensitivity for its representations of mental health. The most enthusiastic comments came from the category of mental health professionals and researchers, while the least positive came from researchers in the field of computer science and interactive media, who were part of the pilot of this evaluation and often struggled to connect with the poetic and emotional style of the work. Overall, the range of general impressions from the different audience groups was however less diverse than expected, a possible indication that the film worked in similar ways for audiences with different levels of mental health awareness.

8.4.2 The film allowed most viewers to understand the mental health representations created by the film authors

Comparing the two sections of the evaluation highlights a mostly harmonious relationship between the views of the film authors and those of the majority of the audience members.

The participants who made the film found that the finished product reflected their own experiences and views of mental health authentically and was able to capture their

progression in recovery since making the original film in 2016. They found that the film, in its varying combinations of content, offers a supportive and positive views of mental health, which, they hoped, would encourage those facing mental health problems and stimulate empathy and understanding in those who do not have direct experiences of them.

Reactions from the majority of the audience members confirms that these aims have mostly been achieved. Viewers have spent considerable effort in producing long and accurate answers on how mental health was represented in the film, even when they did not enjoy its style or interactivity. They identified many key messages in the film and, interestingly, recognised the fact that mental health experiences were represented in different ways for each film author, in fact successfully perceiving the polyvocal nature of the film. Viewers also commented on the sense of connection and relatability they felt with the experience of the authors represented in the film.

While we were expecting some of these responses from audiences who have a high degree of familiarity with the subject of mental health, either due to their profession or by direct experience, it was encouraging to record that many viewers without direct experiences of mental health problems still absorbed the messages of the film and commented on the fact that the film helped make the subject of mental health less scary and intimidating. These comments paired with the account of one viewer who explicitly described how stigma was reduced for them by watching this film indicate that *Stepping Through Interactive* might help reduce the stigma attached to mental health for some viewers.

The uses suggested by viewers for this film also mostly matched the authors' intentions (as support, training, and mental health awareness tool), with the additional idea of using the film to stimulate mental health discussion amongst young people, a group that the authors never directly intended to address.

For some viewers, even those who were very positive about the representations of mental health in the film, these representations could be more thorough by adding discussion on specific mental health conditions, describing some daily life circumstances, and translating the positive messages around mental health into doable actions. Viewers also commented on the lack of diversity in the film and asked for more voices, including women, young people, and further ethnic minorities. The participants who made the film discussed several times during the process of making this film how to include more diverse voices, and tried to do so by involving me, a dance choreographer, and women

extras. They also showed awareness of how the film can only aspire to offer fragments of experiences, pieces of the puzzle which can only be told from their individual viewpoints.

This is one of the main reasons as to why participants wished to actively involve viewers in inputting content in the film, choosing their own colour and words, leaving comments, and becoming a voice in the film, even though this was not possible for this specific prototype. Considering that some viewers expressed wishes to be more active in the film and several viewers used the blank space in the questionnaire to leave messages directed at the participants who made the film, this need for an active conversation between the two parties seems to be reciprocal. Future research could address ways to facilitate this conversation, opening the film to the active contribution of viewers and to further responses from the film authors.

8.4.3 Non-linearity supported the mental health representations in the film for its authors and most of the audience

The narrative non-linearity of the film was appreciated by participants who made the film and a majority of the viewers as something that supported the representations of mental health in the film.

For the participants who made the film, interactivity made the film more engaging and created an expansion of the original film, which was described as a growing tree, a more in-depth course of studies, and as moving materials such as water and clay. They thought that the non-linear nature of the narration also mirrored the workings of the mind.

A majority of the audience also found that the interactivity in the film made the experience more engaging thanks to the offered choices and increased agency of viewers who can build a personalised viewing experience. Even more interestingly, most viewers picked up on ways that the interactivity was deployed in this film in ways to support some of the specific expressive needs of this project: encouraging self-reflection in viewers and building an empathic bond between viewers and film authors. These effects of the interactivity in the film were commented on by people who have knowledge of mental health and general audience. This, paired with the fact that many viewers could appreciate the polyvocal representations of mental health in the film, indicates that the use of interactivity and narrative non-linearity successfully supported some of the key expressive needs of the participants who made this film.

8.4.4 A clear need emerged from more freedom of movement, more choices, and other basic interactive features

While the interactive elements in the film were mostly appreciated by film authors and viewers, most participants in this overall evaluation expressed a need for more freedom and richer ranges of choices in the film.

The participants who made the film unanimously called for the possibility of moving back and forth in the content and being able to explore different choices. Adam thought that viewers would get the most out of the film by watching as much content as possible. The fear of missing out in this case could have been connected to the fact that these participants knew of all the materials present in the film and had an emotional investment on these being seen as much as possible by viewers, as articulated by Paul.

However, responses from viewers confirmed this viewpoint. Most viewers felt they were missing out by not being able to rewind and explore different choices. Especially those viewers who were heavily engaged in the film felt they want to see more without having to restart their viewing experience from the start. Answers to the questionnaires seemed to suggest that if interactivity was successful in stimulating the audience's interest and curiosity, it should also support this by offering a more extensive freedom of movement amongst the content. Both participants who made the film and viewers asked for an overview menu which would show the entirety of the content. This is something that the core group of participants had been trying to insert into the film design since the early stages of the design work (section [7.3.3](#)).

Both film authors and some audience members also wished they could explore combinations of feelings instead of having to pick one and some wished they could insert their own feelings in the film instead of having to pick prescribed ones. At this regard, some viewers appreciated the fact that they could just sit back and let the film roll if they did not feel compelled to choose anything.

Finally, both parties also suggested that they would like to pause the film as needed or having some control over the running time of the film. While just one viewer complained about the film being too long, several expressed the need to keep an eye on the duration of the film, or of at least their current clip. This indicates that while the sophisticated object-based interactive features in the film were very successful, there is a need to preserve those basic interactive features that any audience now takes for granted

from their TV/media and online watching experience: being able to pause, skip, move forward and backwards, access menus of content.

8.4.5 Linear segments are as important as interactive features in supporting the representations of mental health in the film

The participants who made the film praised some of the linear content as an important element in supporting their representations of mental health, looking in particular at the way the poetic and documentaristic clips supported each other, with one representing their inner thoughts and fragmented reflections on their experiences of mental health, and the latter providing context and a form of more direct storytelling. They also thought that the connective texts amongst clips combined in different orders by the film interactivity were key to create a cohesive narrative which was guaranteed regardless of the different combinations of content.

Viewers also mentioned some part of the linear content in the film when asked to comment on their preferred aspects of the film, with the half-painted face emerging as an overall favourite. Audiences overall enjoyed the presence of the colours' metaphor throughout the film, a touch that the film authors particularly cared about and decided to use as a shaping element in the film early in the design process (section [7.3.2](#)). The outtakes were appreciated by both parties for the insight they offered into the process of making the film, even though some found it too long. Many viewers also talked about the stylistic choices in the film (music, colour grading, visual effects) as something held the film together and helped empathise with the authors' experiences.

Overall, these reflections show that it is very important to dedicate attention to how the interactive structure and the linear content support each other in making participatory interactive films, without underestimating the importance of how aspects of traditional filmmaking sit within novel non-linear narratives.

8.4.6 Negative reactions from audience members were mostly linked to the poetic nature of the film

While the majority of viewers enjoyed the film's representations of mental health and interactive elements, we found that a minority reported dissatisfaction in the film with both of these elements. By analysing these responses, we found that most of them revolved around a sense of confusion and randomness. These comments were directed at the general narration in the film and at their interactive elements, which in turn affected the perception of the represented themes in the film.

For most of these viewers the main barrier in the film is constituted by its poetic nature. They found that this was not a strong enough narrative approach to build a cohesive narration and found that the selections of clips watched ended up feeling random. With feelings' menus and related connective texts mostly revolving around poetic keywords and spoken words fragments, these viewers found that they could not make sense of how the menus worked and felt that their choices were not making any difference on the development of the viewing experience. Not only they felt disempowered by making a choice which did not result in visible effects for them, but for a few viewers this resulted into a negative perception of the subject of mental health too, which they connected to a sense of losing control and being overwhelmed by confusion. As such, the poetic and feelings-based approach negatively influenced both the interactive experience and the reception of the mental health representations for these viewers. These reactions often coincide with the request for more specificity and details of specific mental health conditions through a factual approach.

The documentary section of the film could have counterbalanced the abstract nature of the poetic part for these viewers, but most did not stay in the experience long enough to access the documentary section. While this clearly indicates that the film does not cater for these viewers' needs, it could on the other hand be a sign that the film is working well from the perspective of the film authors. In fact, they have created a storytelling approach where they first share fragmented aspects of themselves and their inner thoughts, to then open a higher level of disclosure to viewers who have been through enough content to "match" their feelings profile with one of them. This was not a design deliberately created by participants in the view of only opening up to certain viewers, but it emerged gradually through the design of the feelings' menus, the assignment of colour tags to content related to specific participants, and the idea of rewarding certain parts of the content to viewers who had been through all the colours' tags. The gradual disclosure which is embedded in the film as a result means that only viewers who bond emotionally with the participants who made the film and are willing to explore the film through an emotional rather than logical approach will likely access the

part of the film where participants drop the protection offered by the abstract storytelling to reveal factual details of their experiences. This means that the film is operating a selection process which discourages those who do not respond to this kind of empathic bond. While this inevitably excludes some viewers, it can also be supportive to a form of safe disclosure for participants who are sharing their personal experiences.

A very small number of viewers, however, did not react positively to the film regardless of its poetic nature. A few felt that having to make choices and risking making the wrong choice might trigger anxiety. One viewer with lived experience of mental health problems questioned why she would want to walk in someone else's shoes. Due to constraints around the COVID-19 pandemics very few people with lived experience of mental health problems were involved in the evaluation. Future research could address this gap to deepen our understanding of how the film might be received by people who are currently experiencing acute mental health problems, a group which the participants who made the film were particularly interested in involving.

8.4.6 Towards future research and designs for *Stepping Through Interactive*

Through the results emerging from this study, we could better understand how the film supported the expressive needs of the participants who created it and how the audience mostly confirmed these results by positively responding to the mental health themes represented in the film and the interactive features which support these representations.

However, future research would be useful to involve people with mental health problems in more extensively evaluate the film and the specific uses this could have for supporting their recovery journey. This would allow us to better understand how to frame interactive filmmaking for those who are currently experiencing some of the issues explored in the film. Interesting avenues to investigate could address how the film could recombine itself according to audiences' preferences, by providing different versions and combinations of materials according to the background or level of mental health awareness of the audience. Also, future designs of *Stepping Through Interactive*, or similar participatory interactive film projects, could address how to involve audiences in taking part in forms of facilitated dialogue with the participants who made the film.

8.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the evaluation study which asked participants who made *Stepping Through Interactive* and a number of external audiences to watch the film and express their responses to it. We found that the film supported the views on mental health of its authors with authenticity thanks to its non-linearity and the interplay between interactive features and linear content, with the exception of needing more support in terms of moving spatially through the content.

External audiences with varying degrees of mental health awareness showed an understanding of the main mental health themes expressed in the film, and found that the interactive features supported engagement, self-reflection, and facilitated an empathic bond with viewers, with a probable reduction in stigma and self-stigma in some cases. Most viewers mirrored the opinions of the participants who made the film in asking for more access to options and freedom of movement across the content.

Some viewers found the poetic approach of the film unappealing and too abstract; those are often the same viewers who did not absorb the messages on mental health and that found the interactive features confusing and disjointed, showing that the emotion-based approach of the first part of the film does not work for those viewers who look for more concreteness and specificity.

CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION

9.1 Introduction

I introduced this research project by showing how the pervasiveness of mental health problems (MacManus *et al* 2009, NICE 2011, Mental Health Foundation 2017, Cullet *et al* 2020) does not equal acceptance and openness on the subject: in spite of many attempts from mental health campaigning (Corrigan and Watson 2002), phenomena of stigma and self-stigma are still prominent and affect many aspects of the lives of people with mental health problems (Corrigan and Watson 2003, Rüsçh 2005, Pilgrim 2017). I also analysed how the often stereotyped representations of mental illness in the media reinforce stigma (Wahl 1995, Glasgow Media Group 1996, Rose 1998, Cross 2004, Birch 2012) and have tangible and pervasive hold on the public's perception of mental health and of people who experience mental health problems (Philo *et al* 1994, Birch 2012).

Participatory filmmaking could counteract many of these stereotyped views by promoting inclusive and subject-led film representations of mental health. Participatory filmmaking can in fact provide occasions for people with lived experience of mental health problems to disclose their views on their own terms, benefitting from the increased sense of agency this induces (Shaw and Robertson 1997, White 2003, Yang 2012), while also producing films through which audiences can build a bond with the participants' experiences and increase their awareness of mental health (Boyd 2010, Van der Ham *et al* 2013, Whitely *et al* 2020).

In my practice as a participatory filmmaker in mental health related communities I have witnessed how all these opportunities are possible but could be better achieved if there were ways to ensure that the multiple viewpoints of all the participants involved in this kind of productions are respected and made space for in the films. Linear filmmaking might not be the most efficient form of storytelling for this kind of polyvocal production. On the other hand, interactive documentary has been often commended for its polyvocality (Husak 2018), afforded by narrative non-linearity (Nogueira 2016) and the possibility of letting viewers establish a more active relationship with the content they watch (Nash 2012, Aston and Odorico 2018). This makes interactive documentary a genre with considerable participatory

potential. While most i-Docs offer forms of executory participation (Nash 2021), we set out to explore how a structurally participatory interactive film could support the multiple and polyvocal representations of mental health of a group of participants.

9.2 Answering our research questions

We explored this area of investigation by conducting three main studies with the same participants who created *Stepping Through* with me in 2016: the deconstruction of the original linear film in search for its limits; the design and production of an interactive version of the film; and the evaluation of the interactive film with the participants who made it and external audiences. This longitudinal practice-led work has allowed us to answer the overarching research question:

How can the non-linear narrative affordances of interactive media support the production of participatory accounts of mental health by people with lived experience of mental health problems in a way that respects the authenticity and polyvocality typical of participatory filmmaking?

We have documented and explored that the possibility of producing a non-linear interactive account of their experiences of mental health has allowed these participants to create an expansion of their original linear film which transcends the limitations they had identified during the first part of this research. The interactive version of *Stepping Through* has made space not just for multiple perspectives to co-exist, but for the emergence of a modality of navigation shaped by the expressive needs of the participants, who wanted to encourage viewers to engage in self-reflection on their own feelings and on similarities of experiences between themselves and the authors of the film. While the final prototype of the film did not meet all the requirements that participants would have wanted to support their authorial intentions, it did make space for the co-existence of the multiple perspective of the authors, it respected their authenticity, and it allowed most audience members to effectively receive and understand the mental health themes that participants wanted to convey.

To achieve this overall result, we started by analysing the limits of linear filmmaking in conveying the participatory accounts of mental health of this group. We then placed attention to both the participatory process that led to the creation of *Stepping Through Interactive* and the film itself, in accordance with the participatory filmmaking approach, where the process of making films is as important for the participants' experience than the final film itself (Shaw and Robertson 1997).

9.2.1 Limits of linear film

The first part of our research addressed the following research sub-question:

what are the limits of participatory linear filmmaking in articulating individual and collective viewpoints on the experience of mental illness and recovery by people with lived experience of mental health problems?

The participants reflected on key words and symbolic images in the original *Stepping Through*, and the relation between the film they made and their life circumstances, reaching the conclusion that having to streamline their viewpoints to fit a linear narrative did limit not just some of their individual self-expression, but also the inclusion of contextual information that they thought essential to communicate with non-Converge audiences and of another second collective storyline (the half-painted face film), which they could only refer to through a symbolic image.

While *Stepping Through* was a successful participatory film appreciated both by its authors and their community and did not raise any particular discontent at the time of making it, this part of research still uncovered that parts of the representation were sacrificed to create a unified linear narrative. The main limit of the linear film consisted in the fact that participants felt the implicit pressure of exploring mostly portions of their experience that were in common with other participants. However, preserving the complexity of multiple viewpoints is very important in this kind of practice for two reasons: because there is a need to validate the experiences of every participant to ensure that they receive the benefits implied in engaging in these forms of self-expression; and because producing oversimplified accounts of mental health incurs into the same risk of misrepresentation which much mainstream media is criticised for.

This part of the research also revealed which specific expressive needs were left unfulfilled by the film: the need to have different storylines, some addressing mental health themes with different degrees of relevance to each participant, and one of collective relevance; the need for contextual information and other supporting materials; the need for all these elements to be linked to each other and to the existing body of the film; the need to involve audience in actively reflecting on the themes presented.

The findings from this part of the research suggested that some of these expressive needs could find an accommodation in the form of non-linear interactive films, where non-linearity would allow multiple viewpoints and perspective to co-exist.

Once we had a clear idea of how the linear film had limited the expressive intentions of these participants, we moved on to the making of a non-linear counterpart, to investigate how to mix participatory filmmaking processes with interactive media workflows and to explore which non-linear film form would emerge from these processes.

9.2.2 A structurally participatory process

Throughout the fieldwork conducted to make *Stepping Through Interactive*, we posed this question:

how can we merge participatory filmmaking and interactive filmmaking processes to guide people with lived experience of mental health problems in producing polyvocal interactive films on mental health that are structurally participatory?

We found of importance, in fact, that the process would mirror the stages of the participatory filmmaking processes participants were familiar with, while also embracing the added complexity of exploring interactive media production, a new field for both the participants and I. Lack of prescriptive guidance on how to achieve this meant that we experimented and adjusted the process as we went on with the work.

By reflecting on the overall fieldwork, we found that in order to keep the process meaningful for participants and structurally participatory we applied several strategies, which mirrored those employed in participatory filmmaking: keeping the process flexible and adaptable; letting the expressive needs of participants guide the research of a film form, rather than imitating pre-existing formats; using paper-based design methods which could bring tangibility to the process of envisioning a new film form; finding a balance between focus on the process and on the final product; forging new collaborations with supporting figures which are not normally involved in participatory filmmakers, such as software developers.

The application of these principles ensured that the process, while much longer and more complex than usual participatory filmmaking processes, would be as inclusive as possible, focused on supporting the authorial needs of the participants without being overwhelming, and could be a meaningful experience in itself for participants.

9.2.3 A polyvocal film form shaped by expressive needs

The design phases of the overall process addressed the research of a non-linear film form which could be envisioned by participants as fulfilling of their expressive needs. This part of the work addressed the question:

how can non-linear forms accommodate the expressive needs of participants to convey personal experiences of mental illness and recovery in participatory filmmaking?

A series of design activities and reflections of the film gradually led to the creation of a film form where different personal chapters, mental health themes, documentary clips, and other filmic materials are tagged by colours to mark their degree of relevance to different participants. The materials are navigated through a series of feelings-based menus which encourage viewers to reflect on their emotional responses to the film and watch materials which are linked to those emotions. After combinations of feelings and clips have been exhausted, viewers are matched with the participant they have resonant feelings with and can access documentary interviews detailing more of his story and/or a self-generated clip that summarises the emotional journey of the viewer. This structure was designed to encourage empathy and self-reflection and to personalise the viewers' journeys so that they could explore mental health themes that might be relevant to their feelings. The alternation of poetry content and documentary is also a key feature of *Stepping Through Interactive*, which supports a process of gradual self-disclosure, where participants first express abstract emotional experiences through poetry, and then offer a more factual form of self-representation only to viewers who have established an empathic bond with them.

Due to technical limitations, the final prototype does not include some features that participants would have wanted: the possibility of having a map menu of the entire content to let viewers spatially orientate through the overall materials; and interactive ways for viewers to input keywords, reflections, or their own combinations of footage. While the final prototype fulfils most of the expressive needs of the participants, who evaluated the film and found it able to authentically convey their collective and individual viewpoints, it did sacrifice those inputs which participants found important in their design.

Evaluation with over ninety audience members with varying levels of familiarity with the subject of mental health showed that the majority of viewers reacted very positively to the film, receiving the mental health messages expressed by the participants who made the film, connecting emotionally with them, and engaging in forms of reflection on their own feelings. Many viewers with no direct experiences of mental health problems found that the

film helped perceive mental health as a non-scary subject and for one viewer this explicitly helped reduce their stigmatised views.

A minority of viewers, who found the film disjointed and difficult to engage with, thought that the poetic approach to the first half of the film was not a strong enough narrative to guide their viewing experience. For these viewers, their reception of the mental health representations in the film was confusing and at times negative, and the interactive features felt random and not meaningful. This result suggests that the film form works best for those viewers who are more likely to engage with poetry, abstract imagery, and emotional modalities of storytelling.

9.2.4 Overall considerations

Overall, we found that by turning *Stepping Through* in an interactive film through structurally participatory forms of authorship, we could produce a well-rounded representation of mental health which respects the views of all participants involved. This representation was supported both by the range of linear content present in the film and the ways this is explored via interactive features. In this project, non-linear filmmaking did not just produce a longer viewing experience for viewers, who accessed a higher volume of content compared to the original film, but rather a qualitatively different experience, where moving through feelings' menus and being matched with a participant became a form of representation of mental health in itself.

9.2.4.1 Use of non-linear narrative qualities in *Stepping Through Interactive*

In section [3.3.1](#) of this thesis, I outlined a preliminary exploration of non-linear narrative qualities which could support the participatory production of films on mental health. In view of our completed project, we can state that this project fully exploited the co-existence of more storylines to be present within one film; the responsiveness of content that can re-arrange itself according to the combination of viewers' choices and pre-set parameters; the ability of this form of storytelling in encouraging an empathic bond with the film characters; and, in intent, an active audience involvement in the film, which was designed by participants but not included into the final product due to technical limitations. Two remaining qualities were not included in this project. One is the possibility of including extra materials in non-filmic form. While participants seemed fascinated by this option at the initial stages of the work, during the design and filming process ideas of adding text, photos, or web links to the film were gradually abandoned. This might be due to the volume of filmic work emerged in the

process and the fact that participants were increasingly invested in the new clips they were producing. The remaining quality is immersion: while some viewers defined the film as immersive in their questionnaire, participants did not consciously design the film with immersive effects in mind.

9.2.4.2 Stepping Through Interactive as mediated contact for the reduction of stigma and self-stigma

We found that this type of storytelling could be an ideal vehicle to support forms of mediated contact (Reinke *et al* 2004, Corrigan *et al* 2006, Stuart 2006, Clement *et al* 2012, Yamaguchi *et al* 2018), a strategy particularly effective in combating stigma and self-stigma (Corrigan 2012). In fact, films like *Stepping Through Interactive* can provide space for the multiple viewpoints of participants to co-exist harmoniously, supporting effective self-expression; but participants can also be in charge of designing ways in which they want to articulate their own disclosure with audiences.

In *Stepping Through Interactive*, participants' main intent towards the audience was to reduce the levels of self-stigma in people who are experiencing mental health problems to encourage self-acceptance and optimism towards recovery. Secondly, they wanted to reduce stigma in other viewers, not through an information-based lecture on what mental health is, but rather through establishing empathetic bonds which would show the commonalities of feelings between people who have direct experience of mental health problems and audience members. The overall representation of mental health in this film paints it as a continuum (Westerhof and Keyes 2010), and this kind of approach is mentioned in the literature as an effective in reducing stigma (Schomerus *et al* 2016). This kind of representation strongly counteracts the positioning of people with mental health problems as "othered", which is frequent in much mainstream media (Rose 1998, Birch 2012), as discussed in section [2.2.1](#) of this thesis.

While addressing the audience, participants also articulated self-disclosure on their own terms. Since making the original *Stepping Through* in 2016, participants made a clear decision that they wanted to represent their own experiences through emotive metaphors rather than literal accounts. In this non-linear expanded version of the film, they decided to increment their level of self-disclosure by adding direct interviews, but only after viewers had engaged with the emotional and abstract part of their representations.

For other groups of participants with different expressive needs, disclosure via interactive filmmaking could be designed in completely different ways, but could still harness

the flexibility of this type of storytelling to support dialogue on mental health (or other stigmatised issues) which can be open, participatory, personal, and safe, qualities that we found (section [2.3.2](#)) are key towards stigma reduction.

9.2.4.3 Qualities of participation in Stepping Through Interactive

We made a constant effort through this project to design ways for participants to be structurally involved in the production of *Stepping Through Interactive* and we believe that we managed to do so by modelling the process that led to the creation of the interactive film on the values and processes typical of participatory filmmaking. Participants were the authors of the film and took authorial decisions about their representations and the interactive structures which supported these.

However, there were segments in the process where the risk of reducing their authorial control was higher. In traditional participatory filmmaking, this risk usually arises in the video editing phase, which often involves a more stringent mediation from the facilitator. Once this field is opened to a less inclusive form of technology, such as interactive media, an additional layer of mediation is inserted. The contribution of software developers is necessary to translate participants' plans in viable technical solutions. These negotiations need to be carefully monitored: there should not be excessive pressure to necessarily implement every input from participants if some are not feasible; but it is key to keep their authorial intentions at the centre of the process so that alternative solutions can be proposed without disrupting the authenticity of their representations.

In this case, I acted as a mediator between participants and technical team and I believe the familiarity with participants' artistic work developed over the years has helped me keeping their preferences in mind when working out alternative solutions. An indispensable step is to keep checking in with participants, and the use of low fidelity prototypes I could quickly create in Klynt helped in this regard. However, despite these steps, there were still important features that could not be accommodated in the final prototype. In other projects, involving participants in working closely with software developers, and learning some interactive media design skills from them, would be ideal to ensure structural participation is supported.

In terms of film form, *Stepping Through Interactive* falls into a paradox induced by our impossibility of translating some of the participants' requests for direct involvement of viewers

in the film. While we managed to create methods and processes to make this film structurally participatory for the participants who authored it, we could not accommodate any form of executory participation from the audience. The final result is a film that was made by people with lived experience of mental health, but which would not be considered participatory by a viewer who might want to input their views into it. Even the less innovative form of participation *through* media (Nash 2014), consisting of viewers being able to discuss the film content in forums or social media, is non-existent at the moment. Paul proposed ideas to create a website to host the film and embed social media features to allow viewers' involvement in this form. While we were not able to create this within the scope of this research, we plan to do so in the future. Future research could also address the wider gap between authors' and viewers' participation by completing the development of the film to respect the entire design brief participants envisioned.

In terms of supporting authorial voices of a group of participants in this project, we found of relevance to reflect upon two different authorial intentions which underpinned the process of designing a structurally participatory film form: expressive needs and communicative aims. "Expressive needs" indicate the authorial intentions of participants for what concerns poetic associations, memories, symbols, emotions, and affects that each participant intended to convey through their creative work and reserves space to the artistic and creative vision of the participants as authors of films. "Communicative aims" refer instead to participants' authorial intentions concerning more concrete cognitive and informational objectives, in particular with regards to what participants wished the viewers would learn or understand by consuming content produced by them. This conceptual difference was not pre-established, but instead emerged through our work with participants. We believe that, in order to support participants in authoring interactive documentaries, it might be useful to other scholars and practitioners to use both of these concepts so that space is reserved not just to what kind of information participants intend to convey to viewers/users, but also to how they intend to express their personal worldview and outlook through the film.

9.2.4.4 Facilitation and researcher's positionality in this project

In intensively working with participants to make *Stepping Through Interactive*, my double role of researcher and facilitator has undoubtedly influenced some aspects of the work made by participants. In participatory filmmaking, the facilitator is supposed to act as supporting figure who does not steer participants' views in any direction. However, this supposed neutrality of the facilitator's role has been deconstructed (Shaw 2012), and it is

important to bring to light an awareness of the nuanced relationship between participants and facilitators. The collaboration taking place between the two parties can be a creative catalyst as long as power relations are monitored.

My own relationship with participants contained many nuanced aspects. First, I am a supporter of the mental health views of participants, and I strongly agree with the values that underpin their work. This is part of what helped establish good rapport with these participants and Converge in general, and while it is helpful to think about this issue in very similar ways to participants, I was aware that I could risk laying my own ideas about mental health on their thoughts. To counteract this, I tried to doublecheck views and opinions with participants very often, by dedicating ample space for discussion on mental health, sharing my opinions on the subject while sensitively asking for participants' views. This created thought-provoking conversations, which supported the work for *Stepping Through Interactive*, preserved the authenticity of participants' views, and also expanded my own mental health awareness.

In terms of creative influence, I was aware of the fact that participants see me as an expert in filmmaking, and often ask for my opinion on filming solutions for their ideas. This is inevitable and I made a conscious effort to try and preserve the authenticity of their ideas by offering solutions to support these rather than attempting to change them. Robust documentation in form of fieldnotes has been indispensable to keep track of participants' inputs over time, as I had a tendency to better remember ideas who I personally found more interesting. To counteract this, I referred to my fieldnotes very often. Producing summaries of findings and checking them regularly with participants has also helped in this regard.

In terms of interactive filmmaking, there was an interesting conjunction of inexperience between myself and participants, as I was also new to this form of practice. While I, unlike participants, had time and means for in-depth studies of the subject, this area of the work has been a shared experience of exploration, in which I often declared my inexperience to participants and updated them on the solutions I gradually found through my studies.

The biggest external input that has influenced participants' choices in their work was the proposal of three mini prototypes which would help them focus on pros and cons of database, map, and self-reflective quiz structures (section [7.3.4](#)). Participants did not request this step, which was instead motivated by discussions between me and the student intern, which led to spotting a possible mismatch between the participants' authorial

intentions and the natural progression towards a categorical database from the paper map they produced. While I believe that this intervention was a necessary form of collaboration which supported participants' authorial intentions, and the overall results from the evaluation seem to confirm this, I am aware that the project could have taken a different turn if these steps were not taken as part of the Summer School's portion of the work.

Finally, my role was not just a mixture of research and facilitation, but I also appear in the film through my own chapter and as a participant in the half-painted face film, in which I acted and recorded some lines on my own experiences of mental health problems. This involvement of my own viewpoint was something that participants welcomed since the making of the original *Stepping Through* in 2016. In a field of practice where participants disclose personal experiences with a high degree of vulnerability, it is not uncommon for facilitators to also share their own experiences within the boundaries of the project. This is also helpful to get a first-person sense of what it means to disclose, which in turn can improve facilitation. Therefore, I did not shy away from discussing my own experiences of anxiety with the participants and they have encouraged me to input my views in the film as someone who is part of the group. Considering our shared belief that mental health affects anyone, a viewpoint which informs the entire film, including my experience was coherent and natural in our opinion. It also helped input some gender balance in the representation, something participants were very aware of.

9.3 Limits of this research

This research presented some limitations in several ways. First, this work was carried out in particularly favourable circumstances. Participants are experts by experience who had spent years engaging with Converge as artists and mentors. They are mental health activists, who are used to articulate their experiences of mental health and to reflect on what it means to share them with external audiences. They knew each other very well and had worked with me through several different participatory film experiences before. This created not just an established relationship of trust, but also an implicit knowledge of their favourite film styles and modalities of expressions, of activities they were more likely to engage with, and of group dynamics at play. This level of familiarity saved time that would have been necessary otherwise to establish rapport early in the process and made these participants well engaged in a long term and often time demanding process. Replicating aspects of this research project in other contexts will need to consider the necessary time and resources for those aspects that were here already established before the start of this project. Support from Converge meant that participants were working in a known and safe

environment, with no limits to the possibility of accessing free venues and adapting bookings to the needs of participants. Converge also had a team of support workers at disposition to support participants in case of need. Whereas a gatekeeping organisation is not involved, this form of supported needs to be arranged in other forms.

In terms of research methodology, this research was strongly grounded on using *Stepping Through* as a case study, which guided our process throughout. Not just the film form achieved was developed from the grounding of an existing film made by the same participants, but the design and production process also mirrored on the process participants were already familiar with and positively responded to in the past. While we drew out general principles from this practice that can guide other similar experiments in different contexts, we are aware that projects which start this investigation from scratch might require extra resources and time to design a process and film form which can best support groups with completely different expressive needs and contextual experiences.

Considering instead limitations to our results, there were some areas in which we could not achieve all of the aims we set out to pursue. One of these areas regarded the technical skills and tools necessary to implement the design created by participants in full. We had to instead compare two different technical tools and opt for the one which offered the most flexibility. However, this meant that some of the features participants envisioned could not be translated into the final prototype. While this could be disappointing, we still documented those features that could not be implemented and accounted for them in this research by exploring their roles and why they were important for these participants.

We also faced limitations induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The effect of restrictions and lockdowns meant that participants could not be involved into co-leading the evaluation study as they wished, reducing the participatory potential of this research. It also meant, that while we made efforts to create a process for participants which mirrored their usual participatory filmmaking experiences, participants did not have the opportunity to show their finished film to face-to-face audiences, a step that they find very important. We plan to organise a screening event as soon as the conditions allow to offer participants a meaningful closure to this research. The pandemic also meant that struggling mental health organisations could not grant access to viewers with lived experience of mental health problems, which were under-represented in the evaluation study. While a good portion of the viewers still had very deep understanding of mental health as professionals and researchers, the evaluation might have benefitted from a larger involvement of a category of viewers that participants created the film for.

9.4 Takeaways for other participatory interactive film projects in mental health

We hope that this research can inspire other researchers and participatory filmmakers in carrying out similar work involving people with lived experience of mental health in using non-linear storytelling to produce interactive films. However, as explained in the previous section we are aware that we were conducting work with participants in particularly beneficial circumstances. Projects which wish to carry out similar work would probably need to take into considerations a few additional elements.

We have proposed a series of principles and some guidance which can support the set-up of participatory filmmaking processes for interactive media in [Chapter 6](#). In particular, we recommend projects which start with a new group of participants to invest time in building rapport amongst participants and with the research team. In fact, setting up a safe environment is essential in this work to allow participants to voice their experiences, before any kind of technology comes into play.

Groups where there is not a pre-existing practice of participatory filmmaking would also need to invest time in passing on skills to do with creating sequences of images, timelines, scripting, and using cameras, to facilitate the design and production of the linear segments of the film. This kind of training could happen alongside other activities that have to do with brainstorming themes or devising a story.

In this project, we worked with a form of storytelling which is very flexible: the combination of video poetry, with its use of spoken language and symbolic imagery, and simple documentary content. For projects in which participants wish to use more structured film genres, the challenge of merging these with interactive media can be more stringent, with continuity and dramatic acts whose cohesion need to be preserved throughout the varying combinations of content created by interactivity.

A very long portion of our work was dedicated to translating the design ideas of participants in a working prototype. Due to the agenda of this research, it was necessary to let participants explore and define their own unique non-linear film form, and the design had value in itself even when it could not be fully translated into a prototype. For projects that have a shorter timescale or are more product-driven, considerable amount of time can be saved by bringing in the technology of choice earlier on, so that the ideas developed by

participants are commensurate with the technological possibilities available. While this can limit the creative scopes of some projects, it also means that participants' expectations on what is achievable are clear from the start, avoiding possible disappointments or a last-minute need for extra time and resources.

We have found that where technical support through software developers or other supporting figures is necessary, it might be a good idea to involve this from the start of the project and ensure that a direct relationship is built between participants and software developers. While in this project this was only achievable with the student intern, we believe that direct contact can help clarify technical expectations in participants and help software developers better understand the expressive needs of participants and propose solutions that a filmmaker facilitator might not be aware of. It would also be ideal to involve participants in user testing and evaluation, so that they can gain a tangible sense of how their designs are received by others.

An important final takeaway from this project lies on the fact that creating this form of storytelling, with its increased level of complexity, makes sense when motivated by the expressive needs of participants. While the challenge of accommodating a plurality of voices has been a constant in my practice as a participatory filmmaker and in some of my colleagues', there are cases where traditional filmmaking is all a group needs to represent their viewpoints in their full complexity. Rather than being practiced for its own sake, interactive media in a participatory filmmaking context should be another expressive tool at disposition to the main focus of these filmmaking experiences, which is supporting the self-representation of groups which are marginalised by mainstream media.

While this form of storytelling proved promising to support polyvocal forms of productions, we are aware that current scenarios in applied arts and third sector's provisions could often not allow for a process like this to take place, even if simplified. However, as participatory filmmaking used to be a complex and lengthy experience until digital cameras made it accessible to most, we hope that future developments of non-linear authoring tools will allow this practice to become increasingly accessible and affordable.

9.5 Directions for future research

We hope that this research can be the starting point towards developing a community of practice and research around using interactive filmmaking with groups of people who have lived experience of mental health and beyond. The polyvocal potential of

this practice could in fact be applied to any community film production where complex and multi-faceted issues are explored.

We intend to expand on the research documented in this thesis in several ways. In 2022 funding was awarded to optimise *Stepping Through Interactive* so that it can be easily accessible online and supported by a website which will be co-designed with the core participants, who will be able to re-tell their journey through this research and select which materials should appear on the website. Once the website is ready, the film will be disseminated to academics in the field of interactive documentary and mental health, to community practitioners, to third sectors organisations, and to mental health arts festivals. Our dissemination plan intends to promote collaborations and to encourage some of the uses for the film which emerged from its evaluation. We also plan to apply for funding to present the work and the processes used in this research to a group of participatory filmmakers with a view of developing a toolkit of methods which can be used by practitioners looking to use interactive films with communities.

An interesting area of research emerging from this work could address how to make structurally participatory interactive films who also embed a more active role for viewers. As a result of the evaluation of *Stepping Through Interactive*, we found that participants would have wanted a more active relationship with viewers, while at the same time viewers often left messages for participants in their questionnaires. While structural participation was successfully achieved in this film, and turned the participants into authors, we could not implement ways to facilitate dialogue between the viewers and participants through the film itself. Finding ways of doing so would not just fully achieve the potential of interactive documentary to become a “living documentary” (Gaudenzi 2013) but could also support the emergence of what is defined as “third voice” (Dreher 2010 and 2017, Waller *et al* 2015), a blend of participants’ voices and the responses from audiences who have taken into account their viewpoints, which embodies the transformative power of this kind of participatory practices.

A key area of research in relation to this kind of projects should address the digital divide (Boardman 2021, Nash 2021), an issue which forcefully emerged during the isolation induced by the pandemic. With many groups in society lacking access or skills to use digital technology, target audiences for these projects might never be reached. An investigation seems necessary to define ways in which the digital divide can be filled and where participatory interactive films could sit in relation to this issue.

However, taking into considerations all aspects of this work, we think that this research has showed that non-linear narratives afforded by interactive media can work harmoniously to support the production of participatory accounts of mental health, where multiples viewpoints are represented in their authenticity, individual and collective views can co-exist, and interactive features can be shaped to embody the expressive needs of participants. In doing so, we believe that this research has addressed questions and dynamics emerging from the intersection of participatory media and interactive documentary.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 – STUDY 1 WORKSHOP REGISTER

Table 7 Study 1 register of workshops

Workshop number and date	Research Question	Activities	Attendance
1: Review of the film and the process (22 nd September 2018)	RQ2, SQ1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction to the research project - Brainstorming - Writing and discussion from prompts 	Paul, Wayne, Adam, Nathan
2. Review of narrative material in the film (29 th September 2018)	SQ2, SQ3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brainstorming - Locating symbolic images - Personal mapping activity - Discussion 	Paul, Wayne
3. Repetition of previous session for missing participants (3 rd October 2018)	As above	As above	Paul, Wayne, Adam, Nathan

4. Creative writing (20 th October 2018)	SQ4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recap of ideas emerged so far - Writing exercises using symbolic shots - Writing on prompts based on discussions of mental health happened 	Nathan, Adam, Wayne
5. Creative writing and new image sequences (10 th November 2018)	SQ3, SQ4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Repetition of the writing exercise for Paul - Creation of new sequences of images 	Paul, Wayne, Adam, Nathan
6. Review of extra materials (17 th November 2018)	SQ4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review of the half-painted film idea - Repetition of writing exercise for Laurie - Discussion of sequences from previous week for Laurie - Sound recording of writing 	Paul, Wayne, Adam, Nathan, Laurie
7. Creative writing based on the half-painted face idea (1 st December 2018)	SQ4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rev and discussing old materials - Combining new and old: brainstorming and writing 	Paul, Wayne, Adam, Nathan, Laurie



APPENDIX 2 – PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF MENTAL HEALTH FROM MAPPING ACTIVITY

Table 8 Personal experiences of mental health emerged from the mapping activity in workshops 2 and 3

Paul	<p>Paul writes of having struggled with anxiety, which he links to his own self-image and evolution as an artist/performer. He talks of having had to develop and mature his personality “alone” and stresses the important of individual resolution in this process. His story is a process of from being unable to breathe and expand in space as he experienced anxiety, to sense of liberation. As he embraced creativity and built himself as performer, a sense of humour and fun emerges, as he sees being a creator as being able to introduce humour and irony in his expressions. He is keen to use his own self-reflection to induce reflection in others. He wants to inspire, show the lighter side of mental health problems, and to reduce stigma by showing the humanity behind existing labels.</p>
Wayne	<p>In Wayne’s experience lack of confidence and self-worth seem to be central issues. It sounds as if, unlike Paul, he did not need to build a new identity as much as finding acceptance and meaningful connections to others. Wayne expresses that he often felt lonely around others and felt both a need to deep calm and of self-expression (“my voice shouted out loud”). Wayne wishes to inspire others who are struggling with mental health problems and show that it is never too late to achieve goals in life.</p>
Nathan	<p>For Nathan a key step towards recovery was establishing self-care habits, eating healthy foods and exercise. He also talked about supporting others as way of keeping well. In terms of audience, Nathan would like to encourage other people struggling with mental health problems in taking up healthy routines and reflecting on the fact that bad days will always happen, but they can be managed.</p>
Adam	<p>Adam talks about being at a crossroad, reaching out for help and looking for stability, wondering about his own identity, and the ups and downs in his mental health. Opening up to exploring new areas of life and new connections with people is what helped him to recover a sense of well-being and satisfaction. He wishes to instil hope and empathy in audience members.</p>

APPENDIX 3 – SYMBOLIC IMAGES AND THEIR MEANINGS FOR DIFFERENT PARTICIPANTS

Table 9 Symbolic images indicating different meanings for participants

Symbolic images	Meanings by participant
	<p>Wayne: serenity, relax</p> <p>Paul: finding a key, resolution</p>
	<p>Wayne: carrying a weight on my shoulder</p> <p>Adam: a balancing act</p>



Laurie: a new start

Rest of the group: taking a decision



Paul: being constrained, unable to breathe

Nathan: birthing new life



Adam: dissociation, confusion

Paul: sense of energy, vibration



Nathan: friendship, mutual support

Paul: passing of time, rhythm



Wayne: nature, harmony

Nathan: healthy habits, growing food

APPENDIX 4 - REGISTER OF ALL PARTICIPANTS' WORKSHOPS ACROSS THE THREE STUDIES

Table 10 Register of all participants' workshops

Workshop Number	Date	Participants	Activities	Outputs
1	22/09/18	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intro to entire study - Discussion on the film (memories, new impression, themes, strong and weak points) - Discussion on the film production process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip of session . Field notes . Brainstorming posters (images)
2	29/09/18	Wayne Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More in-depth discussion on film themes - Location of meaningful shots - Personal Mapping Exercise and discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip . Field notes . Personal Maps for Wayne and Paul . Extra Poem from Wayne . List of shots
3	03/10/18	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Repetition of the same activities with missing participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip . Field notes . Personal Maps from Wayne and Paul . List of shots

4	20/10/18	Wayne Adam Nathan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recap of extra content ideas - Recap of extra themes emerged from the mapping exercise - Writing exercise on each of the key shots found 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip . Field notes . Writing from Wayne, Z, and X for each of the key shots identified
5	10/11/18	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Repetition of writing exercise for Paul - Creation of new sequences of key images for the themes identified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip . Field notes . Writing from T . 7 new sequences of key shots
6	17/11/18	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul Laurie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussion on half-painted film idea - Repetition of writing exercise for Laurie - Discussion of sequences created with Laurie - Recording of writing from previous sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip . Field notes . Writing from C . 26 audio clips in which participants read their writing
7	1/12/18	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Writing for the half-painted face film idea - Discussion of writing - Ideas for possible exhibition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip . Field notes . Writing from participants
8	15/12/18	Paul Wayne Nathan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Photo shoot for half painted portraits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip . Field notes . Series of portraits showing closeness and

				openness regarding mental health
9	22/12/18	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Repetition of portraits for missing participants - Selecting text from previous session writing for each picture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip . Field notes . Additional portraits . List of selected writing
10	07/04/19	Wayne Adam Nathan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recap of study so far - Writing "personal profiles" for each participant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip (incomplete) . Field notes
11	03/05/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rearranging sound clips for the 7 additional theme clips 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip . Field notes . 7 spoken word pieces related to each 7 themes sequences
12	25/05/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating new imagery for the 7 additional theme clips 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip . Field notes . List of additional images to shoot
13	01/06/19	Wayne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Designing interactive map using papers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Audio clip

		Adam Nathan Paul		. Field notes . Images of film map
14	15/06/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Looking at images of film map - Watching other interactive films 	. Audio Clip . Field notes
15	06/07/19	Wayne Adam Nathan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organising meeting going through details of organising filming - Watched back What is Converge 	.Audio Clip . Field notes
16	14/07/19	Migle Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First session with Migle, introductions - Filming Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audio Clip - Fieldnotes - Interviews footage
17	20/07/19	Migle Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussion of Friendship and Reinventing yourself - Filming of Eyes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audio Clip - Fieldnotes - Filming of Eyes
18	27/07/19	Migle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making of the scrapbooks - Filming the making of scrapbooks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 4 Scrapbooks - Production Diary

		Wayne Adam Nathan Paul		- Behind the scene footage
19	28/07/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	- Filming Reinventing Yourself	- Production Diary - Reinventing Yourself Footage - Behind the Scene Footage
20	08/08/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	- Filming of Friendship	- Production Diary - Friendship Footage - Behind the Scene Footage
21	10/08/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	- Introduction of the interactive structure using Klynt - Discussion on exploring film through choice of feelings - Watching rough cut of Reinventing Yourself - Each participant generated three main feelings from their chapter	- AudioClip - Fieldnotes
22	29/08/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	- Filming of Down to Me 1	- Down to me Footage - Production Diary - Behind the Scenes Footage
23	05/09/19	Wayne	- Filming Down to Me 2	- Down to me Footage

		Adam Nathan Paul		- Production Diary
24	02/11/19	Wayne Adam Nathan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organisation of next filming days - Reviewing Lonely in a Crowd film ideas - Reviewing Half Painted Face film, Achiev. Later in Life, and Sustainable Recovery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audio Clip - Fieldnotes
25	10/11/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watching and reviewing Reinventing Yourself, Friendship - Listening to soundbites for Sustainable Recovery and choosing a soundtrack - Filming second part of Down to Me at the end of the session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audio Clip - Fieldnotes - Footage of chalks on wall and mirrors - Behind the Scene footage
26	16/11/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More organisation of next sessions of filming - Watching Down to Me and collecting feedback - Recording of a few more lines for Down to Me - Looking at menu with feelings and collecting feedback - Filming faces expressions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audio Clip - Fieldnotes - Filming of face expressions for new menu - Down to me New Lines recording
27	24/11/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organising upcoming film with extras - Discussing of Half Painted face film and recording of new lines - Introduction of Andrew joining the project - Checking Sustainable Recovery soundtrack 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audio Clip - Fieldnotes - Half Painted Face Recorded Lines
28	1/12/19	Wayne Adam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Filming of Half Painted Face and Lonely in a Crowd with extras 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Film Footage - Production Diary

		Nathan Paul + extras		
29	14/12/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Showing the editing of Lonely in a Crowd and choosing music for it - Watching and reviewing the cut of Reinventing Yourself - Having a look at the half-painted face footage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audioclip - Fieldnotes
30	18/12/19	Paul and Christie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Filming Christie's Dance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Film Footage - Production Diary
31	22/12/19	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watching half painted face rough cut - Watching Lonely in a Crowd - Watching Reinventing Yourself - Watching Friendship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audioclip - Fieldnotes
32	19/01/20	Wayne Adam Nathan Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Filming extra footage of Half Painted Face 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Film Footage - Production Diary
33	24/01/20	Paul Nathan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Filming Being the Performer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Film Footage - Production Diary
34	22/02/20	Paul Nathan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watching Half Painted Face Film - Watching Behind the Scene Film - Watching Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audio Clip - Fieldnotes

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collecting Feedback on these clips and how to move forward 	
35	30/02/20	Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Filming Achievements Later in life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Film Footage - Production Diary
36	3/10/20	Paul, Wayne, Nathan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information sheets and consent forms - Watching the film - Spontaneous reactions and conversation - 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fieldnotes - Sound recording
37	10/10/20	Paul, Nathan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watching Film - Nathan individual interview - Paul individual interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fieldnotes - Sound recording - Written notes from Paul
38	26/10/20	Adam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information sheets and consent forms - Watching Film - Adam's Individual Interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fieldnotes - Sound recording
39	1/11/20	Nathan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watching Film - Nathan additional views 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informal session, no output

APPENDIX 5 – SAMPLE PRODUCTION DIARY

Production Diary Workshop 19 – Filming Session 4

28/07/2019 Timings 2pm-5.30pm

Storyline: Reinventing Yourself & Friendship

People present: Simona, Nathan, Adam, Wayne, Mige

Met earlier on campus to tackle the filming of both Friendship and Reinventing Yourself (we mostly filmed Reinventing Yourself).

We started by filming in the usual room, starting with the see through images of Wayne sitting and Adam and Nathan appearing as ghosts to support him. Most of the camera work was done by me here as participants focused on acting. The first clips were of Wayne keeping his position while I directed him. We had to repeat some of these clips as we realised we shouldn't have moved the camera to create an overlapping effect. It took a few attempts to coordinate the movements of Adam and Wayne entering the scene.

Once this scene was done, we moved on to filming hands on the wall as these represented a newfound sense of friendship and a re-elaboration of the hands symbolism so present in Stepping Through. Adam suggested some ideas of hands coming together on the wall. Everyone included Mige acted while I worked on camera. Adam proposed the idea of having on hand moving on its own after having taken on the support of the other hands. We tried to achieve this effect by having the rest of the hands moving down to mimic the movement of his hands going forward.

After capturing this image we moved to some filming for Reinventing Yourself. We started with the elevator scene. Adam was the first one to enter the lift. We filmed him going in, then I entered with him in the lift and filmed him in his process of transformation. We did the same with each participant. Each one acted their feelings in the elevator in different ways and helped with camera work while not acting. After this round of filming, participants got

changed from dark outfits to colourful ones and we filmed them reemerging from the lift one by one.

After this scene, we went exploring campus to see if we could find corners that would inspire us for additional footage. Participants found a see-through opaque door downstairs which surprisingly had lights of different colours and started to explore using it for imagery of hands and movements as silhouettes. They loved this space and we decided to use it for additional filming too in the future.

After this scene, we kept exploring and decided to use the sitting spaces on the ground floor in a similar way as it was done in the film course. Adam and Nathan were the first to sit and explore some movements while me and Wayne were on camera. Then Wayne sat on his own.

Walking around the quad, Adam spotted a mannequin visible through a window and experiment with acting with it. We also used the bike racks as a symbolism for enclosed spaces: Adam crawled through them to then break free, and then everyone else tried, creating some movements around them. We wanted to film in the quad but it was locked, and I later found out that that area is now always locked on weekends (used to be open 24/7).

We then moved to the area adjacent to the construction site next to the students' union. Here the fence and some signs appeared to be quite poignant with the Reinventing Yourself theme. Adam acted using these props while me and Nathan handled camera work. Adam also decided to be filmed next to a poster depicting students using the future space, as to underline his sense of exclusion from that universe.

Adam took the lead in choosing and directing part of this work, which makes sense since reinventing yourself is a theme close to his experience and shaped by him.

We moved to an area of campus where the grass was kept quite wild and not looked after, and filmed Wayne walking through it to symbolise moving from a state of wilderness and unclarity to a much easier and clearer path (which we filmed later in front of the university).

To finish off this session we filmed some images of lavender in the same area where Wayne was walking.

Migle worked on the entire session by capturing behind the scene footage on a second camera.

Overall, the filming took around 2 hours. While the group was very responsive and engaged, with the many repetitions of clips and changes of scenery we were all quite tired by the end. Anything longer would have probably been too much.

APPENDIX 6 - BREAKDOWN OF WORKSHOPS ACTIVITIES IN THE ORIGINAL *STEPPING THROUGH* PROCESS

- **Workshop 1:** the group started with a brief presentation of the course, an ice breaker where each participant talked about eventual previous experiences with photography/filmmaking and which films they usually enjoy. A short brainstorming exercise ignited discussion on possible themes and stories they would have liked to explore. Examples of films were shown and discussions on themes/emotions/styles took place. By the end of the sessions the group established they would have liked to explore the sense of relief experienced by joining a group after a time of isolation induced by mental illness; some had a specific view of addressing the role of Converge in this instance.
- **Workshop 2:** this session was dedicated to some writing exercises to get ideas on paper. The group experimented with writing on prompts, both generic prompts (“I am....”, “I feel....”, “Life is....”, etc.) and prompts I developed specifically based on ideas brainstormed the previous week (“Loneliness....”, “Recovery is....”, “Joining a group....”, etc.). We also tried a free writing exercise. We concluded by watching more examples of films which I collected according to what the group seemed to enjoy the most the previous week. I participated in this exercise too.
- **Workshop 3:** the writing exercise was further developed by recombining bits of the writing from the previous week which I had anonymised, printed on paper, and fragmented. The fragments were placed on a table, and participants were encouraged to explore them and rearrange them in the order they preferred. They were also given the possibility to add more writing if they wished to. At the end of the session each participant had a piece of poetry which included the voices of all the other participants framed according to his viewpoint and taste (Fig. 78). The session was concluded by reading and recording each piece of poetry in turns.

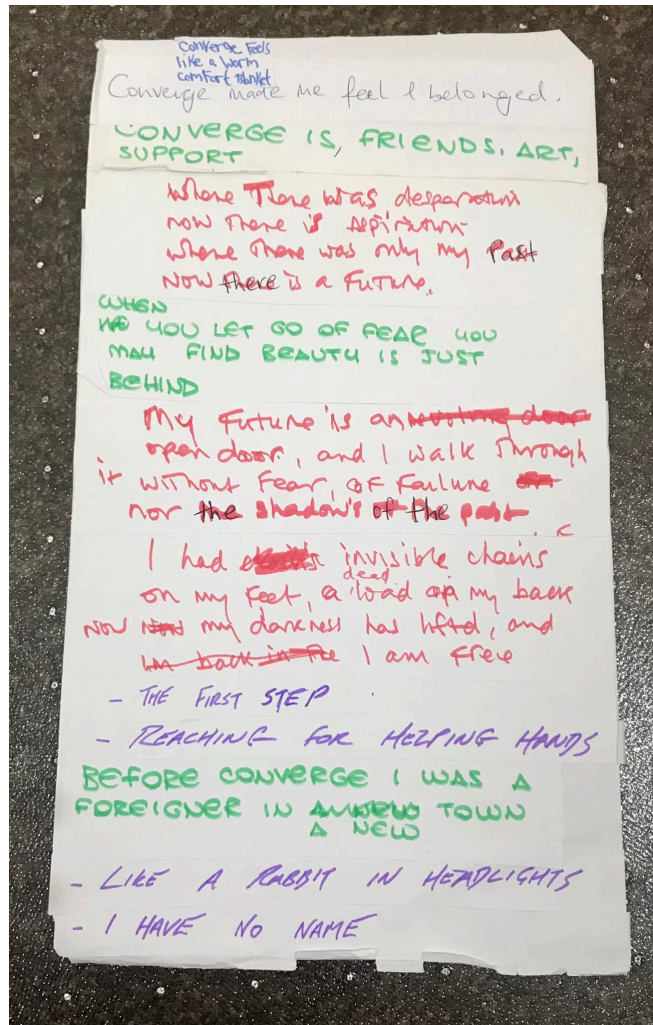


Figure 78 Wayne's poem in Stepping Through

- **Workshop 4:** this session was dedicated to exploring the use of music and images paired with the recorded poetry from the previous session. Each recorded piece of poetry was played with very different soundtracks to explore and evaluate the effect of music on the emotional content of the poetry. I provided printed photographs of images that could resonate with the poems, and participants were encouraged to create a “timeline” of photographs they thought would represent their poem efficiently. At the end of the session, each poem was read with the music of choice while another participant presented the photographs in the order chosen.
- **Workshop 5:** the first part of the session was dedicated to creating a paper edit for the poems where each participant envisioned a list of images that they would have liked to use to represent the words in the poem (Fig. 79). After a list of shots was

produced for each participant, the rest of the session was dedicated to camera training. After this session, I prepared a rough film schedule.

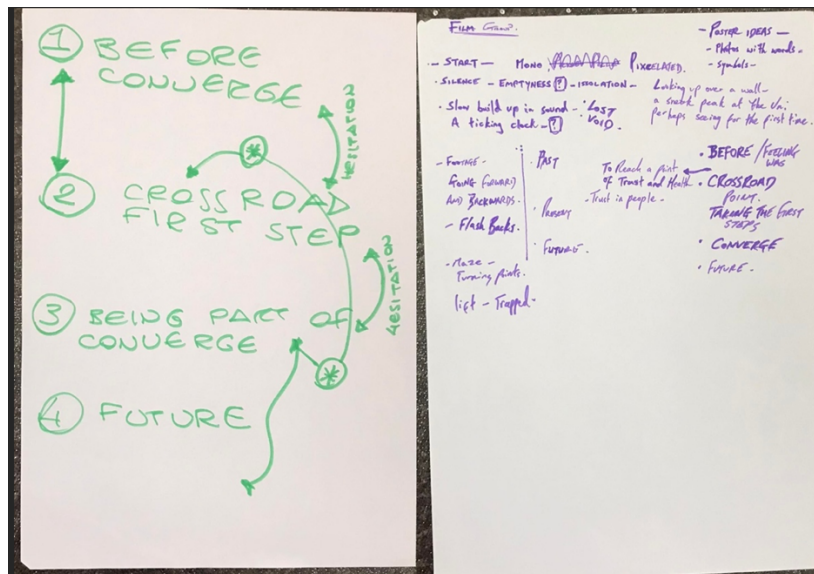


Figure 79 Notes on emotional journey and imagery in Stepping Through

- **Workshops 6-7:** these sessions were entirely dedicated to filming footage for the film. For each poem in the film, the participant who created the poetry acted as director, some participants performed as actors and at least two participants acted as camera persons in turn. The roles were then swapped for each chapter, so that every participant could experience every role. I offered technical support as and when needed but did not film any sequence for the participants. Some images in the shot-list proved impossible to film, but many others were improvised according to the in-the-moment inspiration deriving from found objects and locations. Most filming happened at York St John University campus. The second filming workshop involved other Converge staff members and students in the role of extras.
- **Workshop 8:** after session 7 I produced a rough cut of the film implementing all the notes and shot lists provided. Editing the whole film together with the group was not possible for lack of time and resources. In session 8 I presented the rough edit, collected feedback from each participant. We decided to also include outtakes to insert a comical, light-hearted element at the end of the film.
- **Final session:** the final film with implemented feedback was shown to participants over coffee and cake and the group chose a title for the film.

- **Screenings of the film:** a couple of weeks after the end of the sessions a screening was organised for Converge staff and students, which included a discussion and Q&A with participants. The feedback received was extremely positive.

APPENDIX 7 – AIMS, PHASES, AND TASKS OF THE STUDENT INTERNSHIP

Table 11 Aims, phases, and tasks of the student internship

<p>Goals for the Summer School</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Working towards the definition of the most efficient structure for the film - Starting to create a workflow for producing the interactive film
<p>Phases of the Summer School:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Familiarisation with the project and involvement in the participants' sessions - Research on interactive films and interactive filmmaking tools - Definition of a structure for the film - Individuation of a workflow to edit the film
<p>Migle's tasks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Research of interactive films and interactive filmmaking tools - Observation and fieldnotes during participants' sessions - Filming the behind the scenes - Conceptualisation of film structure - Research & test of technical ways to implement the film
<p>Development of the project during the Summer School</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First stage: starting from the structure prepared by participants, one question emerged: shall this be the final structure of the film, or shall we articulate the film differently according to some of the participants' expressive needs (encouraging self-reflection in viewers + allowing viewers to find their way around the material)? In order to test ideas, we originally prepared three concepts to compare: a database film, a quiz film, and a map film - Second stage: realising the three prototypes had different kinds of implementations and

	<p>would be very time consuming to trial, we created a structure which would incorporate elements from all three of them. We designed a structure where clips are organised in two main groups - viewers will be able to navigate them choosing which feelings most resonate with them</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Technically this is being implemented by having some videos on a website working in conjunction with Cutting Room
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APPENDIX 8 - TABLE OF LINEAR FILM MATERIALS FOR *STEPPING THROUGH INTERACTIVE*

Table 12 List of linear film materials for Stepping Through Interactive

Type of Materials	Clip Title	Content
Theme clips	Lonely in a crowd theme clip	A poetic clip exploring the quality of connections on recovery. Especially relevant to two participants.
	Down to me theme clip	A poetic clip exploring the role of inner resolution towards change and recovery, which needs to be developed alongside, and at times independently of, external support. Especially relevant to one participant.
	Reinventing yourself theme clip	A poetic clip exploring the process of creating a new identity, which incorporates, but is not entrapped in, the experience of illness. Especially relevant to two participants.

	Self-care theme clip	A poetic clip exploring the importance of self-care in recovery. Especially relevant to one participant.
	Friendship theme clip	A poetic clip exploring the importance of supportive friendships in recovery. Relevant to all participants.
	Achievement later in life theme clip	A poetic clip exploring the role of having goals and recognition later in life, especially when this did not happen in youth. Especially relevant to two participants.
	Sustainable recovery theme clip	A poetic clip exploring the cyclical nature of the recovery journey and its ups and downs. Relevant to all participants.
	Being the performer theme clip	A poetic clip exploring the process of embracing creativity and becoming a multimedia performer as part of a new identity developed after the experience of mental health problems. Relevant to one participant.

Half painted face film	Half painted face film	A poetic clip exploring the healing effects of self-disclosure and the detrimental effects of shame on recovery. Relevant to all participants.
Documentary	Personal profiles	A series of interviews of each participant discussing their role in Converge, their recovery journey, the aims and making of <i>Stepping Through</i> .
	What is Converge	A clip explaining what Converge is for viewers who are not familiar with the organisation.
	Behind the scenes	A collection of footage on the making of <i>Stepping Through Interactive</i>
Chapters from the		

original Stepping Through	Adam's personal chapter	Original <i>Stepping Through</i> chapter directed by Adam
	Laurie's personal chapter	Original <i>Stepping Through</i> chapter directed by Laurie
	Wayne's personal chapter	Original <i>Stepping Through</i> chapter directed by Wayne
	Nathan's personal chapter	Original <i>Stepping Through</i> chapter directed by Nathan
	Paul's personal chapter	Original <i>Stepping Through</i> chapter directed by Paul
Extra content	Simona's personal chapter	A new personal chapter directed by the facilitator-researcher about her personal experiences of mental health

	<p>Additional poetry</p>	<p>Sound recording of extra written poetry presented by two participants as meaningful towards their personal message.</p>
	<p>Half-painted face photographic portraits</p>	<p>A series of photos of participants with half-painted faces.</p>

APPENDIX 9 - A SELECTION OF SYMBOLS IN *STEPPING THROUGH* LINEAR AND INTERACTIVE

Table 13 A selection of mental health symbols and their relevance to participants

Symbol	Meaning	Relevant to
Journey	<p>For Adam, the idea of journey means moving from an old to a new personality, able to reach those aspirations that mental illness had temporarily blocked. Wayne also identified this sense of journey in the original film, linking not just to his chapter but to all sections of the film. This was strongly supported by Paul, who talked about how this journey from despair to support is reflected in the entire film.</p>	<p>Everyone, especially Adam and Paul</p>
Walking	<p>Process of transformation, moving forward, acting on intention</p> <p>Moving from walking in uncut, unkept areas (unclear path) to moving in a clear space, well-delineated (Reinventing Yourself clip)</p>	<p>Everyone, especially Adam</p>

	Adam's poem: "walk of recovery"	
Tunnel	Mental illness	Adam
Revolving doors	Being stuck/being able to step out/having fun Paul suggests idea of comparing the different versions of the revolving doors	Wayne, Paul, Nathan
Open spaces (quad)	Sense of balance, freedom	Wayne, Paul, Adam
Hands together	For Wayne Conveys a sense of support For Paul conveys a sense of passing of time	Wayne, Paul

<p>Hands on a wall</p>	<p>Trying to find stability</p> <p>Support and guidance when in group.</p> <p>Also taking charge of one's own recovery journey after others have shown the way.</p> <p>("my hands to show you the way forward, but in the end it's your own hand, to show you the way" from Adam's writing)</p>	<p>Adam, Wayne</p>
<p>Lift</p>	<p>Incubator of transformation</p>	<p>All participants</p>

APPENDIX 10 – COMPARISON BETWEEN KLYNT AND CUTTING ROOM

Table 14 Comparison between Klynt and Cutting Room

Klynt (Branching narrative)		Cutting Room (object-based media)	
Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ease of use and accessibility to non-programmers - Possibility of pausing, rewinding, skipping, and restarting clips - Automatic addition of content menus and maps - Possibility of adding filmic transitions (dissolve) to clips, menus, and soundtracks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fixed branching structure: viewers must find their own way around the materials, and risk getting stuck in loops or watching the same content several times - Impossibility to add personalised content or options based on viewers' behaviour - The impossibility of inserting pre-set parameters on how the content is assembled means having to design each 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Possibility of actively tracking viewers' behaviours - Possibility of setting the film to automatically re-configure itself according to pre-set parameters - Possibility of adding more sophisticated/flexible forms of curation of content rather than just branching - Possibility of adding personalised content or options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need for a programmer mediation - Abrupt endings of menus and video clips (no dissolve option) - Impossibility of pausing, skipping, rewinding clips - No content menus or maps unless specifically created by a programmer - Flexibility of narrative forms is subject to investment of programmer's time and skills

	single route a viewer could take independently		
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APPENDIX 11 - AN ANALYSIS OF *STEPPING THROUGH INTERACTIVE* NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The final prototype for *Stepping Through Interactive*'s overall structure resembles Nash' definition of a narrated database, in particular the modular approach, where film units and other media assets can be re-configured according to different parameters (Nash 2021). The empathy-based navigation of the poetry section of the film falls under the dynamic object-oriented narrative described by Maurin (2011), in which the media assets are recombined and arranged in an order which responds to viewers' choices. As indicated by the author, this type of structure presents a lower risk of information tsunami compared with the initial database-like designed by participants during the first design workshop. In fact, choices are not offloaded to viewers in their entirety, but rather proposed gradually in a curated journey through the content. Maurin warns that this kind of narrative can only be successful if the video assets are coherent enough to make sense when combined in different orders: in the case of *Stepping Through Interactive*, the use of poetry has helped mixing the content without losing a sense of coherence and unity, which could be more difficult to maintain in narrative fiction. Also, the use of feelings menus and the connecting texts between personal chapters and mental health film clips have reinforced the meaning of the alternation of content. The overall structure of the film also resembles the parallel narrative model, in that it presents some fixed nodes that all viewers will go through regardless of their active choices and of the recombined portions of the film (intro and outro clips and feelings menus).

By analysing the film according to the grid developed by Baptista and Azevedo (2019) we can reflect on some of its aspects in regard to technological innovation and filmmaking approach. The evaluation grid designed by the authors presents a series of criteria which are either affordances of interactive media or of traditional linear filmmaking. By assigning a score to the criteria, we can assess which unique balance of the two realms of practice an interactive documentary achieves.

The following table assigns scores to *Stepping Through Interactive* and reflects on each element, considering both the achieved and ideal film design.

Table 15 Analysis of *Stepping Through Interactive's* narrative structure according to Baptista and Azevedo's model (2019)

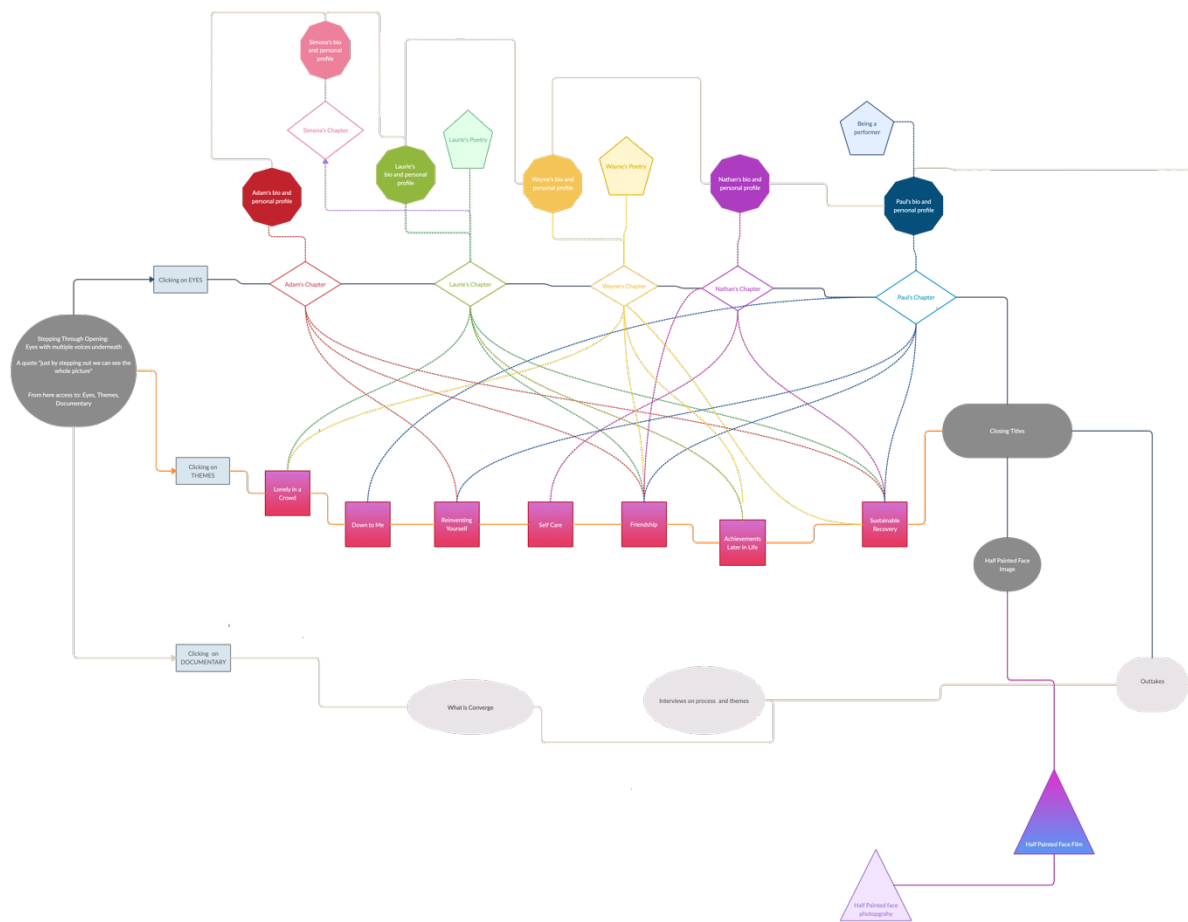
Technological Innovation				
	Feature	Score	Description	Reflection
	Database	-1	Multiple entry videos or storylines	The film presents some multi-entry videos and storylines, but overall, the underlying database of content is not visible or offered to viewers without mediation. This approach is the result of the reflection carried out with participants and student intern as part of the student internship work.
	Participation	-2	No participation	This criterion applies to viewers' participation. Due to the fact that technical constrains impeded the implementation of forms of viewers' involvement that participants wished to include in the ideal design of the film, the final prototype of <i>Stepping Through Interactive</i> ends up in being structurally participatory in terms of authorship, but not participatory at all in terms of viewers' involvement. On the other hand, had we managed to implement the film exactly as envisioned by

				<p>participants, <i>Stepping Through Interactive</i> would have achieved a score of +2 in this section, as it would have allowed viewers to edit content from a pool of materials to upload their own film chapter. This means that the film had the potential of being considerably more innovative in this area.</p>
	Interactivity	+1	Hypertext mode: the users' choices create a path	<p>In terms of interactivity, the film presents a structure where users' choices determine the paths they take across the content.</p>
	Gameplay	-1	The user's choices reflect on his path	<p>The film does not present gameplay elements aside from the fact that the feelings selected from the menus determine the path taken by viewers, which becomes evident to audiences once they access the recap menus and have the opportunity to watch a personalised clip and be matched with the participant they have feelings in common with.</p>
Filmmaking				
	Feature	Score	Description	Reflection

	Content	+2	More than 40 minutes of video	he film is decidedly heavy on the video content, including materials which combined run for more than 60 minutes. However, the number of minutes watched by a viewer depends on their choices and could range from 15 to around 75 minutes.
	Authorship	+1/+2	Branching, concentric, or object-based narrative Fishbone, parallel, or linear narrative	The mixed narrative structure of this film assigns it two different scores in this area, as it included object-based narrative segments, parallel segments, and linear intro and outro. Overall, the film tends to reserve a strong position to authorship through the journey curation.
	Narrative	+2	All clips contribute form one narrative	While multiple viewpoints are present in this film, the entire content watched by viewers builds a coherent narrative around emotional wellbeing and recovery, which culminates in the half-painted face film at the end of the viewing experience.
	Poetics	+2	AV documental author content	In terms of poetic, the audio-visual content is participatory and documentaristic in nature, encapsulating the viewpoints and experiences of the film authors.

Overall, the final film prototype achieves a higher score in the realm of traditional filmmaking than in its level of technological innovation (-3 Vs +8), which should indicate that the affordances of traditional filmmaking dominate the representation. This is due to the fact that the entire experiment was rooted into an existing linear film and technological innovation was brought in to expand the limits of the linear narrative rather than re-inventing it from scratch. The results could have probably looked very different if the investigation had started with a direct exploration of interactivity from the beginning of the process. However, the area of technological innovation could have scored higher in terms of viewers' participation if we could have created a prototype which fully supported participants' wish to actively include viewers.

APPENDIX 12 - BREAKDOWN OF THE DATABASE FILM FLOWCHART AND USER'S JOURNEYS (DIGITAL VERSION OF PAPER MAP PRODUCED BY PARTICIPANTS)



- The film starts with a menu (dark grey round shape on the left side of the structure) which links to: personal chapters from the original film (rhomboid shapes); theme clips produced by participants with different relevance to each of them (square shapes); a documentary containing behind the scenes and information on Converge (oval light grey shapes).
- Personal chapters from the original film (rhomboid shapes) link to additional personal profiles of participants introducing themselves (decagonal shapes) and to some extra materials for some of the participants (pentagonal shapes), in form of extra writing and reflections personal only to one participant.
- Personal chapters in the original film (rhomboid shapes) also link to the theme clips relevant to each participant (square shapes), according to which theme clip is relevant to whom. These links are represented by the coloured lines; each participant has assigned himself a colour as follows:

Adam	Red
Paul	Blue
Nathan	Purple
Laurie	Green
Wayne	Yellow

The film ends with a closing sequence (dark grey round shape on the right side of the structure). The conclusion would lead either to outtakes, or for viewers that have travelled through clips which covered all the five colours, to a hidden content film and photo series (the triangle shapes).

An **example of a possible journey** through the materials could be:

Intro → Menu: Personal Chapters/Themes/Documentary → *choice of Theme Sustainable Recovery* → **Sustainable Recovery clip** → Menu: Theme Achievement Later in Life clip/Any of the 5 participants' clips/Closing → *choice of Wayne's Chapter* → **Wayne's Chapter** → Menu: Theme clips related to Wayne (Lonely in a Crowd, Achievements Later in Life/Friendship)/ Wayne's Personal Profile/ Laurie's Chapter/ Nathan's Chapter → *choice of Lonely in a Crowd* → **Lonely in a Crowd Clip** → Menu: Theme Clip Down to Me/Laurie's Chapter → *choice of Laurie's Chapter* → **Laurie's Chapter** → Menu: Adam's Chapter/Laurie's Personal Profile/Theme Clips Related to Laurie not yet seen (Friendship/Achievements in Life) → *choice of Laurie's Personal Profile* → **Laurie's Personal Profile** → Menu: Laurie's Poetry/Documentary → *choice of Documentary* → **Documentary** → **Closing Section** → **Hidden Content Film** → **Credits**

APPENDIX 13 – EXTERNAL EVALUATORS CODE SYSTEM

External evaluators have been anonymised and numbered according to the following categories:

- R1 to R3 are mental health professionals
- R4 to R8 are mental health researchers
- R9 to R16 are pilot evaluators, mostly academics and researchers from Computer Sciences and Interactive Media
- R17 to R22 are third sector professionals and practitioners
- R23 to R33 are Converge professionals and members
- R34 to R99 are Prolific users

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Stepping Through Interactive is accessible at:

<https://steppingthrough.nfshost.com/>

inserting an email address as ID code.

Mental health resources

- **Time to Change campaign:** <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>
- **CERT:** <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/converge/evaluation-and-research-team/>
- **Psychosis Animation**, produced by Digifish for Community Links

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thmuqhNwrXg&ab_channel=CommunityLinks%28Northern%29

- **Converge:** <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/converge/>
- **Out of Character Theatre Company:** <http://outofcharactertheatre.squarespace.com/>
- **Hoot Creative Arts:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJp2GcO1ZwA&ab_channel=HootCreativeArts

Converge participatory films

- **Stepping Through:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8i91ArM6oTI&ab_channel=ConvergeYork
- **Through my Mind's Eye:**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qits7tmMBQk&ab_channel=ConvergeYork

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyyCTPvensI&ab_channel=ConvergeYork

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2K6HT0EN08&ab_channel=ConvergeYork

- **25 to Life:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXVARWdKg8U&ab_channel=ConvergeYork
- **Street of Thoughts:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXVARWdKg8U&ab_channel=ConvergeYork
- **The Good, the Bad, and the Upgrade:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scLa-CaPNG8&ab_channel=ConvergeYork

Interactive documentaries

- **Hollow:**
<http://hollowdocumentary.com/>

- **The Waiting Room:**
<https://victoriapplebeck.com/films/the-waiting-room/>

- **Question Bridge:**

<http://questionbridge.com/>

- **Capturing Reality:**
<https://capturingreality.nfb.ca>

- **Prison Valley:**
<http://prisonvalley.arte.tv/flash/#en>

- **Small Town, Big Stories:**
<http://www.bigstories.com.au/>

- **Gaza/Sderot:**
<http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/time/all/>

- **18 Days in Egypt:**
<http://beta.18daysinegypt.com/>

- **Amb Titol:**
<https://www.ambtitol.cat/en/#/node/37>

- **4StelleHotel**
<http://www.4stellehotel.it/>

- **One Shared House:**
<http://onesharedhouse.com/>

- **Open Your Eyes Hate:**
<https://openyoureyestohate.com/>

- **Out of my Window:**
https://www.nfb.ca/interactive/highrise_out_my_window_en/

- **Quipu:**
<https://interactive.quipu-project.com/#/es/quipu/listen/intronode?currentTime=0&view=thread>

- **The Space we Hold:**
<http://spacewehold.nfb.ca/>

