

Online Lifebooks: Narrations of lived lives to foster inter-generation exchange

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Although age and aging are natural conditions related to biological processes, their meanings are socially and culturally constructed. Almost universally, aging is seen as an irreversible process that is likely to include infirmity, dependence, incapability and increasing levels of disability and dementia. In the light of this ominous perspective, birth rates and expenditure trends in healthcare are brandished to motivate investments and fundings on innovative technologies that sustain the imagined needs of an aged population (Charness & Boot, 2009). Correspondingly, contemporary mainstream ICT research is devoted to the design and experimentation of technologies that, much as they are seen as flexible, tailorable and unobtrusive, are but assistive means; or means to convey new goods/services for the elderly market segment as well as to adapt for it those services that are continuously conceived for the 30-65 year-old segment.

No matter how this could seem an unacceptable simplification, designing for the elderly is usually declined according to the dominant image where "aging persons" are somehow different from generic "persons that age" (as everyone does). The common place view of "elderly" as person that needs some structured assistance brings us to envision a technology that could help "aging users" get rid of consolidated images of the 'aging' and related needs, by enabling them to create their own image of their aging process, contrasting the socially imposed stereotypes

In this paper, we will outline the concept of such a technology and discuss its main requirements in the light of the relevant literature. We refer to this type of application as a Lifebook, so as to hint at its main functions, irrespectively of how they are actually realized. Indeed, we envision a Lifebook as an application aimed

at promoting the creation, sharing and co-construction of life-centered narratives: our point here is that *experience* and not *presumed* incompetence, should be the factor to take into greater consideration when designing for the elderly user; and how to valorize it should be the main goal to achieve, since experience is the resource that makes this category of users really different and homogenous with respect to the others, especially if considering their potential for content production.

To our aims, the concept of narrative is detached from any narratological technicality and it is rather closer to the meaning that the term has recently acquired in psychology and the field of human and cultural studies. In these ambits, narratives are conceived of as ways in which humans make sense of the world and in which a culture structures and propagates situated and experiential knowledge. Therefore, we intend narrative as "a mode of knowledge" or a "cognitive scheme" by which we understand the world and assimilate the intentional behavior of the others (Bruner, 1991); and we see them as "intricately related to knowing [and as] our way of taking the flow of experience and making it intelligible" (Baur 1994, p. xx), (Kreiswirth, 2000, 304).

The often-cited definition by Barbara Herrnstein Smith (narratives occur when "someone tells someone else that something happened") (1981, p.228) clarifies the main traits of narratives we also are interested in: these are accounts of situated events, governed by a processual nature and a double temporality, which is constituted by the chronology of the events (i.e., story or *fabula*) and their presentation in the text (i.e., discourse or *sjuzet*) (Rimmon-Kenan, 2006); they require an act of intentional and *verbal* sharing of sequential, up close, and personal facts that is deeply affected by a context of relationship and by even tacit conventions of expression; and, last but not least, they involve both a teller and a listener – or a writer and a reader - which are bound by a communion of some sort and by an interpretative and, possibly, empathic relationship where meaning is constructed and apprehended collaboratively (Iser, 1978). This bidirectional relationship is essential to the concept of narrative on which we focus for the design of a narrative-based technology empowering its users and the communication between them. To account for this twofold relationship, scholars have defined two intertwined concepts: that of *narrative intelligence*, i.e., the human ability to organize experience into narrative form (Bruner, 1986); and *narrative knowledge*, i.e., the human competence to understand the meaning and significance of stories through cognitive, symbolic and affective means (Polinghorne, 1988) and to respond to them adequately. These are both capabilities that we apprehend effortlessly since we are children: if narrative frameworks are an important part of the way we learn to approach the world (Nelson, 1989), also as adults "we continue to surround ourselves with stories, furnishing our worlds not just with data but with meaning" (Mateas & Sengers, 2003, p.1).

Several systems have been proposed with the aim to help people organize their memories and externalize their life, e.g., Memories for Life (Fitzgibbon & Reiter, 2002) and MyLifeBits (Gemmell et al., 2005). These projects are all based on the concept of “product for memory”, i.e., something to remember (as search and retrieve), like a picture, a recipe, a note, a web page, an email. Yet, in order to enable what Van Dijck appropriately calls the “googlization of memory” (Van Dijck, 2005), these technologies seem to adopt a naïve conceptualization of memories as *objective* facts rather than recognizing them in the act of remembering itself, in the discursive representation (and re-invention) of stories that relate to both private facts and to the reflections and interpretations of the others. Other systems are designed to support people in telling stories to one another (e.g., Umaschi & Cassell 1997; Ryokai & Cassell 1999), but they have focused on the creative dimension of inventing, and representing, fictional stories, rather than on the mediating role of personal, confidential and truthful narratives. On the other hand, Web 2.0 services and platforms seem more to promote decontextualized chattering and fragmentation of personal stories in thousands of incoherent trickles and snippets e.g., in Facebook postings, Twitter feeds, Google Buzzes (Carr, 2010, p. 91) rather than contribute in making sense of these personal facts all together. The induced sense of time has no substantial ties with the past, which is thus doomed to the oblivion notwithstanding its seemingly everlasting digital retrievability (Carr, 2010, p.193).

Several online services are devoted to support the narrativation of life stories. For instance, StoryCorps¹ is an (American) oral history project by a nonprofit organization that archived more than 30,000 audio/video interviews from more than 60,000 participants. From our perspective, the interesting point of this project is the face-to-face 'interview session', while the site with its services acts more as showcase and promotion initiative than as enabler of an interactive community to maintain around the collected stories. The Remembering Site (TRS)² is a similar initiative launched in 2004 that is aimed at facilitating the textual narrativation of life stories. All in all, both of these web-based initiatives provide little or no support to the dimensions of sociality and community life.

These dimensions are in fact the focus of interest of two recent online initiatives, which recall many features of other successful social network platforms (like Myspace and Facebook): Famento by Famento Inc.³ and “Story of My Life” by Eravita Inc.⁴. Famento, in particular, recalls Facebook from the logotype itself and seems to specifically address the older targets in that it also allows to create accounts for other persons “in absentia” (suggesting this could be

¹ <http://storycorps.org/> - The conversation of a lifetime.

² <http://www.therecoveringsite.org/>

³ <http://www.famento.com/> - “Your family History”.

⁴ <http://www.storyofmylife.com/> - “Keep your story forever”.

the case of either elderly people with very low e-literacy or passed-away persons to commemorate). “Story of My Life” looks more successful in its aim of gathering life-related narratives from its members. Preservation, i.e., the capability to store stories and make them accessible allegedly forever with commenting functionalities, is one of the main tenets of this initiative.

Yet, a Lifebook is radically different from these initiatives. In fact, these projects - as many others in this vein - simply undervalue the importance of narratives and sociality and how these complement each other in the co-construction of sense (e.g., through mutual annotation), the two aspects that we identify as the most important ones for our application of interest.

1 Envisioning a technology for life-related narratives

Inspired by the research and activity undertaken about narratives in fields such as psychology (e.g., Lynne & McLeod 2004), medical anthropology (e.g., Vibeke, 1997), medicine (Charon, 2006) and gerontology (Randall, 1999; Kenyon et al. 2001), and surprised not to have found so far duly exploited the potential of ICT in mediating narrative-based relationships between actors, we came to envision and design a web-based service we refer to as Lifebook. This is a digital “book” in which users can narrate true stories and their personal memories, as well as where “other” users can make sense of these accounts and strengthen their mutual acquaintance with the “teller” as a consequence of an active and participatory interaction between these. We discussed this vision in an informal and preliminary workshop and elicited the indications that we report in what follows.

Such a technology is aimed at fostering a narrative-based interaction between human actors (irrespectively of their age) by allowing tellers and their active “followers” to co-construct their narratives, in a fluid exchange of ideas, descriptions, tentative interpretations, inquiries and clarifications, by means of functionalities now widely adopted and stable like seamless message threading, asynchronous communication, instant messaging, content annotation and collaborative editing. In other words, we focus on technologies conceived to help “tell stories”, and “share narratives *that evoke* memories” which, for their own nature, are continuously mutable as they are built, comprehended, interpreted and even re-formulated, especially if they can be of some value for elderly people.

Moreover, facilitating elderly people to tell and share their memories can: provide young relatives with a sense of strengthened closeness and family belonging (because it gives them a “sense of the origins” and “continuities with their roots”); foster the transmission of values through generations (Parada & Viladàs, 2010) and the reappraisal of the importance of keeping in touch with the aged; these, in turn, could corroborate their image as *information resources*

(Powers et al., 1989), if not a downright cultural and educational resource that is rooted in a direct experience of past events.

To achieve these goals a narrative-promoting technology should support the easy *shareability* of the stories among people who are encouraged to “put in common” with others pieces of their experiential arabesque. Then stories can be spurred by an explicit request (mediated by the system) of (authorized) acquaintances (like when a grandson asks his grandfather “please grandpa tell me when you were in London under the Nazi bombardment...”) or undertaken by the teller’s initiative. The technology could then ask a couple of simple data to help frame the memory (like, if known, time, place, people involved in the narration) and then leave room for the textual reminiscence. During the composition of the story, the technology should provide wizard-like or one-click procedures for the in-line attachment of multimedia objects (like pictures, videos, audio excerpts) so as to facilitate the task of embedding additional elements, and the capability to keep stories in draft mode, i.e., provisional until the teller decides it is ready for shareability. At the completion of the story, the system could then ask who has right to see the narration from the teller’s contacts and whether these can forward the invitation to get access to the story as well. The publication of and access to the stories are easily encompassed within the standard functionalities of social network platforms but, right for this reason, a proper compromise must be met according to the e-literacy of the teller not to overload her with irrelevant requests and make publishing a story a pain. Moreover the technology should give both to the writer and the reader the capability to annotate and comment in a public and private fashion the story for private uses and to relate it to other stories (either of the same person or of others whose stories are accessible) as well as to events of public interest available on the Web (Cabitza & Simone, 2010).

Our research agenda is being articulated in a twofold path: on the one hand, we will analyze how existing online services are frequented and used by elderly people and how the social networks (like Activagers¹ and Intrage²) intended for the so called “silver surfers” (Bitterman & Shalev, 2004), are used by their members to collect personal experiences and memories and share them in some narrative form. In doing so, we aim to gain insight into recurring patterns of storytelling and social interaction “around” their stories, as well as to extract useful requirements on how to improve the inclusion and participation of aging persons in these initiatives. On the other hand, we are currently developing a prototypical Lifebook that integrates existing open-source tools (like Android³ as

¹ <http://www.activagers.com>

² <http://www.intrage.it/>

³ See <http://www.android.com/>

operating system for handheld multi-touch tablets, Drupal¹ for the blogging platform and the SIMILE timeline developed within the SIMILE project²) to undertake a focus group and pilot study with selected users and, hence, extract more precise requirements on which advanced functionalities could facilitate the creation and sharing of life-related narratives.

2 References

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¹ See <http://drupal.org/>.

² See <http://www.simile-widgets.org/timeline/> and <http://simile.mit.edu/>

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