Give Me a Reason - Encouraging Dialogue
Through Interactive Media

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1. Introduction

The Give Me a Reason -project (available at givemeareason.info) was initiated in the autumn of 2015 because of an interest in the phenomenon of volunteers helping asylum seekers in Germany. The first cycle of the project was concluded in June 2016 and produced a Masters thesis in Art Education (see Marttila 2016) as well as an interactive or generative artwork available at the above website. The second cycle of the project was initiated in October of 2016 in the context of a PhD program in digital media and will be concluded in July of 2020. This paper presents the process and findings of the first cycle of the Give Me a Reason -project, as well as the current state of my research in the context of the PhD.

The first cycle of the project entails an art-based action research project with three cycles. The action takes the form of dialogues amongst a community of volunteers working with refugees. The aim is to find out what needs to be considered for the design of a successful dialogical community project. Additionally, we ask whether dialogue can in fact put anything in motion amongst participants. Some of the material from these conversations is used as material for an interactive or generative artwork which aims to shatter and reconstruct discourse on motives for volunteering.

Over the cycle of three dialogues, we learn that dialogues do create social cohesion but that the design and creation, by the pedagogue, of the moments is crucial in order for the dialogues to succeed in creating a space for deep encounter. The speech-based generative artwork presents interesting results, yet requires further elaboration to be truly effective. Future work aims to continue with the use of dialogue as an artistic medium in community-based work, but also to explore the power of technology as a persuasive actor and conversational partner.

2. Background

While migration is a natural phenomenon, major crises such as the sizeable war and unrest in Syria and neighbouring countries has set record numbers of people in motion to seek the stability and security which their homeland currently cannot provide and likely will not be able to in the coming years. I was living in Germany in the summer of 2015 and experienced first hand as the Munich train station became an iconic symbol of the German "Refugees Welcome!" -sentiment. By the end of 2015, a total number of 476,649 asylum applications had been placed, an increase of 135% from the previous year (BAMF 2016). The following description is based on my first-hand experiences.

In late 2015, Germany opened inflatable halls ("Traglufthalle") all around the country which each provided temporary housing for up to 300 people. The inhabitants were provided a bed in a six person dorm with office cubicle-style half-walls, poor soundproofing and little privacy. Three daily meals were served by a catering service, although inhabitants could contribute small amounts of work such as cleaning in return

for a rather insignificant, symbolic monetary compensation. Security services attended to the hall around the clock and three social workers were employed during office hours.

These halls were used all over Germany as the primary housing solution for around one year as fixed housing solutions were either sought or built. A work permit was issued three months after entry into the country, but due to insufficient knowledge of the language, most asylum applicants were unable to secure jobs. Hence, during the 9-12 month period which it took for asylum applications to be processed, most applicants were idle.

As common as the hall housing concept was the volunteer ("Helferkreis") model which sprung up in the vicinity of these halls. Local communities realised the importance of a contact point between the asylum applicants and locals, as well as the importance of helping the applicants with both integration into life in Germany as well as solving the problem of idleness through various activities. Only Syrian, Iraqi and Eritrean applicants were admitted to state-funded language classes, which left around 75% of applicants with no access to language learning opportunities. The tasks of the volunteer community included teaching german, organising opportunities for sports, excursions, cooking and other activities.

3. Research Objectives

The objective of the research was to implement a community art education project with a group of volunteers who work with migrants in Germany. Anti-migrant sentiment created derogatory terminology to describe these volunteers as "do-gooders" ("Gutmensch" in Germany) or "overly open-minded people" ("suvakki" in Finland), and the voices of these volunteers was never as present in public discourse as was those of their opponents. Ultimately, volunteering is about seeking some form of contact with the newcomers. Hence, the aim was to create an artwork that would act as a turn of speech in this public debate about whether to seek this contact and why or why not. The artwork would thus act as some form of representation of the volunteering community.

Not only was the aim to create an artwork, but to also engage the volunteer community in a reflexive artistic process whereby an exchange could happen between members of the volunteer community. In this case, dialogue was chosen as the artistic activity. Grant Kester proposes the concept of dialogical aesthetics as one in which the act of conversation itself becomes the artwork (see Kester, 2004).

Thus, the artistic aims were to 1) create an interactive artwork based on a database of speech, which would serve to represent the motives of the volunteers for volunteering and 2) to create situations in which enriching dialogue could emerge.

The main research question related to the pedagogy and creation of the dialogical pieces were as follows:

"1) Through three iterations of art-based action research, what needs to be considered in the design of a dialogical workshop setting?

2. What does a dialogue put in motion in the participants and can it strengthen and deepen bonds between the members of a community?" (Marttila, 2016 p.10)

4. Methodology

The research methodology followed an adaptation of art-based action research as articulated by Jokela, Hiltunen and Härkönen (2015). Art-based action research shares elements with design-based research in that cycles of action follow a process of design, implementation, observation and evaluation. The action takes the form of art or art-based activity and findings from one cycle of action inform the design of consequent cycles. Moreover, action research aims at exerting influence on the behaviour and attitudes of participants through the action, and to instil changes that will live on past the action-research process.

Within the scope of the Give Me a Reason -project, three cycles of art-based action were completed. The first cycle was followed up by semi-structured interviews with all four participants to evaluate their experience of the first conversation. These findings were incorporated into the second cycle of art-based action. Furthermore, a co-researcher (one of the participants of the first dialogue) joined the research team and thus we worked together to design, implement and evaluate the consequent two cycles and dialogues.

Additionally to the semi-structured interviews after the first dialogue, the consequent dialogues included an open feedback session at the end of the conversations, in which participants could share their thoughts and reflect on the experience. Not all participants contributed to this, but some did and this feedback was considered in the design of consequent dialogues.

Observations by myself and my co-researcher also contributed to the design of the workshops. I made recordings of all three conversations and was thus also able to "peek in" on the conversations to observe how they progressed, what topics were addressed and so on. This data was also analysed and used to modify the design of the dialogues.

5. Results

The interviews following the first dialogue showed that participants felt that the experience allowed them to form a bond with the other participants. Because the dialogue took place before the volunteering activities started, this early bond was perceived as pleasant in particular as it allowed the members of the community to begin connecting with each other. This in turn made them feel they have a place in the community and a first friend. Several participants were amazed at how much depth the conversation managed to create in such a short time. Some participants felt that writing down eight reasons for helping also challenged them to reflect on why it is that they are helping.

The second dialogue was similar to the first, albeit with minor adaptations and the addition of a shared dinner after the dialogue. The third dialogue was a major re-design of the way in which conversation topics were introduced: topics were in three sealed envelopes. This performative aspect, in which pairs would open the envelopes together to discover their contents, led to more engagement with the set topics of conversation. This in turn allowed our pedagogical aims in directing the conversation at specific topics to be more successful, as shown by the content analysis of the recorded conversations.

All dialogues allowed participants to get to know each other on a personal level. This was in part because the set conversation topics touched upon reasons for volunteering, and for most participants these motivations were tied to personal life experiences or a current life phase. Because conversations were held in pairs, there was a certain privacy which allowed pairs to diverge from set topics and to exchange these personal stories. Besides sharing personal stories, the dialogues served to create a space for reflection on the events of the past months in working with the asylum applicants and thus allowed some volunteers to voice out loud their frustrations but also particular joys encountered in the work. In the second conversation, some participants arrived late and this affected the quality of the total experience as the late-comers were not able to fully immerse themselves in the conversations.

In terms of the length for dialogues, we found that conversations began to gain depth after about 10 minutes. Based on these findings it would be recommended to allow at least 10 minutes per conversation. In our case, most dialogues were 30-40 minutes long. It is important to allow these conversations to flow without unnecessary interruptions from the pedagogue. For future dialogical work, it might be advisable to not allow for latecomers. Control of noise levels should be considered, or arrangements made for separate spaces for conversations. We also recommend working with three or maximum four pairs, in order to allow for enough space for all to speak and be heard.

For a more detailed account of the results, see Marttila (2016).

6. Understanding Migration through Dialogue and Interactive Art

The creative concept for the interactive or generative artwork in the original Give Me a Reason -project was very simple. Each participant would create 8 sentences to answer the question "Why do you help the asylum applicants?". I would cut up the eight (8) sentences into the rough grammatical categories of subject, object and verb, and use these audio fragments to randomly generate an infinite (∞) number of new sentences or reasons to help. The following is a quote from my Masters' thesis:

"The first test I made of this art concept looked like this:

Original sentence No 1: *I help because these people need help.*
Original sentenceNo 2: *I help because I want to learn about them.*
Mixing these two sentences up with one another, I got these two sentences:
New sentence No 1: *I help because these people want to learn about help.*
New sentence No 2: *I help because I need them.*
"
                                                          (Marttila, 2016 p. 94)

Although this simple interactive or generative artwork leaves much to be desired, it nevertheless awakened my interest in the potential of interactive art as a means to bring to light qualitative research or interview data, and furthermore, to persuade about a specific topic. While the use of dialogue as a methodology for working with communities was not new to me, the scope of the masters' thesis allowed me to explore the medium of conversation more consciously. The experience proved to me that I wish to continue working with dialogue and communities in my future work as artist, educator and researcher.

While I feel the topic of volunteering with migrants is on my part exhausted, migration surely is not. For this I thank the "European refugee crisis". My current research interests in the context of my PhD and in the scope of migration relate not so much to our current European climate of increased asylum requests, as to the phenomenon of migration within Europe by European citizens. Again, my interest stems from my ideological standpoint, which is that I believe the near open-borders policy within the European Union to be a fundamentally good thing. Incidentally, border control is a relatively recent phenomenon in world history, and there is active discussion in the domain of the free borders movement from the perspective of the ethics of immigration (see for example Carens 2013).

Hence, my current research path aims to bring to light the motives for and perceptions of migration within the European of young European women who themselves have chosen to migrate. The methodology will again follow the idea of dialogues with these young migrant women and the dialogues will serve both as a means to connect with others in a similar situation, but also to reflect on their own behaviour and choices. Ultimately, these interviews, thoughts, words and speech, will make up the content of a database which will serve as the core of the interactive artwork.

7. Persuasive Technology, Procedural Rhetoric and Art education?

Following onwards from the project concluded in June of 2016, I began pursuing my doctoral studies in October of 2016 at the University of Porto in a Digital Media program run jointly by the University of Texas in Austin. In future elaborations of this work, the focus will be on developing a text and speech-based interactive art format which aims to persuade through procedural rhetoric.

Fogg elucidates the multiple means in which technology can be employed for purposes of persuasion (2003). These mechanisms include, amongst others,

persuasion through personal identification with the computer program, a match in the personality (on a scale of submissive - dominant) between the user and program (Fogg 2003). Another surprising finding is that a computer program can assume an authoritative position equal to that of a therapist, as in the case of Joseph Weizenbaum's ELIZA program (see Weizenbaum 1966). Many of these findings related to the power of computer programs to persuade have been proven in experimental settings. Furthermore, these persuasive effects have been put to test and to use in several projects (see for example Khaled et Al 2006) and have proven effective.

Furthermore, researcher and game theorist Ian Bogost elaborates on the particular case of computer games as persuasive technology, arguing that games persuade through a process of what he calls procedural rhetoric. Procedural rhetoric refers to an art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures. In practice, this means that computer games are programmed to represent the world in a particular way. Through playing the game, the user becomes exposed to these rules and representations of the world in an experiential manner. For an elaborate discussion see Bogost 2007.

In my personal experience, after breaking out of a game play session, I have come to observe parallels between the game world and the real world around me. For example, in The Sims, a life simulation game, level bars indicate needs such as food, sleep, social and bladder. Depending on activities as well as duration of time, these bars go up and down, much like in real life. However, a recent version of The Sims allows players to choose which gender is the one to get pregnant. I made the male character get pregnant and bear children. In real life, this is not possible, but the possibility of playing like this in the context of the game challenged the status quo and made me reflect on the realities of our world and to imagine other worlds.

In the context of this research project, dialogue is our medium for aspects related to community-based art pedagogical practice, yet also provides the core of the material used in the game. In fact, the final product and persuasive, text- or speech-based game should follow the logic of a dialogue or exchange, whereby the user is subtly exposed to the views of the young European women. But what is this mechanism? Should it mimic the dynamics of regular conversation and try to persuade thus? And furthermore, can we truly come to understand each other in such a manner, mediated by technology and with no real personal contact? Can an interactive game truly take on the role of a conversationalist and partner in dialogue? Can the the computer persuade and educate through such a dialogue? These and many more such questions pave the challenge as we put to test theories of persuasive technology and procedural rhetoric in the context of a speech/text-based interactive game for the purposes of community-based art education.

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