

Chapter 15

The Arctic Journey: Design Experiments in the North

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Abstract Arctic journey was an experiential exhibition series that was realized as a part of HumanSee research project at the University of Lapland in 2016. The exhibition series sought to experiment the multisensory ways of presenting personal experiences in the Arctic and to invite exhibition visitors into the co-creation of the installations. By exploring the exhibition formats, this article asks what is the role of co-design process in the construction of an arctic experience. Two of the exhibition cases included co-creation sessions, where the creation of the arctic experience was taken into a closer experimentation through the co-design process. Through qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis, the research findings suggest that arctic experience, even when not connected to personal experiences in the actual arctic region, is a reflection of the personal understanding of the marginal context that brings the stories of an individual into the core of the experience.

15.1 Introduction

This chapter is focusing on describing the research outcomes of the Arctic Journey, a mobile and experimental exhibition about personal human experiences of the Arctic. The exhibition experiments different formats for concretizing invisible elements of the arctic experience and pursues to create a tangible experience of our arctic lives (Miettinen 2012). The exhibition was aimed at evoking thoughts about how each of us experiences and copes with our living conditions and qualities, and how we relate to others in this sense. The Arctic Journey exhibitions were a platform for creating the arctic experience.

The works of the exhibition were a collection of artwork from HumanSee -research project team at the University of Lapland and from the participatory workshops organized as a part of the HumanSee -project. The HumanSee research project, conducted in 2015–2016, was focusing on service design research around the human experience as a consumer of tourism and retail services. Exhibitions studied

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alternative and unconventional formats for exhibitions and co-design processes related to them. The exhibitions tried to locate spaces and formats other than conventional exhibition arenas such as art galleries. This chapter asks what is the role of co-design process when constructing an arctic experience?

The art works incorporated both new media and more traditional media both in digital and printed form, as well as in paper and textile materials. The exhibitions aimed to gather information from the exhibition visitors on how these medias could be used as service design probes or other participatory means to create an arctic experience. The use of different medias enabled to study the online and person-to-person interaction, as well as the auditory part of the user experience.

The Arctic Journey – Design Experiments in the North exhibition toured in six locations including some of the main art and design universities: Parsons the New School for Design, New York; Finlandia University, Hancock, MI; Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver British Columbia; Stanford University Campus in Palo Alto and University of California, Berkeley Campus. The exhibitions were important means for visualizing and producing sensory scapes to illustrate an arctic experience.

The Arctic Journey was an artistic research project where the exhibition design and implementation process produced the data for this research paper. The exhibition design process included group discussions that were noted and documented (Nimkulrat 2007). The exhibitions were as well documented and discussed. The obtained research data was then analyzed by using qualitative content analysis (Strauss 1987) through categorizing and coding the themes discussed during the project. These themes are later on discussed in the larger theoretical framework by using discourse analysis (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). In artistic research process, it is the process itself that helps the researcher to discover the research questions. The artistic production and the overall process stretches out over a longer period, where new discoveries are made and the research phenomena becomes more focused and explicit. Artistic research is many times trying to transform tacit knowledge into explicit and experiential knowledge (Nimkulrat et al. 2016).

15.2 Designing the Arctic Journey

The design process for the exhibition took place through a series of design meetings where the exhibitions were discussed. The exhibition team, consisting of the HumanSee project team members, discussed how to produce the arctic experience that would not only limit to the visual aspects of the artwork, but that would include all the senses and even the cultural context and the behavior experienced in the exhibition. As all the exhibition locations were different, the design team came up with a concept that could be transformed into these different circumstances and would be flexible to use including interactive, tactile and visual elements.

One of the major exhibition elements was an interactive multimedia installation. This included a series of arctic photography that exhibition visitors could use to

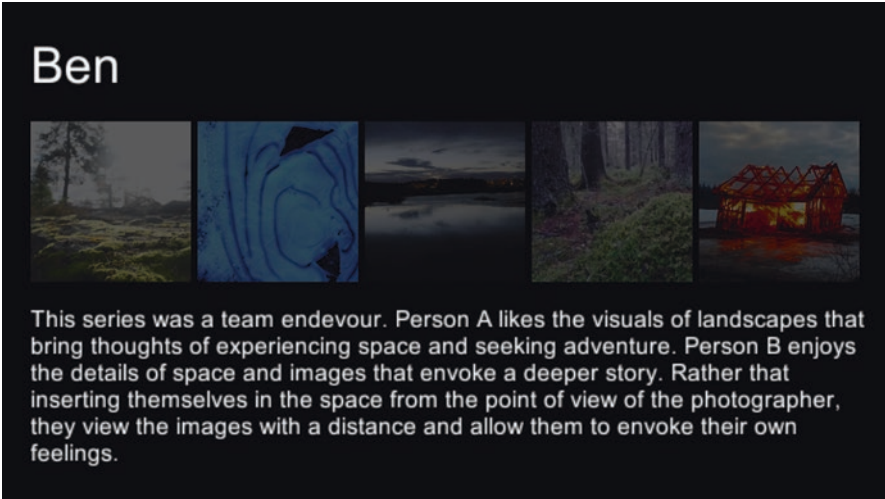


Fig. 15.1 One story in the digital Arctic journey picture collage

create their own arctic experience. The pictures had been chosen by the exhibition team and the selection was guided by their own experiences of the Arctic. The pictures were then re-iterated and formulated by the exhibition visitors into their own stories through a computer interface (Fig. 15.1). All the created visual journeys were then visible for the next visitors, and the collection grew throughout the exhibition series.

The audio experience of the Arctic was presented in the exhibition as garment installation pieces: there were four different types of hats, representing the four different arctic seasons. Each hat was equipped with headphones and audio players. The hats repeated sounds recorded around the Lapland region representing moments from everyday life. The exhibition visitors were encouraged to wear the hats and to imagine what the sounds in the recordings could mean to them.

One of the interactive elements of the exhibition was a paper installation consisting of paper cut snowflakes positioned in the space as a hanging composition. Exhibition visitors were encouraged to create their own snowflakes by following the easy visual instructions and they could place their creation as a part of a co-created installation. The cutting of snowflakes is traditional crafts that many children are involved with, and such a simple form of crafts was familiar for many visitors. This form of installation therefore brought a historical and narrative aspect to the exhibition.

To introduce the tactile level to the exhibition, the exhibition visitors were provided woolen socks to be used during their visit to the exhibition. Woolen socks are an important part of the arctic experience as they represent the practical side of coping with the coldness, but also carry memories of warmth and softness. Knitted woolen socks in varied patterns are also a very traditional form of handicraft in the arctic culture.

The visual elements of the exhibition also included pictures of the arctic region, paired with pictures from similar visual settings in another context. Half of the pictures were photographed at the Arctic Circle around Rovaniemi, Finland, and their counterparts were photographed in New York City, USA. By making the contrasts strongly visible, the picture pairs illustrated the dichotomy of the marginal and the hub. They illustrated the remoteness and isolation of the Arctic against the crowded centers and traffic of a metropole.

The pictures were supported by other visuals such as graphic signs that gave the visitors information and introductions to the exhibition, but also made the familiar street signs appear in a different form when adding an arctic perspective in them. Also in two of the exhibition locations, at Stanford University and University of California Berkeley, posters with QR codes were placed in public places at the university campus areas to guide the viewers to the digital content of the exhibition.

15.3 Co-design in the Exhibition Cases

Two of the exhibitions were combined with collaborative processes through workshops; first one in New York and the second in Hancock, Michigan. The exhibition and workshop in New York were organized at Parsons the New School of Design and the participants were both students and professionals. The exhibition here included the most variety of elements such as an interactive multimedia installation, hats as sound garments, picture pairs, collaborative snowflakes, woolen socks and graphic signs. In addition to this, the exhibition visitors participated in a video production workshop where they created their own arctic journey by using material that they had shot beforehand in New York. Through videos, they were interpreting their view about the arctic experience and created short stories about their journeys.

The second exhibition was conducted at the Finlandia University in Hancock, Michigan. The associated workshop included five parts. In the first part, the workshop participants were asked to complete a storytelling probe where they shared their life histories and experiences with Satu Miettinen and Titta Jylkäs. Collaborative or participatory processes require probing to stimulate interaction between the facilitator and participants.

The core to probing is in creating contextual understanding (Gaver et al. 1999; Mattelmäki 2008). This method of using a probe was used in the ‘Wings to Fly’ collaborative art process that was initiated by sending storytelling probes to the youth participants. These storytelling probes helped the workshop facilitators to understand and relate to the life stories of the participants as well as to understand the challenges they were facing. The narrative practice is a powerful mean to open communication and make sense of societal contexts and everyday lives (Ryan 2004). The life stories were then analyzed by qualitative content analysis categorizing and coding themes that were afterwards discussed by Satu Miettinen and Titta Jylkäs. The second part of the workshop was a narrative practice where the workshop



Fig. 15.2 Wings to Fly (*left*) and paper mandalas (*right*) as results of co-design workshops at Finlandia University, Hancock (Photograph by Titta Jylkäs)

participants were first writing words around different themes related to their life histories and then sharing a story, narrative, around this.

In the third part of the process, these previously obtained narratives were transferred into a textile installation that was collaboratively created by the workshop participants. The participant stories were visualized and painted on feathers made from paper and textile. The feathers were sewn together to form a wing resulting as “Wings to Fly” installation (Fig. 15.2) in Reflection gallery in Hancock, Michigan, where it was presented for some months.

As it was experienced in the workshop with the youth, artistic production is a way to process significant personal histories, experiences and decisions. Art processes facilitate identity construction, permitting the reconciling of multiple identities, fractured selves and personal stories to guide individuals and groups in coping with life’s realities (Miettinen et al. 2016).

The goal of the installation process was to give the participants artistic, visual and verbal tools for processing their life histories and finding empowering elements in their stories. Paulo Freire et al.’s (2000) discussion of education as an intervention and social action where art functions to strengthen self-expression, creative ability and learning experience was one of the motivations of the project. Freire et al. (2000) discusses how art and artistic process gives means to participate, ‘to do with’, rather than ‘for’.

The fourth part of the process was a video workshop where the participants were creating a short video about their process to create “Wings to Fly” together. As the fifth and last part of the exhibition process a collaborative workshop was organized around storytelling at the local indigenous Ojibwe Community College. A storytelling practice started the workshop and it concluded by creating small paper mandalas

to visualize the stories. The stories were shared by the authors to the other participants. Some of them were true empowerment stories that described surviving from hard personal challenges like subsistence use. These stories created a mandala installation of the everyday coping stories (Fig. 15.2). The storytelling method was inspired by the imagery weave practice of Chueng-Nainby et al. (2014).

15.4 Findings from the Arctic Experience

In the exhibitions, the arctic experience was created by using both co-creational and visual elements. Parsons the New School of Design offered an arena for the use of different visual, audio and tactile elements. Visual dichotomies, soundscapes and the feel of woolen socks were providing the elements of everyday experience in the Arctic context. These elements were aiming to construct something that the exhibition visitors could recognize and relate to, rather than something exotic and strange. The exhibition was creating a forum where to discuss different everyday elements related to the arctic experience.

Co-design was an important part of the arctic design process. The exhibitions included parts that were collaboratively created either in the exhibition situation or in workshops. Participation and inclusion seemed to be one of the nominal themes of the arctic design.

The series of exhibitions showed that creating and sharing an experience about the Arctic is both personal and collaborative. The experience is subjective, but as it is shared and created with others, it provides a person with the possibility for reflection and realization. The used co-design process supported both individual exploration and collaborative sharing, when the stories could be iterated and shared.

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