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Digital storytelling as an educational dialectic model: results from a project on contemporary forms of *Odyssey*

La narration numérique comme modèle dialectique éducatif : résultats d'un projet sur les formes contemporaines de l'*Odysée*

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Abstract

Technological improvements offer new forms of communication and self-expression. Their use can sometimes leads to undesirable statements, exclusions and isolations, human rights violations and undemocratic practices. In recent years, digital storytelling methodology has become increasingly popular as a multimedia storytelling educational process, both creative and educational, that encourages critical thinking and democratic behavior. Starting from a research-creation project in the framework of an IDEFI-CreaTIC workshop dedicated to the *Odyssey*, editorialized and remediated through the collections of the French National Library in collaboration with the University of Athens, we will expose in a critical way the question of digital storytelling and we will advance the hypothesis that this methodology, both participative and innovative, has a dimension of democratic education that touches the mutations of freedom expression in the digital age.

Key-words: digital storytelling, *Odyssey*, research-creation, Digital humanities, remediation, editorialization.

Résumé

Les avancées technologiques proposent des formes inédites de communication et d'expression de soi. Leur usage peut parfois conduire à des énoncés indésirables, à des exclusions et des isolations, des violations de droits de l'homme et des pratiques non démocratiques. Ces dernières années, la méthodologie du *digital storytelling* devient de plus en plus populaire en tant que procédé pédagogique de narration multimédia, à la fois créatif et éducatif, qui encourage la réflexion critique et le comportement démocratique. Ayant comme point de départ un projet de recherche-crédation dans le cadre d'un atelier-laboratoire IDEFI-CréaTIC consacré à l'*Odysée*, éditorialisée et remédiatisée à travers les collections de la BnF en collaboration avec l'Université d'Athènes, nous exposerons d'une manière critique la question du *digital storytelling* et nous avancerons l'hypothèse que cette méthodologie, à la fois participative et innovante, revêt une dimension d'éducation démocratique qui touche les mutations de la liberté d'expression à l'ère numérique.

Mots-clés : digital storytelling, narration numérique, Odysée, recherche-crédation, Humanités numériques, remédiatisation, éditorialisation.

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Introduction

Digital humanities is considered as a new emerging promising cross sectorial and transdisciplinary field for research and practice. The literary theorist Stanley Fish (2012) considers that the digital humanities pursue a revolutionary agenda and thereby undermine the conventional standards of “pre-eminence, authority and disciplinary power”.

Within these variations, a distinctive feature of digital humanities is its cultivation of a two-way relationship between the humanities and the digital: the field both employs technology in the pursuit of humanities research and teaching and subjects technology to humanistic questioning and interrogation, often simultaneously. It fully disarticulates innovation and progress and never stops reminding us of the cultural and ethical, rather than material or digital, dimensions of human experience (Hirsch 2012).

In the present paper we will discuss the potential use of digital story telling as an educational dialectic model showcasing results from a project on contemporary forms of the *Odyssey*.

On digital storytelling as an educational model

Digital storytelling tools and methodology are recognized as generators of constructive user experiences for civic education. The aim is not to produce media for broadcast, but to produce “conversational media” (Couldry 2008): Digital storytelling is offered as a technique for increasing understanding across generations, ethnicities and other divides, and as a tool in activist organizing, education, professional reflection and corporate communication (Lambert 2006).

A digital story as a self-generated, short-length digital production tells a story of personal or community relevance by combining visual and audio elements such as video, photographs, documents, music, and narration (Burns 2013).

Digital storytelling leads through a process of sharing lived experiences in a story circle that results in a 2-4 -minute digital story blending personal narratives with multimedia content, including voice-overs, digital photos, video clips, music, and computer-generated text (Lambert 2013).

The multimodal affordances of digital storytelling can allow the expression of lived experiences in poignant and dynamic ways by juxtaposing layers of multimedia content to convey meanings that may not surface within a traditional linear print-based text (Brushwood 2009).

The story becomes a representation of ourselves, of our transformation, and through it all we learn important skills: (1) the cultural & social skills of how to understand ourselves and the world around us, (2) the technical skills of how to produce a digital story, and (3) the political skills of how to use story for community change initiatives.

Digital storytelling as a narrative and social process empowers with new tools the ability to represent the world around us - using a shared infrastructure. The aim is therefore both civic and profound political: According to Nick (2008) “to engage us in listening to each other’s stories with respect and then perhaps we can sort out new solutions”.

On the Odyssey project

The project was implemented by the French institute IDEFI-CreaTIC as an innovative training program running on project-based teaching method: design digital services and objects, applications, ebooks, or websites.

The thematic project in question on the contemporary forms and possible identities of *Odyssey* and the Odysseus figure took place in the academic year 2015-2016 and include:

- a seminar with speakers on scientific, publishing or technological issues;
- a supervised project by the Master CEN teaching team with a prototype that students, some of them, will show you then, even if it’s not finished yet;
- an original digital storytelling workshop in Athens in collaboration with the NewTech Lab team of the Media Department of the Ethniko and Kapodistriako University of Athens and under the scientific coordination of Prof. Michalis Meimaris.

The educational and pedagogical scope in working on the *Odyssey* was reading and questioning the Homer master piece and trying to understand his work in the present time and sociopolitical landscape in Europe.

In other words the creation research on the *Odyssey* was:

- Publishing in a new way (new media) based on the National Library of France collections as a digital mediation on the corpus;
- Transposing the *Odyssey* in the Contemporary World.

In the effort to invent a form, a language as hypermedia writing, hybridization of forms and modes of expression that borrows from both documentary and fiction were used. Students experimented via different media like movies, drafts, interviews, photographs, creating their content under two angles:

- Sanitary and social approach: they were looking for initiatives, alternatives, solidarity, brotherhood, altruism, hope;
- Legacy and artistic approach: we there looking for a vision of the world, impressions, vocabulary to tell the world like artiste, and street art do.

For them the concept of odyssey could be transposed to the fact that everyone lives a personal odyssey in the world today that is as a journey of initiation through which se are building as individuals;

For them the *Odyssey* figure could be the incarnation of Greek people, as a protean form figure, self-projection in this metaphor of life that offers the Odyssey.

In the question “Who are the Ulysses of today” three themes were raised:

- 1/ The migrant, migration (balanced between French / Greek / migrants)
- 2/ The idea of Europe and human values (those promoted in the Odyssey)
- 3/ A generational vision (the students generation and of Greek youth)

While in Athens the students had the opportunity to be familiarized with a series of people and organizations that were linked to the aforementioned themes. They were asked to produce their personal digital story of this entire journey to Athens.

On the potential of digital storytelling for personal expression and emotional comprehension of technology and through technology.

Through their digital stories, the 10 French university students opened up and introduced their other “self” in the university classroom discussing virtually personal issues.

Stories are produced through collaborative processes inside and outside the classroom. Students and scientific associates of the university (acting as facilitators – trainers) worked together. At the end the stories are presented and discussed in the classroom. For this reason, the design, the production and the final product presentation was as important, if not more important, than the final product.

The methodology used to evaluate the outcome of their productions included: sample observation during visits in Athens to a series of organizations and NGOs as well as during the preparation of digital narrative films and their presentation, small informal meetings, a series of qualitative interviews through semi structured questionnaires as well as an open discussions during the preparation of the digital stories. But also once the final product was presented in order to identify strengths and weaknesses of this digital story methodology as a pedagogical mean so as to design user experiences for civic education.

According to the feedback received in addition to the technical skills students acquired, the proposed digital storytelling methodology allowed them to express themselves about “sensitive personal matters” they experienced, to break through some of the self-inflicted isolation associated with them and thus increased their self-confidence. The majority of participants found it to be a wholesome experience creating mutual levels of trust between students, academic staff and the rest of the classroom. In parallel they recognized powerful tools that facilitated them in their process to build their own communication skills such as learning about crafting messages, constructing narratives and articulating viewpoints. Through telling their personal stories, students created powerful material, and were able to connect with each other and to interact as individuals, outside of these boundaries. It allowed them to know thyself and do an introspective reflexion of their own personal truths.

Conclusion

The stories produced, presented and discussed in the classroom via the proposed digital story methodology give powerful and personal insights into the realities of citizenship, students civic attitudes, social needs and behavioral patterns. The intention is to open spaces for students and academics to reflect, learn and discuss issues that concern them even if they are coming from different sociopolitical and cultural backgrounds and they share possibly totally different live experiences. Technology therefore becomes much more than just a media tools production.

It can be a technological enabler in order for constructive dialogue, unleashing students creativity and enabling their self-expression.

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