



Changing the game

Kickstart your digital journey

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ACCIDENTAL FUTURE
IMAGINE! SCREENS
Festival of Ideas & Politics **NI** CONNECTING CREATIVITY

Foreword by Paul Moore, director of Future Screens NI

The Cambridge Dictionary suggests that the meaning of thrive is to grow, develop or be successful. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to work with thrive the organisation know that this definition is a two-edged sword. On the one hand as an organisation focused on developing new and better understandings of audiences thrive has done just as the definition suggests: grown, developed and been successful. More importantly, however, thrive has facilitated, and encouraged, those it has worked with, and for, to grow, develop and be successful.

Working with thrive as a partner organisation has been both a privilege for Future Screens NI and an important locus for learning. thrive has a profound understanding of the nature of audiences in Northern Ireland (and indeed across the UK through its links with the Audience Agency) and this understanding has been a constant source of advice for FSNI as it developed its own strategies and programmes. During the pandemic period the importance of the knowledge thrive possesses has been underlined and thrive has been a constant champion not only for audiences but for those who bring productions to those audiences.

The research contained in the Changing the Game report is indicative of the interrogative approach which thrive brings to any project. It questions the assumption that all organisations will succeed by simply jumping on the digital bandwagon. It accepts the ubiquitous nature of the digital in our life but then asks organisations contemplating a shift to an all-digital offer to examine why this is being done and to develop a strategy suitable to the needs of that organisation. This may seem the 'common sense' thing to do but

experience indicates that in the rush to become digital many forget that the needs of an organisation and its partners must come before the need to have a shiny new digital presence. Thrive developed this project in partnership with The Imagine! Belfast Festival of Ideas & Politics and Accidental Theatre. Both partners and the cultural organisations who contributed to the research phase of Changing the Game should also be thanked for their openness and honesty – sharing both their successes and their opportunities to learn – to benefit the wider cultural sector.

Encouraging organisations to do this thinking would be important enough in itself. What thrive then does, however, in Changing the Game is to offer a five-point plan to make the transition to digital manageable. The apparent simplicity of this plan is its great strength and too often one is confronted with complex digital strategies which, when interrogated, are found to be merely wearing the emperor's new clothes.

This research is precisely the kind of work FSNI was hoping would emerge from the Rewriting the Narrative funding call. It examines the issues which have emerged from the crisis and offers ideas for strategies which are valuable in themselves irrespective of the crisis from which they developed. It is a privilege for Future Screens NI to be associated with Changing the Game and as Director I thank thrive and its officers for the opportunity.

W. B. Yeats once asserted that, 'There is another world, but it is in this one.' One of the tasks of those of us involved in the creative industries is to find and develop that world. thrive is one of the many organisations involved in that task and this report takes us one step further in that pursuit. It does exactly what thrive works continually to achieve. It makes culture count.

Changing the game

When lockdown hit at the end of March 2020, a lot of arts and culture organisations turned to digital so they could continue to deliver their programme at all costs. Some offered live or pre-recorded events filmed from their living room, others explored complete new ways to present their work. It's fair to say that everybody dipped their toes in the deep pond that is digital, some more successfully than others. And that's ok. New things don't have to work right away. It's good to test and try and see what works and what doesn't for your own organisation.

Our audience research [After the Interval](#) and [Culture Beyond Covid](#) showed us that we're in this for the long-haul and there's no going back to how it was before. The focus is now indeed on digital so is there an easy step-by-step process that one could follow to start their digital journey?

We partnered with [Accidental Theatre](#) and [Imagine Belfast](#) to answer this question. Together, we ran the Changing the Game research project and this document is the result of our collaboration. Supported by the Future Screen NI's Rewriting the Narrative grant, we conducted desk research, qualitative interviews and surveyed 12 NI organisations to better understand their use and knowledge of digital. This 5-steps framework was developed based on what we found. The approach is the same, regardless of the art form. We hope it will help you to start your digital journey but also that it will support organisations who have delivered a digital programme and would like to review and improve what they've done.



How to kickstart your digital journey



Step 1 – Define your goals

Think about why you want to offer digital content to your audiences. How does it connect to your organisation’s purpose?



Step 2 – Look at your existing data & do some research

What do you know about your audiences? What can your organisation offer? What is already happening on the digital scene?



Step 3 – Time to plan your new strategy

Use your learning from Step 1 and 2 to shape a plan that will fit you like a glove.



Step 4 – Implement your plan

Remember to track your audiences as you go so you can use this information later to assess your success.



Step 5 – Review & evaluate

All done and dusted? Not quite. Your last step is to review and evaluate what you’ve done to determine what worked and what didn’t. Go back to Step 1 and make changes to start again!

Step 1 – Define your goals

The first question you need to ask yourself is **why** do you want to have a digital offer? What are you trying to achieve? What are the outcomes you want to see? How are you going to blend your online and offline offer? Think about what your different programme offers can give to different audiences.

When we asked NI arts and culture organisations what were the main benefits of going digital, they said:

- A wider reach and new international audiences,
- An opportunity to keep a dialogue between your organisation and your audiences,
- A possible income if you charge for access to your content,
- Reducing barriers to accessing your work.

Pick one or more and make them your objectives. It will be easier to plan with a specific aim in mind.



These objectives have to be in line with the **purpose** of your organisation, connecting your passion to your audiences. We talk about this more in our blog [‘the perks of being clumsy & how to embrace change.’](#)

Step 2 – Look at your existing data and do some research

This is the most important step as the data you collect now will be the base of your new digital strategy. It’s like making a sourdough starter for your bread. The more bubbles, the more likely your loaf will rise. The more data, the more prepared you’ll be, the more your digital plan will be likely to be a success.

There are two types of information you should gather: **internal data** – about your organisation – and **external data** – about the marketplace.

What you should know about your organisation:

- Look at your online **audience data**: Who are they? What platforms do they use? What type of content do they engage with? What does other research say about digital engagement?
- Look at the **digital tools** you already have and make a list of your team skills: What do you know and not know? What skills do you need?
- Look at your **archives** and organise it. Your digital offer doesn’t necessarily have to be all new. Is your content re-usable? Can it bring joy to audiences? Make sure you ask permission to all parties involved before re-sharing archive material.



Online analytics are your best friend to find out about your online audiences. Check out our toolkits for [Google Analytics](#), [Facebook Insights](#), [Twitter Analytics](#) and [Instagram Insights](#).

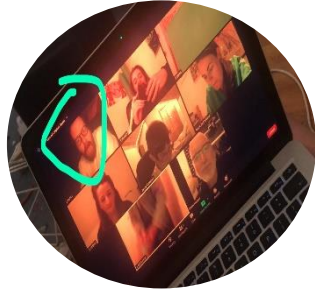
What you should know about the marketplace:

- What do you know about the **technologies** that are out there, especially immersive technology like Augmented and Virtual reality? Maybe these are not for you but what R&D do you need to do?
- **Pricing** digital content can be difficult as it is quite new but it shouldn't be random. Don't forget to include it in your research.
- What are others doing? Read case studies. [You can find them on our website](#) but in other sources too: [Arts Professional](#) or [Culture Hive](#) for example.



1. Our research [After the Interval](#) and [Culture Beyond Covid](#) is full of insights about NI audiences, their engagement with culture online and what type of digital content they're more likely to pay for. [We have other reports worth having a look at too.](#)
2. Think about **copyrights and contracts** when creating new content for digital. When re-sharing archives, **ask permission** to artists and all other parties involved even if you're not legally obliged to. **Be ethical!**





Big Telly's Zoom Theatre

Big Telly Theatre Company specialise in immersive theatre, set in traditional venues as well as in unusual spaces. Unable to tour their plays due to Covid-19, they quickly found an alternative to continue to work and perform in front of audiences.

Pre-recording their work wasn't an option as they wanted to keep the immersive aspect of their plays. When artistic director Zoe Seaton noticed conference and meeting platform Zoom's speaker view followed the person who was speaking, she realised it was the right platform for displaying each actor at the right time. Zoom allowed them to create things that couldn't be done in physical theatres and shows had to be entirely written to fit the online platform.

[Read our case study](#)

Step 3 – Time to plan your new strategy

You now have all the cards in your hands. Use the knowledge acquired in Step 1 and 2 and **turn it into action**.

- Where will you be delivering your programme and communications?
- Include your monitoring and evaluation in your plan. What does success look like? What data will you track to measure it?
- Don't be afraid to experiment. Culture online is new for everyone, audiences included. Manage their expectations by telling them exactly what to look forward to.
- Don't get too caught up with the strategy, it doesn't have to be perfect from the first try. Strategy is important but it's also about trying new things.



1. We recommend to start with platforms you know but if you're up for trying something new, **partnerships** can give you the skills you don't have. Think outside the box and don't necessarily look for other cultural partners.
2. Our website has many [toolkits and templates](#) you can use to make your planning easier.
3. **Free webinars** are now everywhere so you can learn new skills without leaving your sofa. Check out [Digital Culture Network](#), [Arts Marketing Association](#) or [Culture 24](#).

Step 4 – Implement your plan

This is the most exciting part, time to go live! While sharing your hard work with your audiences, don't forget to **monitor the metrics you chose in Step 3** as you go to gauge your success. You'll be able to see mid-process if everything is going smoothly or if you need to change things. If you do need to make amends, keep these changes in mind for the next step. Additionally, make sure you can manage the way you ask your audience for feedback.

Step 5 – Review and evaluate

You made it! The only thing left for you to do is your evaluation. There are 4 essential questions you should answer to inform the changes you'll make when you go back to Step 1:

- What is working?
- What isn't working?
- What are your audiences saying?
- What have you learned so you can start again and improve your plan?



This step is very similar to Step 2. Use the same tools – online analytics, audience feedback – and compare data. Is there any difference? Use the differences you discover to guide your next move, for example segmenting your online audience and creating different content for each type.



The Earagail Arts Festival: How they evaluated their online festival

The Earagail Arts Festival is an arts and culture festival held every summer in Co. Donegal. It usually takes place in venues from purpose-built theatres and galleries to village halls, forests and beaches. Like many others, EAF had to pivot from holding a live, in-person festival to online.

This year, instead of conducting a regular evaluation survey after the festival, they decided to focus on **what motivated people to attend their festival and look at what held the wider public back from attending**. This way, they could compare in-person and digital audiences, but also find out about people's motivations and barriers. Looking beyond audience demographics will help you to strengthen your relationship with them and refine your overall strategy.

[Read our case study](#)

Final tips

All the organisations we surveyed were unanimous (and we agree with them):



Don't just stick up things online without thorough research and a plan.



You don't have to do this alone, consider partnerships. Some other arts and culture organisations may have the skills you're looking for but also think about others in the creative industries who know about new technologies like AR and VR.



There's no need to buy new fancy equipment like cameras and lighting when there are other skilled individuals out there who can help. Spend your money wisely.



Experiment, test and try!



Organisations who can help:

- [Thrive](#). We can help you with your evaluation, research, marketing, communications and more, while making sure it is always audience-centred.
- [Accidental Theatre](#). Whether you need a recording space or help with recording image and sound, Accidental are happy to collaborate with you on your next project.
- [Future Screens NI](#) offers funding opportunities and support for creatives keen to develop their research or programmes on the digital front.
- Interested in immersive technologies? [Digital Catapult NI](#) may be able to help.
- [The Space](#). They specialise in online audiences and have a great set of resources on their website.
- [The Nerve Centre](#) is a creative media arts centre with sites in Derry and Belfast. They provide training opportunities as well room and studio hire.
- [Northern Ireland Screen](#) offer funding, training and skills development opportunities.
- [Digital Culture Network](#) is an initiative from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to provide support around digital skills and leadership development to the arts and culture sector. From one-to-one support to practical workshops and webinars, most of their resources are available on their [Knowledge Hub](#).
- [Creative Scotland](#) have an online library of resources, toolkits and guides that you could find useful.
- [Arts Marketing Association](#) is a member-based organisation that offers workshops, training, resources and networking opportunities to their members.
- [Culture 24](#) provides support and advice to museums and galleries. They often run workshops and have a lot of free resources around digital skills for the heritage sector.
- [ArtsProfessional](#): Thought-provoking news, articles and case studies about the arts in the UK and beyond.
- The [Digital Culture Compass](#) was commissioned by Arts Council England to help cultural organisations approach, assess and improve their digital activities.

Appendix

The 12 NI organisations who took part in this research are:

- Earagail Arts Festival
- The Black Box
- Tinderbox Theatre Company
- Centre for Contemporary Arts, Derry~Londonderry
- Belfast Exposed
- Culturlann McAdam O Fiaich
- Big Telly Theatre Company
- Belfast International Arts Festival
- GoldenThread Gallery
- Oh Yeah Music Centre
- John Hewitt Society
- Terra Nova Productions