MEMories and EXperiences for inclusive digital storytelling (2019-2022)

Innovative European Project bringing together technology and heritage to support people at risk of socio-cultural exclusion: first steps toward the MEMEX app.

MEMEX partners have successfully completed a first version of the MEMEX app, which is currently only available for consortium members testing it with communities at risk of exclusion in Paris, Lisbon and Barcelona, in order to promote their socio-cultural empowerment through storytelling. The preliminary version focuses on the tools for narrative production; adopting an innovative approach, the entire design and development process involved different phases, both while developing the app and during the creative process of the participants' first stories. MEMEX – "MEMories and EXperiences for inclusive digital storytelling" is a European 3 years project (2019-2022) coordinated by the Italian Institute of Technology (IIT) funded under the Horizon 2020 programme.

Among the objectives of the European Union programme "Horizon 2020" there was the reduction of people endangered from social exclusion; in 2017 there has been 24.4% of people, especially women and young people between 18 and 24 years old, in all Europe at risk of poverty and marginalization (Eurostat, 2019). In this social context, MEMEX project aims to develop new technologies that encourage the visibility of the most vulnerable social groups, by exploiting the pervasive presence of smartphones.

During its first period, the technical consortium partners of MEMEX (Italian Institute of Technology, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, EY & Interactive Technologies Institute-LARSyS) developed an application that lets the users share captivating and meaningful stories. As for the social partners (Interarts, Mapa das Ideias, Michael Culture Association, Dédale and ECCOM), they rose to the challenge of implementing storytelling workshops with communities in Barcelona, Lisbon and Paris. Aiming to empower the participants to create stories and to be the main actors in the first usability tests of the application.

The MEMEX consortium is delivering a mobile-responsive application that contains the first functionalities such as User Login, Story Viewing and Story Creation. Since the MEMEX app targets both story localisation and media content, the user has the choice between two visualisation modes of the stories. The user can either access them through a list that filters the stories by category and title or through a map that shows the specific location of each story, allowing to explore and search for specific location points. Both visualisation modes present the stories and their content in a simple and accessible way while maintaining a spatial awareness about the places and cultural heritage highlighted by the users. The app allows them to write and share whatever their interests, memories, thoughts, feelings are, and in the form they prefer: it can be narrative or go as far as poetry and it can

be further enriched by uploading multimedia content such as photos, voice audios or even video. Stories are then geolocated and linked to a cultural heritage site or asset, and it is also possible to tag them between a list of fixed keywords.

The ideal design and requirements choices were fulfilled in the framework of a previous field study conducted in Lisbon by Interactive Technologies Institute-LARSyS, in partnership with Mapa das Ideias and Instituto Marquês de Valle Flôr, inviting young migrants as participants. From this first experience, a set of single and co-created authored stories was gathered, leading to a list of requirements and specifications. All these needs were translated and developed into an MVP (Minimum Valuable Product) to be available for usability testing with the MEMEX pilots' communities.

This first version has been tested in the 3 pilots deployed by the project: Barcelona's migrant women and the gender perspective; in Paris - District XIX, for digital storytelling with inhabitants in priority neighborhood; in Lisbon, through Enhanced readings of shared Portuguese heritage through emancipated eyes.

The main goal of these tests was to analyse the expectations from communities in different cities of the European territory, in collaboration with local stakeholders. In those pilots, the participants are actively helping to identify issues and co-design the application by giving feedback. From October 2020 until May 2021, they discovered digital storytelling methodologies by means of customised workshops in each of the pilots' location. They also had the opportunity to reflect on the stories they wanted to share and the format these stories should take.

As for now, they are finishing the process by using the app's tools for narrative creation to generate the first geolocalised and meaningful stories of MEMEX. To date, 34 participants, aged between 30's and 80's year-old, are involved in the project; they created 31 stories in the first version of the app. All participants produced a story while testing the app's current functionalities, supported and guided through the whole process by a facilitator they are already familiar with, which certainly helped them to feel more comfortable along the way.

Besides the fact that the different groups had contrasting levels of tech-knowledge and were rather reluctant about the usage of technology and smartphones, this experience was completely new for some of them. Even so, they showed commitment and excitement to explore the app, while using the tools to create and share the stories they previously created. A Spanish 40-year-old woman praised the usage of the tool: "*I find it amazing to write about what one feels: as a traveller, I found it very beautiful to have this app to share our writings, our feelings*". In Lisbon, participants valued the importance of linking their stories to different Cultural Heritage and pointed out: "*A statue that transmits happiness or joy can transmit the opposite to another person. It's interesting to know what other people see in the same heritage element.*"

A second version of the MEMEX app – scheduled to be internally available this year for consortium members – will incorporate improvements suggested by the valuable insights collected during the testing process. Moreover, new features will visualise the stories with Augmented Reality (Italian

Institute of Technology, EY) with an integration of Knowledge Graph (Ca' Foscari University of Venice) that will engage users in creating more appealing and lively stories.

Copyright : MEMEX Project

MEMEX Project is coordinated by the Italian Institute of Technology (Italy).

The consortium is composed by: Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy), EY (Italy), ECCOM (Italy), CNRS – Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (France), Interactive Technologies Institute - LARSyS (Portugal), Michael Culture Association (Belgium), Dédale (France), Interarts (Spain), Noho (Ireland), Mapa das Ideias (Portugal).

Useful links:

YouTube playlist about MEMEX Pilots:
https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLasZTPJh8lB9i0COzqdGWIUzwUIfOXE1S

Website: https://memexproject.eu/en/

MEMEX on social media:

  @MemexProject

Contact: contact@memexproject.eu