

# Stepping Through Remixed

## Exploring the Limits of Linear Video in a Participatory Mental Health Film

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### ABSTRACT

Participatory filmmaking offers opportunities to counterbalance stereotypes about mental health often endorsed by the mainstream media, by involving participants who have a lived experience of mental health problems in production. It is our experience, however, that the linear videos traditionally resulting from such processes can fail to fully accommodate and represent a plurality of participant voices and viewpoints and, as a consequence, may lead to oversimplified accounts of mental health. Interactive film, on the other hand, could open up a space of opportunities for participatory films that allow multiple voices and complex representations to coexist. In this paper, we explore this opportunity by reviewing *Stepping Through*, a linear film produced by five men with mental health problems in 2016 about isolation and recovery. Through a series of workshops, the film was deconstructed by its creators, who analysed which additional possibilities of both form and content that could be revealed if the *Stepping Through* was transformed into a non-linear interactive film. Our findings reveal several expressive needs that a non-linear interactive film could more easily accommodate and opportunities for making participatory filmmaking truly dialogic by allowing an active exchange with audiences that preserves, rather than streamlines, the tension between collective views and personal accounts.

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### CCS CONCEPTS

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### KEYWORDS

Interactive film, iDocs, mental health, participatory filmmaking, stigma

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### 1 Introduction

Mental health is a complex topic to discuss. In spite of recent government efforts in improving access to services and widening awareness in the general public on mental health [12, 5], reports show that mental health stigma is still strong in many layers of society [25, 30, 24]. Stigmatizing views often end up being internalized by people with mental health problems in what is defined as self-stigma [8, 7]. Mainstream media has been historically accused of reinforcing existing stereotypes on people experiencing mental health problems [32, 23, 16, 11]. To counteract misrepresentations, best practices guidelines produced by mental health charities recommend including the voice of people with mental health problems by involving them directly, avoiding framing them as separate or other, and presenting more nuanced and complex representations [28, 29]. However, in most cases people with mental health problems remain excluded from contributing to media representations of themselves as the artistic and financial pressures typical of mainstream media severely restrict access [17].

As an inclusive practice that aims at counteracting the detrimental effects of mainstream media [33, 27], participatory filmmaking could fulfill the best practices

recommended above. It consists of using video “as a social and community-based tool for individual and group development”. In participatory film, professional filmmakers act as facilitators, transferring technical skills to participants in order “to develop their confidence and self-esteem, to encourage them to express themselves creatively, to develop critical awareness and to provide a means for them to communicate with others”. Unlike mainstream media, it “aims systematically to hand over control of the process to the group, providing a structure without imposing content” [27]. In the context of mental health, film, similarly to music and drama, is used as an Arts & Health activity [1], which aims at supporting recovery through group work in which participants are encouraged to engage with each other and the outside world. This differentiates participatory filmmaking from the use of film in the individual setting of psychotherapy [6].

The first author has worked as a facilitator since 2013 using participatory filmmaking with groups of people in recovery from mental health problems through a variety of charities. This experience has shown that managing the polyvocal nature of this kind of production can prove particularly challenging. Producing a linear film, which needs to consistently revolve around one main storyline imposes to streamline the variety of viewpoints emerging from the group. This entails the risk of misrepresenting mental health experiences for some participants, and falling into the trap of oversimplification that much mainstream media production is accused of [23]. In the first author’s practice, these constraints often resulted in the production of mini films interlinked by internal references, whose links are not always easy to catch for an audience. In other cases, some participants decided to drop out if they felt their contribution was not fully valued in the process.

The challenge has inspired us to explore whether various forms of interactive film – developed in the TVX community and beyond – might offer more multifaceted forms of representation that can better support the management of multiple voices and the complexity of individual experiences required in participatory filmmaking around mental illness. In this paper, we begin to explore this possibility by analyzing *Stepping Through*, an existing linear film produced by five men with lived experience of mental health problems in 2016. Through a series of workshops, the film was deconstructed by its original participants, who explored which additional options, of both form and content, could be generated if the film was transformed in a non-linear interactive film. Our findings show that the possibility of non-linearity allowed participants to imagine a form that would expand the film both in

terms of content and audience fruition. This study is first in exploring how a film made by participants with lived experience of mental illness could be benefitted by interactivity and we believe that the findings from this study will inform the future research and practice on the use of interactive forms by participatory filmmakers, in both mental health and other settings.

## 2 Related Work

Interactive film, and in particular the genre of interactive documentary (iDocs), seem to lend itself to potentially filling some of the gaps imposed on participatory filmmaking by traditional linear forms. According to Nash’ review of the genre of web-docs, later evolved into the wider definition of iDocs [22], interactivity is intended as the array of choices offered to users now able to exercise control over the materials presented in the documentary. As she states: “interactivity can serve a number of functions within the documentary text: finding information (either within or beyond the documentary), learning, furthering the narrative, personalizing the documentary, adding to the documentary content, play or search “playfully” for hotspots within an image interface’ [22]. According to Gifreu Castells, interactive documentaries are inherently non-linear as unlike traditional documentaries, discourse’ order “can be affected and modified”. In this context, non-linearity is perceived as an opportunity that “allows audiovisual projects to provide elements to complement and enrich it, providing several added values to the global experience of the audience” [14]. As such, iDocs seem to embrace a higher level of complexity that may suit the polyvocality of participatory filmmaking.

Interactive documentaries also seem to mirror, in some of their intents, the dialogical nature of participatory filmmaking and much conceptualization around interactive documentary seems to value participation. According to Nash, collaborative webdocs reveal in their very structure an opening towards communities who are allowed to play a role in shaping the film [22]. Many interactive documentaries are designed with the idea of allowing audiences to add content to films so that they become transformational objects, evolving continually according to the collaborative relationships taking place within them. Gaudenzi suggested the definition of a “living documentary”, a “much more fluid, layered, and changeable” form of documentary” in which “the ownership of the narration is communal: it belongs to all, author, user, environment, infinite possible transformations, all the causations it provokes – in a word: it belongs to the complex series of relations the interactive documentary is formed of” [13].

Following is a list of key aspects of interactive film that we envisage offering opportunities for participatory filmmaking on mental health. These are based on a preliminary exploration of possible uses from the first author's experience as a facilitator and informal chats with participants that took place over multiple years. The strategies and qualities listed below are not mutually exclusive, and may work in synergy to reinforce a certain effect for viewers.

### 2.1 Coexistence of more storylines

The possibility of placing multiple narrative materials into the same film can open up the filmic form to the polyphonic nature of participatory filmmaking, solving the problem of having to streamline different storylines into one. Storylines can be linked to each other in different ways to not just reflect the complexities of the situations explored in the film, but also "to build an argument either by focusing on relationships of similarities or different or by compounding different forms of evidence" [22]. Films like *Gaza/Sderot* (Muzayyen, Elmaliah, 2009) allow viewers to move between parallel storylines, exploring different points of view on the same issue. Other experiments, like *Amb Títol* (Ballús, 2016), present alternative stories from which to choose at different points in the film according to users' preferences. These affordances seem particularly suitable to capture both group views and personal accounts of individuals, which can be linked by theme, participant, or any other parameter set in the production process.

### 2.2 Possibility of presenting extra materials in non-filmic form

This is another feature of many interactive documentaries. The main narration prevails but there are other materials (text, photographs, websites) attached to the storyline to add depth to the topic. These films seem to align with Nash' definition of "narrative webdocs", where the role of interactivity is to "augment" the central narrative [22]. An example of this is *One Shared House* (Anton & Irene, 2014), where the documentary is structured around a linear narration which can be interrupted in places to access text providing additional information. In participatory mental health films, this opportunity could be used to provide background information that participants are willing to share, in order to portray themselves more thoroughly.

### 2.3 Responsiveness

Interactive technology such as Object-based media treats filming materials as units that can be recombined at the moment of consumption, according to either or

both pre-existing parameters set by the viewers and their active choices during the course of the film. This strategy was used in documentaries such as *A Golden Age*, which "allows (re)configuration in real time, while remaining coherent and aesthetically pleasing" [31]. In the context of participatory filmmaking, this would allow the same material generated by participants to be aimed at different audiences. The same film could be used to promote awareness in audiences that are unfamiliar with mental health issues, and to offer support to those who are experiencing the condition.

### 2.4 Empathy

The effects of interactivity on empathy levels in the audience are highly debated in the literature [15]. However, giving some choices to the viewers as to when and how events unfold could raise awareness of how mental health is deeply linked to many aspects of life (relationships, material wellbeing, emotions, physical health, etc.). This may encourage audiences to reflect on how mental health applies to themselves and the people around them and inspire them to respond differently in real life. Miller and Allor spoke of "a documentary form that connects storytelling with engagement strategies to throw light into darkened areas and provide the viewer/user with an experience that can potentially change their perspective, even their actions" [21]. An example of this kind of production is *Terminal 3* (Malik, 2018), where viewers are placed in the role of an airport security officer interviewing Muslim passengers. Through this role, the connects more deeply with the challenges Muslims face in the current political climate.

### 2.5 Immersion

Immersive viewpoints, such as first-person points of view, are not often used in traditional film as they could make the viewing experience confusing. Interactive film can offer the possibility of switching between an immersive/embodyed viewpoint and an external/objective one, allowing viewers to jump in and out of characters. This opportunity may be used to show different ways in which people experiencing mental health problems perceive themselves, the reality around them, and others.

Strategies like this are at play in films such as *Asylum Exit Australia* (SBS, 2011), where the viewer takes the role of an asylum seeker and needs to take decisions on their circumstances, or in the overall linear but still interactive *The Choice is Yours* (Open Your Eyes to Hate, 2016), which places the viewer in the shoes of a lower-class young man who gets targeted by far-right extremists. Both these examples make the circumstances explored closer to the viewer

by intimately linking the viewpoints of the characters with the audience’.

## 2.6 Audience’ input in films

Interactive film can offer opportunities for audiences to input their own comments and materials into the narration. In *HighRise, Out of My Window* (Cizek, 2010) users can upload a picture to contribute to the film. *18 Days in Egypt* (Metha, Elayat, 2011) built a database of users’ contributions to offer a complex mosaic view on the events of the Egyptian Revolution. In films like *Prison Valley* (Brault, Dufresne, 2009) discussion forums allow viewers to generate dialogue around the issues explored in the documentary. This form of interaction “has blurred the distinction between author and user/viewer/reader/player” [20]. This possibility can open up the conversation by allowing viewers to elaborate the issues explored in personal ways and it could be particularly fruitful to participatory filmmaking, where the film is expected to become part of a wider dialogue [33].

## 3 Method

While the opportunities interactive film poses for participatory mental health filmmaking appear to be rich and varied, we are mindful that the complex nature of such processes may mean certain features and techniques of interactive filmmaking may not be suitable or may not serve the expressive needs of participants, or may need to be re-configured to do so. Also, we anticipate that there will be additional opportunities for applying interactive forms in participatory mental health filmmaking that will only be discovered by exploring how they relate to real people’s lived experiences of mental health.

In this paper, we present a study that seeks to develop such a concrete understanding of how the opportunities posed by interactive film can apply to the participatory filmmaking processes for mental health. Our study deconstructs a pre-existing participatory mental health film with its participants, with the aim of identifying possibilities of both form and content that could be revealed if the film was transformed into a non-linear interactive film. The aim of the study was to review *Stepping Through* as a linear film, exploring possible limitations it had in representing personal experiences in a group context. The main research question for the study is: what are the limits of this participatory linear film in articulating individual and collective viewpoints on the experience of isolation in mental health?

## 3.1 The Film and its Participants

*Stepping Through* was produced in 2016 during a pilot film course for Converge, a local organisation that provides creative courses for mental health service users in a university setting. The participants who made the film have long experience of taking part in theatre, music, and creative writing courses at Converge, and often perform in the context of mental health advocacy.

At the time of making, the theme agreed by the group was the sense of relief in joining a community (for most Converge itself) after a long time of isolation induced by mental illness. The choice of the participants was to express their view and feelings about isolation and recovery through a poetic juxtaposition of words and images, rather than using documentary-style interviews, with the aim of communicating emotionally with viewers. *Stepping Through* is organized in five individual chapters, where each participant uses spoken word and meaningful images to express his viewpoint. At the time of creation some additional poetic materials and a second storyline could not be accommodated in the film. The written material was archived, while the second storyline was hinted at through an image in the film.

Participants are all adult men who have engaged with Converge for a long time and act as mentors for newcomers. They joined the organization through referral from mental health services; however, we cannot provide information on their mental health conditions as these are not disclosed to Converge, in line with Arts & Health approaches which allow participants to reconstruct their identity as individuals and artists, rather than patients [1, 26].

There are several reasons for which we thought the chosen film would be a good case study to investigate how participatory film could benefit from non-linearity. Firstly, its participants were already experienced, having attended film courses more than once. This allowed them to discuss non-linearity immediately rather than having to provide a wider introduction on general filmmaking. The participants were also active in advocating for mental health, which made them particularly aware of mental health dynamics in society. Finally, the participants had already worked with the first author and with each other, so trust and rapport were established before the start of the study. The approach of working with such ‘experienced’ participants has also been suggested as good practice in previous HCI work exploring participatory arts contexts [18].

### 3.2 Methodology

This study was conducted using a partial participatory action research approach [20, 10] and employs creative methods [19] to access and explore information from participants. The general direction of the research was led by the researchers to ensure that the aims (exploring new non-linear narrative forms of participatory film production) underlined every session and activity. However, participants were granted agency and led discussions on aspects of the research concerning their experiences of mental health and how they would like to articulate those. The workshops' structure partially reflected participatory filmmaking sessions participants were used to taking part in, but differences of approach and research aims were clarified from the start, at the preliminary stage of collecting informed consent for the study.

The first author occupied two overlapping positions of researcher and facilitator, overseeing discussions around key activities while capturing and analysing data. As a facilitator, she also gently suggested possibilities around non-linearity, with a conscious effort not to guide participants towards specific ideas. In order to ensure her views could be checked against objective data, all sessions were audio recorded in full, with consent from participants. Research findings were regularly checked with participants for accuracy, by starting most workshops with a recap of preliminary forms of data analysis from the previous session, presented in an accessible language.

### 3.3 Workshops

The study consisted of six workshops, taking place on Saturday evenings at the university over roughly three months, and an additional informal meeting to accommodate one participant who struggled to reach the venue at the weekend. Due to the small size of the group, we decided not to have an external observer. A rough calendar of activities for each session was refined week by week according to themes and directions that emerged in previous sessions. Some workshops had to be repeated to include participants who could not make it to the previous session.

During the first workshop, memories of the film and the process were explored with participants, some of whom never got a chance to re-watch *Stepping Through* after its first screening. Participants retrospectively listed themes present in the film to review how efficiently the film conveyed those themes. A brief part of this session was dedicated to reviewing the participatory film process, in order to identify possible problematic aspects according to participants' memories.

Two following workshops focused on a more in-depth exploration of the relationship between the main theme of the film and the personal experiences of participants, with an attention on how authentic the participants felt their own chapter in the film is in relation to their experiences. An exercise of personal mapping devised for this aim looked at the existing film and its relations with circumstances the participants face, the emotions induced by those circumstances, and what they would like an audience to get from their film. This exercise served to show sub-topics that hold particular importance for one or more participants, and unexplored areas that each participant felt were important, but currently only hinted at, or absent, in the film.

Alongside this personal mapping activity, another exercise encouraged participants to watch the film and stop the screening in places where they felt an image expressed more than the film could convey, images "behind which" there was more to be told. This activity was designed to work organically with the previous one in order to identify visual elements linked to what participants felt was not explicitly explored in the film.

In two following workshops, the images selected were then used to produce creative writing, in order to cross-check whether this would mirror or add to the themes identified in the mapping exercise.

During the last session, participants used the key shots, printed as photographs, to create new sequences which, they felt, could illustrate the sub-topics identified. This served to cross-check how sub-topics resonated with each participant, and to generate discussion around which symbols participants would pick to illustrate them.

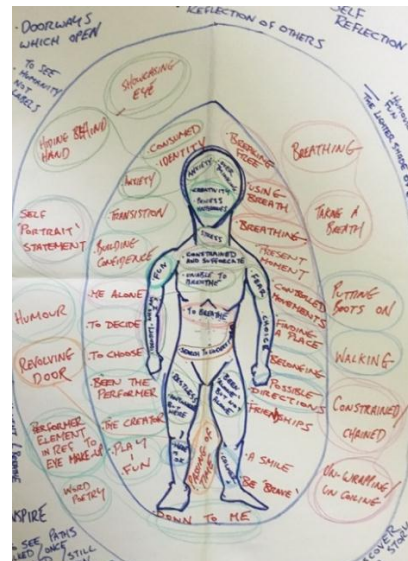


Figure 1: A participant's mapping exercise.

## 4 Findings

The data generated from the study consists of field notes, selected transcriptions from the sessions' recordings, paper artefacts generated during the activities, and pictures of the sequences created. This data was logged and analysed using thematic analysis [26], in order to identify a number of sub-topics that participants felt were key to the film. The sub-topics were categorised as currently expressed in the film, hinted at but not fully developed, or absent, and were also ordered according to their importance for each participant. A separate log was kept for spontaneous ideas that emerged from participants about how non-linearity could allow space for extra content, and why they felt that this was needed.

These sets of data were considered together to identify a number of expressive needs that the linear film did not fully support.

### 4.1 General review of the film

The first reactions upon watching *Stepping Through* were enthusiastic for participants: they were overall happy with the film and its qualities. As part of the first workshop, they retrospectively reflected on the topic of the film and what they remembered their expressive needs to be at the time of making. For X the main focus of his chapter in the film centered on “being trapped with a condition like mental illness, that stopped me from achieving my goals until I started Converge, which inspired me, my creativity, to stop being trapped, stop being fearful”. Overall, for all participants the film captured their journey of recovery through engaging with a supportive community. They also acknowledged the fact the film contained this as a thread that runs through every chapter. T commented: “there is that underlying theme link of each person being an individual (...), with anxiety provoked loneliness, despair, unsure, uncertain, to then (...) how each individual [found] their path, or journey, or connection, or a link in that, and that thing runs throughout in each film”.

The collaborative process in making *Stepping Through* seemed to reflect the very theme of the film - mutual support within a community - as phrased by T: “we're watching the film, we can actually see that because of us making it, that we are involved in each other's story, (...), you can tell that that community of support is there, in the five films”. Most participants affirmed that they still felt the film was relevant to their experiences.

A review of the process of making the film generated mostly positive feedback, with participants remembering the work as fun and engaging. T appreciated the process as a whole, but also

remembered a challenging time of trying to work with collective poetry when another participant, who is a poet, would have preferred to use his own work rather than producing writing as a group (T: “I remember one part that was (...) also really stressful and it was the whole debate on the poem side of things (...) with someone wanting to write their own film poem, and not mix it up or writing something different”). In spite of this episode, T, who like three other participants, has since taken part in more group film experiences at Converge, remembered this particular one as the most successful.

Participants identified the reasons for the effectiveness of the *Stepping Through* experience in the fact that they already knew each other and were used to do creative work together in a theatre company related to Converge, that they had known the first author for a couple of years, and that everyone in this group was committed to the process and did not skip any sessions. Therefore, participants identified quality of relationships and trust as key elements that supported engagement with the filmmaking process.

### 4.2 Expressive needs not fully accommodated by the linear film

While a first review of *Stepping Through* did not show a pressing need to “correct” particular shortcomings, the subsequent workshops highlighted a number of possibilities that could not be explored in the original film. The activities in the workshops generated discussions in which participants tended to operate across two main levels: discussing mental health (with participants identifying how the experience of loneliness and joining a community meant different things to them) and discussing how the film chapters may or may not have conveyed those viewpoints. The findings of these discussions have been grouped here around needs that non-linearity could support.

**4.2.1 Need for presence of more storylines.** One of the needs that more strongly emerged from the workshops was to create space for multiple storylines. This theme first emerged through a discussion of a collateral film, which was supposed to be produced after the main film, and is referred within the original via the image of an actor with half-painted face placed immediately before the closing title. The second film was in the end not produced, leaving that shot as an empty reference that an audience could not possibly understand. T said: “the more I look at it the more I think, yes that just doesn't make sense to anybody, we know what that is, and we know that that was going to be the lead on to the next film that we were going to be making, but (...) we haven't made that film”.

The half-painted face film idea incorporated some materials that could not fit in *Stepping Through*. This

secondary film was going to visually represent how mental health affects everyone and how trying to hide mental health problems tends to increase loneliness and isolation whereas openness can have empowering effects. The reason for including a reference in *Stepping Through* was that participants felt the two films were intimately related. Non-linearity could allow access to the second film from the dedicated reference image, rather than having the two films standing as separate pieces, which would dilute their relationship.

Aside from this pre-existing idea, the personal mapping activity served to highlight a number of differences amongst participants' experiences of loneliness and recovery. While *Stepping Through*, as it is, privileged what participants had in common, this exercise showed a number of sub-topics that are relevant to just some or to only one participant, but that are still critical in conveying how recovery happened for them. Some of the sub-topics are completely absent from the film, while others are only hinted at through a symbolic image. A list of these topics was discussed with participants, who produced creative writing around them and, during the last session, rearranged images from the film in different orders, to portray each of them. The list can be found in [table 1](#).

All of these sub-topics have a validity and meaning of their own, and participants envisioned each of them as a possible separate storyline, created combining images already present in the film in different orders, and by possibly adding new ones. As with the half-painted film idea, these sub-topics expand the original theme of isolation and recovery, painting a more personalised and complex view on the matter.

Finally, T talked about creating a chapter of the film by the first author. In her practice as a facilitator, the first author often adds her contribution to the film in order to further deconstruct the power dynamics of a filmmaker/expert, who does not talk about herself, opposed to participants who are put in the vulnerable position of sharing personal issues. In this case, her contribution to the film was going to be a chapter about living abroad as a foreigner and looking for a community of like-minded people, which she found through volunteering at Converge. However, her chapter ended up not being produced to give priority to the participants' work. T acknowledged the fact that the first author joined Converge through a different path than participants in the group, and saw this as an element of diversity that would enrich the film: "I would be interested to see if you could get that into it somehow, even if it's an extra, like a special edition or whatever, I think it would be nice because your one was about paths, coming from elsewhere, from a different way, in where we all came from quite of a similar sort of mental health thing, plus also with

having a female context in there". The rest of the participants mirrored T's interest in having a chapter of the first author as a voice in the film.

**Table 1: The varying relevance of sub-topics to participants.**

Film Sub-Topic	Relevance to Participant				
	X	Z	C	M	T
Feeling lonely in a crowd vs meaningful connections	Medium	None	High	High	Medium
Recovery through the use of creativity and developing an identity as an artist	Medium	None	High	Medium	High
Self-care and healthy habits	Low	High	None	None	None
Liberating parts of yourself which were always there, but unexpressed	High	None	None	None	Medium
Achievements later in life	None	None	Medium	Medium	None
Building a new "you"	High	Low	None	Low	Low
Sustainability of recovery	Medium	Low	None	High	Medium
"Down to me" - inner resolve towards recovery	Medium	Medium	None	Medium	High

Overall, the identification of all these additional storylines (second film with half-painted faces, eight personal sub-topics, and a facilitator's chapter) indicates a need for a film form that allows multiple storylines to coexist.

4.2.2 *Need for adding context and extra materials.* This research theme encompasses extra materials participants would like to add to complement the film, which were distinguished from "storylines" as they do not mirror the film poetry or are not necessarily in film form altogether.

From the first session, Z discussed a couple of scenography elements in the film that were found at the university campus and were produced by university students. These elements are a poster in the library and a group of chairs in the dance studio. Z was interested in researching who produced those and their meaning. He said: "it would be nice to know what that actually all meant (...) because somehow they come inside *Stepping Through* without knowing what we were doing (...), the person who's done it might want to get interviews, and explain". X also talked about

interviewing the students who worked on those projects. These elements could have a particular value for participants, as Converge works around establishing collaborations between its students and university students, in order to break down barriers between mental health service users and the university as a whole. By including interviews or written content about these elements, participants are trying to offer additional context on how Converge works and how collaboration with university students might take place.

Along the same line of thought, Z talked of producing a “making of” that could be accessed while the film is running: “you stop it and you play something else, in which maybe I’ll be chatting about what I’ve done”. This links to a general need participants identified around adding context on Converge and how their relationship was born. For X this meant “the background of like maybe Z’ story or whole background of M’s story or maybe some sort of how the idea came up”. C spoke of wanting to add information about how participants met through Converge and how he became a writer. This would complement and enlarge the role of the outtakes currently present at the end of the film, a portion which participants found very important to keep in order to show how the process of making the film incorporates in itself many of community values discussed in the film.

This is also important to participants as they realised the current film takes for granted the presence of an audience who is already aware of what Converge is. They imagined adding context either through a documentary style film, audio pieces podcast-style, or a website that can be explored by viewers who lack background information or want to deepen their knowledge of these specific aspects.

Two participants have also suggested adding more poetry through the film. M brought a poem to illustrate the sub-topic “Feeling lonely in a crowd Vs meaningful connections”, which is particularly relevant to him. C, who is now a published writer, suggested linking some of his writing to an image of a notebook included in his chapter of the film. Allowing participants who are already artists to link their previous work in the film could also help accommodating different levels of expertise, solving the tension previously mentioned by T (“someone wanting to write their own film poem, and not mix it up or writing something different”).

*4.2.3 Need for linking portions of the materials together.* This research theme looked at how the additional materials identified (storylines + context) were envisioned by participants as being linked in different ways to each other. This conceptually differentiates a possible non-linear version of *Stepping Through* from simply making a certain number of additional linear

films. The half-painted face film idea was envisioned from the start as a film that could be accessed through the shot of the actor wearing face make-up.

In producing new storylines that deepen the personal relationship of each participant with the theme of the film, they also identified which of these elements are in common between different chapters. The eight additional sub-topics identified in [Table 1](#), apply to different participants at varied degrees. The sub-topic “Recovery through the use of creativity and developing an identity as an artist/performer” is relevant to T and C, who both developed a creative identity in different ways and at different ages. For C, this sub-topic also links to “Achievements later in life”, which is relevant to M but does not apply to T. The sub-topic “Liberating parts of yourself which were always there, but unexpressed”, generated originally by X, resonates strongly with T, who linked it with “Recovery through the use of creativity and developing an identity as an artist/performer”. The sub-topic “Feeling lonely in a crowd Vs meaningful connections” emerged from a poem written by M, but resonated with T and X as well. As such, participants have imagined these sub-topics as storylines accessible or linked to different chapters in the film.

Z has imagined a “behind the scene” section which could be accessed at different points in the film, according to viewers’ interest (“you stop it and you play something else”), so that they can explore how the film was made alongside watching it, highlighting how the process of making the film incorporated the same community values discussed in it. It was suggested that if the first author were to produce her own chapter in the film, this could be linked to an image of herself appearing as an extra in C’s chapter. Positioning her story through a link would suggest how her position is connected, but slightly different to the rest of the group, as she joined Converge as a volunteer and then a facilitator, rather than a mental health service user.

Participants also identified recurring symbols and stylistic tropes that link parts of the film together and could be used as a “tag” to explore different portions of the film combined. An example of this is the use of black and white, from the opening title to places in the film that wanted to represent a challenging time for its author (identified by T); or the presences of posters, about which X affirmed: “because sometimes the theme can go through it, the same theme, having a poster at different points, because sometimes it interlinks”. The symbol of the revolving door appears often in the film. For T, it represents “going in different directions, for going forward and going back (...), this feeling of searching to understand, what had gone on, and why it had gone on, which would then revolve as a kind of a passing of time”; for X that “we are all going in circles



in our lives but we eventually connect again”, while for M and others it also has the meaning “the fun of doing [the film]”. Another recurring symbol is the cage, which is represented by the presence of bars in one shot, of a window with the reflection of an actor in another, and images of T who filmed himself in a “tangled” position. All of these images represent feelings of constraints, “not being able to breath”, which are relevant to three participants out of five, who in this case seemed to apply the same meaning to the symbol.

Participants started to imagine how these images could work together, either by interlinking chapters, or by creating compilation clips, in which viewers could explore more deeply participants’ feelings and experiences if interested in that particular topic or symbol.

Discussion on these references seems to indicate that the prospect of non-linearity allowed participants to review additional materials and existing recurring symbols in the film as fundamentally interlinked with the body of the film, rather than generating separate films as stand-alone units.

*4.2.4 Need for audience involvement.* The personal mapping activity reserved space to a reflection on the role of the audience in the film. T reflected on the fact that originally the group took for granted that *Stepping Through* was aimed at people who might be thinking of joining Converge; considering the possibilities allowed by non-linearity has now expanded the scope of the project: “where we initially made the film (...) for those that are initially going through something and wanting to come through to Converge, (...) where we take it now we can broaden that’. While the current film requires viewers to already be aware of the existence of Converge, the possibility of expanding the theme and context of the film means a wider audience can now be addressed.

All participants agreed that they would like to use the film in supporting people who are struggling with mental health problems to inspire them to join a supportive community and take action towards recovery. Raising awareness in people who might not know about mental health appeared to be less important, even though they recognised it could be a possible beneficial side effect of the film. For M, the film should encourage people by showing that “there is light at the end of the tunnel” and that “there is hope, that you are not alone, that there can be laughter, good times”. T saw it as an opportunity for “speaking to other people that are experiencing it themselves, because of each person having their own different experiences and talking about the stuff you have, isolation, vulnerability (...) because while you’re going through it you think right, I heard that people go

through this, but I don’t believe it, it’s only me that’s going through this (...). It’s saying no, there’s others, we’ve been through this, we’re still going through it”.

T also spoke of the film as a “trigger” to inspire the audience to see multiple possibilities and discover their own stories: “I was going for inspiring or inspirational (...) to see paths walked on, or want to walk, or still being walked (...) for others to sort of reflect and discover their stories, as reflection of other people’s stories”. This seemed to resonate with X, who from the first session demonstrated an understanding of interactive films as those “where you can dictate what’s happening in your journey”. By bringing these viewpoints together, participants imagined the possibility of allowing viewers to mix words and images to create their own chapter in the film as a result of the reflection induced by exploring their stories. The aim is to guide viewers through the same process participants followed to produce *Stepping Through* in the first place, a cycle of reflection, creative writing, and choosing symbolic imagery. As participants have come to a better understanding of their circumstances through this process, they hope to create change in others. In T’s words, “I think primarily yes, it’s for people who are experiencing [mental health problems], and feel lost and maybe come across it or interact with it and then think, oh bloody hell, there is a way or there is a hope, or there is a light”. The idea of involving an audience and allow it to interact with the film seems to be important for every participant.

## 5 Discussion

The findings from the study have demonstrated that, while there was no pressing dissatisfaction with the film at a first review, the introduction of the possibility of non-linearity has pushed the film boundaries in new directions, with participants developing new ideas as a result. Four expressive needs not currently supported by the film were identified and the group started imagining possibilities towards fulfilling those needs via non-linearity.

### 5.1 A more complex representation of isolation and recovery

In the linear film, participants worked around an experience they all had in common (joining a supportive community and reducing isolation) and, as a result, tended to pick and highlight elements of their experiences that they knew were in common with others. Through the workshops they started to reflect more on their particular circumstances, and explored elements of those experiences that were unique to just themselves, or were in common with just a number of other participants. This has shown that, while joining a

community was helpful for each of them, the dynamics are slightly different in each case, and so are the conditions that were conducive to recovery. Imagining a non-linear version of the film has painted a more complex picture of recovery, where overcoming isolation does not consist simply of joining a community, but of a synergy of elements. These included finding an inner resolve towards recovery; establishing productive and authentic relationships with others; developing a new identity in which the experience of mental illness can be incorporated in the sense of self of the individual without shame; valuing creativity, achievements, and self-care as ways of increasing self-worth; being aware of the ups and downs of recovery. These are all aspects that can be influenced by the presence of a supportive community and, crucially, that have different degrees of relevance to each participant.

A first limit of the film in terms of representation thus consists in partially depicting a binary relationship between isolation/mental health problems and community/recovery. Participants considered the message in the original film significant and still relevant to their lives, which means we cannot consider *Stepping Through* a misrepresentation of participants' viewpoints; it is still a film that successfully conveyed what the participants wanted to express. However, the representation of the issue isolation/recovery that emerged through exploring non-linearity is a more complex and well-rounded view on the matter that preserves inner tensions and possible contradictions, in line with best practices on how to represent mental health [28, 29]. Drawing upon opportunities of interactivity to create more personalized films in which participants are able to express their unique viewpoints on the issue could, therefore, allow both a safe and empowering level of self-disclosure. This could be an effective strategy against self-stigma according to Corrigan [9] and offer mediated form of contact for viewers, which again has been demonstrated to help counteracting stigma [2]; these strategies, facilitated by the possibility of non-linearity, would be better supported by an interactive film, which, as a result, could be particularly effective in counteracting those mental health stereotypes widely portrayed in mainstream media [32, 23, 16, 11].

## 5.2 A polyvocal film form

In imagining a non-linear form for the film, participants have also identified the need to provide extra context to describe both *Converge* as a whole, and their experience of participatory filmmaking, as forms of supportive communities. They have deepened the meaning of recurring symbols in the film by envisioning them as "tags", explored how they may

have attached slightly different meanings to each of them, and found a number of thematic links that bridge different portions of the film together.

These findings are not necessarily exclusive to non-linearity: other forms of complex storytelling might have been able to bring out these additional viewpoints in participants. However, with a view on participatory filmmaking, they seem to indicate that the main limit of the linear film might consist in the fact that participants felt the implicit pressure of exploring mostly portions of their experience that were in common with other participants. Some of them still inputted personal elements in their own chapters of the film in the form of symbolic elements (eye makeup to represent being a performer, overlapping images to suggest a split self, the presence of a notebook to indicate the importance of creativity); the evocative form of video poetry and structuring the film around personal chapters have allowed a degree of flexibility on this. However, it would be difficult for an audience who is not familiar with the participants to catch the importance and depth of those symbols. The prospect of non-linearity allowed participants to imagine a film form that would accommodate a storyline encompassing group views while branching out in a number of personal directions, each linked in complex ways with the original body of the film, with the addition of a broader context. Finally, the participants have designed a more precise role for the audience, and thought of ways of making it capable of inputting their views in the film.

In terms of the possible opportunities offered by interactive documentary film explored in the Related Work section of this paper, the participant in our study spontaneously moved towards three of the six qualities identified.

**5.2.1 Coexistence of more storylines.** As demonstrated in the findings, the emergence of more storylines interlinked with each other was one of the strongest directions originated from the study. This matches the potential of iDocs to build complex arguments and would open up the linear film form to a polyphonic structure able to accommodate both personal and group views.

**5.2.2 Possibility of presenting extra materials in non-filmic form.** This emerged in particular in the context of linking existing poetry produced by participants in their own creative writing practice to their chapter of the film and in offering context information on *Converge* by linking audio clips or other works produced in the film classes. This would "augment" the central narrative of the film according to Nash' definition [22] and allow viewers who are not familiar with *Converge* to explore this extra material according to their level of interest.

5.2.3 *Audience' input in the film.* Some of the participants talked recurrently of pathways and journeys, both as metaphors of their experiences of mental health problems, and of the possibilities they would like to present to an audience (defined as “pathways” and “doorways” to explore). They would like to inspire an audience to reflect on their circumstances as a result of participants’ stories. As such, it seems that a film form that allows an explorative journey for audiences, such as iDocs, would be particularly suitable for *Stepping Through*. Participants have imagined ways for viewers to interact with a pool of images and words to create their own chapter in the film, in fact opening up the film form to a dialogic potential that is one of the key aspects of participatory filmmaking [33]. With participatory filmmaking often focusing more on the empowering effects of the process of production rather than its final products [27], limited attention is often given to how the resulting films could be used to engage audiences, aside from local community screenings [33, 27]. An interactive film that grants the possibility of an active dialogue taking place between the original creators and audiences – who are in fact ideally turned into co-creators – would allow for a truly dialogic participatory film, whose life does not end with community screenings, but keeps on transforming over time, a ‘living documentary’, according to Gaudenzi’s definition [13].

5.2.4 *Other opportunities.* Other possibilities allowed by non-linearity previously identified (responsiveness, empathy, immersion), which could present fruitful opportunities to participatory filmmaking, have not been explored by participants in this occasion, nor have they been presented to them. The reason not to present additional opportunities to participants, in this instance, was to allow them space to develop possible solutions based on their current expressive needs. This is in line with the scope of study, which revolved around an analysis of existing limits in the film, rather than designing a functional interactive film prototype. For the same reason, the study did not entail an evaluation of which of the ideas developed by participants could be realised in practice according to the non-linear editing tools available at this stage, nor an analysis of possible workflows to get non-professional filmmakers familiar with those tools, leaving these areas as scope for future studies.

## 6 Conclusion

The study showed that, while the linear film made a considerable effort towards allowing authors a certain degree of personalization through the use of symbols and chapter division, some expressive needs were not

met by linear filmmaking. Rather than trying to adapt the creative process to the medium, we explored what additional ideas could emerge if the medium could be shaped according to the expressive needs of the participants. The non-linearity of interactive documentary presented an array of opportunities for participatory filmmaking thanks to its capacity to “afford new ways of presenting multiple points of view”, including “the perspective of a community of authors working collaboratively around points of view,”; also, non-linearity “can offer more scope for in-depth engagement with a set of complex ideas” [3], which makes it particularly suitable for discussing mental health. In this particular case, participants have spontaneously moved towards imagining a film form that allows the coexistence of multiple storylines, the presence of background information, the possibility of linking these elements through tags, and modes of interactive engagement of viewers; overall, they imagined the possibility of a film that not just presents, but embeds in its very form both the complexity of the topic discussed and the multiple voices discussing it.

In this study participants worked in particularly beneficial circumstances for this kind of investigation: they all knew each other and the first author well, trust was already established, the group was small, and all participants were particularly aware of visual storytelling techniques. The context of participatory filmmaking is often more challenging: usually funded through the third sector, participatory filmmaking groups tend to have tight time constraints which could make interactive filmmaking, a practice which is often less accessible than traditional film, particularly challenging.

This study represented a first step towards building a bridge between participatory filmmaking and non-linear interactive film by investigating expressive needs that were constrained by linear filmmaking for this group of participants. While future studies should explore workflow designs to build a practice of interactive filmmaking in participatory settings, the authors also intend to keep working with participants to design and implement an interactive film prototype which will expand on the possibilities explored in this study.

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