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## **Script Development as a 'Wicked Problem'**

### **Abstract**

Both a process and a set of products, influenced by policy as well as people, and incorporating objective agendas at the same time as subjective experiences, script development is a core practice within the screen industry – yet one that is hard to pin down and, to some extent, define. From an academic research perspective, we might say that script development is a 'wicked problem' precisely because of these complex and often contradictory aspects. Following on from a recent *Journal of Screenwriting* special issue on script development (2017, vol. 8.3), and in particular an article therein dedicated to reviewing the literature and 'defining the field' (Batty et al 2017), an expanded team of researchers follow up on those ideas and insights. In this article, then, we attempt to theorise script development as a 'wicked problem' that spans a range of themes and disciplines. As a 'wicked' team of authors, our expertise encompasses screenwriting theory, screenwriting practice, film and television studies, cultural policy, ethnography, gender studies and comedy. By drawing on these critical

domains and creative practices, we present a series of interconnected themes that we hope not only suggests the potential for script development as a rich and exciting scholarly pursuit, but that also inspires and encourages other researchers to join forces in an attempt to solve the script development ‘puzzle’.

### **Key words**

script development; wicked problem; research paradigms; research methods; screen industry; creative practice

### **Introduction**

In this article, a group of Australia-based scholar-practitioners argue that the complexity of script development – both as a creative/professional practice and an area of research – makes it a ‘wicked problem’ (Rittel and Webber 1973), and also one whose industrial location almost certainly requires collaboration between the academy and the screen industries to define, understand and address it. The fundamental difficulty of defining script development has previously been identified by Batty et al. (2017), Price (2017) and Kerrigan and Batty (2016), namely in relation to it meaning different things to different people, under different circumstances, at different times, and for different agendas. In this article, we work from a basic definition of script development as a gradual, time-bound process of improving a ‘screen idea’ (Macdonald 2013): the object (idea) at the heart of a collaborative process of devising for the screen. How we define improvement – and its associated processes, roles, texts, discourses, values, outcomes and audiences – are contested issues that we explore in this article.

In particular, this article is offered as an extension upon the insights and ideas expressed in a special issue of the *Journal of Screenwriting* on script development (2017, vol. 8.3), wherein the editors joined forces to review the literature to date with the aim of laying the ground work in order to define the field. Where that article asked foundational questions of script development, especially ‘how is it defined in industry discourse and screenwriting scholarship?’ (Batty et al. 2017: 225), in this article two of the original authors have collaborated with six other screenwriting researchers to ask exactly *why* script development might defy easy definition, not least because of its complexity and relationship with multiple factors and contexts. Where Batty et. al previously concluded the literature on script development ‘is wide, varied and multi-faceted; and for our purposes here, arguably fragile and still emerging’ (2017: 240), in this article we take this idea further by proposing that script development be approached, at least within screenwriting scholarship, as a ‘wicked problem’.

Problems that are inherently difficult to define, analyse and address have been described as ‘wicked,’ and we propose that in the shared realms of screen studies, screen practice and the screen industry, script development is a significant and wicked problem. The process of script development displays many of the ten characteristics defined in Rittel and Webber’s (1973) theorisation of ‘wicked social problems’, which distinguish them from simple problems, or even complex problems that are usually solved in a linear fashion. Rittel and Webber define<sup>i</sup> the characteristics of a wicked problem thus:

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but better or worse.

4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation'; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error, and every attempt counts significantly.
6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution.
10. The social planner has no right to be wrong (i.e., planners are liable for the consequences of the actions they generate).

(1973: 160-168)

Wicked problems are an inherent, and inevitable, result of complex organisational structures, with Rittel and Webber's definitions employed in such 21<sup>st</sup> century examples as sustainability, food security, terrorism and institutional failure. The 'problem' of script development may seem trivial in contrast to these examples, yet the method of analysis and reflection provides us with a new way of approaching what has seemed like an intractable industry problem. Wicked problem analysis seems particularly appropriate to two facets of script development: (1) script development is invested in by a variable, often unstable, community of stakeholders; and (2) solutions are constrained by limited resources within changing social,

commercial and political landscapes (see Conkin and Weil 1998). Further, John Kolko (2012) argues that wicked problems demand interdisciplinary collaboration if solutions are to be found; hence the collective approach of this article, which brings together ‘traditional’ and practice-based researchers from disciplines spanning screenwriting, screen studies, cultural studies, gender, comedy, ethnography and filmmaking. Script development research requires a dialogue between theory and practice – between academic analysis and practical experience – in order to define and address it. Additionally, and not unlike its very practices, script development tends to be chaotic and sporadic, requiring a multi-factored approach that acknowledges the complex contexts in which it operates.

### **Script Development is Complex to Define: Competing Discourses**

Script development has thus far been approached from a number of perspectives, which each define and describe it in different ways. Screenwriting research has tended to frame script development as either creative labour (Maras 1999, Conor 2014), an industrialised system (Bloore 2012), a social process (Kerrigan and Batty 2016), or as poetics (Thompson 2003, Bordwell 2008, Macdonald 2013). Key issues in script development studies include the nature of authorship and the challenges of collaboration (Kerrigan and Batty 2016), and the very problem of defining its practice (Taylor and Batty 2016). In an industrial framework, a script is a highly prescribed document, and development a highly institutionalised set of practices. In this sense, a script is a plan for an industrial process, ‘closer to an architect’s drawing than it is to literature, [and] exists as a blueprint for a film,’ (Minghella 1998: 100). It is a text that has multiple functions that are determined by the role of its reader within the production process. While the architect’s plan is analogous because of the complex

industrial context, the metaphor takes no account of the aesthetics of the literary control of narrative, time and character that are required in scripts.

Script development is also often dominated by the competing discourses of business models or creative processes, with discussion sometimes focused on the tension between these discourses (see Batty et al. 2017). Although these discourses are important in shaping conceptions and practices of script development, they are not sufficient for understanding the complex interrelations at its heart and the multiple logics and systems that govern its contexts. Indeed, script development might be characterised as being at the nexus of such discourses. We thus suggest that all of these lenses be employed, and various discourses engaged, to give a comprehensive, if not more authentic, account of script development.

Development could be described as the process of moving a project from a creative genesis to an industrial activity; a complex and time-consuming, albeit essential, practice. In the context of the screen industry, development means the production of scripts, and encompasses all aspects of that process from the ‘white heat’ of conceiving a new idea, to the satisfaction of casting it, into financial deals that will see it realised. Rarely will a screen project be financed without detailed commitment of ‘story’ to ‘paper’, often guided by the principle of *improvement*.

If improvement is at the heart of development, we can also ask, improvement towards what? On whose terms is this improvement defined? This draws us into theoretical questions of power, control and ideology, and practice-based questions of taste, subjectivity and the development context, all of which make script development a rich source for academic research. Within the question of improvement, we are also faced with defining and unpacking the notion of *quality*: is script development concerned with the quality of a screen idea; with the quality of a script; with the

quality of the writer's execution of their own, or someone else's, idea; or all of the above? Further, how is quality defined, and by whom? Is quality speaking to the content of development (what makes a good drama; what makes a successful horror), or the context in which it takes place (what is the budget; whose vision is it; under what set of rules is it funded)?

Script development might also be understood as the product of cultural policy, which itself enacts multiple competing discourses. Away from the Hollywood studios, national cultural organisations that control and produce cultural products focus on development and the 'quality' of scripts as a management strategy in straitened economic times, because this is perceived as the area of smallest investment and greatest control of risk. In their historical analysis of the Australian film industry, Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka (1988a) employed the metaphor of a 'slippery fish' to frame a commerce/culture binary within which screen production operates. However, unlike other cultural forms such as local theatre, visual arts and literature, screen production is suspended between culture (and cultural debates) and industry (and the discourses of employment, profitability, the language money "speaks") (Dermody and Jacka 1988b). Script development is bound by the same contextual intricacies, including: legislative conditions; government policies and initiatives; volatility in international screen industries and markets; global and national economic factors; technological advancements in screen platforms; and developments in local cultures.

Enacted in different ways over many industries, cultural contexts and individual practices, script development has porous boundaries that see it subsumed into a more discrete stage of making a screenwork (i.e. pre-production). Those 'doing' script development each bring with them their own notions of the practice, from their

perspective as screenwriter, development executive, television network commissioner, producer, director, script editor, script doctor, script consultant, and so forth. This is further complicated by the way in which these roles are undertaken. For some, such as directors and producers, their contribution to the script development process is not fixed; they might not be involved at all, and any participation varies from project to project. For others, their role is not easily distinguished from that of others, such as script editors, script consultants and script doctors (see Bordino 2017; see also Macdonald 2013 Ch.5).

### **Script Development is Complex to Define: Numerous Roles and Perspectives**

Given that research into script development does not want to argue ‘that the practice of script development should be standardised or limited by definition’ (Batty et al. 2017: x), it is important that all perspectives of the practice are incorporated. As Richard Coyne writes, ‘Wicked problems are not objectively given but their formulation already depends on the viewpoint of those presenting them’ (2005: 6). Likewise, the sheer number of stakeholders involved in script development, and the fluidity of their relationships, make it difficult to pin down the perspectives and goals involved.

Development is notorious for involving multitudes of consultants, script editors, story editors, script doctors, executives, and rafts of others who bring their various expertise to bear on the project for what may only be a short time. The power and status of such roles can thus be hazy, and their impact on the project may well be determined only after the social interaction and labour relationship has ended. This fluidity is complicated by the often large number of people involved in development, whose tenure on the project is often uncertain and usually unforeseeable. As Taylor



and Batty note, screen industries have ‘many personnel and departments dedicated to “developing” scripts and many writers with scripts “in development,”’ (2016: 204), but these projects may never progress to the phase of ‘official’ pre-production. One element that may define the phase of development is that very uncertainty about who the core members of the project are, and who wields power. This might help to explain the difficulty Bloore has in charting roles and relations during this phase of a screenwork, because the roles and power are complex and shifting (2012: 69-91; 120-121).

Script development is marked by the dialogic investment and labour of a number of players with competing and often conflicting goals. Writers may view the process of development as one where s/he is provided the space and time to progress the screenplay from its locus of origin to a final draft. After that final draft is submitted, the role of the director is – arguably – to craft the film as closely as possible to the specifications laid down in the screenplay. If the director does not adhere to the requirements of the screenplay, the writer often believes it is due to a deficiency in the director’s ability to understand the words written on the page. However, production is not a straightforward process of translating a screenplay into a screenwork, thus further problematising the (perceived) practice of script development.

Directors are perhaps more aware than writers of the possibilities of further developing a work during production. As an example, Stanley Kubrick recorded the voice-over for *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) by taking a Nagra recorder and a Sennheiser microphone into a hut at the back of his garden, and spending a number of days with lead actor Malcolm McDowell trying different approaches. Kubrick has said about his function as a writer and director:

Rehearsing a scene can also cause script changes. However carefully you think about a scene, and however clearly you believe you have visualized it, it's never the same when you finally see it played. Sometimes a totally new idea comes up out of the blue, during a rehearsal, or even during actual shooting, which is simply too good to ignore. This can necessitate the new scene being worked out with the actors right then and there.

(in Ciment, 1982)

A director who is not also the writer will invariably be closely engaged with the process of development since it is their responsibility to steer the production towards a successful outcome. Yet the role of the director in influencing script development has received little scrutiny. Milcho Manchevski has described the process of working as both writer and director (2014: 275-286), suggesting that the director's job is 'to truly, deeply understand the screenplay' (2014: 276). This deep understanding does not refer only to the story, but also to the meaning and themes that underpin it.

Directors often participate actively in script development and make significant impacts on scripts, even when the credits do not reflect this. For example, when working with screenwriter Jan Sardi on *Mao's Last Dancer* (2009), it was director Bruce Beresford who suggested a change in structure to begin the film in Texas rather than in China, so that Western audiences could better access the drama. This was a significant intervention in the storytelling, yet Beresford did not receive (or seek) a credit for screenwriting or script editing (Beresford 2016).

Arguably, the role of those working in development roles is not to solve problems within the script, but rather to raise questions and indicate where things may

not be working. It is then up to the writer to arrive at solutions to these script issues. Sometimes a writer must navigate how to respond to conflicting notes that may not coincide with the writer's story intentions, displaying a negotiation between personal intent and commercial imperative, often through the script editor as conduit. As story consultant and producer Yvonne Grace notes, 'It's a job that demands the juggling of both creative and administrative information' (2014: 66). Here the writer may need to clarify their aims if their intentions are not clear to the developer, which suggests a further task of script development: that of communicating not only via the script, but also through supplementary documents (formal or informal). At other times, a writer must respond to a 'dumb note' by a powerful executive, and rather than respond in a combative manner that would cause irreparable damage to the project, must creatively work to 'come back to them with a version of their notes that they recognize' (Tolchinsky in Taylor & Batty 2015: 208).

Script development problems sometimes arise when the production hierarchy disagrees about what makes a great script; where they cannot identify a clear and common goal to the process. This, too, often leads to a project plummeting into 'development hell', where work is stalled and never receives the elusive 'green light' into production. Hierarchy in script development is perhaps less defined than in production, and 'development hell' often arises due to the problem that writers simply do not have the power to say no (see Conor 2014). Script development may thus be understood as a social process, which foregrounds the complex and dynamic interrelations between these roles over creative or industrial contexts and goals. In this way, script development would be seen to follow a broad trajectory from a screen idea entertained by an individual, towards a shared goal of screen production. Sometimes, of course, this process also continues during actual production, such as the need for

scenes to be re-written, dubbing, and arguably also subtitling as ‘re-writing’ (and see Macdonald 2013:74-6, 87-9 *passim*).

Stayci Taylor (2015) has noted that it is difficult to define where development begins and ends; nevertheless, practices of screen production are commonly divided into three phases (or acts): pre-production, production and post-production. These phases are usually considered axiomatic within screen industry, and the terms are in such widespread use that they are familiar to many outside industry. Similarly, we might understand script development as a phase in the collaborative process of screen content creation that occurs prior to pre-production. Before preparation for production begins, ideas and people must gather and cohere: this is the process of development, and that process is marked by a particular social organisation.

### **Script Development is Complex to Define: Porous Boundaries and Multiple Objects**

Despite the common agreement that script development is a gradual, time-bound process, it can be difficult to extract ‘script development’ from wider understandings of ‘story development’ and ‘script production’. Even if, for our purposes, we narrow script development down to the development of the document that guides the production of the screenwork – usually known by terms such as screenplay, teleplay or script – the nature and function of this piece of writing is already contested in discourse and scholarship. As Steven Price writes, ‘The most familiar and insidious argument against the literary status of the screenplay is that it is nothing more than a planning document’ (2010: 44).

Part of the complexity of defining script development, then, is this lack of agreement on its primary object. Is the goal to write the best possible screenplay,

produce the best possible screenwork, or assemble the most productive team? Are the core objects and goals a matter of each stakeholder's perspective? A primary confusion of script development surrounds whether the process refers solely to the development of the screenplay itself – which may include pre- or ancillary documents, such as pitch, treatment and script notes – or whether the term should also address the development of the final screenwork. A secondary confusion concerns the role of people other than the writing team as contributors to the process.

Emphasising the development of the screenplay, and not the development of the final screenwork, is tempting for scholars and researchers because it reduces the focus of study to those in the production process, i.e. those whose roles affect the script as it appears on paper (and, by extension, excluding those whose influence is solely upon the resulting screenwork). Script development in this instance is arguably more containable and finite, with a more obvious beginning and end, which offers a greater chance for clarity about the process. But this still leaves the problem that the object at the heart of script development will be defined differently by people who perform different roles. For example, unlike a writer or script consultant, a director might not view development as a linear, finite practice. If we acknowledge the power of the director to influence the trajectory of a work, then the role of the director (and others, such as influential actors) can only be taken into account by looking at development as a process that is about the final work, not merely the story on the page.

Indeed, allowing for the influence of various screen production roles in script development might provoke an inclination to view it as a process that occurs throughout production, i.e. one that is centrally occupied with improving the final screenwork. It has to be acknowledged that writers are often excluded from the

production process, and therefore may understandably see development as about improving the screenplay rather than the final work. In contrast, the director (for example) being present until the conclusion of the production process, may be more inclined to define development as a process that extends throughout production, beyond submission of the final draft screenplay. To wrestle with this research predicament, we raise here arguments for and against defining development as principally about the screenplay or the final work, or as being essentially located in the role of the producer, director or others in development.

At a first glance, it would seem advantageous to narrow the vexed term ‘development’ to the screenplay, in order to reduce the size and complexity of the subject (and object) under discussion. Such a definition allows for a contained time period that commences with the engagement of the writer and ends when production begins. Even then, however, there must be an acknowledgement that development occurs not only within the script ‘department’ (e.g., screenwriter and script editor), but also via the contributions of other creative personnel who might temporarily step into that department. This is reflected in Macdonald’s (2013) proposal of the term ‘screen idea’ as a locus of discussion in a fluid ‘screen idea work group’, rather than the paper-based screenplay.

Is the end goal of script development to maximise the quality of the screenplay or the final screenwork? These two goals are often assumed to be analogous, but this may not be the case. A linked concept is the notion of the screenplay as a ‘blueprint’ or foundation of a screenwork. This assumes that the better the screenplay, the better the final on-screen outcome. Director Akira Kurosawa has attested that a good director can make a masterpiece out of a good screenplay, but a good director cannot make a good film out of a ‘bad’ screenplay (1983: 193). Taken to its extreme, this

notion implies that if it were possible to write a ‘perfect’ screenplay, the production team would merely need to ‘join the dots’ and complete the project in conformity with the prescriptions of the screenplay. But is this the case?

A director who is also the writer may develop a project in a linear fashion, as Manchevski has indicated is his own process: firstly, working as ‘the writer’ and refusing to consider issues of budget and cast; then terminating the employment of ‘Manchevski the writer’ and commencing the role of ‘Manchevski the director’, who turns to the problems of logistics and the art of the possible with finite resources. That being said (and acknowledging this article focuses almost exclusively on developments whereby the screenwriter and director are separate roles) a writer-director may simultaneously enact both processes during all stages of production. A director who is not the writer may not become involved until all the finance is in place, as Beresford did on *Mao’s Last Dancer* (2009); or they may become involved before the writer is commissioned, as was the case with the film *Lion* (2016). In this example, director Garth Davis was engaged by producer Emile Sherman and met with Saroo Brierley, the author of the underlying work upon which the film was based, before meeting the screenwriter, Luke Davies (Davis 2017). Davis and Davies then had a series of meetings before the writer commenced his draft. Garth Davis received no writing credit on the film, but clearly had a substantial influence upon its development (Davies 2017).

In those perspectives of script development that emphasise it as a social process, the screenplay arguably becomes a means of communication between players. A writer’s integration of an editor’s script notes is, for example, an act of social acknowledgment and inclusion, and the screenplay becomes a beast that mutates to reflect the social relations flowing around it. The ultimate outcome of the

development process from this perspective is not the best possible work of art, craft or commerce, but rather a productive social dynamic that can produce a screenwork. The screen project itself is an emblem of social compromise, although in some situations, it can also reflect inequitable power dynamics.

‘While an ordinary problem is self-contained, a wicked problem is entwined with other problems’ writes John C. Camillus, as part of a checklist for the Harvard Business Review (2008). These other problems include the precarious place of the screenplay in both industrial and academic discourses, which makes script development a *research problem*. This is because the object of study at the centre of the research – the script or screenplay – is already slippery and contested due to ‘its troublesome ghostliness in relation to the film: it is both absent and present, dead and alive, erased yet detectable’ (Price 2010: xi). If the screenplay is only theorised as a means to an end, it becomes difficult to track its development.

### **Script Development is Complex to Define: Variable Contexts, Variable Practices**

Script development encompasses processes ranging from the concrete to the abstract, from the commercial to the creative, and from collective to individual. It can be an idiosyncratic practice, so a research investigation may draw upon a variety of sources for study, ranging from the individual experience of a writer, to the study of successive versions of scripts, to the production and funding contexts that surround them. The complex logics and systems that drive the process of script development, including personal, creative and industrial imperatives, could exist in tension with each other, and this means that it can be a site of conflict.

For many stakeholders, their role and perspective is shaped by their context in the screen industry and the nature of the individual project. For each player and each



project, the stakes are different; their role in the script's development is only one facet of a much broader role. In the case of the screenwriter, their major contribution to the screenwork is the process. The term 'script development' can just as accurately be applied to individual practice (a screenwriter developing a story through one draft or several) as to collaboration (e.g. a story team in a television writers' room). For many – perhaps more so in 'independent' or 'alternative' contexts – the process is thoughtful, interrogated and managed in ways designed to facilitate discovery, including deep reflection into reasons for telling the story and their writerly intentions. For others – more so in 'mainstream' or 'commercial' spaces – script development is little more than a hierarchical process of receiving notes, often filtered through a third party, and making the required changes. From such processes might come such military analogies as 'choosing one's battles' or comparing 'war stories', as screenwriters perceive themselves losing creative agency, or other stakeholders become disillusioned by the potential of the material in a space where screenwriters believe they 'must accept their secondary status and be supplicative; they must disinvest from their work at an early stage' (Conor 2013: 49).

Script development may also take on a number of varying forms, from script development notes, to meetings, to script readings and improvisational workshops. Taylor and Batty have identified that 'those outside of the screen industry rarely understand that development happens, and if they do, they do not really know what it means, how long it takes, and how many people are involved' (2016: 205). The practice of script development is thus as varied as the projects it aims to finesse. As per the core premise of this article, 'it has become clear that a definition of what script development is – and is not – is missing from the literature' (Taylor and Batty 2016: 205).

Beyond text-based documents, script development may take the form of script readings, with feedback from script developers, script editors, directors, producers and actors. Some projects, such as comedies, may further benefit from improvisational workshops, where actors may improvise specific scenarios that may later be integrated into the script. Actors may work with a writer (and/or director) to improvise backstory within the screenplay to flesh out characters and their reactions to certain incidents. For example, the revelation of a moment in a character's history may trigger a response in the present that can then be woven into the screenplay. In this way, not unlike the discussion of writers and directors above, the linearity and texture of script development can emerge from a project's needs, rather than pertaining to an expected format.

There are a variety of other practices that might be discussed under the rubric of script development, and these take different forms across different media and formats. Script development can look different depending on whether the project is for film, television or the web; fictional or factual; is a short, a feature, a series or a serial; studio- or independently produced; and commercial or amateur. Further, various nations have their own cultures around norms of script development, and (from the collective experience of the authors of this article, and in particular Burne, who has worked as an international adapter of drama formats) this can include how development is funded and structured. In the case of television, this can be how it either explicitly borrows its model from existing productions or creates its own ecosystem to suit the show and/or culture in question (see, for example, Redvall 2013).

In a recent 'Series Mania Industry Day' held at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (Melbourne, July 2017), writer and story producer Kelly Lefever

explained to Vince Gilligan – creator of *Breaking Bad* (2008), writer on *The X-Files* (1993) – that Australian television writers’ rooms are given two days to plot an hour-long episode. Gilligan responded:

I’m truly sorry to hear that [...] Most shows in the States you might get a week to break an episode, maybe less. Not 2 days. That’s crazy – no offence. [...] You’ve gotta have time to think it all through. Otherwise you’re running for your life. You’re up your ass with alligators.

(in Knox 2017).

From our collective experiences in, and interactions with those who work in, Australian TV production, we observe that script development – which would usually also include story development – largely occurs beyond the hands of the writer. Script editors, producers and network executives take an influential role in the development process, as scripts move through various industrial levels of approval and production. Script development in this case is not about bringing out the creative best in the story, but is rather a time-driven process of producing shoot-able scripts. Development occurs to service the show. Driven by commercial imperatives, short timelines and tight production budgets, Australian television is producer-led, where writers are a mere part of the process. In contrast, in the UK and US television is much more writer-led; or it is at least more respectful of the writer’s contribution to the show. This is evidenced by factors such as a greater number of, and respect for, showrunners; more authorial status for those who create shows; greater pay; and in the case of screen agencies who fund television (and film) development, more

opportunities for funded writer/story development, as opposed to producer-focussed development programs that are about getting a show on air.

In an era of diminishing audiences for local drama, we feel the time is right to begin researching the particular problem of Australian script development. Questions need to be asked about how script department structures, writers' room sizes, story breaking methods and timelines, the processes for writing and editing scripts, and network executive notes and producer notes – to name a few – function as critical factors in development. Further, how do these factors impact on the creative ownership of and investment in what writers are writing, and on audience ratings?

Now in its 33<sup>rd</sup> year of production, the television series *Neighbours* (1985-) has been a *de facto* training ground for many Australian screenwriters working across film and television. In order to produce over 100 minutes of drama per week, Grundy Television's Reg Watson introduced a particular system of script development. As Dunleavy (2005) notes, the Grundy Organisation model of high turnover, daily soap opera production came about, in part, by the Australian government's increase in local content quotas for television drama in the mid 1970s. These new regulations spurred local producers to devise more efficient production methods, including script development. Networks favoured the more economical soap opera form above the more expensive hour-long drama series format, and by the 1980s the Grundy Organisation had developed a highly efficient method of producing soap opera on a daily basis. For script development, which two of the authors of this article have direct experience of working with, this model involved:

- a storyline room producing scene breakdowns (detailed treatments);
- freelance scriptwriters writing first draft scripts;

- script editors producing second draft scripts and any amendments to shooting scripts;
- and a script producer signing off on final shooting scripts.

Grundy's flagship daily soap opera, *Neighbours*, quickly achieved success domestically and internationally. Although it has been argued that the appeal in UK and Europe of Australian soap exports lay in their representation of sunny, friendly lifestyles (Crofts 1995), Dunleavy suggests that in the UK at least, these productions, with their economies of scale, filled a gap in the serial television market, effectively demonstrating the commercial advantages of five-night-a-week soap scheduling (2005: 376). During each stage of development of shows such as *Neighbours*, producers and network executives give notes, and at second draft stage directors and heads of production departments (wardrobe, location, etc.) also give notes. Thus, whereas in the UK and US the script editor is a 'low level, entry level, staff job' (Macak, cited in Taylor and Batty 2016), in the Grundy/Fremantle (Australian) system the script editor is a high-level staff job given to experienced writers, who further develop story and scripts through a process of re-writing.

Some industry practitioners believe that each individual story and project will dictate its own idiosyncratic path of development. Margot Nash, for instance, resists following 'a predetermined shape', instead attempting to let 'structure emerge out of the material and be a response to the ideas' (2014: 97). There is a widespread assumption that script development affects story outcome, for better or worse. Stories are shaped by production requirements, and script development processes act as a form of gate-keeping to ensure that they conform. Peter Bloore (2012) portrays script development as a creative, legal and industrial process within film production by

which stories can either flounder or prosper, depending on the levels of investment and commitment. The assumption here is that script development processes are impositions, necessary or otherwise, on stories. But what if, in some circumstances, the equation was altered? What if the story to be told determined, for better or worse, its development?

Western serialised television, for instance, relies heavily on a complex web of tribal plots. Some will span a series, while others will endure for only one or two episodes. Serialised drama stories are typically designed to engage an audience's curiosity and irony. In this genre, audiences are often privy to character deception, and they watch to see what will be revealed. In order to achieve such story intricacies, script development processes must produce detailed backstory, maintain character development and ensure continuity. On *Neighbours* (1985-), for example, the tasks of the storyliner, script editor and scriptwriter are to make sure that its collection of serialised narratives are served by a pre-requisite and comprehensive understanding of the entity (and 'world') of Erinsborough, in any story or script meeting. The fictional suburb of Erinsborough, with its contradictory mix of openness and deceit, is a land of open skies and open doors, one in which adults, teenagers and children co-habit and, for a large part of their lives, deceive each other. Whether storylining, editing or writing, the script development processes should serve Erinsborough.

A very different example of story shaping development can be found in script editor Stephen Cleary's account of working with David Tranter, who co-produced and co-wrote the feature film *Sweet Country* (2017). In a recent Facebook post, Cleary describes the very particular collaboration they developed, involving a process whereby Cleary would make a written response to Tranter's verbal (and illustrated) telling of the story (Cleary 2017). This resulted in a draft that was then sent to the

film's director, Warwick Thornton. In his post, Cleary asks: 'How many people who cannot, or don't want to, write in the way "the industry" expects, get to tell their stories?' He goes further to probe, 'How often does "the industry" take the risk of going out on a limb in out of the way places to find startling stories that break open the world in a new way for audiences?' (2017). Implicit in Cleary's account is a suggestion that some stories, or screen ideas, produce distinct methods of development.

### **Defining Script Development through Academic Research**

Defining script development is a challenge because it raises so many issues, including the competing discourses used to describe it, the numerous roles and perspectives involved, the porous boundaries of the process, the multiple objects that concentrate attention, the variable contexts and practices across media, forms and cultures, and the difficulty in defining the nature of 'improvement.' This range of intersecting complexities is what makes script development such a wicked problem: one where solutions and definitions are recursive, and 'where the search for a solution never stops' (Rittel and Webber 1973, cited by Camillus 2008). Academic intervention in this area offers the potential for research collaboration, which can bring multiple disciplines and approaches to bear. Screenwriting research is particularly well placed to interrogate this nexus of theory and practice, and research will draw on and impact on fields as diverse as media studies, political economy, aesthetics, ethnography, cultural policy, and gender studies.

Further, script development is arguably the foundation of screen production, and while the industry has always been well aware of its importance – its dramatic, mysterious and potent aspects – these processes are yet to be properly scrutinised.

The screen stories nations tell are predetermined by the industrial, economic and political realities that frame production. Script development research means the exploration of complex political, social, cultural, economic and legal forces that shape the screen industry. A great deal of information relating to funding decisions around development and approaches to scriptwriting is not being recorded, and as such these activities are frequently mythologised (see Conor 2013).

As a less explored (though rapidly emerging) area of study compared to production, both within the screen industry and within academic research, there is insufficient research to place development within broader economic and organisational contexts. Industry processes are thinly documented because significant quantities of such information remain commercially sensitive, are not recorded, or are deemed irrelevant. The tendency is that once a screenwork is released or broadcast, the final version becomes the focus of attention and the development processes are forgotten. Academic research can work to bring documentation to light, put it in context, and develop new understandings of practices, objects, goals and outcomes.

### **Script Development Research: Future Directions from an Australian Perspective**

There are a number of directions that research on script development might take, from conceptual interrogations to case studies of industrial practice. The study of script development can help media studies trace and grasp the complex relationships between globalisation of media corporations and media practices.

As a brief case study then, we look to the Australian television industry, whence the Grundy/Fremantle system of television script development, as noted above, has been disseminated around the world, via the sale of Grundy format shows such as the previously mentioned *Neighbours* (1985-) and *Sons and Daughters* (1982-



1987). While this system has remained in place in countries such as New Zealand and Germany, *Neighbours* underwent a restructure in 2007, driven by budget cutting. The storyline room was cut<sup>ii</sup> in favour of producer and freelance writer story generation, and greater responsibility for development was put on to script editors. The impact on story quality and the script development process from this major shift in practice has not yet been investigated, and would be a useful approach for those interested in studies of both industry and creative practice. Questions that might be asked include: what has been the impact of outsourcing script development to freelancers? What is the (new) role of script editors in story development? How much input does a network have into television story development?

Australia has a long history of producing one-hour prime-time dramas, that in current times has tended towards romantic comedy shows such as *Offspring* (2010), *The Wrong Girl* (2016) and *Doctor Doctor* (2016); legal dramas such as *Janet King* (2014) and the short-lived *Newton's Law* (2017); and period dramas such as *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* (2012) and *The Doctor Blake Mysteries* (2013). Here we might ask: how does script development differ in one-hour and half-hour drama? How are writers' rooms staffed, and is it the same people who write the actual scripts? How much input do producers and network executives have in one-hour and half-hour drama script development?

A third and increasingly popular format in Australia is the short-run series of four to eight episodes, sometimes called the mini-series or serial. Recent examples include *The Kettering Incident* (2016), and *Secret City* (2016). These formats are veering towards a showrunner model, as seen in the UK and US, where the writer follows the script from creation through to on-set supervision and post-production. For *The Kettering Incident*, Vicki Madden very deliberately took the title and role of

showrunner, and fought hard to convince the network to trust this structure for script development (Madden 2016). How this works in practice, how much influence this model has on the resultant story product, and how this impacts on the role of producers and networks to influence script development, are all important questions that research might ask.

Research into script development has the potential to improve the efficiency of practice and the quality of the process's outcomes. In her essay lamenting what she believes are failing practices of script development in the US – namely, Hollywood – Barbara Schock (1995) provided a deliberately cynical summary of the process, which sees the screenwriter disempowered, the vision compromised by untimely and overly rigorous interventions, and the project ultimately shelved because, at the end of the script development process, everyone involved has lost faith in the potential of the idea/story. Not only is it good academic practice to interrogate wicked problems in the field, also such an endeavour may assist in creating more effective processes for both the experience of the practitioner and the quality of the product. It seems clear that understandings of script development – what it is, how it works and what/who it is for – are nebulous, even while practitioners forge ahead without necessarily questioning the processes within which they engage. Best professional practice might be achieved by acknowledging and examining this wicked problem.

Research into the practices of script development, for example by reviews of industry documents and ethnographies, is potentially rewarding for both those participating in the practice and those studying it. For example, who do script developers themselves turn to for definitive answers as to what makes a 'good' script, and what can this tell us about how development is practiced? Is there a tension between these directives and the lived experience of what makes a project work?

Many have turned to script ‘gurus’, such as Robert McKee and Christopher Vogler, believing they can provide a quasi-scientific formula for a successful story structure; however, as discussed, there cannot always be the same formula for every screenwork. Our question, then, is can research contribute to solutions for the conflicting pressures, for screenwriters and script developers, to seek innovation on the one hand *and* conform to the safe and familiar on the other? Can empirical research provide answers to this?

Examination of unusual or unique script development practices might serve as models for others, or open up further questions for examination. For example, in his reflection on the unique development process that led to the Australian feature *Sweet Country* (2017), Stephen Cleary suggests that mainstream development organisations, with their tendency to micro-manage, cannot do some stories justice, especially when they require ‘real trust in the practitioners’ (2017). That his influence saw this particular story brought to the screen, raises some further questions: what other stories have found their own unique development processes that have enabled them to be screened? How might a dialogical approach to script development, in which the story and the storytellers from their earliest conception are valued, help uncover these processes?

How, too, might the idea of improvement work as a guiding concept to investigate development practices? Could it be used to focus in on analysing particular domains of development, such as script reader notes or screen agency policy, to say something specific about how each of those domains operates? Screenwriting manuals and guides, and their ancillary competitions and talent schemes – all of them imbued with a clear sense of aspiration and achievement that promote a sense that ‘improvement’ is possible (see Macdonald 2013; Conor 2014) –

could also be sources of interrogation here. With their ‘can do’ attitude, and in the case of competitions and talent schemes that aim to find the next new voice, their sense that there is a successful formula, a line of research could examine the qualities they espouse (directly or indirectly) to try and understand from where they emerge. Are they evidence-based? Do they ethically or falsely empower the reader-writer? Are they creating a reality-check or a mythology?

The ‘how to’ and emerging practitioner market sits at one end of the spectrum of script development suggested by manuals, guides, competitions and talent schemes. If we were to follow this spectrum, it might progress to the professional development sphere (e.g. paid services, funded development schemes and industry-endorsed mentoring); and then to instances where a script is actually in development with a funding body or broadcaster – though this is itself already blurry because, for example, a funding body might hire an external professional script editor or doctor to help with a draft of the screenplay, and that expert might be hired on the basis of their successful (measured or perceived by the one doing the hiring) screenwriting manual.

Nevertheless, we propose that research focusing on development practice could be useful to start to understand how development qualities come about, and how they are espoused. A research project on this might thus ask:

- Who is writing the manuals and guides, and who is running the competitions and talent schemes?
- Why are they writing and running them? What are their stated intentions?
- What are they saying/dictating/advising/suggesting/promising/encouraging, and what are their rationales for doing so?

- To whom/where are they looking for knowledge/tools/paradigms/case studies/examples?
- On the basis of all of this, either explicitly or implicitly, what are they espousing as markers of quality? What is the ‘staple’ of a good script that they are benchmarking?
- Explicitly or implicitly, how is this creating a particular culture of script development? By following these questions and gathering data, can we define what script development means for those who are engaging with manuals, guides, competitions and resources?
- Ultimately, by defining the proposed qualities of a ‘good’ script and thus understanding what improvement looks like, are we also able to define the qualities of good/useful/efficient/effective script development?

While this might present itself as a feasible research problem to explore, it also creates a research conundrum in that this is only one aspect of script development (if we define it widely). Armed with research findings from this type of project, where would we take it next? Would it provide a clear answer about development, or would we need to relate it to the other spheres? For example, is any of the ‘how to’ script development culture influencing more formal script development practices, or vice versa? Does it produce a type of imagined or desired script that might not in fact exist, and/or that industry does not want? Does this sphere of development reflect the realities of the industry (see Price 2017)? If so or if not, what more does this tell us about script development more broadly? In the specific case of competitions and talent schemes, are there examples where writers talk about how their screenwriting skills were improved by this type of development, thus leading to success? Were such

schemes merely an opportunity to have extant skills showcased to the right people; in which case, does this add a further dimension to how we define (or put clear parameters around) script development? The problem is clearly wicked, and questions propagate further questions that have the potential to undo some of the answers found elsewhere.

### **Conclusion: Can There be Solutions to the Wicked Problem of Script Development?**

As we attempt to define script development as both a practice and an area of scholarly research, and encourage others to partake in this work, we are open to discovering questions that matter and methodologies that can reveal new insights. Nancy Roberts (2000) outlines ‘coping strategies’ available in the pursuit of reckoning with wicked problems, namely: assessing the levels of conflict and degrees of power among stakeholders, starting with authoritative (power is held by few stakeholders), moving on to collaborative (power is dispersed), and then competitive (power is dispersed and contested) (pp. 2- 3). Through various case studies of the management of ‘screen ideas’, Macdonald (2013) indicates that these strategies operate at once and independently in the development process, which suggests that Roberts’ method may be a useful tool in conducting meta-analyses of screen idea management – or, script development. If this were to be the case, which theories and ideas might underpin such a methodological approach?

With questions and methodologies for studying them raising even more questions and methodologies, not to mention the different disciplinary approaches that the authors of this article embody, perhaps we need to turn to Levin et al. (2012), who differentiate between a ‘wicked’ and ‘super wicked’ problem. While a wicked

problem relates to the problem itself, a ‘super wicked’ problem relates to those trying to solve it. Levin et al. identify that those seeking to *solve* the problem are also *causing* the problem, and while this sentiment may speak to the idea of developers trying to solve script issues, we acknowledge that this could equally apply to researchers (such as the authors of this article) trying to research the practice of script development.

Why, then, might script development be an important area of research that has the potential to bring multiple perspectives, approaches and methodologies to bear on it? As Price noted in the recent *Journal of Screenwriting* special issue on script development, because the field currently hinges itself upon individual case studies, it ‘risks becoming hopelessly atomized and therefore critically devalued’ (2017: 326). We thus need more research to open up the field and provide avenues for innovative scholarship. By identifying script development as a ‘wicked problem’ both within and outside of the academy, it is our hope that this article will promote useful research ‘collaborations between practitioners, historians and theoreticians’, which for Price is ‘essential in furthering critical enquiry into script development’ (2017: 331).

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<sup>i</sup> There are many alternative summaries of the 10 characteristics that distinguish social problems as ‘wicked’. See, for example, <https://nautilus.org/gps/solving/ten-criteria-for-wicked-problems/>

<sup>ii</sup> It was, however, re-introduced in 2018.