

Storytelling in a virtual world

John Darvell, Artistic Director of nocturn dance, on an ambitious project that integrated story telling, video streaming and online interaction before and during a live dance performance



Oliver Scott, Debbie Camp, Luke Antysz and Stephanie Townsend, dareyouwatch.
Photo: Mark Douet

dareyouwatch (www.dareyouwatch.com), an immersive dance performance, was the culmination of a 72-day transmedia campaign, streamed live over 18 hours, incorporating web feeds, social media chatter and a site-specific performance. It brought together professional dance artists from the South East, Newbury College students from their Art and New Media courses, West Berkshire young dancers and adult recreational dancers from South Hill Park.

Five fictional characters, existing through social media sites, provided audiences with a unique opportunity to interact, question and direct the way in which the campaign unfolded. A key element of the project was being able to build characters and a world that the general public could interact with or simply observe. There was mystery and intrigue; a lot of our marketing simply said 'SHE is coming', in a bid to create a culture for asking questions. The focus was to get a new audience to engage (for any length of time) in a piece that predominantly existed online and to break away from the structure and formats of engaging with dance work in a traditional theatre space.

To give some sense of scale, on YouTube we had an audience of at least 1,217 in 16 different countries. We had over 5,000 unique visitors to the dareyouwatch website throughout the lifetime of the project and accumulated over 6,000 'likes' to our Facebook page. The largest number of people talking on Facebook about the piece at any one time was 4,554, which was during the actual performance period. On Twitter we reached an estimated 13,000 users.

This thing called transmedia

As a small developing dance company with limited resources, showing work in a theatre space can be challenging. >



Above: Oliver Scott, Debbie Camp, Laura Caldwell and Stephanie Townsend, dareyouwatch. Right: Luke Antysz, Oliver Scott, Debbie Camp, Stephanie Townsend, Francesca Pinder and Becky Horne, dareyouwatch. Photos: Mark Douet

For us, a key goal is thinking outside of this framework about how we develop a new, sustainable appetite for our style of contemporary dance, using alternative spaces and forms of communication.

The use of social media and online work allows us to appeal to newcomers by making contemporary dance accessible and enjoyable to the curious viewer. At the end of our research and development, where we experimented with telling different parts of the story via different social media platforms, we encountered the term 'transmedia'. In this arena, we were excited to find an evolving community, which had an appetite for dance, and as the artform is still emerging it seemed the right place in which to develop a novel way of watching dance with a new audience.

When I first started developing the dareyouwatch concept, it felt right to use social media as a story telling device. The appeal was the elusive way that something simple can go viral. I wanted to tap into this inbuilt inquisitiveness that we all share by weaving a tale that didn't say what it did on the tin.

A real highlight for us in the project has been the collaboration we've built with David Varela, transmedia expert, whose input helped us develop a narrative and structural arc, which allowed flexibility for the cast to expand on a unifying theme.

Is it a fad?

We could have approached the use of social media in one of two ways. As another platform to document what we do; tweet about classes, add pictures of rehearsals to Facebook, upload a Vimeo promo trailer. All are perfectly valid and, when used correctly, very powerful tools. Or, more excitingly, explore its potential as a way of delivering the content of a contemporary dance piece.

Using transmedia is like breaking a single story into chapters and narrating each chapter on a different stage. Exploring this type of storytelling brought three main learning outcomes:

It's all in the planning. When you don't know what the piece will evolve into until you've spent time in the studio creating, it's difficult to envisage the end product. To work out the how, what and when, you need to direct the online content and be consistent. We were finalising visual imagery,



content for tweets, stories for our characters, and a release timeline before setting foot in the studio. Our research and development (R&D) had made some of these decisions easier but I would certainly restructure the process for future projects.

Having the headspace. Allowing yourself and those managing the story sufficient space, outside of the time you use in the studio. It was so tempting to be lured into the studio to create movement material. But to give the characters and the content any depth required time spent questioning and challenging the world we were making. Five of our dancers were responsible for managing the storylines of their personas while I controlled the overarching direction of the tale; needing time to sit and work without being in dancer/choreographer mode.

The more people the better. To send a tweet or post online only takes a few minutes out of your day, embodying a character meant there was much more to consider; including the tone of voice and relation to the narrative. The closer we were to the performance, the more online chatter we wanted to generate, so more interaction was necessary with our audience. Running this required a dedicated team of people in the final stages of the project, releasing time to concentrate on the dance element of the work.



Above: Oliver Scott, Debbie Camp, Laura Caldwell, Stephanie Townsend, Francesca Pinder and Becky Horne, dareyouwatch. Below far left: Debbie Camp, Luke Antysz and Stephanie Townsend, dareyouwatch. Below left: Oliver Scott, Debbie Camp, Luke Antysz, Laura Caldwell, Fiona Millward and Stephanie Townsend, dareyouwatch. Photos: Mark Douet

you can't improve their experience.

Little and often. With so much online chatter throughout the day make sure you are heard. Post quality content regularly.

Be topical. Keep an eye on relevant news stories and feel free to comment on what's going on in the world.

Know your vocabulary. Understand the tone you want to set – are you a 'Hi' or 'Hey' kind of person? – and keep it consistent. Aim to be correct in your use of punctuation, but only if it's relevant to the tone.

Link in. The more you comment on other people's posts the more chance you have of engaging them with your own stream.

Not sure?

For those of us who aren't using social media yet, the simple message is – you could be. There is no hiding from the fact that it's becoming integral. Used correctly and innovatively you can make yourself stand out online.

For those who are using it already, think about being different but also become an expert in the medium. Simply posting a Facebook entry or Tweeting your classes won't get you noticed. There are a huge number of 'off the shelf' resources (apps, websites, technical kit) so all you need is a creative idea and time to play.

dareyouwatch created an intriguing and enticing project that encouraged a new audience to dip their toe in the water of contemporary dance without it costing or inconveniencing them in any way. Whether or not that new audience liked what they saw is almost irrelevant – it will have enabled them to use digital technology to engage with aspects of culture that otherwise they would never have encountered.

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visit www.nocturndance.co.uk / www.vimeo.com/nocturndance/ / www.dareyouwatch.com

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visit <http://shplive.tv/wp/about/>

Our top tips...

It's been an incredibly rewarding and releasing experience to create a world that lives and breaths outside of the confines of a traditional stage piece, and I would encourage any dance artist to play with this form of storytelling.

People don't like change. The less friction there is between the different narrative platforms, the more people will stay with the plot. Having the build-up on Facebook and moving the action to the website and Twitter possibly caused a few interested parties to drop off. Use fewer channels, don't be tempted to use them all.

Use paid advertising wisely. A very small outlay paid for a targeted advert on Facebook, which dramatically generated an increase in page 'likes'. It was more effective than producing flyers - but not all about figures, you still need those people to engage beyond 'liking' your work.

Save for a rainy day. Bad weather equals more people online. If possible, plan your project for the winter months.

You can't please all of the people... Our R&D had a shoestring budget and some end users experienced picture, sound and download problems. The main performance had a larger budget and the finished product was of superior quality, but some end users still had issues. If someone is watching on a poor internet connection on an older computer