

The Theatre of Posillipo: a Communication Paradigm for Cultural Heritage

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Abstract. User-friendliness, low cost and extra-rapid release times. Thanks to these features, instant multimedia may represent a crucial resource for cultural institutions in need to create interactive multimedia artefacts with no internal technical competences and very limited financial resources. The proposed paradigm, 1001Stories, includes a workflow, a content production method and a development engine to produce high-quality applications that can be distributed as CD-Roms, websites, Podcasts and applications for other mobile devices. 1001Stories has been used to generate multimedia applications for a variety of customers, including museums, government bodies, research groups, and academic institutions.

Introduction

Cultural Heritage is usually associated to durable values and contents that do not change in time (at least, not quickly). We tend to see publications related to Cultural Heritage communication as products having a long life and, therefore, requiring a long-term, carefully-planned production effort. Most museum catalogues, publications, websites and multimedia applications require a remarkable amount of development time, as well as a significant effort and equally remarkable amounts of financial resources.

Recently, however, a series of elements including budget cuts, new communication opportunities and the fast-paced evolution of technologies and devices have started inverting the trend. A new approach to Cultural Heritage communication has emerged: “instant multimedia” (Bolchini, Di Blas & Paolini 2007), i.e. the possibility to create a high quality multimedia application in a short time and with limited resources, meeting also today’s portability requirements of being able to enjoy cultural contents through different channels (web, mobile devices, iPod, iPhone, information kiosks, etc.).

1. Instant Multimedia

Like “instant publishing”, which refers to the release (in a short time and at low costs) of high quality printed products, the expression “instant multimedia” indicates the production, in a short time and on a contained budget, of a quality multimedia application, to be used in different contexts and situations.

This approach offers several advantages, which make its adoption not just beneficial, but even strategic for the entire Cultural Heritage sector:

- The market’s fast evolution makes it more profitable for companies, institutions and organizations dealing with Cultural Heritage communication to release several products in a short time (3-4 weeks) and at low costs, than fewer products requiring significant financial resources and longer times (8-10 months). Clearly, this is even more true when the budget is limited.
- Agile, fast-made products allow promptly meeting new communication requirements, or taking advantage of opportunities offered by special circumstances and events – such as temporary museum exhibitions, company fairs, the launch of a new brand, product, or service, and similar.
- Multimedia products tend to age very rapidly. This factor, which represents a significant problem for long-term productions, becomes secondary in the case of small, low-cost productions, easier to update or to replace.

Basing on previous observations and on the large experience of HOC laboratory in the field of Cultural Heritage communication, 1001stories was created: a development tool allowing to model in a simple and intuitive way a “multimedia narrative”, i.e. an application that combines together different media (texts, audio, images, video, animations) and can be used through different devices, contexts and situations, both online and offline: on the web, on a CD-Rom or on mobile devices, such as iPods and similar (Fig. 1).



Figure 1 Examples of use on multiple devices: web, iPod and Information Kiosk

As further evidence of the easiness and quickness of realization allowed by 1001stories, it is important to note that the tool was designed for users who are not multimedia professionals, i.e. for people who wish to communicate a message or content, with no specific technical qualifications and with a limited budget.

With 1001stories, customers and authors of the multimedia narrative may focus on the message (“what I am trying to say”) and on the contents’ quality, rather than on the technology and information architecture (“how I talk about it”). Using 1001stories does not require relevant technological requirements for the design and implementation of a multimedia narrative: all efforts may be directed to the elaboration of the editorial plan, the creation, production, and editing of the

contents, the product evaluation and the assessment of its quality. In summary, the main qualifications needed by the production team are essentially related to the knowledge of the content domain, plus oral and written communication skills, rather than technological know-how.

It wasn't by chance that, since January 2007, 1001stories has been used by the students of the University of Italian Switzerland as a basic tool for authoring exercises, and by approximately 10,000 Italian students (from preschool to high school) within the national PoliCultura competition (Di Blas, Marini, Boretti, 2009). It was also used in its different versions to create multimedia applications for several prestigious customers, such as museums (Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan Archaeological Museum, Herman Hesse Museum in Lugano) and public institutions (Sirian Ministry of Tourism, various Ministries for Cultural Activities and Tourism in the Mediterranean area).

2. The 1001stories kit

The 1001stories kit developed by the HOC Laboratory of Politecnico di Milano – the name is inspired to the collection of short stories “The Book of the Thousand and One Nights” – includes two main components: (a) a development tool, which allows efficient uploading of data and fast generation of the multimedia interactive applications; (b) a methodological guide, supporting the organization of the development process of a complete and effective multimedia narrative, indicating a recommended workflow, i.e. a structured sequence of activities, and some guidelines for the creation and editing of contents.

2.1 The development tool

The 1001stories engine allows i) transforming the conceptual structure of the narration into a digital interactive format; ii) enriching the conceptual structure with multimedia contents; iii) distributing the multimedia narrative through multiple devices.

The tool is intuitive and easy to use, because the complexity of its implementation is hidden behind an easy-to-learn interface; therefore it allows producing a multimedia and multichannel application in a short time. The entire production process of the applications is quick and intuitive: from the creation of the narrative structure to the uploading of multimedia content, from the publication of pages to the generation of CD-Roms and podcasts: everything can be done in a few clicks.

The 1001stories kit is based on an Information Architecture with predefined navigation and interaction patterns (Antle, 2003; Garzotto et al., 1999). Every narrative develops following a hierarchical structure, composed of “topics” and “subtopics” (Fig. 2), each one lasting approximately one minute. It is recommended to keep the number of topics between 4 and 8, and to do the same for the number of subtopics within each topic. The topics offer the most important information about the theme of the narrative, whereas the subtopics provide more details and describe relevant aspects of the topics themselves. Each topic and subtopic includes a certain number of images (the recommended number is between 3 and 6) and an audio commentary. In the professional version of the tool, still images can be replaced by video and/or animations.

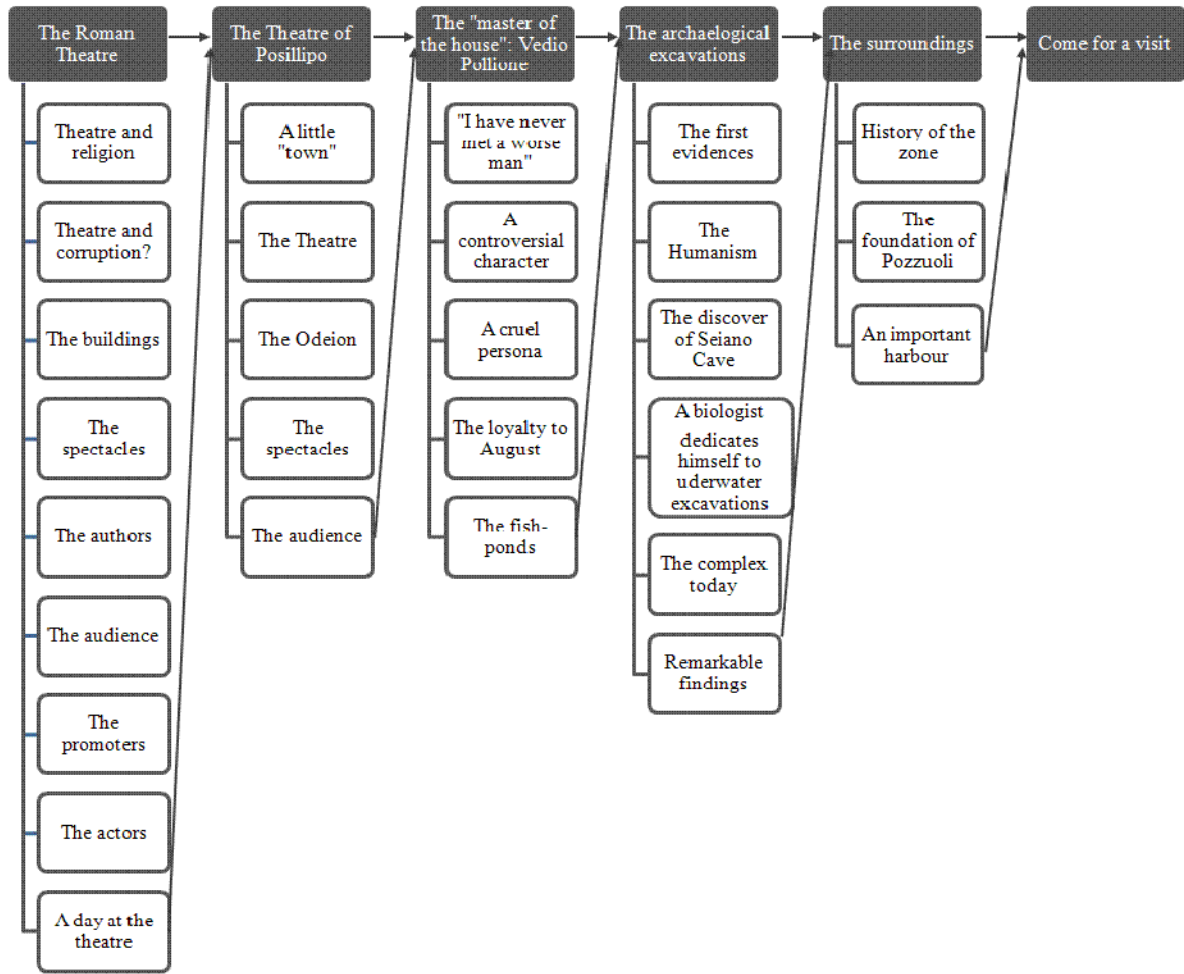


Figure 2 Editorial plan of the narrative “The Posillipo Theatre”, from the series “Entertainment Places of the Ancient Times”

2.2 Navigation patterns

Starting from the home page, the user can follow different navigation modes. S/he can choose the short automatic navigation (i.e. a sequence of only the main topics), the long automatic navigation (all the main topics plus their subtopics) or the manual navigation (free selection of items). A further option, particularly useful during exhibitions or fairs, is the loop navigation. The engine (1001stories) is organized into three main functions: (1) data entry; (2) preview and (3) generation.

The data entry control panel is quite simple (see Fig. 3). It allows the user to modify the editorial plan of the narrative, organizing topics and subtopics (adding/deleting/moving them at will) and to insert the content (title, images with captions, texts, audio). The preview function allows the user to check at every step how the final result will look like (for example, as regards the blend between the audio and the slideshow of images) and modify it as needed. Once the work is satisfactorily completed, the generator allows the creation of the final application (over the different channels).

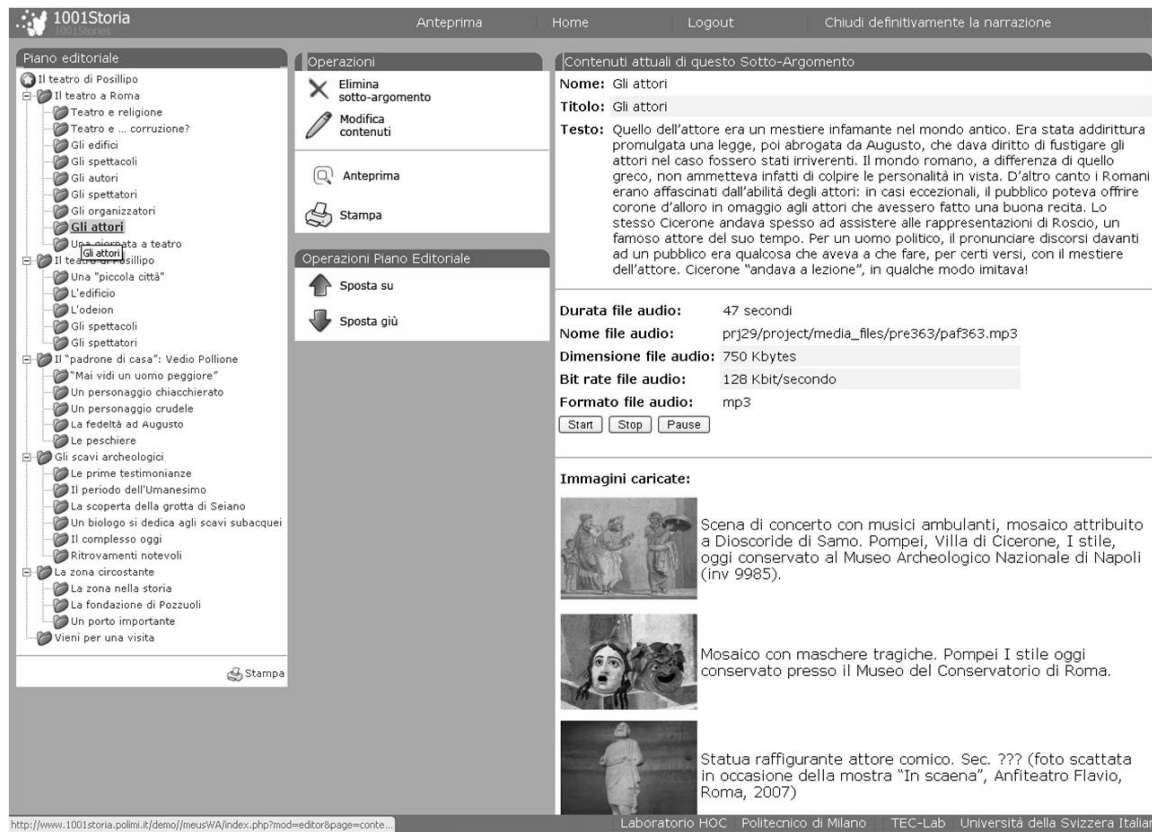


Figure 3 The data entry interface of the 1001stories engine. On the left, the editorial plan's hierarchy of topics and subtopics; on the right, the content management section.

2.3 Methodology guidelines

An effective tool is not sufficient per se to guarantee an effective and successful process of development. Questions like “what workflow of activities needs to be followed in order to create a good multimedia narrative? What are the key ingredients for creating engaging content?” need precise answers in order to effectively support the development team. While professional designers may find these questions trivial, beginners do need to be guided in the development process. That is why, together with the 1001stories engine, we have developed a precise workflow of activities plus a detailed set of guidelines on how to produce the content.

2.3.1 The workflow

The workflow is divided into 10 major steps.

1. Gathering of the "raw" material and a general idea (1-2 Hours)
2. Editorial Plan (1-2 Hours)
3. Visual Communication (3-8 Hours)
4. Writing the narratives (8-16 Hours)
5. From text to audio (4-8 Hours)
6. First version: putting the pieces together (2 Hours)
7. Quality Check (2-4 Hours)
8. Revising text and audio (4-8 Hours)
9. Revising visual communication (1-4 Hours)
10. Final Version (2 Hours)

From the above workflow we can see that the minimum amount of time needed is approximately 28 hours, while 56 hours is the maximum. These rough estimates, of course, can't be taken with scientific rigor, but they can help in that they are the result of our experience over several developments.

2.3.2 Content production

In order to be effective, an instant multimedia package needs a high quality and a fast way to produce content appropriate to the result we wish to obtain, in a short time and within a fixed budget. Three key ingredients make our proposed approach effective: interviews to experts, evocative images and professional speakers.

Interviewing highly competent people and experts in the field for a couple of hours will secure the gathering of the “raw” material, to be transformed in audio narratives. During the interviewing process, knowledgeable people can tell wonderful stories, often much more engaging than those we find in written contributions, since they tend to use a more adequate terminology in order to make the storytelling emotionally involving.

The storyteller's voice is the driving force of the narrative; the images have the purpose to enrich it with an emotional aspect, rather than providing strictly rational information. In this way, the attention of the user stays focused on what is being told, without being diverted by the slide show. On the other side, thanks to the merely evocative role of the images, their choice can be delayed or changed during the working progress, without need of modifying the entire production.

The use of professional speakers instead of the “author's” or the expert's voice (e.g. the curator of an exhibition) ensures audio of a much higher quality in a short time.

3. The series “Entertainment Places of the Ancient Times”

Professor Bruni, a teacher of Latin literature at a Neapolitan high school, is having a walk through the city with his own family, when his attention is captured by an information kiosk of the Tourist Information Office placed in Plebiscito Square. Consulting the kiosk, the professor hits on the multimedia storytelling about the Roman Theatre of Posillipo, finding out that the archeological park has finally reopened.

Professor Bruni decides to plan a guided tour to the archeological complex with his students in order to deepen the basic themes concerning the Augustan age he is currently teaching in class.

Once at home, surfing the net, he finds again the storytelling about Posillipo realizing it is downloadable for the iPhone. In this way he will have the chance to hear the storytelling, in any situation. The day after, during his lesson, the professor prepares the students for the visit to the Pausilypon Villa by showing the multimedia storytelling in the lab. He also recommends all his students to transfer the storytelling to their own iPod/iPhone.

On the day of the school trip, the students visit the park by using the multimedia narrative as an audio-guide leading them throughout the history of the Roman Theater and its celebrities.

Thanks to Instant Multimedia packages like the 1001stories engine that we introduced in the previous sections, the scenario we have just described is not so far from what could really happen. The Directorate-General for Archaeological Heritage (DGBA), within the Italian Ministry of Culture, recognized the effectiveness of the 1001stories format, and commissioned to the HOC Lab of Politecnico di Milano a series of multimedia narratives dedicated to the “Entertainment Places of the Ancient Times”: the “Theatre of Posillipo” narrative (Fig. 4) is the pilot project.



Figure 4 Homepage of the multimedia narrative “The Posillipo Theatre”

Having a tool that creates multimedia applications in a short time, which can be deployed through different devices and used for different purposes, makes it possible to take advantage of a specific event (such as the reopening of the archaeological park) to convey a cultural message that effectively responds to the needs for valorization, communication and promotion of Cultural Heritage in Italy.

We also wish to emphasize that, in this case, as with previous applications created with 1001stories for Cultural Heritage, communication does not coincide with mere divulgation, but it is based on a specific strategy which combines together scientific contents and a commitment to “making culture”. Good communication is therefore critical for increasing the value of Cultural Heritage in the eyes of our community (Paolini P., N. Di Blas, F. Alonzo, 2005). For this reason, following the guidelines summarized in Section 2.3, all the contents of the application have been collected straight from the mouth of an expert in the field: the director of DGBA.

During our interview with him, as it often happens, the expert carried away the audience in an emotionally involving narrative, intersecting multiple narrative layers about the history of Roman theatre, the events that took place in the Posillipo complex, the anecdotes and incidents that involved the historical characters who made it alive.

Culture is linked not only to the physical features of the objects, but also to the historical events they gave evidence to and their capability of arousing emotions, creating connections, awakening curiosity. Thus, in the multimedia narrative on the Theatre of Posillipo, both official history and “historical-cultural gossip” lead us on a virtual journey through space and time to discover the archaeological park of Posillipo and its surroundings, reenacting at the same time the series of archaeological excavations that gave it back to people.

Conclusions

Cultural Heritage in Italy is among the most relevant all over the world, and certainly deserves to be appreciated in an adequate way. The instant multimedia approach offers the opportunity of an effective communication, in short times and with limited budgets; in this way, it is immediately possible to respond to the needs of cultural institutions that wish to bring a multifaceted public, composed not only of experts, closer to the world of Cultural Heritage.

All this is possible without sacrificing the scientific accuracy of contents: interviewing the “insiders” allows not only to gather rich and scientifically accurate material, but also to convey an emotionally engaging message using the communication format of the multimedia narrative. Moreover, combining together different media (audio, text and images) in an application that can be deployed to different devices (web, iPod, iPhone, information kiosk, etc.), allows effectively responding to different situations and cultural contexts.

The multimedia narrative “The Theatre of Posillipo” and the series dedicated to the “Entertainment Places of the Ancient Times” show a concrete commitment of these institutions to transforming the relation between culture and communication. We wish this may become a widespread practice.

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