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How To Design Interactive Art Experiences For Collective Decision-Making

On 3 March 2022, Dan and Rachel from Fast Familiar facilitated a workshop called How To Design Interactive Art Experiences For Collective Decision-Making, as part of FACT's You're on Mute... series. What follows is an incomplete and subjective documentation-resource, by Rachel.

You can find an audio recording of this resource, read by Rachel, [here](#).

Fast Familiar (FF) is an interdisciplinary collaboration with expertise in narrative design, facilitation and computational art. We make audience-centric experiences which are playful, participatory and political. By 'audience-centric', we mean experiences where the audience are at the heart of what is happening — collaborating, discussing, making decisions.

Why collective decision-making?

Most of FF's artworks invite a small group of people (often strangers) to wrestle with a big social or ethical question and come to a collective outcome. Why are we so interested in this? None of the problems that confront humanity — climate change, structural racism, the refugee crisis — will be fixed by one individual acting alone. These are all massive, complex issues which demand collective action. FF's artworks are a space to rehearse the kind of dialogue and collaboration which are needed to drive social change.

FF use a lot of digital technology in our work because we find that live performers can actually detract from the relationships we're trying to foster between participants. Using technology also allows us to structure decision-making in different ways. Not everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves in face-to-face group discussions. Do people communicate by talking or writing? Is voting public or private? Using technology, you can play with different modes of communication and with anonymity.

And why technology?

Fast Familiar have **two principles** which underpin the collective decision-making work that we make.

1.

The closer people are to playing as themselves, the more effective the experience.

Some immersive theatre and LARP (Live Action Role Play) ask participants to play characters e.g. the police officer, the government minister. We don't do this. It takes A LOT of preparation for someone to be able to play a character who is very different to them — and lots of audience members won't have time for this. You can end up making people feel uncomfortable because, for example, they don't feel they are equipped to be a police officer, or they have issues with the police and actively don't want to represent them.

Instead of using characters, we use **roles**, where people are still themselves but with some additional responsibilities e.g. they're a juror or a member of a citizen advisory panel. This role forms a sort of 'alibi' for the participant to play fully. It can free them up to express thoughts or explore ideas that, outside of the artwork, they'd stay away from.

2.

Focus on one decision and layer complexity, rather than offering multiple decision points.

Often when you say 'interactive', people think of those 'choose your own adventure' books ('turn to page 37 if you choose to go into the cave; turn to page 93 if you choose to climb the mountain.')

At FF, our work tends to be a group making **one significant decision**, with layers of complexity being added — rather than lots of small decisions. We've talked elsewhere about why branching narratives are not for us.

We talked about **two formats** that FF use for artworks which model collective decision-making.

1.

Our **Syndicate platform** brings a group of people together to assess information, discuss, vote and make a decision during a short but intense period. Participants are in the same space (or via video call during the pandemic), with everyone encountering information at the same time. Experiences tend to last between 60 and 120 minutes.

- > [The Justice Syndicate](#)
- > [Overview of platform](#)

2.

Our **Siika platform** allows a group of people to communicate remotely, by message. Players can assign themselves a codename and use any picture as an avatar: other participants don't know anything about the age, gender, ethnicity etc of the person/ people they are talking to. This platform allows for an asynchronous element, where participants can process information in their own time, before a synchronous 'chat window' when they can discuss. The experiences we've made using this platform take place over multiple days, allowing a 'blurring' with events in the outside world.

- > [Smoking Gun](#)
- > [Tech-focused Write Up](#)

Questions to think about when structuring a collective decision-making artwork.

- **Do people share physical space (i.e. are they in the same room)?**

What are the pluses and minus of this? If you are going with it, how can you make this physical shared space inclusive of neurodivergent people, less confident people and people with all sorts of other access needs?

- **What information do people have about each other?**

Do they know what other participants look like (with all the unconscious prejudice that this can trigger)? Do they know each other's names? (when we moved the Syndicate platform online during lockdown, we decided against this — point 6 [here](#)).

- **How do people communicate?**

If they talk, are there mechanisms to deter individuals from monopolising the airtime? If they message, how do you allow for complex conversations which might have lots of threads, between multiple people?

- **How structured is the way they are asked to communicate?**

Will a general 'Discuss this question' deliver what you want? Are there ways that your structure can help the ground avoid groupthink, or the strongest voices drowning everyone else out? (or push the likelihood of these things happening, if that's what you're interested in). Our belief is that structure is everything — you can push people into cognitive snake-traps or make sure they avoid them just by how you structure your experience.

- **What are the boundaries of the experience?**

Does it take place at a certain time? Does it need to? How long is it — and is there any overlap with the outside world? If there isn't (or perhaps also if there is!) how do you support people to transition back into the real world after the experience?

- **What is your responsibility as the person making the artwork?**

How can you prevent situations where structural inequalities from the world outside come crashing into the artwork? What will you do if someone does something which offends other participants — or how can you reduce the likelihood of this happening? We think about this a lot — you can read more [here](#).

YOU'RE ON MUTE

During the workshop, people shared some **resources**, mainly to do with creating accountable spaces.

- The practice of the [Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination](#)
- Starhawk's [The Five-Fold Path of Productive Meetings](#)
- [From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice](#) by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens
- Plus you can read more about why FF use tech in our work [here](#)

Thank you to everyone who took part.