



**Bolton Storyworld**, for the uninitiated, was an interactive, transmedia prototype that ran between the years of 2011 – 2016. The project spanned several platforms and devices, employed over 100 film production students, generated hundreds of pieces of media and evolved through three major iterations.



*From the desk of Lee Robinson*

For me it began life as a conversation over coffee and ended with an award ceremony....

Broken into 3 phases, Bolton Storyworld was initially pitched as an online soap opera. Written, shot and delivered by students, managed by teachers and produced by Bellyfeel.

This soap opera was intended to act as an on-going production, which incorporated real-time social media, while launching a student TV platform for students to host and host work. A writer's room was established and each student was given... something.... to write.

And so, for the remainder of 2011, staff and students alike learned what "Transmedia" meant and discovered that the traditional writers room just wasn't appropriate for the format. We spent months trying to nail down narrative arcs, establish a storyworld bible and wrangle 100's of quickly diminishing students.

In the winter of 2012 we shot our first 3 episodes, a tie-in behind the scenes documentary, had our first live event (a party in the SU bar) and ran our Facebook campaign.

It was a fantastic failure. Nobody saw it, those did, didn't understand it...

By this time, I was about to graduate from university.

I had used Bolton Storyworld as my dissertation research project, and, in collaboration with Anna Zaluczkowska, managed to get my findings published in the journal of media practice.

At the same time, Bellyfeel re-worked the storyworld bible, brought in a new director for the project, and together with a much smaller team of 6, reworked the format into a mobile and email delivery.

After weeks of writing new scripts, creating new media, booking shoots and re-assembling actors, during the summer of 2013 – it was time to launch phase 2....

Phase 2 was unlike Phase 1 in almost every way.

We had a smaller crew, consisting of myself and a fellow graduate called Holly doing all the writing. We had Ashok, the newly appointed film director, and we had our crack camera team consisting of Tony and Jack. And of course, we had Krish at Bellyfeel producing the entire project.

What a difference a small crew makes!! We got through 5 days of shoots, travelled all around Bolton, shot some green screen in a studio and filmed at all hours of the day on the unforgiving Winter Hill. We filmed 10 webisodes and around 15 pieces of GC. We hosted a live event, and introduced a new major character into the series, Prof. Justin McManus, who held a live money making seminar (which was a complete technical failure, when the film students forgot to record sound). And we held a few smaller live events and protests at fresher's week at the university all to promote the project.

During phase 2 we decided to make a significant change to the structure of the story and turn Spoon into the main protagonist (previously Lizzie). This decision allowed the audience to immerse themselves in the investigation, and allowed us to introduce more storyworld expanding platforms.

At the heart of it all was a diorama!

And Spoon's Blog.

The blog was the platform in which all others spawned from. It connected the dots between each webisode, clue, and all character driven content. As a writer, I created a collection of blog posts from Spoon, which indirectly hinted at the alien

investigation, as well as further explored her character and her wild conspiracy theories.

In addition to all of this we also introduced an experimental Geo-Map.

Like everything else in Bolton Storyworld, this map was intended to serve multiple purposes. On one hand, the map was another story outlet, Spoon would mark down points on the map that related to her investigation; and on the other hand the map also served as an interactive hotspot for players, who were also encouraged to upload their own stories and news reports from wherever they were in the world.

Using a Transmedia authoring system called Conducttr, we delivered the project across 2 major platforms – SMS and Email.

Players had the choice as to which platform they wanted to play on, but it was obvious that SMS and smartphones were by far the most popular choice. And from a technical point of view there were less issues with delivery and reception of content on the SMS version.

All-in-all, Phase 2 was a success. Albeit, moderate.

However, it was still not getting the reception we had hoped for. It was still too complex for players and the effort required to feed 2 versions of the story at once was too taxing. We had to simplify, we had to streamline, and we had to give the audience a thrilling experience exactly where they wanted it...

Phase 3 – the final phase of the project – saw yet another turn over in contributors, a whole new set of re-shoots and another MAJOR re-think of the stories' delivery. Bolton

Storyworld also took on another name. "Bolton Storyworld: Codename Winter Hill".

Having learned that the audience were mostly playing BSW on their smartphones, we made the decision to reformat the project to be played ENTIRELY on a smartphone. This meant rethinking the way content was designed and delivered one more time.

We enlisted the help of 3 more student writers, Liam, Jade and Nathan, to take the existing storyworld and all the media and re-work it into a fresh, original narrative.

Taking the lead on this project, now as a full-time member of Bellyfeel, I redesigned the whole script. Now all of Spoon's communications were sent to the audience via SMS and the entire Bolton Storyworld experience was created to play out over a live 5-day broadcast. With the option to re-play the story again as a self-paced 2-hour delivery.

One of the biggest additions to BSW during this phase was "The Box". This was a constantly updating space within Spoon's blog where the player was able to search through all the clues that Spoon had collected so far. It contained images, videos, audio recordings, the Geo-Map and all kinds of other artefacts that relate to the story.

We also introduced ways of immersing the player, by having them receive threatening videos and phone calls from the main, unidentified, antagonist. They were being watched, their actions monitored.

I created an ARG, which tied into the Geo-Map, that allowed players to search around Bolton to find real world artefacts. This, combined with a secret website and some co-ordinates, would lead the player to a phone number. If the player called the number, they would be the proud owner of some limited-edition merch...

We updated the social media space to reflect this new branding and begun to release unique content onto the space. Memes and goofs from the webisodes during the build-up to delivery and episode recaps at the end of each live broadcast.

We dug down into the character vault and brought back characters long since abandoned in Phase 1. Mrs. Collin's corner shop bakery made a resurgence as a Facebook campaign had players debating "Bap or Bun"?

The entire story was written with a clear goal at the end, as players would eventually unlock a secret code that allowed them access to a Moment of Perfect Clarity. An explainer video that would enlighten them to the entire scope of BSW, before dropping the final twist on them.

And with that – Bolton Storyworld came to its gripping, and emotionally draining end.

Once it was time to put Bolton to bed, the project had been viewed in 5 different countries, and reached close to 1000 people on Facebook.

It has been featured in local news outlets, provided learning experiences for 100s of students and had 2 academic articles written and published.

The crowning achievement for Bolton Storyworld was receiving the Premier Award for best in show at the 2016 Learning on Screen awards – beating other universities and even the BBC for the prize.

I went and collected the award, delivered a moving speech, and then award in hand, got on a plane to New York for break that was 5 years in the making.

As an added bonus, BSW was also shortlisted in the Seattle Transmedia International Film Festival. Although did not win anything.

After a round table discussion between myself, Krish and Anna, the originators of the entire project, we reflected on the project, and took the lessons we learned forward into our future projects.

And that was that...

Student filmmaker to award winning transmedia producer and published academic. Not a bad journey to have when you're in your early twenties.

And at the heart of it... Bolton Storyworld.

**Lee Robinson 2018**

[www.boltonstoryworld.com](http://www.boltonstoryworld.com)