

Diary of a Pakistani Vegetable Cart Community Culture through Multimedia

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ABSTRACT

In 2004, my proposal for a multimedia project called “Diary of a Pakistani vegetable cart” won third prize at an international competition organized by Nabi Art Center, Korea and supported by the International Council of Museums and UNESCO Digiarts. It was based on “Digital Storytelling of Intangible Heritage”. For this project, still under production, local community culture was interpreted for a global audience through my interactions. The approach has been to document then distill and display the contributors involved in sustaining an old tradition. Multimedia is being used to bring all the participants together in one installation. A vegetable cart and its vendor, customers, recipies, children learning about vegetables through song and other city cart vendors appear as manifestations of my memories. This paper will show some concepts I used as the basis for my work, inviting feedback that could help overcome challenges faced in doing justice to my ideas.

Author Keywords

Digital Storytelling, Pakistan, Vegetable Cart, Heritage, Multimedia

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.2 Computers and Society, I.3.3 Digitizing and Scanning

INTRODUCTION

Without it, lunch could be a bland, tasteless affair. Every morning it is pushed by a vendor through the residential lanes of crowded Karachi neighborhoods. It's wooden structure is versatile enough to overcome all obstacles when reaching even the remotest house on the block. As he walks, the vendor announces himself with a loud cry every few seconds. A welcoming reception awaits the cart and the vendor from most houses. When some home-makers complain about the wares bought the day before, the vendor reassures them most convincingly that his vegetables are the finest. After the selection of the day is made and the final price agreed upon by both parties, the deal is made and

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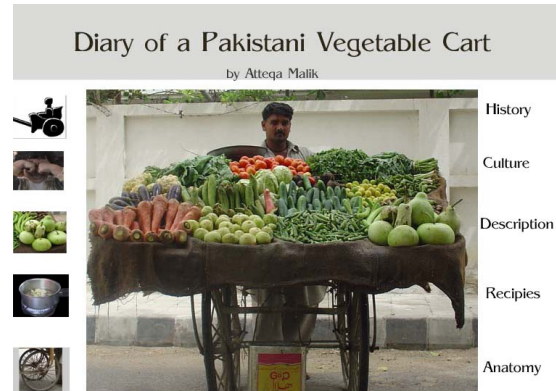


Figure 1. View of the project as it will appear on the website

the vegetable-cart owner is ready to move on to the next house. In the large metropolis of Karachi, Pakistan, the scene described above is one that marks the start of every day in most households. Cooking is an essential part of Pakistani living. Given the right blend of ingredients even the most simple food such as lentils can taste like a dish fit for royalty. Many ingredients such as the coriander leaf used for garnishing food are needed fresh for that day. At a time when other members of the family are at work or in school it is a great relief to have the vegetable-cart man make his rounds for it could make the difference in that day's meal.

The cry of the vegetable seller resounds in my subconscious mind as an integral part of my daily living experience. It marks my childhood memories, not because of any interaction followed by it but because it could be reassuringly heard every morning. As a woman of the house now I hear this cry with a new understanding, that of the transaction it makes possible. On occasions that I have been away from my country I have sorely missed this part of my daily routine. I value it very much.

With the help of digital technology I will be attempting to capture, then present some integral contributions that the presence of the vegetable-cart and it's owner has made to the communities of Karachi. The interactive multimedia presentation would be based on audio and visual interviews with one or more vegetable-cart men, physical aspects of

their being, their interactions within the community and a few issues surrounding their existence.

As a digital artist presenting my work to an international audience, I feel that there has to be included something in the presentation that would connect directly with a viewer even if s/he is viewing the life of the vegetable cart as a strange and new experience. Since cooking is a topic that affects all humans in the same way, discussing recipes using Pakistani vegetables would surely be of interest to non-Pakistanis as well.

CONCEPT

In a foreword to Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” Richard Shaull (1) writes that he is encouraged by Paulo Freire’s belief that “the power of thought can negate accepted limits and open the way to a new future”. He describes how this belief is based on Freire’s assumption that “man’s ontological vocation (as he calls it) is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively”. “It is the material used by man to create history, a task which he performs as he overcomes that which is dehumanizing at any particular time and place and dares to create the qualitatively new. For Freire, the resources for that task at the present time are provided by the advanced technology of our Western world, but the social vision which impels us to negate the present order and demonstrate that history has not ended comes primarily from the suffering and struggle of the people of the Third World”.

As I witness my old neighborhood being torn down mercilessly and hundred year old houses and trees being uprooted to make place for highways and offices, I am compelled to react. I transform my memory into an experience that others can share. This multimedia project is a manifestation of my fear that a lot of history will be erased with this neighborhood and others like it if not preserved in some way. A bonus that emerges from this interactive effort is the window provided to people in other parts of the world to understand and participate in what would otherwise have been a purely sub-continental experience.

Inspired by active recollection from my memory, an aspect of local community culture is documented and reinvented into a multimedia presentation. If successful in including the interaction of global community members, I would like to suggest that the experience would be one forming the basis of a new, virtual community culture. The nature of the participation in this project from each individual will be different as each will have his or her own baggage of

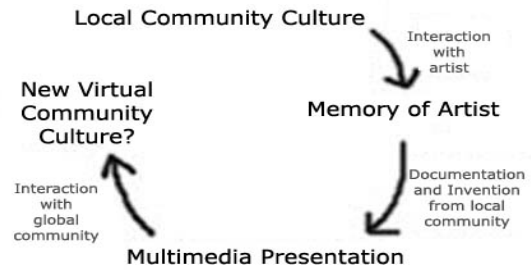


Figure 2. Concept showing link between local and global community through the project

memories, knowledge of food, it’s preparation and community culture. Thus what each person gets out of the “Diary of a Pakistani Vegetable Cart” could range from the triviality of pure entertainment to the significance of a sense of belonging to the community depicted. Thus I hope that this project would act as a link through which, as Freire put it, “people educate each other through the mediation of the world”(2).

Although inspired by the vegetable cart, which is a specific role player in our community culture, this story telling project requires input from other sources of the community as well in order to have meaning. Participatory design is involved in this project at various levels. For a story to be successfully narrated each character’s role in the story needs to be developed in great detail beforehand by the story teller. Only then the story comes together, integrated through participation of all the actors involved. Then no matter how it is experienced, it provides enjoyment to others.

The audio and visual pieces had to be given great thought so that the resulting representations speak for themselves rather than being given the voice of the artist. All the characters knew the reason for which they were asked to demonstrate their skills: To show other people who did not know how it is done. In this particular story about the vegetable cart which is part documentation and part invention by the artist. It has to be very clear that the presentation is not at all an artists representation of the life of the vegetable vendor, but a focus on the contribution made by this vendor and all the others who interact with the vegetable cart to the intangible heritage of our country.

An example of how this process worked can be seen from the link on the main page which leads to “culture” under the main title “Diary of a Pakistani Vegetable Cart”. For this link I asked my three year old daughter to sing a folk song called “aloo kachaloo” that she learnt at playschool. This playful song is full of actions taught to children so that they can easily learn the names of basic Pakistani vegetables in Urdu. It tells the story of a potato who was lost and then found sleeping in the vegetable basket He was mistreated by the eggplant, loved by the carrot and scared by the bugs coming out of the peas.

I recorded my daughter singing this song with a digital video camera, caught stills from the video to create frames of an animation. Then I worked on the frames using Adobe Photoshop and eventually created an animation in Macromedia Flash to go with the .wav recording of the song. This song or others similar to it are embedded in the memories of most children who have grown up in this part of the world. So when I asked my seven and eight year olds to draw me sketches showing specific scenes from the “aloo kachaloo” story they had no problem and did a wonderful job. I then digitized the sketches and worked on them a little more adding colour and changing the sizes etc. so that they could form an animation for visualization of the recorded song. The resulting piece would be what the viewer would experience upon clicking the “culture” link.

For the link leading to “recipes” I asked the person who cooks meals for my household to set up the ingredients like he would have seen in a television show and then used a similar process to display the essential steps required in cooking that particular dish.

All the participants will be acknowledged in the presentation, as the story belongs to all of them, I am just the story teller in a new medium. The final piece would be presented as an installation at an art gallery or an interactive website. It would exude a newness due to the technology used to present it even though the content and the philosophy behind the whole exercise may be age old.

The “Diary of a Vegetable-Cart” would also invite participants from all over the world to share information related to their neighborhood carts, vegetables and recipes through words or pictures. One of the goals of the project is to give the site a purpose similar to that of an actual vegetable cart. Through the daily give and take involved due to its presence, the cart has enabled community networking in South Asian civilizations for generations, a role that is now being associated primarily with e-technologies. There exists a risk of losing an older, established norm to a newer format if its importance is not stressed enough. This project aims to intertwine old and new in order to endow both with a lasting future.

The reason why I have chosen the diary format of storytelling is because it gives me the opportunity to create separate chapters (or links) which talk or show entirely different aspects of the cart’s daily routine. All the separate characters in the story such as the vendor, customers, vegetables and other types of carts are disconnected from each other in a way, yet are integral to the cart’s existence as an intangible heritage.

I would hope to involve audiences in a number of ways:

- 1. For Pakistani viewers: hoping to create respect for community culture that is under threat as urbanization takes over the country
- Inviting awareness of heritage and activism



Figure 3. Detail from sequence that was vocalized by a 3 year old, sketched by a 7 year old and finalized by the artist

towards preserving it

2. For Pakistani participants living in other parts of the world: helping the amalgamation of memories of home by providing

- A virtual place for nostalgia to find solace
- A source from where children could be introduced to valuable aspects of Pakistani culture.
- A place for recipes and cooking techniques that a generation grew up with, left back home with their parents and now has a chance to relearn via the multimedia project.

3. For participants from countries other than Pakistan:

- A glimpse at another culture. The site will include a brief, pictorial history of various other carts that are used in Pakistan, chances are that other countries also have such carts in their neighborhood the recognition of which allows the site to have a broader horizon.
- A way to see how similar or how different they are from Pakistani culture, after all food is at the heart of all matters everywhere
- The Pakistani vegetable dictionary with names of vegetables in both English and Urdu and a step by step explanation of how to use these in the preparation of meals will hopefully make the site inclusive to all those who are interested in the subject

PROJECT DESCRIPTION, TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION AND SET UP PLAN

The presentation of the vegetable vendor/s will be conducted with empowerment in mind, showing the value of the vegetable-cart’s presence in the community rather than criticizing it. The structure of the vegetable cart will be presented to show how it benefits functionality. Other manifestations of the vegetable cart like the corn-on-the-cob cart and recyclable materials cart will also be studied and compared in order to show that this type of selling is inherent to Pakistani culture.

Documentation and selection of film clips and still images would be organized through specific titles such as “walking through the neighbourhood”, “arranging the vegetables”, “interaction with customers” etc. Editing will play an

important role in the selection and rearranging process. I have recorded the cries of the vegetable-cart man and other audio data using digital audio recording equipment.

The presentation will consist of a large rectangular viewing platform in the center of the computer screen with a simple menu on the left hand side. The text will be in a frame on the right side of the screen and it will be proportionate to the viewing rectangle. The icons will be made using some cut pictures from the images that I will have collected. The icons will give the options of either viewing movie clips, hearing audio, watching still pictures. The menu will be thematically arranged with material arranged for viewing one subject at a time. For example, an icon dealing with the structure of the vegetable cart clicked on the left of the screen will show a sequence of images on the viewing rectangle in the center of the screen. First photos of the whole cart will be shown, then details of the wheels. Finally other carts of this type that are used in Karachi for other purposes will be displayed. In this way the presentation serves an educational purpose also with a minimum of written text to make the presentation appealing with a minimum of text. The icon bar will remain consistent with the image and text frames changing according to the icon that is clicked upon the left. I have a Sony digital video camera which I will be using myself to capture the visuals. Macromedia Flash will be used to create the presentation as a multimedia movie. Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Premiere or other video editing and photo editing software will be used to crop and enhance visuals as necessary. Audacity is being used for editing the sound files recorded as .wav. Any sketches required will be made by hand and then digitized or created entirely using computer software. The idea is to keep the interface as simple as possible with the content of the site varied and textured enough to keep the viewer interested.

ICON MENU SHOWING THE CONSTITUENTS OF THE WHOLE

The following is a list of what the icon menu will include with details on the type of presentation. All the pages will include two or three sentences of text which will complement the picture and make any extra points if needed.

1. Anatomy_The vegetable cart _viewers will see a sequence of pictures introducing the man, his cart and vegetables using audio and visual aids.

2. History_showing the different types of carts used in the city . A separate link will show a family history of the vegetable cart vendor and his daily routine.

3. Description_ Typically South Asian Vegetables_ A digital picture dictionary presenting 10 or more South Asian vegetables and their nutritional values. Links will connect directly to the recipes page.

4. Recipes_ at least 5 recipes of traditional Pakistani dishes made from vegetables that could be bought from the

vegetable cart. Step by step instructions will be in pictorial format, making them easily comprehensible.

5. Culture_ Audio visual sequences showing children having fun learning about vegetables in our culture and introduction to all the other participants of the project.

On mouse over, all of these menu icons would display a glimpse of the page that is to appear if clicked. These will be designed artistically in Photoshop using the images collected. Even the main page of the presentation will be artistically managed in a way so that on a plain background screen there are displayed just the menu icons, the rectangular viewing frame and the text. No bounding boxes close in the text.

CONCLUSION

The whole project was supposed to take me about four months plus or minus fifteen days but has ended up taking much longer. I have collected all the audio,visual and textual data, and now am struggling with logistics in how to present it the best possible way.

As an artist who uses new technologies to create organic visuals that address humane issues, I prefer to use material that has been shot spontaneously rather than that which is too rehearsed or completely staged. That is why I have relied on my own technical knowledge in the production of it. Although this a main factor for the delay in the completion of the project, it is one that allows me to test my own education as I bring together my history, and hopes for the future.

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