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Tricksters, Unfiction & Alternate Realities

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What are the most effective mechanisms for becoming conscious of, and changing, our relationship to reality? How can we best facilitate transformations in consciousness and sustainably deal with intractable issues that cause global suffering? How can we stop taking reality for granted, and become active participants in growing our own worlds?

Over my two years of residency I have interviewed, perused, experimented, mused and meandered my way through a number of different worlds and realities on a quest to answer these questions. I recorded results of my investigation in a blog called 'Un-Fiction' <http://www.un-fiction.blogspot.com/>.

The blog also contains records of different field tests and experiments of a reality-shifting nature.

The most successful of these experiments was a large scale un-fictional Alternate Reality Game I ran over several months in South Auckland, NZ http://lib.fo.am/awhi_world.

Awhiworld

Awhiworld was an alternate reality game and integrated curriculum experiment that took place within a economically-challenged primary school. It involved 150 children aged five to twelve years old, eleven teaching staff and assorted creative professionals.

A parallel world was “discovered” to exist in and around the school, with a variety of “portals” and special “gatekeepers” keeping a close watch on activities. Children were invited in special sessions to undertake forensic examinations of portals around their school garden (assisted by local multimedia artist Raewyn Turner in a lab coat). They were also challenged to think of what qualities “gatekeepers” would have, and identify gatekeepers in their local community and these same qualities in themselves.

Awhiworld introduced children – and teachers – to different ways of learning maths, science, social science and English. It also helped integrate home leisure activities (such as online games) and learning. It taught children to pay attention to their environment in a way that they would not have previously, and supported a number of different changes in their behaviours.

More fundamentally, it exposed both teachers and students to a paradigm that is beyond traditional concepts of true and false, and re-ignited their capacity to imagine. Exposure to new ideas and technologies in some cases generated a sense of awe and disrupted previously held notions and assumptions about what “teaching” and “learning” is about.

Teachers’ comments included: [narrative extracts from debrief interviews] “Great for boys to keep them engaged.” “Excellent to stimulate their imaginations.” “Much harder work than normal curriculum as you are working with their imaginations rather than hard data.” “Great way to get them thinking about Kaitiakitanga [guardianship in Maori].” “Notice that

children are behaving differently around the gardens - at the beginning of the year were running over the gardens and dropping litter; now that is rare." "Our children need to be introduced to things they would never be introduced to. Exposed to different ways of thinking, things and experiences. This did that for them."

Reality, Consciousness and Transformation

Some key themes and threads emerged from these experiments, and from my interviews and investigations. First of all it was clear that transformation is often associated with shifts in consciousness and developmental evolution, which allows individuals to have a greater sense of epistemological choice and awareness, and often a deeper connection to spirit and sense of meaning in their lives.

Transformation most often happens when our fundamental assumptions about reality are undermined through either disturbance and disruption, experiencing profound awe, or very conscious and critical reflection. Undermining habits of mind and tightly-held assumptions is the most sustainable method to bring out behaviour change both individually and at a group level, but needs to be part of a multi-spectrum approach.

The methods and tools that facilitate this shift are those that disturb and confuse underlying perceptions of reality and/or that expand the confines of existing perceptions of reality. These include:

- hybrids that evade categorisation by existing mental models





- activities that blur the dichotomies of right and wrong, true and false, real and unreal
- processes that reveal hidden or obvious truths
- mediums that stimulate multiple senses simultaneously or bypass well used senses and engage different parts of the brain that are not normally in play
- experiences that push the boundaries of consensus reality by inviting us to question whether something is real, exists, is happening.
- ways of engaging that create meeting points between different realms: spiritual, physical, digital, imaginal, magical to name a few.

Transformation and The Trickster

In his book *Trickster Makes This World* (North Point Press, 1998), Hyde talks about a number of trickster characteristics that fundamentally disrupt or call into question things we have taken for granted. Trickster is in fact a transformative archetype that is set among us to help us develop and grow, although often the activities that feed this growth are unpleasant experiences.

Trickster is a hybrid creature that defies categorisation, or is him/herself a creator of strange hybrid un-genre-able artefacts and experiences. The common characteristic of nearly all of the methods and tools that I

studied was that they in some way blurred categories and boundaries. For example geo-caching is a hybrid of orienteering, treasure hunting and GPS location technology; sensorial labyrinths are a mix of community theatre, multisensory installation and community development. When experiences or artefacts challenge traditional epistemological frameworks which rely on intense categorisation, then there is greater potential for shifts to occur to orders of consciousness which are much more complex, and therefore offer more choices for action.

Trickster is also a "revealer of hidden truth," often inducing embarrassment and shame with his lack of ability to keep secrets. Trickster sometimes reveals the obvious, or new ways to work with the obvious, meaning that it is not then possible to go back to old patterns and ways of engaging. Trickster is therefore the god of innovators.

Guerilla Theatre and other examples of art activism are designed to disrupt and reveal. ARGs work to make the real world less obvious by giving new meaning to what seems ordinary (i.e. magazine articles, websites, posters, people). These methods allow taken-for-granted people and processes to be reactivated and engaged. They also allow implicit norms and unconscious behaviours that are hindering expansion to be revealed and potentially changed.

Trickster often is a messenger between worlds, a god of crossroads and intersections and a facilitator of unusual meetings and entanglements. Trickster is a god of unusual partnerships and collaborations.

This residency, and particularly the Awhiworld experiment, involved bringing together disparate individuals and groups, and putting together concepts and activities in new and unusual ways. By engaging with people from different worlds our own world expands, and there is greater potential for underlying assumptions to be uncovered inadvertently as mistakes and

sometimes conflict between assumptions occurs.

It seems from my research that the Trickster is an archetypal figure most clearly associated with transformational shifts, and the methods that can often bring these shifts about.

Outcomes so far

The residency has had a number of extremely positive outcomes. The blog has provided a portal to a wider audience that has not encountered these ideas and concepts before. It has connected people across traditional boundaries and has actively promoted both the gRig project and FoAM in a number of areas they would not normally easily reach. The experiments, particularly Awhiworld, were inspirational to education, arts and community development professionals desperate to find new ways of engaging with old issues. And the work has spawned a number of new projects which will take these ideas further, and aim for a much wider audience and area of influence.

Finally, I believe this residency made at least a small contribution to the global movement promoting active citizenship and participation. After many years of working in community and organisational development, I have seen firsthand what happens when we take reality for granted. When we believe that we exist in reality that is "out there" and somehow simply provided for us, then our ability to engage with complex issues is impaired, we tend to shift responsibility to "the other" and we lose any sense of agency in our lives. Believing that we have the power to create our reality, or alternate realities, and that parallel worlds and dimensions in fact exist, gives us new options and possibilities. It transforms us from passive recipients to active participants in solving the issues that face us today.

Biography

Maggie Buxton has been working around the globe for sixteen years as an organisational and community development consultant, facilitator, and researcher.

Her most recent activities emerge in the entangled spaces between creative arts education, technology, organisational and community development, games, science fiction, spirituality and enterprise. Her focus is on helping organisations and communities learn, innovate, collaborate and regenerate through creatively playing in the spaces between the digital, physical and imaginal realms.

Maggie has an MSC in Organisational Development and Consulting (Sheffield Business School), and a BA Political Studies and Education (Auckland University). She currently lectures Part time at a business school while simultaneously engaging in nefarious creative/art practices and projects in collaboration with FoAM, Brussels.

Although the "guild for Reality integrators and generators" may have been active for centuries, since November 2006 six cultural organisations have begun to open the doors of the guild. The current gRig members share a mutual purpose; to mix separate realities, as well as bring whole new realities into existence. They are committed to research and create situations in hybrid (or mixed) reality, where digital media and physical materials, objects and spaces are increasingly intertwined. It is on these fuzzy edges that experimental technology and contemporary culture amplify each other's potentials. We have found these edges to be the most fertile ground for innovative social and cultural advances, in which the Guild for Reality Integrators and Generators can be best called into service.

gRig sites 2006-2009

FoAM (Belgium) is a transdisciplinary laboratory committed openness, resilience and a holistic approach to life. FoAM seeks out and connects people in the interstitial spaces between professional and cultural boundaries, encouraging them to mix realities of art and science, digital and physical, nature and technology, adopting the motto - "grow your own worlds". <http://fo.am.be>

nadine (Belgium) is an arts laboratory aimed at developing research focusing on transdisciplinary experiments in the fields of new media and live arts. *nadine* is a flexible and evolving project that doesn't shy away from questioning itself to be able to stay on top of the constantly changing needs of artists.

<http://www.nadine.be>

Time's Up (Austria) is a research institute using experimental situations as a means of investigating the behavior of the public individual in everyday and nearly everyday situations. <http://www.timesup.org>

Performing Pictures (Sweden) works in the area of moving images and new technologies for media delivery as part of the Interactive Institute – a Swedish experimental IT-research institute that combines expertise in art, design and information technology. In their artistic practice Performing Pictures explore and develop responsive film art. <http://performingpictures.se>

KIBLA (Slovenia), a multimedia artcentre, is focused on the new (contemporary) educational, cultural and artistic praxis, connecting education and research, culture and technology, arts and sciences, emancipating and demystifying media as a creative tool in education and new forms of art. <http://kibla.si>

InterMedia (Norway) investigates the intersections between design, communication and learning in digital environments. Their approach is multidisciplinary and involves critical research, development and experiments. <http://intermedia.uio.no>



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