The Sandbox Mindset

Web-Based Documentary's Legacy

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Introduction

Web-based documentary, also called by many interactive documentary (Nash 2021) or i-docs (Aston, Gaudenzi, & Rose 2017), had its *âge d'or* around 2013 (Dubois 2021). In the years that followed, the vanishing of Adobe Flash technology and the advent of mobile-first storytelling (shorter linear formats) as a new standard, broke the mainstream momentum of browser-based documentaries.

It had all started so well for i-docs. Audiences were left craving more hard-hitting investigations after the release of shock docs such as Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) or Hubert Sauper's *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004). The global public was enthused by aesthetic wonder works such as Michael Glawogger's *Workingman's Death* (2005). Documentary was on a roll – enjoying a revival not yet impinged upon by the platform economy,[1] not yet challenged by the onslaught of post-truth politics. It was a time of relative continuity, building upon the Californian ideology that was fueling the beginnings of the web.

By the 2010s, i-docs had made a name for themselves by embracing some of the precepts of Web 2.0, including ease of use (i.e. browser-based access that was close to users' everyday desktop use), interoperability for end users (e.g., no specific operating systems or devices required, interactive content delivered via APIs [application programming interfaces]), participatory culture (with dedicated personalized, interactive, and even live features), and especially user-generated content (not just comments, but also things like audio and video remixes that would end up having an impact on the narration).

Quite a few i-docs managed to capture large audiences, including David Dufresne's game documentary *Fort McMoney* (2013)[2] and Brett Gaylor's serial inter-

1 In this period, very large online platforms (VLOPs) such as Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006) were still to be invented.

2 *Fort McMoney* attracted 350,000 visitors within three months of launching. See Jankovic 2014 for more details.

active *Do Not Track* (2015).[3] Others caught the zeitgeist with a clever combination of narrative, aesthetics, and technology (e.g., The Goggle's photo-book *Welcome to Pine Point*; the 2D and 3D versions of *Bear 71* [2012] by Jeremy Mendes and Leanne Allison). We even saw participatory i-docs make a political difference in forcing legislative change (*The Quipu Project* (2015) by Maria Court and Rosemarie Lerner, on forced sterilization in Peru) or cultural impact at the local level (*Hollow*, by Elaine McMillion Sheldon).

In the decade that followed, however, i-docs steadily declined to become, if not a marginal practice, a niche one. I-docs were increasingly overshadowed by millions consuming their culture on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, while tens of thousands adopted virtual-reality and augmented-reality documentary. Meanwhile, the linear members of the documentary family – on TV and the big screen – remained as resilient as ever.

I-docs continue to be produced and released post-2020, but, more often than not, are restricted to specialized contexts such as education (e.g. *Ulster End of Year Show*, 2022), healthcare (e.g. *Behind the Mask*, 2023), or special purpose niche sectors (e.g. history museums in need of long-form interactive content).

Today, this raises the question of the legacy that i-docs leave behind as they silently walk away. From my own practice as i-doc maker and scholar researching the phenomenon from a production studies perspective, I argue that interactive documentary's legacy can best be found in what I call the *sandbox mindset*. This mindset, I maintain, has two main forms of heir: institutions and individuals. On the institutional side, this would be organizations such as interactive media training schools, art schools and universities, production companies, and festivals. They are the institutions in the audiovisual sector that have opened up to the "experimental character" and continue to this day to carry the flame. Additionally, there are conservative institutions such as museums, which are not directly affiliated with the audiovisual sector, yet play an ever-increasing role in furthering the sandbox mindset (see e.g., Coding da Vinci hackathons, Mediasphere for Nature lab at the Berlin Natural History Museum).[4]

Individuals are harder to identify, as some have taken on "new risks", jumping into immersive or game-like technologies, filling in leadership or teaching roles

3 *Do Not Track* attracted one million visitors in its first 7.5 months (14 April–1 December 2015). For more key figures, visit co-producer Upian's website: https://www.upian.com/en/project/donottrack.

4 The Coding da Vinci initiative had collaborated with more than 350 institutions by the time of writing. Discover more here: https://codingdavinci.de/en. The Mediasphere for Nature offers many different types of projects. For an overview, see https://www.museumfuernaturkunde.berlin/en/science/mediasphere-nature.

within institutions, or continuing the practice of i-doc-making within more specialized settings. Some of these practitioners still engage with the discourses and potentials of i-docs to this day. Katerina Cizek, Liz Miller, and Florian Thalhofer are three individuals who continue to make and think i-docs in the present.

As noted above, the most enduring footprint of the web-based documentary is not its manyfold multi-vocal and interdisciplinary projects, which more often than not have succumbed to the relatively sudden unplugging of Flash-technology (see Fournier 2023 for an account of the selective archiving of web-based documentaries at the National Film Board of Canada [NFB]), but a larger and re-awakened acceptance of the *sandbox mindset*, which blesses documentary-making as a practice of experimentation.

The research objective I am pursuing with this essay is for one egotistical: to reflect upon my personal journey, which involved facilitating and implementing the sandbox mindset in selected settings associated with interactive documentary development, production, and distribution in Canada and Europe over 15 years. More importantly, I aim to extract the knowledge gained over time, so as to define the sandbox mindset conceptually, and establish how it can be helpful for creative media production moving forward.

In what follows, I will succinctly describe my specific research angle, the methodology I used for this article, while unpacking the sandbox mindset in the form of a framework. I end the paper with a more open discussion.

Methodology

Before entering the more conceptual part of this scholarly essay, it should be noted that most of the knowledge drawn on in writing this text comes from my personal experience. My vantage point is grounded in my practice as a former employee of the NFB, and subsequently an independent maker of i-docs, an organizer of interactive documentary events (e.g., the Berlin-based monthly Netzdoku network, the DOK Leipzig *Hackathon*, and various conferences and workshops), a practice-based researcher (doing a PhD at Film University Babelsberg, working as a professor at ifs Internationale Filmschule Köln), and an educator (coaching at ARD.ZDF Medienakademie and Łódź Film School, training at several documentary festivals).

In terms of practice specifically relevant to i-docs, I should mention that I have authored and produced (*GDP*, 2009; *The Hole Story Interactive*, 2010; *Atterwasch*, 2013; *Field Trip*, 2019), developed (*Bauhaus Spirit*, 2016), and distributed (*Fort McMoney*, 2013) interactive documentary in Canada and in Germany over the timespan of 15 years.

My research on the sandbox mindset can be considered a form of "analytic autoethnography" (Anderson 2006), as I am, among other things, trying to make a con-

tribution to both practice and theory (Anderson 2006, p. 373). The autoethnography was then complemented and filled out by means of desktop research performed between November 2023 and April 2024. I consulted a range of online journals and scholarly databases, and read a number of books directly relating to interactive documentaries, which are included in the bibliography.

The autoethnographic effort is here focused on offering what the sociologist Herbert Blumer calls a *sensitizing concept* (Blumer 1954). Such concepts, according to Bowen (2006), "draw attention to important features of social interaction and provide guidelines for research in specific settings" (ibid., 14). In my case, my methodology does not seek to come up with a research agenda, but aims rather at generating situated insights, or as Charmaz (2003) would put it: "Although sensitizing concepts may deepen perception, they provide starting points for building analysis, not ending points for evading it" (ibid., p. 259).

The Sandbox Mindset

Interactive documentaries are the product of a process whose outcome is always uncertain. As in other forms of documentary, the audiovisual material can be designed, but not fully planned for, as protagonists come and go, realities in the field shift, and the storyline needs to adapt. Reality unfolds as the project is developed, meaning that a scripted narrative might be great to secure funding, but chances are that this narrative will change substantially in the timeframe of a year, as protagonists go through life events.

Another aspect is the technology. Technologies underlying interactive documentaries have changed fast, especially when looking back at the three generations of the web. Between the start of a project and its completion, an entire technical generation might already have come and gone. Some projects, budgeted for one technology, are immediately out of sync with consumer habits when published. This was, for instance, the case with i-docs that were built for the desktop, once the mobile internet established itself as the default web. The fast-paced evolution of technology is the single most important factor that rendered i-doc-making more uncertain and less established than traditional documentary making.

The notoriously difficult funding landscape of the film business is particularly tricky in the i-doc sector as i-docs are treated as in-betweens: projects that are part art, part journalism, part documentary, part innovation, and part game. This feeling that your next i-doc project will again fall between the cracks of strictly defined funds (game fund or media art fund) is shared by i-doc makers globally. Even though the funding climate might have been more advantageous for a while in certain countries, such as France and Canada, here, too, it remains a highly uncertain endeavor.

As a result of this high level of uncertainty, i-doc makers are sailing in choppy waters… and there is no compass to help them navigate. This was particularly true in the heyday of i-doc-making, when there were very few models and inspirations to provide guidance. Individuals making i-docs in the early days created from scratch, as there were no recipes to follow even given formats of screen to produce for. Reinventing the screen, coding your own video player, represents a particularly challenging production setting.

From a cultural perspective, interactive documentary-making is a significative practice of open culture. In production terms, i-doc making is similar to other digital production cultures in that it shares the methods of agile production (Dubois 2021, 25), very often also that of design thinking (Gaudenzi, 2017)and in the development stages, co-creation (Gaudenzi, 2013). Most of these elements can be traced back even further to computer-assisted innovations in a variety of fields, such as game design (Nash, 2017). This said, i-doc teams and collectives have experimented with these methods in such a variety of settings (e.g., countries, production traditions) and such breadth (e.g., mixing media types, playing with the limits of genres), that they have informed other fields of creation, such as virtual-reality storytelling (Rose 2018) and digital journalism (Dowling 2022), to name just two.

I-docs are generally quite good at pulling interdisciplinary contents and forms together. For instance, it is not rare to see i-doc projects featuring photography and illustration as well as 3D modelling and software development. The morphing and recombination of genres, between journalism and games cultures, via film and documentary theatre (interactivity, live performativity) speak to the openness with which i-doc creators experiment. This is also true for the narrative styles, where storytelling from print traditions (graphic novels for instance) are transposed onto the web (e.g. *The Boat, 2015*) or fiction onto documentary (e.g. *The Art of Pho, 2011*). In terms of story, projects such as *Gaza Sderot* (2009) or *The Enemy* (2014), but also *Alma* (2013) and many others are particularly effective in bringing polarized positions into one interface and confronting audiences with multiple perspectives at once. A possible antidote to the fragmentation of contents and the contested notion of echo chambers (Dubois & Blank 2018). This is outside the scope of this paper, but could make for a useful contribution in the times we live in.

In what might sound banal at first, interactive documentaries are situated practices. They are situated in both time and space. It is important not to see them as ahistorical. They do not come *out of nowhere*, they are rather a moment of crystallization of media, drawing-in and remediating different creative practices such as creative writing, web design, and creative coding. I-docs are a phenomenon growing out of open culture (Powell 2015), where open access to content via open licenses, open web standards, and open or commons-based peer production (Benkler 2006) are the norm. The co-construction of meaning and knowledge is particularly well-represented here, challenging traditional audiovisual single-author-style setups. At

the same time, the "everyone can take part" ideal remains an ideal, and it must be stressed that in terms of both production as well as audience involvement, i-docs in practice sometime fall short of the participatory ethos. Productions such as GDP (2009), which were geared towards participation, for instance, failed to draw in the masses either on social media or in the communities. This said, the point I'm trying to make is that the spirit, the mindset of i-docs, is to be situated a larger open movement, here trying to open up documentary practice and circulation.

I-doc productions are also situated in geographical space, with projects mainly coming out of Western countries such as France and Canada, and then further down the list Australia, the USA, The Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland. This said, there have been notable productions out of Latin America and Asia, but with a reduced output.

In most of i-doc hotspots, there is already a creative ecosystem of design agencies, web developers and artists. There are also sometimes major institutions, such as the CNC in France, which has been a critical source of funding for i-docs for several years, or the National Film Board in Canada, something of a relic of ancient, more socialistic audiovisual times. There would be more to say, but I will limit myself to underlining that as a public producer of audiovisual content, the NFB has played a key role in metropolitan centers such as Montréal, Toronto, and Vancouver to further the already bustling production ecosystems and thereby create a particularly active hive of i-doc development.

During *the i-doc decade*, it can be asserted that interactive documentaries made a substantial contribution to how storytelling is understood, breaking out of established genres and crossing over the aisle to other disciplines and sectors. The documentary sector was certainly one direct benefactor, but many (situated) institutions have taken advantage of innovations in storytelling.

Defining the Sandbox Mindset

The sandbox mindset is the most prominent legacy of the i-doc movement. I say this because beyond the beautiful and often professionally crafted i-doc works, only a handful will be ported over to the next digital age. One case in point is *Bear 71*, which after having been released on the web, got revamped as a VR experience. This is an absolute outlier, as most productions remain stuck with the affordances of the web 2.0 phase of development. The influence in terms of storytelling thus fades and gets beaten back by social media omnipresence, and what some call the metaverse (Ball 2021). Once the dust settles on i-docs' golden age, one ingredient of i-docs continues to make noise, refuses to go to rest. That ingredient is related to the process, not the – now largely broken – product, and pertains to what is most transferable and interoperable of all: the mindset.

A mindset is something that can be located on the individual and the collective (and/or institutional) levels. It is a concept that helps sensitize makers of open culture more generally to a set of attributes that are otherwise never made explicit. It is not 100% tangible, but since it stems from the behavioral sciences, it can be described with a relatively clear combination of attributes. Before characterizing the sandbox mindset, I will define it, bouncing off William H. Dutton's work on quite a different phenomenon, the "cyber security mindset". Dutton defines the cyber security mindset as: "a set of attitudes, beliefs and values that motivate individuals to continually act in ways to secure themselves and their network of users, such as by acquiring technical skills, new practices or changing their behaviour online" (Dutton 2017, 3). The emphasis on attitudes, beliefs, and values is particularly transferable to other domains.

I define the sandbox mindset as a set of attitudes, beliefs, and values that encourage individuals and institutions to continually act in a manner that fosters experimentation. My choice of this notion of the sandbox mindset has to do with practice: It appears to me as something essential to both i-doc makers and i-doc-making institutions, and to be a widespread phenomenon. Its relevance is also very much engrained in the fact that it is transferable to other creative sectors that employ prototyping. One such sector is that of computer programming, where sandboxing is an established term for describing controlled programming environments (Prevelakis & Spinellis 2001).

Let me characterize the sandbox mindset from the bottom-up, starting with the individual level. Institutions are made up of individuals, and even though they are more than the sum of the people who belong to them (see below), it seems sensible to first look at the characteristics proper to a sandbox mindset in the smallest unit.

What is the set of attitudes, beliefs, and values that fuel a sandbox mindset? As part of the set, I can confidently say that a positive and proactive attitude is the first characteristic that all sandboxes should have. When someone moves out of their comfort zone, for instance, by going on a camping trip in the wild, they take the risk of being exposed to bad weather, wild fauna and flora, and cold lakes. Not every member of a team that goes on a canoe trip or works on i-docs possess this attitude, but if the team is to thrive, this kind of constructive, positive, confident, and solution-oriented attitude should be dominant. One who can be resilient in moments of adversity and deal pragmatically with what's thrown at them is able to find a way through the hardship. Acknowledging that a catch-all expression is always a shortcut, and at the risk of eventually raising at least some eyebrows, I call this attitude *The Happy Camper*.

Second, people working on *uncertain outcomes* such as i-docs, computer games, or similar interactive cultural products need to have a profound belief in trial-and-error. Setbacks are common: there can be funding shortfalls, new tech standards may be introduced in the middle of during production, or interactive storytelling fails to resonate with the target audience. The individual can gain by anticipating

such setbacks and staying focused on versioning, prototyping, and the longer term goal. Trial-and-error is the bread and butter of the sandbox mindset. It's how an interface gets made, ripped apart, and made again. It's how a prototype gets coded, tested, left aside, and coded anew. It takes patience and coping strategies straight out of the psychologist's handbook. I call the individual facing these challenges *The Committed*. They are good at receiving feedback and facing critique. The Committed integrates the feedback and tries to improve the product while remaining farsighted.

While values are hard to define, due to the "duality of values as constructs that reside between thought and action" (Scharlach, Hallinan, & Shifman 2023), for the purpose of this chapter, I am sticking to *value as principle* only, which in Heinich's understanding is a form of fundamental compass orienting one's judgment (Heinich 2020). There are other forms of values, such as discursive constructs (ibid.), that I am consciously leaving out for space reasons. Thus, the Committed Happy Camper needs to also stick to a set of values that relate to personal ethics or *stable personal attributes* (Scharlach, Hallinan, & Shifman 2023). If I'm a committed person happily camping out, but with a hunch to perfection, I will need to respect that and deliver a design that is of high quality. My colleagues might deliver rougher parts, but as long as I am happy with my own work ethic and that I can protect it, this is what counts. The personal ethic might involve "details" such as being on time at production meetings. Some of these ethics will need to be negotiated in the team so that they do not lead to disappointment or conflict. Being transparent about one's ethics in the planning stage of a project is something that pays off in subsequent phases such as development, production, and post-production. I call the individual who stays close to their own values *The Grounded*.

When the Happy Camper, the Committed and the Grounded meet at once in the form of a single individual, do we have a leader in the field of creative media in front of us? Not yet, I would argue. Only extraordinary personalities can push innovative and experimental projects forward, and for this, one additionally needs to be a risk-taker. That means not waiting for the dust to settle, but rather moving fast and, for example, testing and adopting new tools and methods early. It means investing time in uncertain outcomes and taking decisions that might seem counterintuitive. This appetite for risk is definitely an ingredient that the sandbox mindset requires, alongside the other three key features of sandboxing.

Fig. 1: The four main characteristics of the sandbox mindset

Proactiveness	Committedness	Groundedness	Risk-taking
The Happy Camper	The Committed	The Grounded	The Risk-Taker

The sandbox mindset can be performed individually or as part of a community of practice. The idea is that users need to prioritize the sandbox, here taken as a metaphor for the framework in which one experiments in all aspects of their i-doc practice. Rather than following a learned set of practices or habits, individuals can internalize this mindset in ways that motivates them to prioritize experimentation.

The Sandbox: Not Child's Play

Institutions, as I have noted, are more than the sum of the individuals that compose them. In fact, strictly speaking, institutions have rules and formal limitations that make them independent of the single unit, the individual (Hodgson 2006).

When your community of practice is a cultural institution, there is value in taking the sandbox metaphor at face value. Strictly speaking, in order to foster the practice of the sandbox mindset for its individuals or teams, an institution needs to a) adopt a *box* and b) level the *sand*. These initial actions, not the institution in itself, frame the mindset, and it is the individuals within institutions that enact the mindset.

The box can be understood here as an ethical framework. In a recent talk opening the Conference on Interactive Documentary, the Dean of the Lucerne School of Design, Film and Art, Jacqueline Holzer, said that institutions are "thrusts of integrity and trust", calling on higher education institutions to take responsibility for creating the ideal conditions for experimentation to unfold. In other words, mechanisms need to be put in place that prevent capture (i.e., arms-length agreements between i-doc-makers and funders, advisory boards, regular audits, and other checks and balances). Although a range of institutional models would need to be discussed, this is outside the scope of this paper.

In my own research on impactful storytelling (Dubois 2021), I came across the "impact pathways framework" of Notley, Gregory, and Lowenthal (2017), which suggests a framework for generating social impact while sticking to a number of ethical guidelines. This is one of many frameworks that echo the groundedness in values presented earlier at the individual level. At the institutional level, innovators need to create that framework and to defend it against internal institutional pressures. Institutions need to allow for these frameworks to be implemented so as to ensure that the mindset can be enacted by teams and individuals. In other words, designing the box translates into defining and sticking to a vision of experimentation, a creativity mission, and a concrete innovation agenda.

Once a collectively agreed upon framework and rules are in place, it allows for the unleashing of creativity and experimenting with technology, aesthetics, and narrative at will. Experimentation-happy settings allow for re-creating from scratch. Think video players in 2004. Every larger institution with experimentation at its core

would come up with a player of its own, innovating in the nature of features. This is also true for the undoing of established production pipelines.

This second phase is what distinguishes freed up projects from those that have undergone institutional capture. In the audiovisual sector, there are innumerable examples of production cultures that don't allow for genuine originality or creativity. Sometimes broadcasters see themselves wrapped up in red tape, unable to free themselves from the chains of bureaucracy. In other cultural settings, a legal sword of Damocles stifles creative teams, with legal departments, as we can often observe, dominating the institutional culture of film archive institutions or media companies. This risk-aversiveness results in limited innovation.

In the field of interactive documentary (and science for that matter) impact measurement is smothering the sandbox mindset. For this reason, creative teams need to call for, take charge of, and shelter within institutions that have a more multi-layered understanding of impact. I have written about the shortcomings of measuring impact in the traditional quantitative way elsewhere (Dubois 2020).

In order to adopt a sandbox mindset at the institutional level, there needs to be a clear awareness among its constituents that experimentation and innovation don't come for free. They entail risk-taking and actively protecting the box against traditional or corporate institutional reflexes. It is for this reason that many institutions, be they higher education and research institutions such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) or the University of the West of England have come up with boxes in the form of studios, labs, and hubs. It is also the reason why the BBC has kickstarted its R&D department. Film schools have multiplied laboratories (cf. Skövde municipality and university's PlayLab, Film University Babelsberg's Creative Exchange Studio, Visual Narrative Lab at Łódź Film School) – enabling a production culture rooted in a research-creation approach, more or less[5] detached from institutional contingencies.

Producers have also created temporary units (e.g., NFB Interactive, Interactive Media Foundation), initially oriented towards prototyping work, celebrating work-in-progress over final works. Festivals have floated experimental sections (Visions du réel's *id w*, DOK Leipzig's *NetLab* and *Hackathon*, the IDFA's *DocLab*,[6] etc.) all of which are built around interdisciplinary creation workshops and hands-on project development.

5 Some institutional labs are dependent on the agendas of their funders, whether these are foundations or have another legal form. This can put a dent into the quality of sandboxing. This is particularly true of sponsored labs, where the mindset can be hijacked. As with most mindsets, their adoption is vulnerable to capture.

6 Out of the list of festivals here, only the DocLab is still alive, while the other festivals have partly changed the names of their innovative sections and programming.

By adopting frameworks that enable teams to play, institutions have made space for new ideas and projects to trickle through. Yet in these innovative settings, interactive documentary projects are not *de facto* in line with what film scholars would refer to as avant-garde cinema (Dulac 1994), a concept much closer to the modern one of disruption, i.e. breaking with what was there before. This is not necessarily what is meant here, since the sandbox is more open to technological, aesthetic, and narrative recombinations, assemblages, and convergences. The mindset does encourage experimentation, but not to the point of completely overhauling a genre, institution, or previous working methods. To take an approximate metaphor: It is important to keep the box and not throw it out with the bathwater.

Once the mindset is adopted, hurdles will continue to arise, even in small production settings such as DIY collectives. When working on the interactive documentary *Field Trip* between 2017 and 2019, the team I was part of had to engage in pre-conflict mediation. This was our attempt at levelling the sand within the pre-defined project. So even though the creative juices were flowing as a result of a relatively clear project box, production realities such as funding shortfalls and cumbersome partnerships kept pitting the team against challenges. Here the box continuously had to be resized. This put stress on the team members and prevented the framework from achieving stability.

Ceteris paribus, when the box is relatively stable, as in the case of labs that are funded over a longer period of time, a dynamic and iterative process guarantees innovation, as Lena Thiele and I have previously described elsewhere (Dubois & Thiele 2022). Then it is time to play with the sand. Determining how much experimentation is healthy depends on who is playing the role of masters of ceremony. In most interactive documentary works, these key people are called creative directors, interactive producers, or simply authors. They are the ones pulling the strings of the creative effort on a day-to-day basis.

Conclusion

Based on my own practitioner's journey, and observing what colleagues in my interactive documentary community of practice have reported, I have gathered a few additional insights that directly stem from the adoption of a sandbox mindset.

First, the sandbox mindset that could be observed in the i-docs community is no flash in the pan. Even if the genre is now entrenched in niche areas and has lost its mainstream appeal as a result of new consumer habits, the sandbox mindset has lasting social significance in the here and now. It is not just carrying the flame of open culture, but is shaping how documentaries are made today in tangible and concrete ways. The sandbox mindset determines how authenticity plays out today, how

the fabrication of meaning, more than the passing of truth or information, is being carried out.

Second, institutions need to take risks in financial terms, i.e., they have to allow for an innovative space that explicitly does not expect a positive return on investment. In other words, open culture projects such as i-docs need budgets that allow them to breathe, but, more importantly, they should be produced with independence: independence from the conservative and narrow-minded idea that mistakes should not be made and every expense needs to pay off. Institutions that are in it for the long haul have to permit failure, such as choosing the wrong story at the right time (cf. my book chapter on i-doc GDP [Dubois 2024]). This said, successful leveraging of the sandbox mindset is not correlated significantly with available resources, but rather with the level of risk-taking guided by a conscious rejection/active management of impact expectations.

Third, it is only possible to anchor a long-term sandbox mindset at the institutional level in a minority of observable settings. This begs for a cool-headed assessment of institutional setups beyond brand names and reputations. Creative media makers should always be on the lookout for the core characteristics of the sandbox mindset when deciding where to work or who to partner. At the ifs Internationale Filmschule Köln, the choice of partners for our students' production exercises always includes a search for institutions that have a track record of experimentation and do not need an introduction to what the sandbox mindset might entail.

While more research needs to be done to deepen the understanding of production cultures and how they are compatible or not with the sandbox mindset, especially at the institutional level, the sensitizing concept might help creative storytellers to keep the community of practice alive and kicking.

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Audiovisual Works

Alma, 2013
The Art of Pho, 2011
Atterwasch, 2013
Bauhaus Spirit, 2016
Behind the Mask, 2023
The Boat, 2015
Bowling for Columbine, 2002
Darwin's Nightmare, 2004
Do Not Track, 2015
The Enemy, 2014
Field Trip, 2019
Fort McMoney, 2013
Gaza Sderot, 2009
GDP, 2009
The Hole Story Interactive, 2010
Hollow, 2013
The Quipu Project, 2015

Ulster End of Year Show, 2022
Welcome to Pine Point, 2011
Workingman's Death, 2005