Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN)

JEAN BURGESS AND MARK FALLU

JEAN BURGESS

The Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) project is an Australian Research Council funded incorporation with industry partners including, the Office of Youth Affairs, Department of Communities, Arts Queensland, Brisbane City Council, and QMusic. The research team is Professor John Hartley, Greg Hearn, Jo Tacchi and Tanya Notley. Jo and Tanya are the two most active researchers. I have been involved with some of the content creation and training workshops as part of the first year of the development of the network.

Briefly, the Youth Internet Radio Network project uses a methodology called Ethnographic Action Research to develop and investigate a network of young content creators and youth oriented organisations from across Queensland. The most visible aspect of the network will be a website, which is going to be called not YIRN but sticky.net.au. Its aims include establishing a network of young content providers across Queensland, identifying opportunities for youth enterprise development, providing and facilitating training to young people in new media content development and considering policy level implications for the establishment of online youth networks and for enabling young people in different contexts to participate.

There are two core principles that relate to my interests in the democratisation of technologies and in how that might assist us to build a broader base of cultural participation in general. The first of these is intercreativity, which is a term that is used by the YIRN research team, most specifically to highlight the conceptual shift to inter-creativity from the older idea of interactivity. Interactivity was one of the buzz words of the early 1990s. With the advent of the World Wide Web, there is the suggestion of a more powerful sense of user engagement with media texts, individualised personalised media use and greater user choice.

For the Internet, Graham Meikle believes that the term interactivity implies greater autonomy and agency for its users, but it is often loosely defined and loosely deployed. He gives the example (often it boils down to really just an increasing array of consumer choices) in his book, Future Active, of going to the Republican Party website and clicking on a link marked ‘On
Line Activism’ and being taken straight to the Gift Shop. Building on Tim Berners-Lee’s concept of intercreativity, Meikle makes this important distinction between interactive use, choosing between options already mapped out for us, and intercreativity: the potential not only to interact but to collaborate, communicate and create, and that is very much a core principle and guiding motivation for the Youth Internet Radio Network in general.

There is a plan for three content creation workshops at each of the regional sites in Queensland over a two year period and we have just finished the first series of those content creation workshops, using a methodology called ‘Digital Storytelling’. Digital stories can best be understood as short, personal, multi-media tales. In a group workshop, participants collaborate together with each other and with trainers to develop a personal narrative, which they record as a voice-over and then they combine with images that they may have scanned from their own photo albums, or have captured digitally. They put all this together in a video editing program and end up with a two-minute short film. The three stories I am going to show highlight the type of content that is going to be on the network, although there will be many others.

The actual content of the film gives some idea of what types of creative content multimedia and interaction we might expect to see on the network. That is really exciting. The other important point I want to make about the film is that the first two stories are very much the kind of creative showcase stories where young people are using the medium, the opportunity to make a digital story which they know will be available eventually to the general public. They used this opportunity to showcase a particular creative pursuit that they are really interested in, hopefully, having some kind of entrepreneurial outcome.

The first story is entitled Photography. Here the creator actually came to this interest in photography through her participation on the Internet in the first place, and that is really interesting. The second story, Gemma, is about a musician who uses a recording she has made of a song that she has written herself as the soundtrack for her story. The third story is a work by a boy called Nathan, who we met at the Ipswich workshop, and he was very quiet in the session when we were developing scripts, but he said, “I know what I want to make my story on – I have a philosophy about life and death”, and he had these quotes from ancient Greek philosophers and we were, like, where did this 13-year old boy get this stuff from? It turned out that he got these little quotes musing on how to live a good life, and
basically the fundamentals of ethical philosophy, from a trading card from a computer game. He really wanted to use lots of rich imagery from the computer game in his story. Because none of us really know what we are doing with copyright at this stage, we made all these compromises. First, we were not going to let him do it, but he was very upset and he was very angry when we explained to him some of the basics of copyright and he made a really good argument, which was, that this game is really important and that it is really good and that I have learned something from it, so why can’t I refer to it in my story?

I will just finish by pointing out that, with the Youth Internet Radio Network, all the kinds of content that are generated through the use of the network we consider to be important in understanding creativity, not just singular texts that you can attribute to one author but the kinds of discussions that might grow up on a bulletin board around a film – ‘my favourite film’, say – and even emails. The participants are going to be given, by default, the option to attach a Creative Commons Licence to any demonstrably original content that they are uploading to the network.

**MARK FALLU**

I would like to digress a little bit from our project and talk about some of the technological antecedents that make it possible and the environment in which it is occurring. I am going to talk a little bit about disruptive technologies, particularly in relation to the broadcast industry.

What is a disruptive technology? Well, you know movable type words are disruptive technology. The steam engine, telegraph and telephone are disruptive technologies. All technologies, devices, gizmos, tools, pieces of software that put an end to the good life that existed for the technologies that preceded them are examples of disruptive technologies. Steam supplanted wind and animal power. Landline phone numbers in the United States and Australia are now dropping in number in comparison to mobile phone telephone numbers. This presents interesting opportunities in places like India and China. There are going to be these divergent devices, things that are MP3 Players, mobile phones all in one. That is a whole exploding new market for us to distribute content that did not exist here.

We assume that in other parts of the developing world they will go through the same technological progression that we have gone through here, that they will start with land line telephones, they will have dial-up Internet
access and, maybe if they are lucky in a few years’ time, they will have broadband. Well, they are going to skip a few steps and go straight to what we are developing now.

I am going to be quite bold here and suggest that the age of broadcast is about to suffer from more than just a disruptive technology but an environment where disruption is the permanent state of being. Where we will no longer have periods of radical change and then balance, but the environment will, in fact, be characterised by continuous radical change. One of the tools that I would like to talk about here is being made with a precursor to the end of the age of broadcast: ‘BitTorrent’.

BitTorrent was invented by a single individual, Graham Collin, who took some time off from the dot-com boom because he was dissatisfied with producing products for companies that never went to market because they kept on collapsing before the product actually was finished. He used his own savings and the savings of some friends and family to sit down and produce this tool that allows you to chunk up really large media files and distribute pieces of these files to people who are requesting them. And then, as soon as that person gets that piece of the file, they can start distributing that to everybody else. The audience can start to share the cost of distributing content.

I tend to think that holders of large amounts of copyrighted material and broadcasting networks must tend to view Graham Collins similarly to the way that the Pentagon views rogue biochemists and nuclear scientists, except he is not producing weapons of mass destruction, he is producing a weapon of mass distribution, a weapon where the barrier to entry for becoming a broadcaster is now conceivably so low that anyone can do it.

We have heard a lot of talk about the documentary Outfoxed. What has not been mentioned today is that large portions of the original content of that documentary have actually been released to the public under Creative Commons Licences to be reimagined, to be remixed for use in new documentaries. This is not the news footage, rather interviews and things like that that were done to support that material. This was not done by the production company that put together the documentary. It was not even done by the original creator of the documentary. It was done by a fan of the documentary who approached the makers with an idea, and the idea was that they would take not all of it but just a portion of the documentary and release it by this peer-to-peer network of BitTorrent.
There have been seven or eight thousand people who have downloaded it in the first three or four weeks of this material being released. That is 750 gigabytes of content. This is an enormous amount of material, far more than any one person could afford to pay, but because of the use of BitTorrent, that tool allowed the audience who were consuming the content to also distribute it in the very act of their receiving it. It meant that that 750 gigabytes was distributed in little, small parcels amongst the entire audience.

This presents a really radical, new opportunity where you already had very low barriers of entry to production. Five or six years ago a laptop that you could do word processing on was nowhere near adequate to do video editing or music production. Today it is one and the same device. Tomorrow the console gaming unit or the mobile phone that you get will have a megapixel resolution suitable for broadcast quality film captures. The barrier to entry to production is quite low but it has been distribution that has been the real problem.

What really excites me about Creative Commons is that it takes the existing production capacity and this new distribution capacity and brings them together in a legal context that allows for entirely new markets of content to develop where you do not have producers and consumers of content. You have active consumers – people who are reconfiguring, choosing exactly what they want to see, what they want to listen to when they want to do that. You are getting things like Podcasting. This is where tools from blogs, the syndication and aggregation engines (RSS – Really Simple Syndication or site summaries), allow you to subscribe actively to content. To say, ‘this is what I am interested in’ and then whenever new content is released, using these peer-to-peer distribution mechanisms, that content can be downloaded to your computer. That way, you do not have to click and wait to listen to something; you can subscribe to it in advance. It gets downloaded automatically and then, at some later point, you play broadcast quality material on your iPod, phone, or computer, and you timeshift it so that you are listening to it exactly when you want to. If you get home from work and you want to listen to publicly broadcast material that has an appropriate legal licence, you can do that.

This is the environment that the YIRN project, or the ‘sticky’ web site as we are calling it, exists in, an environment where people expect to have the right to publish content, to actively consume content when and where they want, and to be able to have discussions with their peers about this content. We have tried to cherry pick technology from a whole range of open source
projects to allow us to do that. We are using largely open source software in almost every area of our project, except for one, and that is in the transcoding of video files from one format, that the producer might have made them in, to the format that they will be distributed in. The reason that we are not using open source software there is because content producers tend to use proprietary codecs – compressors and decompressors that crunch big pieces of content down into much smaller more amenable-for-transfer size pieces. Because of the proprietary nature of the codecs, we have to use proprietary software at this point to be able to turn them into stuff that we can distribute more freely. We are actively looking at getting around that, but that is a problem that lots of people are dealing with.

So what technologies are we using? We are using an open source content management system called Plone, which is built on an open source programming language called Python. This allows us to add extra functions, like RSS, which is a syndication technology which allows people to subscribe to feeds of information based on their interests. We are also using Trackback functionality from blogs. We are using it slightly differently though. One of the things about Creative Commons is that there is attribution. It tends to be in one direction, like you create a music file, someone takes a sample from it, puts it into a new music file that is put online. The notification that someone has used your piece of content does not necessarily come back to you, so we are using Trackback functionality to allow users of Creative Commons material to voluntarily let the original authors know about the secondary uses of their content. We will see these branching networks of content, where you might be a big fan of one track, see a sample that you like, and want to see all of the other uses of that sample, or what happened to that song and if anyone else liked and used it.

This is the great thing about open source: you can collaborate, if not on a programming level, even on a conceptual level. There is riffing, the backwards and forwards, a conversation about the use of material. One of the other interesting things that we are doing is allowing conversational threads to be attached to content objects. A film might inspire you to want to talk about it, go to its website and write your thoughts in a discussion thread attached to that content. But that thread of discussion does not only appear in the context of that object, it also appears in a centralised, threaded discussion board. And they are kept in locked step with each other so that, that way, people do not have to go hunting down the discussion thread; they can see what are the active ones in a central location and that will actually drive them back to the original pieces of content. They can click on the author of that piece of content and see all of the other content. You
have got these constellations, these vistas, of new content that people can explore and browse. They have all got single URLs so that you can always go back. You can bookmark those pieces of content; you can go back to them; you can refer other people to them. All of these technological advances will make it really quite a rich and, hopefully, very easily understood environment for creativity.

The interesting thing about this project for me as a relatively technical person has been that the biggest challenges we have faced have not necessarily been technical; they have been the legal and the administrative challenges, and technical approaches to dealing with them. For that I am exceptionally grateful to the Creative Commons because it has provided an avenue where someone else has done a lot of the work of dealing with licensing issues. In the technical world there is a metaphor that if the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem starts to look like a nail. It is amazing the number of solutions to problems that I have managed to apply Creative Commons to, even down to the level of the categorisation of content. Our target audience ranges from the age of 12 to 25. There are very different life experiences between those groups of people and the sort of content that would be appropriate for one sub-group will not be appropriate for another. Rather than us heavily vetting and moderating and soul searching what the content is and whether or not it is appropriate, one of the approaches that we are investigating is community-based moderation, community-based classification. What is a community standard of decency if not one decided by the community? It is not necessarily up to the curators of content to make those arbitrary decisions on behalf of the community. These are philosophical approaches that are very much informed by the openness of Creative Commons-style licensing.

I guess some of the challenges that still remain are how we can take this pool of Creative Commons enabled content and allow it to sit alongside, in an active sense, fully copyrighted content. How can we allow a 13-year old who has produced their first song to program that song alongside the works of their favourite copyrighted artists? This has been an area where we have been working with APRA in order to develop licensing that covers the broad range of usage in our system, not just the Creative Commons licensed material. When there is a stream and it has Creative Commons meta-data attached to it, the content management system will allow you to download that content to your computer. Then you are able to remix it and upload your version. We are aiming to also to allow you to include copyright material alongside that. The content management system is smart enough to report back to APRA that we have used it, so that royalties can
be paid. It knows that that copyright material can only appear in live streams and if it appears in an on-demand stream then it has to have different meta-data attached to it and send different information back to APRA.

What we were hoping to see is that there will be some sort of arms race that will develop between the copyright material and the Creative Commons licensed material. And we will get to see as a research outcome exactly how our users choose to use that material. Whether the flexibility that is embodied in the Creative Commons licensed material means that it will receive a greater focus of attention from our users. That is the research project and you will have to come to the website to see it all in action. The web site will be sticky.net.au.