Audio-Visual Documentation Method for Digital Storytelling for a Multimedia Art Project

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Abstract. In this paper, we describe an interactive multimedia art project, namely *FaceGrid*, using mosaic photography art concept for digital storytelling. Inspired by mosaic photography and a montage concept, *FaceGrid* was produced by using many small image tiles that were woven and stitched together to form the pixel art design pattern. *FaceGrid* documents the different ways of living and lifestyles of ordinary folks in a multi-cultural and diverse ethnic society in Malaysia. We use audio-visual documentation methods (photography and film-documentary techniques) to record, capture and archive the different facets of lives and user stories by ordinary people. We then transform those slices of life via digital storytelling technique into an interactive multimedia art project.

Keywords: Audio-visual documentation method, digital storytelling, multimedia art, ordinary folks.

1 Introduction

In the past decade, the prevalence of various new media platforms has enabled ordinary people like us being able to be seen or heard on the 'news'. On many occasions, people like to share, to hear, to read, to check and to receive everyday news. We also like to share stories with others about ourselves, our experiences, and about the news we hear and read through various forms of media such as newspaper, radio, television, blogs, and social networks (i.e. Facebook, Twitter). As a result, the exclusivity and media coverage received by celebrities and politicians can now be shared by ordinary folks who, in this project, are provided an opportunity to share their snippets of their life stories and experiences via convergent media.

2 Motivation: Why Ordinary Folks

Ordinary communities living in a developing nation such as Malaysia have invaluable life stories, culture and experiences. A multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society have much to share about what it means to be free, to have dreams, to uphold principles,

values and religious beliefs, to have families and lives, and many of them untold. [1] described how researchers can encounter the 'unnoticed' as:

> *'Everyday life is something we tend to take for granted, something that just is, something unnoticed. But everyday life is perhaps the most important dimension of society – it's where we live most parts of our lives with each other…. Looking at everyday activities and experiences, from language and emotions to popular culture and leisure, encountering the everyday explores what social structures, orders and processes mean to us on a daily basis."*

As a result, *FaceGrid*[1] multimedia art project addresses the absence of the voices of ordinary folks. It aims to document and portray the extraordinary stories of the untold life stories by ordinary people in Malaysia in digital storytelling format. Based on a series of short interviews using audio-visual documentation methods (photography and videography) on Malaysians from all walks of life, the multimedia art project captures the many ways that they experience living, working, communicating, and ageing. Through the use of vignettes, a glimpse of the livelihood, cultural practices, and freedom of the population. This multimedia art project, using research-creation process, critically and creatively explores the potential of multimedia forms and formats to depict the extraordinary diversity within the so-called ordinary lives of Malaysians.

3   Research Creation Process

This research-creation project provides its audience an insight towards the intersection of storytelling, multimedia art, and interactivity. Rather than presenting single unified images of a local ordinary folk's profile, the many dimensions, and contradictions, is presented to the audience of what it means to live in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic community in the context of multimedia art installation and online web (www.facegrid.info) platforms.

There are 3 stages involved in the research-creation process. Firstly, we formulate the conceptual design of *FaceGrid* based on an inspiration of faces montage. Secondly, we use audio-visual documentation method to conduct a series of in-depth interviews with the local folks. Lastly, the process involves transcription, translation, video-and-photo-editing in the media production process to transform into an interactive multimedia platform.

3.1   Conceptual Design of *FaceGrid* User Interface

FaceGrid project is an interactive multimedia art project produced by an interdisciplinary research team consisting of photographers, videographers, interface and interaction designers, an ethnographer, and a sound artist. *FaceGrid* was inspired by mosaic art and is a montage of image tiles created from photography that is woven and stitched

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[1] *FaceGrid* multimedia art project can be accessed online via `www.facegrid.info`

together to form a grid (design pattern). The image montage was then analysed and arranged, so as to match the overall concept design of its intended artistic form. With the transition of images in a pixelated grid manner, *FaceGrid* interface enables scalability and zoom-ability for the audience to interact with any multimedia content and elements (i.e. audio, images, text, video) through each art pixel. The users will experience ordinary folks' lifestyles through digital storytelling while interacting with our interactive multimedia platform, thus stirring every audience for their insights towards the diverse ethnic unity and multi-cultural integration.

There are two platforms for *FaceGrid,* which are multimedia art installation and online website version. Users are allowed to toggle, interact, drag and move the profile content "pixels" around *FaceGrid* multimedia art project. For *FaceGrid* multimedia art installation platform, an audio controller is also presented to allow the user to turn on or mute the background audio as desired (Fig. 1). Whenever each pixel is selected, users are able to view, interact, interpret and re-create with the selected pixel's (profile) content (Fig. 2). However, one will notice that every pixel of multimedia content that is shown will not be deemed as a discrete whole, but contains several irreconcilable and contradictory meanings - an amalgamation of photography, audio and video into a dense interactive format. It portrays that any one pixel should not be interpreted literally, but consists of alternative perceptions, and will invoke the audience into making various opinions and having a mixture of experiences.

This project provides its audience the different facets of ordinary folks' life stories and an insight through the intersection of digital storytelling, multimedia art, and interactivity. Rather than presenting single unified images of a local subject, the many dimensions, and contradictions, of what it means to live in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic community is presented to the audience in context of a country that achieved its independence over 50 years ago.

Fig. 2 is a content page, which shows a Malay warrior descendent, an amateur weapon collector, whom likes to collect all the Malay weapons i.e. lady dagger, *keris*

Fig. 1. User interface of *FaceGrid* multimedia art installation project (All rights reserved)

(Malay warrior dagger) since its ancient time. In the video interview, he explained how the different type of Malay weapons were used during the ancient war period, and how those collections have been past to him from his ancestor till now.

Fig. 2. Each pixel contains different user stories in *FaceGrid* content page (All rights reserved)

The user interface for *FaceGrid* website online version (www.facegrid.info) is slightly different as compared to multimedia art installation platform. Fig. 3 allows users to key-in text for profiles searching, tagging and also allow users to leave comments. In addition, it also incorporates with social media features such as Facebook, Google Plus, Tumblr, Tweeter for profile sharing, which allows for higher publicity as compared to the multimedia art installation.

Fig. 3. A website online version of *FaceGrid (www.facegrid.info)* (All rights reserved)

3.2   Audio-Visual Documentation Method *in FaceGrid*

We document the different ways of living, experiences and work using audio-video documentation methods (photography and videography) of ordinary local folks [1, 2, 3, 4]. We seek consensus from the local folks using either oral or written consent before the interview. Subsequently, all of these inputs were transferred, re-packaged and transformed into an interactive design platform.

We use structured interview given in a set of interview questions to document the ordinary' life story; their passion towards what they are currently doing, any particular hobby/artifact/interest they have, experience of technology, and to explore their perception about being a Malaysian. Thus far, we had conducted 66 interviews (include photo-documentary). As this project is still on-going, the total user profiles will be growing as time goes along. In terms of sampling selection, we use a snowballing method to recruit our user profiles. We attempt to encompass different ethnicity as stated in Malaysian society section, with various educational and socio-economy backgrounds. Hence, we approached our relatives, colleagues, and friends whom possess different backgrounds, various culture and also diverse ethnicity. Some are also strangers whom we approached them about the notion of project through our fieldwork.

Due to diverse cultural society of Malaysia, we usually conduct the interview in various languages. For those who can converse English fluently as spoken language, the interview was conducted in English whereas would be conducted in their mother tongues such as Mandarin, Cantonese (a dialect of Southern China, normally spoken by Hong Kong citizens), and Malay language. We then convert those local languages into English sub-title in our video captions during our multimedia production phase.

During the research-creation process, we employ photo-documentation [4] as one of the visual research methods in visual methodology. Unlike most of the visual methods where the researcher studies images created by artists e.g. photo-elicitation method [4], photo-documentation method invites the researchers make the images with their own creation in different forms such as film, video, photographs, maps, diagrams, paintings, drawings, collages. In photo-documentation, a researcher takes a carefully planned series of photographs to document and analyze a particular visual phenomenon [4, p. 298]. Rose [4] mentioned that photo-documentation method is not commonly employed by researchers as compared to photo-elicitation method, which makes this project unique and more authentic as our own research creation.

In our context, we extend the photo-documentation method, and employ audio-visual documentation method to document their ways of living by using a combined photography and videography techniques. Each profile was informed about their disclosure of identity when briefed the consent form and purpose of project. With their consensus, we took photograph of their hobbies that they like to share with others (i.e. artifacts, material objects), their living or work environment, family and beloved photos (See an example of Fig. 4). For some photos which we could not capture on the spot, we asked the interviewee whether s/he can share their old photos, which they considered as memorable in their lives. We then scan and return those photos to them after the transcription and video-editing work.

Images such as photographs are seen as valuable for the local folks profile in portraying their individual life story. Collier [1] claimed that 'photographs are precise records of material reality', and photography are taken in a systematic way in order to provide data which the researcher then analyses and interprets its meaning. Besides, [1] also argued the use of photographs alongside interviews. Grady [5] also stated that 'pictures are valuable because they encode an enormous amount of information in a single representation'. According to Becker [6], photos are valuable for the way they convey 'real, flesh and blood life', especially making their audiences 'bear witness' to that life [7].

In the *FaceGrid* project, multimedia art installation and online website platforms share the similar content elements e.g. photos, videos and text description except user interface and its arrangement. The following describes the user interface of *FaceGrid* multimedia art platform, in which a profile content interface is divided into three regions (Fig. 4). Region A: Photo Collage portrays some snippets of life stories of the user profile. Region B is a brief text description to provide users or audience the profile's background information. Region C allows users to toggle the interview in a video form. For instance, the photo collage at the left panel in Fig. 4 tells the relation of cultural artifacts for a 75 year-old trishaw peddler (Uncle Ah Peng) at the UNESCO world heritage site, Malacca historical town. During the interview, the informant shared his passion of spending over RM10,000 for ornament decorations on his trishaw as his hobby with the motive for welcoming his passengers as hospitality of Malaccan tourism. He was so proud when he talked about his trishaw, and how he decorated his trishaw given thoughts on his ornaments. For example, the top right photo in the photo collage below (see Region A as in Fig. 4) shows a Malay yellow '*tengkolok*' (headdress), which represents the symbolism of Malay Sultanate
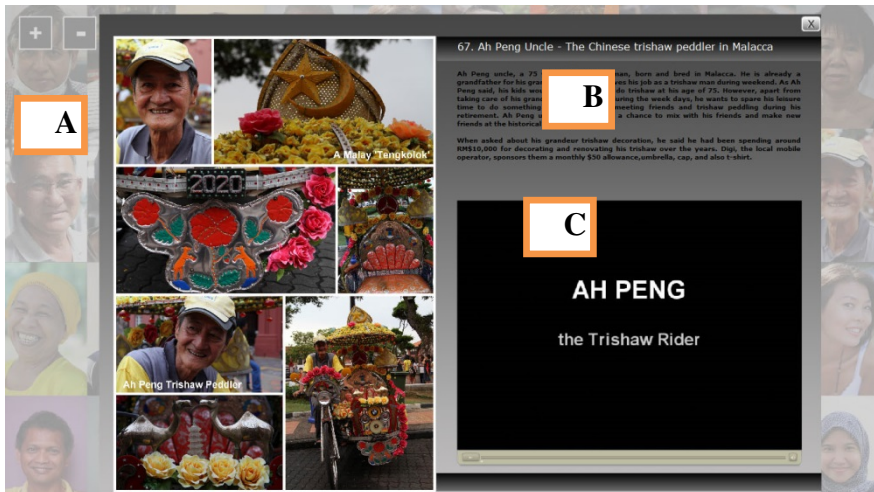

Fig. 4. A profile content page that portray a snippet of a senior' ordinary life stories in *FaceGrid* multimedia art installation platform (All rights reserved). A: Photo Collage. B: Brief Text Description. C: Video Interview (All rights reserved).

(Emperor)'s royalty. The mouse deer and hibiscus flower (in second row left in photo collage) symbolizes the State of Malacca and national flower respectively. The camels (below left in the photo collage) denote the mobility of a vehicle in ancient time that carries passenger, which indirectly signifies the meaning of trishaw fetching the passengers from one place to another place. Region B of the right top panel denotes a brief description of the informant.

It is arguable that the criterion of images must be considered carefully taken, and the audience who view photographs and interpret the meaning of the photographs is always context-specific. We agreed that the role of photograph itself has to be clearly present, either as self-evident evidence or as evidence whose significance is established through the research-creation process [4]. More importantly, in photo-documentation method, photographs are used to examine the social effects of images with which this method is most concerned centered on the relations between the researcher, those people they are researching, and the photos [4].

Apart from the visual photography, the session is usually followed by an in-depth interview of each local folk's profile that is documented using videography. (This is shown on Region C: Video Interview in Fig. 4.) The purpose is for the users to have a view of understanding the local folks sharing their life story and views of livings and work in documentary film. The interview is structured interview with several sections, which are: the local folk's life story, perception on current livings, work, hobbies, interest or artifacts, challenges in life, and perception being a Malaysian. Before end of the interview session, they are also given a chance for them to share their life wisdom or experience that gives advice to others.

According to Appadurai [8], "we follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view, it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context."

From the kaleidoscopic intersection of many voices, a collective tale emerges from a combination of distinct narrative fragments [9]. Narrative is all around us when we share our experiences, our beliefs, our history, our wellbeing, etc. in various means be it in static or moving images, audio, video or in print [10]. In this project, we transform the user profile's life stories into a digital storytelling platform in the *FaceGrid* multimedia art using audio-visual documentation method.

4   Users Interaction with Facegrid

For *FaceGrid* multimedia art installation, a user can use a touch pad to interact with the individual user profile. *FaceGrid* will be projected out on a wide screen (using white cloth or portable projector screen) with projector at the background, and audio-visual multimedia system (Fig. 5). The grid somewhat acts as a structured manner in an artistic form to provide the users a vehicle to delve, and to participate in a stranger's experiences on a computer-based platform.

Fig. 5. Users/Audience interacting with *FaceGrid* multimedia art installation using a touchpad

5   Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the many facets of lifestyle, work and living in a multi-ethnic nation of Malaysia in an interactive multimedia art platform known as *FaceGrid*. As the country celebrates its 55th independence anniversary, this work commemorates the freedom, the livelihood, the struggle, the biodiversity, and the developments experienced by Malaysians in their everyday lives. This project is an on-going exercise accumulating the community sharing of sustenance, experiences, careers, history, artefacts and many more on a unified platform as a means for sharing and disseminating information. It uses a multimedia approach in capturing and documenting, and illustrates these captured moments in an interactive platform known as *FaceGrid*.

Certainly, we have extended the photo-documentation method [4] to encompass videography into audio-visual documentation method in this research-creation project. As stated by Rose [4], photo-documentation method is not widely used in the interaction design discipline and visual research studies, so does audio-visual documentation method. As the project is still on-going, we still have rooms to argue and debate the viability of its research method in the context of interaction design and visual methodology. However, we believe audio-visual documentation method can serve as a rigorous visual method in design process, with careful way of documenting visual and aesthetical appearances and relating them to social processes, in which the researcher engages in a reflexive discussion of the coding in the research-creation process.

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