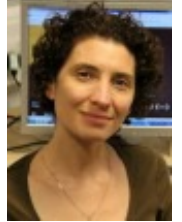


# Clicking on the real: telling stories and engaging audiences through interactive documentaries.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/04/15/clicking-on-the-real-participation-interaction-documentary/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/04/15/clicking-on-the-real-participation-interaction-documentary/)

4/15/2014

*An interesting thing about contemporary media is just how much of it is factual. From journalism to social media, YouTube to reality TV we are surrounded by media that claims to be true. Often this content has a definite agenda; it wants to persuade us, make us click, join in and pass it on. How can we understand our changing relationship to factual media? And why is documentary scholarship well placed to help us do so? [Kate Nash](#) explores new interactive dimensions to documentary that may encourage wider engagement.*



[Fort McMoney](#) is a documentary game. As a player your role is to explore the oil town of Fort McMurray, Canada, in the heart of the Athabasca oil sands development. You 'meet' characters and 'vote' on issues; scouring the interface for clues you aim to sway others through your posts. While Fort McMoney is playful it clearly shares documentary's serious intent: in Fort McMoney 'everything is real: the places, events, the characters.' To play is to engage with the political, social and ecological issues of oil production.

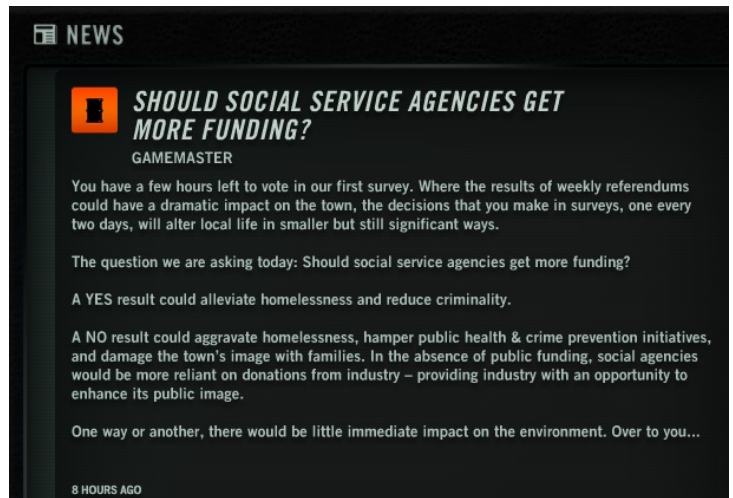
Fort McMoney is part of a growing collection of works that marry the social, political and aesthetic ambitions of documentary with the forms and representational possibilities of digital media. For a rapidly growing collection of interactive documentary work see the [MIT Docubase](#). The [idocs blog](#) defines an interactive documentary as any attempt to document the real that uses digital interactive media. Documentary makers are actively exploring new ways of telling stories and engaging audiences and they are doing so with reference both to new technologies and the idea of documentary – its techniques, aesthetics and critically, its social functions.

## The social functions of documentary

At first glance a documentary game like Fort McMoney seems to have little in common with documentary film and television. But in spite of the very obvious differences there is a clear family resemblance when you think about the social role that Fort McMoney is seeking to play. Drawing on the work of John Corner and Michael Renov I [recently argued](#) that the traditional social functions of documentary help to make sense of the ways that documentary makers structure audience interaction and participation. Three traditional social functions of documentary, recording/preserving, civic engagement and persuasion are particularly relevant. These are not discrete categories but rather overlapping drives that help to shed light on the shifting relationships between documentary makers and their audiences

Recording and preserving are of course key goals of documentary with film and television documentary a valuable audio-visual archive. In the digital domain this archiving function is expanded as databases facilitate a convergence between document and documentary, collecting and presenting a range of documentary evidence that can be created, searched and traversed by the audience. The potential openness of the database and the participatory cultures of new media have been mobilized by documentary makers to collect and preserve the stories and experiences of many.

Civic engagement calls attention to the audience as community, united by shared concern and responsibility. While historically documentary's civic goals were linked to a tradition of government filmmaking supporting dominant modes of citizenship, the current media environment invites consideration of the potential breadth of political participation. Interactive documentary has the potential to create and sustain engaged communities of interest around issues and shared concerns. At the same time documentaries also seek to persuade; filmmaker's seek to persuade others and may structure interactivity and participation to achieve this. But persuasion is also expanded with audiences potentially seeking to sway the views of others through their documentary engagement



In the case of Fort McMoney the player is addressed as an active member of a decision-making community. As the voiceover states, 'Your mission: To visit Fort McMurray, measure what's at stake, vote on referendums and debate with other players'. Persuasion is foregrounded as players seek to influence the views of others in order to achieve responsible development. Engaging with content, players accumulate 'influence points' that can sway debate. The design of interaction and participation in Fort McMoney suggests that documentary should foster debate oriented toward collective decision-making.

### **Interrogating participation and interactivity**

In many ways audience participation in Fort McMoney renders visible many different perspectives. Yet it is also important to recognize that the process of representation remains one in which power relationships are uneven. Authorship is a process of structuring opportunities for interaction and participation according to the needs and goals of the documentary makers. In the case of Fort McMoney the authors' agendas are evident in the content made available, the nature of participation, the questions posed for debate, and so on. We must also be conscious of the economic value of audience actions; in the current media economy every click and comment has a market value. We therefore need to strike a balance between recognizing the possibility of new dynamics in representation while being conscious of the ways in which interactivity and participation are 'authored'.

**SHOULD TAXES ON PETROLEUM PRODUCTS BE HIGHER?**

**YES** 83% 05:04:27:10 17% **NO**

21 641 VOTES REMAINING TIME 4 535 VOTES

**DYLANW**  
35 INFLUENCE POINTS / 0 RANK  
**YES**  
Best way to educate us in how to minimize our impact  
Taxe on petroleum products is the easiest way to signal to the market the true cost of all products and services we use. We need to pay the true cost now or pay a much higher cost in the  
[READ MORE](#) > yesterday  
REPORT ABUSE 0 SHARE 0 REPLY

**JORDANJ**  
17 INFLUENCE POINTS / 0 RANK  
**YES**  
True Cost of Carbon  
Cheap petroleum fuels mask the true cost of their use. If the environmental cost of petroleum were reflected in its monetary cost, they would lose appeal while renewables would gain  
[READ MORE](#) > yesterday  
REPORT ABUSE 2 SHARE 0 REPLY

**HSMITH**  
39 INFLUENCE POINTS / 0 RANK  
**YES**  
Benefits  
Higher taxation will cause users to consider and possibly use other alternative energy options  
[READ MORE](#) > yesterday

**MELAN**  
221 INFLUENCE POINTS / 0 RANK  
**NO**  
Raising taxes seems to be a band-aid solution.  
It seems like one government will raise taxes in some categories, while another will lower them according to their own popularity priorities or at the whim of their perception on how to  
[READ MORE](#) > yesterday  
REPORT ABUSE 1 SHARE 0 REPLY

**GAMEMASTER**  
127 INFLUENCE POINTS / 0 RANK  
**NO**  
Would you be ready to pay more for gas?  
Union leader Jayson Bueckert considers the question. He is a great source of information about working conditions and addition problems in the oil sands. Find the full interview with  
[READ MORE](#) > yesterday  
REPORT ABUSE 1 SHARE 0 REPLY

**JAYBAINS**  
50 INFLUENCE POINTS / 0 RANK  
**NO**  
Blanket taxes create serious issues:  
If you raise the taxes, then issues of affordability, and accessibility arise.  
[READ MORE](#) > yesterday

VOTE YES ARGUE YES SORT ARGUMENTS ARGUE NO VOTE NO

One way in which to do this is to consider the relationship between user actions and the ‘voice’ of the documentary. Voice in documentary scholarship draws attention to the ways in which texts make arguments about their subjects, marshaling evidence to present a particular perspective on its subject matter. In providing spaces for audiences to interact and participate documentary makers potentially open up opportunities for audiences to contribute to the voice of the documentary but they also structure relationships between audience contributions and other content.

A key question is therefore how are audience contributions invited and how are they positioned within the documentary. Are there meaningful connections between user actions and the documentary’s point-of-view? Are contributions central or peripheral to the text and are they likely to be heard and acknowledged by others? The long history of collaboration around documentary projects suggests that interactive documentary may provide interesting opportunities for media participation and an exciting field for further study.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## About the Author

**Kate Nash** is a lecturer in the School of Media and Communications at the University of Leeds, UK. Her research focuses on emerging forms of documentary and she has recently co-edited [New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses](#) published by Palgrave.

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.