

Extending Creative Practice : A European Encounter

Claire Levy

I recently came across a collaborative story-telling website, run by Streetmap, the online mapping website. It calls for people to post short documentary films about the UK street where they live, which can be accessed through a map based search engine. Living in Haringey, I automatically looked up what those who live near me had to say. One film, made before the riots of 2011, depicted a man in his 70's: White haired, dressed in a tweed jacket, with a small blue rucksack on his back, he seemed to illustrate the epitome of the older urban dweller. *'How do I think Haringey can be improved?'* his voice slightly quavered, *'simply listen to the people'*ⁱ. An insight which echoes through the events which came soon after. My trip to the Extending Creative Practice conference in Maribor, Slovenia was geographically speaking, far removed from the concerns of urban London and yet, I realised on my journey down there that there was a common thread.

It was the end of an 18 month project which aimed to teach and encourage older people (those of retirement age and above) to engage with digital story-telling as a means to enhance their understanding and engagement with computing. The method, developed by Joe Lambert in US and spread in UK through BBC Wales producer Daniel Meadows in the late 90sⁱⁱ, involves group work, through the 'story-circle' to build trust and to develop ideas of telling personal stories. Games, writing exercises and most importantly sharing with the circle culminate in the editing together of voice recordings and personal archive images. Goldsmiths based Digi-Tales continued the development of the method as a means for working with people at the margins of society, involving European partners and participants from 2006. The short digital stories produced, are a means of giving people a way of expressing significant moments in their lives. As a facilitator and trainer with Digi-Tales I've seen this process at work many times and never fail to be moved by the journey participants go on – at the end sharing their stories with each other and with me. Our roles are elided as we all participate in the games and story-telling exercises. This is a collaborative process

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where the telling and the listening are of equal importance to the project's outcomes. I'm also a film-maker and creating narrative structure, making sense of the world, seen through my lens is at the forefront of my mind; adeptly described by Benjamin :*'that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law'*.ⁱⁱⁱ Pink observes that knowledge '*does not exist as observable facts*'.^{iv} So when those fragments are drawn directly from your own life, how is that knowledge negotiated? I would contend that is how the digital story-telling process comes into play. There is a whittling down of ideas through the story-circle, which ultimately brings the tale to be told into focus.



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Maribor, nestled not far from the Austrian border welcomes you from a train ride through the drama of the valleys south of Vienna, where the landscape flattens out and you rumble along the River Drava until you reach the town itself. In the midst of Europe's economic turmoil there was durability, an everlasting quality of the landscape which prevailed; a sort of peace which seemed much removed from the hourly updates I listen to on Radio 4 detailing the latest bailout of Spain's banks, and the sense of hopelessness amongst the Greek people. I remembered the story of the Greek pensioner who had taken his own life in a public square in Athens only a month before. In his note, it seemed to me, a desire to be heard brought him to his tragic conclusion:

And since I cannot find justice, I cannot find another means to react besides putting a decent end [to my life], before I start searching the garbage for food and become a burden for my child."^v

It seems significant that this man chose to die publically – he shot himself outside the parliament building – the fabric of the city bearing witness to his suffering. His choice to die publically reflects a desire to be seen and to be heard and to disrupt. His lasting '*presentation of self*' to the world, an anti-social one. ^{vi}. In Goffman's reading, we present differing '*social faces*' dependent on the observer and it is this idea of this active process of composition of the self '*out of many successive layers*'^{vii}, which makes me curious to hear from participants and trainers – what they have discovered and what they have shown.

The alpine scenes before me, put me in mind of Raymond Williams' reflections on the landscape of his youth ^{viii} and indeed his dual interpretations of 'culture' sum up the digital storytelling process: '*to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort*'.^{ix}

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Latour indeed compares the self to a *'layered digital image'*, suggesting a paring down through the digital process, what Lury terms a *'flattening'* and indeed the digital story-telling method allows that process to occur. The process encourages a distillation of culture, so that the participants are drawn to a particular story about a particular part of their life and thus presenting the self in a particular way.

This year's European Capital of Culture, Maribor was keen to welcome us – the Mayor and a Home Office minister addressed the conference and were joined by the Head of British Council. Digi-Tales and CUCR evaluation team from London joined participating groups, from Romania, Finland and hosts Slovenia: all presented their experiences, showing a selection of films, produced through their own interpretations of the method and also introducing us to some of their participants who had travelled on plane and train to join us. Communication was at the heart of the day with speeches made in English, Slovenian, Romanian and back again to make sure all followed what was being discussed.

The films focussed on the past and the present and many displayed a careful composition. One Finnish participant told us about learning the saxophone, though his narrative arc revealed that he also had Parkinson's disease in that crucial 4th act.

'I started to motivate other seniors to learn to play music, unfortunately I couldn't find anyone except Mr Parkinson'.

As Bourdieu observes on participant testimony :*'one of the stakes is the image they have of themselves, the image that they wish to give, both to others and themselves.'*^{x'}

Heikke's use of the well- known dramatic story-telling device suggests an awareness of his situation and a means of sharing it in therapeutic terms. The focus is on the saxophone playing, not the

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disease. Identifying it as 'Mr Parkinson' hints at a distancing of the narrator from his condition. The story-telling process has allowed a separation of the layers of his own persona.



One Romanian participant, told us of her wedding, forced to take place in the aftermath of an earthquake; Her reluctance to marry and celebrate in the midst of a tragedy is termed '*the misadventure of my life*'. The images she shows us embed her story into the backdrop of the ruined landscape, indeed much like the Athenian man's death is intractably linked to the city and its financial chaos, through being seen there. Her film bears witness to these events and how the city looked before. Her testimony and her images, like all the others is lent a sense of importance through this telling. I am mindful of Sontag's observation of our '*promiscuous acceptance of the world*' through photography, which plays with the idea of images shaping our perceptions; but this dislocation of the self, articulated by Turkle as "*to give human qualities to objects and ... to treat each other as things.*"^{xi} perhaps allows a fresh re-telling of the self. If we are as Thrift contends, a

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'shifting ensemble of states'^{xii}, what digital technology affords us is a means to unpick that layering.

Another, told us the story of her mother, but used the first person tense, as though it were her own story, only revealing the real relationship with the subject at the end of the piece. She says the film is a 'display of love'. It gives a sense of the monumental : the importance of what she had shown and told us came through the telling. There is a duality here : the use of the personal image archive forges a paring back to the core of the story and yet her response was to subsume herself within the events depicted. In the Foucaultian sense, the anticipated observation creates an alternative version of the self, so that an audience should engage with the mother's story in a way which feels more immediate.

These participant testimonies created a sense of *'technological assemblage'*^{xiii}, an extrapolation of the Deleuzian *'agencement'*, (commonly translated as assemblage.) In MacGregor Wise's words this was *'an articulation.. the idea that different elements can be connected in order to create unities or identities'*. Intergenerational co-operation', was pronounced an abiding experience by one participant, while others spoke of 'optimism' as a lasting impression. Another ,aged 81, said she had never had a chance to work with computers before and someone else suggested a *'golden age of creativity opening up'*; and it is through these relationships between old and young in using technology that this process is afforded. An intermingling of states of being: story-teller, editor, photographer, teacher, viewer; were found in all of us that day. In the words of Sarah Pink:

'It's not simply the final film document that is important, but rather the collaborative processes by which it is produced.'^{xiv}

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ⁱ <http://mystreetfilms.com/#/films/watch/348>

ⁱⁱ Dyke, J. DigiTales: A European Perspective. [2010:2]

ⁱⁱⁱ Benjamin, W. [1999:227]

^{iv} Pink, S. [2007:98]

^v <http://www.rt.com/news/greece-suicide-218/> accessed 19.06.12

^{vi} Goffman, I. 'Presentation of Self' p.6 1959

^{vii} Latour, B. [207:2005]

^{viii} Williams, R. 'Culture is Ordinary' 1958

^{ix} Ibid

^x Bourdieu, P. [615:1999]

^{xi} Turkle, S. [2011:xiv]

^{xii} Thrift, N [2008:85]

^{xiii} MacGregor Wise

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^{xiv} Pink, S. [112:2007]