Creating Representational Patterns from Oral History Records: The case study of Ermou Street at Mytilini, Lesvos

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Abstract: This article presents a methodology for integrating ethnographical data extracted from Oral History records in innovative representational forms of exhibition design. Our case study focuses on an exhibition presenting historical, social and economical aspects of the main market street of Mytilini, known as "Ermou Street", in the Greek island of Lesvos. "Ermou Street" crosses the central area of Mytilini, connecting the "old" and the "new" port, thus forming the "symbolic heart" of the city.

1   Introduction

This article introduces methods and techniques of exhibition design with the use of new technologies, focusing on presenting oral history records. More specifically, refers to the development of two interactive applications presenting data of oral history from Ermou Street, the central market street of Mytilini, the capital city of Lesvos island in the North Aegean area. These particular applications were integrated in a multimedia exhibition that was introduced in Mytilini, targeting on a representation of Ermou Street as historical, symbolic, social and economical centre of the city.

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The representation models of this cultural promotion strategy were the result of inter-disciplinary cooperation from the fields of social sciences, applied information technology and interaction design constituting in that way an transdisciplinary content negotiation framework (Pehlivanides, 2005a; Pehlivanides, 2005b; Papageorgiou, Pehlivanides and Bubaris, 2005).

2   Ermou Street in a Historical Context

Lesvos island is located in northeast of Greece and is characterized by socio-economic peripherality and geographic remoteness. The permanent population of Lesvos is, according to the latest national survey, about 108.000 people and the capital of Lesvos Mytilini accounts for about 38.000 people (NSSG, 2001)[3]. The particular social, economic and cultural characteristics of Lesvos were historically formed under the strong influences from the multicultural and multinational urban centres of Asia Minor. This historical continuity was ruptured after the Greek-Turkish war of 1919-1922, which ended with Greek defeat. The subsequent extensive exchange of Muslim and Christian populations between Greece and Turkey marked the end of the Greek presence in Asia Minor. The impact of this historical change on Lesvos, which was annexed to the Greek national territory in 1912, was manifold; disruption of commercial, social and cultural bonds with Asia Minor, resulting to the decline of financial investments and corresponding employment opportunities; lack of infrastructural development; cultural degradation and gradual formation of a mentality of 'isolationism". Patterns of change on Ermou Street reflect this historical process.

The «old port» of Mytilini is located at its northern end (figure 1, point A), where traces of different civilisations that prospered during the passing years have been revealed in successive strata: houses and Muslim burial grounds (mezarlik[ia]) were erected over the ancient onshore buildings and port docks of the Hellenistic and Roman period, where recent excavations revealed the remnants of the latter. Yali (waterside) and Valide (or Valizade) Tzami[4] (mosque) (fig. 1, points 1 & 2), once dominating with their minarets at the coast of Epano Skala, consisting pivots of the prevailing, in that region, Muslim community of Mytilini, are still preserved in harmonic coexistence with the churches that were maintained or built by the Christian refugees from Aivali and other regions of Asia Minor. The refugees' buildings re-

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[3] National Statistical Service of Greece.
[4] Dedicated to *Valide sultan*, mother of the Ottoman sultan.

placed Muslim population after 1922 at Epano Skala and the neighbouring refugee settlement (Sinikismos). The old "Refugee Market" (fig. 1, point 7), which consisted of an interesting group of structures of the period between world wars I and II, as well as the refugees' wooden shanties and small seaside coffee houses, no longer exist, since they were sacrificed in the name of an ambiguous progress. However, the premises of the contemporary Courts which originally housed the Ottoman boys' school are preserved (fig. 1, point 4), as well as the Ministry of the Aegean which in the past housed the Ottoman Command Post (fig. 1, point 5); the building of the Experimental High School which once was an Indigent Hospital; the premises of the Gallery, former residence of Halim Bey, the last descendant of the powerful Muslim family of Koulaksiz(idon); the historic coffee house of "Hermis", etc. The castle of Mytilini (fig. 1, point 6), where traces of its threefold past – Byzantine, Genovese and Ottoman – are spotted, dominates over the region of Epano Skala.

Moving further to the southern (modern) port there is the deserted (today) Yeni Tzami (New Mosque) (fig. 1, point 3) surrounded by a linear succession of small buildings disposed all along Ermou street. In the past, these buildings housed workshops, distilleries, coffee houses, bakeries, barbershops, groceries, tailor's shops, cobbler's shops, tinker's shops (where copper household utensils were repaired) and knife maker's shops. These shops were covering the needs of the region's inhabitants who constituted (in their majority) the Christian "middle" class which emerged after the beginning of 19th century and settled in the (broader) surroundings of the "five churches" (fig. 1, point 8): the church of Agioi Theodoroi, Agios Athanasios (the contemporary Cathedral of Mytilini), Agioi Apostoloi, Agios Georgios and Agios Symeon (Ai-Symios). Today, the region mainly fosters second-hand shops, furniture workshops, shops offering ready-made food for university students and soldiers, clothing shops, a few tailors' shops, as well as some entertainment spots.

The third section of Ermou Street, the "New Market", includes the area extending from the intersection of Ermou and Pittakou str. (where in the past "Bas Fanari" (fig. 1, point 9) was located, namely the Market's central lantern), to the region of the southern (modern) port. This region gathers the activities of the "New Market", formed based on the needs of the "middle" as well as the emerging "upper" class of Christians, from the middle of 19th to the beginning of 20th century. In the past, pastry shops, photographic studios, bookshops, groceries, clothing shops, goldsmith and silversmith workshops, as well as some of the famous "traditional" coffee houses (fig. 1,

point 11) of Mytilini, such as "Krystal" and "Panellinio" prospered in this region. Today, the region's identity has not been dramatically altered; it has simply adjusted to the modern demands. The coffee houses have been confiscated by bank organisations, though there is the intention of reopening of at least one of them, the clothing shops have been modernised, the bookshops maintain a constant presence, while the goldsmith and silversmith workshops have been replaced by jewellery shops. In the broader region, urban "mansions" reflect the early residential enhancements of the late 19th century; at the north end of the market, the school complex, erected in the late 19th century, is still in operation; and the church of Agios Therapon (fig. 1, point 10), built during the middle to late 19th century, consists an example of pretentious combination of different styles and visual art perceptions, reflecting the attempt of the Christian urban class to consolidate its (economic and cultural) supremacy, from the late 19th until the early 20th century.

Fig. 1: Topographic map of Mytlini in 19th Century (Source: Samaras, 1959): Á.) North port, B.) South port, 1.) Valide (or Valizade) Tzami, 2.) Yali Tzami, 3.) Yeni Tzami, 4.) Former Ottoman boys' school, (today's) Courts, 5.), Former Ottoman Command Post, (today's) Ministry of the Aegean 6.) The Castle of Mytilini, 7.) Refugee market, archaeological site (today) 8.) The "Five Churches", 9.) "Bas Fanari", 10.) The church of Agios Therapon, 11.) Coffee houses.

3   Ermou Street as Representation: A Multimedia Exhibition

The multimedia exhibition for the presentation of Ermou Street constituted an attempt of an overall representation of the social history of the broader region crossed by the central market street of the city. By this approach, the representation of the everyday life aspects and activities in Ermou Street referred to the overall life aspect of the city of Mytilini. Of course, the main corpus of the collected research material covered the period from the early 20th century to the present, since the main purpose of the research was the use of oral records, which in fact could not be extended to prior time periods. Nevertheless, the Multimedia Exhibition also included more comprehensive historical elements and material that described, to a large extent, the general historical continuity and perspective of the (relatively) contemporary activities on which this presentation centred.

Fig. 2: Part of the photographic material of digital and analogue content used in various applications of the multimedia exhibition "Ermou Street". Picture 1.1: Aspect of Ermou street at noon, Picture 1.2: Example of local architectural style of neoclassical influence at a vertical alley to Ermou street,   Picture 1.3: Decorative pattern constructed in the yard of an upper-class house close to the market, Picture 1.4: Restored Turkish baths: Tsarsi Hamam (Hammam of the market) in Ermou street, at the area of the old market.

In particular, the Multimedia Exhibition was organised based on the following the-matic fields: 1.) The architectural identity of Ermou street and the pertinent social web, combined with the changes in social life during the 20th century, 2.) The per-sonal experience of the inhabitants regarding economical and social life in the past, as well as in the present, 3.) The biographical narratives of craftsmen and shopkeepers representing key points in the historical development of the local market, 4.) The contemporary sound environment (soundscape) formed by everyday activities, 5.) A twenty-four hour visual representation of the urban setting.

The applications presented in the Multimedia Exhibition were arranged according to a particular methodology that defined all stages of the Exhibition's implementation, from the collection of the research material to the design of the applications and their presentation in a certain space arrangement. The central idea governing this method-ology concerned the real-space transfer to a 'virtual environment', using devices that symbolically correlated real experiences with 'virtual' ones, in visitors / users' exp e-riential perception. Figure 3 presents the exhibition's topographic diagram with the alphabetically designated Areas (from A to G) where visitors / users interacted with the exhibition material.
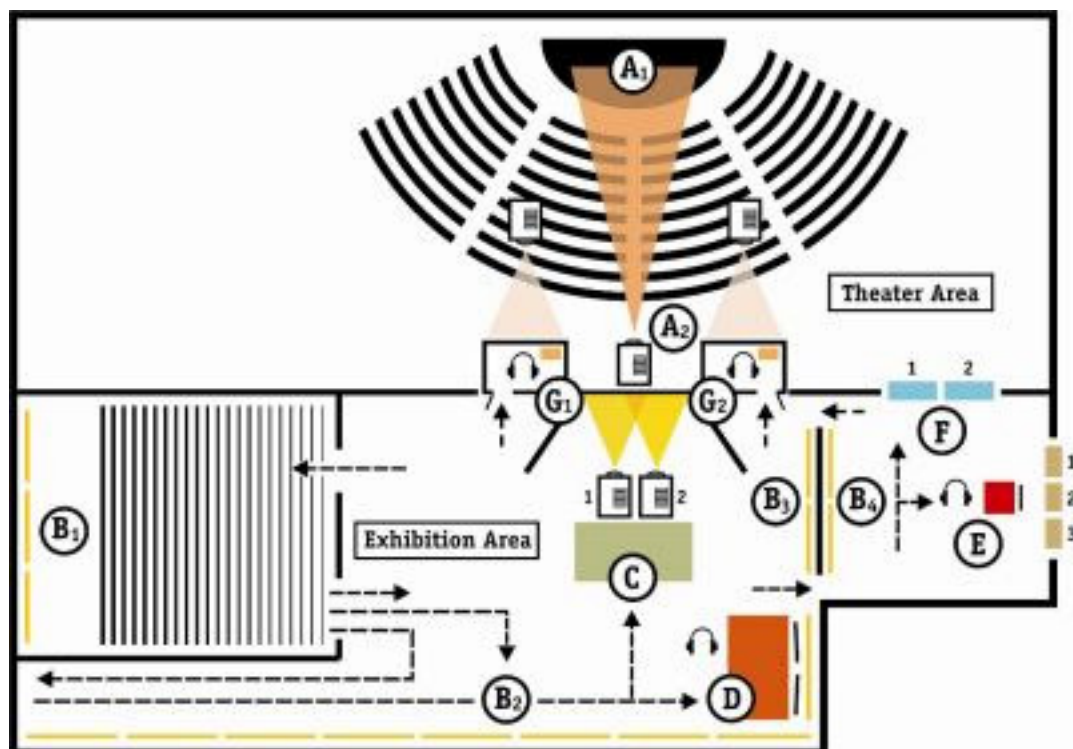

Fig. 3: Topographical diagram of the exhibition with the alphabetically (from **A** to **G,** starting from **A**) designated areas of content interaction: // Main theatre area: 1.) Area

(A): [consisting of key points A_1 and A_2]. Introductory presentation of the subject through a series of lectures by invited lecturers and simultaneous projection of documents. // Exhibition area: 2.) Area (B): [consisting of key points B_1, B_2, B_3 and B_4]. Key points with information material presentation in poster form. 3.) Area (C): Interactive exhibit presenting information about the architectural identity of Ermou street, as well as the neighbouring sites. 4.) Area (D): Interactive exhibit presenting the socioeconomic framework of Ermou street through a series of inhabitants' narratives. 5.) Area (E): Interactive exhibit presenting biographical narratives of craftsmen/shopkeepers of Ermou street, concerning obsolete, scarce or prosperous professions of today. 6.) Area (F): Information presentation in video form / Simultaneous video projection of morning (video 1) and night (video 2) activities in Ermou street. 7.) Area (G): [consisting of key points G_1 and G_2]: Interactive exhibits presenting the soundscape of Ermou street during four time periods (morning, afternoon, evening and night)

Regarding content presentation, most of the applications combined still pictures (photographs) or motion pictures (video), texts, sounds or narratives, with interactive maps representing a certain geographic distribution, thereby allowing visitors / users to directly relate the presented material with specific regions, sites or monuments. In parallel, for the presentation of the research thematic fields, the design strategy of specially arranged interaction "areas" was followed, through which the visitor could be introduced to different aspects of the content. These areas corresponded (more or less) to each thematic field of the collected research material. They held the possibility of independent data presentation within the context of a specific thematic field, but they were also mutually combined in a more comprehensive entirety, allowing visitors / users to associate their experiential perceptions from their tour in a 'virtual" repr e- sentation with their experiences in actual Ermou Street. Having as main feature the multiformity concerning the content presentation, due to the use of different media and ways of presentation, each area provided a different interaction experience (Ciolfi, 2004). The interchange of content negotiation method depending on the area, created in total a unified interaction meta-environment, composed by various representation models.

4   Creating Representational Patterns from Oral History   Records: The Applications of Areas [D] and [E]

The applications for the management of ethnographical data originating from oral history records and in particular applications of Areas [D] and [Å], occupied specified positions in the exhibition area in order to introduce visitors to a series of oral records on the social background of Ermou street and its broader region. For the

implementation of the applications, specially modified information systems under the form of interactive exhibits were designed, where different representation methods were combined using traditional design approaches as well as contemporary / digital ones. Particularly, the design strategy of Customizable User Interfaces was followed, with emphasis on tangibility (Milekic, 2002), aiming at the successful presentation of the information material to the various groups of visitors, regardless of age / knowledge background / special - general interests, even by groups of visitors who were not familiar with the use of computers. The Customizable User Interfaces could be defined as the forms of User Interfaces that provide physical ways of interaction with multimedia content through the use of everyday-life objects / practices. Based on parameterization concerning sensorial approaches, interaction methods and presentation techniques, the forms of Customizable User Interfaces have the ability to be altered according to each given design problem / strategy. Present-day technology is such, that parameterized interfaces can be designed at low cost and easily produced without any particular specialist knowledge of programming and electronics. For the interconnection of physical and virtual environments, innovative platforms, interaction design tools and relative hardware have been and constantly are elaborated suggesting alternative paths of content negotiation. Indicative examples and toolkits are cited in research work of: (Nam & Gill, 2000; Borchers & Ballagas, 2002; Greenberg & Boyle, 2002; Barragán, 2004; Dow, MacIntyre, Gandy and Bolter, 2004; Yim & Nam, 2004; Lee et al., 2004; Hartmann, Klemmer and Mehta, 2005).

Fig. 4: Use of familiar artefacts and actions as interfaces between user and informational material. The applications presenting the content to be negotiated required from visitors a simple and easy manipulation.

4.1   The Application of Area [D]

With reference to content, the application of area [D] presented forty-one sound excerpts, concerning the personal experience of inhabitants on the economic and social life of the centre of Mytilini. Based on the cartographic representation of Ermou street, interviews were illustrated on the user interface, and visitors interacted with them through a symbolic four centimeters diameter object made of wood (figure 4.1). Interviews were presented as numeric representations under the form of graphic symbolisms and were classified in two colors, blue for those concerning the past and red for those of the present (figure 4.2). Although each sound excerpt could be selected only by one user, the application was designed so that it could be simultaneously attended by a group of visitors. For that purpose, the use of headphones was the information transmission method that was applied, instead of loudspeakers. The ability of shared listening of oral records through nine pairs of headphones created a personalized space of interaction, where the participants, 'isolated'' (for as long as their contact with the application lasted) from the general environment of the exhibition, shared the experience of the given moment.
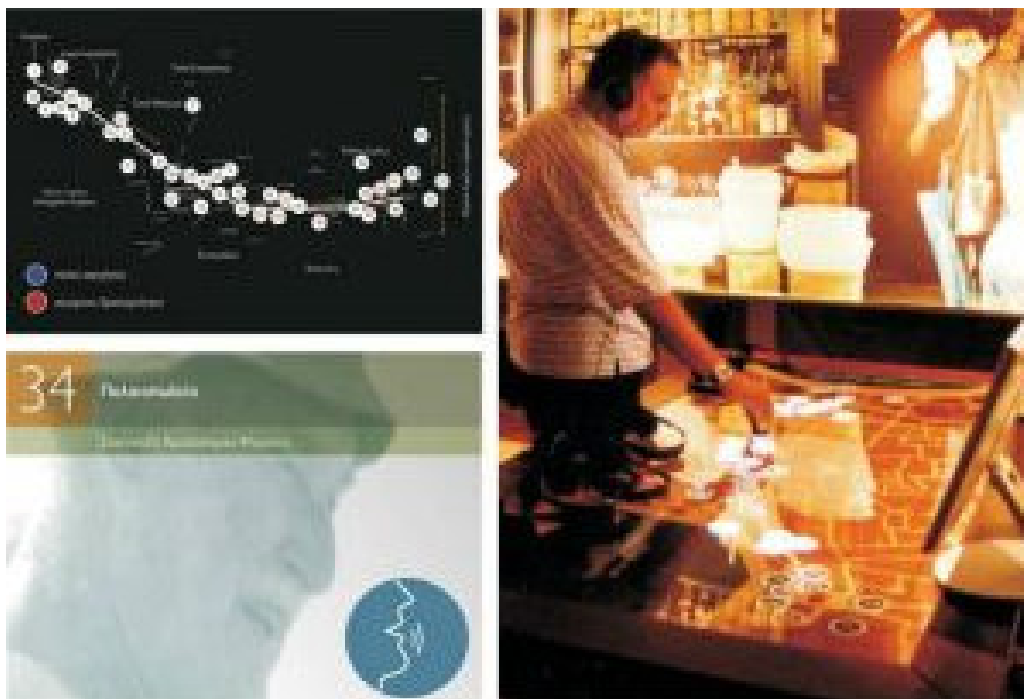

Fig. 5: The application of Area [D] with screenshots from the main page and the thematic field of a key point concerning an interview about an antique shop located at the old market. The data presentation of this application combined text, images and sound excerpts using an interactive map representing forty-one interviews of craftsmen and shop keepers of the region.

4.2   The Application of Area [E]

The application of Area [Å] (which was, according to the exhibition design, the following interaction area), presented three biographical narratives of craftsmen and shop keepers, symbolizing important points for the historical evolution of the local market. In this area, through a moveable selector (figure 4.3), users could interact with three thematic units (figure 4.4) negotiating, depending on the selection, the biographical narratives of a blacksmith (an obsolete craft), a tailor (a profession that scarcely exists), as well as a bookseller (a prosperous profession). Similar to the case of Area [D] application, the interaction mode was designed so that it could simultaneously be addressed to a group of visitors, with the possibility of shared listening from five pairs of headphones. The oral narratives were accompanied by large-scale photographic material, in special constructions with background lighting, where portraits of the people in their working place as well as photographs of the equipment and objects of their work were presented.

Fig. 6: The application of Area [Å] with screenshots from the first/main page and the thematic field of the key point concerning the biographical narrative of a tailor in the region of the central market. Similarly to application [D], there was the possibility of shared listening, with the use of corresponding pairs of headphones.

5   Interconnecting Physical & Virtual Environments

Concerning the interconnection of the applications' digital data with the users' corresponding requests, the application of special encoders was chosen (KE-72T, http://www.hagstromelectronics.com/products/ke72.html), which translated the physical environment's stimuli to perceivable codes. Certain types of encoders can be easily programmed, in order to send commands in alphanumeric form to the computing systems managing the information material, every time a stimulus is received from their input source to which a sensor is connected. At the stages of programming, a library of readily simplified interactive commands with parameterizable selections was realized in the Macromedia Director multimedia authoring tool, capable of translate each data set defined by the encoders' inputs, to various forms of multimedia content. Having such a "dialogue" privilege with the systemic environment the design group was able to easily create hybrid interactive environments without the interference of complex programming processes.

6   Conclusion

This article presented a methodology of integration and management of ethnographical data originating from oral history records, within a cultural promotion strategy focused on practices from the field of exhibition design with the use of new technologies. In particular, the implementation modes of two multimedia applications under the form of interactive exhibits were presented, which, in combination with pertinent interactive applications, were included in a multimedia exhibition for the presentation of Ermou Street in the city of Mytilini. Applying communication practices met in familiar social environments, the information content of the multimedia applications was easily approached and comprehended by different groups of visitors regardless of age, knowledge background or previous experience with computers. The definition of new boundaries on cultural content negotiation, using representation practices based on methods and techniques of customizable User Interface design, offered the opportunity of experimentation and exploration of new forms of interaction with Cultural Information Systems.

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