

A MEMETIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE CONCEPTUALISATION AND EVALUATION OF THE CULTURAL OLYMPIAD OF THE 2012 OLYMPIC AND PARALYMPIC GAMES

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the development of a memetic framework for analysing and evaluating the Cultural Olympiad of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. A review of grey literature has revealed five recurring themes or *memes* (units of cultural transmission) associated with the Cultural Olympiad and the authors predict that they will be transmitted spatially, through planning and delivery processes and between the formal sectors of the Cultural Olympiad. The paper proposes a methodology which includes a longitudinal study of three UK case studies in the four year run-up to the 2012 Olympics. These case studies (London Borough of Greenwich, Canterbury and Durham) will be the subject of quantitative and qualitative analysis which the authors hope will reveal valuable insights into the frequency, transmission and longevity of the identified memes. The memetic framework proposed may provide future guidance for the planning and evaluation of public projects both within and outside the Olympic realm.

Keywords: 2012, Olympics, Cultural Olympiad, memetics, evaluation

INTRODUCTION

The field of memetics has its roots in the coining by Richard Dawkins (2006 [1979]) of the term *meme* as the unit of cultural transmission. The meme is analogous to the *gene* in evolutionary biology in its properties of replication and heredity and, for these reasons, subject to the principles of 'universal Darwinism' (Blackmore 1999). This insight, although contentious, has nevertheless led to a flourishing of dedicated journals, books, websites and scholarly articles on the subject of a new perspective on the evolution and transmission of culture, the field of *memetics*.

Memetics has often been mis-understood as presenting a biological imperative for culture, or as part of the field of socio-biology. It is, in fact, a distinct approach to the understanding of culture as composed of memetic units which, in a weak analogy to the 'selfish gene' theory of evolutionary selection, can explain the propagation and evolution of ideas, behaviours, theories and cultural products. Seen from a memetic perspective, culture is transmitted through the imitation of cultural forms such as gestures, languages, methods of production and fashions. For evolutionary selection to take place it requires a replicator, a unit of information that can make copies of itself and which has the qualities of *longevity*, *fecundity* and *copying fidelity*. In the context of biological evolution, this replicator unit is the gene which is copied on DNA molecules every time a cell divides or in the process of sexual reproduction. It is the degree of inter-generational permanence of a gene, its copyability and the faithfulness with which it is copied that explain its relative presence within the gene-pool. The central argument of memetics is that these same qualities, when identified in units of cultural transmission – memes – can explain the relative prominence of cultural forms and products within the meme-pool, human culture.

In a world where there are more memes than there is time and space to express them, and where some memes prosper whereas others disappear, the 'algorithm' (Dennett 1995) of natural selection first proposed by Charles Darwin of selection provides a powerful tool for analysing the transmission and apparent 'success' of cultural forms and concepts. This evolutionary algorithm requires three conditions to be met in order to be run: variation, selection and heredity (Blackmore 1999: 10). Where these conditions are met, evolutionary pressure will always operate to drive a process of increasing complexity of form and function. The study of memetics is the study of this combination of meme properties and evolutionary pressure on memes.

The cultural phenomenon of Olympism provides a unique laboratory within which a memetic framework can be tested and explored in three contexts. The Olympic games are cyclical and have established mechanisms for evaluation and replication between games in terms of delivery frameworks, promotional strategies, sporting and cultural content and policy innovations and rhetoric. This provides a 'generational' framework corresponding to each games period, across which it should be possible to plot the transmission of memes. Secondly, the combination of the universal aims and values of Olympism and the specifics of each host nation and city also provide a changing, but conceptually coherent, environment in which evolutionary pressure can operate. Thirdly, the four year 'host-city' period provides a short Olympic cycle within which it should be possible to map the transmission of Olympic memes, whether those attached to the Olympic movement generally, or those generated during the bidding for and promotion of the individual games. Each of these three contexts suggest specific programmes of memetic research, but can also be integrated to develop a more thorough and historical memetic framework for the Olympic games.

This study has the aim of developing a memetic framework for conceptualising the Cultural Olympiad program of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games as an example of the third context outlined above, the four year host-city period. What follows is a discussion of the initial findings of this research, an outline of our proposed methodology for a four year research project to continue this research and ideas about future directions for this conceptual and methodological perspective on the Olympic games.

THE CULTURAL OLYMPIAD OF THE 2012 OLYMPIC AND PARALYMPIC GAMES

The Cultural Olympiad is the four year cultural festival that attends the Olympic Games, beginning when the host city assumes the title of Olympic City. In London's case, the title of Olympic City passed from Beijing in August 2008 and this marked the start of the Cultural Olympiad of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, which was publicly launched on 26-28 September 2008 with events in London, the four nations of the United Kingdom and the regions.

The Olympic Games have incorporated a cultural element from their classical beginnings and the nineteenth century Olympic revival of Pierre de Coubertin included arts competitions where winning architects, musicians, artists and writers received medals for their efforts along with their sporting colleagues (Gold & Revill, 2007). However, it has only been in very recent years that the role of culture has been formalised into the Cultural Olympiad, with the first of these festivals taking place in Barcelona in 1992, with the concept then extending to the Winter Games in Turin in 2006. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) Charter states that the host city 'shall organise a programme of cultural events' (IOC, 2007:80) and the Cultural Olympiad of the 2012 games is the first to have a national rather than a solely city-based remit. Along with the promise of tangible legacies, the strength of the plans for the 2012 Cultural Olympiad is among the key factors that impressed the IOC when surveying the Olympic bids for the 2012 games.

The three key values of the Cultural Olympiad have been articulated by the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (LOCOG) and are as follows: to celebrate the cultural diversity of London and the UK, inspire and involve young people and generate a positive legacy. These values provide the inspiration for the objectives of the Cultural Olympiad which are to:

- inspire and involve the widest range of London and UK-wide communities;
- generate sustainable long-term benefits to our cultural life;
- create outstanding moments of creative excellence across the full range of performing arts and creative industries;
- connect future generations with the UK's artistic communities and with their peers around the world;
- promote contemporary London as a major world cultural capital;
- drive tourism and inward investment and use the creative industries to boost economic regeneration; and
- embrace the Olympic movement values of 'excellence, respect and friendship' and the Paralympic movement vision to 'empower, achieve, inspire'.

(LOCOG, 2007, p. 4).

Although the spectacles of the opening and closing ceremonies are well known and mediated across the globe, the Cultural Olympiad is much less familiar and well-understood not only by the general public but also by those organisations that may find themselves involved. Responsibility for planning and delivery is split across a range of organisations including government departments, non-departmental public bodies and a range of cultural agencies and organisations and cultural provision will take place across three tiers. These tiers incorporate the mandatory ceremonies, major bid projects and a UK cultural festival (LOCOG, 2007). There is, therefore, scope for much confusion, lack of awareness and inevitable problems in evaluating the cultural offering and its legacy. The potential of the cultural offering to effectively be merged with the sporting aspects of the games and to deliver tangible benefits has been limited in previous Games (Garcia, 2003; Garcia, 2004).

One of the strengths of the London bid was its emphasis on the national impacts of hosting the games and the cultural programme of London 2012 is the first attempt to deliver a *national* cultural programme to accompany the Olympic games, rather than basing the cultural events solely in the host city. Apart from the staging of some Olympic events outside of London, such as the sailing events that will be held in the south-west of England, the regional programme of the Cultural Olympiad provides an important mechanism for dispersing the benefits of hosting the games to the rest of the UK (Shipway & Brown, 2007). For the majority of the UK, and especially for those who do not participate in sport, the Cultural Olympiad will be the main local manifestation of the games.

The delivery structure of the Cultural Olympiad continues to emerge, but some of its details are becoming clearer as we move past the start of the cultural festival in September 2008. Within LOCOG there is a senior management structure and officers who support the core cultural programme and provide a strategic lead for the UK-wide festival. LOCOG has responsibility for producing the mandatory celebratory ceremonies and key flagship projects and is providing an unspecified amount from its core funding for this.

The programme of nation-wide major cultural projects is being delivered by the national cultural agencies, supported by central funding from LOCOG and the legacy trust (Legacy Trust, 2008). There are also thirteen 'creative programmers', one for each devolved nation and a further nine for each region of England, based in regional cultural agencies or consortia. These programmers will be carrying out mainly coordinating and enabling roles – as yet there has been no project funding announced for local projects. This difference in funding has emerged as a recurrent theme in the grey literature reviewed for these policy review notes, with many regional documents stressing the need for financial sustainability, efficiency and leverage in cultural projects associated with 2012 in the regions (e.g. Coventry and Warwickshire 2012 Opportunities Group, 2006; Croydon Borough Council, 2007; North West Regional Development Agency, 2007; Team South West, 2007). Working alongside the creative programmers and other coordinating agencies will be individual cultural practitioners and organisations, some of whom will be able to access grant programmes connected to 2012, but many of

whom will be seeking to 're-badge' their existing or planned activities to benefit from potential increased exposure associated with the games.

GREY LITERATURE REVIEW – CONCEPTUALISING THE MEMEPLEX

Blackmore (1999) describes the collections of memes within particular contexts as *memeplexes*. These are co-adapted groups of memes who gain benefits (i.e. are replicated more successfully) by being present in combinations of multiple memes. An example of this might be the meme for studying in higher education and the meme for gaining employment. In our current neoliberal environment, the meme for entering higher education is more likely to be successful (to be passed on within families, workplaces and peer groups) if it is linked to the meme for gaining employment, rather than to, say, a meme for personal improvement. Working in this manner we would expect to find a memeplex, or memeplexes, within the discourse of the Cultural Olympiad, made up of cultural units of transmission that will be replicated as the Cultural Olympiad is developed and delivered across the UK. In order to identify the memes involved in this memeplex, we began our research in early 2008 by reviewing the grey literature associated with the emerging Cultural Olympiad of the 2012 games.

Grey literature refers to documents that are not commercially published and usually incorporate reports, policy documents, local and national government documents, conference proceedings and other publications. (Mathews, 2004). The review involved the study of more than 50 documents relating to the Cultural Olympiad. These included guidance issued by central and local government, plans from national and regional cultural agencies and consortia and information from the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (for more information on this process and a more detailed review of this literature see Kennell & MacLeod, forthcoming).

A process of content analysis and frequency measurement led to the identification of five core memes that appear to be the backbone of the Cultural Olympiad memeplex, providing a toolkit for analyzing the emerging cultural programme as it evolves from a polycentric network of organisations spread across the UK. The majority of themes within the literature searched could be reduced to these memes, whilst others are strongly related to them and gain support from being so. These memes are:

- Cultural development
- Developing institutional frameworks
- Social benefit
- Educational benefit
- Tourism benefit

The meme of Cultural development, which was very common within the documentation, has two aspects: social and institutional. The first was expressed in terms of the Cultural Olympiad's potential to promote a sense of entitlement to culture, to engage young people in culture, to link sport and art, to celebrate cultural diversity and to increase cultural participation. An illustrative quotation from the London Cultural Consortium posits that:

'an important ambition... is to leave a legacy of larger and more diverse cultural audiences, including younger generations' (London Cultural Consortium, 2008, p.8).

The second aspect is the much hope expressed in the ability of the Cultural Olympiad to further develop institutional frameworks by forging and strengthening partnerships, by promoting a sense of ownership of the Cultural Olympiad by cultural organisations, by using the Olympics as catalyst for accelerating or enhancing the delivery of existing projects, by developing international links, by promoting financially sustainable projects and finally by coordinating tourism and culture. The Museums, Libraries and Archives partnership (MLA), who have been very proactive in their

planning for the Olympiad have stated that developing institutional frameworks is a key factor in their plans:

‘the Cultural Olympiad...offers the chance to strengthen further the partnership between our three domains, and between them and the rest of the cultural, voluntary and community sectors’ (MLA, 2007, p.4)

The authors found that the meme of social benefit was, inevitably, the most nebulous concept and yet was enthusiastically embraced within the literature. The potential social benefits of the Cultural Olympiad were thought to include increased social capital, promoting social inclusion, improvements to quality of life, improvements to well-being, increased community cohesion and the animation / enlivening of public space. With the possible exception of the latter, these are all notoriously difficult to define, differentiate and evaluate. However, DCMS have promised that:

‘The Cultural Olympiad...will generate a positive legacy through cultural and sports participation, cultural skills, urban regeneration ... social cohesion and international links’ DCMS, 2008, p.15).

The link between the Olympic Games and education (both formal and informal) is clearly emerging from the grey literature. Volunteering is a key theme both in terms of community involvement but also for the skills development potential of this activity. It is hoped that the Cultural Olympiad will also increase creative industries training opportunities and provide educational programmes for schools. Sharing the values of the Olympic movement was also a key theme. The Culture and Creativity Advisory Forum announce that:

‘the legacy had to be...about people... inspiring young people, improving skills and leadership in the cultural and creative sectors..’ (Culture and Creativity Advisory Forum, 2006).

The final meme emerging from the literature review concentrates on the tourism benefits afforded by the Cultural Olympiad, mainly concerned with increased tourism flows before, during and after the games. One of LOCOG’s expressed values is to:

‘promote contemporary London as a major world cultural capital; drive tourism and inward investment...’ (LOCOG, 2007, p.4).

Most regional documentation on the Cultural Olympiad supports the view that the increased international media profile of the UK during the games period will help each region to market itself as a cultural and tourist destination (Yorkshire Committee for the 2012 Games, 2007). By producing memorable moments through celebratory performances / events (both through the mandatory ceremonies and as part of the wider festival) it is hoped that there will be increased opportunity for attracting tourists and maximizing the tourism opportunity for the regions presented by the increased profile of London and the UK. Despite these aspirations, evidence suggests that Olympic Games do not necessarily deliver expected tourism numbers (Weed, 2007).

A memetic conceptualization of the Cultural Olympiad can help us to understand why some themes and terms have prominence within the literature.. All of the memes identified in this analysis share the necessary qualities for successful memes. Frequency analysis shows them all to be *fecund*, appearing many times and in many guises in (for example) policy documents, consultancy reports and promotional literature. Their *longevity* cannot yet be asserted, but certainly the memes identified as central to the memeplex at this stage can be identified in the London 2012 candidate file and in early materials from LOCOG and government. As this research progresses, consideration will be made of the longevity of these memes, but it is still possible for memes of low longevity but of high fecundity and / or copying fidelity to be successful, especially in combination with other memes. The final criteria of ‘successful’ memes is their *copying-fidelity*. We have identified the core memes as being copied with high fidelity as they move between the national, regional and local levels of planning for the Cultural Olympiad, with the highest level of fidelity being shown in the transmission of memes

from the national to the local and regional levels, facilitated by an enabling framework of funding and policy. An additional spatial category is that of the host-borough, those five London boroughs within which the games themselves will be hosted. These boroughs will host many of the core events from the cultural Olympiad as well as promoting, jointly and also independently, their own cultural programme of events as part of the Olympiad. Transmission of memes from the host boroughs should be successful due to their prominence within media coverage of the 2012 games and the Cultural Olympiad, even though the effects of this may be felt more keenly in future games. This is due to the specific funding and organisational contexts of the host boroughs which will reduce the fecundity and copying-fidelity of these memes within the UK. It is possible however, that the fecundity of memes generated or popularized by the host boroughs will be seen in future host cities.

In addition to this spatial dimension of the Cultural Olympiad, we have also identified a formal structure that contributes to our memetic conceptualisation and which allows us to make predictions about the spread of memes between formal sectors of the Olympiad programming that we could expect to see as the programming develops and is delivered.. It is possible to split the programming of the Cultural Olympiad into formal, informal and independent categories. The formal category relates to those projects that are part of the core, national Cultural Olympiad programme. The core programme of celebratory cultural events directly attached to the sporting programme such as the opening and closing ceremonies, as well as the large national projects, funded by the ODA and the Legacy trust respectively, are time constrained and supported by specific delivery teams with their own evaluative remit. Informal projects within the programme are those that are associated with the official programme, but not part of it – these include the ‘inspired by’ projects which can associate themselves with the cultural Olympiad and benefit from becoming part of the 2012 ‘brand family’ (LOCOG, 2007) and are expected to number in the hundreds. Each of these projects will have to show how they meet the broad aims of the cultural Olympiad, but will not benefit from the same organisational frameworks and support as the core programme. The final categorization that can be made of the cultural Olympiad programme is that of independent projects. These are projects that are taking place within the context of the 2012 games, but that have no organisational connection to the formal or informal programme. Some of these projects take an oppositional position as regards the staging of the games and seek to highlight community tensions or displacement effects, for example, whilst others are more supportive but are being staged independently for ideological or pragmatic reasons. The tables below summarize our spatial and formal categorization and how this relates to the transmission and replications of memes within the Cultural Olympiad process.

Table 1
The Spatial and Formal Categorization of the Cultural Olympiad

Spatial	Formality	Project example
National	Formal	Opening and closing ceremonies
	Informal	The People’s record – Museums Libraries and Archives Council national ‘inspired by’ project
Regional	Formal	Open weekends to launch the cultural Olympiad
	Informal	The inauguration of the Stoke Mandeville Archive – a museum that documents the history of the Paralympic movement
	Independent	???
Local	Formal	Handover event in Herne Bay, Kent that showcased local childrens’ activities alongside a temporary ‘live-site’
	Informal	Lyme Regis Artsfest – a recurrent arts festival prompting itself along with the Cultural Olympiad

	Independent	???
Host borough	Formal	Create08 – the five boroughs cultural Olympiad annual festival
	Informal	Pudding Mill Lane - foraging on and around the Olympic site with funding from local authorities
	Independent	Hackney-Olympics – artists-led parody of Olympic events on Hackney marshes

Table 2
Spatial transmission of memes within the Cultural Olympiad planning and delivery process

Meme origin	Meme destination	Level of meme replication	Memetic mechanisms
National	Regional	High	Policy and funding frameworks
	Local	High	Policy and funding frameworks
	Host Borough	High	Policy and funding frameworks
Regional	National	High	Regional programmers networks
	Local	High	Policy and funding frameworks
	Host Borough	Low	Informal networks
Local	National	Low	No obvious mechanism other than through regional fora
	Regional	High	Regional and sub-regional networks and joint programming strategies
	Host Borough	Low	Informal networks
Host Borough	National	High	Projects will be part of the national festival
	Regional	Medium	Projects will have an impact on regional programming decisions
	Local	Low	Disparities of scale suggest only extremely low copying fidelity would be possible

Table 3
Predicted transmission of memes between formal sectors of the Cultural Olympiad

Meme origin	Meme destination	Level of meme replication	Memetic mechanisms
Formal sector	Informal sector	High	'Inspired by' programme ensures replication of core memes
	Independent sector	High	Formal sector defines the territory upon which the independent sector operates, even oppositionally
Informal sector	Formal sector	Low	Disparities in funding and organisation make this unlikely
	Independent sector	High	The independent sector will be responding to memes from the formal and informal sectors
Independent	Formal sector	Low	No obvious mechanisms at

sector			present, although it is possible that independent projects can be co-opted by the formal and informal sectors, e.g. the gradual acceptance of an 'independent media centre' for the games
	Informal sector	Low	The often oppositional nature of the informal sector makes this unlikely

MAPPING THE MEMEPLEX – PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

Previous research into the evaluation of cultural programmes suggests that evaluation should include: concepts and frameworks to guide the evaluation that are agreed early in the programme; longitudinal research; consideration of national / strategic, local and user group priorities and experiences; and that the evaluation should be congruous with the specific aims and cultural content of the programme (Guetzkow, 2002; Matarasso, 1997; Reeves, 2002). However, the complex delivery structure of the Cultural Olympiad outlined above means that following such guidelines is problematic without establishing from an early stage an evaluative framework that accurately reflects the evolving system of projects and priorities that characterizes this national scheme. The national scale of the programme means that there is no 'one' Cultural Olympiad programme whose impacts can be planned for and understood. Instead, there is a diverse network of projects, for which a huge range of claims are being made in terms of their intended effects, and which should be assessed against these claims, which we have conceptualized as being structured around 5 core memes.

We are proposing a 4 year study of the Cultural Olympiad of the 2012 games, using a multiple-embedded, longitudinal case study approach (Yin 2003). A case study methodology is appropriate at this stage as a way of testing our memetic framework against the complex cultural policy and funding mechanisms involved in the planning and delivery of the Olympiad. In this sense, we are seeking analytical generalization (i.e. evidence of memetic pressure and selection) rather than statistical generalization which would not be appropriate at this stage of the research with the potential population of such study being extraordinarily large. Another reason for the choice of using a case study approach is that the early stage of this research has identified spatial and formal divisions within the research field and these can be directly interrogated and contrasted best through the use of research parameters that replicate these analytical categories – an approach facilitated by including the categories in the case study criteria. Although the case studies have been constructed mainly in the interests of theoretical replication, elements of literal replication have also been included in the design to increase the internal validity of the methods and findings.

We have chosen three cases for our study, the characteristics of which are outlined in the table below:

Table 4 Case study characteristics

Case	Population	Cultural characteristics	Claimed impacts of Cultural Olympiad	Integration with 2012 games
London Borough of Greenwich	226,200	World Heritage Site Integrated into London's cultural offer	Improvements to local cultural infrastructure Tourism benefits Social benefits	Host borough

			Increased inward investment	
Canterbury – a city in the south east of England	135,287	World Heritage Site DCMS Cultural Pathfinder Regional cultural centre	Tourism benefits Social benefits Increased inward investment Improvements to local cultural infrastructure Increase in sports participation	97km from London Olympic training venue Live site
Durham – a city in the north east of England	87,709	World Heritage Site Cultural offer integrated into regional cultural strategies	Improvements to local cultural infrastructure Tourism benefits Social benefits Increased inward investment	433km from London Olympic training venue?

Within each study, the same set of methods will be applied to ensure internal validity within the research design. The research is following a mixed methods approach (Creswell 2009) where both qualitative and quantitative data will gathered within each study to triangulate between diverse data sources so as to provide a stronger evidence base for the memetic perspective being taken in this research. Four concurrent methods will be used for each case:

1. Quantitative analysis of meme frequency within the case studies and the relationships between memes and their original sources and contemporary presentation.
2. Qualitative mapping of Cultural Olympiad planning and delivery networks and their development over time to analyse the mechanisms of memetic replication
3. Qualitative interviews with key informants to triangulate steps 1 & 2 and add richness to the data
4. Meta-evaluation of evaluative frameworks implemented within each case study

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has outlined a conceptual framework for understanding the Cultural Olympiad of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games. This memetic framework has received early evidential support from a review of the literature in this area, but in order to interrogate its value as mode of enquiry, a four year research project has been proposed that will test the value of memetics for carrying out research in this field.

Any new theory should make testable predictions. At this early stage we do not have sufficient data to formulate thorough hypotheses, but our research so far indicates that that the meme of tourism benefit in particular is already being replicated with high fidelity and fecundity throughout the Cultural Olympiad planning structures, at all levels. This appears to be the case in spite of research that suggests that tourism impacts from the Olympics are contentious and not even always positive. We suggest that this can be explained best through seeing this meme as part of a memplex that provides competitive advantage to memes that appear to confer economic benefit and that can be best understood within the contemporary neoliberal political context that emphasises inter-regional

competitiveness and a core role for business within public policy frameworks. If this continues to be the case then we would expect to see this meme featured prominently in the post-games evaluation structures at all levels, leading to the possibility of some Cultural Olympiad projects being judged as failing because of the memetic pressure operating on their design. A memetic framework of the kind we are proposing (if supported by research data) may provide insights into the planning and evaluation of projects, especially in the public arena, with more general implications outside of the field of Olympism.

Should the findings of the research prove inconclusive or contradict the memetic hypothesis, the research will add to our knowledge of Olympic planning and delivery by collecting and analysing longitudinal data on the Cultural Olympiad period, and will be the first study of its kind to do so.

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