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Corona Haikus: a case study of interactive factual narrative that uses reflexive and evolutive agency as a strategy for deep personal and community change

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Abstract

When I moved from linear documentary production to the newly emerging field of interactive storytelling in the early 2000, I was excited by the potentialities of the Web, especially the possibility of co-creation in factual storytelling. Looking back, I can clearly see that what attracted me was the exploration of how factual narratives could make use of two affordances that are unique to digital media: *user agency* and *interactivity*. More than twenty years later, I am still experimenting with ways to use interactivity to facilitate co-creation of reality and move away from simple representation in documentary making (Gaudenzi 2013).

In this paper, I will use the *Corona Haikus* project (2020), to question the current understanding of user agency in participatory interactive narratives. I have chosen such project because I have personally been involved in it as a co-author, but also as a participant, and therefore I have both co-designed its user's agency, and experienced it as a user. I will argue that agency in interactive documentary (i-doc) should be considered as a space of user empowerment that does not always have to affect the interactive narrative itself, because it can also be placed outside of the narrated story. The *Corona Haikus* example will be used to demonstrate that, in participatory narratives, deep individual and societal impact can be designed by mixing different types of mini-agencies and by orchestrating them as a journey of empowerment that is gradual and evolutive. Reflexive and evolutive agencies will be defined and presented as new ways to approach impact design in interactive narratives.

Agency and Interactivity in i-docs

Agency and interactivity are two sides of the same coin: in user computer interaction, the agent, seen as "the one who initiates action" (Laurel 1991,4), can be more than one: the interactive author, the computer software and also the user. The author makes actions possible by ideating them, or by allowing the algorithm to generate them, while the user acts on them. It is only once the choice is acted upon that user *agency* - defined as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray 1997,126) – is been exercised.

This well-known definition of agency by scholar Janet H. Murray was coined in 1997, a time where interactive narratives were in their infancy, and one of the few areas that had successfully used and explored user agency was the computer gaming field. In game culture, the players do take *decisions,* and *choices* needs to feel satisfactory to them because, if not, they will stop playing*.* Within this context, action needs to feel *meaningful* to the inter-actor, or the agent. Since sense making is an individual and subjective, this definition of agency is human centric. The user suddenly is the one that needs to be *satisfied*, while the author's point of view and satisfaction becomes secondary. What interests me in this definition of agency is that it gives a power to the receiver of the narrative to question how she feels. There is here the recognition that experiencing a narrative goes way beyond understanding it, and that the affective dimension of storytelling emerges from the encounter between what is offered and what is experienced. Suddenly, the magic of narratives can be seen as an interval of opening, an "affective interval" (Miles 2014, 67), where possibilities belong solely to the receiver, although they exist because an author has designed them, or a computational algorithm has made them possible. Unfortunately, in early interactive narratives, this space of potentiality was rather narrow, because ultimately interactivity was conceived as a series of choices that had been thought as ways to navigate a close narrative space. The predominant "click and choose" agency of early interactive narratives has its route in hypertext fiction (see for example the work of Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a story* from 1990) or

computer games (see early versions of the Sims that came out in the year 2000). In both cases the author, or the algorithm, proposes options, the interface materialises them onto a screen, and the inter-actor chooses. The consequent lived narrative is larger than what a linear narrative could offer, but the experience stays within a more or less confined number of options and, more importantly, user agency never moves outside of pre-conceived branching or algorithmic narratives.

If we bring this notion of agency into the smaller world of i-docs (interactive documentaries) that is at the center of this paper, we understand why documentary scholar Adrian Miles said that in an i-doc the inter-actor is pretty much asked to notice, decide and do: "something is presented to a user (notice), the user views this material more or less quickly (decide), and is then obligated to make a decision that is literally a motor action that effects some sort of change within, or to, the work (do)" (Miles 2014, 69). It is true that in early web-docs users' power was effectively restricted to affect the work, by browsing it. But past 2005, when the affordances of Web 2.0 allowed for users to become content generators themselves, and participatory media and culture (Jenkins 2013) started to spread, i-docs moved out of their hypertext interactive structure, and click and choose agency, and new types of "doings" started to be possible. As argued elsewhere (Gaudenzi 2013) I believe that agency is platform and mode specific, and there can be more than one types of agency in an i-doc. This paper argues that agency is more nuanced and complex than so far given credit to, and that authors can play with types, levels and mutually affecting agencies to create complex and evolutive agency.

If I agree with interactive documentary scholar Judith Aston that, in an i-doc, "a physical action needs to take place between the human and the computer" (Aston 2016, 2), I then want to question: what types of actions can be conceived? What is the effect of such actions on the inter-actor, and on impact of the piece?

In the next part of this paper I will therefore address the following points:

1. There are many types of "doings" that are possible outside the click and choose default option that comes to mind when we think of user agency in i-

docs. We should therefore be thinking of agencies as varied and of different types.

2. The space in which these "doings" are happening do not need to be constraint to the interactive artefact, they can unfold in physical space or in personal psychological space. Agency can therefore be thought as relational and reflexive.

3. The "what" can the inter-actors do, and the "where" does this action take place, can have a variety of different impacts on the individual user and therefore on the societal impact of the piece itself. There is more to agency than the "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray 1997,126)

4. If there are different types of agencies, then we could consider designing progressive journeys of personal openings - within interactive narratives. In this sense, agency could be thought as *evolutive* and *systemic*.

In the last part of the paper I will use the *Corona Haikus* case study to explore possible answers that came from my own praxis.

1. The many types of "doing" in interactive documentary

In the taxonomy of interactive documentaries that I proposed in my PhD I have argued that different digital media platforms afford different *modes of interactivities* (Gaudenzi 2013), and that the "doing" that is possible for the user can be substantially different in an web documentary, in a game, a locative or immersive narrative.

The four *modes of interactivity* that I proposed in my PhD for interactive documentary are *the hypertext, the conversational, the participatory and experiential* mode (Gaudenzi 2013). I highlighted then how each mode uses a different logic of relationality between story, computer, human and environment and therefore has different affective and cognitive consequences.

For example, immersive and location based embodied navigation creates a sense of freedom and physical presence (*experiential mode*) that a click-and-choose between limited screen options (*hypertext mode*) cannot achieve. The first creates immersed fluidity, and aptitude to the randomness of life, while the second calls for

understanding and cognitive selection. In 3D and generative serious games (*conversational mode*) the agency of the user is to map apparently endless options by the way of try and error. The possibility of re-playable actions and generative spaces, or plots, do empower the user a personalised world, taking her away from the idea of one-world-fits all.

Finally, the agency given in the participatory interactive documentaries such as Question Bridge (Chris Johnson 2012), Rider Spoke (Blast Theory 2017) or We used to (Studio Olafur Elieasson 2021) (*participatory mode*) is to create content, rather than just browse it, and therefore to become co-creator of the very topic that is being documented. In this type of "living documentary" (Gaudenzi 2013) the "doing" can almost be limitless – from commenting, to singing, create a video or send a tweet – and, more importantly, this "doing" can take the interactor outside of the story space itself. Precisely because user generated content demands an interval of creativity before being produced and then shared, the interactor finds herself prompted to act by the interactive documentary, but temporarily outside of the story itself. She is now free to move into an alternative personal space that I see as potentially transformative – a space of the self.

2. Spaces of doing, and reflexive agency

While in most interactive documentaries the agency of the user is designed and conceived as a space of action within the proposed story and artefact, both locative and participatory mode have the potential to empower the user within the space of their own life, rather than the one of the i-doc work.

In an audio locative experience such as *Message to a Posthuman Earth* (Anagram 2021), where the user chooses a park of her choice and is prompted to rediscover nature with new eyes and senses, it is the geography of the user's physical space that is explored and, as a consequence, it is the understanding of her presence in nature that is shifted. The "doing" is of walking, choosing where to stop, creating a sculpture with leaves, listening to the wind… none of these doings are shared with others, nor do they become part of a collaborative narrative, but their effect, and impact is to shift the perception of the individual space of the user, rather than the narrative structure of the author.

Similarly, participatory narratives, by the simple fact that they ask to create something that will later have to be shared - record an audio file (Corona Diaries 2021), shoot a video (Life in a Day 2012), make digital poetry (Corona Haikus 2021) – they create a pause from the interactive documentary that moves the agency of the user outside of the digital artefact. By doing so, the agency of *doing* in participative storytelling proposes an interval, a potential moment of personal introspection, of creativity, or questioning, that re-empowers the participants with her unlimited possibilities of being. *Being,* in this case intended as being creative, curious, observer, voice-full, funny… being whatever is needed within the framework of the piece but, for sure, being in-touch with the self – since any act of creativity starts from an affective and emotional connection to part of the self.

From all the agency options that are possible in the context of participatory factual narratives I therefore would like to highlight the option of *reflexive agency*, intended as the meaningful power given the user to interact with the self. When the "doing" calls for reflection, internal tuning, emotion assessment and then some form of expression of this personal internal recalibration, then I believe the space of transformation that agency allows is directly impacting the inter-actor, her inner world, and her self-awareness.

3. The impact of the doing

I would argue that we cannot separate the discourse of agency from the one of impact. If, in existing theories of documentary impact, "changing minds" is recognised as one of the four types of impacts we can design for (DocSociety 2019), then in interactive documentaries this must be intrinsically linked with the type of "doings" that are made possible within the i-doc. Since we make sense of the world through movement and action (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991), our "doings" are not just a way to navigate a story, or to create content, but our very way to make sense of what we are engaging with. When the space of interaction is the i-docs text itself, then our making sense is focused to the story world, but when the space of action is reflexive, hence within ourselves, then our "doings" are reframing our emotional internal balances, or our connection with the physical world, or even our awareness of such relationships. Therefore, when agency is intended as *doing and creating*, or *looking inward*, rather than *clicking and choosing* within a story, this

action can become a moment of internal recalibration and mindfulness. When agency also allows sharing with others, then the private space moves into a public sphere and engenders a new level of potential community transformation. This is where agency can be designed as an evolutive experience for the user. Designing agency in an i-doc can therefore be seen as systemic, where different types of "doings" are meant to affect different spheres of the user – for example the emotional, private and public one – and where not one, but the combination of all the agencies, can create a transformative space designed as a series of incremental shifts of empowerment that would not be possible if proposed as stand alone doings.

4. Evolutive agency: a whole that is more than its parts

If we look at agency as a systemic construct, where the whole is more than its single parts, then thinking of agency as a single type of action in an interactive story is very limitative. I would argue that designing agency as evolutive and systemic forces us to question what types of agencies are possible, when should they be proposed and in which order, who is empowered by such doing, and what is being transformed by it. If the impact on the individual user can be seen as a series of internal shifts, than designing evolutive agency means to plan a choreography of successive openings and personal empowerments that only work because each step has its own purpose and makes possible the following one.

In the next, and final part of this paper, I will use the *Corona Haik*us project (2021) as a case study to highlight possible ways to step out of the click and choose notion of agency and experiment with reflexive and evolutive agency, as a strategy for individual and societal impact.

The Corona Haikus case study

Corona Haikus is a collaborative documentary project that uses social media and visual poetry to document the first phase of lockdown worldwide. Launched as a Facebook group[1] on the 1st of April 2020, when the Covid 19 pandemic brought most

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[1] *Corona Haikus,* co-creative Facebook documentary group (2020), https://www.facebook.com/groups/226094118756231/

countries to close their borders and announce lockdown measures, the project was thought as a communal way to respond to the fear of being isolated and the need to create a safe space to feel connected. The project was co-initiated by myself and Colombian transmedia producer Sandra Tabares Duque and, for more than ten weeks, we acted both as co-authors of the group and co-creators of digital poetry.
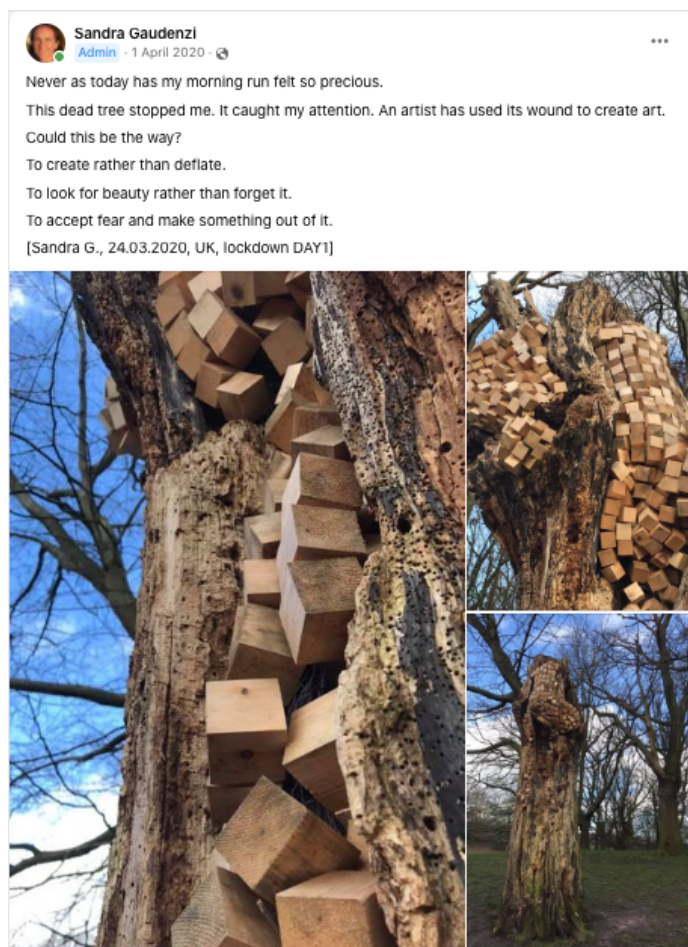

Figure 1: Screenshot of the first post published on the *Corona Haikus* Facebook group.

Corona Haikus is a form of constructive narrative resistance a new type of digital poetry (three photos and a short text to be shared on Facebook) was used to co-create a poetic tapestry of our Corona lives. The group was public, but participants needed to agree to the Term and Conditions and rules of sharing. They could then share their visual poems and comment to other participants' posts. The community grew to over 1,000 members within the first ten weeks of the project, and generated more than 2,000 visual haikus, coming from people from all around the world.

When the first lockdown gradually started to be eased, participants were asked to say good-bye to the community in the form of a visual haiku and to choose the moment that felt right to stop document their lives publicly. A website, www.coronahaikus.com[2], was co-curated to archive a selection of the Corona Haikus created by the community, and to make them available to a larger public that might not be active on Facebook.
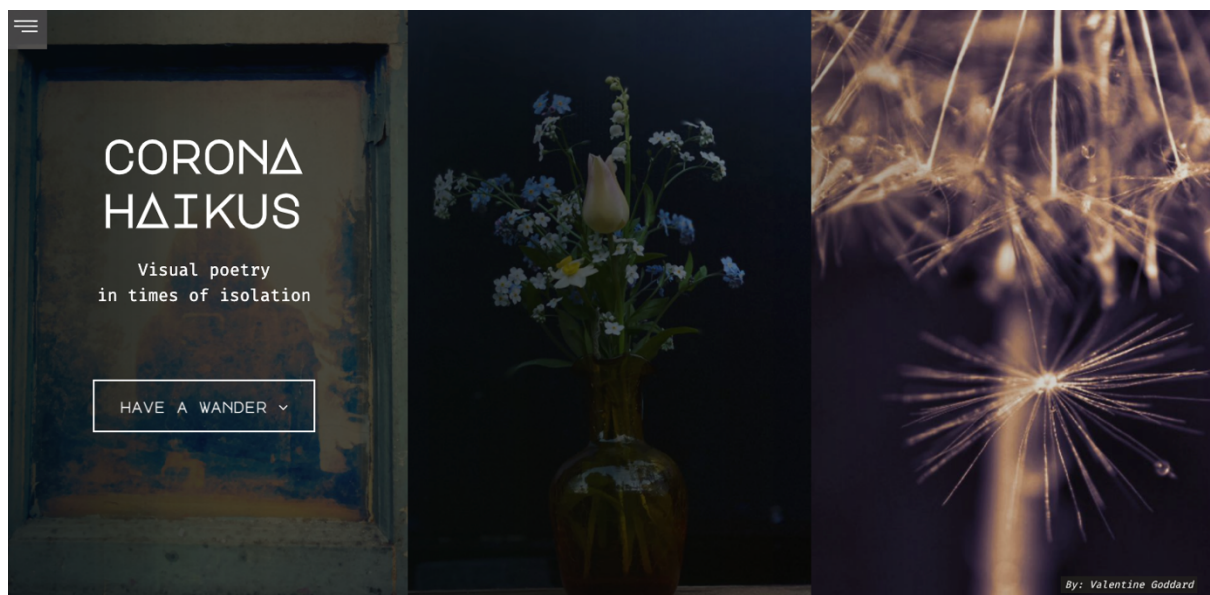

Figure 2: Screenshot of www.coronahaikus.com's homepage

1. Reflexive agency in Corona Haikus

At a first glance, it would be easy to say that the participants' agency was just to create and share a visual haiku. This would simplify the interaction design to what is often called user generated content. But I would like to take a more nuanced approach and question what forms of "doings" are necessary in order to create a Corona visual haiku. After all, the posted Corona Haiku is only the final result of a series of actions undertaken by the maker, each of which creates a series of affective and emotional openings for the participants which, I believe, are the place where individual transformation is really possible. One would therefore need to

[2] *Corona Haikus. Visual Poetry in times of isolation* (2020), https://coronahaikus.com/.

analyse how many assemblages of mini-acts, each of which necessitate a different form of agency, are made possible for the participant.

In order to create a visual haiku about life in isolation, one first needs to connect to the moment itself. This means stopping any other doing, and connecting with the felt sense of the present moment, which is in itself an act of mindfulness. The very first level of agency offered to the participant, is therefore to step out of the collective narrative exposed in the *Corona Haikus* Facebook's group, and to enter into one's private narrative space. Where am I right now? How do I sense the physical space around me and what emotions does it generate in me? At a time where we were all re-discovering our houses with new eyes, the first doing was to become aware of our new glance to our very own private space, and to notice how new life patterns were influencing us. This is a reflexive moment, made possible by what I have called earlier *reflexive agency*, the meaningful power given the user to interact with the self.

The second level of doing is to embrace such act of reflexivity and find ways to express it through visual poetry. Using a mobile phone to take photos is an act of re-framing. By taking three photos it is not just a single moment that is framed, but a micro-narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end of a moment that now starts to make sense to the author because it unfolds in time. At this specific moment the agency of the visual haiku maker is both of allowing the self to be creative and to experiment with the possibilities of the moment. Reflexive agency is therefore expansive. It offers a space of potentialities to be lived by the participant – precisely because now she is the author. Compared to the narrative of close edits of documentary films, which put the audience in a passive seat, and the limited choices of early web-docs that offers pre-conceived options, participatory projects such as the *Corona Haikus* can explore an agency of self-empowerment based on internal re-negotiations. What is meaningful and satisfactory in this type of agency is the very possibility to connect to a inner self that is only possible when one is put in the position of the creator. For a short interval of time, the story to be explored and expressed is the one of the self, not the one of the community, nor the one of an external author. As a result, the impact of reflexive agency is a form of introspection that can be described as an "act of self-care" (Gaudenzi, Kermanchi and Wiehl 2021, 204), because it calls the participant to self-centre, and to find her own voice.

2. Agencies and spaces of "doings" in Corona Haikus

If reflexive agency has been described as a first step that connects the participant to her emotional state, the next step is to translate what is still an affective intuition into a conscious narrative, by using the language of a visual haiku. The act of creation is in itself a space of experimentation which uses trials and errors as a canvas of self-discoveries. How many times have I tried different combinations of photos and changed the text because the result simply did "not feel right" to me? In doing so, I was exercising my creative agency, and my ability to use poetry as an inter-face, an in-between the feelings inside myself and the world outside of me. Giving creative agency to participants is yet another level of self-empowerment.

The third level of agency in *Corona Haikus*, is the agency to share. This is the moment where the space of possibilities of expansion given to the individual becomes public and therefore the impact of the visual poetry moves from a individual to a community level. Sharing requires daring, but it is also an act of belonging. By sharing content the participant chooses to be publicly seen as a co-author, and opens herself to the judgment and comments of others.

The forth level of agency is the one of commenting on other people's visual haikus. This allows the participant to connect to a wider community at a more intimate level. In a previous article, the effect of this networked agency has been described as "an act of community care" (Gaudenzi, Kermanchi and Wiehl 2021, 207).

3. The complex impact of the doings

By looking at agency as complex, we can understand why a project like the *Corona Haikus* has different levels of impact. Reflexive agency tends to have an impact at a strictly individual level, because the doing is internal and introspective. Awareness, acceptance, mindfulness, change of prospective, are internal changes that can be transformational for the individual, but that are difficult to quantify and to be seen externally.

Creative agency, on the other hand, builds on reflexive agency and transforms emerging needs and internal states in artefacts that are tangible and sharable. In the case of *Corona Haikus*, each visual haiku is a poetic utterance that has a double impact: it transforms an intuition into a conscious message for the creator, and it

also makes the creator visible to others. The moment creative agency is followed by sharing agency, and the Corona Haiku is visible by the Facebook group community, then the impact moves from an individual to a community level – because each single visual poetry has an impact on the receivers. Community members can be touched, feel welcomed, understood, hold or even just feel their belonging to a group of like-minded people.

Finally, the agency to comment on Facebook also has both a personal and community level of impact. By commenting to other's visual haikus, the participants earns her belonging to the community and feels connected, empathic and somehow useful to others. Yet at the same time, the community itself becomes alive, stimulated and stimulating. Comments call for more comments and dialogue is made possible. During the first 10 weeks of the project people that had never seen each other started to engage at a deep level. Clearly the state of distress and trauma we endured during lockdown did help to create deep bonds between people, but I also believe that the design of a gradual expansion of personal agency has been a catalyst that has allowed deep exchange.

4. Evolutive agency in Corona Haikus

If we understand agency as evolutive, we can start designing it as a series of gradual openings that, together, and because of their strategic positioning, do allow for deeper change and impact. By analysing the *Corona Haikus* project we can see how sharing visual poetry is only possible when one feels entitled to do so, but also when one has something meaningful to share. Transformative user generated content is therefore only possible if the conditions for introspection and internal connection have been designed through reflexive agency. Once this individual connection to the self has been made possible, then it is almost as if it allows for creativity and sharing. Had the same agencies been proposed at different times, the conditions for gradual change would not have been there, and the impact would have been lower.

Conclusion

The argument behind this paper is that, agency should not be seen as a series of successive and independent doings and choices, but as a systemic and evolutive.

The *Corona Haikus'* call for participation was very specific: it asked people to document their moods, feelings and life while in isolation through a very focused format of three photos and a short text. The design of such call has the intent to focus participants' to their here and now. This paper has looked at the evolutive agency of *Corona Haikus* as an assemblage of different types of agencies that unfold in time, and that build on each other's effect, ultimately creating a layered and pluri-dimensional impact that touches both the individual and community.

Finally, the Corona Haikus project has been used to demonstrate that agency in interactive factual storytelling does not need to be limited to the act of choosing within authorially pre-determined options, nor needs to focus on the story itself. Reflexive agency can well take the participant outside of the collaborative narrative and act within a totally private space. This interval of self-reflective agency might precisely be what makes a project more meaningful and transformative to its inter-actors.

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