

STORYTELLING AND REPETITIVE NARRATIVES FOR DESIGN EMPATHY: CASE SUOMENLINNA

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Today it is widely established in design research that empathy is an important part of creating a true understanding of user experience as a resource for design. A typical challenge is how to transmit the feeling of empathy acquired by user studies to designers who have not participated in the user study. In this paper, we show how we attained an empathic understanding through storytelling and aroused empathy to others using repetitive narratives in an experimental presentation bringing forth factual, reflective and experiential aspects of the user information. Taking as a starting point our experiences with the design project *Suomenlinna Seclusive*, we conclude with the potential of using narratives for invoking design empathy.

INTRODUCTION

Today, it is widely established that empathy is needed in creating a true understanding of the user experience as a resource in the design process (Fulton Suri 2003, Koskinen & Battarbee 2003). Empathy, according to Koskinen & Battarbee (2003:45), is "an imaginative projection into another person's situation". Design empathy is the capacity of participating in the feelings or ideas of another person. It is a personal connection

to the users who are seen as persons with feelings, not merely as informants (Mattelmäki & Battarbee 2002). "As designers, most of our work is about making things, not for ourselves or people we know, but for other people" Suri (2003: 52). 'Unsuccessful' design often comes from the assumption that users like what we like.

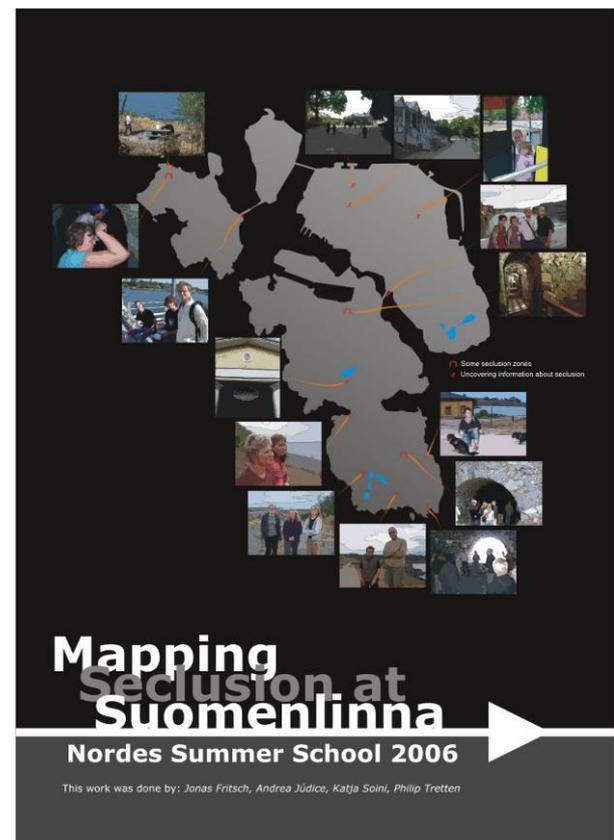


Figure 1: The project *Suomenlinna Seclusive* explored the relationships between stories, narratives and spaces at Suomenlinna. Our work focused on seclusion, a state of being in privacy and away from other people.

On the other hand, design work becomes more difficult if we do think that users are so different from us as designers, in that we see them as a separate entity, 'them'. The challenge, according to Fulton Suri, is to find a balance between these two extremes and develop new approaches to gathering user information and creating empathy in a design team.

The approaches used for design empathy are often required to be "both grounded by the experience of real people and capable of inspiring ideas: to be generative, not primarily evaluative, of good inclusive design." (Fulton Suri et al 2005, 1). Commonly, approaches which vary from user studies to first-hand appreciation have been implemented. Through projective tools like collages or storytelling are users asked to describe, not only their life and activities in general terms but also their dreams and aspirations. Sometimes users are asked to create their own ideas on future products with "make-tools". (Mattelmäki 2006, Sanders 2005)

There are numerous examples of design work carried out using various kinds of workshops as an arena for sharing and understanding findings from user studies in a productive manner (e.g. Buur & Soendergaard 2000, Brandt 2005, Soini & Pirinen 2005). In these workshops, results are not only presented but also used to transfer interpreted findings for further design solutions. Interactive drama, in parallel with more design-oriented and visual practices, has also been applied to transmitting user study findings, creating new ideas and arousing empathy (Kankainen et al 2005). Drama challenges the audience to participate in finding solutions. Trying out things by oneself is also applied to experience prototyping, meaning that designers themselves gain first-hand appreciation through user's experience and new solutions (Buchenau & Fulton Suri 2000).

In the Nordes Summer School of Design Research for Doctoral Students 2006, the task was to examine how narrative theories could be brought into design practice more consciously (Hellström 2007, 8). The focus was on discovering minor and informal stories like gossip, legends and rumours as a starting point to understand the Finnish island group Suomenlinna (Sveaborg) in order to gain a new understanding of social meaning tied to the spatiality of the island. The main tasks were to map, trace and spatially materialize the stories tied to Suomenlinna to discover how these stories unfold in space and time as well as how they could be further conceptualized as an empathic resource in design (Hellström 2007, 6). As design researchers we tried to generate new realities through the minor narratives told

by the people at the island (residents, visitors, workers). Using principles of storytelling we gained an empathic understanding of these people by bringing forth their personal experiences of the island. These minor narratives lead us to developing a major narrative theme concerning Suomenlinna as a place of seclusion. This project further explored the relationships between stories, narratives and spaces at Suomenlinna, mapping Suomenlinna in a unique way (see Figure 1).

In following, we will show how the focus on storytelling framed our information gathering at Suomenlinna, how it led to a deeper understanding of the people we talked to and how we did empathize with them. We will then explain how we tried to present that information through repetitive narratives, staging a design event as an experimental presentation of our user study findings of which we use our results from that presentation to discuss the possibilities of using repetitive narratives for invoking design empathy.

DESIGN CASE: SUOMENLINNA SECLUSIVE

The Nordes Summer School 2006 was organised as a workshop on spatial narratives for design at the group of seven islands called Suomenlinna. Suomenlinna is a unique place that combines cultural heritage and everyday life. It was founded by the Swedes in 1748 to act as a fortress, today it is a World Heritage Site. In the 1970s it was opened up for public residence, today circa 900 reside there. It is also an important recreation area for residents from the capital Helsinki and it is a well-known tourist attraction.

In the first phase of our research, our goal was to get inside the residents, visitors and workers minds, finding out what this unique island community meant to them. The seclusion theme was formed through our observations and interviews with people, in their natural (residents), foreign (visitors) and familiar (workers) environments.

DIVING INTO THE STORIES OF SUOMENLINNA

When our group reached the shores of Suomenlinna, we looked for a cosy place on the rocks to have a picnic. "It is one of the customs to enjoy Suomenlinna", our Helsinki resident member told us. We observed people around us and learned to act like other visitors from the seaside capital Helsinki. Our observation was that many visitors tried to find a detached space for privacy. Through this we wanted to understand the peoples' social actions in relation to spaces on the island. We also became fascinated with the many tunnels on the island



Figure 2: Our own fascination about tunnels, our own experiences and conversations with people opened a story of Suomenlinna piece by piece.

which hold a variety of stories. We kept our eyes and ears open trying to understand and experience the island ourselves - the suspense of unknown adventures, the beauty of nature, the secrecies that our encounters gave. And then we began to have a personal relation to Suomenlinna which then became the grounds for our project.

We conducted conversations, unstructured interviews, with individuals and groups of people over three days (Figure 2). The people released more and more personal information to us which was initiated by our own fascination with Suomenlinna and its secretive tunnels. From each conversation we built a story of Suomenlinna, where the previous story served as a starting point for the next one. We asked people to mark their favourite spaces on a map and found out that the narratives related to spaces of Suomenlinna which combined both physical and social contexts forming stories.

The tunnels became a starting point in many of the conversations and it was as if we turned a key to a hidden door, opening 'inside information' unto us. For example, a Suomenlinna resident told us an exciting story of how she used to play in a certain dark tunnel as a child. Her father told her the story of a headless policeman that haunts the tunnel which made the games even more thrilling. Once, unlike before, she used a flashlight and saw that huge hooks hung from the ceiling. She never did return to the tunnel because the thought of what those hooks could have been used for scared her. This information fuelled our interest, wanting to know more, we started to relate this story in our conversations with other informants. Only very few knew of this story, making us wonder if it were just a child's imagination. We did eventually meet a guide who took us to the tunnel and showed us the hooks. Our excitement could not be held; we found something unique, gaining access to a hidden place of seclusion. This one person's childhood experience became a starting point in creating our own Suomenlinna

experience. We were able to empathize with the informants in our search for places of seclusion at Suomenlinna.

PROCESSING THE STORIES

We were filled of experiences when we began to analyse our stories and spaces. Like Jane Fulton Suri suggests, we had looked at what people do when they are at Suomenlinna to get our initial focus, we had asked them tell us their personal stories thus helping us to participate in their own experiences from Suomenlinna. We took over 600 pictures of our Suomenlinna experience, had eight documented interviews, a map with notes, and lots of ideas about stories and privacy themes found on Suomenlinna. We used our research experience, our insights, and our empathy, as tools in finding greater knowledge of the physical spaces and people's relation to them. This revealed a whole new arena where minor narratives and gossip showed us that they were an important part of the major narrative. We mapped the material and we found out that seclusion was the common denominator. Each group; residents, visitors and workers told a story, of why Suomenlinna represented seclusion for them. The visitors found a 'get away' at Suomenlinna - escape from everyday things, the residents found privacy - a place of seclusion, and the workers found 'opportunism' - being in between and taking the best of both worlds there.

PRESENTING THE RESULTS: REPETITIVE NARRATIVES

The next challenge was to find a way to communicate our insights to our fellow designers. We wanted to go beyond a normal presentation of concepts or ideas. Our objective was to dramatize our insights by using our knowledge on narrative theories to help the audience experience the empathy we gained from our insights on the social and physical spaces at Suomenlinna.

According to Buchenau and Fulton Suri (2000) "The experience of even simple artifacts does not exist in a

vacuum but, rather, in dynamic relationship with other people, places and objects. Additionally, the quality of people's experience changes over time as it is influenced by variations in these multiple contextual factors." We therefore looked into the narrative theories presented in the course, trying to find a theoretical foundation to be able to present the complexity of our data in an engaging way. In doing so, we tried to provide the most natural environment for empathy as possible to achieve our objective.

Booth (1961) shows how different narrative approaches might be used to convey the same story according to different roles of storytelling. Various aspects of time and enunciation that might elicit different responses from the reader when applied to the same story are also to be considered (Genette, 1993). In short, it is possible to present the same story in various ways, to highlight different aspects of the story to provoke different reactions. Following these ideas we decided to present our main story of seclusion by dramatizing it in various ways thus highlighting the minor narratives comprising the story by repeating them in different social and physical contexts. In doing so, we wanted to present the story using *repetitive narratives* to let the designers obtain a more holistic empathic knowledge about our theme of seclusion. *Repetitive* refers to the repeating of the main story by presenting the different minor narratives, thus giving our fellow designers the opportunity to obtain empathy. The *narrative* is the form we used to present or enunciate specific aspects of our seclusion story.

The story of the Suomenlinna Seclusive was the transformation of the people's minor narratives of privacy (residents), get-away (visitors) and opportunism (workers) to a presentation in three different parts; factual, reflective and experiential. In addition to that, we applied the concept of repetitive narratives in the first and last part. Firstly, we wanted to show how we had come up with themes of seclusion and how they were related to real persons and physical sites in a dynamic way (factual). Secondly, we wanted to give our audience a chance to experience the physical spaces and the overall ambiance of the island and the tunnels, thus evoking an attachment to the context in which we had been working (reflective). Lastly, we wanted to give the designers an opportunity for experimental and representational interaction with the persons' stories, hoping that they also could develop a form of empathy with the narratives we had uncovered at Suomenlinna (experiential). We especially worked on the experiential part of the presentation. We sought to tie the narratives of

seclusion to the physical sites on the island which were to work as a physical metaphor for the narratives, we wanted to present.

In the following we will show how these ideas resulted in a presentation creating three different stages of presentation, combining repetitive narrative spaces and physical contexts to let the designers experience the theme of seclusion.

INTELLECTUAL INTRODUCTION (FACTUAL)

The presentation of the peoples experiences on Suomenlinna contain facts; our encounters, the places of meeting, pictures of people we met and the setting we found them in. In addition to that some of their own stories of their search for seclusion on the island were told. The 'factual' presentation was conducted in a traditional way, thru power-point and a descriptive talk. This presentation was to give information of our work and our results. We repeated the theme of seclusion by factually presenting the three narratives relating to the residents, the workers and the visitors on the island. There each minor narrative, obtained from the interviews, was told repeating and reinforcing the main story of seclusion.

QUIET WALK (REFLECTIVE)

Secondly, we took the listeners on a 'reflective' walk of which we wanted them to observe and partake in the Suomenlinna experience. This quiet walk gave them many opportunities to build individual knowledge by experiencing the three groups of informants we had presented, in their own environment. This was to be a period to reflect on the island as a physical and social site for experience.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE (EXPERIENTIAL)

The third experience was held in the tunnels of Suomenlinna, as a metaphor of the factual presentation. In the tunnels we dramatized the themes of seclusion to re-emphasise to the listeners the three different plights to find seclusion with the aim to invoke empathy. The designers were asked to consider what each type of seclusion could mean and how do they experience it themselves? The aim was to get our co-designers to create their own understanding of seclusion.

In the first tunnel, representing the local visitors, was the group led to a narrow place where the tunnel divided. High tempo techno pop music began playing, lights flashed. Then the individuals responded to the question of what their experience of 'get away' was to be from

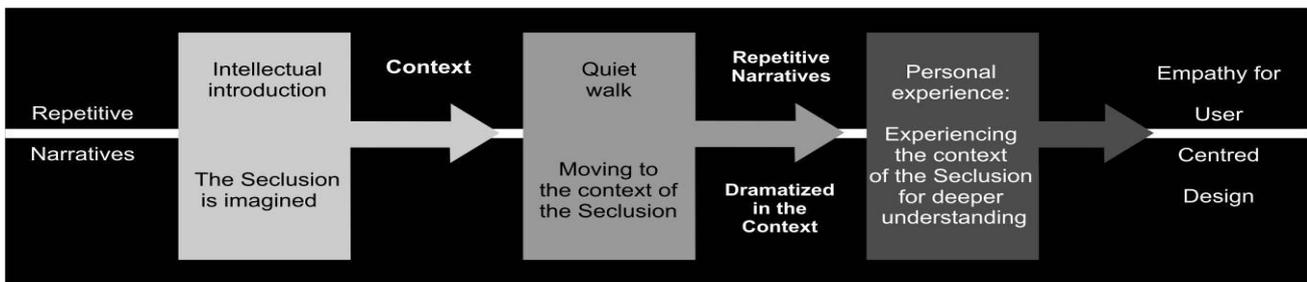


Figure 3: The experiential presentation using repetitive narratives, consisted of three phases which may be reflected with the designer's radar, presented by Koskinen & Battarbee (2003:45): 1) intellectual introduction of the seclusion framework: the co-designers imagined seclusion as observers, 2) quiet walk for sensitizing and reflection: the co-designers familiarized themselves to the context and 3) personal experience in tunnel tour: the co-designers were experiencers themselves.

this dramatic presentation. Words such as; stress, busy, traffic, and people, pertained to the stress of city life.

The second tunnel, representing the residents, was completely dark. There music played and a representation of irritating tourists was dramatized. After the music stopped, the participants were asked to examine this experience. The group members answered aloud in words such as; freedom, alone, and boring.

The third tunnel, representing the workers, had many narrow windows open in towards the center of Suomenlinna. The group was asked to think of what their experiences of 'opportunism' would be in the seclusion theme. Another place in the same tunnel that opened up to the sea, away from Suomenlinna was shown to the group members, these designers now responded with; special, advantage, and choice. The journey ended with our final comments wishing them to understand that the people on the island sought after seclusion in various ways relating to their various needs.

In conclusion the presentation ended with an open discussion where we hoped for reflective and reflective feedback from our colleagues. Albeit very short, it gave us varied feedback. Some people criticized our way of presenting the results and were annoyed with our dramatization of the tunnel tour, which they thought was too "arty". Others had a totally different feeling about the presentation saying they experienced the presentation as a sophisticated and multi-layered unwrapping of the complicated issue of seclusion. It seemed that everybody had an opinion about the presentation, and that it made everybody reflect on how the forms of presentation were related to the plight for seclusion through the repetitive narratives, physical sites and dramatization.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

The purpose of this paper has been to show how we gained an empathic understanding of the people at

Suomenlinna through storytelling. We have explored the idea of presenting user studies through repetitive narratives and we believe that the use of repetitive narratives arouses empathy by providing an opportunity for empathically forming a subjective understanding of users' experiences and points of view (see Figure 3).

Empathy became the key ingredient to gaining 'inside' information from the people on the island. The people's stories about the island helped us to empathize with them in a natural way. We learned from our work at Suomenlinna that by building on the stories we were told were we able to get the people to open up and give information of more personal nature. Storytelling thus led to an empathic and respectful dialogue towards the participants.

The second step of our learning process at Suomenlinna was to communicate our findings to our fellow designers in a way to support empathic understanding. We used the three-phase presentation to give the designers an opportunity to experience an uniqueness of the various types of seclusion of which Suomenlinna had to offer them in three different but associated ways. Through this staging and dramatization, people were encouraged to actively partake in the joint construction of new narratives based on the presentations of the micro-narratives. In doing so we tried to tie together and bring into play the physical and social reality of the narratives.

We choose to dramatize the repetitive narratives to challenge the audience to experience the people's need for seclusion. We believe that we were successful in that our fellow designers did express frustration, irritation, awe and wonder of the dramatization. This is a valuable result since empathy is not about facts and figures. In our presentation, we tried to use the fact that empathy is a natural capability belonging to all of us. By using repetitive narratives we tried to open a door to arouse it. In doing so, we tried presenting the narratives of seclusion in an engaging and inspiring way so that the designers could become emphatic to the users' situation.

The next natural step in our process would have been to explain and talk about the frustrations and enlightenment experienced through our repetitive narratives but time ran out. We strongly feel the presentation had a greater and more reflective effect on our designer audience than a traditional presentation. In our future work we would like to elaborate on how to evaluate this effect in order to support design work.

In the future it would be valuable to study how people with different professional backgrounds would react to this kind of presentation. We would also like to explore what parts of the repetitive narratives we presented should be emphasized as well as the possible aspects we missed. We have also considered the idea of what would happen if we would leave out the intellectual part and focus more on the experiential.

Storytelling and repetitive narratives could have even greater potential if it was to be used beyond the experiential aspect of briefing. We would like to elaborate on this possibility in future studies, since it may open, with support from present theories, a more holistic approach for design empathy.

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