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Multidisciplinary Aspects of Design

Objects, Processes, Experiences and Narratives

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Designer as Drama Manager: Understanding the Roles of Narrative Within Design Processes for Change

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Abstract. This paper aims to propose and stimulate a critical debate on the multidisciplinary aspects of communication design, focusing on the contribution, mutual learning, and synergy of audiovisual storytelling, transmedia design, and game design. We assume the narratives as the common ground for developing design processes and practices for addressing complex socio-economic challenges.

In particular, we focus on the role of design within inclusive and co-design processes proposing the narratives as a framework and the co-created stories as both contemporary cultural expressions and design practices. In light of case studies and examples from our research and educational experiences at the School of Design and Department of Design (Politecnico di Milano), we propose to look at the designer as the drama manager of the design processes, capable of facing the challenges of tomorrow. In doing so, we discuss the gap between authorship and agency that occurs whenever design operates in social innovation contexts, collaborating with non-designers – artists, experts in other disciplines, or people and communities at the margins of society.

Keywords: narrative · narrative change · audiovisual storytelling · transmedia design · game design

1 Narrative Perspective on Design: An Introduction

Our world is facing a historic challenge. The meaning of "well-being" changed from an idea of development primarily based on mass production and consumption to one of micro and diffuse innovative solutions for sustainable developments for human beings and environments. This assumption makes us change the perspective through which

we look at the design and co-design processes and propose a way to improve the connection between experiential knowledge and academic expertise. From the perspective of researchers in communication design, we assume narrative practice as the common ground for developing design processes aiming to address complex socio-economic challenges.

Understanding the roles of narrative within design processes for change is the main focus of our research group, Imagis Lab. It is a collaborative and interdisciplinary design research lab located at the Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano; it is focused on building brands, stories, and experiences. Research and education are strongly integrated into hands-on and in-field activities that build creative content, communication strategies, play and interactive narrative experience for branding and social innovation, with attention to stimulating and fostering personal and social change. Our approach merges design tools and skills in audio-visual language, participatory communication, design strategies, branding as identity development, games, and transmedia practice. Moreover, our work starts from the idea that narrative can empower design activity and overcome the dependency on hegemonic discursive practices.

Since the start of humanity, the narrative has acted as the primary means of interacting with others, giving future generations a legacy, building a culture, and providing the method by which we make sense of our collective experiences. Different fields of investigation – including literature, art, psychology, cognitive sciences, pedagogy, marketing, and communication – have examined the narrative as a complex and articulated subject. Indeed, scholars and innovative thinkers have studied and inquired about the subjects of narrative and storytelling throughout the decades, underscoring how stories have the potential to communicate, engage people effectively, and impact in real and practical ways both real-life and socially concerned topics.

What emerged is the notion that narrative can contribute to the construction of reality [1], give form to imaginary worlds [2, 3], represent immaterial ideas, and share common visions [4–6].

Within these extensive references, the reflections of two scholars were vital to define the narrative vocation of design and our research and design approach. The first is Fischer's [7] concept of the "narrative paradigm", according to which people can be recognized as storytellers, and all forms of human communication can be assessed from the narrative perspective. Then, at the end of the 20th century, the concept of narrativity was adopted by Marie Laure Ryan [8], as other scholars had done [9, 10], to refer to the ability of media text to be perceived as a narrative construction in the audience's mind. Both Fisher [7] and Ryan [8, 11, 12] examined narrative in terms of practices that might impact society, emphasising the significance of narration and the manners whereby stories can inspire change.

In light of such premises, we assume narratives are the common ground for developing design processes and practices addressing complex socio-economic challenges and promoting narrative change. From the communication design perspective, this means addressing two issues: 1) the role of narrative within design processes; 2) the power of narrative change, that is the process of building and promoting story-based content and the construction of collective imagination, challenging hegemonic narratives, and driving social change.

2   The Role of Narrative Within Design Processes

The involvement of users in the collective process of story and experience creation should be based on a design process capable of understanding the experiences narratives can induce. Two concepts of crucial relevance act as focal points for effectively describing, analysing, and designing such involvement: Authorship and Agency. Well-known in interactive storytelling and game design fields, the Authorship-Agency pair can benefit and support the design discipline in general as well.

Within the narrative field, *Authorship* refers to compositions in which a knowledgeable author creates the story, acting as a warrant for its quality in terms of content, plot, structure, and all its formal narrative elements. Users – be they readers, listeners, or viewers – live an experience in which quality is directly dependent on the author's talent. The involvement can be considerable, and users can sense a feeling of belonging, imagining themselves in the story, but – despite their possible yearning – they have no power to change the unfolding story, interact with it, or affect its development.

Contrarily, when users are invited and engaged in shaping the story and creatively acting during the experience, they practise their *Agency*. The quality of the resulting story may decrease since amateur authors would create it, often due to activities mainly absorbing their attention.

According to this overview, we can state that while Authorship safeguards the quality of a story, Agency fosters engagement in the experience; the two are seemingly opposite poles, but they can cooperate and intermix.

In a time when co-design processes are capable of improving people's and communities' involvement in creating innovative solutions, design and co-design could, and should, consider the Authorship-Agency pair in their practice. In order to facilitate spreading awareness of these concepts among designers, we propose a selection of case studies from our research and educational experiences, aiming to depict Authorship and Agency from a design perspective.

2.1   Authorship: @growingstories_Milan

On the authorship side are naturally placed the experiences of reading, listening, or watching stories in which the quality varies depending on several factors, among which the author's expertise and talent are critical.

Examples of this category are the projects developed during the course *Complex Artefacts and System Design Studio* for the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano [13]. In this course students are pushed to experiment with their authorship in the design, development, and testing of interactive narrative artefacts. The course has been active since the 2015/2016 academic year (AY), and the AY 2017/2018 edition saw a collaboration between *Asnada* – an association that provides training in the Italian language for refugees, migrants, and minors in Milan – and Italian and international students from the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano. During the course, the personal stories of migrants participating in Asnada's activities became rough creative material to tell the dreams, hopes, and fears of those who left a familiar place to move to Italy. Specifically, we challenged our students to create interactive narrative artefacts, starting from the miniatures made in 2012 during "179 Places: Geographies of Migration and Roots", a

workshop-exhibition held in Milan and curated by Asnada and the architect Giacomo Borella (Studio Albori).

These materials denoted by important emotional significance were first translated into storyworlds starting from their values, then developed by the design students as interactive narrative artefacts rooted in Milan. Among these projects, we would like to describe @*growingstories_Milan*, a distributed narrative consisting of an Instagram profile containing the main narrative line, then connected to several situated activities, aiming at leading the targeted audience to specific places in the city of Milan. The students (Chiara Barzaghi, Susanna Berra, Felipe Castro, Barbara Gualandris, Jiarui Huang, Yi Wang, and Selen Yesilada) were organised in a multidisciplinary and international team to work on one of the stories developed during the workshop-exhibition mentioned above.

The short story selected was set in Takwu, a village in northern Nigeria, from which they derived values that were the starting point for designing a new storyworld: community, identity, home, shelter, and nature. They identified values that are universal and shared by other social groups. In this specific case, they focused on people who temporarily or permanently have to move to a foreign country and recreate a community of reference in a foreign place. With this aim, @growingstories_Milan was born, a project that consists of a single Instagram profile that presents a story through 17 chapters, each following the classical three-act structure and expressed in different narrative forms (spanning visual to audio-visual content). Specifically, seven visual novels, three textual carousels, three videos, four comics, and an HTML5 website with extra content were designed and developed, allowing the user to deepen the story and enter additional narrative lines. Moreover, leveraging the specific features of the Instagram profile, five geotags were hidden across the chapters, pushing people to go outside and discover five real places in the city of Milan.

2.2 Agency: campUS Social TV

When users are allowed freedom regarding the events in the story, expressing their agency, experiences are characterised by high levels of creative pleasure and a feeling of meaningfulness directly derived from making choices and taking action.

One such agency-centric project is *campUS Social TV*. It is one of the three core pillars of the *campUS* project, co-funded by the Polisocial Award 2016, the social engagement and responsibility programme promoted by Politecnico di Milano and awarded the ADI Compasso d'Oro in 2017.

campUS Social TV was developed in collaboration with Abelia CAG, a youth centre in a northern suburb of Milan. The project brought together social groups of youth on the margins of society, such as ones not in employment, education, or training (NEET) and teens at risk of dropping out of school. The first output of the Social TV activities was the videoclip "Classe 98," a rap song written and recorded by two young men with the help of educators at *Abelia Music Records*. Starting from the rap song they wrote and recorded, we researchers, educators from Abelia, and a group of young people focused on highlighting meaningful words and images, designed the storyboard, identified locations, shot video around the city, and edited the video [14]. Designers acted as mediators, on the one hand providing creative tools and technical skills and on the other eliciting

self-narration and trust. The young people took agency in making creative choices regarding storytelling and expressive languages. Asking them questions, taking time to talk together and gaining their trust, we had the chance to listen to their thoughts, discover their imagery of reference, and make some of their desires come true. For example, we discovered they did not know some locations in the city centre, so we decided to move there for video shoots. They were particularly engaged and interested in visiting the city, looking around with new eyes and feeling they were the main protagonists of the scene. After the shoots, sequences and frames from the videos were used as the background images for creating self-portraits, as the result of adding further expressive layers to the pictures and providing the design of the videoclip with an original, even if vernacular, treatment and style.

We presented the video during a public event, and the young musicians performed their song live after the screening. It was also distributed on Facebook and, even if it did not garner many views or shares, became a key part of the participants' satisfaction. Their agency was the best result we achieved, so we can say that such a narrative-based co-design process was valuable to be shared and replicated.

2.3 Authorship/Agency Hybrid: MyBrother

Authorship and Agency are not two distinct, mutually-exclusive approaches: It is possible to let them meet and intertwine in a mingling that yields interesting results for designers.

Examples of cases where Authorship and Agency meet are frequent among games. Game design has constantly been evolving during the last decades, raising the awareness that it should value the player's perspective or experience. Players have a significant role in games: They make the play experience happen when they interact with the game. Scholars agree that Agency is an essential part of the play experience [15–18]. Players need to feel they can make choices and that their actions result in meaningful effects throughout the experience. Looking at this process from the communication design point of view, games are carefully and skilfully designed artefacts: they have Authorship. At the same time, the experience they can create is active, and their users make choices and express Agency.

When narrative and game meet, a new Authorship-Agency combination emerges. Stories can be present in games in different ways. They can be told during the game, or, as recent design research and cases show, they can be written and treated to mingle with the game deeply. Stories can be split into sub-stories, told by game characters, or found written in game material. Players can infer them by watching the environment and interacting with elements so that stories become "pre-generated narrative content that exists prior to a user's interaction with the artefact and that is fixed and predetermined" [18] and, as such, is Authorship-centric. In this kind of games, Agency emerges in finding, recognising, and giving those elements meaning. Moreover, the description of gameplay actions is a story in itself. It is characterised by Authorship, in the form of the game story – if any –, the game system, and its mechanics, which can be seen as a semiotics matrix [19] and is characterised by Agency in the form of the whole of players' actions.

The case we propose is a game where Authorship and Agency combine themselves not only on the design-and-experience level but also under a narrative aspect. *My Brother*

is a collaborative boardgame designed by Irene Nappi in 2015 in her Master's Degree thesis – supervision of M. Bertolo and I. Mariani – and then published by Demoelà.

The design of the game started from a novel [20] depicting the life of a boy suffering from schizophrenia and his family. The project aims to inform players about the main traits of this illness and about good practices and actions to take in case of someone having a schizophrenic attack. The original story (narrative Authorship) has been treated, simplified, and decomposed (design Authorship) to build a series of game events and sets-of-actions from which each player can choose. During gameplay, events happen, and players decide how to face them (play Agency). The overall experience differs from play to play, so each session results in a new story (narrative Agency) co-created by players according to the narrative world and its rules.

3   Conclusions: Designer as Drama Manager

Since we began, our research and teaching activities have focused on the role of design within inclusive and co-design processes proposing the narratives as a framework and the co-creation of stories as both contemporary cultural expressions and design practices. In doing so, a leading challenge emerged: How is it possible to funnel the potentialities of narrative in driving the change in a context in which people are not only reading but also writing, re-writing, and sharing their own stories, undermining the classical notions of authority and authorship?

Analysing the in-field research activities and the design projects developed over the years by our group and our design students, common traits and differences emerged. From the point of view of the use of narrative, all of the projects (analogue, digital, or hybrid) have prototyped narrative as a driving force to build identity and engagement processes, emotional connection and feeling of unity of purpose, and to drive social change. On the contrary, the main divergence emerged in analysing the user's relationship with the narrative artefacts, characterised by a shift between the Agency and Authorship of storytelling practice.

As a result, we conceptualised communication design as the strategic asset where narrative can be used to manage the aesthetic power of social practices. Specifically, we envisioned a world in which the aesthetic power and the building of shared imagery of a sustainable future stem from people's narrative experiences, authored by designers (characterised by Authorship) and co-designed with non-designers (characterised by Agency) able to unlock the dispersion of new meanings and contemporary cultural expression.

To reflect on the role of narrative within design processes, we then propose a diagram entitled the *Transformative Narratives Matrix* on which we placed coordinates related to Authorship and Agency and their relationship to designers and non-designers to identify clusters related to narrative experiences (see Fig. 1):

As a result, we obtained four quadrants that identify different clusters of narrative content:

- **Story-led**: This quadrant includes projects in which the designer is the primary author of stories. Examples are the traditional non-interactive works and the ones in which the designers strictly manage the mechanics of interaction to ensure the consistency
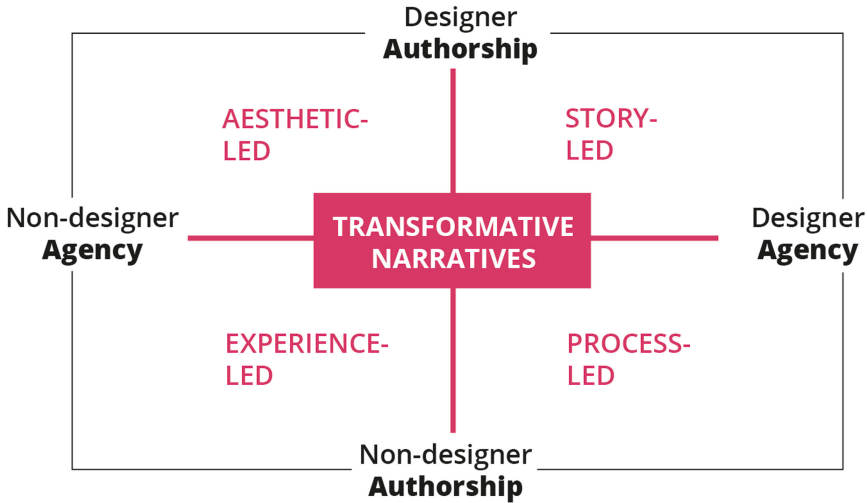
Fig. 1. The Transformative Narratives Matrix

of the story throughout the experience. The choices are limited and predetermined by the author, as in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (David Slade 2018);

- **Aesthetic-led**: This quadrant includes narratives in which the designer's authorship and the participant's agency are concurrent. The result is a narrative experience in which the story's unfolding can be compromised by the arbitrariness of the user's choices, but which the rules established by the author nevertheless limit. Examples are the open, virtual worlds in video games in which the gaming experience is tied to the possibility of experiencing the narrative adventure in ways and at times chosen by the user but still constrained by the game's code;
- **Experience-led**: This quadrant includes narrative experiences characterised by high participant agency and low designer authorship. One example is live-action role-playing games (LARPs), immersive experiences that let players interact with the developed storyworld, acting and dressing up as characters while adhering to pre-established rules;
- **Process-led**: In these narrative systems, the designers develop storytelling processes and tools as in-field participatory activities that allow people to build a narrative world while telling their own personal or fictional stories or while experiencing and playing the story. One example is digital storytelling projects in which the narrative output designed and implemented by users is not as crucial as the lived experience.

During the analysis, some recurrences in the design of the narrative experiences emerged:

1. The tension between Authorship and Agency is present in all the narrative-based projects we worked on, but at different moments and on both story and design levels;
2. The experimentation of Process-led storytelling processes in the project characterised by Agency gives way to language experimentation (Aesthetic-led) in the design of narrative content based on a high level of authorial production;

3. In designing narrative content beyond the community of reference in which the participatory process was activated, authorship increases, and agency decreases.

In light of such reflections, we can affirm that in storytelling systems, the designer's role as a vision-keeping storyteller and the role of participants are tightly intertwined [21]. The designer can be the author but also the creator of frameworks, structures, and narrative processes, opening the story to a choral, communal experience, wherein the audience is provided with appropriate enactments/drama and empowered to unfold the story or create their narrative [21].

Given that, we can recognize the vital role played by narratives within design processes. Thus, we propose the communication designer as the *Drama Manager*, able to balance the use of Authorship and Agency within projects to promote a narrative change.

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