Institution: Bournemouth University

Unit of Assessment: 27

Title of case study: Enabling the Genarrator Generation: creating a more active, participatory role for modern readers

Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2006 – 2020

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s):	**Role(s) (e.g. job title):**	**Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:**
Dr Jim Pope	Principal Academic in English	1999 – current
Dr Simon Frost	Principal Academic in English	2012 – current

Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2020

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No

1. Summary of the impact

Legacy publishing has assigned authors and readers traditional roles, with interaction between the two limited to the completion of a published work. However, digitalization, new technologies and new publishing structures now challenge traditional views of what it means to be an author or reader. Bournemouth University (BU) research has generated theoretical and practical ways to develop this alternative understanding, placing the reader closer to the centre of literary practice whereby users and producers are co-creators of a narrative experience. The interactive storytelling, writing and publishing platform, Genarrator, and the New Media Writing Prize have enabled and empowered readers to have a more active participatory experience with literature. Young people have acquired skills which enhance their employability, and narrative practitioners have developed innovative methods in new media writing to further their own careers.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Too often, readers have seen themselves as mere passive recipients of the outputs from a professionalised corporate literature industry, replete with its impassable gatekeeping. This view of legacy publishing is underpinned by an understanding of literature through what is called the author-centric conduit model that treats narrative as a transmission from the mind of the author to an isolated reader who decodes the story to receive its 'meaning' – a model that has traditionally enabled a high level of exclusivity and division of literary labour. BU research has looked at theoretical and practical ways to develop an alternative understanding, which places the reader closer to the centre of literary practice.

BU researchers have created a collaborative model of understanding narrative in which users and producers are co-creators of a narrative experience – more resonantly than ever in our participatory digital era [R1, R2]. Findings from this research suggest that readers create their texts' values as an active expression of the desires that they see being supported, obstructed or ignored. Because these values are made possible by the intertextuality of other publicly available works, where the meanings and values of works are shaped by one another, they are fundamentally collaborative. This theorisation, especially the social political ambition, has been articulated in outputs by Frost and Pope [R3, R4, R5].

The research approach has roots in the Konstanz school, in *Rezeptionsästhetik* and later important schools of thought advancing the role of the reader in narrative experience, but it also integrates more recent studies of the material-book, of reading history and of digital media. We therefore stress the additional importance of materials, technologies, formats, prizes, platforms,

devices and economies. Our research concludes that the collective interaction between all agencies, technologies and economies enable the reader-user to gain a personalised narrative experience, creating value in relation to the reader's desires [R3, R4, R5].

In tandem with the theory, we have produced practice-based research responses to the challenges posed by legacy publishing, by creating from the ground up both the web-based app Genarrator [R6], and its allied global New Media Writing Prize (NMWP) [R1], both spearheaded by Pope. Since a more active role for readers is available through interactive narrative, we developed Genarrator as a commercially free space for digital interactive stories, in which readers participate more fully by choosing the direction and outcomes of a narrative [R6]. Genarrator has also been developed as an app for writing interactive narratives; in conjunction with being a community site and publishing platform that is home to around 2,000 narratives (http://genarrator.org).

Our research also found that this interaction needs to be accompanied by a more accessible cultural capital. Hence, BU researchers responded by setting up the open call NMWP, which is now in its 11th year, with many entrants featuring on the site and using the Genarrator app. Furthermore, as new media industries working with the NMWP – for example, by sponsoring collaboration with and providing internships for NMWP winners – draw on the outputs of BU research in their own research and development activities, the capital of this field is further enhanced in this research 'loop' [R1].

Thereafter, when Genarrator, its role in the NMWP and our theorisation of the active reader come together in schools and learning environments for disadvantaged young persons, the BU research is brought full circle. Here, a generation of young readers, who otherwise see themselves as disenfranchised from legacy published literature, get to newly experience their power as readers in the modern digital world [R6].

3. References to the research

All the following outputs appear in rigorously peer-reviewed publications.

R1. Pope, J. (2017). Further on Down the Digital Road: narrative design and reading pleasure in five New Media Writing Prize narratives. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 23 (4). DOI:10.1177/1354856517726603

R2. Pope, J. (2010). Where Do We Go From Here? Readers' Responses to Interactive Fiction: Narrative Structures, Reading Pleasure and the Impact of Interface Design. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 16, 75-94. DOI: 10.1177/1354856509348774

R3. Frost, S. (2015). "A Trade in Desires: emigration, A.C. Gunter and the Home Publishing Company – calls for a user-oriented model". In: Wilson, N., ed. *The Book World: Selling and Distributing British Literature, 1900–1940*. Ser. Library of the Written Word, 49. Leiden: Brill, 31-51. DOI: 10.1163/9789004315884_004

R4. Frost, S. (2017). "Readers and Retailed Literature: findings from a UK public High Street survey into purchasers' expectations from books", *LOGOS*, 28 (2), 27-43. DOI:10.1163/1878-4712-11112128

R5. Pope, J. (2006). A Future for Hypertext Fiction. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 12, 447-465. DOI:10.1177/1354856517726603

R6. Pope, J. (2009). The design and development of Genarrator at Bournemouth University. *Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education*, 8, 157-167. DOI: 10.1386/adch.8.2.157/1

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Theoretical and practice-based elements of this research drove the development of the Genarrator app and website in 2010 which allows readers to 'read' or participate in interactive stories, as well as using the purpose-built app to create their own stories, which can then be published on the Genarrator website as a professional publishing platform. It is already home to around 2,000 narratives (some 1,850 since August 2013), with the most popular having 9,400 views (The Dog in Clogs, May 2020). Genarrator has three main purposes:

- It enables people to produce active-user-oriented interactive narrative, with provision for branching pathways, multiple endings and versioning, incorporating text and other audio-visual material.
- It is a free publishing site for new media writing, free of charge and with no advertising.
- It provides a collaborative community online space and app for the interactive narrative community (http://genarrator.org/blog/).

Genarrator's success has come from the fact that it enables readers to connect with storytelling but, crucially, also allows authors to find new ways to reach their audiences and tell their stories.

A further aspect of the practice-based research is the internationally acclaimed New Media Writing Prize (NMWP), created by Pope in 2010, which showcases the best in new media writing with innovative digital fiction, poetry and journalism that integrates a variety of formats, platforms, and digital media. It is the first and only global prize of its kind and has received entrants from every continent in the world, bar Antarctica. Many practitioners and NMWP entrants turn to Genarrator for inspiration.

Genarrator and the NMWP have changed the way that participants view their relationship with literature, empowering and enabling them to create their own interactive stories, and helping them to find and use their voice in ways that have never been possible before.

Empowerment of young people, skills development and enhanced employability
In May 2016, BU researchers, in partnership with AIM Central (a charity sponsored by Children in Need/Bournemouth Council), undertook a co-creation workshop with AIM users: those; Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and young people at risk. Each participant self-designed and created an interactive narrative using Genarrator, which was subsequently published on the Genarrator community site. The outcome was social enfranchisement: derived from participants having their experiences heard and mediated with sufficient cultural capital to be published on a professional platform. The video [E1] features interviews with participants and the AIM Central team, highlighting improvements to:
- Understanding of digital storytelling
- Creative writing, filming, and artistic skills
- Technical skills in using Genarrator
- Teamwork and co-operation
- Unpacking relationship and social media dynamics, evidenced in Genarrator piece "Friend-Zoned" (https://genarrator.org/view/7jf4el44s70pvpgy)

The workshops provided acknowledgement, as young people saw their work alongside professional output, and, as AIM Central noted, they also gave "employers, for instance, a place where they can see the person's work and art" [E2].

Between 2018 and 2019, a series of workshops, led by BU researchers, took place at the Bishop of Winchester Academy with pupils aged 14-15 from "working class/non-working families" [E3]. The pupils were supported by school sixth formers and mentored by BU students. The workshops resulted in skills acquisition and signposting for career futures [E4], encouraging pupils to consider Higher Education: as one teacher said, "especially students like ----- [anonymised], as they see what can be achieved" [E3]. She also testified that Genarrator helped in "building links between the university and community" [E3].

Both Bishop of Winchester Academy pupils and AIM Central young persons can now see their narratives published on Genarrator alongside NMWP prize-winners.

The narratives created by young people include stories articulating concerns over bullying, racism in football and anxiety. The workshops "allowed them to use their own skills, build confidence and give them a chance to shine" [E2], as well as contributing to their narrative skills acquisition. By acquiring both technological skills and confidence derived from the research's user focus, the workshops provided "CV-building potential" [E2] and an experience that "certainly contributed to the future paths [that] our young people may take" [E5].

In a pedagogic context, Genarrator helps to maximise narrative competence at the intersection of reading, vlogging, and text-based adventure or puzzle computer games, which are key skills in the digital age. Furthermore, as recreational reading migrates exponentially to the smartphone, this intersection is *the* target of publishing's R&D, thus opening opportunities for our young reader-users. The sense of achievement felt by many young participants [E6] translated for some into aspiration; "I feel proud that it is complete … and I now want to study media" [E6]. Genarrator has thus provided disenfranchised young people with "links to university that could be inspirational and build …aspiration for university study" [E3].

Improved careers of narrative practitioners though digital collaborative writing
The NMWP has contributed to the development and promotion of new media writing over the past 10 years, engaging a "range of disciplines … via new media methods" including "journalists, documentary makers and a range of other professions beyond the writer or artist" [E7]. Following the British Library's public event 'Digital Conversations' in July 2019, which focused on celebrating the NMWP, national arts charity One-to-One Development Trust praised the impact of the NMWP. They commented on the "unique" and "cross-discipline" features of the prize, crediting it for attracting a broad range of entries and widening the field of new media [E8].

The NMWP was also praised by an international artist for enabling creative practice, encouraging her in her language democratisation and giving her the chance to avoid Egyptian censorship in her 2018 prize-winning *Dictionary of the Revolution* [E9].

Other winners and 'shortlisters' have also benefitted from the NMWP, as they further impact the wider literary world: one winner, a digital writer and artist, is currently building their own platform for authoring and playing text-driven interactive digital narratives, to develop a psychological thriller for a practice-based PhD in Digital Writing [E10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

E1. Performing Arts AIM. (2016). '*BU/AIM digital storytelling project'.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSSvcKL3GbU&t=7s (Accessed: 11 January 2021).

E2. AIM Central. (2018). Summary of a phone call to Rebecca Mills, 2 October.

E3. Bishop of Winchester Academy. (2018). Email to Rebecca Mills, 1 October.

E4. Brad Gyori (2018). '*Bishop of Winchester Digital Storytelling Project'.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5rbuUC_BLc (Accessed: 11 January 2021).

E5. Bishop of Winchester Academy. (2018). Letter to James Pope, 4 June.

E6. Frost, S., and Pope. J. (2018). Bishop of Winchester Digital Writing Project evaluation forms, 17-25 May.

E7. British Library (2019). Email to Rebecca Mills, 18 February.

E8. One-to-One Development Trust (2019). Transcript of an interview by Rebecca Mills, 18 July.

E9. Digital Conversations panellist (2019). Transcript of an interview by Rebecca Mills, 18 July.

E10. British Library (2019). '*Digital Conversations: Celebrating Ten Years of the New Media Writing Prize'.* Available at: https://blogs.bl.uk/digital-scholarship/2019/06/digital-conversations-celebrating-ten-years-of-the-new-media-writing-prize.html (Accessed: 11 January 2021).