

Cultural heritage in XR told through design and artistic creation

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A proposal to the Workshop: Interactive Storytelling for Communities, Heritage and Public Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This is a proposal to the workshop “Interactive Storytelling for Communities, Heritage and Public Engagement”, with the purpose of discussing an artistic work using immersive technology and interactive storytelling on cultural heritage material. The proposal raises the question of whether we should start thinking about clarifying our context or positioning as designers in the field of interactive storytelling of cultural heritage.

CCS CONCEPTS • Human-centered computing • Human computer interaction (HCI)

Keywords

XR, Cultural Heritage, Art, Artist, Designer, Context

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The proposal of cultural heritage in XR told through design and artistic creation

A thought that struck me, through having studied and working in the design field from different perspectives, both an artistic perspective and from the perspective of Human-Computer interaction (HCI) and interaction design perspective, is how differently we talk and think about the relation between the creator or designer and the content, and context the designer works within. My experience of being in the interaction design field is that we usually talk about the user, the user's needs, and the user's experience which are all relevant and important aspects, and I have been thinking “what if we should start talking about the designer in these contexts?” Who is the designer and in what context does it move, and how does that affect the design? This is something that I experienced to be a more common discussion in the art field, than in the field of HCI and interaction design. Through this, I wish to further discuss artistic explorations of interactive storytelling in combination with cultural heritage and I wish to discuss artistic mediations of cultural heritage in eXtended Reality (XR).

An example that I find relevant is Lap-See Lam's exhibition *Det regnar drakfjäll* which was shown at the Rhösska Museum, Sweden from autumn 2022 to spring 2023.[1] In Lam's exhibition, she works with the Chinese restaurant in the Swedish context and cultural appropriation based on her own experiences and background.[1,2] Lam has described the capture of the Chinese restaurants as an attempt to document a phenomenon that is about to disappear, something I would like to call a contemporary cultural heritage.[1,2] She does this from an artistic perspective, mixing fantasy and reality with the help of various digital techniques such as immersive installations, such as Virtual Reality (VR), and projections in harmony with physical materials in the museum space.[1,2]

To provide a further discussion, I would like to take one more point of departure in my master's thesis work *child remains -an immersive conversation about grief*, in the sense that similar parts are described in the master's thesis "child remains, Screening the Family Trees".[3]

During my last year as a master student in design at HDK-Valand, Gothenburg I explored how I as an artistic designer could tell an interactive story based on cultural heritage in an artistic incorporation.[3] This resulted in an XR-installation consisting of both physical and virtual artifacts and interactions that move between different time periods.[3] The interactions move between the virtual and physical worlds, and the people inside and outside VR.[3] The storytelling moves forward with the help of an interlocutor who guides the participants through the experience.[3] The narrative processes both cultural heritage material and contemporary experiences.[3]

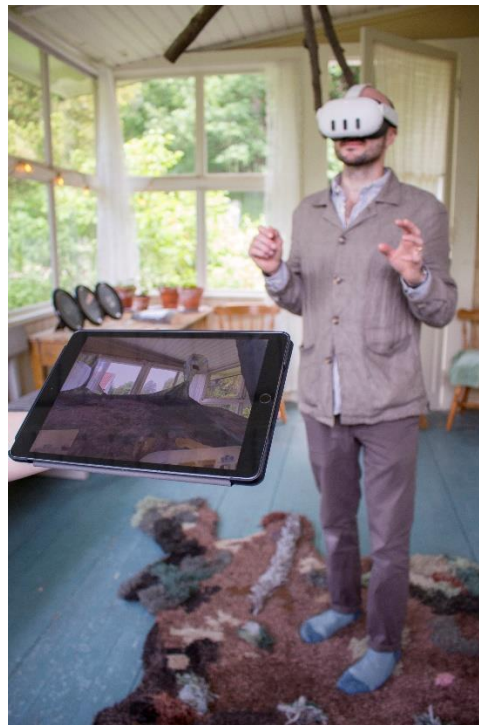


Figure 1: The installation *child remains* at the Lilla Änggården Museum
Photographer Therese Berglund

The project has been described in the following way in the HDK graduations 2024 exhibition and webpage:

The master project child remains is a collaboration between the museum Lilla Änggården and HDK-Valand student Gabriella Di Feola. The project explores how a designer can open up conversations about grief at Lilla Änggården and how a museum can be a public space for grief and mourning.

child remains takes its starting point in the Grén family, who lived at Lilla Änggården during the 19th century. The project lifts parts of the depictions of the family that are less visible in the storytelling. The family does not talk much about the experience of losing three of their children and there are few stories preserved about these children. In the absence of stories, what is there to tell? This exploration is combined with making room for contemporary experiences of child loss through Di Feola's experiences of losing a daughter as well as other parents' experiences of child loss.[4]

The work was created with the help of my own experiences together with cultural heritage material, where my own experiences could embody much of the design work.[3] For example, the interaction of walking between worlds has been a way of showing the feeling I had during my most intense part of grief, of being in another world with another time-space, while at the same time also being physically present in the actual world, in a world that does not see what I carry.[3] Drawing from my own experiences of grief I could also highlight the importance of being physical with the body in the interaction and being able to share feelings, and all this has been embodied in the work.[3] I want to say that my position and relationship to the subject have influenced how the work was designed, and how grief and the loss of a child have been able to be lifted into the museum. In relation to the work, just like Lam's it is artistic, it is also important to highlight who the artist is, and how she has worked. One such example is the text that we often encounter in conjunction with an exhibition, which was also present when the work child remains was shown. Working with the museum's collections, archives, and the own perspective is not unique, more artists work in that way, e.g. Eric Magassa and his exhibition MESSAGES FROM THE STARS at Bohusläns Museum.[5] In exhibition texts about Magassa, it is described that the artist explores from within himself and his artistry which, among other things, explores identity in harmony with the museum's collection.[5]

It seems that moving in the artist's context and having a relationship to the subject allows for this form of processing of cultural heritage material. This context seems to have allowed me to work with and materialize my grief within the context of the museum. This indicates that the artistic context can be decisive for the design and the designers in how she or he can influence and create content in the museum's narrative. It also seems that it is progressing with discussions and methods that make it possible within HCI to discuss one's own positioning. The article "More Samples of One: Weaving First-Person Perspectives into Mainstream HCI Research" writes:

Our historicity permeates our work; as design researchers, we carry personal experiences that implicitly influence the course of our research. This influence is not only epistemological but also material; it is not unusual to create and test prototypes ourselves before sharing them with others. Self-testing and judgment are widespread in design practice, yet the articulation of such practices into research is still contested.[6]

In the article, they propose several methods that enable a first-person perspective in design and research and highlights what kind of problems it can generate.[6] Maybe we as designers in the heritage field should also start having such discussions when we create interactive and immersive cultural heritage experiences?

Bio

Gabriella Di Feola is a Swedish interdisciplinary artist and designer with an MFA in Design. She has studied artistic fields such as painting, ceramics, textiles, and animation and her practice works even more broadly with different types of material and methods. Di Feola has a BA in culture, aesthetics, and media and has studied areas as ludology, digital art, and interaction design. Apart from her artistic practice, Di Feola has work experience as an interaction designer.

During 2024, Di Feola worked with photogrammetry, VR, and grief from an artistic perspective, which resulted in, among other things, the exhibition MOURNING A STRANGER together with Hugo Pilate at Galleri Rotor 2, exhibition, display, presentation, and testing of the XR-work child remains at the museum Lilla Änggården and exhibition of child remains at the HDK's Graduation exhibition.

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