Report on the Citizen Jury 'Gamecall' Award to Ducky Elford

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This citizen jury was randomly assembled from members of the general public in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne using blind invitation to passers-by in various areas of the city. At their first face-to-face meeting jurors considered several potential public-interest themes suggested by the researchers. After general discussion, and by majority vote, the jury selected video-computer games as a commissioning theme and agreed on the wording of the call to artists for 'a creative project that critically compares power, domination and the glorification of violence in the invented worlds of gaming with everyday life and reality'. Reflecting their discussion the jury also proposed two key questions for applicants to consider: 'Are malevolent invented worlds a consequence of a lack of control and collective material investment in the physical world we inhabit? How far do the invented realities of gaming actually underpin social isolation and ecological catastrophe?' Ten artists from several disciplines responded to the international call, all were high-quality proposals, and most were very detailed. By majority vote, after a day-long face-to-face meeting in the summer of 2024, the jury awarded the £8000 commission to the London-based game designer Ducky Elford to develop a game entitled *Echoes of Humanity*. The jury also commended a proposal from Hadi Mehrpouya and Duncan Nicoll from Dundee for 'Barzakh: journey through the hybrid life of gaming', an immersive video-installation and video-essay project which the jury thought also deserved public-funding.

Sortition (random selection) never offers a perfect microcosm of society although the social composition of juries can be evaluated and the quality of deliberation assessed. Going by our diversity scale running between a Type A jury (the most homogenous) to Type F (the most diverse) the jury assembled in Newcastle which included a total of seventeen female and male jurors was a moderately diverse Type E jury. The more diverse Type F jury on our scale would include two or more population groups subject to a significant conflict. All the Newcastle jurors were UK citizens or residents, sharing English as a common language though they reported a variety of social-economic backgrounds and cultural identities on our questionnaires. The oldest juror at the outset was 74, the youngest 23. The average age of the jury was 37. To deliberate adequately any jury requires time and needs to hear competing arguments. This is a demanding process in policy areas where expert and scientific opinions have to be sought out to ensure informed debate. There is of course no shortage of expert views about art and culture but the public-centred commissioning process we are testing is led by juries who decide on commissioning themes and by artists who respond with detailed proposals. Anyone may propose public-interest themes for the consideration and commissioning by juries.

Here we may briefly recall the literary and cultural scholar Raymond Williams (1921-1988) who declared that 'Culture is ordinary', the title of his 1958 essay arguing that the arts are one aspect of an 'expanding' culture more deeply connected to everyday life.[1] The bad exists but it does not drive out the good he insists. If, as Williams suggests, important common meanings arise in the arts thanks to their connections to everyday experience, and that the making of a society depends on the search for such meanings, then surely the idea of what is good needs to be tested out much more by ordinary people than the mixture of politicians, art-lovers and professional elites who tell us what we should be concerned about or valuing. If culture is understood as communication and process (the social processes that create value and values) it seems doubtful that the public-interest can be determined by professionals and directly interested parties acting on their own or in concert with one another. Yet great claims about the

public benefits of the arts are interwoven into the self-promotional rhetoric of organisations and in many instances it is difficult to distinguish the promotional techniques of public organisations from private ones. The actual public-interest in cultural development may be neglected by both because we have few practical ways to work it out democratically. There is little hope of using referendums to test the public-interest each and every time it presents itself without exhausting public capacities for participation and deliberation. Our comparative study of citizen juries tests a practical egalitarian answer to networking, and particularly a counterpoint to the flattening-out of opinions which Williams warned us would occur if communication technologies were driven by business and the general competition for power and influence.[2]

A useful measure of deliberation which sets it apart from judging talent shows or popularity contests is the extent to which it changes minds and modifies opinions. More by circumstances than by design there was a long delay of more than two years between the jury's first face-to-face meeting to decide on a commissioning theme and their second meeting to make an award. Among the tasks in the intervening period a website was created to facilitate the whole process, and by the time of the second meeting some jurors were no longer available and five new jurors were recruited by random selection and invitation. However aside from the practical problems delaying the award we (the researchers) did also want to give the individual jurors as much time as possible to contemplate the theme and reflect on proposals received. Because not all the jurists benefitted from the delay some did not want to express preferences by nominating proposals for the award before reaching a collective decision. During the face-to-face meeting to make the award the jury reached a decision through a process of elimination working through the proposals and relating each to the terms of the original jury call until arriving at the two proposals which were considered the best responses. So in this case it is difficult to say how many jurists changed their mind on any particular matter, though jurors who were unsure about certain proposals made up their minds in the course of the day-long award meeting.

However a more general shift in the jury position is discernable. The original jury call reflected various concerns. Some jurors focused on the content of video games and kinds of escapism they endorse or behaviour they might encourage, while others were more concerned about habit-forming activities and addictions. These different perspectives underpinned a critically forthright call in the eyes of artists who responded. However their proposals revealed to the jury the political aesthetics of game design, an especially contested and nuanced area of culture after Gamergate harassment campaign. The fact the jury eventually favoured game design projects, rather than art projects *about* video-games suggests the inter-generational and non-specialist consensus in the jury that the public-interest entails supporting critical aesthetics within game design as an aspect of general cultural development. The decision to finance Ducky Elford is particularly interesting since it reflects what jurors both liked and feared about Elford's project *Echoes of Humanity.* By proposing to use 3D scans to populate a psychological gamescape with real people from Newcastle, Elford presented the jury with ethical production issues for a game which also intends to explore the unexpected consequences of players' moral dilemmas. The award reflected the jury's confidence that Elford showed a readiness to take these combined issues seriously. Following this successful outcome Elford now hopes to assemble another citizen jury to examine issues of artificial intelligence and game design in an even more focused experiment in artistic power-sharing that reminds us of Williams' argument about the importance of 'creative disturbance.'[3] Elford looks forward to cross-examination by a jury. Instead of diminishing an ideal, Elford thinks that citizen juries might strengthen artistic autonomy, releasing artists from transactional networks that underpin trust and patronage in the creative industries.

References

[1] Williams R. (1989) *Resources of Hope, Culture Democracy Socialism* (London: Verso) pp.3-18.

[2] Williams, R. (1989) *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso) pp. 119-138.

[3] Williams, R. (1973) 'Dickens and Social Ideas' in *Sociology of Literature and Drama* (London: Penguin) p.347.