

COMMONS. Heritage in common, shared stories.

Introduction

Commons is a project supported by Compagnia di San Paolo di Torino¹ and directed by the Passages² Association, as part of the initiatives activated to promote experimentation with new forms of participation in culture. The project was organized in a series of interventions on the territory that involved contexts and modalities that, although different from each other, had in common the narrative method and the research of the stories on which the heritage of the territories are founded. Here, we will take into consideration only the digital storytelling activity and we refer to the project website for a depth analysis of the other aspects and project objectives.

The project included the Archivio Storico of Turin, Biblioteche Civiche of the city, Polo del '900 and the University of Turin³. It involved about forty participants among professionals, volunteers and trainees of the university who, through the digital storytelling methodology, told about their heritage experience.

Commons: the project

In order to present Commons we borrow the words used in the "The project" section of the dedicated site⁴ as we think they are particularly effective in transmitting the spirit and the main objectives of the activities⁵. They are: Discover, tell, share and return.

As most of the storytelling theories deliver, each story is itself a discovery, that is a way to bring to light some elements and meanings that before the narrative transformation were somehow "hidden". The stories, then, necessarily imply some form of tale: there is no story where there is not a person willing to tell it or to reconstruct and transmit it through some kind of code. Then, the narration has in its precondition an expressed or latent desire of sharing, where the narrator is engaged in the construction of a connection, between himself and the potential listener; this, in the development of the story, becomes a real relationship or a situation in which a variable form of mutual recognition is defined. That's why in the construction of a device that promotes a cultural participation we opted for storytelling and, in particular, for digital storytelling.

Proceeding with a more in-depth exploration of the concepts, we see that under the heading "discover" it is stated: "Discover, through unknown stories, unexpected relationships between public / institutional heritage and private / affectional one". The first element that we like to emphasize concerns the heritage, not only in its most material nature, but in particular in the more cultural and emotional one. Precisely in culture, public heritage meets private heritage allowing the appearance of those aspects that, generally, in the institutional narration tend to remain hidden. The public presentation of heritage focuses on elements which are often distant from people. In the case

¹ <http://www.compagniadisanpaolo.it/>

² <http://commons.network/testimonials/passages/>

³ <http://commons.network/partner/>

⁴ <http://commons.network>

⁵ Also in this case, the explanations are declined by the writer, referring only to the part related to the digital storytelling

of Commons, the idea was to tell the cultural-institutional heritage through the emotional and existential experiences of the people who care of that heritage. It was a real discovery, sometimes for the narrators themselves, that allowed to weave the threads of which the stories are composed in a fabric that linked people who were sometimes very far from each other. Through narrations, we discovered that, people apparently distant were, in reality, very close in their way to feel and relate toward the heritage they were telling.

Telling: "the emotional and relational aspect of the heritage through the subjective experience of the participants" transformed the very essence of the heritage, which were recognized as entities, mostly extraneous and distant, as opportunities for sharing and closeness, beyond ages, jobs, genres and provenance. The whole project focused on the narrations because only through the narration of their stories people can find elements of closeness and solidarity. This statement is even more true for those contexts (archives and libraries) of which people produced representations that tend to distance non-experts from the work. Let's consider the archives: these are, according to the common feeling, represented as dusty places in which only those who go there for curiosity or their job can find something interesting. Through the narrations of the archive professionals' emotional experiences, it has been shown how these contexts produce emotions and how memory constitutes an element of deep connection between people. We all have memories and we are all memories in the same way that, as Bruner reminds us, we are all stories and we have stories to tell and share. As already mentioned, sharing was the second element of the project. The narrative path was implemented by attributing a specific role and space to the sharing processes. Not only stories were shared, but also difficulties as well as skills. In different moments the sharing process allowed to generate real forms of solidarity between the narrators who joined with the aim of completing their narrative path.

Last but not least, there is the return process where the results of the narrative paths were "returned" to the territory through different initiatives with a double objective: 1) generating new forms of "approach" among people ; 2) promote other forms of narration.

Given the premises on which the project was built, it is now necessary to illustrate its structure. So let's start from the people involved. As previously said, about forty people took part in the activities: about thirty professionals and volunteers from libraries and archives and a dozen university students who were doing their internship. None of them had ever participated in this kind of activity and, in general they were not familiar with narrative strategies. In addition, professionals and volunteers were not particularly familiar with digital technologies and at first, this constituted a strong critical factor that found a solution thanks to the collaboration and the spirit of solidarity established with the trainees. In fact, both for their young age and their training path they were all quite competent on the digital area and they constituted a great resource for the development of the project.

As said, the main objective of the research was to enhance the cultural heritage through an approach of the people - in particular the non-professionals. Another objective was represented by the promotion of a particular area of the city center called Contrada dei Guardinfanti, characterized by a particular and intense history of trade and handicraft production. Through these initiatives it was intended to reconstruct the social and cultural community of the district and to promote its knowledge among Turin citizens.

As mentioned above, a central part of the project was represented by the narratives, more precisely the digital stories⁶ produced by the participants. These were divided into four groups that, in succession from February to June, took part in a wander lasting about 25 hours, during which they learned how to tell their stories through digital storytelling. The activities were supported by three facilitators and trainees.

The products created were collected on a site (<http://commons.network/>) which, in addition to presenting the project, intended to constitute a reference point not only during the period of activity, but especially afterwards. It should be emphasized that the whole path was shared through social networks and accurately documented through photographs and videos. This is not only because the documentation is a fundamental part of any research process, but because it was considered that the results of the research were represented not only by the digital products made, but also by the whole process.

We refer to the following sections for an accurate description of both the methodology and the results obtained.

Digital storytelling

Currently the term digital storytelling (DST) collects different forms of narration that have, as a common basis, the production of an audiovisual digital artifact. Therefore, we have digital storytelling in didactic, advertising, literary area, etc. The DST applied in this project is, however, of a different type and it is essential to consider this distinction if we want to fully understand the spirit of the activity. Otherwise, there is the risk of dwelling on the products, losing a fundamental component of the entire path. Therefore, here we will assume that the digital storytelling is a narrative practice which, using a plurality of codes, allows to tell a story.

It should be noted that this is a process articulated in different phases, whose objective is not only or exclusively the production of a digital story but rather the definition of a context in which people have the opportunity to share their own experiences. This sharing is aimed at the construction of new meanings and the definition of different forms of solidarity (emotional, cultural, ideological). It is precisely in this characteristic that the element of pedagogical interest can be identified: the production of digital stories acquires a pedagogical meaning when it constitutes the opportunity for people to share meanings, to build new ones together, to establish relationships. It is no coincidence that this practice was born precisely with the aim of allowing people, especially those in difficulty, to tell their own story together with others and for the others. Telling a story is not an end in itself, but it constitutes a process of re-elaboration which allows to find the answers and confirmations that it could be difficult to identify. Moreover, the same answers and the same constructs can be an important source of information or inspiration for other people who are in the same condition or who, despite being in a different situation, show an interest for specific situations (let's think of the situations of illness that can be an object of interest both for those who are struck by the same pathology and for whom, even if they don't suffer from the same pathology, want to understand the situation experienced by the sick people).

⁶ The digital storytelling method will be presented in detail in the next paragraph.

The literature identifies seven fundamental elements of DST:⁷

- The personal point of view. As we said before, the digital stories are not documentaries or audiovisual products, but stories of people told by people for other people.
- A narrative structure that can also surprise by asking questions and providing non-ordinary answers. Obviously, the storytelling component is fundamental and it is explicit in the narrative plot that transforms a sequence of events into a story. For this reason it is essential to distinguish the different types of DST because a digital story created for educational purposes will have a narrative plot different from that which can be built to tell a professional story.
- Emotional and engaging content. As known, the aspect of emotions is an essential element of the narrations. With regards to DST it should be emphasized that the emotional component is often amplified by the evocative and engaging power of the images.
- The use of your own voice for the storytelling. The voice is that element which allows to distinguish each individual in his uniqueness and which, therefore, makes the narrations unique. That's why in a DST the contribution given by the voice is a fundamental and essential component.
- The use of a suitable soundtrack for the moments of narration. Music or other sounds chosen by the narrator allow to create a specific, emotional atmosphere and to represent moods and contents when words are not always adequate.
- An effective storytelling economy because you can say a lot with little. Generally, the digital stories do not exceed 10 minutes. The limited duration allows, during the story, to choose what to tell properly (a very circumscribed theme, in order to avoid the risk of converting the narration into an autobiography); moreover, the availability of multiple communication plans allows the construction of meaningful narrations while respecting the time limit.
- An appropriate pace for the narrative methods chosen for the story.

All these elements are very important and can be placed in the stories according to different shapes and intensities, depending both on the story and on the choices made by the narrator. The interesting aspect is that all these factors allow not only to assume a precise and different narrative style for each narrator, but also to employ a certain creativity and, at the same time, to develop a generative attitude. In fact, the multimedia languages used in the DST do not perform a mere exhortative or narrative simplification function, but they constitute a reflective engine. Searching the images for the DST activates important reflective processes and finding the "forgotten" photographs often urges memories that allow to access to forgotten or never organized sequences of your own life.

⁷ Lambert J. (2002). *Digital storytelling: capturing lives, creating community*. Berkeley, CA: Digital Diner Press, p.

Digital storytelling in action: The workshops

As previously said, the participants were divided into groups of about ten members. Although in the planning phase it was assumed to prefer a heterogeneous composition, in the implementation phase we opted for homogeneous groups to respond to the organizational needs of the entities involved. This choice was successful because it allowed participants to be involved in professional forms of sharing and support that were very interesting on the organizational side.

Each group was involved in approximately six meetings of four hours each, organized as follows⁸:

First meeting: Presentation of the working methods and of the narrative methodology used. The participants had never made digital stories and did not know how to work. It was important to describe the planned steps and what would be required to them. In the same meeting we communicated the suggested narrative topic (dramatic question). The dramatic question (DQ) is the central topic on which the story is built. This is an important element in the chosen methodology because it allows both to help the participants in identifying a well-defined narrative path and it is a fundamental tool for the facilitators to prevent narrations from proceeding on unexpected routes that do not adhere to the project objectives. Each group had a different set of DQs, among which the participants could choose the one that they considered most stimulating⁹. The choices were subsequently shared and each member of the group explained the motivations that led him to opt for that specific topic.

Second meeting: first draft of the story and sharing with the group. Some participants arrived at the second appointment with a first draft of the story, while others preferred proceeding with their writing during the workshop. In both cases, a part of the scheduled time was dedicated to the sharing of the stories. That is the first moment in which we can say that a true sense of togetherness is created in a process of digital storytelling.

Third meeting: storyboard planning and sharing with the group. The transition from the textual narration to the multimedia one requires a certain planning to ensure the coherence of the story and to facilitate the subsequent implementation phase through the sw. Even in this phase the most significant aspect concerns the collaborative spirit that is naturally produced: people begin to ask for the opinion of the group, to share points of view and choices in a real process of social construction of the story. A story that, despite this, remains personal and individual.

Fourth and fifth meeting: implementation of the digital story with Windows MovieMaker.

⁸ In addition to the activities carried out during the meetings the people worked independently both in the writing of the story, and in the design of the storyboard and in the implementation. A portion of self-employment is necessary to guarantee reflection during the narrative phase.

⁹ Dramatic Questions were: Torino è la mia città; Muri di carta; Oltre il quotidiano; Ripercorrere il labirinto; Ritrovare; Percorrendo il corridoio; Un ponte tra passato, presente e futuro; Lasciano un'impronta; Tenere in memoria; Dietro le quinte; Questo luogo è un mistero; Fuori e dentro; Tra le pagine ingiallite, il mio lavoro; La tua cartolina di Torino; salendo quegli scalini; Il tesoro nascosto; Le luci che si possono accendere; Entrare nel mondo attraverso un altro ingresso; Labirinto di carta; Porte socchiuse; Sbirciando dalla serratura.

Sixth meeting: socialization of completed video-stories. This is a very significant phase: although the narrative path is full of moments dedicated to sharing, the collective vision of the finished products always generates a state of great emotion and intense participation.

The activities were directed by the university spokesperson of the project with the collaboration of three facilitators and the group of trainees of the University. The trainees had a dual role: 1. In the first phase they told their story, acquiring new skills with respect to the narrative modalities expected by the DST; 2. Later they supported, especially on the technological aspect, the other members of the groups in the fulfilment of their digital story. The support of the students was fundamental as it allowed the overcoming of various operational problems; it also made possible an exchange, often intergenerational, by activating an interesting atmosphere of mutual help and exchange of knowledge, skills and emotions.

The outcomes.

Here we will consider only the outcomes of the project we can connect to the narrative activity.

The first outcome is represented by the digital stories that were created and published on the project website and on the dedicated YouTube channel. They constitute a heritage of great human, social and cultural interest. On the human side, the professional-storytellers were able to represent their professionalism through passion, transmitting a series of emotionally engaging contents. The "affective" dimension of the DST put in contact the stories with the Story, showing how the content of the archives is much closer to the common people than what we might imagine. This proximity is also the prerequisite for the public who can see the stories directly or indirectly developing a sense of belonging to those places and contexts described, a sort of adhesion connected with the purpose of people engagement of the Commons project. Recalling the seven points of the DST previously stated, we can affirm that digital stories told the heritage through a particular point of view that is the personal one of the people involved. The narrators represent a sort of "filter" through which we can also look at the historical resources of the city that allows us to bring to light the humanity in them.

We think a second outcome is represented by the processes of "opening", "approach" and "discovery" among people who took part in the workshops. Some of them knew each other, however their stories let discover unknown aspects and dimensions, fostering, in most cases, a sort of approach. Certainly, this aspect has interesting social consequences, but even more it constitutes a significant element on the organizational aspect. In fact, there is a natural wondering about the possible organizational repercussions generated by these activities. What changes in people who have been working together for years when they discover unexpected aspects of their colleagues? But above all, what are the effects determined by the sharing and collaboration processes activated by the DST paths? Here we do not have the necessary elements to provide complete answers, however, based on the experience gained in this area, in other contexts we feel to affirm that, generally, the greater mutual knowledge and the approach stimulated by the shared narration constitute factors that intervene positively both on self-esteem and on mutual recognition.

The third outcome concerns, more specifically, the trainees who had the opportunity to approach a narrative practice particularly in step with the typical digital consumption of young people, and to live an educational experience not only on the professional side (some of them came from studies such as History, Literature, DAMS certainly close to the contents and methods of development of the Commons project), but above all on the human side. As said, the trainees supported the other narrators in the multimedia development of their stories. All this allowed: a generational approach; the creation of the necessary conditions for people of very different ages, jobs and experiences to share an experience of solidarity based on mutual exchange; the sharing, on an equal footing, of the points of view with respect to very different topics; the development of soft skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion we feel to affirm, taking in consideration the moments of sharing and dialogue that marked the months of work of the project, that digital storytelling is an effective device in creating the conditions for the activation of various forms of togetherness and mutual support among people. Despite the initial perplexities expressed by many of the participants, the results were generally positive both in terms of personal satisfaction, expressed by the narrators, and with respect to the group work atmosphere generated.

With respect to the experience reported here, we believe it might be interesting to know the impact that stories can generate on the public. At the moment, no data are available; we have only a few positive feedback, obtained during public meetings organized in those months, which obviously can't have any scientific validity. A development of the project could therefore be represented by a research aimed at investigating how the public reacts to the vision of the stories of Commons, in order to check if one of the initial hypotheses of the project (digital stories are a device to promote the people engagement) could be completely confirmed or not.

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